
Worlds of the Timestream: The Interregnum: The Peace

by Rick Sutcliffe

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Post Prologue

It is impossible to tell the story of the nexus of 2001 without referring back to the earlier “great” or “long” nexus, whose course spanned the first thousand years of our Lord, from 29 to 1014. Its bookend events profoundly affected world history, as can readily be seen by comparing the two resulting earths.

However, such history, and that of the Irish dynasties who ruled our world until 1941, has been well combed. Much less attention has been devoted to the years of the interregnum, and it is to these that the current work is addressed.

This chronicle has been created by searching transcripts of news accounts, interviews with survivors, and several electronic memoirs. Some conversations have been fictionalized, but many are reported by bards who witnessed them or to whom they were recited, and must be taken as authentic. Thus, the narrative before the reader is not fiction woven around a few threads of history, but a tapestry of scenes from actual lives of real people. Only the connecting arrangement is artificial, representing an attempt on the editors’ part to participate in other than dry textbooks. If this is well received, the entire story will one day be told likewise, though the principal author/editor of the volumes will vary.

Also, with the help of the Professor, this series represents a departure from long standing policy in that it will be offered for publication on his world as well. There, it will indeed be taken as fiction, but the general editors trust it will serve to prepare the ground for eventually revealing there are more earths, and with very different histories than theirs.

This first volume cycles among three related stories:

1. The 1941 rise to power and deposition of High King James IV, with the subsequent history of the four royal cousins to 1958,
2. The origin on Tirdia (Prime, per Metan scholars) of Sally O'Neill and Lucy O'Brien, their involvement with and marriage into the royal family in 1945 and following events through 1955,
3. An account of Brian McIlhargey and his wards Meghan (Mara) and Karen from the 1977 battle of Glenmorgan through to their departure from Edwardston in 1990.

To assist the reader, each chapter is clearly tagged with names, dates, and places (including the earth) to indicate which of the three story cycle arcs is in view. All of *The Peace* takes place on Hibernia and Tirdia, but readers should note when reading chapter tags that from the sixteenth century until the nexus of 2001 the Hibernian and Gregorian calendars were identical, so dates used in *The Peace* are the same on both earths. In this edition, to securely establish the initial settings in readers' minds, the first six-chapter rotation through the three plots has two successive chapters from each arc. After that, action rotates among the three plots in less predictable fashion.

These chronicles could not have been completed without the assistance of Physician-Colonel Maeve Derry of City Hospital, Tara, whose explanation of medical terms and practices was invaluable.

Offered in the Name of the High Lord of Heaven
Under the Patronage of the crown
Dedicated to the Throne of Tara, Mistress of Worlds
by General Editors
Richard Kent, Academician and Lord Protector of England
Jana Whelan, Ard Seanacha of the Court of Ireland
Walking Buffalo, Academician and Lord Holder of Edwardston
Cameron O'Grady, Lord High Bishop of Tara

and

Princess Rainbow Buffalo/O'Grady, Seanacha,

who compiled this first volume.

Worlds Of The Timestream

From: A Guide For Federation Security Agents

by Patrick O'Toole

Tara, The King's Library, 1941 (rev 2002)

The Timestream is a spatio-temporal medium providing access to at least six known versions of planet Earth arranged in hexagonal fashion. Each has different histories and societies, some different geologies, but all have the same physical laws and chronology. Travel from one planet is via timestream vehicles developed by scientists of the Federated Earths (Hibernia and Babylon) from specifications transmitted by the Metans in 1792. At critical historical points (nexi) on one of the planets, some crucial decision(s) results in two earths, with the same prior history, but differing subsequent ones. Major events on neighbouring planets in the timestream affect each other strongly, but not necessarily symmetrically.

Notes:

1 All but those of Water World also call their planet "Earth".

2 Tirdia: introduced by patriotic Hibernians who objected to "Prime".

3 Constitutionally, Hibernia or Ortho earth is "Greater Ireland".

4 The continents of Tirdia, Hibernia, Para, and Desert are similar.

* member of the Federation of Worlds

Planets:

Tirdia (called Terra by its peoples, and Prime by Metans) is thought by scholars to be the original planet Earth from which others subsequently divided. It has more people than the others combined. The names Prime and Tirdia (God's world) are both due to it being the location of Christ's crucifixion. Since 1912, Tirdia has been the locus of major events affecting its timestream neighbours of Water World and Ortho (e.g., The Three Worlds' War of 1939-1945 was centred there.)

Capital: London and New York are leading financial centres.

Currency: Many, though the American dollar is commonly accepted.

Language: Numerous, though English is widely spoken.

Government: Various forms, many nominally democratic.

Population: 6.1 billion.

Hibernia(Greater Ireland, or, per scholars, Ortho) divided from Tirdia in the long nexus, beginning at the crucifixion, and concluding with the Battle of Clontarf in 1014. From that point, Hibernia's Ireland became a stable kingdom, eventually making herself mistress of the entire planet, and, using Meta technology, later becoming the administrative centre of her Federation with partner Para.

Capital: Tara.

Currency: Shamrock.

Language: (Ortho)Gaelic.

Government: Constitutional Monarchy.

Population: 300 million.

Motto: H.E.I.O.U. (Hiberniae est imperare orbi universo, i.e., Hibernia is ruler over the whole world.)

Meta(Builder's World) divided from Tirdia in the first nexus shortly after Adam and Eve were driven from the garden. Has one continental land mass, mostly agricultural excepting one small city. Meta manages the worlds of the timestream to prevent the Enemy (Satan) from having free rein.

Capital: Builder's City ("The City").

Currency: Credit. (electronic only; uses no cash).

Language: Metan.

Government: A council of elders chaired by the Builder.

Population: 28 million.

Babylon(also called Para or The Corporation) Formed when Balshazzar repented. Babylon is the scientific and technological centre of the two-planet Federation (with Hibernia), both of which had their industrial revolutions well before Tirdia. The economy is controlled by large corporations whose CEOs form the planetary government.

Capital: Babylon; Hibernia's Tara for Federation business.

Currency: Terebinth.

Languages: Persian and Gaelic.

Government: A board of directors.

Population: 280 million.

Desert(so-called because of the vast radioactive wastelands covering Europe, Africa, and the Middle East) originated in a nexus with Water World a few generations after Noah's flood. Early scientific and technological advances led to nuclear war, and today the planet is thinly populated by nomadic tribes only in the Americas and Asia.

Capital: Desert has no cities and few permanent towns.

Currency: Precious metal coinage and barter.

Language: Numerous; both continents have a trade language.

Government: elected warrior chieftains.

Population: (Est.) ten million.

Water World(or, Ocean) has no continents, just numerous scattered islands. It was formed at the time of Noah's flood, which was a greater disaster there than on the other two worlds of its time. Its two nations of Pacifica and Atlantica consist of several thousand confederated islands, each supporting one or more merchant/warships. These and the League of Corsairs (pirates) live in a semi-permanent state of warfare. Events of recent history have been strongly influenced by timestream neighbour Tirdia.

Capital: No fixed locations.

Currency: Precious metal coinage and barter.

Language: “The tongue” is universally spoken.

Government: Three councils of ship captains.

Population: 90 million.

Editors’ Note: In the first several volumes of **The Interregnum** the principal events take place on Hibernia (Ortho) with some on Tirdia (Prime), some on Meta and single chapters on Babylon (Para) and Desert. Our history does not touch upon Water World until later volumes.

That the members of Hibernia's hereditary nobility have for centuries acted as guardians of her throne at Tara is well known to anyone who paid attention to Irish history lessons in third grade. That they reserve the throne exclusively for themselves is less obvious—many a talented, strapping lad has gone to court thinking he could claim it, only to be thwarted by the surprising development of the normally fractious nobility cooperating against him. Because the ruling monarchs have since 1791 surrendered their clan names, it is not always obvious that the green chair has been occupied by a single family ever since the Federation of Worlds was founded. It may be that this “gentle agreement” was reached solely to avoid the embarrassment of the nobility killing itself off entirely with its notorious infighting.

Such matters are only politely discussed privately among the high lords and ladies, or here at Kilkarney, where their best and brightest are sent, ostensibly to train as military officers. Get used to being candid for four years, for at Kilkarney you are on sacred ground. You may say anything to each other, but are not permitted to kill students or staff. After you graduate, it is the other way around, for none of us are under any illusions that the “noble” among you have actually come to prepare for the polite but much more deadly power games your families play with each other. Or have the lessons of 1941 been lost on you?

—selected from the commander's commencement address to the entering class of 1964, Kilkarney cadet school.

Chapter One

Tara's palace, Ireland, September 1941 (Hibernia)

“The time for kings has passed.” Donal Tobin began his seditious speech to the other lords quietly, carefully mixing patriotic rhetoric and history lessons in a mind-dulling recipe. “From the establishment in 1014 to 1792, ten different families ruled Ireland. Yes, the current dynasty has occupied the green throne for a century and a half, but a change now would generate a mere footnote in Ireland's rich and glorious history. And, I assure you that when our ancestors established the Peace of Ireland following the great European wars, they scarcely imagined Tara's rulers would ascend to world dominion, mastering two earths and accumulating interests on three others. They did not set out to invest a monarchy with such concentrated power, enormous influence, and potential for corruption.”

The conspirator sat in his study, “scarcely fifty staves from the court chambers, as the buzzards fly”, he was fond of saying. The court scene unfolded in one part of his MT wall screen, as he scrolled a text window beside it. “Following the script, are you, friend Donal? Good. Let's keep the lies predictable, shall we?”

Ending the Irish monarchy was neither a pleasant nor a safe prospect, but better than any alternative. He

could easily die in his coup, but there was no going back now.

“Oh, Lord of Heaven,” he gazed toward the ceiling in appeal, “People will say I've prolonged our own version of the Three Worlds' War, even betrayed the realm. But you know I've not my own interests at heart, only Ireland's. I'm in your hands, for life or death. Lord, I may have done wrong manipulating Donal, but he'll merely get the power he wants.”

“It has been,” Donal Tobin's voice droned at the periphery of his attention, “one hundred fifty-two years since the elusive Metans gave us the technical ability to travel among five of the six earths, excepting only Meta herself. The Federation of Ortho and Para, under the rule of our glorious capital here at Tara, is almost as old. It's time a fresh breeze blew through these ancient halls, time to set aside the rule of despots, incompetents, and drunkards, time to take the reins of power into our own hands for the good of all Hibernia. Henceforth, let this house reign collectively.” He swept his arm about to include his audience.

“The fighting in Europe and Asia has dragged on far too long. Ireland needs fresh initiatives, fresh leadership, fresh vision to put an end to this interminable war.”

“Ah, yes, the war,” mused the conspirator to his empty office. “Some argue we Irish merely play our favourite game.” He wagged his finger at Tobin's image. “You and your MacCarthy allies believe Ireland lacks the will to fight hard enough. You forget the savage conflict on the earth next to ours, how it leaks through the timestream to adjacent worlds, also producing a war much like ours on Water World, the other side of Tirdia.”

A group of junior officers had agreed too enthusiastically with his argument, and he'd had to stop the hotheads from assassinating Tirdia's Hitler and Hirohito.

“Perhaps,” he thought, “we could have achieved the side effect of an earlier end to our war if we'd stopped Tirdia's fighting.” But the last thing Hibernia needed was a failed intervention resulting in Tirdia discovering the other worlds. “We could all be overwhelmed by the multitudes of a planet whose people apparently have nothing to do but breed,” he reflected. “Perhaps that's one reason the Metans call the place Prime. It has more people than four other earths combined.”

The conspirator spoke toward a microphone. “MT, open new window, public file James Fourth.” He ignored Donal Tobin's speech, to review for perhaps the hundredth time his carefully assembled dossier on the young king whom the nobles were about to dethrone.

“James, second son of James, son of Conn. Born 1917, fostered out to Barry and Millicent Devereaux of New Tara. Entered Kilkarney 1934 on a full scholarship, graduated 1938 as first cadet. Returned to Irish North America in the king's service, promoted to captain 1940, and to major, 1941.”

Little else than well-known and well-polished facts, the conspirator thought. Access to a palace network node and skills few would advertise were required to reduce a reigning monarch's personal information to such bare bones. He'd also been responsible for most of the lies in Donal Tobin's somewhat larger file on the King. “But it's not what Donal Tobin thinks he knows that could get people killed today,” the conspirator mused. “It's what is not in this file...”

* * * *

James, April 1941, Irish North America

“Going somewhere, Major?”

James whirled from packing his backpack. His hand was halfway to his sword at the unexpected interruption when he suddenly realized who his visitor was. “Your Highness, I...”

“Cut the guff, James. Brace my arm instead. It wasn't too jolly when you found out, but I've rather enjoyed having another brother. You never knew Conn,” reflected his visitor, suddenly pensive, but moving the conversation along rapidly. “He died at four. Matthew has his heart set on bardic orders. Daisy is still too young to know what she wants besides her own horse. But we two are the family warriors. There need be no formality between us.”

James relented, and the two locked right arms, testing each others' strength. As they relaxed, William casually observed, “You're more like Dad than ever. Why not become King instead of me?”

James started in surprise, and William added, “If you weren't Dad's secret insurance policy, I'd trade places in a heartbeat. Tara's palace is a dreary place compared to an army camp. This is where Hibernia's true heart beats.”

James forced himself to relax before the force of William's good humour. Fostering out a second son to have him raised in obscurity wasn't merely custom, but a necessary security measure in fractious Ireland. Even when his foster parents were killed in a riot during his second year at Kilkarney, the elder and younger James were never together. William was instead informed of the relationship, and dispatched to the school with the news. He had visited many times since, becoming a friend as well as a brother, though James had rarely been to Tara.

James shook himself. “What brings you, William?”

“The high command needed to send a ceremonial bigshot. Dad's managing risk by working out of the country estate. His actor only stands in for routine ribbon cuttings, so I volunteered to chuck palace life for a week.”

James raised his eyebrows. “Have there been enemy threats?”

“Nothing so tangible, and he wouldn't worry about the Germans or Japanese. No, he's staying out of circulation till he's ruined the latest domestic plot.”

James nodded grimly. Ireland's “loyal” nobles were notorious for such schemes. He reverted to William's initial greeting. “Just as well you spend some time on the field, but you've forgotten I'm only a captain, not a major.”

“Not to the high command. You and ten soldiers standing off three hundred Apache at the Alamo until the rest of the army got there made interesting reading from General Ryan's dispatches.” William fished a small box from his pouch. “They sent this trinket along with your new stripes. Presentation's tomorrow.” He held it out with a grin, and flipped the lid open.

James gasped, then shook his head. “The Medal of Honour. I can't accept that.” Ireland's highest award hadn't been given for nearly two decades.

“Thought you'd say that.” William laughed, and took a seat on a canvas chair. “Two nights ago Tara News editorialized, and I quote, ‘Not content with ranking first sword of the army, James Devereaux has now taken his place in the ranks of Ireland's great heroes.’ Meanwhile, the high command thinks you've

single-handedly turned around the North American theatre. The way things are elsewhere, Ireland needs her heroes. I'm here to ensure she gets one, and no argument."

"None of it matters." James turned bleakly to the sack he'd been packing.

"Why not?" William's smile faded.

"Got a report from one of my sergeants that an entire Cree village is dead." James held out a photo. "I need samples, but it looks like smallpox."

William gasped. "Only the great houses have access..."

"Exactly. One of Ireland's lords schemes to shorten the war by wiping out the North American natives."

"But we can't win dishonourably. Our allies would turn against us. Hibernia would fall apart." William paused briefly, then pocketed the jewel box. "Got an extra isolation suit?"

* * * *

Two hours later, James trudged back up the hill where he'd left William on guard. The village of Jumping Pond and its dead were two hundred staves behind and below. He stopped for William to hose him down with disinfectant, stepped from the isolation suit, tossed it onto the fire, accepted another spray on his bare skin, dried himself, then donned his clothes and hefted the sample box.

"Almost certainly smallpox," he announced grimly, as the two walked to the crest, "but genetically engineered to be fast acting. Some died walking down the street or in the midst of a meal. I'll wager it spreads over the whole continent in days."

"What now?"

James glanced at the box in his hand. "By the book, we send these to Tara for analysis."

"By the time they could act," William observed quietly, "the whole world will know. The political fallout..."

James gripped William's arm. "Running Bear's daughter was here visiting her aunt."

His brother whistled. "When the Stoney chief finds out, he and our few North American allies will desert. We'll have to pull troops from Europe to contain the mess."

"Not necessarily."

"What have you in mind?"

"I've prayed about it, William. In what wisdom the Lord of Heaven gives, I believe there's only one way to get an antidote into the field in time."

"That is?"

"We both have our MCs." He waited for William to draw his own conclusion.

“Cut Tara Medical out of the picture and re-engineer the virus ourselves? Messing with pathogens without a vote of the lords means breaking the covenant, brother of mine.”

“You don't have to join me, William, but surely if banned techniques are employed to do good, or to stop evil, they're legitimately from God, and must be used, despite the law. There's little choice but to act at once.”

Just then, they crested the hill, and James saw five bodies lying in a tangle of swords and blood. He turned to William, astonished.

“Who?”

“Low thugs.” William waved his dismissal. “Walked into the clearing chatting about ambushing you. I killed them all, unfortunately. No papers, but all European.” His manner was almost casual, but James detected a quaver in his brother's voice. An honourable man disliked killing, even when it was necessary.

“Do we leave them?”

“Might as well keep whoever sent them guessing. Look. I've pulled rank on a few calls I made while you were below. The ceremonies are postponed. I've booked New Tara hospital's synthesizer. An air car picks us up between here and the camp in ten minutes and takes us directly there. Security will guard this place till we're done, then burn it.”

James looked at William in awe. “I didn't need to persuade you.”

William shrugged. “We're family. We think alike.”

* * * *

Tara's palace, September 1941

And, thought the conspirator, drumming his fingers on the richly-polished desk, the royal brothers won the gamble few would ever know they had taken. They built a virus-vectored countermeasure, then arranged for its distribution throughout the continent with secret cooperation from enemy chiefs. Doing it compromised Irish security, but stopped the plague with only three communities lost.

Within weeks, a quiet telegraph had spread the news of their involvement, and though the reason was never spoken aloud to Europeans, the North American rebellion suddenly collapsed, all twenty nations of the enemy Blackfoot coalition re-entering the Peace on terms negotiated between them and the Stoney chief who headed the allied nations. The document was signed by William for the crown. Whoever stole the smallpox samples from the national lab and altered them would know how the plague was stopped, but not by whom.

“Family Monde started this,” mused the conspirator, “but I'll never prove it.”

But fortune had not smiled so kindly on the royals two months after.

* * * *

James, June 1941, Irish North America and Tara

“Sir, General Ryan to see you.” The sergeant was in a near panic, and no wonder. Generals summoned majors; they didn't visit them unless the news was extraordinary, and even the unusual would get soldiers killed.

“General.” James snapped a salute as his commander entered the tent, receiving one in return.

“Sergeant, see we're not disturbed. Stand easy, Major.” Ryan activated a white noise generator.

“Good,” thought James, relaxing. “It's military business, after all.” Perhaps, as others already, he was being transferred to the European front.

“I take it,” began Ryan, picking over his words gingerly, “you haven't had the news from Tara.”

“No.” James was baffled. Was the war over? But if so, why this? He willed the general to get to the point.

“I'm family,” observed Ryan, taking him by the shoulders and looking his young officer squarely in the eye.

James started. “You know?”

“That you were fostered at birth to my sister-in-law's brother-in-law Barry Devereaux, but are by birth the king's son, and my wife Carole's nephew? I was your godfather. You came to New Tara in my arms.” Suddenly, the general's eyes brimmed over with tears, and he no longer needed speech.

“It's the King,” James suddenly concluded. “What happened?”

Ryan bowed his head, forcing his words. “A force of two hundred invaded the palace early this morning. James III died defending your mother, then they killed her. Apart from two kitchen servants, there were no survivors. None of the invaders was taken alive.”

“Matthew and Daisy?”

“I'm sorry, lad.”

His voice became a squeak. “Then William is King.”

“William slept in the palace after a late-night meeting with the King. He took fifteen with him, but he is gone, too.”

There was a long silence while James stood immobile with shock and the general gathered his thoughts. “I hate to do this to you, James, but you have duties. Patrick O'Toole advises that Calaghan MacCarthy and Gerald Monde will proclaim the dynasty's end, then send in the court's name to the high armoury for the means to ‘end the war once and for all,’ as they put it.”

“They would use atomics? Ireland would be dishonoured forever.” Shaken back to a measure of rationality, James observed, “Only the King may enter the high armoury. Doing so requires a DNA match and codes known only to the high command.”

“There is an override provision, requiring a second code set assembled from among the bards, the church, and Lord Chamberlain. It will take them a day to arrange, no more.” Reilly held out a black

pouch. "The military lords sent their passcodes. Your DNA was registered at birth."

"You want me to..."

"The general staff agrees the war must not end so. An orbital shuttle arrives in ten minutes. I will pilot. Once you get us into the satellite, we remove a hatch from a class MX device, extract one of the two plutonium canisters and the trigger detonator..."

James finished for him. "...and set a timer to blow apart the protective casing after we leave, contaminating the armoury with radioactive material. It would be years before robots could be built to recover weapons or new ones made, and by that time..."

"...honest soldiers should have won the war honourably," Ryan finished. "Will you do it, James?"

James nodded his head slowly. He would grieve later. "I will."

"I told the other generals we could count on you."

"And, when we return?"

"You will have other duties."

* * * *

Two days later, James stood at court in the row reserved for senior officers. Any with the rank of Major or higher were entitled, when at Tara, to participate in governance with the hereditary and political nobility. As high churchmen and bards, they were "lords by position." All but one of Ireland's colonels and generals were present, as were four of his own rank.

James looked around at the court chambers, built on the lawn of the second palace forty years earlier when the court had outgrown its previous quarters. On the dais stood the celebrated emerald throne, a chair carved, despite its name, from a solid block of jade. Tears came to his eyes, and he looked away.

Surrounding him were the nobility of Greater Hibernia, hereditary and domain peers, military and bardic lords, and three bishops. Court servants occupied lesser places at the back and rear. The other side of the aisle was empty, for today's session concerned Ortho alone, not her Federation partner Para.

He watched and listened as the front row and other lords drifted to their places in anticipation of the day's opening. Tara was awash with rumour. Secret sessions had authorized a mission to high orbit, but it had returned empty handed, and high-level shouting matches behind closed doors had followed. Some suggested civil war was in the offing. Others had darker forecasts.

"All stand for the first lords."

Quiet shuffling followed Lord Chamberlain's announcement, then a long pause. Wearing matching scowls, Calaghan MacCarthy and Gerald Monde walked in front of the first row, up two steps of the dais, turned as one, and faced the house, thus claiming equal status as overdomain lords.

Lord Chamberlain thumped his mace on the floor. "Recess is over, and the house is back in session. Who speaks first?"

Lord MacCarthy opened his mouth to say, “We do,” but was cut off by First Military Lord General Reilly. “Ireland is at war. The high king and commander-in-chief is dead. The army claims the right to speak on a matter touching its honour.”

“Such is the custom of the house,” intoned Lord Chamberlain, so Ryan, Reilly and their fellow officers strode to the front, ranging themselves on the dais behind MacCarthy and Monde.

“My lords and ladies,” began Reilly. “King James III has departed us to join the High Lord of Heaven. Were he here, he would disapprove of your intentions for prosecuting the war.”

Tensions grew as many concluded Reilly was about to announce a military coup. But he surprised them. “Moreover, we believe Ireland ill served that this house has not yet announced a state funeral. The army will not interfere with political decisions, but the general staff hereby announces its own warrior's parade and military wake for James III and his family, beginning 0900 day after tomorrow at the palace armoury. Thank you.”

Following a brief stunned silence, the dignitaries broke out in applause, thumping fists on their scabbards in approval. Gerald Monde looked around as the tumult died, and nodded at the generals, clearly expecting their party would now vacate the platform.

“There's one thing more,” Reilly added, as if in afterthought, waving the house to silence.

James looked from their midst, taking note of the several dozen officers now filing in around the perimeter of the room. Cameras swivelled to cover the breaking events, and he could see reporters in the gallery speaking frantically into their throat microphones for audiences around the world. General Reilly had broken the tension. Now...

Reilly began anew. “William is dead, and so are other children of King James and Queen Maeve. However,” He waved at an MT screen, where a birth certificate, school records and military honours were suddenly displayed. “Not many know that in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred sixteen, King James and Queen Maeve gave birth to a second son while in Austria. That son was fostered out and raised abroad as James Devereaux, ostensibly a nephew to the king's brother-in-law. As you can see, DNA and other records prove his blood. I am pleased to present an officer and gentleman, a hero of Ireland's wars, the army's youngest ever first sword, a man worthy of his father.”

The group of officers parted. Red faced, James sat on the throne as Reilly concluded. “James III is dead. Long live King James IV.”

Callaghan MacCarthy's hand went to his side, but halted when the screen displayed a sword rating for James of one hundred five, ten points higher than his own. As he and Monde hesitated, James spoke to their backs in the ensuing silence. “My lords Monde and MacCarthy, we do not permit you to face the house or to share the dais. You may return to your places and speak in your turns.” He hid a grin. Whatever else, the pair had lost enough face to prevent them from attempting another run at first any time soon.

* * * *

Later, after a gruelling session dominated by reversals of the previous two days' initiatives, James had the king's suite re-keyed to his own DNA and codes, and retired behind a guard of loyal officers to quarters he'd only visited twice and never expected to be his. On his entry, a man in palace livery bowed deeply.

“Your Majesty, I have the honour of being your steward, Patrick O'Dwyer. My fathers have served yours for six generations.”

“Your father was the previous steward, and perished here?”

“Yes, my lord, though he killed three first.”

“You also are a master sword?”

“Of course, my lord, an eighty-five rating.”

“There were survivors.”

“Cook and a scullery girl. Beneath their notice, my lord.”

“Not beneath mine. Escort me to the kitchen, would you please, Master O'Dwyer.” Using title and family name together confirmed the man in his post.

“Right away, my lord, if you will follow me.” The approval in O'Dwyer's tone spoke volumes. “I will engage a new staff at your pleasure, of course. But at the moment, we are only three.”

When James entered the kitchen, a sumptuous dinner, no doubt his own, was laid out on a tray under the warming lights by one oven. Across the room were the makings of a fresh batch of bread. He'd seen the cook only once. She was Molly Byrne, a broad woman whose sharp tongue diminished her formidable skills. She set down her mixing bowl, and went to her knees at once. At her side, a flour-covered ragamuffin of a girl stared at James like he was an apparition from another world, then dropped the plate containing her own supper to the floor, where it shattered into a hundred pieces.

“James,” she whispered, eyes wide.

“Be quiet, girl,” the cook snapped, “and get down.” She cuffed the child to her knees, and bent her head.

There was a long, silent moment, then James carefully announced, using only her title, “We take note of your service during a harsh time, Mistress Cook.” He turned to his steward. “Master O'Dwyer, kindly authorize two months' wages as her bonus.” He glared disapprovingly at the girl. “Once this careless child cleans up her mess, send her upstairs for discipline.” He stalked out, followed by the steward.

* * * *

Minutes later, James stood behind his study desk, facing the royal shield and three crossed swords of O'Connor, Devereaux, and Meathe. He sighed deeply. These were the symbols of his family's power and authority, the three blades Conn I had won to take the throne in 1792. Could he wield them, or would they devour him?

Behind him, the door opened. He turned to find Patrick O'Dwyer ushering the child into the room.

“The scullery child as ordered, Sire.” O'Dwyer set the dinner tray on the table, bowed, then winked. He knew.

“Thank you, Master O'Dwyer. You may go.”

The door no sooner closed behind her than the nine-year-old let out a yelp, ran to James, and threw herself into his arms. The two wept copiously.

“Oh, Jimmy, it was so awful, so wicked. Afterwards, I prayed to the Lord of Heaven you would come and rescue me, but I didn't know how you could, or if you knew I was here. Today they told us to get ready for a new master, but not who, and...”

James looked down with great tenderness. “How did you do it, Daisy? How did you fool everyone?”

“I was running to the kitchen, and stumbled on the body of Patsy, the scullery girl. It was only her third day here, Jimmy, and she was so innocent, so harmless, but she was dead, her neck all twisted and broken. The men were upstairs fighting, and I knew there were too many, so I took her smock, ran inside the kitchen, mussed myself with flour, then hid in the closet and prayed. Afterwards, when security found me, I screamed and screamed, but I didn't tell who I was. When Cook Byrne came back from visiting her mother's place the next day, she didn't know, ‘cause she'd never met Patsy. She didn't even see me, not really. You can't trust her, Jimmy. She says nasty things about Dad.” Daisy's voice caught.

“I'll find her a new posting. But you can't stay here, Daisy.”

“How will you get me out?”

“I've made cousin Patrick O'Toole chief of security. He'll send agent Seamus to escort you.” James sounded amused.

Daisy blinked her dark lashes at him, relaxing slightly. “Agent Seamus is nice, but where will he take me?”

“The safest place is with Chief Running Bear and the Stoney west of Edwardston. His daughter died in the war, so you can be his new princess. You've your grandmother's dark features, and no one will know you're not a native.”

She chuckled, and the terror in her eyes faded. “Will I ride a horse and live in a teepee?”

He answered in reverse order. “The Stoney have permanent towns, but Running Bear will surely give you one of my ponies.”

“Will I see you often?”

“No, little sister. It's too dangerous.” He hugged her close. “And, you'll have to go tonight.”

“What will happen to you, Jimmy?”

He looked around, his expression dark. “I don't know yet, Daisy. But this has become an evil place.”

And, more evil there was, too, for when James next appeared in court two days later, he was pale and haggard. One rumour claimed he'd been poisoned, another that he'd drunk too much at the wake for his parents. Easily believing the latter story, several churchmen quietly let it be known they were withdrawing their support, and several military officers wondered aloud about a man who couldn't hold his liquor. Hearing them, the jackals gathered once more.

Genetic engineering techniques were well-explored by the mid-eighteenth century, and even today bring benefits when applied to plants. However, the weaponized viruses implicated in the great plagues of 1755, provided the primary impetus for an enduring ban against modifying either pathogens or the human genome. But despite the Covenant of the Living, all today's great houses have the resources to produce biological weapons, and by such an insane act, sterilize all of Greater Hibernia.

At the time of James III's assassination, two such madmen ruled their respective houses. The other nobles, tired of the war and anxious to have the fighting done so as to return to an easier life, were morally soft enough to indulge them. Duty and honour both perverted, the atrocity could not be stopped from within the corrupt system, and certainly not by the influence or direct actions of the King, so the royal family had no choice but to exercise their policing role in less conventional ways.

—*from The Peace, a novella by Patrick O'Toole*

Chapter Two

Tara's palace, Ireland, September 1941 (Hibernia)

The conspirator paced now, impatient to have the farcical courtroom speeches finished so his coup could proceed to the next stage. It had been obvious from the beginning that James IV lacked the connections and prestige to govern effectively. It was time to get it over with.

He grimaced as he considered those with whom he had dealt, however indirectly, to bend events to his liking. It was no great sin to desire power—all the Irish nobility did. Nor could he fault others for turning against the throne. He had.

But, deceived by their own sense of self-importance, and unable to do any but the most simplistic analysis, Callaghan MacCarthy and Gerald Monde would have Ireland desert her duty to rule nobly and fight honourably. The sabotage of the high armoury and James's accession to the throne had scarcely slowed them, merely redirected their preferred means of mass destruction.

“Fools.” He slammed his fist against the desk. “Don't those two see they would permanently destroy the Peace, create a legacy of distrust, and ruin Ireland forever? If they win this war so, others would counter in kind, and the exchange could destroy the planet.” That was the real issue. Everything else was unimportant, including kings.

He paced faster, wearing the carpet, ignoring Donal Tobin, who was, after all, merely a puppet. Why could they not learn from history? Did the tragedies of the eighteenth century mean nothing? Much of the population had died in genetically engineered plagues then, and the genetic damage persisted to this very day. Had Monde and MacCarthy never read the Covenant of the Living? Didn't they understand that the realm—nay, life itself—couldn't survive without a powerful moral compact of honour and duty, a set of mutual imperatives strong enough to stay the hand of even the most determined maniac?

“Such men would trade human beings whom the Lord of Heaven made, and for whom His Son died on the cross, to save a few shamrocks in the war budget.” The conspirator pounded his hand again in frustration, vowing, “So long as I have breath, it shall not happen.”

He sighed and paced, wondering if there could have been another way.

“No, there was not,” he decided once more. Like it or no, James IV would not be crowned. Honourable victory hinged upon stopping the atrocity. He must also refocus attention, if ever so slowly, on changing the structure of Irish society. Getting this started while avoiding planetary catastrophe required a change of government, necessitating his betrayal of the emerald throne.

Realizing the invincibility of the forces gathered against the King, the man the others knew only as the grey lord had first anonymously joined the conspiracy, then bent it to his purposes, so they now unknowingly did his bidding. Today they would depose a king, ostensibly for two shallow reasons, one of which he had carefully betrayed. Better that than the assassination they had intended. At least, the succession should be orderly.

He glanced at the MT, where Lord Tobin's rhetoric showed signs of running down. “Ah, Donal, you're the dupe of a dupe today.”

He reviewed his war analysis. Ireland, with her allies and client states, ought to triumph over Germany and Japan by 1945, both here on Hibernia and on Tirdia. But victory on this earth would hold only if the war was conducted honourably. Thanks to James, atomics were now out of the picture, but Gerald Monde had developed a new horror that he and Calaghan MacCarthy were preparing to deploy. Sabotaging it could be more difficult than subverting the high armoury, for nothing but a national crisis would draw the guard from the Monde manse.

Thus, the key to the grey lord's plan was employing the king's deposition as a diversion to allow the kingdom's finest sneak thief entry to that manse to pilfer and sabotage Gerald Monde's files, crippling the hawks' endeavours long enough to see a conventional war through to the end. Longer term, he hoped to bring about a new and more stable realm—one whose legitimacy flowed from the people's trust, and obeyed the old compacts.

Ah, Donal was finished.

“Who speaks in reply?” intoned Lord Chamberlain.

Would anyone? wondered the conspirator. Was he wrong? Court members knew the king's deposition merely cleared an obstacle for Monde and MacCarthy ambitions. Could they yet fulfil their duty to govern responsibly and honourably?

Silence.

He turned his eyes heavenward. “Lord of Heaven, you know there is little of either in today's court. But forgive them, Lord. Forgive me.”

Ah, and there was the rub. Was he justified in using deceit and trickery in a good cause? Could he really say, despite painstaking calculations, that this was the best way? Well, the Lord of Heaven had given him ability, with some measure of wisdom, and hadn't spoken on the matter from his Heaven. Thus, a servant of God had to do what he could. And, the social calculus gave such high probabilities for the long term success of his plans.

The problem, he reflected, was that the nobility had stagnated, first into decadence, then into moral corruption, betraying Ireland's people almost incidentally. The realm needed spiritual and political renewal, honest competition, new frontiers, enough instability to provoke change, yet not enough to destabilize it further. Honour and duty also had to be restored. It would take two generations, he

reckoned, but the attempt had to be made, and from outside the system.

It was one symptom of the lassitude of the great houses that technological innovation had all but ceased in the last hundred years. That, too, must change. He had a few ideas of his own, such as the human tissue regrow nanomachine he almost had finished, but he needed time, distance from the court, and help. Donal Tobin would unwittingly arrange it for him into the bargain, for all the royal cousins would be banned, not just the King.

“Oh, Lord, necessity makes me a traitor to throne and family,” he prayed again. “But surely duty to the whole planet is greater than duty to the home island, or even to the whole United Irish Kingdom. Surely it is greater than the court's self-serving desires, vastly more important than the interests of one man, even of a king.”

He returned his attention to the wall screen. They had voted ninety-five to five. Shortly, the throne would be vacant. Donal's plan, his plan, would be law once it was proclaimed. The grey lord closed his files, placing the data cube into his carefully boobytrapped safe.

It was time to confront a king, the most delicate part of his scheme, when a single hothead could spoil everything, provoking the very three-way war of succession he laboured to thwart.

To the end of his schemes—especially the sowing of just the requisite amount of confusion—he had enlisted some of the many royal cousins. Others, especially the king's military supporters, he had arranged to be far from the Emerald Isles. When they returned, his coup would be history, the monarchy temporarily abolished, and an oligarchy of Irish nobles led by Donal Tobin in power. By his calculations, the likelihood of civil war under such an arrangement declined from seventy percent to twenty, with little degradation in long term stability. Better to have the venal but highly regarded Lord Donal in charge of a unified kingdom than a powerless and unknown king presiding over ruins.

Meanwhile, he would either destroy Monde's schemes or die in the attempt. In the former event, he would end up far from court, influencing events at a distance, and the remaining royals would be unable to act without themselves triggering civil war, which they would not do.

To make it all happen, to vanish into obscurity himself, yet remain able to undermine the schemes of MacCarthy and Monde, and work quietly to build an enduring new compact for governance, the kingship had to go, to use the words of that fellow Eliot on Tirdia, “not with a bang, but a whimper.” More than that, the end of it all needed to be bathed in sufficient confusion to prevent anyone from untangling his skein until too late.

“So let it be said, so let it be done,” announced the image of Lord Chamberlain, and the nobles began filing from court, those of the front row on their way to the king's study.

The grey lord chuckled grimly as he reflected on their reluctance to settle matters with a good old-fashioned duel. Whatever they thought about the uncrowned high king's failings, he was the world's best blade, and none could stand before him.

The conspirator prayed once more for guidance to do what was best to glorify God and serve Ireland's people aright. Then, he strode toward the exit of his inner study. Partway to the threshold, he caught his reflection in a mirror, and paused. Expensively-tailored kilt and stockings covered legs his Stoney friends averred could outrun the wind. The rest of his tall, muscular physique was carefully hidden beneath silk shirt and richly-brocaded vest, his image completed with the long tresses of curled hair and tricorner hat courtiers affected.

“Lies upon lies, my boy,” he observed to his image, with a wry smile and a tip of his hat. “It’s time for the man of many names to join his fellow traitors, but with so many tricky schemes going this time, even I’m having a time keeping track.”

* * * *

Heavy thumping sounded on the ornate door of a palace suite, and its occupant heard it answered. There were demanding voices from the hallway, and moments later his servant appeared grimly before him to announce, “Several of their lordships await the pleasure of an audience, my lord.”

“Very well, Patrick. Show them in.”

Patrick O'Dwyer stood to one side of the double doors of the cavernous formal study and receiving room as the sombre group of nobles trooped in. After announcing each, he strode to the centre of the room, bowed to his master, saluted stiffly with his sword, then turned to the group.

“His most Christian Majesty James IV, hereditary Lord of Tara, Protector of the United Irish Kingdom, and High King of the Federation of Worlds.” Patrick bowed again, stood to attention, then marched stiffly back to stand by the door.

James waved them to seats around the fireplace, and took one himself. There was no point in standing on ceremony. There would be no more of it for him.

As expected, Second Lord Donal Tobin, the Overdomain Lord as he was known, spoke up first. It was his right in court downstairs; here it was his duty. He used James's familiar name, and pointedly omitted any titles.

“Jack, you know why we're here.” That there were spies everywhere about the palace was a fact of daily life.

James waved a casual royal hand around the circle. All but a couple of the high hereditary families currently at court were represented. “Yes, Donal, I know. At least when those sharks down the hall sent the executioners, they sent their best.”

“They're not so bad, Jack.” Donal paused to collect his thoughts, and went on in a rush, momentarily embarrassed by what he was here to do. “They're impatient for results.”

“And you don't want a disagreeable king whom people call an incompetent sitting on Tara's throne.”

“We overrode your veto and said the new domains in Irish North America this morning.”

James made the slightest nod in acknowledgment. He alone had insisted on native self-government, opposing their plan to put Irish lords directly in charge of the continent now that the war there had ended. The issue had become their principal irritant with him, and one convenient excuse for a deposition. Well, if they lacked the courage to bring their real agenda into the open, they would hear nothing of his. He kept silent, awaiting their next charge.

Donal changed the subject. “Are you prepared to tell us who you've been stepping out of the court to see these months past?”

James started, a study in shock.

“You were too obvious.” Donal informed him almost absentmindedly. “When two nobles raised the matter, some thought you were selling Ireland out to the enemy.” He showed no compunction about cooperating with what must have been a betrayal by a close royal associate or trusted staff member.

The about to be ex-king reached a hand to his sword with an angry gesture, but Donal stopped him with an offhanded wave.

“As I pointed out to the idiots, that idea makes no sense. What power can a king gain? I had you followed.”

“Then you know.” James kept his voice calm despite the tension. How well had their spies traced him, and what had they learned?

“Yes, we know,” Donal replied. “It's a bit much, having you go off with peasants to spend your time drinking in low taverns. Isn't the company of the Families good enough for you? Can't you be here when there's business to conduct? Do you not know people openly scorn you as a drunk?” He paused, glaring. “I don't suppose you'd agree to stay in the palace and behave yourself? Even now, we might be able to offer a figurehead position of sorts.”

James wiped his brow to hide his relief. His excursions had been betrayed, but they had not found the why. Did Donal not know any of the rest? Or was he hiding it from the others? He hoped those who followed him had been unable to go farther than the pub. In apparent confusion, he let several moments go by without reply. After all, he could scarcely tell them it was a matter of honour, that he was using the time to work against MacCarthy interests in his secret lab. Nor would he betray other loyalties. Finally, knowing he could change nothing, he determined to make no reply.

Donal picked up where he had left off. “I thought not. Look, it's not just the court, Jack. The people are on edge. If things don't change, we're going to have civil war right here in the Emerald Isles to add to our troubles. You can do the computations as well as anyone. If people don't see definitive action at the top, our whole system of government could break down, setting back the course of civilization a thousand years or more. It's not who sits on the throne that's at stake, it's the very existence of the kingdom. We're facing anarchy, Jack, and it's going to take drastic and sober measures by experienced hands to hold it back.”

Hearing Donal, the conspirator stifled a smile. He'd planted those exact words into receptive ears not two days earlier. “Still according to the script,” he thought, keeping his face wooden. Being too free with alcohol in public was precisely sufficient moral failing in a king to keep potential military or church supporters on the sidelines, while covering political agendas sufficiently to allow the King to escape with his life.

James nodded mutely, conceding Donal's point. Neither competence nor battle prowess mattered. Current difficulties demanded a high-profile scapegoat, lest Tara have nothing to rule. He could have attempted dismissing the entire executive, but given his youth and their power, he could not succeed.

He saw agreement on their faces, and little sympathy for the man they were shunting aside. Besides Donal Tobin, most of the old high noble families were represented. Those who weren't at court, like his cousins of the Rourkes, Ryans, Reilly's, O'Tooles, and others, would not have cooperated. Lord Chamberlain was there, of course, and so was the court secretary. He idly noted loyal Patrick O'Dwyer in the doorway, and wondered what his man thought. Then he became aware the room was silent. Some

reply was expected.

“What now, Donal? Will they make you king?” They were just words. He knew their plans.

Lord Chamberlain cleared his throat at such impropriety, but Donal cut him off. “You know that's impossible, Jack. Mine is not a high family. No, we're done with monarchs. We've decided I shall have the title of ‘First Lord Among Equals’, and power to appoint the executive, but the green throne stays empty. I give up lands and family name as your ancestor did in 1791, but as First Lord will have less power. Governance will be shared among the front row nobility.”

James sighed deeply, and it was only partly theatrical. It was what he had expected, but Donal wouldn't last long under that arrangement. All the front row positions were open to challenge, and the man could hardly exclude himself. “Four or five years,” he thought, after a quick calculation, “long enough to finish the war. Then they'll put a knife in his back.” It was too bad. Donal Tobin wasn't evil, merely the tool of others who were its personification. But there was no point telling them the deficiencies of their scheme. It was time he officially learned his own fate.

“Do you want my head as well as the throne?” He conjured up a mental picture of the royal executioner standing on the palace steps over his headless body with a bloodied sword, and had to stop himself from smiling at the impossibility.

“No, Jack, we're not even going to banish you from the Emerald Isles, just from the court.”

“How long?”

On Donal's hesitation, Lord Chamberlain answered in his most formal tones.

“Upon the agreement of the court, the throne of Tara has been said to be vacated, and shall be so for the span of a triple ban. At one minute past midnight, Ireland becomes a protectorate, and remains so for sixty years. During that time, neither you nor your children may be named or recognized in the council chamber. You will be offered one of the regional domains in Irish North America and a new name, but are adjured under penalty of death from representing yourself as high king. You may tell your descendants only that yours is a hereditary noble family. After sixty years, the old rules of succession resume, and your family will be free to compete for the front row or the throne on the same basis as any other.”

Stunned silence seemed indicated, so James mentally reviewed what those rules meant. If someone became heir of three or more high noble families, and had the swords to prove it, he could claim the throne. Descendants of a recent king might mount a separate claim, but it would be difficult without the blades. In any case, two objectors among the hereditary nobility or the swords of the Isles—the protectors of the throne—denied the claim. There would be no monarch for the sixty years they had said, but perhaps none for long after.

No doubt they thought it ironic, he reflected. As king, he had waged a very public losing fight over their North American plan, arguing that Ireland should not impose direct rule there. Now they had proclaimed it anyway, and would send him off as one of the holders obliged to implement it.

Donal looked around the group, suddenly thoughtful, and James tensed. Lord Tobin was notorious for both his temper and his whims. What last minute complication would he introduce?

“English ambassador Kent is already a protector of the throne. However, since it's for the people's good

we're doing this, I say we also make the two commoners present protectors.”

James suppressed useless anger. Patrick O'Dwyer might indeed be a commoner, but his servant's exterior hid a trained officer's skill with the blade, or he would never be in these chambers. He could defend himself. But Court Secretary Solomon Transky scarcely knew which end of a sword to hold. James felt a bead of sweat trickle down his neck. “Old Rust take Donal's recklessness,” he thought. “Why risk Solomon's life by involving him? Someone will surely try stealing his protector's sword.”

Hearing no objections, Donal called over Patrick and Solomon. “Do you solemnly swear, upon your honour as citizens of Tara, as have these others, that you will enforce this decree of the court, and will formally object if any unworthy person attempts to occupy the throne? Do you swear to give this charge to your heirs and theirs forever? Do you say it upon the honour of the protector's sword we shall entrust to you?”

Both looked to him, and James reluctantly nodded. When they agreed, Donal nodded to the Lord Chamberlain, and he thumped his mace on the floor before intoning, “So let it be said, so let it be done.”

At this, the others left, glad to escape the deposed king's presence. None offered to pray with him. Only two touched his scabbard to wish him well. The others avoided his eye and departed silent, as though escaping contamination. It was just as well. James didn't want any more killed than had been already. His friend and cousin Patrick O'Toole was already mourning his assassinated father. The senior O'Toole had unexpectedly returned early from a diplomatic mission to Russia and discovered the conspiracy. The morning after voicing his objections in a hallway conversation with Gerald Monde, he was found murdered in the palace park. It was too high a price to pay for freedom of speech.

Donal paced the carpet until all had left, then waved Patrick O'Dwyer out of the room. Alone with the former king, he began lecturing him, justifying his actions. “Whatever the attraction out there, and I suppose it to be a woman, she's less important than your duty to the court. Whatever your reasons for opposing us on the new domains, you should have given in to the majority. The nobility trusts you no longer. If I were you, I wouldn't go near the domain they offered; there's sure to be an assassin waiting.”

“Where would you have me go?” James' voice held a tinge of sarcasm, but he was using it to hide his relief. Apparently Donal did not suspect what he did with his time. If he knew about the lab...

Donal stopped pacing and glared. “Don't hector me. I'm not after your life, and didn't want the job they gave me, but it was either that or allow MacCarthy and Monde to fight it out. Besides, if it weren't for me, they'd have killed you.

“At the very least, disappear officially. Take the domain if you're foolish enough to want it. You and your cousin Devereaux were chosen to hold New Tara and Moody, with Holdom as alternate. Show up for the investiture disguised as Holdom or Devereaux, ask me on stage how my daughter Gertrude is doing in school, and I'll invest you with one of your own swords. A security man will get another to be your life-agent. Maybe you can fool the other nobility long enough to escape Tara with your life. Once you're in Irish North America, the agent and the other domain lord ought to be able to offer you some protection.

“However, in my opinion, you should leave the palace within the hour, before the ban is published. Use any name you like, but disappear. I don't want to know where. I won't be able to tell what I don't know. The palace is full of intrigue these days. Who knows what would happen if I were to hand you a royal sword, disguise or no?” He stopped and pointed his finger at the former king. “I'll not protect your back. You would be on your own, except for the one agent in the event you go to INA.”

James's first reaction was that Donal's was the advice of cowardice, and he would be better off boldly claiming the proffered domain and later raising an army to return to Tara and reclaim his rights, but he kept that counsel private, declining comment. Let Donal think he was insulted. He had his own plans for the domain investiture.

“In that case, how would a descendant of mine,” he asked disingenuously, “be able to re-enter the court and be identified?”

“If you take the domain, use the name and sword we offer you. If you don't, the kingship is abolished anyway, but you may save your life. If you know it, use the name your family had before they first became high kings, or make one up. Your descendants can fight their way back here. Perhaps they can pick up one or two noble swords along the way.”

He pulled one of the three royal-crested blades from the wall bracket over the large shield, displayed its blade for James, then collected the others and put all three under his arm. “We'll give the first back if you show, though most of us think you could do without,” Donal tartly announced.

“Frankly, it's time we were done with royalty and their worthless swords,” he added, his tone growing nasty. He would have melted them down, but the other nobles wanted them kept in circulation. Donal had brooded over this, then persuaded them to give the sword of Ireland, most powerful symbol of all, to a mere security agent who would be sent with the new holders to Irish North America. The others would go to James and a royal cousin to mollify the nobility.

James didn't respond. He already knew who would be given the swords. It was no matter. The three blades under Donal's arm were fakes. The genuine one he had selected as his own was carefully secured elsewhere. The other two would be distributed by his instructions, not Donal's.

He dissembled in what he hoped was a cowed voice, “Suppose I do not come, or my blade is lost?”

“Your problem. I'm sticking my neck out even to put you on the same level as the other old nobility. They guard their crested swords and precious family names. You can do likewise, especially with a little discreet help. But take my advice, and forget nobility altogether. You'll live longer.”

Donal looked around. “I plan to convert the old royal grant suite into a security office. We'll use this place whenever one of the many penniless aristocrats with nothing but a name and a fancy sword comes begging for a meal and a place to sleep. Maybe your grandson will find the place useful for a few nights, provided he can produce a blade.”

He turned to go, but whirled in the doorway to add one last barb. “But none of yours had better set foot downstairs unless they can stay sober and are a lot more amenable to the will of the court than you.” With that, Donal marched from the room, and a few moments later, James heard the outer door close behind him.

Patrick O'Dwyer re-entered the inner suite, looking embarrassed. He stood stiffly, awaiting orders.

“Relax, Patrick, I'm a commoner like you now.”

“If Your Majesty please.” Patrick raised his voice on the last word, sounding offended at the suggestion.

James sighed. The habits of lifetimes wouldn't change overnight. “What is it, Patrick?”

“Well, Your Majesty, it seems to me you have no money and no place to go, and,” the words tumbled out, “me and the missus would be glad to put you up for a few nights, and pass along what shamrocks we've got to get you on your feet, so to speak.”

James was touched by this devotion, and said so. “Patrick, you have served faithfully and loyally. Be true to the charge you were given to protect the throne, and keep the sword they give you safely hidden. Ensure your descendants can protect both it and the throne.

“I am not without resources, and will not involve you in my troubles. Now, report to the chief steward, and while the Metalibrary terminal still works for me, I'll send along instructions to reassign you to family Ryan. They will be good to you and yours.” As Patrick turned to go, eyes filled with emotion, James added, “May your descendants and mine serve each other and the Lord of Heaven.”

He heard Patrick mutter, “Amen, and God bless Your Majesty,” in a very low voice before he too went out. The door closed and latched behind him.

James quickly turned to his MT, sent the promised note to the steward, and closed his palace account. The last action would trigger a series of automatic processes making James IV a non-person to the system, and simultaneously create several assumed identities.

Rising, he shifted aside the crested shield on the wall to reveal a small safe. From this he took several blank identity cards and two that were already filled in. “Anyone aspiring to high position should work in Security,” he reflected aloud. The blanks and one other he secured under the false back of his pouch, and the one he planned to use immediately he placed in the main compartment beside a small store of cash. There was more elsewhere. As crowned king, he would have had to surrender his possessions, but as Prince James, he had accumulated considerable wealth by shrewd investment of his officer's salary.

He also had royalties from the invention of a portable MT device that landsmen and commercemen found useful to access their affairs on the network. He sold it under an assumed name as the “Portable Intelligence Enhancement Appliance” or “PIEA,” though it was commonly called a “pocket brain.” It was carried on the belt and activated by finger sensitive pads at both ends. There was little point in taking one with him—there were no transceivers installed where he was going—but the little machines provided a substantial income stream even his cousins knew nothing of.

He entered settings on a timer, activated devices he had built to protect the safe, closed and locked its door, and rotated the shield back to its place.

Satisfied, he stripped off his vest and shirt, and went to the washroom to make cosmetic alterations usually performed in a secret suite behind the Red Lion pub before leaving by its side door. He had a way to get there no one could have discovered, and had taken the streets to his destination but once. Betrayal of that trip was the trigger spurring the court's action. Thinking about it, James grinned and began whistling. Getting dismissed trumped being killed.

He removed his glued-on beard, revealing a small goatee beneath. Next, he removed the wig he'd made from his own hair that covered the short straight cut he'd always preferred. Both went into a sack, along with a few items of sentimental value. He had clothes and weapons elsewhere, and nothing else here mattered.

Donning a plain shirt and vest to replace the ornate ones he discarded, he surveyed the results in a mirror. What he saw looked for all the world like a sombre young landsman or commerceman, not at all

like a high lord. “It’s ironic,” he thought. “The commoner’s kilt is the same tartan as the high king’s.” It satisfied the legal fiction that the monarch was of no house but the court’s, and of no people but the commons. Moreover, it suited him. He’d wear no other.

He called up the hidden hallway monitors on the screens by the door, and idly watched the guard being changed in front of his suite. It took a few moments for the significance of the simple act to sink in, and when it did, his blood slowly turned to ice. The watch was not due to be rotated for nearly three hours.

“So, the game begins, and the opponents vie already to play ‘kill the King,’ do they?” he muttered. “So much for secrets, and a good thing I wasn’t going out that way.” He slid the deadbolt into place to slow later investigations, and strode to a closet door. This he opened and left ajar. It led to a secret hallway exit shaded by a decorative alcove around the corner from the guards. Let his pursuers discover that, he thought.

He glanced at the timepiece. In exactly five minutes a man roughly resembling the king’s description would be seen scurrying through that hall, and down the back stairs to the kitchen. He would leave by the palace grounds in the direction of a residential neighbourhood to the rear of the complex. It would be a humiliating departure, and sure to be laughed over by the pompous nobility.

False trail prepared, he palmed what looked like one of the ornate wooden panels, but was actually a sensitive plate keyed to his print. At this, a section of the wall slid silently aside, and he entered a small tunnel. On the count of three, the door closed behind him. Only one other person knew of this private royal entrance to the tunnel system security agents employed to leave the palace without being noticed.

“One stop on my way out,” he thought to himself, “and High King James IV will vanish into history without ever having been crowned.” His step took on a spring and a lightness it had not had for a long time. “After all, Donal guessed one thing aright. In a few days, I shall be free to marry the most beautiful woman in the world.”

The descendants of King Conn III (High King of Ireland 1912—1932) have been exhaustively documented. It is therefore rather odd that there is no trace prior to 1945 of two key family members, especially since DNA was routinely recorded along with other personal data at the time. This work supposes a local computer on the Metalibrary became corrupted in the aftermath of events surrounding the conclusion of the Three Worlds’ War, and the error propagated through the network. The story that both women originated on one of the other earths is surely romantic fantasy.

—from “*Pax Hibernia (The Peace of Ireland), 1939-1951*” by Richard Kent, later withdrawn.

Chapter Three

Sally and Lucy, four years later, en route to Calgary, July 7, 1945 (Tirdia)

The locomotive spewed roiling clouds of smoke into an otherwise pristine sky as it chuffed its human cargo across the hot prairies toward Calgary. Guests in the wheeled luxury hotel strung out behind were, variously, European immigrants seeking new homes far from the war, salesmen visiting their customers, lovers arranging a summertime tryst, cowboys heading to the stampede, or soldiers returning home from the front. Aboard the head end, the veteran crew of CPR Number One executed their tasks with the dull efficiency of endless repetition. Behind them in the mail car, postal clerks lazily sorted letters taken aboard at Medicine Hat. As always, sleeping car Lake Louise was coupled next. The conductor’s book

showed that most of her seats were ticketed, including upper and lower five.

Bunks long since made up, Lucy O'Brien and Sally O'Neill sat on the comfortably wide benches facing each other, alternating their gaze between the monotonous brown grasslands beyond the window and the aisle beside them. By prior arrangement, the adjacent seats were empty.

"Three years today," Sally observed, after the silence between them grew unbearable. She must tell her friend she shared the awful pain.

Lucy glanced back through suddenly blurred vision, then away at the window. She closed her eyes, not wanting to talk. Three years. Three long years since a massive explosion had levelled her childhood home at Galway, killing her parents and younger sister. Her friend and second cousin Sally, already orphaned when her parents and brother were killed in a German air raid on Belfast the previous year, had made Lucy's home her own, so was bereft of family a second time. The remembrance was overwhelming.

* * * *

July 1942—September 1944, Dublin

Returning to their flat near Trinity College following the funeral, Sally and Lucy no sooner opened the door than their landlady appeared, anxiously clutching a small package wrapped in brown paper.

"Sorry 'bout yer folks," Betsy Maguire opened, hesitantly, then, apparently deciding to get it over with, thrust the parcel into Lucy's hands. "This came after yer left fer Galway." Unable to say more, she turned abruptly away, closing the door on the two women and their grief.

Sally heard Lucy's sharp intake of breath as she turned the parcel to examine its postmark. "What is it, Luce?"

"It's from Da. He mailed it the day before..." Her finger traced the monogram of the Galway Hospital where her father had been senior resident physician, as her grandfather before him. Tears splashed on the brown paper. He had also been her inspiration, her confidant, her friend, and was almost as much for her cousin Sal. Both women had taken an M.D. from Imperial College, London, before returning to Ireland and branching into other fields. They had received many such packets. Da sent medical books or indulged their later interests with tomes on history and linguistics he found on his many travels.

The object they unwrapped was a featureless, dull-grey, solid slab the size of a large pocketbook. On opposite ends of one side near the shorter edges there were two rows of four indentations, with a larger depression on each end of the opposite surface.

"Whatsit?" Sally whispered once the pair regained some measure of emotional control.

"Don't know, Sal." Indeed, it mattered little. Hand trembling, she held out a paper scrap. "Read Da's note, will you. I can't manage."

Sally scanned the half-sheet of stationery and complied, as they flopped into chairs on either side of their tiny parlour.

"Dearest Daughters. I trust this finds you well and relaxed now the summer is well under way and you are no longer teaching. Give each other a hug for me and one from your mother." Sally stopped, her voice caught. It was how he always began. There was a long silence before Sally could continue.

“The enclosed item was in the effects of a forty-year-old Caucasian male brought in by the constables following a fight near the Coach Inn. He died shortly after from multiple wounds inflicted by a sharp instrument, apparently a sword similar to the toys with which you two fence. Needless to say, I haven't mentioned the matter to your mother.”

There was a longer pause, as both wept freely, remembering how Mrs. O'Brien fretted so over their unusual hobbies. Lucy could hear her asking, in her characteristic northern music, “Why not do something else for your exercise? You both take after your great-grandfather's ways far too much. A fine and lordly man, he was, six foot four if an inch, but always fighting, and came to a sad end following a brawl in a pub because of it. Now here's you two chopping at each other with swords, and throwing people around with your ju-jitsu. What man wants a six-foot bride with more degrees than you can shake a stick at, and hobbies like those? I may never have grandchildren.”

They'd never told her their prowess had led to them being drafted by their government as reservists and given extensive combat training, both unarmed and with several other equally “unladylike” weapons. Supposedly, this was in case Britain or the United States breached neutrality and invaded troublesome Ireland. Surely it could never happen, and mother needn't know, they'd reasoned. Now, she never would. Nor would she see another generation, if ever there were one.

Voice shaking, Sally resumed several minutes later. “I don't know what this object is, though it may be war-related. Someone thinks it important, as there have been two apparent attempts to steal it. Keep it safe, and we'll study it together when we three come up to visit at the end of the month. Your ever-loving Da.”

Sally and Lucy prodded halfheartedly at the little box to no effect that night, and next day Lucy casually dumped it with other duffel in the linguistics department basement storage room at the college. There it would lay forgotten for months—there was too much to think about.

A week after its arrival, following an Irish studies symposium they'd helped organize, a sharp knock at their flat door interrupted their evening reading.

“I'll get it, Luce,” The latest copy of Irish History Journal folded under her arm, Sally eased the door open a crack and peered down at the balding man who shifted his feet impatiently in the hall.

“Father Damon, come in.” She unhooked the chain and invited him with a cheer she didn't feel. “Have a seat.” The priest was not here about their spiritual needs. A long-time member of the Fianna Fáil party, who now spent his time toiling for deValera's government, he often asked them to carry messages when they attended conferences abroad. Neither woman cared for clandestine work, and they'd resisted more than minimal involvement in his shadowy world.

Damon was edgy, blunt, and impatient.

“You're both going to the CMA meetings in Montreal next week.” It wasn't a question.

Sally replied, taken aback both by his tone and his knowledge of their business. “We're speakers. It's been arranged for months. We travel with a party of four other physicians.”

“One of them is an English spy.” Damon's snarl made the words sound filthy.

“We're not interested,” Sally replied, sharply. Lucy shook her head in agreement. Neither liked the

English, but betraying professional colleagues seemed too much.

Damon calmed his voice with an effort. “The taoiseach thought otherwise. He specifically asked for you two.”

Sally and Lucy glanced at each other, not comprehending. What would Ireland's prime minister want of them? They'd never met Taoiseach Eamon deValera.

“Get someone else. We've other things to think about.” Lucy stood, dismissively.

“I know,” he agreed, “your family. They're why he sent me.”

Dread settled over Lucy as she abruptly sat down again. She'd only finished the paperwork for the estate this morning, and was hoping to put the horror behind her. Now...

“Your father treated a foreign national just before he died.”

Thick, nauseous silence settled over the two women.

“There's been activity in Galway ever since.”

“What are you saying?” Lucy demanded, teeth clenched.

“Our theory is the patient was a German spy, his assailants British agents. They killed him for something he knew. They're still poking around town.”

Lucy's head swam. Sally started to hiccough, a sure sign of extreme stress. Damon continued relentlessly. “Obviously they thought he might have talked to your father, and were making sure.”

There was more, but they heard little. And in the end, Damon's story left them no choice. Revenge being the most visceral of emotions in the susceptible, they agreed to do his dirty work.

Three weeks later, when they returned from Montreal with enough evidence to send a fashionable Dublin surgeon to prison for the duration, their door was unlocked, and Damon awaited inside.

“Holy Moley,” Sal exclaimed. “What happened here?”

The flat had been hit by a tornado. Books, clothing, and other effects were strewn about the floor, cushions had been ripped open, and their beds turned over.

“Somebody searched your place while you were away,” Damon remarked, unnecessarily. “The door was unlocked when I arrived.”

Nothing had been taken, but several irreplaceable photographs were torn from their frames, and many breakable items had to be replaced. It was too much. Sally and Lucy felt violated. From that day, they were enthusiastic members of Ireland's secret service.

Over the next year, they sounded out academics for loyalty, recruited a few, got to know agents from other countries, and went on several field assignments. But it gradually became apparent that all was not as they initially thought.

In the face of withering public reproach from both English and Americans, Ireland remained officially neutral. After all, deValera could scarcely have any other policy and keep his office. But when a well-known German agent made a too-public remark to the effect that the Irish knew how to die for their country but had not yet begun to learn how to fight for her, Sally and Lucy were sent to pay him a quiet visit, crack a few ribs and teach some respect.

Later that week they managed the cases of four fliers downed in a dogfight over Irish territory. The Brit and Yank they quietly provided with first aid, supplies, and escorted to the border. Their two German counterparts went straight to prison camp. One of the latter, not realizing Lucy spoke fluent German, resignedly remarked, "It is as we were told. The lying Irish vermin secretly fight for the English. We will rot on this miserable island until the Fuehrer fumigates them for more living room."

Aghast at the implications, Lucy used her security clearance to check other records, and soon verified that Ireland was indeed quietly helping her loyal children to enlist with England and her allies. Tens of thousands had joined up directly from the south, travelled to the north, or signed up in England. The communication centre logs showed nearly ten times the message traffic to Whitehall as to Berlin.

"Why?" demanded Lucy of the priest, "deValera surely knows. Whose side is Ireland really on?"

"Her own," Damon retorted angrily. She had touched a sore point. He made no secret of his passionate hatred for everything English. This day, confronted with their discoveries, he radiated fury in palpable waves. The priest was a full foot shorter than either woman, but when he raged so, they feared the man.

"Ireland's political masters have determined the Germans are the greater evil," he admitted through clenched teeth, making it clear he thought otherwise. "But mark my words." He changed to lecture mode, pounding one fist against his other palm. "This war weakens the English more than they know. Once it ends, her empire will slip away, and Ireland will emerge from her shadow to centre stage. We shall prosper, they shall suffer." The last word was a shout.

"We still don't like it," Sally insisted, sourly. "You could have told us."

"I'll give you something in return," he offered, calming himself with obvious effort. "We've caught a couple of agents nosing around Dublin harbour. They're Will Featherstone, one of Intrepid's men, and the American, Douglas Boone. You can expel them." He winked.

Taking his hint, Sally "accidentally" broke the Brit's arm in the process. "It made up," she told Lucy, "for having to work with them."

But they became used to the cooperation, and the summer of 1943 saw them spend six weeks at Canada's Camp X learning the latest tricks of their third trade. On the way home, they stopped at the learned society meetings in Oxford, conducted some clandestine business for Damon, then went for a walk away from the university.

"A farthing for your thoughts, Luce."

Lucy glanced around. Sally leaned casually against the railing of a bridge over a marshy area. To her left was the row of old stone buildings constituting Oxford's colleges. To the right, the road vanished up the hill to a residential neighbourhood. No one else was around.

"We have been pretty quiet, haven't we?"

“Something bothering you?”

“Sal, we know three more ways to kill, several new suicide techniques, and now carry two guns and a garrote each, along with half a dozen pills, miniature cameras and microphones. We've just come from betraying one of our own agents here at Oxford to the Jerries in order to plant false information about an Allied invasion.”

“We could quit?”

“Could we? Remember the last time we tried to turn down an assignment?”

“When Father Damon hinted he would make a fuss with the Archbishop about us working at Trinity?” Sally recalled. “Yeah, I remember.” She paused. “He has us by the hair, doesn't he?” They were silent for several minutes. The very pragmatic Bishop of Galway had taken a personal interest in them as tall, gawky, teenage prodigies, approving their original attendance at the Protestant school, provided they attended Mass faithfully. Years later, he had also agreed to let the women do further work at Trinity, and eventually to take faculty positions there. Thus far, the Archbishop of Dublin had chosen not to notice, but if the matter were officially brought to his attention...

“We do it for Ireland, Luce,” Sally offered, weakly.

“So Damon says, Sal.”

“What do you mean?”

“Suppose he decided we were expendable?”

Sally nodded slowly. Damon was capable of it. “We're surely too valuable, Luce.”

“Does it matter? Are we better people for all this, Sal? When God weighs our good deeds against our bad when we die, will He let us enter Heaven, or send us away?”

Sally looking into her friend's eyes, and seeing her own fears mirrored, added to herself, “And worse still, what if our Protestant colleagues are right, and no number of good deeds matter at heaven's gate?” Aloud, she said only, “But Damon's a priest. Surely if he gives our orders...” She trailed off.

“But can he, Sal? Does he have the authority to make us betray our friends?” She patted her arm holster. “To kill?”

This time when they returned home, both their offices at Trinity had been ransacked. Again, nothing was taken, and with several willing students and tutors assisting, things were back in order by the end of the week, though behind more securely locked doors.

When they told Damon, he shrugged it off. “Comes with the territory.”

Lucy stifled her anger at his indifference.

“I bin thinkin', Luce,” Sally remarked the following Sunday afternoon following Mass at the Pro-Cathedral.

“Sounds dangerous, Sal.” Lucy wasn't happy with her own thoughts.

“The black hats want something specific from us.”

“You watch too many American westerns,” Lucy grumped. “They probably want to see if we've left any of Father Damon's precious government secrets lying about. As if we'd have to write things down like a couple of undergraduates who can't remember their own names.”

“We didn't know any secrets when they tore our flat apart.”

“True.” Lucy laid down her copy of *The Lancet*. The article on promising new antibiotics could wait. “What then?”

“Remember the jigger your Da sent us? His letter said somebody tried to steal it.”

Lucy felt cold as she picked up Sally's train of thought and suddenly made several nasty connections. “What if that's why Damon recruited us? Maybe he's the one who searched the flat and our offices.”

“He's never said anything about the jigger.” Sally sounded doubtful.

“You still trust him, after all the lies he's spun us? I'm beginning to think it wasn't the Brits back home at Galway. What if it was the Jerries, and Father Damon strung us along to recruit us?”

“He's a priest, Luce.” But Sally sounded more doubtful than ever, and Lucy knew she'd been thinking along the same lines. Damon was just as capable of using hidden pressure as he was of employing brute force. There was no more morality in the world's second oldest profession than there was in its elder sister.

“He claims to be a modern man, able to deal with political and military activities independently from religion. What kind of society would we have if everyone made separate airtight compartments for God and daily life that way? I'm not sure it's even possible. Surely we are what we do.”

She grimaced, then slapped a hand on the arm of her chair for emphasis. “Besides, he's a spy, Sal. Spies lie. It's our job. Remember when he told me to go to bed with the opposition leader, and how angry he was when I refused? We're nothing but pieces on the game board to him, Sal.” Suddenly, Lucy rose from her seat, took her purse from the hook by the door, and began transferring its contents into a larger one, a “special office” product, oversize, with several less-than-obvious compartments.

“We going somewhere?” Sally asked.

“It's only a matter of time before whoever is after us finds out about the lockup in language hall. If it's the jigger they want, let's make them take it from us, direct and personal.”

“You're going to carry it around in your purse?”

“They have to fight us both to get it that way, Sal. If it's Damon, no way he can take the two of us. Besides, we already carry plenty of other toys we'd have trouble explaining. C'mon, let's get over there.”

The worst thing that can happen to a society is not that it suffer plague or lose a war, but that it stagnate toward slow but inevitable death. Despite the best efforts of the royals, Hibernia fell into both moral and technological lassitude following her suppression of the great rebellions of 1913-1919. The revival popularly known as the Children's Crusade stemmed the tide for a time on one front, but a measure of

Ireland's bankruptcy of ideas is that the only new device coming to manufacture in the entire first half of the century was the PIEA, the now ubiquitous portable network access tool, and its inventor was anonymous.

—from Twentieth Century Hibernia by Ars Seanacha Jana Whelan

Chapter Four

Sally and Lucy, September 1944, Dublin (Tirdia)

Lucy sat at her office desk huddled over the object they now both suspected had cost them their family. Sally stood behind, facing the door. While Lucy unwrapped the jigger, she glanced at its window where gold letters proclaimed the occupant to be L. O'Neill, Professor of Linguistics. Sally had a duplicate office in History, and they shared a third in the surgery department at Health Sciences.

She stared at the package's contents again, then her eye caught the old Fada bullet radio on a nearby shelf. "A bakelite carving," she announced, looking down again. "Maybe there's a spy's message scratched on the back."

"Some other type of Catalin," countered Lucy holding it up at an angle to the light. "Look how smooth it is. Not a mark anywhere. It's like polished obsidian, but lighter." She tried to score the surface with her fingernail, to no avail.

Sally dug into her purse, and pulled out the heirloom engagement ring that had been her mother's and grandmother's. "This'll mark it."

It didn't. Lucy whistled. "Coated with a layer of diamond," she concluded

"Or something harder. A super-plastic, maybe. No wonder somebody wants this thing. We know lots of secrets, Luce, but nothing like this. Do we..."

"...tell Damon? Not a chance. I don't trust him." Lucy finished her friend's thought as she turned the mysterious box in her hands, caressing it, feeling out its shape. She held it with the long edges sideways, the eight indentations down, and the two larger up. Suddenly her fingers and thumb slipped naturally into the five little hollows on one end, and her mind lit up with possibilities. She put her other hand in the same position at the opposite end, and pressed both thumbs.

"Holy Moley, Luce, look what the jigger's doing!"

The entire top of the slab was awash in steady light, displaying two rows of small pictures on both edges, one by each finger. There were unfamiliar words in the centre.

"It's a miniature cathode ray screen," Sally remarked, reaching a hand over Lucy's shoulder to brush a finger against the surface.

"Not much room for a tube here, Sal." Lucy turned it sideways. "It's not half an inch thick. Besides, this thing's in colour. Tubes don't display colour."

"More secret than ultra, then. What does the message in the middle say?"

“I dunno.”

“You're the linguist. Can't you read them? They're Gaelic. Even I can see that.”

Lucy scrutinized the inscription. It did have the form of Gaelic, but several were unfamiliar. Weeks later, when she could translate them all, she learned they read:

Personal Intelligence Enhancement Appliance

made by Moody electronics, 1943

After that, they called it a PIEA instead of a jigger. It didn't take long to discover that pressing twice with a finger was supposed to do something related to the nearest picture. However, eight of the ten choices displayed one of two cryptic messages for a few seconds, then returned to the starting point. She would eventually render these as “Network Unavailable,” and “Provide Password Sequence,” but neither was much help even once she knew the words.

“How'd they get all that stuff in there, Luce?”

“Beats me, Sal. There's no connectors.”

“It's a wireless, then. How's it work without being plugged in?”

“Gotta be some kinda batteries.”

“I was looking at a battery catalogue in the lab just last week, Luce. Nothin' available that small. Besides, there's no opening to get them out and change them.”

* * * *

When they weren't busy with government business, research or teaching, the PIEA occupied their spare time during the winter of 1943—1944. They got a scare when the display faded out after their first half dozen sessions, but soon discovered that if the box received enough bright light, especially sunlight, it quickly returned to working order.

“Light to electricity,” concluded Sally. “Score one more secret technology for whoever's boffins made this thing.”

One of the two pictures that led anywhere consisted of four symbols that proved to be arithmetic operators. Pressing the adjacent finger turned the screen into a kind of calculator, but much of the notation was unfamiliar, and they soon tired of trying to relate it to what they knew. Later translations were little help without context.

“After all,” Lucy complained, looking up bleary-eyed from her notes one December night. “What are ‘economic calculus,’ ‘network traffic efficiency,’ ‘nanomachine information capacity’ or ‘meme velocity parameters?’ And who denominates money in shamrocks and distance in staves two metres long, but mass in kilograms?”

However, the tenth miniature picture, the one resembling an opened textbook, fronted a goldmine. Pressing beside it produced a new screen without complaint, offering two more pictures, each in turn yielding the contents of an actual book. Pressing on a thumb “turned the pages” forward or back one at a

time, and using the other fingers flipped them faster. This much they discovered the first night.

During a later session, Sally commented, “The type's clearer and sharper than if the words were printed on paper, and the illustrations are full-colour publication-ready quality. I betcha this thing could store lots more'n two books. What are they, Luce?”

“Near as I can tell, one of them's an English-Irish dictionary, the other a story of some kind.”

“What do you mean by ‘near as I can tell’?”

“The Gaelige isn't the same as ours, even though it claims to be Irish.”

“One of the islands? Wales? Breton?”

“Different from them all. It calls itself Orthogaelic.”

“You're the linguist.” Sally sounded doubtful.

Lucy glanced behind, slightly annoyed. “Well, here's one out of the wee box for you, oh great historian. Ever heard of King James III?”

“Child King of Scotland, crowned in 1460 and deposed by his nobles because...”

Lucy shook her head, and read haltingly from the device in her hand, translating as she went. “No, High King James III, ruler of Ireland from his capital of Tara after 1932, preceded by his father Conn III, and supposed to be succeeded by his son, who would be William I.”

There was a long silence, broken at last by Sally. “There's nothing at Tara but ruins, Luce. You're reading a little folks' tale.”

But the PIEA was too intriguing to dismiss so lightly, and the pair continued to spend many hours carefully studying the dictionary. It had sufficient detail in its entries to be halfway to an encyclopedia, yet little enough to be tantalizingly obscure. Lucy became puzzled then alarmed as they worked out the contents.

“The one electric book, if we can call it that,” concluded Lucy one midwinter's evening, “describes Gaelige as it might have been, a strong, vibrant, confident, living language filled with the same warlike images common in pre-tenth century Ireland, but complete with all the words for modern concepts and then some.”

She waved the PIEA and lectured Sally as she paced their tiny flat. “Orthogaelic is a language of power, not of oppression. Where our language reflects the bittersweet poignancy of a defeated people fighting futile, whimsical rebellions, there's no such thing here, Sal. This is a commanding tongue, spoken by conquerors, leaders, and governors of the affairs of others.”

“It's also impossible, Luce,” Sally observed, wryly. “Too many non-existent words and fanciful inventions. You need to write more research papers and spend less time on yarns. What, for instance, is a ‘metalibrary terminal?’ Why do so many English entries bear the notation “not yet extant on Tirdia’?”

“It has just enough of both consistencies and inconsistencies to be real, Sal. I'd answer by saying that in the Gaelige-to English-section, the translator is working from the larger vocabulary to the smaller. But

here's a harder puzzle. There are dozens of entries on swords, knives, fighting sticks, and hand-to-hand combat, yet every English reference to bombs, guns, or even bows is put back into the Gaelic of the PIEA with the added comment 'forbidden projectile weapon.' Why?"

"If you're saying 'pretend to take it seriously,'" replied Sally lazily, still playing devil's advocate, "The book describes a civilization where people fight with swords rather than guns, a lower technology than ours. That's exactly why it can't be real," she insisted.

"Why not?"

"Because, Luce," Sally insisted, slapping her hand against a sheaf of Lucy's notes, "what about words like 'computing machine'? Modern as can be, but there aren't ten people outside Bletchley Park besides us who know about the code breakers. Ergo, this has to be an agent's notes, consistent with what Damon suggested happened at Galway."

"Kept on a machine you and I know can't exist. Don't you realize? This PIEA is itself just such a computing device, and one of incredible power packed into a miniature package. Colossus takes up a whole room, Sal," Lucy reminded her.

She tapped the front of the PIEA with one hand. "The calculator in here can do better work on crunching statistics or numerical integration than any machine I've ever heard of, secret or otherwise. I ran my research on the new penicillins through the routines, and in less than a second got results the boys in math would take weeks to produce. And watch this."

She held the PIEA where Sally could see the screen, and said, "PIEA off," in Orthogaelic.

Sally whistled. "It hears and obeys. PIEA," she added, "turn yourself on."

Lucy saw Sally blink at evident success, and spun the device around again. "Besides all that, what about this entry I found today?" She pressed a finger several times and found the Gaelic entry she wanted.

"Atomic bomb. Last used against the city of Nagasaki to end the 1745—1750 East-West war between the Irish led European states and the Japanese confederacy. Forbidden weapon.' In the English part, it says, 'Warning. Such devices projected to be extant on Tirdia no later than 1945.'"

Sally dismissed it flatly. "No such war ever took place, Luce."

"You're not listening, Sal. Forget their war. How does the writer know the word? If the Yanks knew somebody was tossing around casual mentions of their Manhattan hellbomb project, they'd have a cat."

"The PIEA was owned by a master spook, somebody like us who knows all the dirt," Sally insisted.

"Cortes, Bolo, or that American fellow Boone we kicked out of Ireland? I can't imagine those cowboys using something like this. For all their airs, they're nothing but barely literate hoods. If it weren't for the war, they'd be in small-time crime or on skid road."

Sally grinned. "We're spending too much time in Canada. You're picking up their expressions. What about Schmidt?"

"A possibility," Lucy granted. The German spymaster was reputed to be a man of high education and refined tastes. She continued her argument. "What are 'nanomachines,' and how were they used to kill

millions of people at the same time?”

Sally laughed. “It’s from the future, then.”

“But,” countered Lucy, “The inscription on the first page says:

‘Prepared under the authority of his most Christian Majesty James III, Seanacha and Brehon of Tara, High King of Ireland, the Isles and all the Earth; ruler of the Federation of Worlds.’ The subscription beneath is, ‘by the King’s Information Office at Royal Avenue, Tara, 1936.’

“It’s the contrivance of someone writing a fantasy for one of the pulps, or perhaps a joke. It can’t be real, Luce. It has no possible value. There’s no such city, no such street, no such office. Never has been.”

“Right. This thing has an impossible case, and contains state secrets it defines as casually as if they’ve lain by the side of the road for centuries. On the other hand, you say it doesn’t exist. It’s not that easy, Sal. Take the date at face value for a minute. How could the Yanks’ atomic secrets have been known nine years ago, before they even started?”

Sally started to object, but Lucy interrupted. “And, why is the English word ‘lawyer’ translated into Gaelic ‘a pariah who practices law for money?’ Don’t they have a word?”

Sally blinked, and Lucy saw this point had struck home. There was enough atomic information in the journals to speculate about bombs, but everyone knew what a lawyer was. “What do you think, Luce?” Sally finally asked.

“I don’t know,” Lucy admitted, tilting her head up to stare at the ceiling. “What if there’s another world out there, Sal? One where Ireland’s high king rules everything? One with,” she recited from the dictionary, “noble families, a code of honour, and a covenant of the living that prevents them from using certain weapons? What if, Sal?”

“Forget it, Luce. If there were, it would have all the problems our world does, and more. Besides, the Tara we know is a ruin from which no high king has ruled for ten centuries.” But Sally no longer sounded convinced.

After several more such arguments, they compromised to the extent that they both learned the language of the PIEA, and spoke it between themselves, Sally accepting Lucy’s argument that in their business it was useful to have a means of communication no one else could easily understand. “Orthogaelic,” as they now called it, was a lot like both English and their own Irish Gaelic in its underlying patterns, and eventually they understood it as well as one could from a book.

They had to re-learn some words after Lucy accidentally discovered she could activate a mode that read aloud whatever she selected on the screen, even though no speaker grille was visible. “Vibrates the whole box,” she concluded. But even she still wondered, “What use is an imaginary language?”

During their third year as spies, matters became more serious. Damon had them visit several Killarney partisans who were vocally anti-English, and warn them to be silent lest they be neutralized. He showed up at their flat again the following day.

“Those two Wop agents you uncovered in Mayo last week? Go back and kill them.”

Sally was aghast. “You, a priest of Holy Mother Church, order us to commit murder? We would go to

Hell.”

“It’s in the interests of your country. Besides, you have a special dispensation from the archbishop. All of us in the service do. We sent you to Camp X to learn how to kill efficiently for a reason. Do you think we’d teach you, yet not use you?”

They argued, but this, too, they did. And the Italians were only the first. Lucy and Sally tried to harden themselves, but couldn’t.

“I hate what we’ve become, Sal. We were physicians and respected academics, and the world still sees us that way. But we’re ruthless killers.” She was having trouble sleeping nights, and felt wracked by guilt.

Sally looked at her hands, and saw blood there, despite having washed six times since they’d returned from assassinating a Brazilian military attache Damon claimed had been selling secrets to both the British and Germans. “Is there any way out, Luce?” she asked in a very small voice. “Is there any way to stop?”

* * * *

Sally and Lucy, Calgary, July 7, 1945

“Wake up, Luce, you lazy old sawbones. We’re in Calgary.”

Lucy snapped alert as the dull rumble of the train wheels gave way to screeching brakes. A friendly insult was an “all clear” wake-up signal. She felt her gun hand relax as she grinned at her partner. The trip had been somewhat relaxing, despite what they were here to do.

Sally carefully assessed the other passengers as they made their way to the sleeper door. Her arm rested with false nonchalance atop a small, painstakingly-aged duffel bag. The leather-covered steel strap locking it to her wrist was invisible under the cuff of her dress.

Sally noted Lucy’s glance. “I’ll be glad when our shopping trip is done. Maybe we can relax at the Stampede on Monday before heading back to Oshawa.” It was obvious cover, what onlookers would expect.

“Not as likely as I thought at first, considering what we’ve come to buy,” Lucy replied grimly. She stood, ducked her head under the upper berth locker, and entered the now-empty aisle to scan the car. She stretched grandly, then smoothed down her blouse and skirt, economically checking the weapons beneath. She reached for her own bag and peered through the window, taking hazard inventory. No one else remained in their car, only one obvious watcher was outside. Nevertheless, she would go first and re-inspect the platform before Sally exited.

She tried to put herself into the frame of mind occupied by fellow travellers and the sundry onlookers at the Calgary CPR station. She knew what they should see, but what would they? Not two women who faded into the background, for when it comes to wartime espionage, appearances aren’t merely deceiving, they sometimes have to be pressed into enthusiastic prevarication.

She took several deep breaths, then flexed her arm. A single-shot pistol snapped into her hand. She eased it back into the arm holster, satisfied it was working.

“The bold, confident route as usual, Sal?”

“We can scarcely do anything else, Luce. Let's hope there's not too big a welcoming committee.”

* * * *

The two women who stepped from the train were distinguished-looking, of professional mien, and vaguely thirty years, laughing, enjoying their vacation. Remarkably tall, O'Neill and O'Brien yet managed not to be too noticeable after one glance, though their photographs suggested restless, haunted eyes when he studied them closely.

Michael Sloane, newly appointed Commander of the Calgary RCMP, knew better than to accept them at face value. It wasn't often he had to decrypt messages these days, but the latest concerning these two had occupied hours. The original and his working papers were now ground and scattered ashes. There were things even in these latter stages of the war of which a wise counterintelligence officer left no possible trace.

Sloane lounged in plainclothes nearby as the two women waited for their luggage to arrive from the baggage car. He reviewed the memorized dossier, comparing the pair to their descriptions.

“Salty” Sally O'Neill, reported to be the bolder and more reckless of the two, had a full head of red hair and a smile full of good-natured Irish freckles. She wore a brown plaid skirt below a light-brown leather jacket. Her companion and second cousin, the leader of the pair, was “Lucky” Lucy O'Brien. She had shoulder length brown hair, a smooth but slightly flushed complexion, and dressed similarly, except in green. A matching purse hung from her shoulder. Both carried small travel bags, one of which supposedly contained twenty thousand of Uncle Sam's greenbacks. Sloane doubted it did, and supposed the money would come via another route.

He glanced at their feet, and grunted quietly. Both wore dark brown flat-soled shoes, not the high heels most women favoured. They were indeed about his own height of just over six feet—very tall women, and it wasn't a misprint in the file.

Two doctorates apiece, both professors at Dublin, frequently speakers at learned society meetings, and respected academics. They didn't inhabit his kind of world, but could plausibly be in town to address the surgeons' convention at the Palliser Hotel.

Their cover was unusual, but effective. Everybody in their academic circles knew them. Anyone else who looked twice was unlikely to forget, but surely wouldn't imagine them as spies. It wasn't the self-effacing Canadian way Sloane had learned, but if it worked for the Irish, who could argue? “Blatantly obvious enough to be mundane,” he thought, as he merged into the shadows.

The last to retrieve their baggage, the two women proceeded down a deserted hallway toward the exit, Sloane casually following at a distance. Suddenly, just as they passed a darkened doorway, he started in surprise, nearly crying aloud, as a knife-holding hand sprang from the shadows to slash at Lucy.

She sensed the attack immediately. “Rube!” she called to her friend, whirling and striking the man's hand, to send the knife clattering to the stone floor. The force of her blow caught him off guard, making him stumble. Grasping his coat, Lucy pulled him forward, and in a split second the fellow was flat on his face. By now, Sally had her foot on the back of his neck, but the man was already unconscious from the blow she had delivered on the way down.

Sloane faded into a doorway while the two quietly and efficiently rifled the fellow's pockets, apparently finding nothing of value. They glanced around, hefted the cases they had dropped, and nonchalantly

strolled off.

Sloane sighed, unsure whether to be relieved or worried. According to the dossier, the pair were skilled in various forms of unarmed combat, crack shots, expert knife fighters, and said to know fencing. The two were Irish nationalists, deadly effective agents for their government, and part of an elite, “top-secret ultra” group who had eliminated a number of spies operating on Irish soil. Until now, he hadn't believed the reports. Now he wondered if their attacker was dead.

“How many people have yon lovely ladies killed?” he wondered, and shuddered. His superiors hadn't told him what the two women were to buy in Calgary. Nor was he to interfere in their business, just keep them surreptitiously under observation until they completed contact. Then ... He sighed deeply.

Sloane was a naturalized Canadian born an Ulsterman, and had no love for Papists. No doubt that was why he had been picked for this assignment. Still, when the war with Japan ended, as that with Germany had already, he hoped he wouldn't have to do this kind of thing any more. He didn't like killing people, especially women. However, orders were orders. Give the two quiet assistance to ensure they made their buy, then eliminate both. The items he retrieved were to be passed directly to Ottawa, bypassing the boffins at Camp X, thence, he presumed, to the Americans, rather than the British. No mention had been made of budget limits for the operation, so whatever was going on, it was class one.

As soon as the women left the station, Sloane hand-signalled his backup. He quickly ascertained the failed assailant was alive, and ordered him taken to the city jail for questioning. He followed outside, continuing to take care he was invisible to his quarry.

* * * *

Sally and Lucy walked lazily from the station to the Palliser hotel next door.

“Who do you suppose the mug was working for, Luce?”

“The Japanese, the English, the Spanish, the Russians, the Americans—who knows? Everyone's hand is against Éire these days. Perhaps he wanted us out of the game. Maybe he was looking for money,” she added.

“He wasn't one of us, a professional.” But Lucy doubted the fellow was a common thief. She wished there had been time to wake him and extract useful information, but the station had been too public for proper interrogation. When they lifted his head by the hair from the floor, his face bore a distinct Irish look, so she wondered if an anti-deValera faction was on their trail.

But, most telling, the fellow had tried for her purse, not Sally's bag where they'd been told to carry the money. The steel wire woven into the strap had nicked his knife, and he could never have gotten it. But it was there she kept the PIEA.

Assume he knew what he wanted. Conclusion one: he either didn't know about their mission and the money, or he didn't care. Conclusion two: somehow he did know what was in her bag. Lucy considered matters as the pair walked slowly across the parking area while heat rose from the asphalt in hypnotic waves.

By now the two had their fill of deValera's duplicity and the priest's schemes, but they'd thought themselves finished with spying once the European war ended and they'd been assigned to writing lines for victory speeches. How ironic what they'd penned for Churchill: “...we left Mr. deValera's government

to frolic with the German and later with the Japanese government to their hearts' content." The taoiseach was determined to maintain the fiction of English-Irish enmity, and Churchill was glad to pay the price of cooperation in return for secret help throughout the war.

Then Damon showed up demanding one more mission. "We've still the Japs to deal with," he insisted, "and Intrepid needs you to train new agents at Camp X."

After arriving in Canada, they had accepted the suddenly revised mission offered at Bill Donovan's unexpected briefing, but were determined this would be their last foray into the field. Were they expected in Calgary? Impossible. This operation was too important, too secret, too rushed. Surely no one else could know.

Thus, today's assault, she was sure, marked at least the fifth attempt to steal the PIEA. Why? In how many games of intrigue were they pawns?

She considered the second book the device housed. Entitled "The Peace", and written in Orthogaelic, it was a candidate to be the very romantic pulp for which Sally insisted the dictionary must have been created. This became evident when they knew enough to make out the first two chapters, which Sally heard Lucy read aloud, then refused any more, dismissing it as "silly, sappy, sentimental fiction."

Sally stopped and shrugged off her jacket to carry it over her arm. Lucy followed suit. They'd been overdressed for the day, not expecting this much heat. As Sally glanced around, Lucy couldn't help wondering, "What if the fantastic story of the gallant but uncrowned James IV were true?"

Humankind is fallen on all the earths, yet on each of the six planets there is such a thing as honour. These facts have three consequences for soldiers: first, war is ugly, brutal, and devastating wherever it is found; second, warriors invariably have rules by which their deadly game is to be played; and third, there will always be those who ignore the rules. Neither can one trust history books or the writers of popular plays to give an accurate view of the shame or the valour, for both are determined by who wins the battles and writes the accounts. Take the popular and often performed stage play "Death in the Glen." For one thing, most people would never have heard of Morgan's Glen if it were not for the anonymous playwright. After all, there is a battle almost every year in Ireland. For another, though the court troops undeniably won a battle at Glenmorgan, almost nothing else in the work was thought to be authentic for some two decades, yet almost everything was. On the other hand, we now know that historical accounts of the event universally accepted during that same time as correct were deliberately falsified by both sides. Observe for yourself; don't take the word of others for anything; you may discover you know far less than you thought. As Jack Devereaux learned at Glenmorgan, ignorance is as fatal as being unarmed.

—from the Kilkarney cadet training manual.

Chapter Five

Brian McIlhargey, three decades later (1977), Glenmorgan (Hibernia)

It was mid June of 1977 on the home island of Hibernia, whose name her citizens chauvinistically applied to the entire planet her scholars call Ortho. Warm nights had banished the last wisps of winter's gloom, her days were gloriously alive, and young love bloomed afresh alongside her spring flowers.

It was an equally glorious time to die, for, the Irish being who they are, it was also the season when the crown's warriors march to battle, each one claiming loyalty to the throne of Tara, mistress of the United

Irish Kingdom, and capital of two worlds.

One such soldier woke slowly and painfully to the certain knowledge the forces he had trained and fought with had been thoroughly routed. He and a small group of his troops had made a fine account of themselves at the end, but it was after most of his army were dead, captured, or melted away in flight. Last stands, as any soldier knows, are not all the romanticists claim them to be. Moreover, winners write the official chronicle of their glorious victory. Losers may retain their honour, but history affords them little glory to go with it.

This battle was over. The halls of Tara's palace would never see the boots of the defeated rebels. Free from challenge, the eleventh Donal could now solidify his rule over Hibernia and the Federation of worlds from the court of Ireland of the Emerald Isles. Meanwhile, two royal families were no more.

The first surprising thing was that he still lived. Back-to-back with his lieutenant, he had dealt with two opponents at a time for several minutes running, losing track of how many he killed during the battle, but superior numbers eventually wore him down. He was barely aware, through a curtain of blood from numerous facial cuts, when the savage stroke from a third enemy struck his sword arm. Only the clotting agent and other drugs with which his system was loaded prevented him from bleeding to death.

He opened his eyes and found himself in a standard issue army field hospital tent. Nearby, he heard muted sounds of a victorious army celebrating. Taking in his surroundings with a practised eye, he made silent inventory as he went. "DNA sequencer, top flight surgical facilities, analytical lab, metaterminal to the central computer, and all the best gear Tara's shamrocks can buy. The Donal spared no expense to bolster his power against the 'Devereaux rebellion.'"

Excepting one other patient several beds away, the room was deserted. That was the second surprising thing. "No guards for the dangerous criminal," he thought, as he made to heave himself upright. Only when he fell off balance in the attempt did he discover his right arm below the elbow was just a stump. He stared stupidly at it a few moments, slow to realize what was missing. At the same time he recognized the tingling sensation in his stump and the buzz in his brain as the regrow nanomachines already busy at work building him a new arm. He had twice needed fingers regenerated before, so the effects were familiar, though much stronger this time. He was not a physician himself, but knew the tissue and bone would rebuild over a period of a few months, then the nanomachines would automatically turn off the rapid cell growth mode, go dormant, and gradually be flushed from his system.

"Another surprise," he thought. "Why not banish me as I am? It would be years, if ever, before a penniless exile could afford a regeneration clinic, and I would be a marked man the whole time." Banned lords, and the officers and ratings in their losing causes had a way of meeting unfortunate accidents, so his life wasn't worth much. "For that matter, why not execute me and save money?" In that unhappy event, by the time the arm could have grown back to normal, his head would have long since rolled down the palace steps, the cost of treatment wasted.

He shook himself in puzzlement and stood awkwardly, glancing in the mirror at the head of the bed as he moved. Eyes resting there, he stared hungrily and fixedly at the image he saw, as if memorizing what the glass told him.

The face full of partially healed cuts staring back was that of Sergeant Brian McIlhargey, late a non-commissioned officer serving in armies loyal to the crown via the house of Devereaux. "Not a bad face," he concluded after several moments' examination.

Thoughtful, he reached for the pouch on the side table, and rifled its contents. It was his, all right, and the

match between the face in the mirror and the hologram on the military identity card was, if anything, better than before. An obliging field doctor in the court forces had not only given him regrow to repair his arm, but made a pretty decent effort to restore his sliced up visage from the papers. Doubtless, his arm could not be located among the body parts that by now littered Glenmorgan, for it would have been a simple matter to re-attach it. He attempted a painful grin on his improved image, and was pleased with the result.

The man in the mirror was an authentic, leather-faced old soldier, who seemed to carry more than the forty-seven years proclaimed by his card, and who felt ancient. He glanced about the room again, noting his uniform jacket hanging on the bedpost. Of course it was missing the right sleeve, so there were no rank insignia. It could as easily belong to a private or an officer as to a sergeant.

A sword in an unadorned rough leather scabbard hung on a post at the foot of the bed. Intrigued, he grasped it with his left hand and drew it part way, turning it to catch the light. As he knew upon touching the hilt, it was the priceless symbol of royal authority known as sword Devereaux, but with the family crest obscured by silvered wax. He had never seen the scabbard before. He wondered why his enemies had left it with him, but evidently the disguised blade meant nothing to his captors, and they must suppose him harmless without his right arm.

A kilt in the plain brown tartan of the court hung over his jacket. Wearing it in or near this camp would mark him as a prisoner, as court soldiers wore the tartans of the houses under which they trained and fought. With the defeat, the tartan of Devereaux would surely be banned for a generation, the very name proscribed in the Emerald Isles. He considered his service under that name, and shrugged. Devereaux was no more. Its lands and people would be dispersed and given to others. Perhaps MacCarthy allies Haggerty and Malone would claim the most. They were near neighbours, and ambitious to add to the resources a person needed to stand in the front row at Tara's court.

He sat and thought. Brian McIlhargey was no ordinary soldier. He had been chief instructor at nearby Kilkarney officer cadet school until declaring common cause with Devereaux and Rourke against Donal XI. His name was an army institution, part of its very furniture. There wouldn't be an officer or enlisted man who didn't know his prowess with the sword, yet he was confident none other than the general staff and Lady Katherina knew who Brian McIlhargey really was. Their ignorance was his one advantage. Besides, he had the precious royal sword that had once hung in the king's palace.

His prospects would have been much worse as an officer, so in all there was something to be thankful for, he supposed. He was alive, and where there is life, there is opportunity, even if not to serve with Devereaux.

He donned the kilt and jacket, found his boots by the bed and pulled them on, then buckled the sword belt around his waist, taking several tries at the latter as he fumbled with one hand. He stood again, leaning heavily on the bed at first, and tried a few steps. He was off balance, but thought he could manage, with practice. "Now to escape and find Lady Katherina and Mara." He sobered and added grimly, "If there's anything left to find."

"Up and about, I see."

He turned, startled at the old familiar voice. In rapid succession, he had a moment's panic at being discovered in the act of leaving the hospital, remembered the rebellion was over, then realized she was probably the one who had repaired his face. He stared at the tall, dark-haired, olive-skinned beauty framed in the doorway, and was afraid to say anything. In reflex action, he tried to salute, then realized he had to use his other hand.

Maria Ryan smiled and held up her hand, seeming to read part of his thoughts. “No, don't speak, except in a whisper. One of the cuts was to your throat, and we had to reconstruct your larynx. You will not be able to talk properly for several days, and your voice is likely to sound different, but we did the best we could. I'm afraid your face will be thicker in spots after a while. We covered most of the scar tissue, but can't stop it from growing underneath to some extent.” Her voice had the same old musical huskiness he had always enjoyed.

When he made no reply, she added, “Oh, by the way, Liam and I are Surgeon Colonels for the court's army in this campaign. It's been a few years since we were all together at Kilkarney, Sergeant. Too bad we had to meet this way.” She saluted back informally, adding, “How's the face feel? Your own mother wouldn't have recognized the man in your papers for the one our people dragged in here half dead two days ago. You were pretty badly sliced up.”

He nodded his acknowledgment and thanks, even as his mind churned furiously. Why had Maria and Liam Ryan patched him up? Brian McIlhargey had been their trainer at cadet school, but could scarcely be said to have been close to Maria, or to be owed any favours. Most cadets hated him because of his harsh instruction in the ways of military discipline. He wondered if she knew his secret, but could scarcely ask that. Baffled on several accounts, he held up his stump and looked a question at her.

She shrugged. “Your arm is your hostage.”

It took him a moment for the significance of the old Gaelic formula to sink in. The code of honour said a prisoner of war could be freed for the loss of a limb in battle, because he could fight no more. That the limb could these days be regrown made no difference; the rules antedated modern technology but were still followed. There would be no rigged duel, no prison walls, no work gang and not even formal banishment. He was free to leave. The rule did not apply to named leaders or full officers, but it surely did to a sergeant. He began to wonder what he could still do for the house in which he had fought.

“Devereaux and Rourke have been dissolved, of course,” Maria put in, as though again reading thoughts from his expression. “You are freed from your indenture, and by the law of hostage, cannot be claimed by another house.”

McIlhargey had actually not been indentured to Devereaux, but was carried on the roll as a volunteer bound only by his honour. Maria Ryan apparently didn't know that, but the effect was the same. All ties to Devereaux were null and void, and he could walk away from the lost battle with no diminishment of honour. “Except for my lady and Mara,” he amended to himself, plastering over his continuing resolve to duty with a smile of gratitude.

Without further exchange, he saluted again and started for the door, on the way checking the infirmary's only other occupant. The tartan by that bed was also court brown, so this was another of defeated Devereaux, but there was no uniform cloak, so no rank insignia or identification. The patient was unconscious and swathed in bandages about most of the head and arms. He touched her throat and felt a strong pulse. He looked another question at Maria.

“She was badly burned about the upper body when she was brought in. She has no papers and was not in uniform, so we've classified her as a civilian casualty.”

He acknowledged this report with an expressionless nod. Discounting the bandages and the sheet, he guessed the woman was also a soldier, but the Ryans were evidently prepared to release her, as well. He toyed with trying to awaken her, but quickly rejected the idea. As far as the legalities were concerned,

she was at least not an officer, so would be safe in court hands. He took another look around the room, nodded once more at Maria Ryan, and made for the door. There, he picked up the discharge papers she indicated, stuffed them in his pouch, and strode confidently through to the camp outside.

As expected, there was no sentry. He walked casually to a post, and read the Donal's proclamation displayed on the public MT notice screen. It was as he anticipated. Devereaux and Rourke were proscribed names; all bearing them and all listed officers were banished for twenty years; the families themselves and all their fealties, whether by marriage, friendship, or indenture, were forthwith dissolved. Their lands, monies, titles, the people and chattels of both houses all reverted to the court. A separate proclamation declared Lord Devereaux dead in the battle, and listed the names of his officers, each with the annotation "killed in action," "banished," or "death penalty."

A cadet who was liege to Lady Katherina, and the only remaining retainer of the much diminished Rourke family, was noted as "missing, believed killed." Brian didn't think young Fred Hallas would have run, and imagined him in an unmarked grave. Only three officers had survived, and Brian felt sick over the loyal men and women who had gone down in the cause of their house. "But," he thought for the hundredth time, "the court provocation was severe." The Donal had deliberately singled out Devereaux and Rourke, forcing them to defend themselves, then declaring them rebels. Brian stood to attention, snapped a salute for those named on the proclamation, turned on his heel, and strode away.

Technically, he was at liberty, even if merely to escape banishment or death, but neither the legal destruction of Devereaux and Rourke nor the official fealty dissolutions released him from duty. His throat tightened and his left hand reached involuntarily around to touch the royal blade hanging at his other side. There were things his mere possession of that blade demanded he still do for those who had been Devereaux.

He walked briskly through the camp, more alert all the time. The court forces had occupied the east end of the glen, and one side of the camp was demarked by dense forest. To the west lay what had been the battlefield a few days before. Now, Morgan's glen grew hundreds of white crosses, and two work squads were busy adding more. Several court soldiers glanced his way as he passed. Taking in his tartan, they knew him to be one of the vanquished enemy, but seeing the stump of his arm, turned away disinterested.

Mechanically, he began to note the size and positioning of the court forces, until he stopped himself with the bleak reminder that it no longer mattered. He took in the standard security fence about the camp with its two exits to control the men and prevent looting, and decided to make for the easternmost gate, as it was farthest from the manse. It wouldn't do to be seen going that way.

He fished in his pouch with his remaining hand for a couple of coins, and tossed them to a civilian sweetmeat vendor who had been allowed to set up in the camp after the battle. "Commerce will go on," he thought as he ate the pastries he got in return. The call of duty was growing with his body's strength now, and he picked up his pace toward the gate.

The sergeant on duty took in his tartan as he approached and stepped behind a partition. "Captured soldier to see you, Sir," he snapped to the officer of the day.

Colonel Thomas Monde was irritated by the interruption. He had been on duty twenty hours, and had business of his own about the estates of Devereaux he wanted to attend to without the army's knowing what he was about. He had been about to go off duty, and didn't welcome distractions.

"What's he doing out of the compound, Sergeant?"

“Missing an arm, Sir.”

“So those softheaded medics let him wander around the camp?”

The sergeant did not reply. There was not much to gain by pointing out that both camp doctors technically outranked his colonel. One didn't want Monde for an enemy.

“All right.” Monde pushed back his chair, donned his uniform jacket, and walked around the partition to deal with the matter. As he did, the soldier waiting for him came smartly to attention and saluted with his good hand.

Brian thought, “Of all the people to present papers to, I have to draw my old Kilkarney enemy. Well, hard shillelagh and all.” He began to sweat as Monde looked him up and down closely before acknowledging the salute with a languid one of his own.

“Stand at ease, McIlhargey. What do you want?”

Well, the face was recognizable, Brian realized, despite his having added a few years and a lot more scar tissue than it bore when he sparred swords with Monde and the other Kilkarney cadets. It was said of Thomas Monde that he never forgot a detail, and could not forget an enemy. “Discharge from service, Sir,” he whispered, obeying Maria Ryan's command not to talk aloud.

“Speak up like a man.”

“Can't, Sir.” He touched his throat scar, and continued to whisper. “Doctor's orders. Be a while before I can talk again.”

“You have papers, I suppose,” Monde barked angrily.

“Yes, Sir.” Brian fished in his pouch for the forms he had been supplied and handed them over.

Monde took the proffered documents, and scrutinized them for flaws that might allow him to deny the discharge. Finding none, he grunted, “If it were up to me, I'd behead the lot of you.”

Brian made no response. Anything he said could provoke the man's legendary temper, and he could afford no risks at this juncture. This was one former Kilkarney cadet who would extend him neither sympathy nor mercy.

“All right.” Monde reached a reluctant decision. “Stand to attention. Do you, Sergeant Brian McIlhargey solemnly swear by your honour as a soldier and by that of your family you will not for the lesser of twenty years or so long as you live, take up arms in the name of Devereaux or Rourke, and that you will respect the court proclamations and bans against the said rebel houses?” He spat out the words rapid fire, as though detesting their very taste in his mouth.

“I so swear,” came the whispered response. It mattered no more. The “rebellion” was over. It should never have happened, but was all blood under the sword now.

Both men knew there was a great difference between this oath and one of fealty to the court, which forswore attempts to supplant a First Lord. Not even such oaths were always kept; most Donals gained power by breaking one or more fealty oaths. But this time the Donal had won, and Devereaux had lost.

Winners not only write history, they redefined broken oaths as patriotism, or the keeping of a higher duty. Not so for McIlhargey this day.

Monde took a wand scanner from the side of the PIEA at his belt and ran it over the encoded summary on one set of the papers for the official record. He thrust two copies at the man before him with the formula. "You are discharged from the camp of Tara's court with your arm held as hostage for your honour." He glared coldly at McIlhargey, adding, "If I were you, I would get as far away from the Emerald Isles as possible. You ought to have been banished for twenty years like the officers. They should all be beheaded." Satisfied with his cold, grim advice, Monde saluted casually. "You are dismissed." The old soldier returned the salute with his left hand, turned on his heel, and strode briskly through the camp gate, a free man.

* * * *

Maria Ryan stared after the discharged sergeant a few moments, then turned to greet the two men entering the ward from the office area.

In stark contrast to his taller, much darker wife, Liam Ryan was a slight redhead with a riot of freckles covering his face and arms, and he bore an irrepressible good-natured grin. His male companion towered over both, was dark complexioned, and had a severe and serious countenance that hid a vague middle age and many concerns. They knew him as John Dominic, a civilian physician currently practising in plastic surgery at Moody General hospital on the west coast of Irish North America.

Liam took his wife's arm as he entered, and spoke to her, but his remark was addressed to their colleague. "Well, he's gone. I hope we haven't meddled too much."

John Dominic answered deliberately. "The honour of our three families and several others is at stake. He and we are bound together until we resolve that honour at Tara herself."

"He has very little of anything left," Maria put in sympathetically. "I doubt he will ever come to Tara, much less claim rights there."

"Perhaps in the next generation," Dominic suggested.

"When he finds out the rest..." Maria broke off without finishing.

"It'll be a terrible blow. But he's still young. He has plenty of time." Liam was always optimistic, whether on his own account or another's.

John Dominic was, characteristically, more sober. "The troops were out of control to do what they did at the manse. The officers will get a reprimand."

"One won't care," Maria observed.

"I suppose not." John Dominic pointed to the other patient, on whom he had also done extensive plastic repairs, though without the benefit of a picture from which to work. "Do we know who she is yet?" he asked Maria.

"She was found with a young cadet, unconscious on the manse lawn, and with burns over much of her body. Face and hands all but destroyed. I don't need to tell you that part; you helped us do the facial construction. If Devereaux had any DNA records, they never sent them to a higher data node, and

they've all gone up in smoke, now. A soldier by the look of her, but we're calling her a civilian casualty. She was either in the house when it was torched, or tried to get in afterwards. When she's not sedated, we hear her crying 'my baby, my baby,' so she may have lost a child, though not in the fire. They were all identified. An old place like that; it must have gone up like a match."

"The cadet?" John enquired.

"Treated and released," Liam answered. "By the school records, he hadn't graduated yet, so he couldn't be interdicted as an officer. He left the camp this morning."

"Katherina and Mara?"

"Put to the sword before the house was torched, according to the autopsy the commander ordered, but that won't go into any dispatches, I'm sure," replied Liam.

"Identification was positive?"

This time Maria answered. "Yes, by clothing and jewellery remains. The bodies were not a pretty sight. All the adult servants were accounted for, except a maid assigned to Lady Katherina by the name of Karina Tansey, and one Karen A'Devereaux, said to be a half-wit. There was talk the latter had torched the manse in a mad fit, but there can be no doubt it was our soldiers because several of them were found in the ruins, as well."

"No survivors?"

"Not unless this one is." Maria gestured toward their last patient. "Our friends of Devereaux and Rourke aren't just proscribed, they're wiped out completely."

"The soldier who murdered them?"

"Missing from camp without leave is the official line," she replied.

"You two are closer to the situation than I," Dominic persisted. "Do you think one of our ambitious colonels had a hand in this atrocity?"

Liam turned and looked him in the eye. He couldn't believe it of his old friend Sean Reilly. Thomas Monde or Frank Haggerty, on the other hand ... However, the stakes were high. "This makes fewer contenders to be First," he suggested, adding, "Commander Reilly paces his tent in a cold rage, scarcely speaking except to his captain of military police. Who knows what he will do now?"

Dominic sighed. "Best watch your own backs, I would think. Well, I must go. I have a meeting to arrange later today. Thanks for the practical opportunity, and I will drop in again from time to time when I'm in the Isles."

"Any chance you'll bring a wife?" Maria returned to one of her favourite personal topics.

Dominic arched an eyebrow. "Haven't I told you? I really am married, and my wife lives on..."

"...Meta Earth, I know," she finished. "And you are one of the mythical Metans whom none of us has ever seen, gliding about among us as a ghost. Really, John Dominic, for a man who's normally so serious, you can be pretty flip about real life."

Dominic winked and grinned. They exchanged more idle pleasantries about his supposed home, and he left them to the last of their record-keeping on the many soldiers they had examined and either released or buried.

Unnoticed by the three, an almost inaudible sob escaped the ravaged throat of their remaining patient, who heard much of their conversation before fleeing her pain into welcome unconsciousness.

Salvation is a gift of God and cannot be lost. By contrast, the warrior's honour must be earned. Guard it carefully, for it can be destroyed or stolen. Thus, of the old Irish warrior's epitaph "generous, handsome, brave," only the first and last matter. When you are dead, no one will care what you looked like, but history will surely remember whether you were a saint or a scoundrel.

—basic notes in ethics, Kilkarney cadet school.

Chapter Six

Brian McIlhargey, near Glenmorgan, 1977 (Hibernia)

The sounds of the court camp faded gradually into the distance as the weary soldier trudged along the dirt road leading away from the Devereaux manse in the warm early afternoon sun. Troopers stationed at three additional checkpoints scanned Sergeant Brian McIlhargey's credentials and discharge papers, and each time waved him along the road without incident.

When he was about an Irish mile from the camp, and out of sight of what he knew would be the last picket, he jumped from a small bridge into the stream below, waded along the creek around a corner to hide all trace of his passage, then slipped silently into the woods to work his way back to the manse. Mere seconds later, he heard a foot patrol on the road he had just abandoned. Motionless, he watched between the thick foliage as the troop ran briskly by, and wondered who of the camp had changed his mind. Another narrow escape.

When all was quiet again, he wiped the sweat from his brow, and resumed his journey. The sun was high, and he had a long way to go to avoid the camp scouts, but he knew these woods too well to lose his way or be readily observed. As he glided quietly through the apparently trackless area, occasionally walking along a streambed in case any dogs were about, he had plenty of time to reflect on the events of the last few months, and the ignominious defeat that was their culmination.

The forces of Devereaux had been well enough trained, and should have been adequate to win the day against what intelligence reports insisted was a mere two companies of untried troops. Initial engagement seemed to corroborate this information, but once the battle was joined in earnest, fresh court troops poured into the glen, overwhelming Devereaux by sheer numbers.

Brian had recognized two lieutenants on the battlefield whom he knew were liege to Thomas Monde, so Sean Reilly's original forces must have been reinforced by Monde's two companies during the fighting. Given what he had seen of the camp, fully an additional four companies of veterans must have arrived later under a third command. Either the Devereaux intelligence system had been suborned by the court, or some far more complex game had been afoot.

Well, it would be another feather in the cap for Monde and Reilly. A fresh victory for the up-and-coming military stars would no doubt bring them both plenty of MT coverage and big promotions. Someday

soon they would stand in the front row at Tara. He wondered how safe the Donal's chair would be from the two of them. Well, he would never join them there, he thought, bitterly. It was enough of a challenge now to survive. The harshest thing of all was suffering defeat at the hands of his old friend Sean.

“Is there a Lord of Heaven watching over what he has created?” Brian wondered. “Do the priests tell us true that God can be trusted? Was his Son really crucified for my sins on Tirdia, or do their Holy Books and ours merely record illusions?” In his mood, he might have wondered about the very existence of the other earths, but he had done military service on all excepting Meta, where no Hibernian had ever been. He knew the other earths were real enough.

He rehearsed an oft-indulged mental debate. “Does the Lord of Heaven truly split worlds off from one another at history's nexus points? By our Holy Book, Pilate determined to free Christ; the worlds divided and people of our Jerusalem watched their counterparts on Tirdia crucify Christ. Their Bible confirms this, though saying nothing of two worlds forming from one. Neither earth is an illusion today, but what's the point? People on five worlds say they follow Christ as their saviour, yet others dismiss him as a myth. Are any of the worlds better for this? What of the Metans? What do they believe? Does any of it matter to me? What if I do die not believing?”

He sighed heavily. He knew not what to think of mysterious Meta Earth, whose council purportedly gave Hibernia the timestream travel technology in the late eighteenth century, allowing her to access four other earths. Federation with Para had resulted, but other than a growing fear of the swarming billions of Tirdia, not much else had changed here on Hibernia. There had been some new technology, and large-scale religious revivals, but wars were still fought, and innocent people still died in them. If God existed, why didn't he care? Why didn't he do something to ensure justice? Why hadn't he taken up the cause of Devereaux and the other royals against the court's manifest evil?

He wondered if there really were Metans, or if timestream travel could have been invented by the Parans. Was there even a Lord in heaven? If so, what were his obligations to that Lord? “For that matter, what are truth and duty?” he asked himself.

The latter thought seized him, and he reflected on that sense of duty in which all Orthans are imbued from the time they can hear and speak. Duty to the Lord of Heaven and to the principles laid down in the Holy Book, duty to church, clan, house, and family. Duty to the court of Tara and to the Federation of Worlds. Conflicting duties were balanced one against the other by discerning the higher and following it.

No one could order a violation of heaven's moral principles or the warriors' code of honour. Otherwise, if one's domain lord were ill-treated or had an unresolved grievance against another house, or Tara herself, and if the result was war, every fighting man and woman having fealty to that house went to battle. So did those of allies. It mattered not how one viewed the affair personally.

On the other hand, a lord who declared war or spoke for it at court could not escape the duty to lead the armies so committed. Obligations went both ways, and the supposed nobility must so act. If they dishonoured their office by exploiting the poor, indulging self-interest, taking money for administering law, or harming a noncombatant, their very lives were forfeit.

Everybody understood and paid homage to these ideas. All were subject to the rules defining the duties of soldiers to clan and Tara on the one hand, and those of domain lords to their subjects on the other.

Take the captives in the camp compound. Officers or family members were deemed dishonoured. They could be executed or banished from the Emerald Isles for twenty years. Lesser leaders would be scattered with their families to become liege to other lords, and the rest would remain here, becoming

subjects of the former Devereaux holding's new masters. Soldiers such as Brian McIlhargey, who had lost a limb, were free to find service where they could. Was this a mercy or not? Others' futures were secure, and his very uncertain. On the other hand, a Kilkarney-trained officer, as opposed to an enlisted trainer, would have little chance of surviving an assassin's blade to reach exile, and even a place far from Tara would be none too safe.

Rules. They were a small part of the great, often unwritten codes binding every soldier, every officer, every true man and woman of the Irish, from scullery maids to the high nobility. Originally derived from a mixture of brehon and Christian law, they now had a life of their own. By them he should be dead, but for the moment he had instead slipped through his enemies' fingers. Some would call that the hand of the Lord of Heaven in his life. Should he term it fate, the luck of blind chance?

Given what some surely knew, it would have been a simple matter to include the name of Brian McIlhargey among the leaders of the rebellion, but it had not been done. Had Maria and Liam, or Sean deliberately let him go free? He thought someone must have, but couldn't put the question directly to Maria without dishonouring her. Well, he had little to lose in taking advantage of what had been offered, whether by chance, his former friends' connivance, or what believers called Divine Providence.

But he had never trusted the Lord of their Providence, and little understood those who did. Were their lives much altered because they professed to believe in the salvation of Jesus Christ? Believers said they were, but apart from greater contentment, he failed to see practical differences. What if they did find it easier to cope with the trials of life? They still had them, didn't they? Could their peaceful acceptance of life's circumstances really be cited as evidence of more such peace in a hypothetical life to come? What of those who claimed to believe in a good God, yet did what was manifestly evil? What of sickness and war? What of the way Katherina had been treated?

He recalled the cadets' religious and philosophical discussions that had swirled around the intellectual hothouse Kilkarney had been in the off-duty hours. The class of '68 had been extraordinary in both their skill and diversity.

Liam and Maria Ryan, betrothed before arriving, and married after graduation, were staunch believers. Sean Reilly had been doubtful, yet still their ally. Jack Devereaux and Katherina Rourke were mild skeptics, and Thomas Monde, from the next class, an open scoffer. Drill Sergeant McIlhargey, a frequent participant in his students' debates, had provoked and stretched their minds every bit as much as their bodies. Nine years later, the ones representing opposite ends of the spectrum were evidently successful, but those most unsure were destroyed. What did that say about faith? If the Lord of Heaven rewarded friends and foe alike in this life, what did it say about the next, assuming there was one?

"Guess I'll always be a skeptic," he thought, "neither soldier nor civilian in Heaven's armies."

So intent was he on his reflections, he nearly stumbled into a clearing he should have skirted, being saved from the blunder only by the betraying sound of voices. Suddenly alert and cautious, he edged around one side of the open area, and ventured a look. Not four chains away, two men conversed. One, facing almost directly at him, he recognized as the gate sergeant from the camp. In the second or two he risked being seen, the other raised his arm in a threatening gesture to punctuate something he said to the soldier. The words were indistinct, but there was no mistaking a colonel's insignia on the sleeve.

"So," he thought as he ducked out of sight, "one of the red-haired colonels has quiet business with an enlisted man out here in the woods. I wonder which?" He was tempted to work closer and try to find out more, but decided instead for the safest course, and made quickly away from the area, though not without wondering which of his former cadets was up to surreptitious business, and what it might be. But

this close to the Devereaux manse, he would take no risk of discovery.

Thus, almost another hour passed while he circled the area of the manse twice before venturing to close with the place. He saw no guards, no local residents, no servants, not a single person, and that made him more wary and uneasy than would dodging others at every footstep. It was too quiet, and his growing apprehension made him cautious to a fault. Why wasn't the manse guarded? The sense of wrongness grew the closer he got. Was it an odd smell in the air, or the eerie quiet? "Through those trees, and a little to the right. No time to get careless." He was crawling now, inching silently through the bush. He risked a look. No one. Why was the very silence so oppressive? He looked again. Nothing.

Wait. He threw caution to the wind as what he had seen, or rather not seen, suddenly sank in, and he recklessly stood in plain view. It took a few moments to register, for an absence rather than a presence was the key factor in the vista. The manse was gone! Oblivious to danger now, it became the work of moments to dash across the small field separating him from the remains of the house. Arriving, he stared dumbfounded at the few blackened ashes and charred beams that remained of the stately ancient manse that was home for him, others of the Devereaux family, and some of those who worked the surrounding lands. A paper version of the placard banning Devereaux fluttered where it had been nailed to a nearby post. Some local had defied the court and crudely added the seditious information "foul murder were done here".

Long minutes later, vestiges of caution returned, and he began a careful look around the grounds. Trained by the very best, he found the story all too clear in the tracks. Many soldiers had been here. Several had entered the manse, others the outbuildings. One double set of tracks went in and out a side door, and ended in a bloodstained patch of ground near the manse garden. Bodies had been removed from the spot, and he thought of the badly burned woman back at the hospital. For a while, this gave him hope. If one survived, there might be others. Then he crossed the deeply indented parade of tracks leading east to a second clearing. Those he postponed following to the last, for part of his mind knew what he must find there. Meanwhile, a man in a bad dream, he searched about the main area that had hosted the house and various outbuildings. Nothing remained. He grimaced as he read in the dirt that the barn animals had not been allowed to escape the blaze. "Foul murder" had been combined with wanton cruelty.

The story of the tracks was obvious. A party of out-of-control soldiers had come here following the battle to fire the manse and destroy those inside. Others had arrived later and removed many bodies.

When he could no longer delay the inevitable, he steeled his mind, walked the hundred staves to the east of where the house had been, and pushed open the gate to the small cemetery. Passing the resting places of the generations of Morgans who had previously owned the estate, he stopped briefly to acknowledge the three-month-old graves of Jack Devereaux, Sr., and Colleen O'Toole, whose murder by court troops had begun the rebellion. Finally, he walked to where fresh dirt had been heaped in more than twenty new mounds. Walking as a man in a trance, he passed slowly by the first fifteen or so crudely lettered crosses before halting in front of the one reading "Jack Devereaux, Jr., rebel." He grunted incoherently. Evidently, someone had gathered up body parts from the field, and brought them here to rest instead of planting them in the glen with the rest. He bowed before the mound, and wept before turning grimly to the next two.

He forced his eyes to clear long enough to read, "Katherina Rourke, rebel," and "Mara Devereaux-Rourke, child of rebels," then fell to his knees in anguish. Were these rude inscriptions all that remained of the two royal houses he had loved and protected? Was this how his own life ended? For an agonizingly long time he knelt there, neither knowing nor caring if he were seen or even killed on the spot. His blood could fittingly mingle with that of Katherina and Mara, he thought. All was bleak despair.

After a long frozen time, during which he might have been part of the graveyard statuary, a powerful and relentless anger overtook his sorrow, cleared the pain from his head, and replaced it with a fierce resolve. He would wreak terrible revenge for this deed, he swore, as he bowed over the remains of his loved ones.

First things first. He took out his boot knife, and laboriously scraped off the reference to rebels from each cross, then etched in the word "loved" in its place. Satisfied, he sheathed the knife and drew his sword. Placing it point down on the ground between the grave of the Lady Katherina and that of Mara, he swore upon his own life's blood and honour he would return one day to build them a proper monument. Then, he lifted his eyes and blade upward to cry out angrily to the Lord of Heaven in whom he barely believed, to know who had done this thing, and to demand the right of vengeance, be it against God himself. Finished with his defiance against Heaven, he put down his head, and wept copiously and unashamedly.

Another hour saw the grim face of Brian McIlhargey, still alone, on a western path along the river and through yet another wood, away from manse and camp. He had no definite plan, but strategy could wait until he established himself somewhere far away and gathered much more information. Eventually, the killers would die by his own hand. The Donal himself would not escape.

As he went, he reflected grimly on the role of the Lord of Heaven in such atrocities. If God existed, he was cruel, even dishonourable. He could not be just and allow such things. Was there such a thing as justice? Did anything matter now that the ones he cared most about were in the grave?

No, honour and duty remained, and these two would keep him alive and satisfy him until he resolved both. Several times he felt pain in his jaw, and tried to unclench his teeth but he could not relieve the tension, for, the moment he remembered the dead, the pain returned.

He saw no one. It seemed that the entire estate was devoid of people. Perhaps those who remained in the area feared for their own lives if they came too close to the dead.

Then, for the second time in a day, his reflections nearly made him stumble upon someone unawares. This time the voice interrupting his reverie was far from indistinct, and very close. For a brief moment he thought it was an animal's cry, but quickly recognized it instead as a woman's scream, cut off, then muffled. He heard a sharp slapping sound and a man's low, angry voice.

Abruptly coming to his senses and looking sharply around, he realized his all-but-unconscious footsteps had brought him automatically to the edge of the very glade where Lady Katherina had once spent so many happy hours with her friends. This was her throne room from the time she had first visited Devereaux at the age of eight, and had taken regal command of the group of friends that included Liam, the twin Jacks, and Sean.

Brian turned quietly aside from the path to investigate the clearing without being seen, and seconds later found himself looking through the leaves of a laurel bush at a small encampment. From the size of the ash pile beneath the little fire, it had been occupied for the two or three days since the battle. A woman sat on a log by the fire, and a male soldier stood over her. Behind the woman stood a pile of wood for the fire, a small tent, and a clothesline bearing towels and a sleeping mattress.

He saw a trickle of blood running from the woman's face, and realized she had been struck. He recognized her immediately as Karen, originally O'Toole, a maid from the manse. The Devereaux family had taken her in after she had been nearly killed in a serious accident that left her with permanent brain

damage. Because the other members of her immediate family had perished, the accident had also promoted her uncle Patrick O'Toole to the lordship of his clan, but he had been far away at the time, and unable to help his niece.

Karen was forever a young child, alert enough only to concentrate for a few minutes at a time, scarcely able to perform simple household tasks. Not for her the excitement of learning, the invigorating thrill of passage into adulthood, or the ability to defend herself with the sword. Karen would always wear the white of a noncombatant, and live under another's protection. Brian touched his sword with his hand, and wondered if vengeance could start here. But rather than take precipitous action, he crept closer to hear what the soldier said.

"There's more where that came from, if you don't give me what I want."

He heard the girl's low, stumbling voice. "But I only want to be Brian's girl. I can't do that with you." She sounded muddled, but that wasn't unusual.

"You don't belong to anyone of Devereaux, now. You're every man's for the taking." He gestured toward the tent and changed the subject. "You got what the colonel asked from the house, didn't you?"

The girl nodded miserably, but said nothing.

"It's the colonel's, and he sent me to get it from you. You've done your part. Do you think he would let you live after what happened at the manse? I'm supposed to kill you, but I'll let you go free instead if you do as I want."

The girl shook her head in confusion. "I don't want to go anywhere. I belong here."

"You'll go with me."

The silent watcher saw the soldier reach out for the frightened girl, and he edged closer. It was obvious enough what the man wanted. It was equally apparent any respite the fellow gave the poor child from death would be temporary enough. If he had been ordered to kill the girl to get something she had taken from the house, she wouldn't live once he was done with her. Brian wondered idly what could be so valuable, then moved closer as the girl spoke.

"No, it's not right."

"It's right for me." The soldier clutched at the white and grey noncombatant's dress she wore in lieu of the adult's kilt.

"Jesus wouldn't like it."

"Who cares what he thinks? He's not here and can't stop me. You can't. Nobody can." He made another grab at her.

It was enough for Brian. He would learn nothing more, and it was time to end it. He stood up. Karen was facing his way, and saw him immediately. Her simple, honest face lit up in a happy smile.

"Jesus has sent my friend Brian, and he'll stop you."

"What are you talking about?" Her assailant made another grab at her. Looking past his side, she leaned

away, clapping her hands in delight.

Ireland is also called “Hibernia” which means, variously, “Land of the nobles,” or “Land of the warriors.” For both Irelands, the inability to combine the two concepts consistently has been the bane of her history. On Tirdia, despite a common land, religion, and culture, the various Irish families were never able to set aside their feuding long enough to prevent becoming the slaves of the English, or to throw off that yoke for seven long centuries. In the process, to avert starvation or extinction, she went from being the jewel and preserver of Western civilization to the supplier of armies for other kings. Our Ireland fared much better, but her likewise fractious nature has nearly been her undoing. On several occasions in our history, warriors have had to re-invent nobility and honour, or Ireland would have perished in the inter-family wars that regularly threaten the realm.

One of these was when the last dynasty was instituted in 1791 following the breathtakingly corrupt reign of Thomas (O’Niall) II. Upon the conclusion of the battle of Paris when, with the help of the secretive Metans, the families set aside their feuds to unite on a new kingdom, they did so under a carefully constructed wall of silence with respect to the new king’s family name. Some historians speculate Conn I was none other than Conn Meathe, who had led the forces of Ireland at Paris; others point out reports of the latter’s death shortly afterward seem indisputable, and hold the King was instead Turlough O’Conor, who used “Conn” as a nickname. Still others argue he was Conn Devereaux, Meathe’s adjutant at Paris who was not accounted for afterward. However, that the royal lines of Meathe, O’Conor, and Devereaux ostensibly died out at that time and records were destroyed is more than just coincidence. So is the undeniable fact that the new king had all three family swords as his qualification to take office, blades that hung in the king’s quarters as symbol of family authority for a hundred and fifty years.

—Richard Kent, writing in *Annals of Modern History*.

Chapter Seven

The Royal Cousins, Tara, 1941 (Hibernia)

“Agent Seamus reporting for duty, Sir.”

The second to the chief of palace security looked up as his secretary ushered in the young man who, over the last few years, had been one of his best undercover agents, and waved him to a seat. He reflected again for a moment on the wisdom of trusting a man of only twenty-five or so, and about whom he knew nothing but a first name. However, the fellow came with the highest recommendation—that of Chief O’Toole himself—and had proven loyal, diligent, and most successful. He supposed Seamus must be a younger son of a high noble family who could not expect to make a mark at court, and so was getting his quota of adventure elsewhere. Well, no point in “looking too closely at one’s lucky clover,” as the saying goes.

“You were due to report yesterday, Seamus.”

“My apologies, Sir. I was detained by a matter touching on personal honour. You have my message to that effect, of course.”

“Yes I do, but it is not satisfactory. You were needed.” He contrived to look more annoyed than he felt. Seamus had been chosen for an honour he would have given his very tartan for, though it was apparent Lord Tobin didn’t think of it that way.

“I am willing to overlook the fault if you will take an interesting assignment that has become available.” The door closed on their conversation, and the young secretary found himself eagerly anticipating the outcome of the interview. Perhaps if the project he had championed went ahead, he could advance in the service.

However, when their long talk was done, and agent Seamus emerged in silence, it was only to wave a quiet good-bye to the secretary. The latter immediately checked his MT for the disposition of the assignment, and was gravely disappointed to discover that not only had Seamus not taken the case, he had been terminated in the service, and all his accounts were to be closed. Moreover, project Deep Cover, which he had himself suggested, had been cancelled for “lack of suitable personnel.” He sighed and closed the file. The targets would be on their own, then. Pity. It had seemed like a good idea. No doubt the palace would issue a news bulletin saying it had been done, just to confuse things. Well, perhaps he could come up with something better another time. Armand Derry was nothing if not innovative.

Moments later, Seamus emerged from the Security tunnel that led under Royal Avenue, checked the street outside through a window that looked across the broad street to the palace of Tara, nodded to the guard in the innocuous looking bake shop, bought a pastry from him, and strolled casually into the street.

Another fifteen minutes of carefully checking his back trail found him moving from building to building, and edging toward the Old Town part of Tara. Satisfied, he slipped into the back door of a safe house run by recently married Charles and Marilyn O'Connor, where he would spend much of the next three nights and two days. The utterly loyal and trustworthy Charles was secretary to the king's Home Office, and Seamus was known to him as one of three men who, like him, answered to His Majesty and to no one else.

That first afternoon, Seamus sent and received a few carefully encrypted messages on an MT account even Security knew nothing about. Had the court learned where the messages went, he would have been imprisoned. Had they known who the recipients were, he would have been executed.

The next day he was out all morning, dressed as a palace guardsman. Charles was used to this, for those who employed this house on the king's business could arrive anytime by the children's rhyme as “nobleman, landsman, commerceman, beggarman, fi!”, and leave by the second verse as “gypsyman, soldierman, sailorman, rebelman, spy!”

There was a large wardrobe down below for which Charles purchased clothes and makeup from time to time. Once, when Patrick O'Toole visited, he seemed to walk more like Seamus than himself. On another occasion, Jack Devereaux had emerged from the garb of a street lady. On still another, a team of plumbers had metamorphosed into two foreign diplomats accompanied by O'Toole for a meeting with the King himself, and right here in the O'Connor parlour, of all places. Well, it was rented from the Home Office, but it was their home, from which not even the King could evict them except for due cause, and His Majesty would never have such from him.

“His Majesty, aye there's the sharp of it,” Charles thought repeatedly, tapping his sword, “and he'll stay king, regardless of what the House of Lords says. Isn't my own family a royal one, save only an extra letter in the name? Don't we commoners of Tara have the old right to say who is our king, and who is not?”

Seamus returned at noon that day with a triumphant grin, and vanished into the basement for the entire afternoon. Once, when he emerged briefly for food, Charles thought he heard two or three familiar voices below, and concluded the others had used the tunnel entrance to the basement. He decided that one

mission had succeeded and another was in progress, but, as always, asked no questions, and was serene in his confidence that his wife Marilyn could also be trusted.

From the age of eighteen, Charles had served James III and James IV in his capacity as Clerk of the Home Office, where the King took care of the governance of the city. He and his wife were now in their early thirties. They had met less than a year before when, newly-promoted to captain, Marilyn had been assigned to security duty as door guard to the Home Office. The King, taking one look at Charles's love-stricken face the next day, had launched an exhaustive security check on her.

She had apparently been found satisfactory, for when they were married in the Old Town Cathedral by Father William O'Grady six months after, the strange brehon who stood solemnly beside the priest to sign their papers had winked at Charles, and the latter had barely been able to restrain himself from crying aloud when he looked down at the legal document and saw the inscription "James IV, Brehon of Tara." Not many couples had been scribed for by the King himself, he often reflected, proudly.

Charles had been warned by James about the coming deposition, and had helped move furniture out of the Home Office to make it seem deserted. Still, it had been a shock when he had heard the nobles' plan announced in public on the MT the night before. It made no difference to his dogged loyalty. He was the king's man until either he died or the Lord of Heaven returned, in like manner to the way he had promised himself to Marilyn.

That evening, Seamus took time off from whatever he was working on, and joined the O'Connors in their parlour to watch the MT news channel. Tara's reporters, normally a staid and rather boring lot, were having a right green day following the king's deposition and disappearance. The night's second item, after some meandering speculation about the king's plans and whereabouts, was the investiture of Irish lords over two North American domains earlier in the day.

The camera zoomed in on the faces of the holders-to-be in turn, then scanned the audience for reactions. Seamus grunted as he saw himself as a guardsman enter the room just as the ceremonies proper were underway, then march smartly across the back of the chamber towards Patrick O'Toole.

* * * *

"Guardsman Seamus reporting for duty, Sir." The room around him was electric with tension. It was an open secret among the nobility that the King was expected to take a domain in the name of one of the new appointees, both of whom were his cousins. Reporters had been underfoot at the palace the previous afternoon trying to assemble what scant information there was on Jack Devereaux and James Holdom, the new holders of record.

Moreover, rumours of an attempt on the deposed king's life and of a possible counter-coup abounded, as did conspiracy theories about the whole affair. The council chambers, devoid of representatives from Ortho's Federation partner for the occasion, were packed with people wearing a variety of clan tartans, and every available security officer was on duty in or just outside the room. The dais, with its chairs of state, sat ignored in one corner of the room, and all attention was focused on the stage occupying a large niche in the wall to its left.

That, of course, was the point. Patrick O'Toole had introduced errors into the communications system resulting in a double call-up of security personnel from the Monde manse and some of its near neighbours. Had an enemy invaded the capital this day, parts of it would have been found virtually unguarded.

O'Toole's face was impassive, but his eyes turned up at the corners at the sight of Seamus. "Have you concluded your other duties successfully, guardsman?" he enquired, with a hint of apprehension.

"The matter was lightly attended, as expected, Sir. Everything is secure, and copies of the mission documents have already been filed." He grinned at the chief. Their plans had worked out better than anticipated. Gerald Monde had been left with a single guard on duty outside his manse, and none inside. With unhindered access to the rear door for the tenth hour it took the trooper to circle the place, Seamus had disabled the alarm system, slipped inside undetected, and was sitting in Monde's secure lab in a mere four of those minutes.

Not only had he stolen actual samples from the latest project, he had raided Monde's electronic files, and sent copies of his research notes to a secure location belonging to the conspirators. Then he introduced subtle sabotage into the system. First, he attached a process to the input/output driver that would search for strings of characteristic information from the new genetic material Monde had painstakingly assembled, and erase the files containing it. Should Monde try to design new biologicals with similar gene sequences, they too would be targeted. It was written to incorporate itself into backups of the data, and reattach itself to a new system. Periodically it would go dormant in an invisible file, then at random intervals erupt again when Monde might begin to think he had confidence in the system.

That complete, Seamus opened the case of the data cube reader, and turned down the gain on two of the laser controls until it operated intermittently in write mode. Further use of the system would gradually corrupt the data cubes, provoking the owner to make more backups to forestall further losses, whereupon the rogue software would damage them, as well. Monde's research might be set back years by the disaster.

Timing his exit, reassembling and feeding false data to the security system had also been straightforward. The presence of an intruder in the Monde manse might never be guessed.

A mere half hour from the departure of the second contingent of Monde's guards had sufficed for the whole project, and that much time had been consumed by the inevitable delays in court functions, and by preliminary protocols. Agent Seamus hadn't missed a thing.

O'Toole stared levelly at the slightly crooked grin Seamus had planted on his unassuming face, and could barely contain his pleasure and relief. Seamus had stolen for the royals before, but this was a triumph. The conspirators knew Monde had already deployed his deadly weapon, and had given themselves at most two days to counter him before people would inevitably die in large numbers.

"Very well, guardsman," Chief O'Toole snapped aloud, "Take a position on the left side of the stage. If a fight breaks out, your job is to help protect their lordships." He did not name anyone aloud; how the sides played out in a fight would determine that.

All eyes were on the stage, so no one noticed Seamus make his way to within a few staves of the podium. Seamus prided himself on his ability to become invisible in a crowd. Even when not in disguise, people thought him a much smaller and less consequential man than he was, and that accounted for much of his undercover success. On station, he noted that Patrick had himself taken the opposite side, so the conspirators controlled both sets of stairs to the high stage, whose opening was kept covered by a curtain when court was in session.

The tension in the room grew through the ceremony. Jack Devereaux came to the front, to much backslapping and congratulations, to be invested as Lord Devereaux and made master of the sword of that name, then stood to the rear of the stage. He had only been at court two days, but had already

earned the reputation of a dashing young army officer and colourful socialite who had a tendency to dress and act outrageously, and spend money recklessly. Today he was sporting a bright red scarf around his neck, and Seamus wondered if such would become the next court fad. The blade he was given had been held by ancestors of family Devereaux for centuries before passing into the hands of the last dynasty and becoming one of its three ruling swords. Though Devereaux was cousin to the King on his mother's side, and foster cousin on his father's side, giving him one of the James' swords was seen as a way of ensuring that the old royal family would never rule again.

What only Donal and the conspirators knew was that the grant of blades was their reward for betraying the King to the first lord—or so the Donal thought.

The name of James Holdom was called, and he came forward, walking within cents of Seamus as he made regal procession to the front. Holdom didn't spare the guardsman a glance before starting up the stairs. Like all the royal cousins, he was a giant of a man, fully a staff tall, and with an unmistakable aura of power about him. The room became deathly quiet, and scores of hands surreptitiously crept toward the hilts of swords.

“So much for secrets,” Seamus thought, glancing around as Donal reached for the rack holding the blade called O'Conor. “If he hands that sword to our man, all Mayo will break loose.”

In the tense silence, he could hear every word on the platform, though the two spoke too low for the microphones.

“Is it really you, Jack? Did you ignore my advice and come, or is this James Holdom presenting before me? Is there a James Holdom, or is he one of your o-so-clever ruses?” Donal was uncertain, but his tone was bitter, for the King was all too recognizable in the man standing before him. He had thought to save James from this, but could see that others had betrayed their assurances, and made the council chamber into a death trap. When the man at first said nothing, merely gave him a penetrating stare, Donal became annoyed. “Give me the agreed recognition, then,” he snapped.

Seamus looked around again. It was a defining moment. Holdom and Devereaux had the stage; he and Patrick controlled access. They could count on clan Graham and several of the royals who had returned for the ceremony. He could see Lady Kate Rourke with her sword half drawn and itching for the signal to begin fighting. He calculated the odds once more, and came up with the same answer as always. There was a fifty percent chance they would win and take the throne back by force, but the realm would be no more stable than it already was, and a long civil war would surely follow.

It could still come to that, he knew, but a grand Mayo here had always been plan B. What they really wanted to have happen...

* * * *

“So, His Majesty took their offer of a domain after all,” Charles observed, looking knowingly across the parlour at Seamus. When his guest just raised a bushy eyebrow, he added, “Pretty hard to disguise a big man like him, but you or I could have done a better job, if I do say so.” He waved at the image of the screen, and Seamus chuckled. Side by side, he thought, lords Holdom and Devereaux looked about equally like the King. What would Lord Donal conclude when he watched the recordings of the event and thought about it later?

“I wonder what himself said to Lord Donal just then,” Charles mused, pointing to the first lord's suddenly furious countenance.

“Lord Holdom asked him,” Seamus noted quietly, “how his horse ‘Blackie’ was doing in his training for the Irish Derby.”

“Why did that upset him so?” Charles asked, and then answered his own question. “Oh ... he was supposed to give up all he owned when he took the job as first lord. You mean he kept his horses, and the court doesn't know? How did the King find out?” He waved at the image of Holdom on the stage.

“I told him,” Seamus replied quietly, without taking his eyes from the screen, then added, “Donal expected James to say something else.”

Donal, no longer sure who the man before him was, but certain he was being made a fool of, looked about furiously, suddenly deciding that whoever the fellow was, he would get no royal sword after all. Then he spotted the ceremonial blade lying across the podium, and remembered having discussed it that very morning with Security Chief O'Toole. Years ago it had belonged to a court executioner from the low nobility by the name of Dennison. It had no particular value, but when the man died without heirs, the blade went to the realm, and at public functions like this it had become customary to lay it out as a symbol of the court's authority. It was definitely expendable.

Donal slammed O'Conor back into its sheath on the rack, strode to the podium, and took up the scabbard of Dennison in one hand and the hilt in his other. To a rising tide of murmuring, he announced in angry tones, “I hereby make the house of Dennison, call it Holder of the Domain of New Tara, and do both name and say James Dennison, formerly Holdom, as its Lord.”

He turned and offered the scabbard and sword to sudden deathly silence in the room. The big man before him smiled slightly, took the proffered blade, swore his oath of office, turned on his heel, and began to stride from the stage.

Part way he stumbled and fell, so that he had to pick himself up in rather undignified fashion. At this there were a few discreet chuckles from strategically placed guardsmen, and Gerald Monde broke into laughter. He was followed by several others, and the tension in the room drained away in ridicule.

It would be years before the war-shattered domain of New Tara would be able to afford to send a house representative to Tara, and when it did, Dennison would be a nobody without a royal sword. The name was not even on the noble register. James Dennison could threaten no one; he could be safely ignored.

The MT commentator sounded confused. He knew something momentous had passed between Donal and the new Lord Dennison, but not what. Moreover, though there was some information available on Jack Devereaux, there was almost nothing about the former James Holdom except that he was the unmarried only son of Richard Holdom, a once prominent Ulster commerceman, and Princess Maisy, one of the many sisters to James III who had been the out-fostered daughters of King Conn III and Queen Ann.

One of the colour reporters commented that James Dennison's mother Maisy, and James (Jack) Devereaux' mother Daisy had been twins. Another reviewed the rumour that Donal Tobin's supposedly private plan had been to make the King one of the new lords, appoint another lord and relative of the King to the second domain, and give sword Meathe to a second agent who would serve as a personal life-guard for both. The first speculated that Donal had simply kept Meathe for his own, but the second replied that the former Lord Tobin's deep disdain for the trappings of royalty was well known, so this seemed unlikely.

Seamus grunted to himself, tapping the fake Meathe he had already received, and that now hung at his side. It was a pretty good blade, and he planned to use it. The real one he had hidden right out in the open where no one would ever see it.

“It appears to us,” the reporter tentatively concluded, even as Charles shook his head in disagreement, “that the King has refused further contact with the court by disdaining the offer of a royal sword and rulership of New Tara, instead allowing both domains to fall to his cousins.”

That became the last public word on the subject. The King had vanished, and the swords that had been the symbol of his family's power since 1791 were scattered—the one of that name back to Devereaux, Meathe possibly to a life-agent, and O'Connor now would go to the Royal Museum instead of to the new Dennison. A Seanacha interviewed for her opinion waxed eloquent about the careless treatment of such precious relics. She was particularly annoyed that Meathe, the ancient sword of Ireland, would be given away so casually for no good reason except Donal's disgust for things royal. However, when she was finished, the reporter politely thanked her, turned to the camera to summarize the day's events, and signed off without any further comment on the swords.

Seamus sat in his comfortable chair, watching Charles and Marilyn curled up together on the love seat. “MT off,” he said, breathing a sigh of relief. Seanachas could not be subverted or prevented from speaking their mind, but reporters were easy enough to bribe. He rubbed his chin as he reviewed the deception the four royal cousins had worked out. The whole arrangement was designed to confuse Donal (and anyone else) as to who among the actors was the King, if any. Seamus was sure it wouldn't take long for Donal to discover the three swords had been forged, especially since he was keeping one. However, the illusion ought to last long enough to get the conspirators away from easy reach of Tara, and keep everyone guessing who had the real blades. The King ought to be relatively safe, he concluded. Even several messy assassinations could not now make the uncertain certain.

He said none of this aloud, but tossed a heavy purse to Charles. “His Majesty suggests you establish a store in the old warehouse next to your living quarters to support your family. After all, the Home Office will no longer provide sufficient work to keep you busy. Initially, we will own sixty percent, and you will gain one percent per year. When the ban ends, your family will have full ownership of the business, though the building will remain in the royal preserve.”

The O'Connors protested this largesse, but Seamus merely shrugged and observed, “His Majesty's orders, is all I can say for now. We expect to finish the current project tomorrow, and will not likely need this place for some time, if ever. Patrick O'Toole may drop by occasionally, but the rest of us shall be leaving in a week or two, and may not see you for many years.”

“Very well, if His Majesty's wishes. Marilyn and I had talked of opening a hardware supply business.” The two hugged a little closer. It was the answer to their prayer—they had learned only this very day that the Lord of Heaven had blessed them with a viable pregnancy. Without a new source of income, Marilyn might have had to go back on active duty after the child was born, be away for long periods of time, and risk being killed in some distant war. Now she could remain at home as a reservist, do occasional shift work as a palace guard, and be a mother.

The drama was not over for the O'Connor household, however. The next afternoon, Charles heard shouts of triumph, cheers, and much backslapping coming through the half-open basement door. Moments later, Seamus excitedly rushed upstairs wearing a tradesman's uniform to ask if he could borrow their parlour for the evening. When he and Marilyn readily agreed, Seamus pressed both into service as guards for a conference, then left through the front door in a great hurry.

After dark, he returned wearing rags, and in the company of a second beggar. Close on their heels, Patrick O'Toole arrived with two others, the three dressed as priests. Seamus stationed Marilyn at the door to the room, and spoke to Charles.

“As soon as you can brew it, bring us some good Irish tea, would you please, Charles. When you do, have Marilyn come in too, and then the two of you stay inside at the door.”

Charles set down the tea service a few minutes later with trembling hands. He glanced nervously about the room, noting the white noise devices Seamus and Patrick had deployed. No one outside the room would hear what was said this night.

The chief conspirator ignored the agitated state of their normally imperturbable host as he introduced Charles and Marilyn to the others. “The four of us you know. Our guests are...” he hesitated before saying names, “Ito and Gustav, and they are ambassadors of their respective governments.” He waved a casual hand in the direction of the enormous bluff German on the left of the couch and the small wiry Japanese man on his right. “For purposes of this conversation, I shall be ‘Jay.’ This way, on any recordings made here, there will be no mention of real names. Charles, I have already explained to these gentlemen that you and your wife can both be trusted with what you will hear.”

Charles bowed deeply to the speaker and to the two visitors, before moving to where Marilyn had already taken up her position at the door. He was deeply moved as he listened to “Jay” outline the actions the four had taken.

“You have come because of the messages we sent yesterday, so you know the seriousness of the situation.”

Ito replied stiffly for both. “That the Covenant of the Living has been broken is sufficient to bring us. Whatever the justice of our fight with Ireland in the sight of the heavens, we nonetheless do not deserve to be treated with dishonour.”

“And you shall not,” Jay asserted. “But first, the details. A great house of Ireland has produced a genetically altered pneumonic flu. With the help of a second house, this virus was released in both your nations’ territories. The incubation time is ten days, after which there is high fever and severe lung congestion. Death in an estimated eighty percent of those infected follows in another four days.”

“You have prevailed on our old friendship to bring us here in secret to offer an antidote.” Gustav stated his conclusions in flat, unaccented Gaelic, while staring fixedly at the Irishmen opposite him in turn. He showed no emotion whatever. “What are your terms, an immediate surrender?”

“The house that built the weapon also created an antidote. The plan was to wait for the first deaths, give it to the Irish and their allies, then stall for two months before occupying your territories and providing care for the few survivors.” He extended two data cubes. “These contain complete specifications for the virus, the antidotes, and the distribution and cleanup plans.” He handed over vials of a liquid. “Here is our own version of a remedy. Unlike the one they would have offered, it blocks the virus by the genetic signature of the alterations they have made, so it should be effective for anything else they can manufacture in the next few years that is of a similar nature.”

“You give us this before discussing terms?” Ito asked softly.

“We give them to you in the name of the Lord of Heaven. There will be no terms, except that you

distribute our blocking agent as widely and as quickly as possible.”

“The Shogun and Kaiser have erred. You cannot help but win this war in a few years,” Ito observed, matter-of-factly, and Gustav nodded agreement ever so slightly.

“Let it be an honest fight and an honourable victory and loss, whatever the outcome,” Jay replied.

“I honour you and your God. May I act as nobly as you.” Ito stood, bowed, put the cube and vial in his pouch, and sat again.

Gustav's deep voice rumbled to life. “I take it the virus has already been broadcast.”

“Yes, the very day the throne was set aside.”

“Who is responsible for this outrage?” he demanded coldly.

“We have removed the names of the perpetrators from those records. Bringing them to justice is an Irish matter.”

“You have no power to do this within any reasonable number of years.” Ito stated the obvious quietly.

“That is our concern,” Jay replied, waving a hand around the circle of conspirators. “We will care for the matter, be it take ever so long.”

* * * *

Later that night, Charles found himself unable to sleep for hours. For the first time in his years of service to two high kings, he was dumbfounded by what he had seen and heard. He and his wife spoke freely. Hadn't His Majesty said most definitely there must be no secrets—even of state—between they two?

“Marilyn, I almost dropped the tea service when we walked into the room, and I saw who was there. To think of it! Ireland's high king, the first warlord of Japan, and the German Kaiser's son and commander-in-chief held conference in our very parlour, and this in the middle of the war. How did Seamus and Patrick arrange such a thing?”

“There is one thing still I wonder about, Charlie.”

“What's that, my love?”

“I understand the issues of stability and honour. And I can see that a plague and the antidote the royals worked out are good enough reason to bring they two here for conference. But why should the others believe the Irish after this shame? Why wouldn't they suspect the antidote is itself the weapon?”

“If I know Seamus, it makes no difference.”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you see how the four Irish lords hugged their two ‘enemies’ at the end?”

“You mean they infected themselves with the viral antidote, then made sure the Daimyo and the general were infected too, so they couldn't help spreading it when they got home?”

“It is how they would do it, yes. They would ‘take out insurance,’ as Seamus says.”

“There must be more to it than that. They two trusted our four; I could see that.”

“Ah, Marilyn. That is because the King, in revealing his great secret, has given them power of life and death over him.”

“You mean because besides the royals, only the enemy military chiefs, and we two know what identity the King has taken?”

“That, and why they conspired to remove him from the throne.”

“It was not to save his life, was it Charlie?” Marilyn sounded worried for James's honour.

“No, it was to prevent the MacCarthys and Mondes from trying to seize the throne, and so embroil Ireland in civil war while she is fighting on two foreign fronts.”

“That would have destroyed her empire and perhaps our entire world as effectively as the plague,” Marilyn agreed. “So they abolished the kingship altogether for a time rather than have it fall into evil hands, and now will try to mend Ireland from outside the palace.”

“But Charles,” she pleaded, “It's so complex, so subtle, so tricky. They betrayed the crown in the short battle in order to save the realm in the long war. It will be two more generations before the throne can be reclaimed. Whose idea was all this? Who did the analysis, and decided it was necessary? Who thought up such a devious remedy, and was ruthless enough and courageous enough to carry it out, even at the king's expense and that of his descendants?”

“The only one who could, Marilyn.” Charles had himself helped do the research, but not realized its importance until today.

“Then...”

“That's right, my love. What only we eight know, and none of the nobility must ever suspect, is that High King James subverted the assassination conspiracy, and arranged the deposition on his own terms.”

A contract man or woman who disagrees with an employing lord can always work elsewhere. Even a liege relationship can be broken if the holder acts dishonourably, though a brehon must confirm the breach. However, one who has sworn service to the High Lord, whether of Heaven or of Tara, is not free to put away the uniform once it has been donned. You can no more decline to serve the First Lord of this earth once you have sworn to him, than you can resign the salvation the Lord of glory gave you in Christ when you were born again. Entertain thoughts of disloyalty, if you will, while a cadet, but don officer's stripes, and you serve Ireland for life.

—selected from the commander's commencement address to the entering class of 1964, Kilkarney cadet school.

Chapter Eight

Sally and Lucy, Calgary, 1945 (Tirdia)

Lucy started, suddenly aware her friend had spoken.

“Sorry, Sal, I was woolgathering. What did you say?”

“I was just pondering what we should do about that copper following us. He's so clumsy, he's attracting attention.”

Lucy put her suitcase on the sidewalk near the corner of the Palliser hotel. She pulled a compact from her purse and made a show of adjusting the makeup she didn't like but wore for protective colouration—to look, as she put it, “as garish as the popsies,” and so, by standing out, not to do so. “It's the same one who was watching at the train station. Do you suppose he knows Karl is trotting along behind him?”

“Karl Schmidt's back in our game? I thought the Soviets took him before Berlin fell.” Sally pretended to look in a display window. It made an effective mirror.

“Must be working for Boris. Maybe he was a Ruskie agent all along. You don't suppose Karl could retire?”

The two gawked like tourists for a few minutes, and soon tagged two other agents. Farther up the street to the west lounged the sour-faced Spaniard, Carlos Cortez—one of whose spies they had turned double at great cost to Franco. He turned away angrily when he realized they had spotted him.

The second was the American they'd given the bum's rush from Dublin when he showed too much interest in harbour traffic. Later, they'd trained with him at a secret installation near Chicago, and afterwards helped prepare assassination teams at Canada's Camp X, near Oshawa. He was an OSS agent, one of Billy Donovan's boys. Always ostensibly a gentleman, Doug Boone tipped his hat politely from across the street when their eyes lighted on him where he leaned against a lamppost in his trench coat.

Moments later, they spotted a third by the window of the newspaper stand and joke shop only a few feet from Boone. This one they knew only by his photograph as the mercenary Argentinian code-named “Bolo” by their MI-6 associates, whose latest bulletin said he was currently working for the Japanese.

“A regular little Dáil,” grunted Sally, disgusted. “We've got four of the world's top spies traipsing about in broad daylight all at once, and a clumsy cop who no doubt answers to merrie olde England. I suppose the prize is worth it, but we're fair tripping over each other.”

“Don't forget us, Sally. And, make that seven of the finest.”

“How so?”

“That copper was near shouting at us a moment ago, but now things are copacetic, he's being more circumspect. I think he spotted some of our friends, and was sending a warning. Right nice of him, but chivalry has no place in our line of business. They'll all have seen him. He ought to take a Camp X refresher.”

“What do you think we should do, Luce? Take them out one at a time?” Sally was always ready for a fight.

“We're too conspicuous in the city, and there's no use pretending we're tourists now that there's a welcoming committee holding up banners all over the street. Let's take a different hotel room, lighten up, and head for the countryside. By the time the happy gang knows we're gone, we'll be at the rendezvous.”

“Will it matter if we're a day early?” Sally asked.

“The weather's nice. We'll camp out under the stars. But first, a chase to keep the competition on their toes.” She grinned slyly at her friend, who chuckled back. It was part of the game.

It was harder than it seemed at first. They checked in at the Palliser as if all were normal, but on the way to their room, got off the elevator on the second floor, and ducked into an empty men's washroom. There, they made a quick change into trench coats, tied up their hair under fedoras, covered their suitcases with a zipped fabric of a different colour, and took another elevator back to the main floor.

Two stops and several city blocks later, they spent the night at a hotel picked at random, and got a peaceful night's sleep feeling pretty good about themselves. In the morning, however, it was clear that the local police were still on to them, even if none of their fellow professionals were in evidence.

“There's five of them at least,” Sally grumbled, a few minutes after they left the hotel next morning. They had abandoned their suitcases for the knapsacks folded up inside, and left their coats behind. Today, they wore dresses and light jackets, and carried two more changes of clothes in their packs. “The blessed coppers must have bribed every hotel clerk within miles. They're after the goods, Luce, or they would have snuffed us in our room last night for the money. Our local contact is surely compromised, and there's no point heading for the bus station; they're sure to have that covered. What say we hitch a civilian ride?”

“Good idea, Sal. But first, we shake off the troops.”

They stopped at the corner where Lucy consulted a map, looking about as if unsure where to go. There weren't many people around on a Sunday morning, making them easy to follow.

“Look there, Sal.” Lucy nodded toward an elderly couple that had exited a parking lot, and were now walking upstairs into an ornate building partway along the next block. “I saw them drive down the alley behind a few minutes ago. Now they're stepping into that church.” Sally looked at her friend, and grinned. There was no need to say more.

Two minutes later saw them stop again, this time at the mouth of the alley to check for possible watchers along it. Seeing none, and with the nearest police officer a hundred feet away, they suddenly broke into a run down the narrow lane. Twenty feet in, they dropped smoke grenades from their packs, ran a short distance farther, and turned into the church parking lot. There were two soft “pops”, the nearby lane filled with smoke, and they heard angry voices as they bolted up steps and into a side door. There had been no one in the lot or on the street.

“What now, Luce?”

Lucy leaned against the door they had shut behind them and closed her eyes. She could hear singing coming from the church service. “We blend in for a while, and hope our friends go away.”

Sally looked around doubtfully. “This is no Catholic Church, Luce,” she said, uncomfortably. Lucy could see her friend was torn between guilt and curiosity, and felt the same way herself. If anyone back home found out that they had entered Presbyterian doors...

She gulped and patted her small hat. "Good thing we wore these."

Minutes later, they slipped into a back pew, dropped their packs beside them, and watched proceedings with one eye and the door with another. Everything was in English rather than Latin, they had never sung in church before, so the hymns were unfamiliar, and they felt quite uncomfortable until the sermon began. Then things got worse.

"Are you saved?" The preacher boomed out the opening line of his sermon, and Lucy squirmed, realizing they were in for yet another "gospel presentation," such as they had heard many times around Trinity.

But the exposition and delivery were rather good, she thought after some minutes, better than any homily she had heard lately from a priest. After his dramatic beginning, the pastor turned to Genesis 28 to read the vaguely familiar story of Jacob and his dream of a staircase that reached up to Heaven, and upon which he saw angels ascending and descending. He emphasized that Jacob was at a low point in life, estranged from his father and brother, without the wealth he had schemed for, and running for his life from his brother Esau.

"The Lord came to tell him there was hope after all by showing him a vision, assuring him God was in his heaven and cared for lowly Jacob, indeed, to demonstrate heaven was not impossibly remote, but God had made provision for people to gain access."

Lucy knew what a Catholic would say next, that such admission was via the Church, and required its priests, or ministers in this case, to mediate. But he surprised her by turning to the first chapter of St. John's gospel, and pointing out that when speaking with Nicodemus, Jesus claimed to be the ladder in question himself, the living connection between heaven and earth. He went on to hammer home his point that the only way to God was by having faith in Christ, and that his death on the cross availed to save the worst of sinners when nothing else could. Lucy was just coming to grips with applying his argument personally when he closed with an intriguing statement.

"We live in a day when we have seen a few madmen come near to destroying the world. Who knows where the making of weapons and machines of war will yet lead? No power on earth can restrain a single evil man who gathers such weapons of destruction into his hands. Yet none of us is inherently better than the monster Hitler. We may not be killers," he offered, causing Lucy to wince, "but we are all equally sinners. No outward moral compact, no amount of good works, church-belonging, or church-going can make up for one act of wickedness, much less for the deeds of a determined sinner. Only a heart changed by Jesus Christ can produce a good man or woman, because goodness is not a set of actions, but a character quality of God alone. Goodness becomes a part of us only if God infuses it into our hearts. The world could be a better place, but only if God changes people from within. Jesus invites you to trust him. Will you repent of sin, accept him, and be born again today unto good works in his service?"

There was another hymn, the service ended, and people started to drift out. Sally and Lucy had heard such ideas before without taking them seriously, yet today both had to shake off the feeling they had nearly been taken captive, that the man's words almost applied to them personally. They rose slowly and walked down the aisle with their bags to join the couple of hundred people milling about the foyer.

They went up to the pastor, and Lucy was about to ask about the sermon when Sally dug her in the ribs. She turned to look, then followed her friend's glance out the open door and down the front steps. The man who had attacked them at the station the day before was walking by. He must have gotten away from the police already. He didn't notice them, but seeing him brought Lucy back to earth.

“May I help you, ladies?” the pastor asked a second time.

“Perhaps you could.” She started carefully. She knew how to talk to a priest, but... “Our names are Lucy and Sally. We are visitors to Calgary, and wonder if anyone might give us a ride to a town called Montgomery. It's just outside the city on the west.”

“My name's Fred,” the preacher gushed. “I'm so glad the Lord has brought you here, and I'd be happy to see what we can do for you. Just a minute.” He rushed off in great enthusiasm, excited to do someone a favour.

It was no more than the promised minute before they had been introduced to Alice and Gordon Greene, the same elderly couple they had earlier seen entering the building. They turned out to be a very private pair who spoke in sparse sentences about their family and church, but asked no questions, and seemed to accept the two women as if they were old familiar friends.

Half an hour later, they deposited Lucy and Sally on a side street off the end of the bridge just past the tiny town that was their stated goal. Within minutes, the two, satisfied no one was paying attention, were walking briskly upstream along the side of the Bow River, out of sight below the bank. Their actual destination was west of the next town of Bowness, and they hadn't wanted to be driven close to the rendezvous.

* * * *

“Thought any more about the religion in the Ortho book, Luce?” They called the dictionary that because of the frequent use of “Ortho” as an adjective to describe a variety of ordinary things. Apparently it was a synonym for “Hibernia”.

“Sure thing, Sal.” Lucy rolled off her back where she had been watching the stars in the crystal clear night sky, and fished the PIEA out of her pack. She handed it to Sally, who she knew planned to look up some word for a discussion—no surprise, given the way the morning sermon had affected them. Lucy lay back down with her head on her hands and listened to the night sounds—the nearby river rushing over its stones, and the small animals in the grove of cottonwood trees and brush all around that were their insurance against intruders.

The two had early on become interested in the religious terms in the Gaelic dictionary when they realized several came with lengthy explanations rather than simply equivalents. Evidently the best translation of many words meant something different, and the lexicographer had taken pains to point this out.

“OK, Lucy.” Sally found what she was looking for. “This book is just a fantasy, no more real than the romance it came with. But suppose we listen to the argument for a moment. According to it, salvation does not come from being baptized into the church, leading a good life, and obeying the priests, like we've always been told. Rather, it comes from faith in God who gives salvation as a gift. You do good things afterwards out of gratitude, rather than trying to earn it.”

“Yeah, pretty much what pastor Fred preached this morning, same as what our Protestant friends tell us.”

The dictionary referenced numerous Scripture passages, and the two, who couldn't very well buy a Bible in Dublin, had quietly obtained one on a trip to London, then looked up and checked many of them. Most were identical, though for some, the verse numbering did not quite agree, and others didn't exist in

the Bible they had. What were the books of Gamaliel and Hibernians, for instance?

Of course, they had said nothing of this to their confessor. They couldn't very well, when state secrets were at risk. And had they told Father Damon, he would have taken the PIEA.

Lucy put her mind back to the dictionary. "The author gives simple translations for 'priest' and 'church,'" she observed, "so those must correspond to some extent."

"Sure, but listen to what it says about baptism, which is the same word in both tongues." She began to read in Orthogaelic, "(1) a believer's witness, as with us; (2) a ritual, primarily for infants, as with Tirdian Catholics.' Their church defines it the way our proddys do, not like our catechism, Luce."

"Remember what Colleen said when she visited our flat?" Lucy asked.

Colleen O'Toole was a woman of about twenty-five who had taken a course from each of them the previous semester, and frequently engaged her two professors in deep conversations. This started shortly after Sally, thinking about the world represented by the book, made an injudicious casual remark at a conference, wondering what kind of nation Ireland might have become had Brian Boru not died at Clontarf. Colleen showed up in her class shortly after to question her about the speculation, and promptly signed up for Lucy's linguistics course as well.

The two women were uncomfortable and wary at this "coincidence," and took care to make no more slips concerning the PIEA, but the questions of the younger woman who quickly became their star student somehow strayed into religious and political topics with great predictability. Colleen sharply probed the meaning of their faith, and whether on the one hand it was effective for salvation if it was pro forma, iconic, or institutional, or if on the other it had to be personal, specific, and relational to be meaningful.

"Yeah," Sally replied, "Colleen was pretty much on the same line."

The gregarious and charming Colleen had eventually won them over, and they set aside their initial suspicion she was an agent. The subject of an alternate Ireland was gradually forgotten between them. They invited Colleen to dinner when she confided one day to Sally she was lonely for her husband—they had the impression he was a military man on assignment. Well, who but them didn't have a soldier off somewhere these days? Now that Germany had been crushed, the troops were starting to trickle home from Europe, but there were still many in Asia.

That visit had been just a week before exams, and they had not seen Colleen since, as their summer duties carried them to places that would have astounded their students. But the memory of Colleen's challenge to re-examine loyalties and presuppositions in the light of Scripture stayed. So did the Bibles she presented them before departing that evening.

"Too bad we couldn't have talked with that pastor Fred fellow this morning," commented Lucy.

"I've never been in a Protestant church before, Luce. They use the same words as our priests, but mean different things, especially when it comes to salvation."

"That's the nub of it," thought Lucy. "Is it enough to believe in the church and do as we're told, or is there something more needed, something deeper and individual? Is God's salvation institutional or personal?" As a linguist she knew all too well how a word could have different meanings according to its speaker, contexts, register, and intonation. "But surely," she thought, "what God reveals is truth, and

understandable as such. Why then have God's words ended up with different meanings? Is it because Protestants believe the Bible takes priority over the church, and Catholics hold the opposite? Do Catholic symbols illustrate reality or obscure it?"

A few quiet moments went by in the little clearing before Lucy responded aloud to Sally's comment. "It'd be good to talk with Colleen again. I wonder if we'll see her in the fall." She turned pages again, reinforcing her remarks by stabbing a finger. "They have only one church, Luce. It has priests and bishops, but neither cardinals nor a pope."

"I noticed. They don't have words for holy water, the rosary, indulgences, the Mass, or a whole lot of other things, either. Where are you going with this, Sal?"

"For the sake of argument, Luce, suppose there is another earth having a very different church than ours, but with an almost identical Bible to our Protestants. Then the argument that the church produced the scriptures is wrong; it must be the other way around."

"In that case," Lucy concluded, "the church isn't the highest authority, and the Bible's teachings cannot be added to or overridden." She was used to her friend's thoughts running in similar channels to her own.

"Not only that," Sally added, "but what we personally believe about the Bible's teachings is what matters for eternity, not whether we also do what the church says, or use its symbols, and certainly not whether we do what Father Damon tells us."

"If it were true..."

There was silence as the two looked up at the stars. Both knew they had crossed a divide. The world described by the dictionary was not someone's fantastic imaginary Ireland, but real. Somewhere, Éire wasn't a brutalized land recovering from centuries of English oppression, but had her own king, and ruled all other nations, even over another whole world. Somewhere, there was a strong, rich, vibrant Irish empire with a technology two hundred years ahead of their own, computers that fit in a purse, but that used swords in battle, and thought of guns as dishonourable. James IV was High King of that other Emerald Isle. They wanted to meet him. Of course, thought Lucy, if the romance tells it right, he was never crowned.

But more important, Ortho's "Catholics" were her only Christians, but believed as their own world's Protestants. The two of them had a lot of thinking to do, a lot of Bible study, a lot of praying...

It was too overwhelming. Lucy changed the subject. "Thought what we will do when the war is over, Sal?"

Sally didn't answer immediately. This they discussed frequently, and the subject was touchy.

"I wish I had a man," she finally said. "A real man, not some masher who wants a 'grab-and-run,' or a government clerk who'll keep me barefoot and pregnant in a kitchen while he does his dull office job day after dreary day, or even a spook like us, always looking over his shoulder for the bullet with his name on it."

"A couple of strong handsome soldier boys. Officers, of course. Fellas that can take charge, ones we can both lean on and count on, guys worth having saved ourselves for." But Lucy brushed away a tear as the last words caught in her throat. It was her recurring fear that she would grow old and die without having had a man love her, or a child she could raise, and she knew Sally felt the same way. They had

been together too long. They not only knew each others' nightmares, they had the same ones. Not many men were interested in a woman taller than most of them, and neither had ever had a serious romance. Fellow academics respected them, but the few men who knew what they really were had every reason to fear them. Were they still virgins because they were waiting for the right husband, or because no one would have them?

Lucy never visited Canada without thinking of their several tours of duty at Camp X. There had been no men of interest there, but some heady times when their twosome had been four. They had bittersweet memories of friendships she and Sally had formed there, and the awful pain associated with the later deaths of Madeleine and Odette at the hands of the Gestapo. Madeleine had been such an innocent. Lucy couldn't understand why Intrepid had sent her to France. But that was war; pawns were expendable.

Lucy propped herself up on one elbow and looked at the glowing embers of the fire.

"We're almost thirty, Sal. We're pretty much old maids." She felt a tear roll down her lower cheek.

Her friend rolled over to face her in a similar posture, and took up another hard topic. "We've killed people when Father Damon ordered us to. How two killers could ever become wives and mothers is past my thinking. I think what we're doing is wrong, Luce. I mean, absolutely wrong. It's sin we need to repent of, like Pastor Fred said this morning. What if peace comes and we find out it's all around us but not in us?" There. She had come right out and said what the two had thought, but had been afraid to put in words.

"Father Damon claims we have a dispensation," Lucy replied, doubtfully, running her hand through her hair as she said it. But they no longer trusted Damon, did they? And, if they were captured, who would believe their orders came from a priest? He and deValera's government could disown them without fear of contradiction. Everyone knew Ireland had no spies, especially none working with the Allies, certainly none run by a priest.

When they had pressed Damon on the apparent contradiction between Christ's teachings on love, and the missions he assigned, he became very sophisticated, saying that religion could not be mixed with the business of nations, and certainly not with that of intelligence agents.

"Ours is a greater calling, and so a morality that is higher than that of common people," he snapped back, as if it were obvious. That was when Lucy's doubts about his veracity and authority escalated to certainty.

Afterwards, both women were dissatisfied. As Lucy put it, "If there is no difference in practice between immorality and morality, why is there any difference in theory? For that matter, does Father Damon speak for the church, or is he acting on his own?"

Sally agreed. "The Brits and Yanks want to put the Nazis on trial, but if morality is relative, what grounds can they use to condemn them? Besides, Father Damon only gets that sound in his voice when he wants someone killed, and we've killed too many already."

"Guilt is real, Sal, not just a feeling. How do we deal with it?" The question needn't be repeated. It still hung between them.

Only days afterwards they had been sent to Canada, then reassigned here.

“What if Father Damon has no right to say such things, Luce?” Sally's voice trembled as she gave words to more of the terrible thoughts haunting them. Saying them in Orthogaelic made them seem less of a mortal sin, but she had a fleeting thought she would have to find a confessor when she got back home. After all, she was questioning a priest's authority. “What if God is angry with us, and neither the government nor the church can say it's really all right? What if Father Damon's lying about the dispensation, like he lies about everything else? Or, even worse, what if he's telling the truth, but the church can't forgive us because only God can?”

“Maybe this can be our last mission, Sal. Maybe after this we can go back to teaching at the University, forget about being spies, and be at peace.”

“Father Damon won't let us, Luce. Not until Ireland is one country again.”

“Yeah,” Lucy replied, unenthusiastically, and did not say aloud the rest. Damon would order them killed if they tried to resign. They knew too much. Their war would indeed go on.

Lucy lay back and thought about their mission. An unnamed free-lance spy had compromised the Americans' atomic project, and had gotten away with an intact trigger device and detailed plans for the entire bomb. Supposedly, he was coming here to sell to them, but it was clear from the crowd of fellow spooks in Calgary that others were in on the game. They knew Bill Donovan was furious at the security breach. Apparently he had betrayed his deal with the Irish, and put his own agent into the field. What of the rest? Had the double agent crossed them, or were the others following her and Sally? Were they instead responding to some other invitation to bid on the merchandise?

The mission was blown; that much was obvious. But by whom? Had Father Damon decided to eliminate them? Should they give up and run for it? But if they bowed out now, they could scarcely hide anywhere Damon couldn't track them. They would never abandon their friendship and go separate ways, but two women their height would be easy to find.

Well, at least death would render their “after the war” concerns moot, she thought grimly. On the other hand, what would become of their souls if today they were killed? Would they find peace, or worse torment?

That got her thinking again about Pastor Fred—she didn't even know his last name—and how he had spoken of the harm one madman with technological power had already done. Germany had begun to rain down rockets from the sky on Britain. Inaccurate as they had been, what if one had carried a hell-bomb? According to Intrepid's top secret briefing, even a near miss with one of those would level much of London. She found that hard to believe, but if Ortho-Hibernia was two hundred years ahead in its technology, surely it would be even easier there for someone with access to still more sophisticated weaponry to deal death on a world scale. How had the Orthans prevented their whole planet from being wiped out by a single renegade? How could her earth?

There was only one way, she decided. The Orthans must have a powerful set of common beliefs guiding their actions. Religion must be the driving force keeping their society viable. “But,” she told herself, “they're prods, Luce.” She shivered. Then she thought, “Besides, they wouldn't all believe. What if just a very few didn't? Who would be the police, and how could they function?” She shivered again.

Sally's thoughts were troubled, too. “Say, Luce?”

“Yeah, Sal?”

“Read me another chapter of that silly story, would you? I can't sleep.”

Justice, while sometimes easier to understand, is, in the short term, harder to enforce than law. However, while power can forcibly re-define law, the High Lord of Heaven is the ultimate implementor of true justice, making it both accurate and inevitable in the long term. In Hibernia's jurisprudence, the Lord of Heaven's ways are supposedly enforced by the crown, represented by the military and the brehons. But formal courts are last resorts, for every citizen is charged with upholding and implementing justice, and in some situations one cannot wait for a hand of the crown to be placed officially to the task. Then, you must act, concerning yourself with legal consequences only later.

—basic notes in ethics, Kilkarney cadet school.

Chapter Nine

Brian McIlhargey, near Glenmorgan, 1977 (Hibernia)

Brian announced himself. “Sergeant McIlhargey at your service. I believe we have met.” He coolly nodded reassurance at Karen over her would-be assailant's shoulder. Brian and his father had been friends to Karen when no one else would pay attention to the lost little girl in the grown-up body. She could count on him.

The cold desire for revenge against those who had murdered the Devereaux family settled on his heart like a rock. There would be no escape for this one.

“Take your hands off her,” he commanded, his voice a hard growl.

At the harsh whispers behind him, the girl's tormentor let go and whirled about, his hand reaching for his sword in the same motion. Then he took in his challenger's missing forearm, and broke into vicious laughter. Brian stayed calm, unsurprised to recognize the same sergeant he had seen twice today. The fellow did get around.

“You! You were at the gate earlier.” He waved an arm in dismissal. “Begone, cripple, before I make you eat dust. Leave a whole man to do a man's business.”

“Raping and killing a defenseless and innocent girl doesn't sound like official army business to me,” Brian observed quietly.

“It isn't. What's it to you?”

“You say it isn't?” He placed an imperceptible emphasis on the word “say.”

“Yes, I say so,” came the angry retort.

“That's good,” replied the newcomer, coolly. “I swore not to bear arms against the court, but on the oath of your saying, you are not on court business.”

The other soldier was nervous, but had not run out of bravado. After all, how much could half a soldier do to a top enlisted sword like him, even if he was a head taller and far heavier? He licked his lips, then decided not to wait for the one-armed man to turn his back before killing him, but to put an end to him at once. He'd had no doubt the intruder must die from the moment he had seen him. The colonel said there

must be no witnesses when he dealt with the girl, and was not a man to be crossed. Raping and killing her would wait a minute or two.

He took a step forward and started to draw his sword saying, "You're Devereaux scum, and I'll put you in the ground with"

The sentence was never finished. In a movement so fast he never saw it, Brian cross-drew left-handed, swinging the blade deeply through the other sergeant's left arm and into his side. He reeled from the savage blow, but against all odds briefly recovered some balance. Finding himself unable to move from shock, he glanced down at his own forearm on the ground, took in the profusely bleeding stump that remained, then looked stupidly at the man he had been preparing to murder, and managed to whisper, "You're no soldier; you're" With the second half-completed sentence, he slowly crumpled up and sank to the ground.

"Brian, oh, Brian. I knew Jesus would send someone. I prayed, I did, and God answered. I'm so glad he sent you." Karen sprang up from the log where she had witnessed the whole incident and, lifting her skirts, rushed around the prone soldier and threw herself against her deliverer. He cradled her with the stump of his upper arm a moment, then pushed her gently away, whispering, "Just a moment, Karen. I must question him."

He bent over and separated his victim from his weapon. A properly trained man-of-arms took no chances, regardless of how badly the other was injured. He wiped his own blade clean on the man's kilt, cutting off a strip as he did—the downed man wouldn't need it much longer—then sheathed it back in its scabbard with more satisfaction than such an incident warranted. No one graduated from Kilkarney without proving a sixty point rating fighting with each hand while the other was tied against him to throw off his balance. No officer fought an enlisted man unless attacked first, and such an attack was suicidal if alone. Brian McIlhargey taught would-be officers their sword, and the rule certainly applied to him. However, executing a man for attempted rape and murder was the just and expected duty of every honourable citizen who bore arms.

He bent down again and began to tie the strip of kilt on the man's arm to staunch the blood, but fumbled it using only one hand. Then he realized the man's eyes had opened even as the grey pallor of death crept over his face. The dying man worked his mouth into a caricature of a smile, and got out, "Better you than Colonel..."

But his master's name, and whatever else might have been on his mind, would have to wait until he could tell the Lord of Heaven, for at that moment he heaved a great convulsion, and when he became still, he was unquestionably dead.

"No great loss," muttered the girl's rescuer, setting the strip aside. It was the work of a minute or two to rifle the dead man's pouch for a few shamrocks and do a rough search of his effects. There were no orders on him, and he left the identity papers where they were. Apart from supplying the name of Master Sergeant Bruce Conachy, they were of no value, for being caught with stolen military papers would bring a death sentence. He straightened up and looked around for a place of concealment.

"Here, Karen. Take his other leg and we'll drag him under those bushes."

"Oh." She put her hand over her mouth, still a little afraid. "Is he dead, then?"

"He'll not trouble you any more, lass. Come along."

They pulled the body about five staves into the low brush, then worked back over the area to remove the sign of what had happened. He surveyed the area. The job wouldn't fool someone trained by Walking Buffalo without a lot more work, but an army tracker might not be able to read the place at a glance, and any delay would buy them time. It would have to do.

The girl was very quiet during this, and when they were finished, he motioned her to sit on the log. He stared at her a moment or two, and she looked at the ground. "What were you doing here, lass?" he asked gently.

"He said to come here," she whispered back.

Brian decided not to waste time explaining about his voice. The less noise the better, even though this place was deserted.

"Who did, Karen?"

She looked searchingly up at him, turned her head on her side and grinned. "Are you really my Brian. Your face looks like him, but..."

"Yes, I am Brian, and you are Karen. We are not pretending anything just now." He crouched down and cradled her face in his one hand. "I've been cut in the battle, but I'll get better."

"You're cut on the inside," she informed him in a serious childlike voice, ignoring his missing arm as of no consequence.

He wasn't sure how to respond to this, and when he did not, she added, quite definitely, "I can tell."

"What, are you fey, girl?" He said it with a grin he hardly felt, for there was no time for such foolishness.

She ignored this question to answer the earlier one. "He was in the blackberries."

It was always like this when talking to Karen. Few other than he and his father had the patience for it, he reflected. He summoned his resolve for the task of getting coherent answers from the girl whose thinking refused to be organized.

"Were the blackberries for supper?"

"Cookie wanted to make pies," came the dreamy reply, "and Mistress Karina sent me out, but I went back into the manse." Karen hugged her knees, put her head in her lap and rocked back and forth, trance-like, inviting him to do the talking.

He thought about the incongruity of the three-year-old girl's mind in the pretty young lady's body, and tenderly reached out to stroke her rusty curls. "Don't worry, little Karen. I will take care of you, and no one will hurt you again."

Her head popped back up with a new and sunnier smile. "I can be your girl forever and forever? Promise?"

He hesitated a moment, then decided there was no reason to play at this. Who else would look after her now? The thought of just the two of them travelling together, and what people would think about it, crossed his mind momentarily, but he put it away. He would never touch the lass. Whatever she looked

like, she was barely older than an infant. "I promise."

"I will swear to you," she offered, with a ready grin. "You can protect me with your big sharp sword, and I shall be your special servant girl for ever and for always." This last was offered in a bravely determined tone, but she immediately broke the spell with a giggle.

His mind made up, he drew the self-same sword, holding it for the oath of a master's fealty to a servant. Her giggle turned into a big "Oh" as it dawned on her that he was taking her seriously. She knelt in the dirt, put her hands around his on the hilt, and looked up expectantly.

"Do you really know what this means, little Karen?" he asked carefully.

"I'm seventeen; I only seem little," she replied pertly. "I'm allowed to do this."

"That girl," Brian thought, "she knows what it means to be an adult in part of her mind; she just can't concentrate long enough to function as one."

"Very well. Do you, Karen Bridget O'Toole, swear a servant's fealty to me, Brian James McIlhargey, from now on until death releases us?" He used her original name. No one could be called "A'Devereaux" for the next twenty years.

"Yes, I swear." She bowed her head on her hands as she had seen others do, and looked down the length of the blade to await his oath to her.

He swallowed hard before starting, as he thought of all those to whom he had owed fealty or service, and who were now dead. Did the same Lord of Heaven who allowed such evil reward his failures with new responsibility? Did he even exist?

He collected himself and began the proper response. "I, Brian James McIlhargey, solemnly swear to protect and care for you all your life. I will provide for you before myself, and guard your person ahead of my own. If I neglect or desecrate this duty or dishonour myself because of you, then let my life be forfeit to the Lord of Heaven who sees us both."

He frowned somewhat at saying the last words, but if there was no companion to witness and secure an oath, it had to be sworn to the Lord of Heaven alone. He knew that, but it bothered him to say the words. He glanced uneasily upwards, wondering if there really was anyone listening. Well, it didn't matter. An oath was more than life, however sworn. It could never be broken.

When he looked down, Karen was gazing at him with a rapt expression. Unable to maintain it for long, she abruptly changed the subject.

"Will I grow up someday?"

"You are seventeen. You just said so. According to the law, you are an adult."

"You know what I mean." She pouted. "Really, really grow up like other little girls?"

He looked at her, heartbroken. Karen had a bright flame of intelligence, a big vocabulary when she wanted to, and could even read simple MT scripts. "Perhaps, someday," he lied.

"No I won't. You don't mean that. I can tell."

“Why do you want to grow up?” he managed to get out, keenly aware that part of her mind knew the prison it was in, had no ability to do anything about it, and knew that, too.

She suddenly sprang to her feet and danced around him in a swirl of her skirt. “I could marry my soldier man, and he could give me an emerald, and become a great lord with me as his wife, and I would be a great lady, and...”

Suddenly she stopped and put one hand over her mouth, realizing the impropriety of what she had said, and blushing brightly. “Oh, a servant is not supposed to think such things. You're not angry, are you?”

“No, my child, I am not. Listen. I have no one else, so I will care for you, and you will care for me. That will have to be enough, my little lass.” Then, changing the subject as she would do, he went on with, “You like to play pretend, don't you?”

She nodded vigorously, somewhat chagrined, saying nothing aloud.

“Can you tell the difference between pretend and real?”

She nodded once, and he thought he saw a tear glisten in her eye.

“Good. Now, when we meet other people, we'll play pretend that you are my almost grown-up daughter. Is that a good game?”

She nodded again, brightening.

“Now, will you play another game with me?”

She folded her arms and grinned her assent.

“All right. Let's pretend you are picking blackberries in the patch behind the kitchen garden.”

“Yes, and you can be the man who came to visit and ask me about treasures. So you say, ‘Do you know what's the most precious treasure in Devereaux manse?’”

Brian dutifully repeated the words, and she responded, “Of course I do.”

At that, Karen took over both sides of the conversation, walking up and down, picking imaginary fruit, her arm crooked as if holding a basket. “And then you say, ‘Well, if you knew something bad was going to happen at the manse, could you get that precious treasure and take it to the Lady Katherina's favourite place down by the river?’” She paused the game and interjected, waving around, “That's here, you know.”

“And then I say, ‘Of course I can,’ and you say ‘You might have to wait a few days before the lady can come to get her treasure,’ and then I say, ‘Do I need to do it right now’ and then you say, ‘Yes, you had better, because it will happen very soon,’ and so I run and run, and I do it, and I hear men coming, but I get away too fast for them to catch me, and then I come down here and stay by myself a long long time, and then that bad man comes, and you rescue me, and...” She stopped, blinking. She had run out of story.

He looked at her, astonished. With the right trigger, Karen could remember every word said in her

hearing. "You play that game very well, my little Karen," he said, approvingly. "Now, play some more. You are back in the garden, and, well, this will be a harder game, because you have to pretend I still have my arm, and you can see my sleeve."

She nodded, and looked a little scared as she took in the idea of his missing limb for the first time. He could see it wasn't going to work.

He tried again. "Close your eyes for this pretend." When she complied, he led her through it. "Do you see the man's sleeve? Just nod; don't say anything or you might forget to play, and open your eyes."

After a few moments, she nodded.

"Now look at the bright stripes on his cuff, and starting at his wrist, tell me what the colours are, that's a good girl."

She hesitated again, then started to speak. "The first is a pretty yellow, and the second is blue and it's wider. The third one's narrow and green." She announced the last triumphantly and popped open her eyes. "Do I win the game?"

He let out his breath slowly. "Yes, you win," he said, trying to look a pleasure at the achievement that he didn't feel. She had described a colonel's insignia. But whose arm had been in the uniform jacket? Sean Reilly's, or Thomas Monde's? He doubted he would get anything more. They both had red hair and were about the same height, and she was incapable of describing a face.

"The Lady Katherina isn't coming, is she?"

"No, she won't be coming." His voice was flat, and he felt exhausted, more for his emotional loss than because he had not yet recovered from his wounds.

"He was a bad man, wasn't he?" She tilted her head in the direction of the body they had secreted.

"A very bad man, Karen."

"Did he kill our lady?"

"Either he did, or someone with him." Brian hung his head in fresh grief.

Karen's voice rose in anger. "Then I'm glad you killed him, even if Jesus says I'm not supposed to be."

The two stood in silence for a long time before he thought to review her earlier words. Doing so brought him to ask, "What was the treasure you fetched here, thinking it was for Lady Katherina?"

She looked at him, astonished that he would not know, and gestured toward the tent. "Why, Meghan, of course."

His mouth dropped open in a shocked expression, and he could only repeat her word, "Meghan?"

"My little baby, Meghan, yes." She pranced toward the tent. "I had just made some food for her when that wicked man arrived." Karen unbuttoned the door and brightly announced, "Time to wake up, Meghan, dear, and have something to eat." She reached into the tent and brought out a brightly beribboned basket, and continued to coo, "Look, dearest Meghan, our Brian has come to pay a visit,

and rescue us, and look after us, and take care of us both forever and forever.” She marched back to him with the basket swinging from her hand, and held it out for his inspection.

Brian remained rooted to the spot, more afraid than he had been in his life. Rather than look in the basket as she was plainly inviting, he put his hand on her shoulder, and looked at her deeply, hungrily. “Are you sure you can tell the difference between pretend and real, my Karen?”

“Yes,” she answered, falteringly, biting her lip.

“Who is Meghan?” he demanded in a shaking voice.

“No pretending?”

“None at all.”

Tears came to her eyes, and she was slow to answer. “Meghan is the dolly my Brian got for my birthday when he went to Tara for the opening of court. She's my own little baby.” Karen swung the basket back and forth as if it were light as a feather.

The whole house had known about that, and there had been much ribbing over the child's gift to a grown woman, he reflected. They had been even more aware of what happened next, for the girl had turned the household upside down in a panic over it for days.

“Where is Meghan?” he insisted, his hard eyes demanding truth.

There were pleading tears in the girl's eyes as she held up the basket, but he would not move his searching gaze from her for even a glance.

“You have sworn to me, so from now on can pretend only if I give permission. For right now, everything you say must be real,” he said, as sternly as possible in a hoarse whisper.

She put her head down, but the basket continued to swing from her arm. “I lost her,” she admitted.

“Did you tell me you had lost her, and you were sorry?”

“No, but I'm so sorry now. Please forgive me.” The girl's shoulders began to shake with sobbing, and she seemed to shrink in size, as though she were rapidly becoming even more the child than she usually thought she was.

His hand on her shoulder became a reassuring squeeze. “I forgive you,” he said. “Now, what did you do instead of admitting you had lost Meghan?”

“I pretended.”

“How did you pretend?”

“I pretended she was my Meghan,” Karen admitted.

“Everyone knew you were pretending.”

She nodded. “I couldn't bear not knowing what had happened to her when I lost her.”

Steadfastly refusing to look at her burden, he persisted, knowing his own guilt was as great as hers.

“Suppose you had known.”

“At least I would have known.”

“Karen, my child. I have something to confess. I found your real Meghan, your doll. The dogs took her from the front porch where you left her, and tore her up. I didn't tell you because I thought it would hurt you too much. I was intending to replace her. Now I see I was wrong, because truth is better, even when it hurts. Will you forgive me for making you think you had to pretend?”

She looked at him in awe. She understood the complex request, and could follow the whole conversation, even though she remained emotionally a child.

“Yes,” she squeaked out. “I'm sorry I pretended too much. I'll ask permission before I do it again.”

“Now, in the basket. Is that your pretend Meghan, whom the Lady Katherina let you hold?”

She nodded hesitantly, not sure if she had done something even more terrible.

“Really and truly, is it your pretend Meghan?”

“Yes. Did I do wrong to bring her here?”

He did not answer. Instead, he released his grasp on her shoulder, and sank down to his knees. With shaking hand, he moved aside the blanket covering the basket, then stared, dumbfounded. Karen had told the exact truth.

Smiling brightly and quietly up at him was the beautiful little three-month-old red-haired green-eyed colleen whom everyone of Devereaux called the treasure of the house. Impossibly, Karen had somehow helped Mara Rourke-Devereaux make a liar of the cross in the manse graveyard.

When he recovered from the shock of seeing the dead alive after all, he gave new instructions that first confused, then delighted his new servant. “Karen, my child, listen to me. You have told me the truth, and must always do so whenever I ask you. But I want you to pretend for everyone else we meet that this is little Meghan, not your dolly, but your own precious little girl, your own daughter.”

Karen turned several shades redder than her natural Irish colour, and got a stubborn expression in the set of her mouth. “That isn't right.”

“Why not?”

“Because for a girl who's not married to have a baby is wrong. I know that.” As she said it, she reddened further, and almost seemed her true age for a moment.

“Yes, it is a shame for that to be, and I am glad you know it. However, you understand there are people who will try to kill Mara if they find out who she is?”

Karen nodded vacantly. Brian was making her think too much for one day, and her head was getting tired.

“Well, the only way I can think of for the three of us to explain ourselves is to pretend you are my girl, and she is yours. If anyone should think otherwise and finds out we are from this part of Ireland, they might discover who she is, and kill us all.”

Karen frowned, looked carefully at him a moment, then asked with a big grin, “What if we pretend she is your little girl instead? Then I can be her big sister. That would be even more fun.”

He thought about it. It made sense enough. He had tried to fit into Karen's strange mental world, but the girl's solution was, perhaps, more practical than his own. There was no more or less risk of them being found out locally, where the relationship couldn't be explained either way to those who knew them, and perhaps less danger once they were far away. “Very well, she will be Meghan McIlhargey, and you will be Karen McIlhargey.”

“And you will be my Brian.”

“Yes, I will.”

She assumed a sad and far away look. “Did my first Brian die, too? Is that why the Lord of Heaven sent another one?”

He put on a rather thoughtful look at this pronouncement, and responded vaguely, “I'll look more like myself when I've recovered from these wounds.” He rubbed his hand over the intermingled scruff of whiskers and scars that was now his face, and resolved to let his beard grow. Perhaps it would make him anonymous.

She smiled wistfully. “I know you better than the others did.” Suddenly she got up and whirled around him again, prancing up on her toes, and striking various versions of ballet poses, all the while chanting at him, “I am dance, la la la, I am dance, dance dance, and I'll dance all day for you, you, you.” She stopped, looking away into the brush, and becoming wistful again. “He called me ‘Dance’ sometimes, and ‘Bridget’ sometimes, and most people called me ‘Wren,’ which is a little bird, you know, and short for ‘Karen’, which is what you always called me, because you're a gentleman, and it's my proper name.” She didn't elaborate who among the dead she was talking about, but paused, turned around and made an elaborate curtsy before carrying on. “I'll call you ‘my lord Brian,’ because you're the only one I've got now, even if you are not as happy a Brian as the old one was...”

“Can you pretend all those things at once, little Dance?” He neatly avoided the questions implicit in her speech.

“I was bad before to pretend. Would Jesus say it is all right to pretend now?”

“Great,” he thought. “Just when I almost get the situation under control, she has to ask complicated theological questions I can't answer.” He made up a pragmatic answer. What was one more pretence? “Yes, Jesus would approve in order to save a little girl's life.”

“All right. I'll do it.” She became very determined. “It's easy to pretend I'm Brian's girl, 'cause I've been that ever so long. I don't have to pretend I love her like my sister, 'cause I do, so I won't be lying, just pretending a wee little bit. And there's just us to look after her, so she can be our Meghan. Come, Meghan, back into your basket now like a good little girl.”

“When you're done feeding her, pack up all the food and cooking equipment, and I'll get the tent down,”

Brian whispered as he began the task. "We must leave this place soon." He assumed the gear had been placed here for her use by his enemies. He would regard it as a gift to Karen. They would need it for the few days it would take to travel by inconspicuous routes to the nearest smuggler's roost, and the things were not much for him to carry. Once they secured passage aboard a ship, he would sell the gear for a few 'rocks.

As Brian McIlhargey worked quickly on his self-assigned tasks and watched Karen fuss over hers, it was with the strength of renewed hope. He could almost feel the regrow working on his arm and face, and his normal indefatigable work ethic began to assert itself. He did not fully understand what had happened, and might never, but whoever had tried to destroy all of Devereaux excepting Mara would surely come back for her when his messenger failed to return, and it would not take long to find the body of the soldier. He discovered a few plans half-formed in his unconscious mind from earlier in the day, and began to consider his alternatives in detail.

On the one leaf, revenge called out to stay here, kill his enemies, and vindicate the royals. Nothing would give him more satisfaction than matching each family grave with two of theirs, the traditional right of the avenger of deliberate murder, still sometimes exercised in defiance of the Church. On the second, he was not sure who his chief enemy was. A colonel, evidently, but which? And who had instigated the affair? He had much research to do first. On the third leaf, he now had duties that overrode any desire for revenge. The fourth, and lucky Irish leaf, was Karen's fortuitous removal of Mara from the manse. He shrugged. He seldom went beyond the superficiality of traditional harmless superstition, and never ascribed events to Divine Providence as believers would.

Well, any who were left of Devereaux had been exiled for twenty years, hadn't they? Perhaps honour required him to carry out the sentence with respect to Mara. To do so successfully, the trio would have to be many miles away before dark, and on their way out of the Emerald Isles within days. He could return when he had been forgotten, and earn revenge then. In the meanwhile, he would learn all he could about the Kilkarney officers with whom he had once worked. While he was at it, he would raise Mara as a weapon capable of bringing down the whole court if she chose. She would be grown and ready when the ban ended. Was he not the best of those who trained at Kilkarney? Eventually he would know the truth, and when the right day came ... Anger burned within him.

Karen started at a sound, but it was her Brian pounding his fist on the trunk of the tree he always called "Katherina's throne." She ignored him and began to whistle. It felt good to be Brian's girl.

Pagan customs, including a casual approach to marriage, survived many centuries into Ireland's Christian era. However, the reforms of the eleventh and twelfth centuries introduced new and more rigid views of sexual relationships. The strictly economic institutions of marriage (there had been up to ten variations) were unified under the Church. Women lost much of the status they had enjoyed since pre-Christian days, and men came to dominate Irish society and marriages as they had not done before.

At the same time, the Irish clergy, which had always been a married one, persuaded the rest of the Church to its view, so celibacy all but vanished among clerics everywhere, except as a term contract in monasteries and convents.

Thus things prevailed until the eighteenth century when deep spiritual malaise coincided with demands for more rights for women. There was a backlash against religious weddings, and the Church lost control of marriage to the civil authorities. Most reverted to purely business arrangements, and sexual relationships became casual. Things changed for a time in the revivals of the early nineteenth century, but fell back into the previous pattern not fifty years later.

In the 1920s, alarmed by the devastating consequences for women and children in particular, and for society in general, the youth of Ireland themselves swung the pendulum dramatically the other way. One symbol of the “children's revival” as it is often called, is the amphora, that little glass jar of perfume ancient custom associated with dowries and weddings. Today, it is worn by devout young Christian women as a symbol of their pure loyalty to Christ, then broken at a Church ceremony to mark a new and permanent love union with a husband. Devout men who vow to remain celibate until marriage wear a silver ring depicting a crowned heart pierced by cross and sword. At a church wedding, the couple exchange gold love rings that are similar, but bear doubled hearts, as part of their vows of exclusive fidelity. The state must legally approve Church marriages, but the latter are again the majority.

Through all of these changes, greater Irish society has never had the morbid preoccupation with human sexuality one finds on Tirdia during both times of repression and of license. Perhaps this is the reason that, though the same vices exist on both planets, brothels and pornography are comparatively rare on ours, and divorce from a Church marriage almost unheard of. Violence on the other hand, is quite another matter.

—from *A Handbook on the Moral History of the United Irish Kingdom*, by Jana Whelan.

Chapter Ten

Seamus and Hannah, Tara, 1941 (Hibernia)

Seamus, not the least flustered by the momentous events, did not leave the house the next morning until after he had observed the street outside continuously for over an hour. When he did slip out, he walked along Royal past the Red Lion on the left, then partway back toward the palace before doubling around on his path to satisfy himself no one was following. Finally, he emerged into public view from an alley on the opposite side of the Red Lion from the O'Connor hardware emporium, walked around the pub, and began to saunter casually through Old Town along the sidewalk of Derry Street as though he hadn't a care in the world.

He hadn't taken twenty steps when an enormous hand clamped down on his shoulder and arrested his progress. He turned abruptly, backing for fighting room, ducking and shedding the grip, his hand going at once to the hilt of his sword.

“Ah, Father O'Grady,” he said, recovering immediately and checking his draw. “You give a man a start coming up on him without warning like that.”

“Well, you needn't be so jumpy, lad. I nae carry a sword, y'know. Now stop and rest a moment, lad, if you have the time. I need some of your help. That is, if you are not in such a hurry to get back to work as you were the other day.”

“No, father, I'm in no hurry any more.”

“Am I to understand that you've lost your job, then? I hope it was nae my fault for detaining you until the matter was over.”

He got a bemused look in return. “It's hardly the fault of the likes of you, Father Bill. I must say, though, you don't seem very sympathetic to my plight.”

Father O'Grady looked over the young man who had come off and on the last few years to the ancient

church he pastored here in Old Town Tara. In the forty years he had been here, he couldn't recall his like—a strapping fellow of some twenty-four or twenty-five years, big, strong, and handsome, a staunch believer, and with a heart of gold. Here was a man for you—not like all too many of those born here who by this age were often into some very bad dealings indeed, and scarcely likely to darken the doors of St. Patrick's, either. He knew young Seamus liked to hoist a few in the Red Lion, but that wasn't a serious flaw in his books, and easily overcome if the lad had the appropriate responsibilities to busy his life.

He began his campaign to achieve just that. “Well, and perhaps ’tis the Lord of Heaven's own will you should lose your position.”

Seamus looked sharply down at the priest. “That will be small consolation when my last crown is gone, Father Bill. Perhaps you would speak to Heaven on my behalf about the matter, and arrange a new situation.”

The priest ignored the irreverent banter; it was part of his code of friendship with Seamus. “I assume you can handle that sword you have at your belt.” Father Bill had never seen the young man fight, but had heard stories of one or two foolish lads who had provoked Seamus, and had been shown the error of their ways.

“Passably well, Father Bill. I can keep the footpads of Old Town away from my pouch in any case.”

“What other marketable skills have you, lad?”

Seamus thought it over a few moments before replying, growing more certain with every sentence that the old priest had something specific in mind.

“Well,” he answered slowly. “I've done administrative and security work. I can do a few useful things with an MT. Does Heaven have a situation in mind for me already, then?”

The two were strolling along the side of the Old Town square, and for answer, the priest turned suddenly into the doorway of a shop, clearly expecting his young friend to follow. Seamus looked at the priest's back vanishing into the maze that was the interior of the place, shrugged his shoulders, and followed.

They made their way to the back and through a set of doors, ignored the ancient elevator, and climbed a flight of stairs. A few minutes found them entering an upper office and being ushered by a prim young secretarial assistant into an inner meeting room.

But for his short-cropped hair and clean shaven face, the man who rose to greet them from behind the desk had the look and bearing of a high aristocrat, though he was not much different in age from Seamus himself.

Tall and powerfully built, the man looked intently at his callers as though measuring their very souls.

“Well, Father O'Grady, what have you brought me today?” the man boomed out, once he finished his inspection.

“This is Seamus.” The priest waved in the direction of his companion. “He's a handy lad with the sword, and has done security work and administration. Methinks he qualifies for the police force you're wanting to recruit.”

The big man looked Seamus over again, apparently appraising this information, as Father O'Grady thought to himself, "Even the look of young Seamus ought to impress."

"What certificates have you?"

"Administration, the sword, security. I've held several positions." Seamus waved a hand vaguely.

"You are free of fealties?"

"Yes. I have had differences with my last employers, and parted company with them a few days ago by mutual agreement." He cleared his throat significantly. "I do value my freedom."

"A contract man, not a liege man, then. I don't object to that as long as you have integrity. Are you wanted by the law?"

"No. I have had my troubles, but not with law officers."

There was a long silence in the room after that declaration, as their host seemed to be deliberating with himself. Finally, he turned to the priest. "He has your recommendation, and is otherwise qualified?"

Father O'Grady smiled and bowed slightly, not replying aloud.

The big man extended an employer's salute. "I am James Dennison, newly appointed Domain Lord of New Tara, and in need of loyal police officers," he announced.

Seamus noted his stress on the last word and the obvious question it implied. He had said nothing of his Kilkarney training to the priest, but now had to be a little more open. He could scarcely take an officer's position without admitting he was one. "Yes, I am commissioned," he said.

Father O'Grady scarcely noticed as he bent his own part of the conversation to assist. "Seamus, you might remember the item on the MT palace news channel about the new lords appointed over Irish North America now the Peace has returned there."

Seamus hid a chuckle. Apparently Father Bill had not noticed his own role in the event. He thought about the broadcast he had watched in the safe house. Out-of-the-Isles appointments were not normally important enough to be mentioned when court proceedings were played on the MT political channel, but for several weeks prior there had been much debate over what was now the decision to do away with administrators in New Tara and Moody, appointing domain lords instead.

All this had piggybacked on the blockbuster news of the king's deposition and disappearance, and Seamus supposed the publicity was the court's way of affirming it was in control, for the King had opposed the idea, while most of the other lords favoured it. The commentators speculated this very project was a major reason the court had taken the unprecedented step of vacating the emerald chair.

By contrast, the public had heard little of either Holdom/Dennison or Devereaux before the two were appointed to New Tara and Moody, respectively, and most who knew the court would think these fellows must be more out of favour than in to have been given the remote, impoverished, war-torn domains. They must, of course, be hereditary nobles to get any such posting, even though their names were obscure. After all, few people knew all the Families, and time and circumstances often caused the "sword holdership of right" to pass to one with a different name. More than one family's claim to a place at court had been extinguished when the holder of the name lost the sword in a duel before being able to

pass it to the next generation. Then, the right went to the person whoever won it, for honour or position belonged to whomever could take it. However, recruiting in Old Town only added weight to the idea the appointment was no plum.

“Working for me is dangerous,” Dennison announced, confirming Father O’Grady’s suspicion that his appointment was none too secure. “I have powerful enemies, and expect they will seek me out and try to kill me. Your job,” he declared bluntly to Seamus, “will be to ensure there are safeguards between me and them.”

O’Grady nodded. It was a familiar enough pattern in the lives of the nobility, whether they frequented court or not. For every one who had power, there were several more wanting either to take it from them, or get revenge for having lost it.

Seamus summarized: “You need secure computing and communications facilities, and a reliable bodyguard to kill or be killed when your enemies come after you.”

“We understand each other. Before anyone kills me, they kill you.” The two of them glared strength at each other, and Seamus bargained, “I take the nominal rank and cash rate for a Captain of Police, plus kit, found, and a one year renewable contract.”

O’Grady raised his eyebrows at the mention of cash and found. Lord Dennison’s new man wished to leave no trace of his employment in the planetary system, and was willing to accept low merc status to gain anonymity.

Dennison readily agreed. “I suppose you will be wanting to keep your family name in reserve, and borrow the domain name for the duration of the contract.” In view of Seamus’ request for low status, it was an observation, not a question, so his new employee merely bowed, smiling slightly. Dennison paused to reflect briefly, then apparently deciding he had nothing to lose and everything to gain, he grunted, “It’s a deal. Be at the Mary Rose on Dublin’s east pier B five days from now with full kit charged to the domain, and we’ll be on our way.”

Seamus grinned, then stared at his employer’s face, and observed mischievously, “You know, you remind me of...”

“...the King,” Dennison finished the sentence a little too quickly. “Yes, others have remarked on the resemblance. We are related, but it scarcely matters when there is no king, does it?”

“If you both step over to the MT,” the priest interjected at this point, “I would be happy to witness the contract.” He seemed as pleased by the arrangement as if he had fathered a child.

Both men turned to look at him, as though having forgotten his presence, and there was an embarrassed silence.

“That will be unnecessary,” Dennison announced in a testy tone, and waved the two of them off. At this, Father O’Grady turned away and moved toward the door. Seamus grinned. Every detail of what had transpired in this room would be all over Old Town the next day unless he told Father Bill it was confidential. The priest was no gossip, but he would tell his wife about the meeting, and ... palace spies would be sure to hear.

As soon as the priest could no longer see their faces, Seamus winked broadly at his new employer. James Dennison winked back.

Back on the street a few moments later, Seamus turned to the priest, and energetically thanked him for his efforts. “Father Bill, you've got me just what I need—a good position and a ticket away from Tara. It's time I saw a little more of the world, don't you think?”

“Ah, well, lad, 'tis only the start of the day's work for the likes of me.” The priest donned his most solemn expression—a sure sign he had still greater mischief in the folds of his robe. “You'll be recalling the vexing troubles of young Hannah Transky, now, won't ye?”

Indeed, Seamus did. Hannah was the impossibly long and lanky eighteen-year-old-daughter of the equally tall, balding man of indeterminate age whom he knew as Solomon Transky. The pair lived here in Old Town above a pawn shop that seldom had many customers. Hannah's mother had died when she was quite young, and she had only the upbringing of her father—one of which Seamus heartily disapproved. Citing some pacifistic belief Seamus was unable to understand, the old man had not allowed the girl to take even rudimentary sword lessons, and her lack of ability to defend herself had not only led directly to her present predicament, but had involved Seamus in their lives ever since.

He had been walking beside the block of grass and woods in the centre of the square that serves Old Town as a park late one night while returning from assignment when he heard a shrill cry. That was followed by the sound of a blow, then silence. Alarmed, he investigated at once. In the light of a small clearing, he found a man attacking the girl, his hand over her mouth to prevent another cry. There was blood on his fingers, and Seamus assumed she had bit him.

Moved to furious rage by the spectacle of such a vile crime in the king's park, and his arm loaned strength by the terror of the girl, he moved swiftly. Though too late to prevent the attack, he had with his left hand pulled the fellow from atop her and flung him with a single movement against a nearby tree, where he struck his head, then slumped unconscious. There had been a series of similar incidents, some in the very homes of the victims, and Seamus was grimly satisfied to have caught the perpetrator. He sheathed the unnecessary sword he had drawn with his right hand.

Uninterested in the scoundrel's fate, he turned his attention to the girl, whom he now recognized enough to know she lived but a short distance away. Pulling the thin emergency blanket from the first aid kit every agent carries in his sack, he covered the girl's legs and waist, then cut away her bonds before looking her in the face. When he did, she appeared frightened, turning her head quickly to one side. He reached down and brushed a hand against her cheek. “It's all over, Hannah. You'll be safe now,” he told her, then picked up her long frame to carry her home. She wept deep wracking sobs against his chest all the way there, and continued when the physician later came to tend her.

Seamus went out long enough to alert the city watch and have her attacker picked up, then returned to berate her father.

“How dare you let your daughter go out at night unarmed and unable to defend herself? Her blood cries out from the ground for vengeance, but it speaks equally loudly to your negligence.” The old man had not cowered from him, but merely said after a time, “You are right, Seamus. I have sinned against my daughter, against you, and against the Lord. I pray you will all forgive me.”

Her attacker turned out to be one of the many local ne'er-do-well toughs with which the area abounded. He admitted his guilt, but in the limited facilities of the Old Town medical centre, his subsequent suicide went unnoticed until it was too late to revive him, and the case had to be closed without opportunity for recompense. A high noble whose family had been so attacked could insist upon and get the death penalty from the criminal courts, because they could show that there was no financial loss to repay, but in this

case the brehon would no doubt have ordered lifetime servitude with the wages going to the many victims' families.

On a visit to the girl a few days later, Seamus had found her hysterical and trying to smash her maiden's amphora on the wooden dresser. As it was designed to be broken only by a stone, there was no danger of her succeeding, but Seamus had to take it from her and spend some time calming her, before carefully placing the chain back around her neck. "Wear it, Hannah. It is your defiance against evil, and your declaration you are still pure before the Lord of Heaven."

To complicate things further, the girl turned out to be pregnant. Seamus said nothing about his own Medical Certificate, for it would have been improper to treat her himself. However, the local physician, a hardened unbeliever who often offended the Old Towners with her disdain of the Holy Books, had quietly offered Hannah an abortion she assured the Transkys would show on no official records. There were many ways this could be done, Seamus knew—the most common being a focused beam of sound that disrupted critical tissues and killed the child.

Solomon had responded in cold fury, ordering the woman from his house in loud indignant tones. Seamus, just arriving for another visit, saw the equally angry physician out the door, and entered to find Solomon embracing his daughter, and once again begging her forgiveness for his part in her predicament.

Seamus, who jealously guarded the medical profession from such malfeasance, quietly resolved to have the physician investigated by the Medical Academy's board of ethics. If it could be proven she had been providing abortions, she would lose her MC permanently.

On that occasion, he found Hannah much recovered, and still wearing her amphora, though she found it hard to look him in the eye. The pregnancy seemed to focus her mind, and Seamus never saw her lose control again.

"Oh, Father, do not deal with yourself so. The Lord of Heaven will yet bless us. Do not be so hard on the doctor, either. She is no subject of Heaven, or she would never suggest murdering an innocent babe to cover another's crime. We cannot expect better of an unbeliever." Seamus, looking on, loved them both. He added his own embrace, assuring them they were doing right and the Lord of Heaven would acknowledge them.

Privately, he wondered. Hannah was well above his own generous height of just over a staff. The thin, dark-complexioned girl with the gaunt and awkward look would not have been regarded as any man's prize before, but in the wake of the attack, it would be doubly hard for her to find a husband, especially when she did not know steel. Moreover, the attacker had cut her face twice with a knife, and she would surely have the disfiguring scars all her life, for only those who lived behind the walls of the palace or a great manse could afford to have such wounds properly treated.

His love and respect had grown over the months as he had seen the pair continue to attend Father O'Grady's church, seemingly oblivious to the rude comments and tittering aimed at Hannah. Once, he intervened when a girl without any more spirituality than sense had made a loud remark to several others about "women who invite the loss of their virginity by tempting men."

He turned and strode over to the group, whose chuckles over Hannah abruptly subsided in the face of his grim determination. Seamus quietly announced: "The girl has as much purity as ever. Honour has to be willingly surrendered, as you are doing now. It can never be taken away by force." With that, he spun about and stalked off. The whispering came to an abrupt end, not to be resumed. Later in the morning, he noted from a distance as the girl whom he had rebuked went over to Hannah with a sheepish and

tearful look on her face to apologize. He nodded in satisfaction as the two embraced. Young Bridget, whose parents owned the pawn shop, was also very tall, and a natural friend for Hannah.

Scant days before the king's deposition, Seamus had paced the hallway of the Transky apartment with Father Bill and Solomon, awaiting the report of a birth at the hands of a more devout physician. Seamus had lured him from a high practice near the palace on the sole strength of the opportunity to do good for someone who could never return the favour. Sadly, and like so many in the years since the biogenetic wars, the child was delivered horribly deformed, and lived only a few wretched minutes before breathing its last. This was not unexpected, for a scan had revealed heart and other abnormalities some weeks before. That time, there had been no mention of an abortion. Hannah was emotional enough at the loss. Seamus was thankful she had been able to hold the little boy a few moments before he died, and there had been a proper burial.

Those events had made him late for an appointment at the palace, and very late for the one in Security, but he was not going to complain—not over a matter of honour.

Of course, Seamus did not need to review this history aloud when the priest brought up the subject of the girl, for she had been very much on his mind lately, and the events needed no refresher.

“What of Hannah, then, Father Bill?” he asked, once the two were once again walking along Derry street away from Dennison's temporary office.

“I have her staying at the rectory with the missus and me.”

Seamus had a high regard for the priest and his wife, and was about to comment favourably on the arrangement when he suddenly checked himself.

“What of her father? Has something become of him?” he asked, in the sudden cold certainty it had.

“Where have ye been these last days that you have nae heard?” the priest asked indignantly.

“What have I not heard?” Seamus demanded.

“Why, the man was found in the river with a knife in the back the other day, and just after the innocent little one died too. I had only just come from his funeral and the filing of government papers for the two of them when I saw you strolling down the street as big as life for the first time in days. The girl has borne up well, but has been asking for ye to stop by and call, so we'll go there now, if you've a mind to.”

“This is grim news indeed Father Bill.” Seamus stopped and took a grip on the priest's arm. “But there was no mention of it on the MT, or I would have come sooner.” He should have called, he thought, but he had been preoccupied in the lab with work of a higher priority than anything else, and neither Father Bill nor Hannah could contact him.

“Ah, I know. When the lives of the rich and powerful fill the channels, there is little space left for God's other creatures. ‘Twas the same evening the King had his throne taken from under him, and the news people had little else to say.”

Seamus stared at him a moment, and tried to control his emotions. He choked back a tear for the old man, and for the injustice that had left Hannah alone. He turned the two of them back into their path, and now it was he who hurried the priest along, rather than the other way around.

Father Bill's wife Gertrude must have been waiting at the rectory window, for she burst from the door of the little dwelling by the church at their approach to greet them enthusiastically. Sean often reflected that on Tirdia—where the Roman Church had persuaded the Irish one to have a celibate clergy rather than the other way around as here—men like William O'Grady could never serve as pastors. The couple often regaled him with stories of their three children—all grown now and away from home. Seamus imagined they thought of him as a fourth, and possibly, he reflected soberly, of Hannah as a fifth.

“Well look at ye now, young Seamus. Showing up after it's too late to comfort the poor girl and all. Ye ought to be ashamed of yerself.”

“I'm sorry, Mrs. O'Grady. I did not know of Solomon's death until Father Bill told me just now.”

“Well, come along in with you now, anyway, and I'll fix you a little something to eat.” Mrs. O'Grady was perpetually “fixing people a little something”, which was probably why Father Bill had such an ample girth, and she even more so. Despite her opening remonstrance, she was not very upset with Seamus, but acted as if she had been expecting him. Such was her manner. Seamus never saw her unready for or surprised by the arrival of a visitor, whether staying for minutes or months. Nor had he ever seen her angry. She took what life brought her, attributed it to the will of the Lord, and soldiered on in his service.

As they entered, he thought he saw the edge of a kilt vanish around the corner of the back hallway where he knew there was a spare bedroom, but he said nothing about Hannah yet.

He was seated and enjoying the hot orange juice and muffin Mrs. O'Grady put before him when he remarked casually into one of the rare silences that could be obtained in her house, “What will become of Hannah now?”

Father O'Grady replied, “Young Bridget Mally, whose parents own the pawn shop, wants to take her in, but Bridget is every bit as big as Hannah, and all they can afford to feed. Hannah's mother was an O'Toole, but there is no bothering a high family over such affairs. So, the missus and I will settle her here, for she is utterly alone.”

“It's a pity,” Seamus reflected in careful tones, “she has no husband to care for her, and teach her the sword while he's at it.”

“Exactly what I was saying to Bill this very morning,” Mrs. O'Grady averred brightly. “A husband would set things right around young Hannah in a hurry.”

Father Bill sighed. “There's no mistaking it would take quite the fine man to marry the lass now. Perhaps the best she can hope for is a subject marriage in a home where she serves a highborn man while he looks for a political mate.”

“Why,” Seamus responded with some heat, “Such arrangements are no better than forced servitude in return for a loveless bed. I say the girl has her honour fully intact, and deserves better.”

“What of a marriage of convenience?” the priest asked.

“She does need a husband. We're agreed on that,” Seamus replied cautiously. “However, who do we know who might require a wife?”

There was another silence at this question as they ate without looking at one another, then Father O'Grady cleared his throat. “Well, to be fair truthful with you, lad, Lord Dennison has himself only just

married yesterday, and Lady Sarah is a very fetching woman at that. To prevent any temptations, shall we say, and for reasons of stability, he has said he will hire only married hands, and will leave anyone behind who brings not a spouse to the Mary Rose in five days.”

Seamus was shocked. “You told him...”

“...that you were qualified.” Father Bill finished. “I did by my silence somewhat intimate such a thing, yes.”

“But you ... you, a priest ... you lied.” Seamus was indignant.

“It was nae a lie I agreed to, lad. I merely represented that you could be at the Mary Rose with a wife at the appointed time. I knew it was possible, so it was not an untruth leaving my person, now, was it?”

Seamus leaned back in his chair to think the matter over. The priest had gone to a lot of trouble to trap him into the arrangement, yet it did make a kind of sense when he thought about it logically—difficult as that was under the circumstances. He had never thought much of the idea of subject marriage. Usually the result of a military action or a duel, it forced the other partner into a servile relationship, offering no guarantee the ruling partner would not eventually dissolve the relationship if no children ensued to become legal obligations, so leaving the subject partner destitute.

Irish law and custom allowed subject marriage, and though the Church recognized such unions “because of the hardness of her children's hearts,” she would not perform them, and insisted they were not proper for the people of the Lord. Where possible, priests tried to persuade the ruling partner to convert a subject marriage into an equal and permanent one.

Marriage of convenience was more contractual, but because it was undertaken for practical reasons of mutual need, it, too, could be dissolved once the stated contract time had been fulfilled, or if the parties agreed the need no longer existed—whichever came first. The difference was that the two were equal before the law, so either could write a nullification on August first of any year. The Church also tolerated such marriages “out of necessity”, but would not perform them. Seamus was astonished the priest would suggest the arrangement.

No, the Church performed only one kind of wedding, and it always included the words of Christ: “What God has joined, let no man separate.” She recognized no divorces for any reason, and never allowed a divorced person to marry in the Church, or to participate in communion or Church leadership if re-married elsewhere in any form. On the other hand, she forbade a man, say, who had two wives before becoming a believer, to divorce either one, and allowed communion (but not church leadership) to all three.

Seamus looked across at Father Bill and his wife as they waited patiently to hear his reaction to their suggestion. He surprised himself by his calm under the circumstances. “You have outdone yourself tinkering with people's lives this time, Father Bill. But what of Hannah? Have you suggested this scheme to her?”

The priest and his wife looked at each other, and Gertrude answered for them, though in roundabout fashion. “Solomon knew he was in danger,” she began.

“Yes,” Seamus encouraged her on. Gertrude O'Grady could not be hurried through one of her convoluted explanations.

She hesitated a moment before continuing, suddenly very serious. “He left behind a letter, apparently written in some haste earlier on the day he died. He tells Hannah he loves her, and says if anything happens to him, she is to rely on the three of us for protection. So we are her guardians.”

“That's all? What has this to do with a marriage of convenience?”

“Hannah is a very sensible girl,” Mrs. O'Grady averred. “She knows she could stay with us, but that we could offer her no training, no defense, and no prospects. When Father Bill and I eventually leave the parish for a retirement home, where would she go? She needs to be taught the sword at the very least before she could hope to make her way on her own.”

“And I need a wife to accept this position you have arranged. Wait.” He suddenly realized what she was getting at but was unwilling to say plainly. “Are you telling me this was Hannah's idea?” His voice rose, as he found it hard to hide a rising tide of emotion.

Father Bill cleared his throat nervously, and held up a hand as if to stay Seamus from action. “Now don't be hard on the lass when ye say ye will nae do it, lad. She meant well for the both of you, and it seemed to the missus and me that the Lord of Heaven could well be in it, too, so we agreed to represent the matter.”

There was another long silence, then Seamus said in a very quiet voice, “With your permission, I will speak to Hannah on this in private. We will go,” he looked out the window at the sunny day, “across the walk, and stand in that clearing on the edge of the park in full view of this window so there can be no suggestion of impropriety.” Throughout this speech, Seamus kept his voice carefully modulated, showing nothing of his thoughts.

It was the work of seconds for Father O'Grady to fetch Hannah from the back bedroom, and for Seamus to escort her quietly and formally across the street to the open grassy area, where they could be both public enough and private enough at the same time. The clearing was part of the very park where the girl had been attacked, but near the opposite end of the square running between the church and the pawn shop, and so some distance away from that evil place. Seamus said nothing until they arrived and he was able to face her. A full staff and two cents tall himself, he yet had to look up more than five cents to the thin, dark face framed by her long, black hair.

“Now then, Hannah Transky, I suppose you listened at the doorway and heard our conversation?”

She responded with a nod, but said nothing, her eyes just starting to glisten with the slightest suggestion of tears.

“Why have you suggested a marriage of convenience with the likes of me, pray tell?”

His voice sounded stern and unbending, and she looked down at the ground. “I knew you would soon be leaving.”

Seamus was puzzled. He had told no one his plans. “What made you think I was going anywhere?”

“I could sense it in you,” she said gloomily, not looking up. “I have no one, and...” She trailed off again.

He reached out a hand and lifted her face, forcing her to look at him. “And what, dear Hannah?”

A tear escaped her eye and rolled down her cheek. “I couldn't bear the thought of you being gone, and

me all by myself. The O'Gradys cannot look after me now that Father has been killed." Tears came in earnest now.

Seamus looked closely at her face, and gave a little start as he realized she was entirely free of scars from the attack nine months earlier. He did not think to comment on this right away, for Hannah abruptly collected herself and knelt before him.

"I am not what most men want. I know that. But you have cared for me, and my father thought highly of you. I will be your servant and accept subject marriage, my lord. Only take me with you away from this place of unending sorrow."

"Stand to your feet, Hannah." His words were strong and commanding, but not harsh, and there was a little smile on his face. "You need kneel to no man, not now or ever." His voice took on a demanding tone. "I want to know three things from you."

She did as she was told, somewhat bewildered by his lack of response to her voluntary submission. Was he refusing her altogether?

"First, I want to know why me? I am several years older than you, and despite your height you appear even younger than you are. Why not wait for one of the young men to grow up? The Lord of Heaven may yet provide."

She looked carefully at him, not sure how to answer, but found his face inviting rather than rejecting, and on a sudden flood of emotion, opened her heart. "Even before you rescued me, I cared for you, though you seemed impossibly distant and higher. Then I suffered that ... that attack, and whatever silly hopes I had in my heart died in shame. I cried so hard those days, because I was sure you would never look on me again. But you would not let me break my amphora, and made me wear it. You said I still had honour. You told me to be courageous and hold my head high, then stood by me all those months while I was pregnant, so I dared in my foolish girl's heart to hope again. Having the baby die, and my father, too..." She began to cry freely once more.

Seamus reached into a pocket for a cloth, and passed it to her. She wiped her tears and tried to regain composure as he waited patiently for her to continue. When she was able to control her sobbing, she took several deep breaths before getting out: "I realize I have been a fool to think myself in love with you, my lord. Will you forgive a poor and ugly girl for letting her heart escape from her mind?"

At this, Hannah started to turn away without waiting for an answer, but Seamus took her arm and stopped her. "My second question is," he went on, as though they were holding a routine business meeting, "Why do you call me 'lord?'"

She turned back to face him, and quickly put her hand over her mouth as if to take back the errant words. Her dark face became darker still.

"My father..." she started.

"Was a secretary at the court, and had access to employee records, including those for Security. He would know whether any were of the Families," he finished for her. He doubted Solomon Transky could have told her more than that he was of the nobility, for the man had no direct dealings with Security.

He decided to give her some information with a view to calming her. "I was second son in a family with little but a title, and not destined to inherit even that, so after school I went to work for palace security

under a different name. My father and brother later died, but as it turns out, my inheritance is little enough. Your father could easily have looked me up in the records,” he mused, trailing off. “Were I in charge of Security, I would feel somewhat responsible for his death, as such a man should have protection, even if he chooses to live in a place like this, and walk about weaponless.” He paused, and seemed to be expecting her to say more.

Recognizing the invitation, she turned to questioning him, asking the first thing that came to mind, and avoiding the subject that brought them to this conversation. “When you were in Security, did you ever investigate my father?”

“The office ran only a simple check when he came to the palace as an undersecretary. I was more curious.” He began to pace before her as he related the story. “About two years ago, I opened my own file on Solomon Transky and his activities.”

Her breath took a sharp intake. “Is that why you were in Old Town? Are you saying that all this time you were friends with us, you were investigating us for Security?” Her voice rose, and she seemed on the verge of anger.

“It was a little project of my own, and the court knew nothing of it,” he responded coolly. “Moreover, I count a matter of honour my friendship with you and your father. I have never recorded my activities here, and your names appear nowhere in Security office records.” He stopped and waited for her again.

She sighed and looked away. “So, you knew, I suppose?”

“That your father was a secret agent himself, sent to observe the doings of the court? Yes, I suspected so from the start, which is why I checked.”

Her voice grew distant, and she began to ramble. “Father would disappear for a while—I suppose to report—but he never told them he had married, and I have no means of appealing to the other elders for help. They are few, and do not know I exist, while I lack the trick of being able to travel there. Father always warned me I must never tell anyone. He said people here would hate me on his account.” She turned back to face Seamus with steely resolve. “I am half one of them by birth, but all I know is Ireland. Don't you understand? I am of this place and can never go there, even though he said I look more like one of them, and not at all Irish. I know neither their language nor your sword. They cannot help me, and if you will not, what shall I do? Take me as a servant, but offer me the cloak of your house.” She used the old formula of an appeal for refuge.

Seamus stared at a point on the church over her shoulder, not responding just yet. He resumed in a distracted lecturing tone. “I suspected for a while, but he only gave himself away a few days ago, and I realized that he was not spying for one of the houses, nor even for an enemy power, but was the agent of mysterious Meta Earth, promoter of the Peace and the Federation, and sometimes supplier of technology. It had been my hope to ask...” He stopped and thought seriously a few moments, then shook himself and resumed his more customary bemused expression. “But that is all in the past, for I was dismissed from my post for being absent too much on my enquiries, and for not paying sufficient attention to my regular duties, so, here I am with a new position, and it seems, in need of a wife.

“And here before me,” he continued, a lilt coming into his voice, “is a lass as sweet as the Irish spring, as courageous and true as the finest soldier or the greatest lord, who has, withal, been so foolish as to tell a prowling fellow she loves him. Moreover, she is descended on one side from O'Tooles, and admits to being Metan nobility on the other, so she is the finest of matches for any man, be he ever so high.”

Hannah's mouth dropped open, and she flushed noticeably, spellbound by his words.

“Now, it is plain you are too high for subject marriage, and I am not much the one for arrangements of convenience, so ... I'll ask ye one more thing, lass, and it's the most important of all.”

She began to tremble and could not speak, so just nodded.

“Are you willing to lay aside the foolishness of pacifism, and learn the sword—absorb it so well it is an extension of you, and you can fight any man or woman on earth to a standstill to defend your honour and mine?”

Taken aback by the unexpected question, she could not immediately answer, and he had to wait patiently while she collected her thoughts. She had already been persuaded on this point however, and had planned to set aside the noncombatant's white vest as soon as she could get instruction following the end of her pregnancy. When this had come in such new sorrow, she had not given the matter more thought. Briefly thinking it over again, she assented readily, but pressed her case once more. “I'll learn the sword, but only if you teach me.”

He nodded. “I thought it would be so.” He fished in his pouch with his left hand, closing it over an object he found there. He drew his sword point up between them. “I say we be equals in each other's eyes and before people and heaven, I offer what I came to give you before ever Father Bill and his lady began their silly interference.” He let the object drop from his hand, and she beheld hanging from a glittering gold chain a deep green emerald stone carved in the shape of a shamrock. “This is a family heirloom, and my only possession of value,” he started to say, in a somewhat irrelevant introduction.

There is an old saying that a true emerald is a woman's best friend, and even in these more egalitarian days of modern information age Ireland, the meanest sample of the glittering gem still carries but one meaning when offered by a young man to the lady of his heart, or, as is often now the case, the other way around. Usually it is a small raw stone on a ring, a pin, or a chain, and those who can ill afford emerald use the duller and more plentiful jadestone in its place. Hannah had never seen a gem of this size before, but recognized it at once for the genuine article. More than that, from a picture he had once shown her, she knew the carving and setting as works of her own father's art. She also knew for whom it had originally been made. Her mouth opened in an “oh”, and time stopped as she stared at Seamus past the gem.

“It is the emerald shamrock. You are the Lord...”

Seamus stopped her. “Hannah Transky, I, Seamus A'Dennison”—he emphasized his legal name as mercenary in an employer's service—“accept both your love and proposal of marriage, on condition that Father Bill swear us bound forever on this very blade as true and equal lovers for our whole mortal lives.” His eyes glistened in the lengthening silence between them, and he added lightly, “Your first instruction in the ways of the sword, since you lack your own, is that you agree by putting your hand on mine over the hilt of the uplifted blade, and saying so in the name of the Lord of Heaven. But you must indeed say it, not merely speak, so the words will bind your honour to mine forever.” He didn't say then, but told Hannah later, that one of the times her blood had been tested while she was pregnant, he had arranged for biogenetic compatibility tests to be done. The two of them had a pretty decent chance for children.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she reached out in a fog of happiness. When her hand came close to the hilt, a little shudder passed through her long frame, and she clenched her fist tightly over his.

She spoke in a whisper. “Upon my honour, and in the name of the Lord of Heaven, I say I accept your

offer of marriage of equals, and swear to you mutual fealty forever.” With that, Seamus reached out with his other hand and put the chain over her head. It hung down around and over her long dark hair, glittering in the afternoon sun, with the precious gem on the end settled beneath her throat and next to her amphora. Seamus thought he had never seen a lovelier sight in all his life than Hannah Transky.

Good actions are ordered in a hierarchy. One makes choices between them on the basis of the greater good. Don't say “choose the least of evils,” for it reflects too pessimistic a view. For instance, you must serve the Lord of Heaven, look out for the interests of the crown, keep the peace, protect noncombatant civilians, lead your troops into and out of battle at the right times, and preserve your own life. All are good, but an officer of the king always learns, especially in war, that the last of these is often not the highest choice. This course is designed to teach you the rudiments of putting the needs of others at least on a par with your own. I hope you survive it; few cadets do, if they act as individuals.

—Sergeant McIlhargey's traditional recital to Kilkarney cadets at the start of the running of the high obstacle course.

Chapter Eleven

Sally, Lucy, and Jay, west of Calgary, 1945 (Tirdia)

The next morning, careful observers could see two figures dressed in baggy army fatigues and carrying small backpacks. They were cautiously scouting around the edges of a clearing of about two acres in a wooded area on the south side of the Bow River Valley, a short distance west of Bowness. They wore large cloth army caps that covered their heads and shaded their faces. In the loose green and brown clothing, their features and figures could not easily be made out, and at times they disappeared against the background of the cottonwoods. They had long knives at their belts, but otherwise did not appear armed.

Michael Sloane, gazing intently at the scene through a pair of high-power binoculars, was not deceived. Both women had arm slings with small pistols they could pop into their hands in a simple movement, and he assumed each packed at least one other gun. There were other easily concealed lethal weapons of the trade, some of which he carried himself. He returned his binoculars to their pouch, and slid down an embankment into the hollow behind to place a call on his shortwave radio.

“The principal players have arrived for the game a few hours early. I expect the rest by noon. Everything here is ready, and we will proceed as ordered.” He listened for a moment to an answering squawk, then rotated a large dial on the front of the box to a different frequency. “Sloane here. Green squad is to move into place west of the clearing. All units are to hold position out of sight and maintain silence until 1300 hours, then spread out and take up the assigned posts surrounding the target. Over and out.”

Sloane grunted with satisfaction. Someone very high up wanted everyone involved killed as soon as the merchandise was verified. He could run the show as he pleased, so had forty intelligence agents and regular RCMP officers camped close to the decrepit old house and barn in the clearing where the two women were skulking. The army would place more men in a wider perimeter later in the day, just in case. O'Brien and O'Neill had given him the slip the day before, but there was to be no escape for them or any who met here today. It was unpleasant business, but orders were orders.

* * * *

“There's no sign of anyone else yet, Luce.” Sally tugged at her large floppy cap. They had fastened and

covered their hair to be less conspicuous. In a pinch, the hairpins came out of a tiny sheath and could be used as weapons. Alternately, the deadly poison covering them was one of several available suicide methods.

Lucy made up her mind. "Let's wait inside, Sal. We can greet the rest as they arrive. Maybe it will give us an edge." She was grimly aware their mission was compromised, but determined to push ahead. They didn't call her "Lucky Lucy" for nothing. Something always came up.

Sally grinned agreement, and a minute later they were hugging the peeling walls of the old house, peering through its grimy windows. Satisfied no one was inside, they took only seconds to pick the back door lock and gain the interior. After several minutes looking over the empty building, they re-locked it and went to the barn, the actual rendezvous, examining both main floor and loft in case anyone had hidden before their arrival.

"Find anything, Luce?" The two spoke in whispers, though the barn also appeared deserted.

"The place is at least fifty years old, Sal, and likely abandoned back in the Depression, but it's been used recently. The house is clean and dry, and the kitchen chairs have been moved around on the floor in the last few days." She gestured to a point on the wall beside the door. "That electrical switch has an old padlock on it, but like the back door lock has fresh oil on the hasp." She rubbed her fingers together as she said it, then wiped them on her baggy green and grey trousers.

"Yes, and look behind here." The high-ceilinged lower floor of the barn was divided into two areas by a double row of animal stalls separated by a wall parallel to the door. Sally led Lucy around the wall to a spot between the broken-down horse stalls and the heavily barred rear door of the barn. The area was invisible from where they had entered. They got down on their knees and looked carefully at the marks on the ground.

"A big vehicle was parked here, Sal."

"But," Sally pointed out, "there are no tracks of a car or truck coming or going. Look there." She pointed to one side. "People climbed in and out." She indicated the impressions of boots. "But how did it get here, and where did it go?" She brushed at the dirt to see if it had been moved to cover tracks, but found nothing.

Then her hand struck something small and metallic in the dirt. She started momentarily, then realized it was just a coin. She would have ignored it, except the thought crossed her mind to wonder what country it was from in light of the crowd of professionals they had already seen in the area.

"Will you look at this, Luce!" Sally held up the coin and turned it about. It was the size of an English shilling, of dirty silver, with a man's profile on one side and a royal crown on the other. The inscription around the bust read "James III, High King." On the other side, tiny letters said, "the tenth part of a shamrock." The coin was dated 1934, eleven years before. Lucy stared at the bit of metal several seconds before its significance sank in.

"The writing, Sal. It's in Orthogaelic." She was stunned. "This is the coin the dictionary calls a crown, and this fellow is the King James of the dedication, the father of the fellow in the romance."

A chill went up their spines. The dictionary could have been a fiction writer's fantasy, though their hearts had decided otherwise. But here was hard evidence that another Ireland not only produced books, but also coined money. Lucy pocketed the coin, feeling awestruck, but as she did, Sally gripped her arm.

“Listen.”

There was a shuffle of footsteps outside. The two quickly hid out of sight behind a pile of hay bales in one corner. As they did, the air was suddenly pierced by a high-pitched whine that grew sharply in volume until it was almost too much for their ears.

One bale was missing, with others piled crosswise over the gap, so they had an unobstructed view from behind the pile of both the door and the area where they had just been kneeling, yet could be confident their own faces were shadowed. They saw a man come to the door of the barn and stand casually leaning against the jamb. He was unconcerned by the noise, and apparently expected it.

“It’s the bullyboy from the train station.” Lucy whispered in Sally’s ear, “Do you suppose he followed us here?”

But he was unaware of them, and their attention was soon riveted to the closer area, which he was also watching. The noise level steadied, then, to their amazement, an enormous silver-coloured machine slowly materialized into view, apparently from nowhere. The back was a large box, as if for carrying freight, and the front was shaped like an elongated car so that the whole looked like a misshapen truck. Where there ought to have been windows was opaque and silver-coloured like the rest.

There was no rush of air or noise of motion other than the whine. When the apparition solidified, the sound suddenly cut off. There was a brief pause and a “snap.” At that, the windows become transparent. There appeared to be three or four rows of seats and people were moving about inside.

Moments later, a door opened in the side next to them, and two men stepped unsteadily out. They seemed to be affected by a kind of motion sickness, Lucy thought, though they didn’t take long to recover.

Both wore brightly coloured vests that partially covered green brocade shirts and hung down over identical kilts. Below those, they had striped stockings reaching to just below their knees. On their feet were expensive-looking brown leather boots. Their heads were bare, and their long hair was tied back in a knot at their necks. At one side of their broad belts hung a sheathed sword, and at the other a stick with a knob on one end. Sally saw one reach back inside the machine and remove a key-like device before they greeted the man waiting for them. The one with the key spoke for the new arrivals.

“Well, Mike, did you get the ríom back this time?” he asked their assailant. Lucy wasn’t expecting a Gaelic word in the middle of his sentence, and didn’t quite catch it.

“No. You didn’t tell me they’re trained fighters.”

“You let a couple of Tirdian women down you?” The other sounded disgusted. “The colonel is impatient, and you’re the one that let it get away in the first place.”

“Relax. They’re supposed to be here today. When they come, we let them take their delivery, then seize it along with the other goods. If they smell a rat and don’t show, we’ll track them down again for it.”

“They’ll connect the two, sure. Now, we’ll have to kill them both whichever way things go.”

“No matter, as long as we erase the evidence. Besides, they can’t claim noncombatant status now, so by our rules they’re fair game.”

“By Old Rust, I can't see why his lordship is so worried. No one here will ever figure out what it is before it needs new batteries to work at all.”

“By Rust yourself, Paddy, don't you understand? Even if they don't, if it ever turns up, the council will know someone has been using a timestream car for unauthorized expeditions, and we could all end up with our heads rolling on the palace steps. You know how the court can be about things like this. Security is already poking around here on Tirdia looking for it. They know it was taken from their offices. If they learn we turned their agent...” He uttered a disgusted expression of his own, and changed the subject, “Did you bring the other goods?”

Paddy chuckled. “It went exactly as planned. He wasn't expecting a thing, and fell right into our trap. There'll be one less royal after this, and no body to tell tales. Give us a hand to get him out.”

“He already dead?”

“Not much difference if he isn't, after the whack on the head he took. He will be soon.”

“We just leave him here when we shut this place down?”

“Can you think of anything better? The police won't know how many bodies they have on their hands when we're done. I think his lordship had this in mind years ago when he set the place up, and was just waiting for the right opportunity.”

Mike laughed sourly, and brushed at his denim shirt and jeans. “Can't wait to get out of these awful rags and into some decent clothes.”

At this, Sally gripped Lucy's arm in surprise. The last sentence almost slipped by her, and Lucy only realized as it ended that he had spoken Orthogaelic. Things were making more sense, even if a fantastic kind. Evidently the bomb trigger and plans she and Sally were here to buy were destined for other hands. “Ríom” was “book” and must refer to the PIEA. Their involvement may have been a trap all along, or the double agent had decided to sell to a higher bidder, without knowing who. Her mind settled on the awful certainty that they were intended never to see Ireland again, but to die in this remote place. It wouldn't be without a fight, she resolved, clenching her teeth. She started to speculate on how many of these thugs she and Sally could kill first.

While these thoughts were going through her mind, two of the three men struggled out the door of the vehicle, each holding one end of a long, limp bundle. When they got out, the third took hold of a rope in the middle. They carried their burden to another corner of the barn, and Lucy heard them piling hay bales. Moments later, the three came into sight again. They threw a large canvas tarp over their vehicle and tossed handfuls of old hay over that to make it appear to have been there a long time.

All this was in silence, but then their one-time assailant spoke. “Come on over to the house for a drink before we start the rough stuff. The Canadians make pretty good booze, and it was a hot day hiking from the city.”

“No car?” the man who had not yet spoken asked.

“Can't leave one parked around here afterwards.”

“I suppose not. Where's the rest of the squad?”

“Gone to get dynamite so the chemical signature is local. The lieutenant and sergeant will be in just after noon.” This last sentence barely reached the two women, as during their conversation the men had drifted through the barn door.

“All right,” Lucy would later say, “so it was dumb to get involved in a stranger's business. He was from another world, and had no reason to be sympathetic to us. Besides, he might have been dead already.”

But neither woman hesitated, perhaps on the unspoken reasoning that an apparent enemy of their enemies might be a friend. So, when silence fell, they checked the progress of the trio through a window until they entered the house. Seconds later, they rushed to the corner and began moving the heavy hay bales aside. Less than a minute passed before they cut several ropes from around the limp form. They pulled one piece of sacking away, and were rewarded with a man's face, his eyes looking at them with frank curiosity, but no fear. His mouth was forced partly open by a rude gag, and there were more ropes binding him inside the sacking.

Sally looked over his upper body and whistled low. Lucy saw what she meant. This fellow was enormous. He was obviously conscious, but had an ugly wound on the top of his head, possibly due to a blow from a stick or a metal bar. He must have lain face down for a while because there was dried blood where it had run on his forehead and one cheek. He had a hard skull, she thought, but wondered if it was cracked, anyway.

“We don't know who you are, buster, but you've got ten seconds to give us your parole and promise to behave yourself, or we leave you here tied and gagged, with the hay bales back on top.” Lucy whispered. “The black hats might come back any time, and we've enough problems with them.”

At her first words, the man's eyes started, then narrowed sharply. Lucy suddenly wondered what his reaction would be if she spoke in Orthogaelic instead of English. However, he nodded his head in affirmation, so she cut away the gag as Sally worked on the rest of the ropes. Moments later, he was standing up rubbing his wrists and arms to restore circulation, and Sally was cleaning and bandaging the side of his head with supplies from the first aid kit the two were never without.

The man spoke in a stiff, stilted English that sounded like it had been learned from books. “It will please my family as much as it does me to learn that reports of my demise which may by now be circulating are premature.” He made a formal bow.

Lucy hushed him with a gesture to her lips, then waved toward the door. They had to whisper lest the sound escape to the house and betray their presence.

When Sally finished, the man bowed acknowledgment, then suddenly drew his sword. At this, Sally instinctively dropped her medical kit, and both started into a fighting crouch with hands on their knives. They relaxed as he merely saluted and re-sheathed the blade, saying, “I owe you men sword debt.”

Lucy looked at Sally, and winked. In their loose army fatigues and head-covering caps, the big stranger had seen men, rather than women. “Leave it be,” the wink said. She had also seen the look on his face at their quick reaction. He knew they were fighters.

She looked the stranger over. He was much bigger than any of the black hats, but dressed similar to the two who had arrived in the vehicle, except the tartan of his kilt was a different pattern. With the blood cleaned from his face, strong, commanding features were revealed, and Lucy thought him quite a handsome man. His hair was a reddish brown, and his face had a light sprinkling of good Irish freckles,

but was rather darker in complexion than she was used to in her countrymen.

She gestured silently to the hay pile, then to the window. Sally rushed over to watch for the return of the others, while she and the stranger put the bales back where they had been before his release.

“Who are you?” Lucy asked, continuing to whisper.

“You may call me ‘Jay,’” came the cautious answer, with a slight hesitation before the name.

Lucy was in a light-headed mood, and couldn't prevent her reading of the romance from informing her carelessly light reply. “Is ‘Jay’ short for ‘James?’ Are you King James, or another one?” she whispered banteringly, as the last hay bale went into place.

The man straightened up abruptly at this, gripped her shoulders with hands of iron, spun her to face him, and looked deeply into her eyes. She stared back, initially startled as she fully realized at close range he was a good six inches taller than her own not inconsiderable six feet two, and had the strength of a horse. She had struck a nerve, but what? Did she see a resemblance to the face on the coin? You could tell nothing from a portrait so tiny, and the king on the coin had been much older than him when it was minted. If not a son, a nephew? All this passed through her mind in a flash, but she yielded nothing to his intimidation, and after a few seconds, he relaxed.

“You speak of something you cannot possibly know,” he asserted flatly, his look and tone demanding a response.

For answer, she reached into the pocket of her overalls, pulled out the crown, and held it between them. “This was on the floor over there before you came,” she said, with a nod of her head in the direction of the covered machine.

“The fools,” he murmured angrily to himself, taking the coin and turning it. “It is not bad enough to play at forbidden things, but they would destroy us all with sheer carelessness by tossing money about while doing it.” He spoke in Orthogaelic, and the music of his diction was somewhat different than she had thought the dictionary indicated, but Lucy understood it. Then he switched back to English, picking his words carefully. “Mayhap it was jest, but it is impolitic to say that name aloud. We will discuss this matter later. Now, there is little time. Tell me who you are, what this place is, and what happens here.” He was used to command, and Lucy noted him put the coin carefully into his own belt pouch instead of returning it.

She was having none of it. “This is our operation. You're the intruder. Tell us of yourself.” Her voice was firm and unyielding.

He dropped his hands, conceding. “Very well, you released me at your own peril, so it is I who must begin.” He spoke slowly, and she thought it was more because he didn't want to say too much than from unfamiliarity with English. “I am an army officer returning from an engagement. I stopped to visit a relative, and encountered an ambush in a supposedly peaceful place.”

“Did your troops win the battle?” Lucy often found she could get a lot of information by following up on whatever another said. “Get a person rambling, and listen,” she often told Sally.

“We did,” he answered simply, offering nothing more.

“To what nation do you give loyalty?” she demanded. He knew that trick, so better go on the offensive.

He glared, but replied as she expected. "I am commissioned under the realm of Ireland. Whom or what do you serve?"

"We're also officers of Ireland, holding the rank of colonel in the special forces. We were invited here to make a purchase for our government, and popped over early to scout the territory, so were here for your arrival. The machine that brought you is under that." She waved at the tarpaulin-covered device across the room, and Jay glanced fleetingly in the indicated direction before turning back and waiting for her to continue.

"Agents of several other nations have come for the party. With the three black hats and you, there is much more going on than we imagined. My partner and I appear to be outnumbered." She paused, then decided to be bold. There was something about this fellow that she instinctively liked, and it was time to invite trust. "Are you willing to make common cause?"

Jay thought furiously and rubbed his head, still throbbing from where he had suffered the savage blow. He had come to consciousness while still being carried, and had begun to work loose of his bonds even before the two strangers had released him. He thought he could eventually have freed himself.

That he was on Tirdia, and these two men in their odd costumes served a different Ireland than he, was evident. Their use of English rather than the Gaelic universal on his own planet had taken him aback sharply when they first spoke. The impossibility that they knew something of his own Ireland was also apparent. For the entire hundred and fifty years the multiple earths had been known to Hibernia, it had been a recurring nightmare that someday the Tirdians would discover the other planets. Now, perhaps some had. If yon timestream car were discovered here ... He shuddered and carefully didn't look in its direction.

How, why, and what was going on were not apparent, but he had a suspicion it involved one of former First Executive Calaghan MacCarthy's vile schemes.

Four years had passed since the king's deposition, and there was no more honour in the Irish court today than then. With the kind of technology available to the great houses, all it would take was a single covenant breaker to destroy the world, and the royals were up against more than one such. The MacCarthy and his allied clan lords were cruel, ruthless men who believed the Irish were a master race. They were determined to unleash forbidden weapons on enemies they thought of as less than human, destroying with them all possibility of honourable victory. Two previous tries had been thwarted. Was another brewing? Meanwhile, Lord Donal Tobin was First over a court without a king, but had proven less malleable than MacCarthy and Monde might have expected, so his position was none too secure. Was civil war once again imminent?

The deposed James IV and his three cousins had worked hard to re-establish the influence of the Lord of Heaven and undermine that of the MacCarthy and Monde, but they were firmly entrenched, and the royals expected it would take the whole two generations of the royal banishment to accomplish much. In the meanwhile, they could only try to thwart the more outrageously evil schemes by acting as an informal court in exile.

His cousin Patrick, the Chief of Palace Security, had passed on intelligence reports that something was afoot affecting Japan. This must be it. Evidently it involved some devilry of stealing secrets from Tirdia, and passing them to the enemy. He thought carefully through his alternate-history lessons. This version of earth was two centuries behind in technology, but the mere fact of taking things from here would add weight to any crime that might be pinned on the Japanese emperor and his people.

He tried to remember what level of war-making this place had reached in order to frame a question about the forbidden technologies. He had not been here since cadet training, and hadn't kept up with their version of the Three Worlds' War. No, wait. He couldn't very well call it that. It was the "Second World War" here, and their European conflict had been over for a few months. Best to be more specific. Could the MacCarthys be gun-running to try re-igniting the civil war in Irish North America? If so, how were the Japanese involved? He licked his lip nervously before speaking.

"Did the purchase have ought to do with projectile, explosive, or biological weapons?" His voice was hesitant, as he fished for words.

"Gotya," thought Lucy to herself in grim satisfaction. Only the first two of his descriptors made sense. The third must be another forbidden technology. She wondered fleetingly how biology could be used as a weapon, then thought of germ warfare, and shivered. That was bad enough in her own world. What might it have become in his? Aloud, she agreed, but gave only a partial answer.

"It is a trigger and plans for a new type of explosive device."

A horrible thought came to him, and he seized Lucy's shoulder again in his vice-like grip, his head suddenly awfully clear, his face ghastly.

"Never mind petty secrets. If we are to be partners, speak plainly. Are you talking about a part for an atomic bomb?"

Lucy swallowed hard and nodded. Jay was not only a fast thinker, he was very well-informed. "Yes. The package includes plans for a complete weapon."

"Oh, Lord of Heaven, preserve us," Jay breathed. It was all too clear now. On his earth, it had only been two days since the war in Europe had ended with a massive blitz on three fronts, one of which he had commanded himself. He and four other senior officers had dictated terms under which General Friedrich had surrendered honourably to Commander-in-Chief Ryan. The five had been pressuring Lord Donal to accept those terms officially for Ireland, but the MacCarthys were holding out for reparations the royals felt sure would cause the conflict to resume a few years hence.

Meanwhile, Japan's power was crumbling, and the end of that conflict was surely only months away, as it was here. If a nuclear incident could be blamed on her, the Irish hawks who wanted her total destruction rather than mere defeat could persuade the court not to offer peace terms. Instead, with the Emperor supposedly having broken the 1751 anti-nuclear pact and the 1801 Covenant of the Living, the replacement arsenal Ireland had built up after the original had been "accidentally" contaminated four years earlier could be opened, and nuclear weapons used on Japan for the second time. With that, war with Germany would surely resume. It would be a disaster. At whatever cost, he couldn't allow it to happen.

He thought some more. This slight young man in front of him had an air of maturity, and claimed a rank suggesting an age of thirty or so, but his smooth, heavily freckled face made him look like a boy. He glanced to one side. The other didn't look much older. He decided he needed the two and had to take a risk.

"I will be frank," he stated, "because I need your assistance much more than you need mine." He hesitated, then shrugged. They already knew something of his Ireland. "You realize we serve different realms."

He paused as Lucy nodded slightly, again acknowledging his quickness on the uptake.

He waved his hand about. "This is clearly a trap. In fact," he said, as his mind worked overtime, "I fail to comprehend why you were invited here, when the people who use this place could have made their transaction without you being any the sharper. You must have something else they want."

It made immediate sense to Lucy. Had the man they now knew as "Mike" succeeded at the train station, they would no doubt have received instructions changing or cancelling this meeting. Now, they would never be allowed to escape either with what they thought they had come to buy, or with the precious PIEA. "We have an item that several people, including one of those who carried you, have tried to steal," she admitted.

"I see," he nodded, and didn't enquire further. "It must be some other bit of MacCarthy carelessness," he thought, concluding they had left something more valuable than just a coin lying around here on Tirdia. They must be trying to retrieve it before the court got wind of it, and the discovery exposed their entire scheme. However, these two fellows' possession of contraband was of lesser consequence, and could be sorted out later.

"You have also been betrayed," he observed.

"Yes," she agreed. "We suspected that yesterday."

"Why did you come, then?"

"It was the mission our country assigned us," Lucy answered simply. There was no point in adding that they were in no position to refuse. Oddly, the answer seemed to satisfy him, and Lucy recalled the many words for "honour" in his Gaelic that had no distinct equivalents in hers or in English. She had struck a chord with the man, she was sure.

He continued. "Millions of lives are at stake, should this plot succeed. Are you willing to work with me for Ireland to bring to justice those who would murder countless noncombatants, on my assurance it is the right thing to do before the Lord of Heaven?"

Lucy ran a hand over her brow. If they said "yes", they would surely be shifting allegiances. The different church known to the dictionary crossed her mind, and with that came the thought that she and Sally might also have to change religions if they partnered with this man, for they would surely end up on his world.

However, if they refused, what chance did they have even to survive this day's mission, much less to serve their own Ireland? Since, in the end, the point of the exercise was supposedly to keep American secrets from the Russians and Japanese, there was little to lose if they disappeared from their own world altogether. It was not as if Ireland would start making the hell bombs and threatening others. DeValera was merely trying to enhance his image in the post-war councils of the Allies. Thus, on the whole, if the Orthan Irish intercepted the sale, it made little difference to her Ireland, not now, at any rate. Moreover, they might get out of it alive after all, and could stay loyal to their home country, even if it would be a different one, and even if they had to go there. Well, who would miss them? Not Father Damon; he was probably responsible for selling them out to the other spooks. They had no one else.

On the faerie hand, if they succeeded, they could make a fresh start in another and perhaps better Ireland. That was at once dramatic, dangerous, romantic, and practical. As she turned it over, it suddenly occurred to her to wonder what would happen if Father Damon did get the package. Would he really

turn it over to deValera, or would he indeed build a bomb to use on the English? This led to another idea. Damon was surely the most un-priestlike priest she had ever known. What if ... They were fantastic notions, but together they decided her.

She glanced over to Sally, who was listening to the whispered conversation. Her partner was looking out a second window at something behind the building. Suddenly, Sally glided back to the first one, facing front of the house, and took a look there. She followed this with a circling thumb motion around her throat and vigorous nodding, all without turning around. Lucy looked back at the giant of a man before her, and kept her face impassive. Sally was telling her the place was surrounded with hostiles, and she had better agree. She thought carefully about the best bargain they could make. It wasn't money that motivated the Orthans, but honour. She mentally translated the appropriate words into English.

“I will agree if you say both that you are acting for the crown and throne of Ireland, and that you will behave honourably as equal fealty partner with the two of us. I will keep no secrets, but you must have none from us.”

Jay stared, his stomach churning. This impossible young man knew far too much. He spoke freely of the crown of Ireland, and was now appealing to the saying of honour and mutual fealty, and upon the throne, of all things. He knew Tirdia had no equivalent to the “I say” that affirmed the oath a noble man or woman would die before breaking, and he was sure they lacked any concept of mutual fealty. Moreover, their Ireland had no throne or crown. How were such words possible? How much did the two know? Was that earlier remark about King James a lucky guess, or something more?

He rubbed his chin. This was a difficult decision. If he entered into equal fealty with these two, he would be saying for seven people, not just himself. Could he make these two partners with the four royal cousins, the two wives and Daisy? Could he take the risk? On the other hand, could he not, when so much was at stake? He breathed a silent prayer for the outcome to the Lord of Heaven, and spoke, drawing his sword, and holding it horizontal.

“Agreed. I say equal fealty. Does your word bind your partner?” He glanced toward the window where Sally watched.

“Salty can hear us, and consents. Besides, we think enough alike that either can speak for the other.” She used Sally's nickname. There was no need to puncture Jay's illusions, and no telling how he would react if he knew they were women.

“Good. It is so with my six partners, as well,” he replied.

Lucy licked her lips. It was their last chance to turn back. But there was no alternative. She drew the long knife from her belt, held it as he did his sword, and spoke her half of the oath, which he awaited to complete the transaction. “We, Salty O'Neill, and Lucky O'Brien, say equal fealty to you and your house before the God of Heaven.” She employed his translation of the Orthogaelic for a spoken oath, but only when she finished did she realize she had said “God” rather than “Lord.”

He looked at her cautiously, wondering how she had known the oath, and what he had done to them and his cousins by admitting strangers to the family's inner councils. What would the others say? Well, they three had to survive first.

“Do you have a plan?” he asked Lucy.

“Beyond waiting for the double agent to come, buying the goods, and hoping to fight our way out alive,

no,” she admitted with a grin. “Do you?”

He knew exactly what outcome was needed. The incriminating evidence had to be found in the hands of the conspirators on Hibernia before it could get to the Japanese. Moreover, he had to get these two men home for questioning.

“What we need is to persuade the MacCarthys to capture you and take you back with them. Do you think you can use this other item they want from you to convince them you have information of value to their superior?”

Lucy thought it over. From Jay's reaction to the coin, she guessed the Ortho-Irish would go to great lengths to prevent discovery by her earth. She wondered what they had to fear from her world, then nearly chuckled aloud as she realized she now completely accepted the existence of an entire alternate earth. “And, if there are two, there are the four more,” she added to herself, soberly. “Yes, I think we could,” she said aloud, filing away the name of what must be the clan rival to her new partners.

“Good.” He reached into a pouch at the front of his belt, fished out two disc-like objects about twice the size of the coin they had found, and pressed each on the sides twice. “This is a locator device one of my cousins devised. It transmits a signal we have the means to detect. Perhaps we can at least expose, if not capture, their entire leadership if you can remain credible long enough.”

“What will you do?”

“This scheme will only work if they do not see me at all, and that means you have to handle things at this end, and trust me at the other. I will hide, but be ready to enter the fight if things turn sour for you. Otherwise, I will conceal myself in their timestream car. When they return, I will make my escape and bring help, within the hour, if they go to the place I was captured. Otherwise, or if you are moved—and that is why the locaters—it could take as much as a day to mount a rescue. Are you willing to be prisoners that long, and do your utmost to stay with the contraband if they relocate?”

“You swear by your word of honour that you will not simply leave us when you get away from them?”

“I say it on the honour of my name, and upon the emerald throne.” He paused.

“Ah,” thought Lucy. “That's the high noble oath I wanted. He hasn't given us his real name, but he's a mugwump all right.” Even to herself, she often used the North American slang she had picked up at Camp X, and that so irritated her academic colleagues.

Jay saw her react to the royal saying, and added with painful honesty, “There is, however, the possibility they will torture you or kill you out of hand. You will still have done the right thing before the Lord of Heaven.”

Lucy felt fingers of fear touching the back of her neck, not at the prospect of pain, but at that of meeting the Lord of Heaven without knowing what was her relationship with him. Suddenly, she wanted very much to live long enough to make things right between herself and God.

She made none of this apparent to Jay, but shrugged. “We've been tortured twice before; it's overrated. Very well, we do it your way,” she added with an air of finality. She took the locaters, pocketed one, and tossed the other to Sally, who did likewise, but not before grinning at her friend. Then, Lucy had second thoughts. She fished the disc from her pocket, turned it over a couple of times, and on a whim, swallowed it instead. “Insurance,” she thought.

* * * *

Hours later, Sally and Lucy took turns peering over the edge of the river bank a hundred yards from the barn. They had picked the spot to frustrate the police, none of whom could see them without coming into the open. They had watched for some time, and seen much foot traffic in and out of the barn.

Lucy was still thinking over their conversation with “Jay,” and in particular, his insistence that the three pray together before going their separate ways for now. She found herself craving further time with men like him. She had lots of questions to ask. More and more, she wanted to live through this day. She had to know personally the one he called “Lord of Heaven,” she thought, and found herself vowing to serve God, if he would preserve her and Sally.

“Sal.”

“Yeah, Luce.”

“Watch a while for both of us, will you. I need a nap.” Lucy had the enviable ability to sleep or awaken instantly at any time of the day or night.

“Sure thing.”

Moments later, as she was drifting off, Lucy found herself once again dreaming about that other Ireland, wondering anew how much of the romance they had been reading was true.

The only other earth having an Ireland is Tirdia. As here, her monasteries preserved civilization during the darkest ages of Europe, afterward reintroducing both learning and Christianity to a barbaric and illiterate continent, only to have its own scholasticism come to a halt under Norman raids. Unlike ours, their land fell to twelfth century Anglo-Norman invasion, and was utterly despoiled, while ours soon resumed its export of books, scholars, Christianity and a distinctively Irish way of life. There, the Irish have been an impoverished nation for much of the last millennium, oppressed by the English, if one can imagine it.

In a curious anti-parallelism illustrating the odd connections the timestream proximity apparently generates, Tirdia's Ireland was devastated by a potato famine at the same time in the nineteenth century that we were helping the English deal with the corn borer plague. In another, Irish diaspora underclasses in parts of their world have, at times, been treated as poorly as the English in ours.

It is also interesting that a few place names are identical in both worlds, most notably those named by or after aboriginals, or where differing Irish histories have not touched some very remote location.

—basic notes in history, Kilkarney cadet school.

Chapter Twelve

Brian and Meghan, near Detroit, a remote village in Irish North America, 1982 (Hibernia)

“Daddy, Daddy, Daddy.” Meghan ran pell-mell into his arms, her hair a rat's nest of tangled red-brown curls, her face smudged with dried tears, and her clothes covered with dust.

All but the tears were standard issue, so it took Brian McIlhargey a few moments to realize there was more to his daughter's condition than the normal wear and tear of a day's play.

“What's the trouble, Meghan, my little colleen? Have you tripped over a log along the way? If you used the path instead of one of your short cuts that take three times as long to get home from school...”

Meghan looked up at her beloved da with the classic five-year-old's gap-toothed smile. The tears had stopped, but she plastered a grimly determined look on her face. “The other kids were mean to me, but I'll show them someday.”

“That you will, Meghan, that you will. Now, sit here beside your dad, and tell me what happened.”

But as usually happened in such conversations, Meghan had questions first. “Da,” she used her pet form of address, “What's a ‘low English merc?’”

He put on his best lecturing tone. “England is the biggest of the Emerald Isles on the other side of the ocean. When Ireland was already a powerful kingdom, the English lived in primitive conditions, and were always at war among their tribes and against others. After an English faction attacked a peaceful Irish merchant ship at London in 1505, and it started the fifth war between us, the Irish were determined it would be the last. Under Patrick IV, General Sean Meathe—later Sean I—conquered and united their island by 1510, bringing peace and prosperity to the English for the first time, but under our rule.”

“So why is it a mean name to say?”

“To this day some people look down on the English as an uncivilized people, even though they are now partners with the Irish, not barbarians any more. In the Emerald Isles themselves, you hardly ever hear such talk, but in small and remote places like this, people still sometimes have bad attitudes.”

“Is that because they aren't very nice themselves?”

“That's about it, Meghan. Small people try to make themselves more important by being nasty to others. They don't realize they're making themselves less honourable, not more.”

Meghan had heard that speech before, so instead of pursuing it, asked another of the multitude of questions with which she was always armed. “Is Detroit very remote?”

“About as isolated as can be, I suppose. There aren't more than a thousand people within a hundred Irish miles.” Her da became very thoughtful. “There is a Detroit on another world with more people in just that one city than there are in all the Emerald Isles together, but that's another story.”

“Why are there six earths, and why do two of them have two names?” she suddenly demanded.

Brian answered her second question. “We called the earth between us and Waterword ‘Prime’ before the Metans showed us how to get there, then the Irish became prouder of our planet, so they started calling it ‘Tirdia’ instead. Our earth is called ‘Ortho’ because of where it is in the timestream, and ‘Hibernia’ because Ireland rules over all. No doubt the Metans have a name for their planet, too.”

He stopped, not answering her first question, so she tried one out on him. “Father O'Donnell says the Lord of Heaven makes new worlds when somebody can't decide between right and wrong, so there's one place where each choice happened, and things aren't so bad as they could have been afterward on either one.” She halted the rush of words, and tilted her head to one side with two fingers on her cheek

as if thinking furiously. “But if that's so, why doesn't Jesus create lots and lots of new earths, one for every decision people make, with a whole bunch of me and of you?”

Her father got a glum expression and waved a hand vaguely. “Physicists once thought that was the case, but it turned out not to be. Perhaps some decisions are more important than others. There's evil on all the earths. Who's to say whether it would have been worse if things had been decided differently, or not at all?”

“Jesus knows,” Meghan observed confidently, adding, “That's why he made a nexus and started our world—so there could be a place where Pilate decided to release Him, except He wasn't here ‘cause it was a new world, and He could die for our sins only one place and time. And it was Jesus who made it so our Brian Boru survived the battle of Clontarf, finishing the nexus, and making sure Ireland is in charge of everything today.”

Brian grimaced. He had taught Meghan the history; priests had supplied the theological explanations. One couldn't deny the reality of the great nexus. After all, there were the other earths, one of them so like theirs, yet so different.

“Why invoke God as an explanation?” was his bitter thought. “If there is a Lord in heaven, why isn't there a world where Glenmorgan was won, and we there instead of here?” He clenched his teeth in anger, but quickly grew reflective as the stray thought caught at his mind. Could social and historical trends be examined in enough detail so a nexus could be scientifically predicted? If there was a non-religious interpretation of such events...

Meghan felt brokenhearted whenever her da wouldn't talk about Jesus, whom she had trusted as her personal Saviour when she was barely four years old. Apparently he wasn't interested in tales of the other earths this day, so she quickly changed the subject back to the rest of her first query. “What's a ‘merc?’”

“Not a very nice word, Meghan, dear.”

Her mouth became very round, and her face grew redder than normal under the layer of dirt. She knew there were words a lady or gentleman did not say in public. This evidently was another. She should have guessed from the tone of use, she thought. But one had to know such things, not just suppose them. She persisted. “But what is ... that word.”

“It is a rude form of the word ‘mercenary’, and it means a soldier who has no fealty to a liege lord, but hires out on a contract basis to another family to make a living. A low mercenary doesn't register a contract, choosing to be paid in cash and living quarters.”

She blinked twice. “That's what you do.”

“Yes.”

“Then you are one of those they used the rude word for.” She blinked rapidly, as she did when dismayed.

“Meghan, little princess, it is true I have not sworn fealty to any of the lords of the towns we have lived in, or the commercemen I have served. I go from place to place, and work for one or another, training soldiers and installing security devices. That makes me a ‘soldier-for-hire’ or ‘mercenary’, as some people call us. We are the rootless ones who do not belong to any of the families where we work a little

while. Almost every senior officer in the crown's armies works mercenary at one time or another. I ask for pay in cash because I don't want to be conspicuous.”

“So when we were A'Grady or A'Murphy we were just borrowing the name of the family you worked for then.”

“That's right. Everyone who contracts for more than half time employment must use the name of the lord for whom they work.”

Meghan clapped her hands. “And Christians are called that because they belong to Christ, who is their Lord.”

When he didn't reply, she returned to her original line of questioning. “Is it better to belong and wear a family tartan?” She was interested in the personal aspects, not the financial ones. They had also been over the odd matter of the crown having armies, even though no one wore the crown. She would have another go at that one day.

“Ah, Meghan, so they insulted your tartan, too, did they? You need to remember the common pattern is also worn by officials of the court, and even by the King. It's the oldest royal design of all, so you can be proud of it, whatever others say. As for belonging to a clan, it is better for most people, but my first obligations are to you and Karen. To fulfil those and other duties, I cannot swear subject fealty to any house.”

“Not any?”

“Well, I could swear friendship fealty to a royal family, but not subject fealty.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I did, you would belong to that house, too, for you are my little Meghan.”

“Would that be so bad? Most people belong.”

Brian did not answer immediately, but got a far off, thoughtful look, and grew very quiet. Meghan knew better than to press at such times, so she waited patiently, still as a mouse herself.

“Are you a grown-up enough lady to keep a secret?” her da suddenly asked.

Meghan's eyes shone, and she clapped her hands. She loved secrets, and her da had lots. She jumped to her feet and held up one hand, fingers pointed skyward in lieu of the sword adults used for oaths. “I promise by the Lord of Heaven not to tell anyone.” She recited the formula in an incomprehensible rush of words, and waited with eager anticipation for his revelation.

Brian gave his daughter a long and solemn look. “Meghan, this is not a game. It is serious, and you must never discuss with anyone what I tell you today. Do you understand?”

She nodded. Everybody knew promises didn't really count 'til you were grown up. Then you would “say” your oaths, and they bound you absolutely. However, promises were important. She knew that, too. Her da always said if she didn't keep her promises when she was little, she wouldn't honour her sayings when she was older, and that would be the ultimate shame. She nodded, hesitated, then asked, with a more sombre tone, “Not even Karen?”

“Not even her.” Brian glanced farther along the path from where he had waited to intercept his daughter on her homeward journey. From here, he could just see through a gap in the trees to the little house the three shared, and knew Karen would be somewhere close about it.

“Is that because Karen sometimes doesn't understand things very well?” Meghan looked quite solemn.

Brian looked at his suddenly wise little five-year-old, and nodded agreement. She was already more grown up in some ways than Karen could ever be, and was beginning to realize it. Well, there was time enough to explain the hows and whys of that in more detail another day.

“Now, this is a great secret indeed, and you must not reveal it until the absolute right time when you are all grown-up, or it will bring us all much trouble.”

She nodded agreement, expectantly.

“When the other children call you ‘English’, they know better. We are certainly Irish by the way we look and by our very name. That much is obvious.”

Meghan nodded again, eagerly. She wasn't going to say anything now, lest she break the spell of the moment, and risk losing the secret should her da change his mind and not tell it after all.

He looked around once more for eavesdroppers, and continued in an abstracted tone of voice, almost as if she were not there and he were talking to himself. “What no one must discover is we are all three members of old Irish royal families. King Conn III and his Queen Ann are my great-grandparents, and your great-great-grandparents.”

Meghan's mouth made a big, round “Oh,” and she clasped one hand to her side in the manner of an adult making a salute, unable to speak. This was an awesome secret indeed. Imagine being descended from the King.

Brian carefully omitted Karen from the last part of the recitation to avoid telling too many outright lies. She had to remain his daughter for a while. The time had not yet come to inform Meghan that Karen's own line of descent from Conn and Ann was the same length as his. It was also too soon to reveal that Meghan's status was far more interesting and complex than his own. Their enemies were utterly without honour, so the brutal pragmatics of survival dictated he oughtn't tell her things until he knew they couldn't be tortured from her. This would try her out on a secret large enough to be a substantive test, but small enough not to ruin them utterly if found out. After all, Conn had many descendants; he was not called “the prolific” for nothing. If Meghan failed and boasted it to her playmates when they made fun of her, there would be no more revelations until she was reliable.

Forestalling potentially embarrassing questions about details, he turned and put both hands on her shoulders. “Meghan, someday you will go to court. You are entitled to a place there because of your family, and that place can never be taken from you. When you arrive in the council chamber, the first thing you must do is swear fealty to the court. However, you must never swear any other fealty except friendship to an individual person, whether at court or elsewhere.”

“Court fealty is different?”

“Yes, it is. All who, for any reason, enter the council chambers must swear to the court.”

“Who are they swearing to when they do that?”

“Not who, but what, Meghan. They swear to be loyal to the crown and throne of Tara, to abide by the system and customs of the court, to participate in debates according to the rules, to respect the decisions of the court, and to help carry them out.”

“They would swear to the King if there was one.” She took satisfaction in knowing this much from previous lessons. Learning history from her da was much more fun than from the MT or the teacher at her school.

“Yes, they would. But since there is no king, they swear to the symbols of royal authority.”

“Why don't you go to the court and be one of the great lords?” Meghan's confidence in her da was unlimited.

Brian arched his eyebrows slightly at the question, and provided only a carefully edited portion of the truth. “I left Ireland for a few years because ... well, because I was part of a group the court decided were rebels.” There was a lot more she would have to discover for herself.

“Was that when you fought the battle of Glenmorgan?” Meghan always liked to hear stories of war, conquest, and duels.

But the question shook him from the mood, and he only grunted a bare affirmative. Meghan held her breath, waiting for more, but the spell was broken.

“That's enough secrets for now. Before your day at court comes, we must teach you many things, and train you in many skills, so you can earn your rightful place, owing nothing to anyone.” He kept his voice even, but behind the words was his steely resolve to turn his bright, happy little girl into the most potent weapon the court had ever seen. If he had to destroy Tara itself, he would have his revenge. He ground his teeth. The day the twenty-year ban on Devereaux and Rourke ended...

Meghan sensed the moment was over, but made one more try at extracting information. “Is that why we cannot swear to any other family; because we have our own?”

“Yes. You must never swear to another except the friendship fealty of equals, and you must pick such friends very carefully, and only from among the hereditary nobility or, better, the royal families. Not many of the old nobility can be trusted.”

He stood up, extended his enormous calloused hand down to hers, and enveloped it in his huge grip. There would be no more messy questions today. “Come. Karen will have supper waiting.” Then, as if seeing her condition for the first time, he returned to the matter of her scruffy appearance.

“I take it after they called you names, you had a little scuffle.”

By this time they were walking side-by-side, she swinging his arm and skipping to match his long stride. She was big for a five-year-old, and he felt himself hoping she would inherit the large, powerful frame, long reach, and strong sword arm common among the blood royals, rather than the small, wiry build of the Rourkes, whose connection to the crown was by adoption.

“I said we were not, and they said we were, and one of them pushed me down.” Her reply was sing-song, in time to her skipping.

“What did you do?”

“I got back up and pushed him down.”

“And then?”

“Four of them pushed me down, and they all ran away. I couldn't chase four at once, so I came home.”

“You did the right thing, Meghan. You didn't know what the words meant, or even that one of them was true in a way, but they were dishonouring you, and you must always fight for your honour.”

“But I lost the fight.”

“Yes, so the others went away satisfied at having made their point, but you keep your honour because you fought for it. If you refuse to fight, you concede your honour.”

“Is it the same when adults fight?”

“Yes, but when adults duel, the loser surrenders to the winner whatever it is they are fighting over. That may be a possession, or a position the other person claims to be more qualified for.”

“So the best fighter gets to take whatever she wants?” Meghan imagined herself in the courts of Tara, crossing swords over some high office.

“Well, there are rules about that. If others saw a person acting out of greed or too much pride, or misusing strength and power, they might band together to take it away again and give it to others.”

“Is that how the court works?”

“Yes, Meghan, it is. A person with great ability and accomplishment in learning, and even more skill with the sword, can become lord or lady of a great house. With even more skill and strength, one can stand in the front row at court, and rule a mighty domain. When you do, you must do so wisely, rightly and justly, remaining the strongest and best for the job, or it will be taken away by someone who is better.

“To stand in the front row of the court requires three certificates, and only a handful of people earn even a GAC. Being at least a major in the army counts for one, and also means you have enough sword ability to hold your own there. The third could be in, say, medicine, engineering, or as a bard. However, those certificates are just the minimum price of admission. You have to be very, very good to be allowed to rule an executive domain.”

“I shall have all five of those, and perhaps another, too,” Meghan announced, skipping out their names, one at a time.

Brian barely noticed her presumption. His father had earned six before he was twenty-five. He himself had four officially, and could have written for another had not cruel Glenmorgan intervened. He sighed at the thought, but Meghan failed to notice. Instead, she picked up on the issue of being “good.”

“Father O'Donnell says people are not naturally good.”

His reply to her redirection was guarded and noncommittal. “Yes, that is what the Church teaches.”

“He says that's why we need to believe in Jesus and receive him into our hearts, so God will forgive our sin, and see his Son when he looks at us.” She kept her eyes straight ahead as she spoke, knowing such talk made her father decidedly uncomfortable.

Predictably, he shifted the focus by asking, “What has that to do with fighting and the court?”

“I was just thinking the high lords and ladies at the court might not always follow the rules, but sometimes cheat.”

Brian stopped their walk and stared at his too-wise little girl. She had the sharp of it all right, and the Church would say it only proved all were sinners in need of salvation. He couldn't deny the truth of Meghan's observation, but was not prepared to accept the Church's application of it, so he retreated to the dryness of another history lesson.

“When people swear to the court, they are saying they will uphold the Donal as First Lord. However, Sean, the present Donal, is the twelfth since the King was banished, and all but one of the others were assassinated or killed in duels, usually by the very lords and ladies who swore fealty to the court, and thus to him as its representative.” He gave her the edited, accepted, public truth. He was one of a handful who knew that the eighth Donal, as well as the fourth, escaped death upon being deposed, and, moreover, still survived, living under an assumed name.

“Why is he called Donal? You call him Sean. Both are first names.”

“The one who became First when the King was banished was Donal Tobin. After him, the name became a title.”

“But why did their friends kill them?”

“Swearing loyalty to the court is very different from swearing friendship to a person. If someone thinks they can do a better job as first, it is not technically disloyal to challenge the First Lord and try to take the position. Assassination, however, is a coward's tool, and if the perpetrators are found out, they are banished from the court, and gain nothing.”

Meghan put on a very haughty air, folded her arms, and tossed her head. “I shall work hard in school to be the very best, and you will teach me to fight, and I shall be the First someday,” she declared in the most grown-up tone her small voice could manage. “I am already the best in my class at lessons, and could fight any one of them, and win.”

Brian blinked. For a second there, Meghan had been her imperious mother, Katherina, ordering her childhood friends about a woodland kingdom. She, too, had early revealed a burning desire to be First, following in the footsteps of her own mother, Iron Kate Rourke, the power behind her husband Matthew, the fourth Donal. He could almost hear Katherina's voice saying, “When I get rich, I won't buy a manse, because the palace at Tara is already my home. I know it better than anyone, and I'll live there again someday.” He blinked again. Katherina was dead, and her dreams with her.

He grunted at the remembrance, but made no reply to Meghan. “Let the ambition come naturally from her,” he thought. He would feed her aspirations and hone her skills until she could do exactly as she said. He didn't point out that she would first have to kill whoever was Donal in order to take his place. He idly wondered if Sean Reilly would last long enough in the job for Meghan to dispose of him, or if someone else would first do to him as he had to William Desmond, his MacCarthy predecessor as Donal XI. Sean

was coming up on four years in the position, about average for a Donal. For him to last another sixteen until Meghan could confront him as Mara Devereaux-Rourke seemed vanishingly improbable.

He ground his teeth again. When his old friend Sean had, with Thomas Monde's help, ruthlessly and bloodily taken First a year after Glenmorgan, the act convinced him of their culpability in the murder of his family. He would see them both die someday for the atrocity. But he had to prove it first.

Just short of home, his mind turned to the more immediate concerns Meghan's comments raised. He knew they would have to move to a larger centre for the next stage of her education, but had been postponing it. This conversation merely highlighted the need. But where could they go? It had to be a place large enough to have good teachers, full library facilities, and sufficient employment for him, yet out of the way enough to keep her well hidden for many more years.

Unbidden, the sudden image of a small village where he had spent much of his youth popped into his mind. The Dennison manse for New Tara on its island apart from the big city had both the connectivity to allow research into his enemies' activities, and the isolation to allow them to remain out of the mainstream. After all these years, no one there could recognize him. As soon as the current school term ended...

Meghan had been watching the emotions play over her father's face, and hoped for more secrets, but knew none would be forthcoming when he got the hard set to his jaw that she saw so often. She shrugged. There would be other times.

Brian took Meghan's hand, and the two resumed their walk to the lonely little house in the woods.

Female warriors figure strongly in Irish mythology, both here and on Tirdia. However, despite equality movements in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, there have been comparatively few such women known to historians, and until Elizabeth Ryan in 1954, none earned a way to the front row of Tara's court. Contrary to popular belief, Iron Kate never stood there, deferring to her husband, Donal IV, whom she put in the First Lord's chair. The next was Maria Ryan who held second jointly with her husband Liam for many years in the 1980s and 1990s. No other woman had front row status until the three "sisters"—Catherine Ryan, Mara Meathe, and Sheana MacAllister-O'Toole—stood there at the time the worlds divided in the great nexus of 2001. I contend, however, that had it not been for the ban on the king, as many as four royal wives could have qualified in the late 1940s.

—from *A History of the Irish Royal Family*, by Jana Whelan.

Chapter Thirteen

Sally and Lucy, 1945, near Calgary (Tirdia) and Edwardston (Hibernia)

The cloud grew larger and closer, a mile-long arrow of dust along the remote road pointing ominously at an apparently deserted farm. Reaching the yard, it coughed out a battered Model T that shuddered to a halt in front of the dilapidated barn. As the gritty billows drifted slightly to one side, the driver looked furtively about. After a few minutes, he turned off the motor and got out. He was short, hatless, partly bald, and had a wispy moustache, the ends of which he twirled nervously. He was wearing a beige trench coat, and had a bulky parcel under one arm.

Sally nudged Lucy in the ribs, and she looked over the new arrival before grunting back. Somehow it was not too surprising that the double agent had turned out to be George Dowd. Well known to them, he

had long sold secrets to the Russians and Germans, as well as to his ostensible masters in the Irish secret service. Lucy wondered how Dowd had lived this long. She didn't think much of his chances today. But what were theirs? She thought about the L-pill in her belt pouch, and decided to leave it there, rather than carry it in her mouth. Today might see bullets and knives, but probably didn't portend threats of torture that might require suicide.

“This is it, Lucy. He's the last player. The game starts.”

Lucy saw Sally pat the wad of money they were supposed to give Dowd, and idly wondered if the Canadian copper over on the nearby rise was keeping proper track of everybody. “Mike,” their one-time attacker, had earlier changed into a kilt, and so had two others who arrived just after noon, so there were now five in that group. Add them to the three score police they estimated surrounded the place on all sides but the river, and throw in their fellow spies who had either already arrived or were undoubtedly nearby, and it was a regular tea party bidding to become a wake. She breathed another prayer to the God she now realized she didn't know, and the two left the ditch to make a quick dash to the barn door Dowd had just entered.

“Hello, George. Have you brought the goods, then?” Lucy asked.

George Dowd spun around, blinking back into the sunlight from where his eyes had just become accustomed to the dark. Squinting, he recognized the two women.

“Ah, Sally, Lucy,” he said in some agitation. “I'm glad it's you, but you shouldn't come up suddenly on an old man.” He twirled his moustache with his free hand, and edged farther into the shadows. They followed until the three stood several feet inside, and Lucy felt the tingle in her spine diminish. They were out of the line of fire now, but had been very exposed for a critical minute. Good thing no one was trigger-happy.

“Did you bring the money?” Dowd demanded nervously, putting the package at his feet on the dirt floor.

Sally handed over the bundle of cash. Dowd unwrapped and counted it, then put it into an interior pocket of his trenchcoat.

“We'll take the goods now, George,” Lucy informed him.

“You need to check them?”

Sally shrugged. “You know what happens to cheats, George.”

Dowd gave the package he had been carrying a push toward them with his foot, and backed up a step. “The plans are inside. It's all there, as agreed.”

He had a nervous hand on his moustache, and was facing slightly down and away, so he didn't notice a shadow suddenly appear at the door. Sally and Lucy both did, and turned. They knew who it must be from having kept tabs on everyone's position, but neither expected what happened next. Before Dowd was even aware of the newcomer, a gun flamed, and he jerked. He lifted his head long enough to open his mouth in surprise, then folded up as the weapon in the doorway barked sharply twice more.

“Enough,” said Sally pointedly, as Dowd crumpled. Neither went to offer assistance. Behind the gun and against the sun outside was the outline of handsome, debonair, utterly ruthless OSS agent Doug Boone. He was a crack shot, and couldn't have missed killing his man.

Ignoring the guns the two women now had trained on him, Boone slipped his piece into a shoulder holster and shrugged as he sauntered casually inside. "He was a citizen of the United States of America, and a traitor. He got his due." Boone walked to the package Dowd had set down, and hefted it. "Thanks for recovering our property. I'll take things from here."

"You had best put that back, Doug," Sally observed quietly but firmly. "It belongs to the government of Ireland now, duly bought and paid for. When it makes its way to you Yanks it will be through regular channels, not by you."

"I have a plane booked for New York tonight. It'll get there faster this way." Boone turned and made as if to leave.

"I don't think so," came a heavily accented voice from the shadows.

"Put it down, like your friend says," came a similar sounding second voice, as two dark-featured men with levelled guns emerged from a nearby horse stall.

Boone turned to greet the pair, still holding the package. "Well, if it isn't Carlos Cortez, chief spy for the last remaining Fascist regime in Europe. And, if I am not mistaken, I have the honour of meeting the elusive Bolo, sometimes of Argentina, but working for the slant-eyes. Imagine Franco making common cause with the Japs. Gotten over the burning I gave your agents the last time we tangled? Give it up, fellows. There are three of us, and only two of you."

Lucy tensed. Two numbers in decreasing order in one sentence were the signal to begin a standard manoeuvre the three of them had practised together at Camp X, and later taught to countless other agents. She automatically began a count at the word "two."

On five, Boone dropped to roll left and forward. Bolo and Carlos both fired where he had been, then got startled looks as Lucy's bullet struck one, Sally's the other. Carlos collapsed immediately, but incredibly, Bolo stayed on his feet. In what seemed like slow motion, he choked out the words, "Hombre Boone ... Russian agent ... ten years." But he had some strength left, for even as he fell, he pulled a knife from his belt. Boone was just getting up from the ground when Bolo landed on him with a stabbing motion. Neither moved again.

Lucy was still digesting the extent of Boone's apparent treachery when the sound of rushing feet intruded into the momentary silence, and they found themselves surrounded by four of the kilted men holding drawn swords. A fifth went swiftly from body to body checking for potential trouble. Dismissing all as threats, he presented himself before the two women. Lucy still had her gun levelled, and glanced back and forth to assess the odds. Two men, including the one she had earlier heard called "Paddy", were to her left, and two, including "Mike," were to Sally's right. The one in front of her was evidently in charge of what she decided was a military squad.

"You may as well put those away," the officer informed her, barely glancing at their guns. "You have fired the only shot they have." The two women shrugged their guns back up the sleeves of their fatigues, and waited to hear the rest. "Sergeant," he barked at one of the other men, "secure the goods." The huge man he addressed sheathed his sword, picked up the package Boone had dropped, and carried it to the back of the barn. Lucy heard him open a door, and knew he was stowing it in the mysterious vehicle. She hoped Jay was safely out of sight.

"Now," the lieutenant continued. "Which of you has the other device we're looking for?"

Lucy was about to start off with “What device?” but decided that was a waste of time, so instead told him, “It's in a secure place known only to us.” She made it up as she went along. “Both of us are needed to open the safe, and if we don't check in for a month, the combination and instructions are with a lawyer, who will give them to our government. Kill us, and you will only be found out. Pay us enough, and we will tell you how to get it.”

“Corporal,” he called out, ignoring her, “Check them.” One of the men to their right sheathed his blade, took a wand from his belt, and began passing it along their sides. When it reached Lucy's pack, it beeped. Paddy grinned cruelly, and the lieutenant asked, “Do you think such things cannot be detected?” then added, “Take her pack and tie them up. We'll leave them here.”

This was their moment. One man had been detailed to the door; the corporal had his blade sheathed, and the third had not yet returned from the back of the barn. She and Sally could try to take them all. It would be knives against swords, and under other circumstances they would have attempted to surprise the opposition, hoping to elude the police outside. But they had given their word to Jay. It was time to become prisoners.

“I don't think Lord MacCarthy would like that,” Sally coolly advised in a low voice.

The lieutenant started. What could Tirdians know of his lord?

“We have some useful information,” Lucy added.

“Such as?” he snarled back.

“How to find the king,” Lucy bluffed.

There was tense silence for several seconds as the young officer glared at one, then the other.

“The Mounties are moving in,” announced the man who had been watching the door.

“You're lying,” their captor asserted. “But we'll check it out.” He stepped aside. “Put them on board tangled to the middle seats. We've got two minutes.” He turned to Paddy.

“All right, Private, detonate.” The lieutenant snapped the order, spun about, and marched to the vehicle.

Paddy strode to the large switch on the wall, unlocked it, and pulled it down. A thin squealing sound began as the women were rushed on board and secured. Lucy could see the inside of the barn through the front window, and watched Paddy run back as a couple of loops of sticky material were passed around them and the chair. She looked about and could see no place Jay could hide, but decided she had done her part, and the rest was up to him. Then, her eye caught the burly sergeant sitting at the rear beside the package. He was about the right size. “No,” she thought. “Surely he wouldn't have.” She kept her face expressionless, and the sergeant looked through her as if she didn't exist.

The moment Paddy entered, the door closed. The high-pitched whine commenced, and she knew the machine was fading from view in the barn. Someone touched a switch and the windows opaqued, but just as the outlines of the barn dimmed, there was flash of light accompanied by a loud thump, and the machine rocked slightly.

* * * *

Seated on a stump high on a hill across the river, Karl Schmidt grunted to himself as the house and barn he had been watching through high-powered binoculars suddenly erupted in an enormous explosion, and what was left became an inferno. He had heard the gunshots, and was unsurprised when neither Dowd nor Boone emerged from the barn. He checked his watch. "Have to get this looked at," he thought. According to it, his dynamite had gone off two minutes early. From the looks of things down below, he could have used a lot less, too. He was momentarily puzzled about the house, then decided the killed fellows must have stored explosives of their own. Well, there would be no interrogating them now to relieve his curiosity. They were just another lot of dead spies.

He had to give that Canadian cop credit. At the last second the fellow had smelled a rat and ordered his men to the ground, so none were in the direct path of the blast fragments now raining down over the clearing. Most would escape with little worse than scratches and pierced eardrums, but everyone in the building had surely perished. The clumsy, double-dealing Dowd had cheated him, and the sophisticated Boone had failed. No matter. He had a report that the copies Dowd had thought secreted in a bank safe-deposit box for another sale had been secured.

The Irishman had paid him well to kill the two women and pass him the goods. Schmidt grinned with satisfaction. His own military controller in the Kremlin didn't know Damon's real name, that he, too, was a Communist agent recruited years earlier by the Russians, and no more a priest than Stalin. It was the Soviet way. Run several operations from different agencies with the same goal, and keep things secret from everybody. He chuckled. With a couple more promotions for Kim Philby, before long Moscow would be operating Britain's MI6, as she had part of Germany's network through himself in the latter part of the war. What was more, today's debacle could be advanced in the right American quarters as a reason to disband Bill Donovan's OSS.

This time, the Soviet's paranoid secrecy was to Schmidt's advantage, providing him double payment for the operation. And it was best things had worked out this way. Damon was more loyal to the fanatic Irish partisans than to Moscow, and he knew what the false priest had planned for the bomb secrets before passing them to the Kremlin. Schmidt rather liked London, and didn't fancy it a radioactive waste. So he had sold directly to his Soviet masters for even more money, and the copies at least were already on their way to Russia. Not only that, all the loose ends were nailed down here, so he could keep Damon's payment for icing the women, and plead inability with respect to the bomb plans.

Schmidt regretted the loss of the Irish agents. They had been worthy opponents, and he found killing women distasteful, but business was business. This way, he might extract more money from Damon for other jobs. The fellow would likely turn his pathetic little IRA militia loose in the north now that the atomic bomb had been denied him, and there ought to be possibilities in that. Schmidt unloaded, disassembled, and packed the high-powered rifle he had brought for insurance. He walked off to his waiting car, feeling good about the day's work and his prospects. A professional like himself deserved a freer stage.

* * * *

The noise and the sickening motion ceased together about ten minutes later. Lucy and Sally felt queasy, but the others were evidently no better, because nobody moved for a few moments. Apparently one didn't easily become accustomed to this kind of travel. The lieutenant shook off the effects first, and gave a stream of orders, largely related to unloading cargo. Then, as the soldiers tied their hands and hustled the two women off the vehicle, he pulled a duplicate of their PIEA from his belt, and spoke into it in Orthogaelic.

"My Lord Colonel. Lieutenant Jones reporting back from operation fish. We have secured the goods

and left behind the other cargo. Instruments show successful detonation. We obtained the missing PIEA, and brought the two women agents along.”

He paused, cocking his head slightly as if listening. Lucy decided he must have a miniature receiver in his ear. “Not bad technology,” she thought, “when our radios have to be lugged around by two handles.”

“Yes, my lord. I am aware of the consequences. However, they claimed to have information relating to the king, and I thought it prudent. There was no time to interrogate them there.” He paused again, and nodded to the air. “Yes, my lord, right away,” and then in English to them, “You two will come to the commander's office at once. I should point out that you are surrounded by a large armed force, and cannot escape,”—this as he saw Sally looking around to assess the inside of a barn quite different from the one they had left, one that presumably no longer existed.

The lieutenant escorted them outside, still bound, where they were surprised to see a similar clearing beside what must be the same river and with the same hill opposite, but containing different buildings. Here, there were three barns, and a much larger house. The railroad bridge downstream was green rather than grey, and in a different location. In addition, there were several tents around the perimeter, and a number of armed men lounged about. All wore the same kilt as her captors. Sally glanced at the sky, and Lucy's gaze followed. It was the same time of day by the position of the sun, and the weather and trees suggested summertime here, as well. This place was very like the one they had left, though clearly different. Lucy felt a thrill of excitement despite their precarious situation. They were on another earth, never mind the impossibility of it all.

There was no time for sight-seeing. In short order Jones, hustled them into the house, and minutes after “landing”, they found themselves in a large, heavily guarded office, the occupant of which was facing a box of some kind on his desk, and apparently finishing some piece of work on a device resembling a typewriter.

He stood to receive and return his junior officer's salute.

“Lieutenant Jones reporting as ordered, my lord Colonel.”

“Very good, Lieutenant. Have you searched them?”

“Not yet, Sir. There was no time, and I had no women troopers.”

The commander reached under his desk, pressed something, and shortly a woman dressed in a similar uniform entered. Lucy had been puzzling over how they told each other's rank, but now noticed the patterned coloured stripes on their right sleeves.

“Permit me to introduce myself,” said the man behind the desk in English, with an insincere smile. “I am Colonel Michael MacCarthy, by warrant of the crown, commander of this army unit. The sergeant will untie and search you. If you cooperate, you will not be hurt. If you resist or attempt to escape, you will be killed.” The colonel addressed them in clipped terms, but with no accent whatever to his English.

Within minutes, the contents of their packs and pockets, along with their sleeve guns and knives, and several articles from their belts were spread out on the desk. The colonel unwrapped the package they had minutes before bought for their government, and placed the trigger and plans beside their belongings. The only thing the sergeant missed were their boot knives and hair pins. Lucy gave the woman top marks. Not many on her world would be that efficient.

The colonel looked up as the sergeant reported she was finished, and dismissed her. Then he picked up items one at a time from his desk, and examined them. When he came to the precious PIEA, he turned it on and demanded, "Where did you get this?"

"It was my father's. He received it from a man whose wounds he had treated. He mailed it to me."

"Describe it to me," he said.

"It is apparently a carving of some kind," Lucy dissembled.

"I see. And what of your information about the king?"

"We know his travel schedule for the next week."

"His travel schedule?"

"Yes, for example, he will be in Leeds on Tuesday. We can make a deal for more information. Surely you understand the Irish government would like to inconvenience the British, but we are not in a position to do it ourselves."

The colonel got a dangerously sly smile on his face. "And which king, pray tell, are we discussing?"

"Why, George VI, of course."

There was a long silence while he digested her prevarication. Then, the colonel worked the PIEA casually to determine its contents, and laid it on his desk. He looked thoughtful, then tapped a few buttons and began to read from the box on his desk, apparently translating as he went. "He must have documents in there," Lucy thought, "or perhaps it's another computing device." She was intrigued despite their peril.

"Lucy Maude O'Brien, Ollamh in Gaelic studies, and Sally Byrne O'Neill, Ollamh in Irish history. Both are couriers for Tirdian Irish intelligence. They are believed to be in possession of materials not permitted to their earth, to wit, a traced PIEA containing a Gaelic-English dictionary. The latter was removed from the desk of Chief O'Toole by one of our agents working for Security because it was supposed also to contain writings pertinent to the identity of the king. Said agent was assigned to Tirdia before he could report to us. He subsequently was taken to Galway physician John Patrick O'Brien for treatment of sword wounds suffered in a fight with an investigating officer." The colonel made a motion with his hand, apparently moving to another page, and continued to read, "Security sent a deep cover agent to Tirdia for four months, but no written report is available; we presume she gave it verbally to the chief."

Sally glanced at Lucy, and the latter nodded her head slightly. Whatever office owned that data must harbour a spy who was feeding the colonel information. However, the dope he had on them was incomplete, and that might give them an advantage.

MacCarthy looked up, stood, and came around the desk to pace the carpet as he spoke. "Let's go over this again. You came into possession of books that would be immediately recognized as important, even by someone with a passing knowledge of your respective fields, and you want me to believe that two of the leading experts on such matters don't understand them."

He assumed, Lucy noted, they had been able to work the PIEA.

“You persuaded the lieutenant to bring you here on the premise of having information about the king, and now play the innocent lambs.”

He looked over the desk, and his eye caught Jay's locator disk from Sally's pocket. “What do we have here?” he asked, as he picked it up and examined it with a magnifying glass. He pulled a pen-like instrument from his pocket, and touched the side of the disk, whereupon it emitted a small beeping noise. The colonel tapped his fingers a moment on his desk, and sighed. Then he handed the locator to the lieutenant, switching to Orthogaelic.

“Right, Jones, we will soon have visitors in the person of a few royals, if I am not mistaken. Have the men strike the tents and erase all sign of the encampment, hide out in the three barns, and await developments. There's one fewer of them today than yesterday, and they can't know the size of our force, so we may have enough troops already. Call transport, and order in three trucks from the main camp with another hundred soldiers. Put this locator into the white barn. If they don't fall into our trap before assistance arrives, you are to abandon this place. Send the timestream car back to central, so it's not seen here. Move quickly; there isn't much time. I will take these two to the airport using the staff groundcar, and complete the transaction, then to headquarters for interrogation and disposal. Oh, and send an additional squad to accompany me. I might need them.”

As the lieutenant left, Lucy found herself hoping Jay had gotten away cleanly. He would have seen the setup, and know the troop dispositions. He had better be the man of honour he claimed; time was rapidly running out. She wondered fleetingly whether the locator in her stomach was still working, and remembered that if help didn't come right away, it would be better if she was taken to the next meeting place, and traced there.

“You are liars.” The colonel interrupted her thoughts, switching back to English. “However, that is your profession.”

He snapped his fingers at the guards who were still in the room, and motioned the two women to follow. Moments later, the group was marching toward a vehicle parked near one of the barns. The colonel was in front, and his four men behind. With the colonel was the corporal, carrying a box containing the plans, the trigger, and the other items taken from them in the office.

Just then there were noisy footsteps behind, and Lucy could hear a quiet sign and countersign being given as the extra troops the colonel ordered came into the picture. There was a click of heels, and a voice said, “Sergeant McIlhargey and squad reporting as ordered, my lord Colonel.”

Lucy could barely contain herself from crying out. The voice was that of Jay. He must have taken out one of the troopers, and come in his place. Had that been him as the sergeant earlier? But what about those with him? Whose side were they on? It sounded like there were two or three more, but it wouldn't help to look, as she wouldn't know them anyway.

Colonel MacCarthy turned to face them, and the procession came to a halt halfway between two buildings. There was now a guard on each side, and two behind. He glanced past her at the new arrivals, and Lucy tensed. However, the officer didn't seem to notice anything amiss, and ordered. “Fall in, Sergeant.”

Lucy decided it was now or never. This man had attempted to kill Jay, and was apparently trying to mastermind the deaths of many others. She had sworn fealty to Jay, and that was that. Before MacCarthy could resume their march to the groundcar, Lucy asked, “Where are you taking us?”

He seemed irritated at the interruption, and didn't answer her question. Instead, he said, "First, I am one rank above a major, so you must address me as 'my lord.' Second, I will give you the opportunity to tell me where you got that locator, and what you know of the royals. Understand that I will reward you well if you cooperate and agree to join us. If you have ability, you might marry to a high place in the clan.

"Know also, however, that if you do not swear to our house, and there is anything left of you once we have extracted what useful information you have, there is little for either of you here except as kitchen slaves. Noncombatant women have to be under the protection of a fighting lord, or they can be taken by any man at any time without recompense. More likely, we would simply kill you."

"Who would we be working for?" Lucy asked. She saw Sally use her temporizing to shuffle closer to the guard on the left. There was a donnybrook coming, and she wanted to be sure of a first target. That this fellow MacCarthy didn't know they were fighters was about to cost him dearly.

"I speak for the crown as a member of a high noble house."

"But if you speak for the crown, why ask us about the king?"

She pasted on a hostile, defiant expression, and braced herself for action. Lucy knew his type.

The colonel took in her look, lost his temper, strode quickly toward her, and raised his arm to backhand her across the face.

"You'll answer me when I've shown you what pain is."

He had apparently been planning to say more, but as his hand started for her, Lucy grabbed it, twisted her body, and in a move that would have made her jujitsu instructor proud, threw the commander into the legs of the guard on her right. As the latter fell atop the colonel, she heard shouts. She ducked, drew her boot knife, and whirled to strike the guard with the hilt in the sweet spot on his temple. It was a blow her teachers had guaranteed would knock an opponent unconscious every time. As she rolled over him, she dropped the knife, grasped his sword, and pulled it from the scabbard.

Rising to her feet, she was barely aware of a blur of motion to the other side, and quickly found herself facing the drawn blade of a second guard. More men were arriving, and the action was becoming furious. She glanced at the blade. Lucy and Sally had fenced with sabres, but this was a double-edged sword, and unfamiliar to her. She was conscious of parrying a couple of wild blows from the guard, and of the noisy clashing of weapons all around. Unsure of her technique, she locked blades with the man, and pushed at him. He moved one foot to keep his balance, but it struck the leg of a downed man, and he fell over backwards.

Lucy looked around quickly, and was suddenly angry. The colonel had extricated himself, and along with the corporal carrying the box, was running for a vehicle parked beside the barn. There were several other bodies on the ground, more troops in various uniforms were pouring into the area from the direction she had first come, and the fighting was heavy. Sally was engaged, and so was a very tall woman and three enormous men, one of whom must be the disguised Jay. None were available to help, so she ran after the colonel alone. Heedless of her own safety, all she could think of was that MacCarthy couldn't be allowed to escape with the trigger and plans. She had to stay with him.

However, just as the pair she was chasing arrived at their destination, they turned and saw her.

"Lieutenant, to me," the colonel shouted, and before Lucy knew what was happening, Lieutenant Jones

and two more men emerged from the barn to surround her. They disarmed her and shoved her inside the vehicle.

“Car, go to the Edwardston airport, main building,” the colonel ordered, addressing no one in particular. Without much sound or vibration, the vehicle rose slightly and began to move. Lucy turned around and was rewarded with the sight of MacCarthy's troops throwing down their arms and surrendering, but by that time they were moving at high speed, and she caught only a glimpse before the clearing faded from sight. She turned again, and nearly gasped as she realized they were skimming along the surface of the Bow River, and no one seemed to be operating the machine.

The colonel and his corporal were in the front seat, the former with his arms grimly folded, and the latter still holding the box. She was in the second seat with the lieutenant, and two more enlisted men sat behind. A fourth seat was empty. The machine could easily hold twelve, and she concluded the mere sound of the colonel's voice was sufficient to control it. They rode in silence except for a low hum she took for an electric engine, though she hadn't heard of one powering an automobile before. The colonel said nothing to her the entire time, and in the tense atmosphere, sweat began to run down her neck.

“Oh God, or Lord of Heaven, whoever and wherever you are,” Lucy prayed silently. “Help me out of this fix so I can know you, and learn what it means to serve you before I die.”

After about five minutes, the vehicle suddenly went up an embankment at a turn in the river, and made its way cross-country. There didn't appear to be a road, and once, when she turned around as they were going up one of many small hills, she saw they were leaving no tracks in the brown prairie grass behind them. After another fifteen minutes, they came in sight of what was obviously an airport runway. She could see an aircraft of some kind parked next to a large building. A few other structures were scattered in the distance, but the place did not look well used. Second by second, the plane to which they were headed grew larger, until it towered far above the car.

“What a machine,” Lucy thought, admiring it in spite of her fear. “I'll bet that baby goes higher and faster than anything our flyboys have back home.” As they got closer, she marvelled more. It was bigger than any plane she had ever seen, and made of a smoothly moulded black material. There were no rivets showing, and the texture didn't seem like metal. It hurt your eyes to look at it, for as she said afterwards, “It seemed like any light striking it was swallowed up in blackness.”

The colonel barked a command she didn't catch, and the car glided to a stop about fifty feet beyond the plane, between it and the building. Lucy looked around and took inventory again. She saw no other aircraft or vehicles, and the one runway on the other side of the building had only a few wheel marks.

“Come with me. Guard the goods and the prisoner,” Colonel MacCarthy shot at his men, as he left the car to stride confidently ahead of the others to a side door of the building. Lucy thought it eerie that no one else was in sight. She considered escape options, but there was nowhere to go. The country was flat and featureless. Long before she could have reached the next building, they could run her down with the car. Besides, she needed to stay with the contraband, and hope the white hats arrived on time.

As she looked over the deserted little airport and surrounding grasslands, she got the distinct feeling there wasn't a good-sized city called Calgary just over the eastern horizon, but some place much smaller, if anything.

With three of the men at her back, Lucy was hustled along with the others, and through the door of the building. Her eyes took a moment to become accustomed to the gloom, but were thrown off that adjustment almost immediately as a number of bright lights flashed on. They were in the middle of a vast

reception area with a tiled floor, a high ceiling, and panelled walls. Several signs hung around the room, proclaiming safety rules for aircraft. It was evident this was a passenger terminal, but it was empty except for an oriental man sitting on the floor of a raised platform some distance away. And what an unusual man. He was not dressed in a kilt as everyone else she had seen thus far, but in an elaborate traditional costume she recognized from her student days as that of a Japanese Samurai warrior. The man did not rise as they approached, but two other similarly costumed men appeared from other doorways, and drifted toward the group.

“Ah,” thought Lucy. “The MacCarthys are dealing with the enemy, just as Jay thought.” Their partner had hastily explained some of this to them what scarcely seemed like only hours ago.

Lucy stopped about four strides away from the waiting man, and slightly off to one side. Her escort was behind, so she had a good view of the colonel, who stood a few feet to her left and directly in front of the Samurai.

The colonel bowed slightly, but seemed very tense. “Daimyo Miyamoto,” he acknowledged, glancing around somewhat nervously. Evidently, all was not as he expected. There were now half a dozen of the Samurai surrounding them, and more arriving. During a long silence while the other group grew to ten, the seated warrior stared at the colonel. Finally, he broke the stillness, speaking in Orthogaelic. Lucy had no difficulty understanding.

“No doubt, my dear Colonel, you are wondering where the rest of your troops are, the ones who were supposed to catch my agents here with the medicines you were supposedly delivering, but that are instead undoubtedly banned weapons designed to entrap us and bring about the ruination of Japan.

“It seemed prudent to take precautions, so I came personally. We landed on the grass some thirty miles east, and sent a troop to secure things properly here, then flew over to await your arrival. I am afraid, Colonel MacCarthy, that only a few of your troops proved reliable at the mere suggestion of torture. The rest spoke freely, so in the end, we harmed none. When we're gone, your men will find them tied up in the staff meeting room. As for the airport staff...” He waved a hand vaguely. “They unfortunately had to be inconvenienced, as well.”

Lucy had strangely mixed feelings as he spoke. She had learned to hate the Germans and Japanese as enemies, but this man seemed civilized and reasonable. He sounded more like a scholar than a warlord.

“Now, instead of you ‘discovering’ a representative of the Emperor in possession of banned weapons, arresting him as a covenant breaker, and then unleashing some horror on Japan for vengeance, we will take both you and your contraband to Japan, and extract what information we can. Perhaps we can yet turn the tables in this ill-advised war.”

Lucy couldn't help herself, and blurted out in English, “Your war can't be going any better for you than it is for our Japan. Why not take advantage of what the MacCarthys have done to sue for an honourable peace instead?”

The Daimyo fixed calm speculative eyes on her, and she could almost hear him thinking for several long quiet moments.

“An English-speaking woman prisoner in men's military clothing from Tirdia,” he observed carefully in flawless English. “Thus, an agent of a Tirdian government who had something the colonel wanted. It is of great importance to be worth stealing there, and your presence is most curious. Perhaps I am mistaken, and it is not guns the colonel brought, but something else. What is in the box?” His voice was polite,

emotionless, and very firm.

Lucy thought a moment. Her captors were now all but captives, and the Daimyo could rummage in the box for himself if he wished. There was no point in not answering truthfully. "A trigger device and plans for an atomic bomb," she stated flatly.

Anger flared in the man's eyes as he digested the implications of her answer, and there was a gasp from others of his company. He stood in a single fluid movement, and approached the colonel with a finger outstretched to jab it in the man's chest. "You would have annihilated my people." Lucy saw undisguised hatred spring to the colonel's face in confirmation. The Japanese officer noted it also, and turned away in silent disgust. MacCarthy's hand stole toward his belt, and Lucy sensed he was about to perform some utterly mad act.

What should she do? MacCarthy was Irish, and the other an enemy of Ireland. But it was not that simple. The colonel had hoped to implicate the Daimyo in a crime he could use to devastate the Japanese. Jay was trying to prevent that happening. She had sworn fealty partnership with Jay, so, come what may, MacCarthy was her enemy, and the Japanese Daimyo an inadvertent ally. All this was but a flash in her mind as the colonel seethed before her.

"Filthy Jap vermin," MacCarthy declared angrily as the Daimyo took a couple of slow steps away, resolutely keeping his back turned. Suddenly, the colonel's rage boiled over. He drew his belt knife and started a lunge. A cowardly attack on a man's back was the last thing anyone had been expecting, except Lucy, who was ready even as he moved.

With a shout and a blur of motion, she sprang into the space behind the Daimyo, arm raised to block the colonel's knife hand, and gave a quick twist to her whole body to deflect his thrust. He was moving fast and was considerably heavier than she, so the momentum of his attack could not be pushed aside entirely. She felt a bone-jarring shock as the colonel's wrist struck her left hand, and appalling pain as the blade sliced sideways along her forearm before falling to the floor. Continuing to spin, she swung her right arm around and struck the colonel on the side of his head, throwing him off balance and driving him to his knees.

There was a sound of weapons being drawn, but the Daimyo whirled about, took in the situation at a glance, and froze his men in place with a hand signal. Lucy paid little attention for a few moments, as she clamped and assessed her arm. There was a deep cut about five inches long, and it was bleeding copiously. She guessed tendons had been severed, and assumed she would lose the use of the hand. She went down on her knees to retain consciousness, pulled at her torn sleeve, succeeded in ripping away some cloth with which she covered the wound, and began to apply pressure.

The Daimyo barked an order, and one of the Samurai presented himself, knelt before her, and bowed. Making a savage effort to block the excruciating pain, she returned the courtesy. She caught a quick approving glance from the Daimyo, and knew he was as pleased that she had not cried out as that she had thwarted the attack on him.

The medic removed her cloth as she applied pressure above the wound to reduce the flow of blood. He took out a soft tube and extruded a paste into the bleeding area, then seized her arm roughly, moved the torn skin into place, and began to bandage it without applying stitches. The covering was not cloth, but a thick membrane that closed itself around her arm, and put hooks into her skin. When she asked about it the following day, she was surprised to learn it was a living creature genetically engineered from the leech. When her arm healed, the wrap would be induced by an electric shock to let go and fall off. She would also discover the paste was antiseptic, analgesic, and a tissue growth stimulant called "re-grow" all in

one. It provoked a neonatal condition in the cells, causing them to knit back together. A more complex and expensive treatment could even restore a severed limb. Thus, far from losing the use of her hand, she would regain full mobility in a week, and strength in three. It was about then that she realized her medical credentials were as much use here as those of a witch doctor in her native land. She had much to learn.

At the first touch of the paste, the bleeding stopped, and the pain was already subsiding when she looked up seconds later to see the Daimyo standing over the still dazed colonel in silence. After what seemed like several more minutes, he turned to the lieutenant, who was staring with disbelief at his superior officer.

“Lieutenant, this person has disgraced himself, his family, and his uniform. Kindly remove him and your troop from our presence. No, leave that,” he said to the corporal, who made to pick up the box he had dropped.

The corporal abandoned it, and all four soldiers made a sudden rush through the ranks of the Samurai for the door, followed shortly after by their two officers.

None of the Japanese moved to follow, but moments later, there was a sound of clashing swords outside. Unperturbed, the Daimyo sat, motioning his warriors to form a semicircle behind and to his sides facing the door. Lucy, her arm bandaged and the pain down to a throbbing ache, was escorted to a position in front of him. When there was silence outside, he addressed her again in English.

“What is your name?”

“Lucy O'Brien.”

“Your rank?”

“Colonel.”

“Colonel O'Brien brings more credit to the office than yon MacCarthy.” He gestured toward the door, and added, “For others to get here so quickly, you must have a locating device.”

“I swallowed it,” she admitted.

“Only a royal could have provided it,” he observed, laconically.

“I swore fealty partnership to them through Jay.”

“Ah, to Jay.” He smiled for the first time, and Lucy found herself warming to this enigmatic man.

“Then I have giri not just with you, but once again with Jay and his cousins. An interesting turn, and worthy of meditation.”

He motioned her off to his left, and she, too, sat on the floor to await events. There were more shouts from outside, and three men and a woman burst through the door with swords drawn, halted, and looked over the group of Samurai. They were the same ones she had seen before in the attack on the camp. The men were huge, broad-shouldered, powerfully built, and at least six inches taller than she. They looked quite alike, and she assumed these were the royal cousins. One must be the disguised Jay, she supposed, but was not sure which. Neither was she certain when she heard their voices. All sounded somewhat like the man she had first met on her own earth, though each was a little different. She would later learn that

“Jay” had numerous personae, an extensive collection of disguises, and frequently traded places with his cousins.

As for the woman, she was even taller than them—a full seven feet, Lucy was sure. She was thin for her height, but handled a sword as one born to it. Her kilt was a plain brown with little pattern, matching one of the men's. Lucy guessed, correctly as it turned out, that the two were husband and wife.

All three men wore large, broad-brimmed, feathered hats, so if one still had Sally's bandage on his head, Lucy couldn't tell. The one in the middle took in the scene, looked speculatively about the terminal, relaxed, and sheathed his blade. The others followed suit, then the one on the right spun about and snapped an order to another man who was just coming through the door.

“Guard the entrance, Lieutenant. Let no one else in without permission of the Chief of Security.”

The four approached the seated Daimyo, much as the colonel had earlier. When they were about ten feet away, he stood and bowed deeply to them. One of the men returned the bow for them all, and Lucy thought his was almost, but not quite, as deep.

The woman, whom they later introduced as Hannah, took in the knife and the pattern of blood on the floor, looked piercingly at Lucy, and immediately came to check her wound with an air of expertise and authority. She said nothing, but bowed her head while holding the arm, and Lucy realized with a start that she was praying for her. It felt very strange to look so far up to another woman; that had never happened to her before. Nor did it again to that extent; she would meet a few tall women on Hibernia, but none like this.

Later that night, Hannah put her damaged arm in a machine, and Lucy felt a number of wires probe through the bandage into her flesh. “Just doing some microsurgery to make sure all the nerves and tendons meet properly so the regrow acts correctly,” Hannah assured her, as she watched on a screen. It would take much longer to explain the words than the actions, and it would be many months before Sally and Lucy could operate such equipment themselves.

The Daimyo motioned about, and the four newcomers also sat on the floor. Lucy was alone outside the circle now, and just a spectator, but the first words spoken by the Daimyo startled her. “Your fealty partner”—he made a slight hand motion in her direction—“with whom I now have life-giri, has suggested we take advantage of this interesting situation to negotiate an honourable peace. I am inclined to follow her advice, if you are willing and can speak for your government.” He said this in English for her benefit, though the group shortly switched to Gaelic.

No mention was made of Colonel MacCarthy. His horrific crime hung in the air around them, apparently too dishonourable for words.

In the whirlwind of meetings, orders, and activities over the hours following, the newcomers were forgotten. Sally entered the room a short while later, and tapped Lucy on the shoulder. They grinned greetings, and went to a corner by themselves to exchange news.

After Sally heard her out, Lucy got the rest of the story of what happened at the camp. A large force had attacked as soon as the action around the two women began, and had little difficulty taking the area. A captain had been left behind with half the force to mop up, and the rest had hurriedly followed Lucy's locator with a piece of equipment Sally said was “something like radar”. Sally had heard other troops dispatched to a second camp in the area.

The two laughed low with pleasure, and hugged each other tightly, then sat down to watch and listen to proceedings from a little distance. More troops arrived, and various prisoners were brought in and questioned, then led off securely bound. With each of these interruptions, discussions ceased. The colonel was last, and a fourth giant of a man whom Lucy at once took for yet another royal cousin came along to proclaim charges against him.

“Colonel MacCarthy, you and your forces are charged with being in illegal possession of a timestream car, making unauthorized visits to other worlds, careless mishandling of materials that could expose the Federation on Tirdia, stealing technology, unlawful interference in the business of the realm, subverting security officers, and high treason. I, Patrick O'Toole, Chief of Security for the crown and Throne of Tara, hereby say these charges against you in the presence of witnesses. There are brehons present. Will you plead now, or later?” O'Toole made no mention of the attack on the Daimyo or of kidnapping charges, and Lucy decided their part was going to be edited out of official proceedings.

The colonel said nothing, so O'Toole took him away, too, rejoining the others moments later. At that, the four royals and the Japanese warlord got down to serious bargaining. After a while, chairs were brought and arranged in a triangle with the Daimyo and an empty space on one side, the royals on the second, and the third vacant. Hannah left to attend to other business.

Sally nudged Lucy, and whispered, “Do you suppose that's the same fellow who wrote the romance about James?”

Then a team of technicians entered pushing several carts, each bearing a box-like device with a glass front. These were aimed at the various empty places in the configuration. After some careful fussing with calibrations, there was a low buzzing sound from each box, followed by a technician's acknowledgment. With each confirmation, the image of a seated man winked into being in one of the empty spaces. After taking a few minutes to get over the surprise of seeing what were evidently three-dimensional television projections, Lucy wondered if the people owning the images could see her and Sally, but soon decided the smaller devices mounted on poles must be the cameras transmitting pictures back the other way. They were pointed at Patrick O'Toole and the Daimyo, and the other three said nothing above a whisper during this part of the conference.

One of the images, who exchanged standing bows with the Daimyo, was called “Shogun” and must be at least his equal in Japan, she decided. Two others had obviously Irish faces, and to them Patrick O'Toole did all the talking. One he addressed as “My Lord Donal,” and the other as “My Lord MacCarthy.”

The picture quality was amazing—far better than the BBC—and she could read the others' reactions as well as if they were in the room. It was obvious neither Donal nor MacCarthy were happy about the events being described.

As Sally and Lucy sat in the background wondering if they would be noticed, they understood most of the words in the discussion, but little of the detail. There was a war going on here, too, and the MacCarthys had been planning to use the stolen secrets to frame the Japanese military, creating an excuse to destroy their people. That much they knew. Now that the plot had been exposed, MacCarthy and Donal were being forced by the four royals to make concessions to the enemy. However, the subtleties of the politics and the nuances of the bargaining were beyond them.

Lucy heard Patrick describing some of what had taken place on her earth, the technology that had been stolen, and what the conspirators had planned. The two women were not mentioned. Long and tricky negotiations framed with deadly politeness finally produced an agreement to which MacCarthy gave sour consent. Shortly after, all three images snapped off, the entire group rose, bowed to each other again,

and began to march out. As they did, the Daimyo stopped before them, and bowed.

“Japan is deeply in your debt, O'Brien-san,” he said to Lucy, then turned to follow the others.

When he was far enough away, Lucy asked, “What do you suppose he meant by that odd form of address, Sal?”

Sally laughed brightly. “If their Japan is like ours, women aren't allowed much say in things. He permitted himself the legal fiction you were the male head of your household so he could thank you personally without losing face. Ordinarily he would have to express debt to your nearest male relative.”

Lucy laughed with her friend at the charade, and the two followed the procession outside. A few minutes later they were treated to the spectacle of the enormous plane taking off. There were no propellers. It just made a vast noise with three huge engines, taxied briefly along the runway gathering speed, and in a remarkably short time was climbing through the skies at an impossible angle. “So that's what jets will look like in two hundred years,” Sally breathed. They had both seen FH1-Phantoms, but this was orders of magnitude more overwhelming.

While they watched, a couple of soldiers went by, and they overheard part of their conversation.

“You see why they landed here at Edwardston, eh, Mick.”

“Yeah, that beat up old radar evader could never land at the coast without being spotted, but there isn't a defense installation within hundreds of miles of this place. I ran the numbers for his lordship. Two satellites are both a fraction of a degree out of position. The warlord had no more than a five minute window to fly that bird in from orbit without being spotted upstairs, so you can't blame the transport techs up there for not seeing him. Bet there isn't another pilot alive could have done it, though.”

“Think he could have brought down transports to invade the domain with no one the wiser?”

“One of ours maybe, but Ito hasn't any glass jobs that big, and the conventional ones could be tracked as far away as Moody. Besides, what could he gain by taking Edwardston? There's nothing here but grass and buffalo. I'll tell you, though. That Ito has quite the nerve, tweaking Donal's tail like this. Tara will be pretty shaken up.”

“Think Spike MacCarthy will lose his head?”

“Not with his uncle runnin' things behind the Donal's back. They'll bust Spike down to lieutenant, give him three years of field labour, then ship him off to garrison work in Luna city or some such forsaken place. We haven't seen the last of the colonel.”

His companion jerked a thumb in the direction where the royal cousins were giving further instructions to their troops. “Glad you're working for hisself?”

“Be something to tell our grandchildren, Mick, when they sees his'n take back the throne from those mugs running the palace nowadays.”

“Well, he don't even have kids yet, so that's a ways off.”

“I expect he'll do something about that someday soon.” The two soldiers disappeared around a corner of the building laughing.

The royals were busy directing cleanup and removal of prisoners to a just-arrived second plane, so Sally and Lucy went back inside. Near the meeting area was a lounge with comfortable chairs. There, they helped themselves liberally to several PIEA devices lying on a shelf. Each contained one or more books, including a technology primer, a history of the Irish kings after 1014, and a different account of the deposition of James IV than the one they had read.

Sally eagerly devoured the history, but was never good company when she had new material, so when two hours had passed, Lucy found herself weary of reading and somewhat sleepy. Suddenly, all four royal cousins rushed into the larger room. Ignoring Sally and Lucy, they took chairs near the projectors.

Lucy followed one's glance to a large wall clock, and saw it was just turning the hour of five. "That's like ours," she thought, "even to using Roman numerals." Thinking about this, she missed the words one of the men spoke. They must have been to the projectors previously used for the meeting, for immediately all three lit up. Sally and Lucy edged chairs closer to watch from behind where the cousins were clustered.

There was a burst of visual static, and the image of a man sitting behind a desk appeared. He spoke rapidly from a script, and Lucy had to concentrate to catch it all.

"In breaking news following Saturday's stunning victories on the three European fronts, Germany's Kaiser today signed a new Peace accord with General of the Army, Lord Michael Ryan, acting for the crown. Lords MacCarthy, Monde, and Jones have withdrawn their objections to the army's proposed terms, which restore Germany to her prewar status, with an increase in council representation. There will be no reparations as several nobles had earlier demanded, but there will be technology restrictions for a number of years. Details will be available as we receive them. It is widely speculated the Kaiser will soon abdicate in favour of his son, General Friedrich, who will become Gustav II.

"First Lord Donal, speaking for the crown, calls the treaty 'peace with honour', but hard-liners who only last week demanded the utter destruction of Germany are refusing all comment.

"Meanwhile, the officers who led Ireland's final campaign have disappeared from public eye amid insistent rumours from all three armies that the deposed King James IV himself led them in their final battle. European theatre Commander Lord Ryan, speaking through his adjutant, Major Kate Evans-Rourke, declines all requests for interviews, but the impossibility of one man being in three places simultaneously certainly illustrates the creativity of the romantic imagination."

The news announcer smiled at his audience, and turned to another script. "Fanciful stories of royalty abound today. A competing channel earlier broadcast an item claiming the former king was assassinated this morning near the remote village of Edwardston in the western foothills of Irish North America. But as always, Tara News has the real story." He looked up with a superior grin. "Our reporter is live from Edwardston airport."

The image of the man shrank, and the right side of the projection area cleared. One of the men chuckled and pointed as the outside of the very airport building in which they sat came into focus. The tall woman, who had fought alongside them and later prayed over Lucy's injury, stepped before the camera and began talking.

"Thanks, Michael, and there have indeed been interesting events here at Edwardston. A small number of regular army troops under the command of Colonel 'Spike' MacCarthy apparently mutinied, and several soldiers and transportation employees were detained for a time. Palace security forces and loyal troops

put down the mutiny after a brief engagement here at the airport, and Colonel MacCarthy is currently under arrest. I spoke personally to several security officers and the local coroner, who advise there have been no casualties. Thus, stories of an assassination are entirely unfounded.” She smiled broadly for the camera. “That's today's flash from Edwardston. I'm Hannah Meathe, on the spot for Tara News.”

Lucy's attention swung back to the man at the desk as his image expanded, but he was in some confusion. He held a hand to one ear and listened, then looked at something off camera. There was a long pause, and when he spoke again, it was in a high, very excited voice.

“Fellow citizens. I have just received breaking news that the Emperor of Japan has died. There is no word on a cause of death, but he is said to have been ill for some time. The Shogun has announced the dismissal of most of his top military advisors and his own abdication in favour of Daimyo Miyamoto. The new Shogun has issued a public proclamation calling for a restoration of the Peace with Ireland on the same terms to which Germany has already agreed. No explanation is given for this sudden development, but there have apparently already been extensive negotiations.”

He halted again, and a voice in the background said something Lucy couldn't catch. The announcer continued, “In yet another exclusive to Tara News, we take you now to the Commander of the eastern armies, General Stanley Reilly, on board the troop transport Spirit of Mayo in Tokyo harbour.” There was a burst of static, and he continued, “Lord Reilly, can you comment for our viewers on the state of hostilities on the eastern fronts?”

There was a longer pause, and this was followed by the image of a tired looking man in his forties who snapped to attention and pronounced in a deep gravelly voice, “The Lord of Heaven preserve the king and the crown of Hibernia. Japan has agreed to terms. The war is over. Praise God.” He saluted his audience.

One of the four men said, “Terminal, off,” and the voices faded just as strains of martial music began to play. Lucy later would come to know the tune well as the anthem “Rule Hibernia.” The four men hugged each other in turn, letting off several boyish “whoops” in a wild display of enthusiasm.

Then they noticed the two women sitting behind them. One, whom Lucy realized was the same “Patrick” who earlier read charges against the colonel, spotted the PIEA sitting in the box over to one side. He hefted it with a speculative look, touched it with a wand that beeped, switched it on briefly, frowned at them, and put it back.

It was clearly their turn. Lucy wondered if Sally was as apprehensive as she was. If what Colonel MacCarthy had said was even partly true, they might not have much future here.

Into the momentary awkward silence came the sound of the outer door opening. Lucy quickly glanced that way to see it admit Hannah Meathe, and a second woman with her face hidden behind her tall companion. Without a word, the four men abruptly moved six more chairs into a circle, including their two.

Lucy smiled at one, thinking he was Jay, then realized the man next to him was nearly a twin. Looking sharply at the others, she could see a strong family resemblance in them, also. As all four still wore the elaborate hats, it was impossible to tell which had the head wound Sally had treated. She nodded slowly, coming to a working guess that perhaps “Jay” was any one or all four, as need dictated.

One of the men spoke in English.

“My name is Seamus Meathe,” he said, “and this is my wife, Hannah.” He gestured to the tall woman who had just sat beside him, and whom they had seen several times already. “We apologize for giving you the flat side of our time all afternoon, but there were urgent matters elsewhere.” He leaned forward slightly and waved a hand. “On my left is James Dennison, Lord and Holder of New Tara on the east coast of Irish North America. To his left is James Devereaux—we call him Jack—who is Lord and Holder of Moody, on the west coast. At the other end are Chief of Palace Security Master Patrick O’Toole, and his wife Colleen, who just arrived with Hannah.”

He riveted Lucy with a penetrating gaze, then shifted it to Sally as he spoke. “We six owe Jay’s life and those of countless others to you two men. Indeed, you don’t know the tenth part of what has transpired here.” He chuckled. “But we evidently find ourselves with two unexpected fealty partners whose names we don’t even know. Perhaps you gentlemen would tell us your story.”

But Sally and Lucy were belatedly reacting to the introductions, and both turned to look sharply at Colleen O’Toole, at which the latter’s mouth opened wide in astonishment. She shrieked in delight, then laughed uproariously, to the great surprise of her husband and the other men, who looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

Sally laughed, too, and winked at Lucy. Then the two removed their caps and the pins holding up their hair. As Sally shook out her bright red tresses, and Lucy her shorter brown ones, Patrick’s face blanched.

“We risked the lives of noncombatant women on this project?” He stared at the two, astounded.

“They are hardly that,” Hannah reminded him, looking over Lucy and Sally appraisingly, then grinning widely. “Even I couldn’t move so fast as they did to put down their men, and they clearly know something of the sword.” She laughed, bright, warm, and accepting, adding, “I think them worthy additions to our family.”

At this, Colleen recovered from her near hysteria. She wiped tears from her eyes, stood, and became mock-formal. “Permit me to introduce the two ‘gentlemen’ in whose debt we are.” She shot Seamus a big grin, and made her announcements with flamboyant gestures as everyone rose to their feet. “On my left, I present Physician and Ollamh in Languages Lucy O’Brien, and on my right, Physician and Ollamh in History Sally O’Neill, both of Trinity College, Dublin, on Tirdia. I am privileged to have been their student and friend, and look forward to being their sister.” She winked a secret invitation at the two, and Lucy smiled and nodded. Colleen grinned broadly, adding, “Security files indicate they are agents in the service of the Tirdian Irish government with the rank of colonel, so they ought to fit well with us.”

Her husband knew the names at once. He chuckled and mopped his brow in relief. “You are hardly noncombatants.” He bowed. “Apologies, my lady Colonels.”

Colleen walked over and picked up the PIEA to explain further. “They have had this for nearly a year,” she announced, waving it in front of the men. “It contains an unprotected Gaelic-English dictionary and a copy of Patrick’s novelette ‘The Peace.’ It was stolen from his office a year ago. He suspected they had been given it, but couldn’t prove anything. I tried to recover it, but they caught on to me at once, and I failed.”

Seamus glanced at the PIEA, and turned back to Sally and Lucy. “Do I understand you know what was spoken and done here?”

Sally replied for both. “You used the complicity of another Irish faction in the theft of atomic bomb

secrets from our world to pressure them into agreeing to end the war on honourable terms. We got most of it, but..."

Lucy finished, "...but that's not the most important thing to us now. We have a question each, and one from both of us." She glanced at Sally, inviting her to start.

Her friend obliged. "Where did this world come from, and why are there two earths?"

Seamus cleared his throat to answer. "Actually, there are six altogether, joined in a kind of ring through a medium called the timestream. At various points in history called nexi, someone makes a critical choice, and a single world becomes two, one for each version of the decision. The Metans regard yours as in some sense the original, and call it Prime, though we have coined the name Tirdia. On its far side from us is Water World, which we believe took on its present state shortly after Noah's flood. Next to it is the one we call Desert, because much of it was devastated by nuclear war. We think it was formed from Water World. At the bottom of the ring is Para, with which our earth has made a Federation. It came into being during the time of the Persian Empire. Next to it is Meta, about which we know nothing because we cannot visit there. They gave us timestream technology and promoted the Federation at a time when we and the Parans were at the brink of disaster in 1791. Meta may have been the result of the first nexus. Between it and Tirdia is Ortho, commonly called Greater Hibernia, or just Hibernia for short, where we stand at this moment." He paused, and Jack Devereaux took up the story.

"The Holy Books, your world's version of which you call the Bible, tell us exactly when our world hived off from yours. There were a series of decisions made differently, but the critical one appears to have been when Pontius Pilate washed his hands of Jesus Christ in your world. In ours he repented and defied the Sanhedrin, most of whose members subsequently became Christians."

"There were two Christs?" Lucy was astounded. "Impossible."

"No," responded Hannah with hasty amendment, "There weren't. The people of our Jerusalem saw the two worlds divide with the Christ ending up in yours, not in ours. For three days they watched their shadow counterparts in your world, seeing the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of the Christ. Here, the priests were the first to believe in him as Messiah, once they saw their shadow selves send him to the death God ordained as payment for their sin and ours. They also saw him rise on the third day before the shadows faded."

James Dennison took over. "Following that nexus, our two worlds' histories diverged in epicircles spreading out from Jerusalem, with the last trace of commonality in Europe vanishing in 1014, when our Brian Boru survived the battle of Clontarf, and founded an enduring kingdom. Today, the Federation of worlds is ruled from Tara, nominally by the King of Ireland..."

Sally finished. "...except the throne was abolished for at least two generations when he was deposed four years ago by his nobles, and he hasn't been seen in public since, though he has been known to use the name 'Jay.'" She winked.

Was it her imagination, or did Lord Dennison turn pale at her words? He nodded at Lucy ever so slightly, and changed the subject. "And your question is?" He seemed to be staring fixedly at her.

"From reading the copy of 'Flannery's Technical Primer' I found in the lounge, I see you've had jet engines, atomic weapons and power, an advanced practice of molecular medicine, space travel, and several other things I don't understand, for two centuries. Why fight wars with swords and sticks? That seems anachronistic."

Jack Devereaux cleared his throat to answer, and Hannah grinned. They were in for a lecture. Jack loved to teach history.

“The industrial revolution took place in fourteenth century Ireland, and she became the major economic power within two generations. Other nations were jealous, and we suffered through almost continuous warfare for two centuries. However, Irish military dominance grew inexorably until she extended her Peace over the whole planet with the defeat of Spain in 1596. Her rule was not undisputed, though, and there were many rebellions.

“You will note, by the way, that key historical events on our two earths have a strong tendency to take place in tandem. A war on your world is usually matched by one on ours, and the protagonists often correspond, though detailed events do not. We suspect the linkage between Hibernia and Tirdia is a remnant of the last nexus.

“The worst from that era was the East-West war with Japan that ended in 1750 when three nuclear devices were dropped on her cities. The devastation was so great that nucleics were formally banned, and they have never been used since.

“1755 saw the first of a series of plagues caused by genetically engineered bacteria that ultimately killed half the world's population. A side effect was ongoing genetic damage in the survivors that permanently lowered birth rates, so today Hibernia has a tenth the population of your planet..

“The king of the day, Thomas II, was a corrupt sybarite who lived for his own pleasure. His subjects saw the birth of an attitude that morality is a private and personal matter, four decades of increasing crime, and more crippling wars. The Lord of Heaven was all but forgotten, while the same scientism that had failed to deliver on promises of a better life spread the knowledge of ever more means of mass destruction.”

Lucy interrupted. “Did your computing machines play a role?”

“They did at first. For a while, the very rate of technological change masked other problems, but by 1785 William Foley gained control of computing technology, pushed all other families out of the business, and became de facto ruler of Ireland. Almost at once, innovation stopped, the economic engine slowed, and cracks appeared in the whole structure. When confidence in Foley collapsed, the noble families confiscated his assets and put them into the public domain. Beyond that, however, there was neither political nor economic leadership.

“France was taken over in 1790 by a despot who started a new war, and later the same year, an error in the clock system caused the entire computer network to cease functioning for a month.

“In the growing chaos, a seven-year old boy, kidnapped by guardsmen from the streets of Tara for the king's pleasure, put a knife through Thomas's heart in his own bedroom, and what little remained of government expired with him.

“With our whole world on the verge of anarchy, the Metans intervened. Their provision of timestream technology allowed our scholars to visit your world, read your Bible, and see that our own Holy Books were literally true. This triggered the only great revival ever led by bishops and intellectuals, and has so energized Ireland she has not been the same since.

“The war with France ended with the battle of Paris in 1791, and one of our generals became King

Conn I the following year. In 1800 he proclaimed the Covenant of the Living, banning chemical and biological warfare. Later, his son Seamus II, whom some claim was the very boy who killed Thomas, argued that just as honour forbids anyone from sending another to war without taking the lead, so it also forbids anyone sending a weapon from one's hand. Rather, it must be taken to the enemy and wielded personally. Thus, today, battles are fought unarmed, or with swords and sticks, so if death is dealt, it is always personal, never remote. For instance, one can throw a knife only to stop a cowardly attack, and guns, bows, and bombs have been entirely forbidden since 1851, after another war with Japan saw millions killed on both sides.

“Being the fractious Irish, we can never eliminate war, but until recently, the rules of honour held, because the vast majority either share a common personal belief and trust in the Lord of Heaven, or at least regard themselves bound by universal Christian morality, the warrior codes, and the old covenants. Without such a common ethical bond, no society can endure, regardless of its written law.

“However, the materialism and scientism of the seventeenth century gained a new champion a few years ago in the person of the current MacCarthy Mor. Rejecting the Lord of Heaven for a relativistic morality, he teaches the strong should either dictate to the weak, or eliminate them. He believes the Irish are the master Celtic race, with all others fit, at best, to be slaves. He and his allies advocated exterminating the enemy nations in this war. We stopped two earlier attempts, but your involvement has allowed us to end the war altogether, and with honour. Moreover, we managed to manoeuvre friends into power in both defeated nations.”

“Ah,” Sally observed, as he stopped for breath, “then Lord Ito is now more than just Shogun.”

When Jack Devereaux didn't answer right away, James Dennison picked up the thread.

“Most don't know this, but the Daimyo and the Shogun take turns playing the role of emperor in public. As Daimyo, Ito didn't want the war, but once the Shogun forced him into it, he fought with everything he had. The ‘death’ of the Emperor was really the Shogun announcing he was about to go home and commit suicide because his policies had made Japan lose face.”

“I see,” Lucy said, “and if I'm not mistaken, the ‘deposition’ of the Irish king is likewise code for a strategic retreat to fight the war's battles on fronts other than Tara.”

Seamus Meathe nodded agreement. “The major purposes of government, under the Lord of Heaven, are to keep society stable and unified, promote or enforce what is right, and prevent excessive oppression by the powerful. Contrary to MacCarthy doctrines, the Lord's true nobility not only know the only race is the human race, they serve others, and are masters of none, never wielding power for their own benefit. You have joined a glory-rich, money-poor, extremely hazardous enterprise.”

“Ah,” Sally put in. “The royal family police the cops.”

Seamus grinned. “When the court, the army, and the security forces cannot or will not, we are protectors of last resort to keep the Peace of Ireland.”

There was a moment's silence in which Lucy realized that for all his fine royal words, Seamus had neatly evaded direct mention of the king. She thought about the idea of working with coppers, and found she liked it better than being a spy or assassin, but guessed some of their activities might differ little.

Sally took over. “We can talk about history another time. We have a much more important question.” Seamus nodded, so she continued. “We could both have died today, and what would we have said to

God about the way we have lived? Tell us how to be right with him in our hearts, where it matters.”

Colleen and Hannah did the talking for quite a while after that. Much of what they said repeated things they had heard from Colleen, and again from Pastor Fred just the day before.

They told Lucy and Sally about the holiness and purity of God, who would tolerate no evildoers or sinners in his heaven, be the infraction of his law ever so small. They emphasized, to their agreement, that all have sinned and come short of the standards of God. They explained how the Lord of Heaven came down in human form to go to the cross and die to take the punishment for their sin on himself. They told what it meant to have saving faith in the death of Jesus Christ, and how it applied to everyone on all the earths. They invited Sally and Lucy to have their own sin atoned for by putting their trust for salvation in Christ, rather than in their own works or the rules and authority of a church.

Many questions and answers later, words they had heard many times without taking them in made sense, and the two women prayed to receive Christ as their Saviour. When this was done, and they looked up, there were grins, quiet laughter, and congratulations all around. Even in the atmosphere of celebration, however, the light-hearted Lucy couldn't help wondering again which of the four men was the king.

Just as this stray thought intruded, it was in turn interrupted by a sudden noise of hoofbeats outside, and the slight whinny of a pony. The door burst open, and a dark-faced, dark-haired girl of perhaps fourteen wearing a brown buckskin dress burst in and ran toward the group, long pigtailed flying behind.

“Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy, I was so upset when I heard you'd been killed. I prayed to the Lord of Heaven, and...”

Then she saw Lucy and Sally. Her headlong rush came to a confused stop, but not before Lucy saw one of the men begin, ever so slightly, to stretch forth his arms. She knew. He saw Lucy's look, shrugged, and beckoned to the girl, who immediately resumed her rush to embrace him.

“This is my sister. She is called ‘Deerfoot’ by her Blackfoot parents,” said the voice she knew as that of “Jay”.

Lucy vaguely remembered the romance in their PIEA spoke of a sister to James named Daisy, but as she stared into his eyes, the love and compassion she saw there overwhelmed her. Here was a man who gave up his throne and would have given his life, because it was right, because it benefited others. This was a true king. She was awestruck.

There was a brief frozen tableau, and Lucy did the only thing she could think of. She knelt before the king, and Sally knelt beside her. The others would have none of this, and in a second, the whole group were on their knees in a circle.

“Good idea, let's all pray together,” said James brightly, doffing his hat.

Lucy understood. These men were formidable leaders, and she accepted that as the way it should be. They were also mutual equals, with no High Lord among them.

The King gave a quick explanation of events for Deerfoot, and they all bowed and prayed in turn, giving thanks to the Lord of Heaven for his Providence and for each other.

When they got up again and stood blinking at each other, James Dennison, apparently forgetting for a moment that the newcomers understood his words, brushed a hand across his face and muttered in

Gaelic to no one in particular. "This is all well and good, but we've made two women equal family members, and let them in on our secrets. What do we do with them now?"

At this, Jack Devereaux stepped forward and spoke earnestly to Sally and Lucy. "You must realize, my sisters, that you cannot return to your earth."

Lucy shrugged, and Sally observed, "With the barn blown up, everyone thinks us dead, and we have no family there." She echoed Lucy's earlier thought. "We'd rather be coppers than spies."

Devereaux nodded agreement and continued, "Are you willing to learn our sword to an officer's rating, and swear fealty to both the crown of Ireland and our collective house?" He waved around the circle, and Lucy reflected that the six were more than allies; they shared a deep and comprehensive bond.

"Yes, of course," replied Sally for both of them, and Lucy nodded agreement.

He turned to his cousin, and also spoke in Gaelic. "It is obvious what choices we have, cousin James. We can register them as bards of our respective houses until they know the sword well enough to defend themselves and the throne. I doubt it would take long."

"Or?" James grinned at his cousin, and Lucy thought fleetingly that these men must think as much alike as she and Sally. They evidently had the same thing in mind. But just then, Sally, as excited as she, grabbed her shoulder and spun her about for a long embrace. They were so happy over the decision they had just made they were barely aware of Lords Dennison and Devereaux continuing to converse nearby.

"They are good, strong women, not affected by Hibernia's inbreeding or the mutagenic problems from the war-plagues. Either one could have children and grandchildren worthy of a throne."

The voice changed. "Their names trace lineage back to kings, so they qualify as royalty here, too. More than that, they are part of the Lord of Heaven's kingdom now."

The first spoke again. "Look, James, you've had time to mourn Sarah's death, and your duty to the throne has to be considered. More important, after what he has done through them for us and Greater Ireland today, can you doubt the hand of God is in this? Do you need ask for more? Besides, who are we to question God's will when He makes it this plain? What other choice is there? I say we do it right here, even tomorrow, before we break up and go our separate ways."

Lucy heard Daisy clap her hands and cry, "Oh, yes!"

James chuckled. "You sly fellow, Jack. You had your eye on Sally the moment she doffed that silly cap of hers, didn't you? That's all right with me, I rather fancy Lucy, myself. And you're right. I thought I'd never recover when Sarah was killed in battle before we'd been married even a year, but she insisted that if anything happened to her I not remain alone. All right, Jack, they're in this already, so we might as well. Patrick and Seamus are both brehons, so the legalities are covered."

Jack replied, "They can go down to Edwardston, and shop with Colleen and Hannah for new wardrobes tomorrow. Meanwhile, I know an emerald shop you and I can visit." Intrigued, Lucy turned and saw him dig James in the ribs.

"You're right. It's surely not the convenience route for us."

"Of course not. Father O'Grady is here as chaplain of the troop Patrick brought, and can do things up

permanently for the others to sign.”

“You don't think Sally and Lucy will mind being rushed? They only met us today.”

“We'll spend the rest of our lives making sure they don't, cousin. Besides, when the Lord of Heaven creates a marriage, it cannot fail.”

High King Cormac Meathe and his queen, Catherine, arranged the first compact of the throne in 1051 when, concerned with what would happen after his death, they assembled their fractious relatives and forced them to invest their families' honour in maintaining the throne's power and integrity. O'Niall, O'Brien, and O'Connor swore with Meathe to support the best man of their four families in each generation as king to maintain Ireland's unity and prosperity. The tests of strength and skill they devised still determine royal rankings, though their form has varied over time.

The second compact came in 1551, and added several additional clans that had become royal-related over the intervening centuries. It included the provision that an heir of three families could claim the throne even if lacking royal ancestors in the previous three generations (the former eligibility rule). Two hundred years later, amidst deepening chaos, they renewed their pledge and had the royal swords forged, but could not stop the infighting that nearly destroyed greater Ireland. This compact was revived in 1791 when the last dynasty began its rule following the Metan intervention.

What few people knew until recently was that a third compact was sworn in 1951, ten years after the deposition.

—from *The History of the United Irish Kingdom*, by Richard Kent.

Chapter Fourteen

The Royal Cousins, in and around Edwardston, 1951 (Hibernia)

It was early fall when three dusty men gathered against the autumn chill around a small fire in a clearing on the banks of the Coldwater River about fifty miles west of Edwardston. All were in their mid- to late-thirties, enormous and powerful individuals, fully a staff in height, of large-boned build, yet each possessed of the easy grace that marks master swordsmen. They arrived in town at different times and by various means, obtained the necessary gear and horses, and made their way to this rendezvous via several roundabout routes. All were heavily armed, and none looked directly at the fire, but scanned the dark by eye and ear as if daring any face to show out of the deepening shadows.

They had convened in this manner at least once a year for a decade, invariably in a remote and hidden place, always in a different location. Every second year they met in the east somewhere near Detroit, and in alternate years picked a spot here in the foothills of the great western mountains. They tracked this remote country frequently, knew its ways, and were happier in the saddle than in the great manses where they lived. Their family insignia and crests were at home with their wives, and they wore dusty riding kilts of the anonymous common tartan.

To a possible observer, there was nothing remarkable, and no sound of conversation could be heard, only the hiss of the fire, the slight noise made by a haunch of buffalo meat roasting over the blaze, and the bubbling of coffee and soup in two battered, blackened pots that had known many such fires.

The actual watcher who lay motionless on a nearby knoll knew that white noise generators circled the

clearing, and that he could not crawl close without triggering a perimeter alarm. However, he could read lips, and was confident he would at last discover the intriguing business of these men whose steps he had dogged for years. If only there weren't such shifting, twisting shadows on their faces.

He was Walking Buffalo, at age twenty-two not only the new Blackfoot chief, but his nation's most skilled tracker. He was sharp, fit, skilled with many weapons, and thought he could take any one of those below, except perhaps with a sword. That he carried one was unusual among his people, who then rarely used the Irish blade, but Walking Buffalo was no ordinary warrior. A much smaller man than those he spied upon, he was nonetheless the fastest and strongest of his generation of the People, and held his position by merit.

Had it been a few years earlier, during the war, he would have surrounded the Irishmen with a dozen warriors and killed them all. Today, he was alone, and had other priorities.

As on other occasions, the first man he followed evaded him, and the second also. But the third took part of the same trail as the first, and when he likewise vanished, an impossible ascent up what only seemed to be a sheer cliff was the only place he could have gone. Walking Buffalo was fond of quoting the Tirdian writer: "When all else has been eliminated, that which remains, however improbable, must be the case." He found the cut his quarry had taken, but even then it had taken all his skill to stay on the trail.

Walking Buffalo was under no illusions. All three Irishmen he watched were better than he at this game. That he had by God's good grace—he never used the term "luck"—followed one anyway would be a tale to be told to his grandchildren. The Lord of Heaven gave men talents, but sometimes had to add a little extra to produce success. He settled in to his silent vigil with a satisfied grin. Soon the fourth would arrive. He was the wiliest of all, a man of as many disguises as he had names and faces, the one the People called "Trickster."

Other times, the four travelled with their women, also warriors to be reckoned with. The tall, dark one named Hannah, who seemed able to see into a man's soul, the People called "Witch Woman." Colleen, the policeman's wife, was "Sun-Face," and Sally, Lady Devereaux, was known as "Flameheart." Lucy, Lady Dennison, had two names. In public, and officially, she was "Mistress of Good Fortune," but privately, and among a select few, she was termed "Lioness In Wait".

He waited silently, watching. Once he had seen enough to take their measure and learn sufficient bargaining secrets, he would step boldly forward and speak to these men on behalf of his people. Fifteen minutes went by. The smell of the food tantalized, but he did not move.

Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, and so quietly he did not see or hear it happen, there were four instead of three. The new arrival was, like the others, in his mid-thirties, about the same height and build, but you scarcely noticed him, he could blend into his surroundings so completely.

"Any problems?" one of those around the fire asked.

"Nothing unexpected," was the reply. "Everything is in place."

Two of the others chuckled, and Seamus asked, "How did Hannah take it?"

"She's a good sport," Patrick O'Toole answered. "She knew it wasn't you within three minutes, but I don't think anyone else caught on. She put a cot in the dressing room so I didn't have to sleep on the floor."

“So,” put in Jack Devereaux, “did the substitute O’Toole have any difficulty?”

“I got her proxy, duly said,” came the reply. “Iron Kate is in. Her husband is likely to be Donal IV by this time next year, but she nonetheless thinks deposing the King was a mistake, and chafes that it will be fifty more years before anything can be changed.”

“Good,” replied O’Toole. “Any one of you could have gone as me, but for her it had to be a head of family, not a representative. I spoke with Ryan, and he swore in, as well. My brother signs our family’s sword through me.” He turned to James Dennison with a question on his face.

“Stan Reilly agrees, also. He pledges his house to the old ways, and says had he been at court when it was done, they would have had to kill him first.”

The three looked at Jack Devereaux, but his news was not as good. “I spoke with Kent, and he committed the sword of England to a just throne, but warns us Gerald Monde is up to some new devilry. Kent is convinced the man engineered the troubles here at Edwardston.”

“If he bought Maguire’s assassination, it could only be to steal the shipment,” Jack observed. “Let’s accept that as given.”

“I’ve taken steps,” Patrick O’Toole said, as he glanced briefly toward the fire, and savoured the smell of the meal. “We should find out when I visit him. Dinner’s about ready.” He looked at each in turn. “Business first, though, my lords,” he suggested.

Three swords came out, then a fourth. The watcher stirred ever so slightly, straining to make out the oaths being sworn. He got enough from their conversation to infer that all four, along with several other houses were binding themselves in a compact to prevent usurpers or despots from attaining the throne. Walking Buffalo already knew one of these men was the deposed king, and the other three were related high lords, or nearly so. Soon the swords would reveal truths that would empower him to bargain.

He watched the whirling blades pass through a series of sword oaths and proxy oaths, and he learned more from the patterns than from lips. All their weapons and resources were pooled and placed at each other’s disposal. This was unsurprising. The four already swapped identities around as it suited them. Such pranks might fool others, but not him. He could watch a man’s walk or follow his footsteps, and know who owned the feet, regardless of what the faces proclaimed to others. A man could not change his manners so easily as his appearance.

Most important, he now knew which was the King. Walking Buffalo thought about the implications of the ceremony he had just seen. If the King himself had no descendant to claim the throne in fifty years time, those of the other houses would choose among themselves for the position with the backing of additional families. By the proxy oaths, at least three besides these were involved, but there could be more. Almost unconscious of what he was doing, he crept closer.

The swearing of mutual fealty concluded, Patrick looked again at the fire. “I think the meal’s ready. What say we eat now and suspend business until later?” He started toward the roasting haunch with a knife in hand to test the meat.

“Suits me,” said Seamus, and began to lay out bowls on the flat parts of a log. He was followed by Jack Devereaux with the soup pot, and James Dennison, who poured coffee into several mugs.

Walking Buffalo crawled ever closer, but got no more information. He had a nagging feeling there was

something wrong with the scene, but couldn't put his finger on it. While serving the food, the four lapsed into old camaraderie, asking about each other's wives and families, and settling in for a time of good friendship. He got little of it, as he could see lips only occasionally.

“One of us should give thanks to the Lord of Heaven for the meal before we start,” Seamus observed when everything was ready.

“Ought to include everybody,” James suggested laconically.

Just as four sets of laughing eyes looked right at him, Walking Buffalo realized what was amiss. There were five cups and bowls on the log, not four.

He gathered up his remaining dignity along with the rest of himself, rose from the ground, and calmly walked toward the group he had thought unaware of his presence. They must have let him track them, though they had not made it easy.

He strode to one of the men, stood a second, then went down on his knees. “My Lord King,” he acknowledged.

As one, all four knelt in a circle, and the man he addressed said, with a grin on his face, “Good idea, Buffalo. We'll all kneel to pray over the food. Glad you decided to join us, by the way. The bare ground is rather rough.” He winked, and Walking Buffalo resolved never again to try deceiving these tricksters. He also understood two unspoken messages—first, they were to be treated as equals with no mention of kings, and second, they had already decided to admit him on the same basis. He felt rising confidence that his mission would succeed.

* * * *

Their meal finished, the five lounged about the fire, four chatting together about old times in easy friendship, and Walking Buffalo listening. After a while, there was a quiet space, and in it four heads turned to him.

“Suppose,” said James Dennison, pushing back the brow of his big hat, “you assume we know nothing, and tell us what drives the chief of the Blackfoot nation to stalk four innocent Irishmen about the countryside?”

There was grave silence, and Walking Buffalo knew it was his time. “I was sure as a boy six years ago, when the war had just ended,” he began, earnestly, “that our way of life was doomed without radical changes. Too many Europeans read Tirdian Westerns, and come here expecting things to be as depicted in their books. They try to set up in ranching, hire a few hands, and fail in a couple of years, because they neither understand the land nor that there is market for little more than what can be hunted, or supplied by the existing operations.

“Most leave when they discover what it's really like, but a few troublemakers stay on. They work at odd jobs for cash, or help the established ranchers round up buffalo, but spend most of their time lounging about in town drinking and fighting. Some are remittance men with incomes from wealthy families at home, but the money merely buys our nations trouble.

“Others are like Alex O'Brien, their current leader. He has pretensions of noble blood from a good Irish family, but is a drunkard and a scoundrel. He hates and terrorizes the People. Whatever else, such men deserve to die, and it's only a matter of time before one of my warriors kills him.

“I, and others, have taken administration courses and earned our certificates. We know the domain's social calculus well enough to see that it faces a crisis if the number of loafers isn't cut sharply, and soon. The economy of Edwardston is small but stable. If many more Europeans come, it will destabilize and collapse. There could be another war, for such problems contributed to the last one.”

He looked around. Each of the four royals was chewing absently on a piece of grass, listening intently, and encouraging him by polite looks to go on. He suspected they knew most of this, but was determined to tell the story his way. The Great War had ended a scant six years before, and these very men had played a part in ending it. There had been few battles here in the north, but officially all the tribes of the area except the Stoney had been in rebellion. However, that was over, and Walking Buffalo was determined that Blackfoot and Stoney would never fight again.

The tribes would be stronger cooperating with each other and the Irish. He knew that, and so did the Stoney Chief. The first task was to get the idlers to leave.

He went on. “The Europeans built a shantytown across the Knee Joint River, east of Edwardston. They call it ‘Calgary’, after the one on Tirdia, and dream of making it a great metropolis. The People know it can't work. There aren't enough jobs, infrastructure, or markets to support a city in the midst of thousands of square miles of hunter-gatherers and dry-grass farmers who are content to stay as they are. Moreover, we fear being overrun and marginalized, as our cousins were on Tirdia.

“What the People need instead is better education and the ability to take their own place in the world over the next two generations. Eventually, if we need to mine more oil, Edwardston could become a great trading centre, but if we leave things to continue as they are, it will become a vile and unstable slum.

“The domain lord, Albert Maguire, was sympathetic to the People, and halted further development around the town, but he and his wife were murdered last month, and his three-year-old son, John was kidnapped. It was made to appear the Blackfoot were responsible, for we supposedly wish to rule the area, and there is some truth to that. But no warrior of mine would commit such a heinous crime. Now, the Europeans of Edwardston have taken to speaking of the People in foul terms, and provoking fights. It would be suicide to go stick against sword in the streets, but I cannot control the warriors much longer. Lord Monde was sent by Tara to investigate, but it is clear he arrived with his mind made up against us.”

“You wear a sword,” Seamus noted, pointing to the tip of the scabbard that looked out from behind his back, the only place a stalker can carry such a blade.

Their guest nodded. “I went to cadet school at Toronto for three years to learn the Irishmen's weapons.”

“You won your commission,” Patrick O'Toole suggested quietly.

“I have a lieutenant's colours, yes,” the young chief agreed, “though I have not served in your army, only with my own people.”

“Good,” was O'Toole's response, but he said nothing more, and there was a slight pause before Walking Buffalo continued.

“Now, some ruffians have tried to stir up the Stoney People against mine over some land issues. These fellows name us outlaws, and call it a matter of honour, but have none themselves, and are the real bandits—thieves and murderers scoured from the alleyways of the world, and brought to Edwardston for troublemaking. If it were to result in a fight between our peoples, Monde could bring in the army, and we

would lose control of the town, anyway.”

James Dennison quietly asked, “What does the Stoney Chief think of this?”

“He has no desire for war, but his people are under pressure, too. Much land was indeed damaged by fire, but it was set by Monde's men, not mine. Running Bear's people are few, vulnerable, and have more to lose because many of them live in settlements in and near town, whereas most of the Blackfoot nation wander over a wide area, and only a fraction live here. For the sake of his people, he would have to side with Monde against us, or risk the wrath of Tara's army falling against his defenceless nation.”

Seamus Meathe grinned casually at him, and enquired, “And what about his daughter Deerfoot, whose beauty and wisdom the Stoney celebrate? What does the Princess think?”

There was a tinge of excitement in his voice, betraying his own interest in the dark-haired young lady. Walking Buffalo failed to notice. His face turned bright red, displaying to all that the matter of the Princess was indeed significant in his mind, something he confirmed by his answer.

“She is a scholar, and persuaded me to become one. She has reached the same conclusions.” Then he looked Seamus square in the eye, and answered the personal part. “Running Bear has no son, and we two had dared hope we could unite our nations, and in the strength of that union persuade Tara to allow the People to govern the land ourselves as is done in other parts of the world.”

James Dennison cleared his throat. “We discussed the matter with Running Bear and think your plan is a good one. Understand though, by marrying Deerfoot, you unite more than two peoples.”

Walking Buffalo stared at the man in bewilderment a few seconds before comprehension dawned. “She said she was adopted, but is darker even than the Stoney. I assumed she was from another nation of the People. She does not look at all Irish.”

“She has the look of her grandmother,” Patrick observed.

“We would become one of your nations, and you will be one of our families,” Jack Devereaux suggested.

Walking Buffalo grew more flushed. He looked from one to the other until his eyes fixed on the King. “You're telling me Deerfoot is sister to one of you. Yet, I know all your family histories. Only one of you had a sister that age. Supposedly she died when your father and older brother were assassinated.”

“Daisy escaped, and I buried a servant girl who was in their way. I put my sister's name on the stone. She asked us to tell you. She feared you might love her less if you knew, and is this moment praying to the Lord of Heaven about our meeting.”

Walking Buffalo said nothing aloud at first while he uttered his own silent prayers. Far more important than that they would unite two peoples was that he and Deerfoot were already brother and sister in Christ. He pictured her on her knees praying for him, and loved her more than ever. This was a solemn moment. He felt a great calm come over his soul as he raised his head to declare, “Deerfoot and I have given each other jades. My vow to her is sacred, and she is my love for as long as the hills shall stand and the rivers shall run, or Jesus comes for us, or we die. Before this trouble arose, we hoped to marry in just a few weeks. That she is Princess of Tara is less important than that she is Princess of the Stoney, which in turn pales beside the fact that she is Deerfoot, whom I love and who loves me.” Walking Buffalo got a determined look. Royalty was unimportant. Character was what counted.

“It is what we knew we would hear,” said Patrick O’Toole.

“She is my sister,” admitted the King. “But hear me, Buffalo. By marrying her, you oblige yourself and your posterity to defend the throne of Tara against usurpation by tyrants. I might add that in fifty years’ time, your descendants would have as good a claim on the throne as any, but they must be worthy—scholars and warriors of the highest calibre. You must raise your children before the Lord of Heaven to be the best they can be.” He sounded stern, but had a broad grin.

Walking Buffalo bowed his head and prayed again. When he lifted it, he said merely, “It is what we would have done in any case. Our children will be defenders of the right. If that now includes the honour of the throne, so be it.”

“We knew it would be so. We came here to welcome you to the family, brother. The rest is to ensure everything is in the open.”

The five men talked for hours after that, discussing by turns the area’s economy, the plans of the young chief for his people, the role of Tara, and what to do about the ruffraff in the town. From time to time they returned to the plight of the kidnapped boy, whom the four friends had already located at an abandoned ranch headquarters alongside the Coldwater a few miles west of the town, where he was surrounded by a group of about thirty armed men who apparently made their living by robbing travellers. As the night wore on, they put flesh on a plan the four had discussed among themselves, but that had lacked the kind of detail and support only Walking Buffalo could provide. The peace of Ireland could be kept only with active local cooperation.

Before the evening ended, the four made a deal with the Blackfoot chief, saying it on the honour of their names and swords. He would keep their secrets and be ally to their houses; they would help him achieve his People’s goals. They asked for nothing else in return but loyalty to the throne’s honour, and safe haven for themselves and their children if it were ever necessary. In the fifty years before the throne could be claimed, the royals needed allies in places where change happened slowly, memories were long, and allegiances, once made, lasted forever.

* * * *

The next day, when the sun was hot and the air hazy, a big, rough-looking man arrived in Edwardston from a long trail. His black hair and beard were speckled with dust, his kit was worn, and the supply sacks on his packhorse hung limp and empty. He wore a faded riding kilt of the common tartan, and carried his fighting stick and sword in his saddle loops.

He rode without stopping through the neat, clean streets of the western residential parts, then through the central part that housed the domain administration. Continuing, he crossed the wagon and rail bridge by the confluence of the Knee Joint and Coldwater rivers, and entered the European end of town—a meagre collection of run-down shanties. His horse took him to a seedy looking hotel in the middle of the area, where he stopped, looking around in the manner of one seeing the place for the first time. He remained mounted until marking several watchers who would no doubt report his arrival. None of the town’s half dozen or so groundcars were in sight, just a few horses tied up here and there.

Several armed loafers stood around the little square the hotel shared with a bar, a stable, and a cheap dining hall. When Seamus registered his horses at the stable and himself at the hotel, it was as the anonymous John Smith, late of London. He dropped his nondescript kit in his room, and headed for the diner to make himself further known. There was little in his sacks, and the inevitable searchers would find

nothing but travel stained clothes, some dried food, his cooking pots, a worn Holy Book, and a whetstone.

* * * *

Meanwhile, Walking Buffalo and two of the other three went first to the Stoney village. After a day-long conference with Running Bear and Deerfoot, he left again, but with only one companion. By that evening, the Blackfoot and Stoney each had a new warrior, and before the next was over, two elite groups of commandos chosen from the strongest and fleetest of both nations were undergoing training to refine their fighting skills.

* * * *

The next morning, a man calling himself Patrick Doyle arrived at the Edwardston domain manse, ostensibly from the airport. On presenting his credentials, he was immediately ushered to Gerald Monde, the interim domain lord whom Tara had appointed to sort out the mess left by the murder of his predecessor.

“My Lord Monde.” O’Toole bowed as to a superior.

“My Lord O’Toole.” It was a courtesy title for a representative of Tara, for O’Toole’s older brother held the family sword. “What brings the Chief of Court Security to this remote place, and undercover at that?” He waved to a chair, and O’Toole accepted the offer while Gerald Monde sat down opposite.

Patrick came right to the point. “This is a pro forma call to let you know I am operating in the domain. Transportation requested Security provide a high level escort for a shipment coming through next week from the mountains. I will personally off-load and take it by air to Tara, and would appreciate your maintaining my cover as Patrick Doyle.”

Gerald Monde rubbed his chin to hide his excitement. He knew a great deal about these shipments. They were the reason he had arranged both the assassination and his appointment here. They came from two biotechnology labs in different parts of the great mountains. In order to prevent active biologicals from escaping, the facilities had been situated in quarters hollowed out of the sides of remote mountains in geologically stable areas. Products that had undergone extensive testing for toxicity were shipped to Tara for further trials by the Health Domain. As there were no landing strips in the mountains, and it was too dangerous to use the light aircars in the area, the first leg was by rail to the most convenient airport. That was Moody whenever the older and larger of the two labs shipped, but in this instance, only the newer and smaller lab on the east side of the range had product to send, so it was more convenient to use Edwardston. This shipment was surely the prize he had been waiting for, if Patrick O’Toole himself had come all this way to escort it personally.

According to the information Monde purchased, the lab had developed a new type of regrow nanomachine that could unfold the locked gene sites of any type of cell. For the first time, a single treatment could be used to induce growth of severed limbs, repair bone and nerve tissue, even grow a new organ like a heart in situ. It would simplify and expand the power of practical medicine greatly. Monde wanted samples for his own experiments before the Taran medical bureaucracy mired the technique in years of tests. Too bad O’Toole would take the blame for the disappearance, but Gerald Monde was determined to make the next great advance in medicine his own. Others could use it, but pay his price.

Longer term, he and the MacCarthys had good uses for the oil and gas the Tirdians had discovered in

their version of the area, and could be assumed to be present here as well. The royals and their allies were too prissy about the use of explosives, and obtaining Edwardston was a good first step toward changing things. He could do some interesting research away from the public view.

O'Toole noted the gleam in Monde's eye, and was unsurprised.

“When will the shipment arrive, and how many troops do you require?”

O'Toole was certain now. The man's whole attitude betrayed him. He would inform the others tonight they were right, and could proceed with all parts of the plan.

He kept a tight rein on his own face as he replied. “Two guards will suffice, but I'll have to take them on standby, as I will have only eight hours' notice. For security reasons, I don't want them to know what is going on, and I will provide only one hour's warning to meet me at the train and accompany me by groundcar to the airport. All I know myself is it will be toward the end of next week or the beginning of the following one.”

O'Toole leaned back and studied Gerald Monde. He could almost hear the wheels of the man's mind turning. Security was very tight at the mountain labs, and there was only one train per day from the mountains, which Monde couldn't very well stop, as he could not know which one held the samples he wanted. To get the shipment, he would have to attack between the rail station and the airport, and there were precious few ways to do that. There was no doubt in O'Toole's mind that Monde was again operating outside the Peace. It was a good thing Kent had warned them.

“Very well,” said Monde, rising and bowing slightly. “Security has my full cooperation. The secretary will give you the names of two troopers to accompany you, and I will reserve a groundcar for your exclusive use.”

It was obviously a dismissal, so Patrick O'Toole rose and returned the bow, somewhat deeper, then made his way outside.

A few hours later, a stocky but powerfully built man entered the manse in answer to a summons on his PIEA. Alex O'Brien was a little less than a staff tall, and in his younger days had been a champion fist fighter.

Gerald Monde tried not to be too obvious with his distaste. The fellow had alienated the Blackfoot by raping young Rose Cloud and getting her pregnant, boasting about the incident, and refusing to take responsibility for her or the infant girl who had been born a week ago. That was a bit much, even for Gerald Monde.

Today, as always, the fellow smelled of whiskey and rancid sweat, looked dirty and unkempt, and was, moreover, supporting a fresh batch of bruises and lacerations from another of his perpetual fights. It appeared he had gotten the worst of this one. Looking him over, Monde decided that once this job was complete, Alex O'Brien was going to experience a more serious accident. Perhaps he could arrange for him to be alone at night someplace where the Blackfoot warriors would happen upon him.

“What happened to you?” he demanded.

“Just doing a little recruiting,” the cheery O'Brien replied. “Had to try out a new boy.” Actually, “John Smith” had thoroughly beaten him in a fight outside the bar the previous night, and O'Brien had lost face in more ways than one. However, Smith picked him out of the dust afterwards, clapped him on the

shoulder to show there were no ill feelings, then took him back inside and bought him drinks, so the two made up as quickly as they clashed. The part about 'recruiting' was true enough, as Smith was now second in his gang. He didn't seem like the ambitious type, more like a self-effacing fellow. Despite the beating, O'Brien wasn't worried about Smith trying to displace him.

Gerald Monde failed to hide his disgust. "I've got a little job for you, O'Brien," he said, "if you can manage to stay sober."

* * * *

A week later, the four friends conferred by radio and agreed all was ready, so O'Toole notified Gerald Monde the next morning he needed the car and the two guards. He would pick the car up first, and the guards were to meet him at the train in an hour.

Patrick chuckled as he observed the group of twenty ruffians under O'Brien's leadership go riding across the big bridge over the Coldwater and out of town to the north. He laughed out loud as the last raised a hand over his head. Seamus was with them for insurance, and knew Patrick would be watching. Jack Devereaux, meanwhile, reported that half the force from the cabin where the boy was being held had also left to their northeast.

Patrick strolled downstairs and went to the manse to sign out the groundcar. Settling himself inside, he ordered it to the rear of the rail station, opaqued the window, and plugged his PIEA into the car's interface. Because he knew exactly what to look for, it took mere seconds to learn where the car was to 'break down' on the way to the airport, and not much longer to reprogram the system. He used the car's central dispatch link to send instructions of his own back to the main computer. He then dropped a timed canister of sleepy gas underneath the rear seat. He had already injected an antidote, so the gas would have no effect on him. Arriving, Patrick got out of the car and strolled nonchalantly to the station building.

* * * *

At almost exactly the moment Patrick O'Toole entered the station, Gerald Monde received a call on his MT.

"My Lord Monde," came the greeting.

It was Kate Rourke, known almost universally as "Iron Kate," and one of the most ambitious of the great nobles. Monde was mildly surprised at the call, as he normally had little to do with Kate, but what she said next almost made him lose his composure.

"Hey, Gerald. I decided to come out and try the hot springs west of that little burg where you sit on your duff all day. The plane lands in an hour, if you want to do the usual ceremonials. Not that I really care, mind, but there are some media types on board following me around, and they might notice if you're not about when we get in." He saw her turn her head and look away. She spoke to someone out of camera range, "You're bluffing. I'll see your ten and raise you twenty."

Kate turned back to him. "Sorry, Gerald, got some important financial transactions to sort out before we land. See you later." She cut the connection.

Monde wiped the sweat from his forehead, and reached for his MT controls. He had to greet the confounded woman. She was the most powerful person in the realm, and it was only a matter of time before she got tired of the current Donal, and replaced him with her husband Matthew. He had better call

the operation off.

However, when he tried to raise O'Brien, all he got was static. He contacted the place where the boy was being held, and all seemed normal there. Well, he couldn't do anything about it. The attack on O'Toole would have to proceed. He called downstairs and had the twelve-passenger VIP groundcar sent around with a load of troops for an honour guard, then had his secretary make arrangements at the airport. He would have to leave ten men there in order to transport Iron Kate's entourage to the manse, then send the big car out again to pick them up.

Minutes later, he told the car to drive to the airport, all the while cursing under his breath that it had to be today of all days Kate would arrive on one of her whimsical tours.

* * * *

Shortly after, Patrick O'Toole was in his groundcar and just out of sight of town when he heard a soft pop from behind. Seconds later, Monde's two troopers were fast asleep. He ordered the car back to town, to be met by five undercover agents he had sent to the area a month earlier. The six entered the nearly empty manse, and had little trouble taking over its armoury and communications facilities from the skeleton staff Monde had left. Patrick sent the go-ahead to Jack Devereaux and Walking Buffalo.

Seconds later, there was a call on the MT.

"Answer, but tell them only what I say," Patrick told the clerk at the console.

The frightened clerk nodded and thumbed the reply. Patrick did not look at the display lest he be seen, but heard a voice say, "We're under attack out here from some of those blasted Indians. We can hold out long enough for you to get more troops up here, but there's too many for us to handle alone."

The clerk read from the script Patrick O'Toole had given him. "No troops are available; they're all out of town. You have discretion, but the merchandise is to be protected from harm at all costs." There was a curse from the other end, and O'Toole reached over and broke the connection.

"Now we wait," he said.

* * * *

They didn't have to wait long. Jack Devereaux, Walking Buffalo, and ten warriors had crept right up to the building where the Maguire boy was held prisoner. It was a prefabricated house assembled from a collection of outdated used rooms, and brought to the area by train years before, then assembled out here as a ranch headquarters. It stood on the edge of a high copse of cottonwood near the river, and was surrounded by several other buildings that had been barns, stables, and a bunkhouse.

They had little trouble getting the drop on outlying guards and reaching the walls of the house unseen. Jack sprayed one of the windows with a digester, then motioned to his companions to wait while the plastic softened.

The first the outlaws knew anything was amiss was when Walking Buffalo broke through the window of the boy's room, closely followed by Jack Devereaux. A moment later, the front and back doors burst open, and men poured through from two directions. These were followed by twenty more warriors who surrounded the outbuildings and began to flush out the rest. There was one awkward moment when the boy shouted, as a stick-wielding man burst through his room door. The latter briefly engaged Walking

Buffalo, but had little chance against the highly skilled chief, and went down almost immediately. In fifteen minutes, start to finish, the twenty outlaws were subdued, bound, and being loaded into wagons.

Jack switched on the MT and called the manse. A very nervous clerk responded. "All right, Patrick," Jack said to the friend he knew was in the room, "everything's buttoned down, and the boy is safe. We'll join the others as fast as we can get there."

* * * *

At about the same time, the large car with Gerald Monde, Kate Rourke and several MT news channel reporters, was making its way back toward the main Edwardston bridge from the airport northwest of town. Kate had installed a small table in the back between two facing banks of seats, and her poker game continued. Gerald Monde, who had been acting domain lord for only a few weeks, was not familiar with the terrain, and had been badgered into the game, so wasn't paying attention when the vehicle slowly veered off toward a small valley east of the normal route.

Just as they passed between two stands of trees, he glanced up, startled. He knew they had not gone to the airport that way. But before the sense of wrongness could become an actual response, the car emerged from the trees, travelled another several rods, and came to an abrupt halt. Within seconds, it was surrounded by a group of men on horseback. Two dismounted and shouted at the occupants to get out. Monde turned pale. Something had gone horribly, terribly wrong. The outlaws wouldn't be able to see through the one-way glass and realize they had attacked the wrong car, but what could he do to get rid of them? He was paralysed.

Two of the news people began to record the assault on portable cameras. Iron Kate calmly collected yet another pot, only then looking around.

"What's going on, Gerald? Is this for show, or do we need to go out and teach those hooligans a lesson?" She eyed up two that had held back, still mounted, who appeared to be the leaders, and mentally marked them for her own. Then she looked a little more carefully at one. "By St. Patrick," she exclaimed to herself, "if that isn't Seamus Meathe his own self. This ought to be interesting."

As if in reply to her question, one of the outlaws at that moment thrust a bar between the locked door and its frame, and began to force the car open. "Ah, more fun yet," Kate said aloud, as she gestured toward the edge of the clearing. Their thirty or so attackers were so intent on opening the car it took several moments for them to notice that they were surrounded by an equal number of Stoneys in full war paint.

Alex O'Brien was the first to realize. "It's a trap," he shouted, just as the car door gave way to a much louder shout from the men surrounding it. O'Brien looked around, then at the door, and decided to make a dash for the car in hopes of taking a hostage. His horse got halfway there when he felt a rope descend around his midsection, and the next instant he was dragged from the saddle and lay in the dust.

Before he could get his breath, much less make a move, he found the sword of 'John Smith,' his new second, scratching at his throat. O'Brien had not drawn his own blade, and was helpless. The men at the car turned at the noise, and sudden silence descended over them as they realized they were surrounded, and their leader was on the ground. "Tell your men to drop their swords, or I'll kill you," said Seamus Meathe quietly.

A man by the car shouted and started to make a move, but at that moment Kate emerged behind him, and drove the end of her shillelagh into his kidney. He immediately crumpled to the ground in agony.

“Right, then,” said Seamus, into the new silence. “Pile your swords there.” He indicated a spot, but no one moved at first.

Kate's voice was next. “You heard the man. Drop the swords, or we'll run the lot of you through.”

One by one, all the outlaws, including Alex, complied. At a signal from Seamus, two warriors moved the weapons to the edge of the clearing.

Seamus announced, “Now, you scum of Europe's slums who treat the People with such contempt, draw your sticks and defend yourselves in fair fight.” He jerked O'Brien to his feet. “You too, Alex.”

The Stoney Warriors spread out in a large circle, and took on the outlaws one on one. It was a short, brutal lesson in stick fighting, as this was their weapon of choice, and few of the outlaws landed a blow before being thoroughly beaten and disarmed. The Stoney now had training in the European style, so the few techniques that might have been used against them were ineffective.

Neither Kate nor Seamus participated. The lesson had to come from the People. When it was done, the outlaws were placed to one side facing the car and surrounded by warriors. Kate walked up to Seamus, and said, “Let's show them how it's done. I haven't had a good bout in years.” She took a halfhearted swing with her shillelagh that Seamus nimbly dodged, and he drew his own stick. The two backed off, dropped their swords to gain mobility, and began circling each other.

There followed a demonstration of the stick that the Stoney Warriors still tell of. The speed and agility of the two was incredible. Round and round they went, lashing out with one wicked blow after another, and blocking with lightning speed. Gerald Monde was stunned. Skilled with weapons though he was, he knew he could not have lasted with either Kate or the turncoat outlaw for even a few seconds. He wasn't sure who the man was, except that he must be a security or military officer. After the regulation fifteen minutes of nonstop action in which neither landed a body blow, they bowed to each other and backed away, ceding a draw.

Just then, a large transport truck arrived in the clearing with a number of bound men aboard. Two Blackfoot warriors stepped from the cab, and Kate shook her head at seeing one of them. He could have fooled anyone else, but she would bet any number of ‘rocks that was Jack Devereaux under all the war paint. She looked around at the Stoney, and soon had James Dennison picked out, as well. She grinned. This was a heck of a lot more fun than playing palace intrigue at Tara's palace. She would have to get out in the field more often.

All this time, Monde stood by the car, not knowing what to do. That his plans were ashes was evident; whether he could be implicated was another matter. He looked over at O'Brien, the only one who could tie him to this. The man was conscious but bleeding from a stick wound on the head. He was struggling to get up. Perhaps ... He edged toward the group of prisoners.

“All right, listen up,” said Walking Buffalo to the two groups of prisoners. “As a duly commissioned captain in the Taran security forces, and as chief of the Blackfoot nation on whose soil you stand, I'm arresting all of you on charges of murder, kidnapping and attempted robbery. We're loading this lot on the truck with the rest for transport to the airport. You may take your swords, but will be flown in the company of armed officers to Moody, and signed on to five years' deck labour in groups of two as ships leave port. Any who return here face trial under Irish law for kidnapping, and a possible death sentence.

“I have word from town that the bar, hotel, and dining rooms, as well as several houses in the east end

have had an unfortunate accident, and have fallen down. The rest of the inhabitants of that part of town are being evacuated to Tara, and the area has been condemned. No one can live there any more.”

As he finished, there was an incoherent shout, and Alex O'Brien, who managed to get to his feet, began a stumbling run in the direction of Gerald Monde, waving his arms and gesticulating wildly. He reached Monde, and seemed about to take a swing at him when Monde lashed out and struck him a mighty blow with the side of his hand that hit O'Brien on the neck, lifted him from his feet, and sent him sprawling to the ground. Monde quickly bent over the man, and no one saw him pinch the little ampoule under his nose.

An autopsy conducted later in the day showed Alex O'Brien had died of a heart attack. No evidence linking Monde to the affair was hinted at in testimony of the attacks and the kidnapping, and Patrick O'Toole continued to treat the man with the deference due a great lord. Kate donned her brehon's chain the next day, and, after hearing the way the natives had been treated, and of the couple's administrative plans, called for Deerfoot and a priest, married her to Walking Buffalo, and named them Lord and Lady of Edwardston Domain. She coolly expressed Tara's thanks for Monde's help unravelling the problems, told him his services were no longer necessary, got a summons to Tara, and departed the next day.

Before they also left Edwardston, Seamus, James, and Jack set up a pension fund for Rose Cloud to raise her daughter Alice. Alex O'Brien's still-sheathed sword, left in the pile after those of the other outlaws were returned, they gave to Rose in trust for the little girl.

* * * *

Gerald Monde took that day to clean out his office and think about events. He turned the scene of the attack over in his mind several times, finally deciding Dennison and Devereaux were the big men among the natives. For the third, who had been with the outlaws, he had only the name “John Smith.” He grumbled to himself for a while over that, and found himself saying “It might as well be ‘Patrick Meathe’ for all it tells me. He must be Security, too.” He vowed revenge on the three, and on Rourke and O'Toole as well, no matter what it took.

At least he had the shipment. He had arranged to switch it before it left the station. The attack was merely a diversion.

* * * *

Kate Rourke sat on the plane next to Patrick O'Toole. Three-year-old John Maguire was in the window seat sound asleep, with his head resting on her arm. He had followed Kate around ever since getting back to town, and she had undertaken to return him to his relatives. It had been a tough time for him, with both his parents being killed and having been held captive for a month.

“You seem subdued,” Patrick said to her. She wasn't her normal raucous self, and hadn't even suggested poker. He pointed to the boy. “He seems to have adopted you.”

She sighed. “I would like to have had a boy as well as my little Katherina,” she mused. “If I had, perhaps she could have grown up to be a lady.”

Patrick knew Kate's four-year-old daughter all too well, and the last thing she could ever be accused of was being on the way to becoming an elegant lady. If anything, the girl was likely to be harder than her mother. “What would people call her?” he wondered. “Diamond Kate?”

He thought about his own children, the twin three-year-olds Patricia and Patrick, Jr., and wondered how it would have been for him if one of them had been attacked. His wife and children had been on a continental holiday visiting her family while Seamus played the role of O'Toole to negotiate with Kate, and he was looking forward to getting back with them.

His foot touched the package he had secured under the seat, and Kate noticed. "The seals have been tampered with," she observed.

"Of course," Patrick replied. "I imagine he switched the contents, either on the train or in the station."

"What did he get?"

"Standard muscle regrow," O'Toole replied. "It will take him a month or so to find out, depending on how good his technicians are."

"He is not a good enemy to have, Patrick. He doesn't believe in rules. We will have to be careful of our families. Too bad we didn't have enough evidence to try him for kidnapping. I take it the real shipment is safe." Kate was the type to switch among topics with every sentence. It drove her secretaries wild.

Patrick grinned. All the families fished for information wherever they could get it. He considered her request. If Kate's husband Matthew became Donal, she would soon enough learn nothing was being shipped from the mountain labs any more. Seamus, Hannah, Lucy, and Sally had invented a new type of synthesizer that could be programmed to build molecules of any complexity on demand, so only encrypted electronic data left the labs these days, and the plan was to close them in a few years. Before long, they would get the size of the synthesizer down to the point where physicians could carry one in an instrument sack, and make the new regrow, tailored to the patient's own DNA, on demand. That would be far more revolutionary.

In the meantime, Kate hadn't known all they planned at Edwardston, and didn't need to know this, either. "Yes, it's safe," was all he said.

In business, as in war, positioning is everything. Perhaps this explains why the key port of New Tara is the major centre in Irish North America, and, with its hundred thousand inhabitants, de facto capital of the entire continent. Oddly, on Tirdia, the corresponding place is, on the one hand, a hard-to-imagine hundred times the population, and on the other, is named after what is here the obscure English village of York.

—basic notes in geography, Kilkarney cadet school.

Chapter Fifteen

Brian and Meghan, New Tara, Irish North America, 1987 (Hibernia)

Brian McIlhargey sat on a comfortable mossy log with his back to the gigantic tree over whose roots it had fallen. He stared idly across the waters at the skyline of the city opposite the big island. In a mere four decades, New Tara had risen from the ashes of the war, quintupling her population, and making her the big, bold, brassy younger sister of her capital city namesake in distant Hibernia. New Tara swaggered on the shore of the continent, collecting tribute from the trade routes of Irish North America, her only continental rival the much smaller port of Moody on the distant Western Ocean.

Brian had been on Kilkarney orientation tours to the corresponding city that straddled both mainland and island on Tirdia, and had heard the standard lecture about what happened when population got wildly out of control, and how blessed Hibernia was for the much lower burden of people she put on her earth. The teacher had gone on to underscore the importance of never allowing Tirdia to discover the other earths, lest they despoil them all by their sheer profligacy. Yet, there was something grand about a big city, even if the one opposite was tiny by Tirdian standards.

The McIlhargey family had lived here nearly five years after leaving the obscurity of tiny Detroit. Brian continued to contract his services as a security and military consultant. Equally at home whether training troops or working with sophisticated electronics, he did a steady, if not lucrative business, enough to purchase essentials and send Meghan to the best available school. His hours were long and the work demanding, but he was his own man and owed permanent fealty to no one.

He reflected, as often lately, on his present contract with Lord Dennison. The remuneration this past year as manse security chief and drill sergeant for the court troops under the domain holder's family command was much better than the typical commerceman or landsman paid for evaluating and upgrading security procedures. Dave Dennison, the outlands lord who headed his clan and ruled the vast area beyond the island and city opposite, was a rigid, old-time traditionalist—meticulous in his demands, and fair to a fault. Brian had known his employer when both were boys, but doubted the man remembered him from then. Oddly, though people used the term out of his hearing, Lord Dennison eschewed the title “High Lord,” or “King,” to which he was entitled as senior domain holder on the continent.

Like his father James before him, Dave played no role at court, even as regional representative, much less in the front row. It was said, that neither visited Ireland a single time in the years since James Holdom had been renamed Dennison and made Lord of New Tara. This wasn't quite accurate, as Brian recalled a time in his childhood when James Dennison had quietly visited manse Devereaux. Both Dennisons had preferred to rule their domain quietly and without truck with the palace. Brian doubted the current Dennison would ever stand at Tara as he was entitled.

Dave's twenty-year-old son, Alfred, however, was a cut from different cloth. A savagely hot-tempered and unpredictable young blade, he had overweening ambitions for himself and his family.

Just the previous week, Alfred Dennison had provoked and won yet another duel with a visiting young commerceman, severely maiming his opponent, and boasting afterward of his own prowess and the other's incompetence. McIlhargey was in the small town near the manse collecting Meghan from school at the time, and witnessed the conclusion of the incident. Alfred apparently fancied himself skilled enough to win his way to the front ranks of the court, as soon as his father would allow him to go to Tara.

“Problem is,” Brian thought, as he mentally rated the skill he had seen, “he is no more than a fifty on the scale.” Well acquainted with the universal rating system of the Society of Swords, Brian was confident he could place him within two points on the basis of the partial fight he had seen. “That's better than any enlisted man, but below the minimal officer's rating, and who knows if he can use his left hand? He wouldn't last a week at Tara, if he ever got that far alive.”

Dave Dennison might not have brought the lad up very well, but must have recovered enough wisdom to limit his son's travel, or he couldn't have survived to this age. As it was, it was only a matter of time before Alfred encountered someone much better than his last ill-fated opponent. He couldn't understand why the lad hadn't been sent to an army school. If they disdained Ireland, and wouldn't use Kilkarney, why not Toronto? The young man was a blot on the royal family.

Brian had avoided contact with young Alfred thus far, but if he continued to work on the estate, there

would eventually be trouble. Alfred would not be satisfied until he had personally “put the mercenary in his proper place,” and when he tried, Brian would have to decide whether to submit a while to his bullying, leave the domain at once, or fight. He would almost prefer to sacrifice his own honour as he had his comfort, for the sake of Meghan and Karen. But there was no gain in letting a bully have his way, and sooner or later he would have to face the situation head on, or leave and be labelled coward. He also had to consider what his duty was to the royals on the one hand, and to Ireland on the other. He couldn't very well allow the man a try at the throne, but he did have his family ties to consider.

In the event of a duel on the other hand, and once he had shown the young man what sword fighting really was, the McIlhargeys would surely no longer be welcome in the domain. There was little doubt in Brian's mind he could disarm the braggart without inflicting much damage, but Alfred Dennison was not the sort to take defeat gracefully, and Brian judged that anyone who bested the lad and left him alive might shortly expect a knife in the back.

“Thinking again, Da?”

He did not turn or move, just motioned to the place beside him where Meghan sat most days to talk before the two finished the walk home from work and school. Tonight was special because Karen was preparing a surprise tenth birthday supper for her big little sister, and Brian was to ensure they arrived neither too early nor too late. He checked his timepiece. There was plenty of time.

“What did you learn today, Meghan?” He asked the question almost absentmindedly.

She grinned. It was their invariant ritual. She told him about the day at school, and he supplemented her education with his own observations about the subjects she studied. After supper and before homework, they alternated between fighting strategies and security techniques. Some evenings they would go to the communications centre at the Dennison Manse, disconnect a couple of workstations from the network, take one each, and practice “crackers and keepers” on each other's systems. She had beaten him cleanly twice now, and thought she could do it more often.

She answered, as she often did, with a question of her own. “Why did the nobles depose King James IV?”

Brian McIlhargey was startled from his reverie by the question, and looked a query at her with raised eyebrows.

She saw the reaction, and knew she had struck gold. “We studied it in history today. When I asked the reason, the teacher said he was an incompetent and a drunk, and the nobles bowed to public pressure to get rid of him.”

“That explanation isn't good enough for you?”

“I checked the Metalibrary, researched the battles he fought, and looked at the economic figures of the day. The economy was in good shape despite the war, and he was no less competent than his father or grandfather. They weren't deposed, but he was. Why?”

“The war was dragging on, and there was much social unrest. The best projections were that the realm was becoming unstable, and dramatic action was needed to restore order.”

The carefully crafted answer didn't satisfy her. “In other words, the court made him the scapegoat for their own failures.”

Brian turned to his daughter with narrowed eyes, adopting a stern look that belied the pleasure he felt. Meghan was not his “little” prodigy any more. Ninety cents tall already, she towered over children her age. Now she came up with this kind of idea on her own. Her growing maturity wasn't an illusion of her height; she had a sharper mind than most adults. He noncommittally prodded further. “Such conclusions for a ten-year-old. How sure are you?”

“It did make a difference, but not a big one. There were still lots of problems until after the Asian part of the war ended, and it was five more years before the economy settled down again, but my rough estimate using the social calculus like you showed me says it would have taken seven instead had the King remained in power, and by now there would be no difference at all.” She pulled a sheet of paper from her sack and handed it to him. “See.”

Her father barely glanced at the all-too-familiar figures. Meghan was right, of course. He had done the same calculations when he was her age, and had gotten similar results. His face took on a rather abstracted look as stared at the skyline opposite, without answering for a while.

“I'm pretty close, aren't I?” Meghan demanded affirmation.

“Six and a half, actually. You may have forgotten to take into consideration the aftermath of the first Donal's death.”

“Oh, yes,” she agreed at once. “Had the King remained in power, Donal Tobin would have continued as Second Lord, and his influence would have been felt almost as much as it was by them making him First. In the end, his own assassination destabilized things again, so the realm was no better off.”

“Continue your analysis.”

“What do you mean?”

“Every member of the front row nobility has to be a master of the social calculus. If hereditary nobles standing in the back rows aren't, their technicians do the computations for them.”

“You're saying they knew all that ahead of time, so they had other reasons not in the history books. What were they?” Meghan never doubted her da could provide the answer.

“The King had divided loyalties,” he informed her, cryptically.

“You mean he favoured the other side in the war?” She was shocked.

“That's what some of them thought.”

“They thought wrong,” Meghan declared flatly, tossing her head.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because it would make no sense. He wasn't some ambitious noble scheming to take the throne; he was already sitting on it, even though he wasn't crowned. He could have no reason to betray the court over the war, and his battle record clinches it.”

“What would make sense?”

Meghan plunked her head onto one hand and leaned it sideways, as she often did when thinking furiously. After a few moments' silence, she announced confidently: "A woman. He was in love, and she coloured his judgment. They wanted an explanation he wouldn't give, so they used it as an excuse to get rid of him."

He scarcely acknowledged her romantic but accurate answer. Meghan's intuition was all too often correct. She apparently did her analyses at a subconscious level. He simply added, "Donal thought they were doing the best thing for the realm, but as soon as the others decided they didn't need him, they turned on him."

"And the King?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did he escape, or did they catch him, and kill him, too?"

"The King disappeared, and was never heard from again."

Meghan, never dreaming her da would mislead her, was disappointed. She wanted a more exotic conclusion than that. When no more was forthcoming, she renewed her questioning.

"Will there ever be a king again?" It also didn't occur to her to ask how he knew all these things.

"The king's family was triple banned from the throne. If he has any descendants, the green chair could be claimed again no sooner than the fall of 2001." He stood up and shook himself, and Meghan followed suit.

Brian turned slowly to face her, putting both hands on her shoulders. He didn't have to look down very far any more. It was time to give her some of the truth. "Certain of the hereditary nobles have a special duty to the emerald chair placed on them as soon as they are old enough to understand." His voice became quite solemn. "You must reveal what I tell you to no one. Do you so swear?"

Meghan nodded assent, and swallowed. "I so swear to the Lord of Heaven." She still remembered the day her da had told her they were royal-related. This was another defining moment in life. She had felt it coming. She looked up and smiled at her da to continue his tale. Unfortunately, she trusted him as much as she did the Lord of Heaven.

"The heads of certain high royal-related families are 'protectors of the throne.' They have an absolute obligation to participate at court as soon as they are able, even if they must stand at the back. Should someone try to take the throne, and two or more protectors object to the claim, it is disallowed. Should the claimant persist, protectors must sell their lives rather than allow a dishonourable ruler to take the green chair."

He stopped and glanced about. They stood by a solitary tree on the edge of a large meadow that ran down to the inner harbour area. No other human being was in sight. He looked again at Meghan, staring deeply, but said nothing more right away.

"Am I..." Her voice faltered at the enormity of what he was saying. It was a romantic fad among the girls in her class to fantasize they were members of a royal family. She had participated, feeling it would be more conspicuous if she held aloof. But until now, the reality had been a vague and distant promise.

Suddenly it was overwhelming.

“You are indeed,” he replied, to a sharp intake of her breath. “Remember when you were five, I told you King Conn was your ancestor?”

She thought a moment, and frowned. Meghan had pursued that clue by examining generations of the royal family tree in a systematic and vain search for a possible link. True to her promise, she had never discussed the matter with anyone, and been afraid to bring it up again with her da. How was she connected?

“But the ten hereditary high noble families were,” she recited her history, “Meathe, Ryan, O’Toole, Rourke, Carroll that became Monde, Reilly, O’Niall, Devereaux, O’Conor, and O’Kelly.

“Meathe has been a common name without a house lord for two centuries. Devereaux, O’Niall, and Rourke are extinct, and their blades lost. Swords O’Conor and O’Kelly are in the museum at Tara. The former Lord Reilly is the Donal. The other three stand at court today. McIlhargey is none of those.” She frowned again, breathless at her recitation.

“Those are the ones the history files now say, but there were three others originally, and some of those lines are not so extinct as the historians suppose.” He began to lecture. “Anyone taking a royal sword from its owner can claim its right, so if they win a way to court on that and other merits, the right changes to another name.”

“You mean whoever has one of the swords is a royal lord?”

“Yes. Moreover, Lord Chamberlain, the Donal, the High Lords of Scotland and Wales, and the English Ambassador are all protectors, ex officio. So are the High Lord Bishop of the Church at Tara and the High Bard, though they have to delegate their swords, as they may not wield them, except when the High Bard happens to be a warrior-brehon.

“Moreover, on the day they deposed the King, they appointed his secretary and valet as hereditary protectors. Supposedly, this was to involve commoners. All these I have mentioned share the obligation to prepare an heir to their duty to serve Greater Ireland and the Federation by passing judgment on the character of any would-be royal ruler.”

“And if even two of all those object...”

“There would be no one on the throne.”

“If the king's own family has vanished, how could anyone attempt to claim the throne? Doesn't it have to be a son or grandson of the last king?”

Her father indulged in a grim laugh. Meghan didn't realize the rule qualified descendants of any of the last three kings. “Another way would be to become the heir of three noble families.”

“That seems improbable if only Ryan, Reilly, Monde, and O’Toole remain. Who else is there?”

He looked off into the distance again, and did not answer for a time, so she tried another line. “The Donalds rule Scotland, the Evans administer Wales, and the Kents represent England. What were the names of the other protectors, and which one are we?”

His answer, coming as it did from over her head, seemed distant and abstract. “The king's secretary was a man named Solomon Transky, and his valet was James O'Dwyer. Solomon was murdered less than a day after receiving the charge, but may have passed it on, as the sword they gave him was never recovered. The O'Dwyer line still survives under the protection of family Ryan. Your grandmother was a Welsh Evans, though she did not inherit an Irish royal right on that side.”

Meghan blinked rapidly. The only one in the history books who fit his description was Iron Kate Rourke, whose assassination led to her husband's resignation as Donal IV in 1958. But Kate's daughter Katherina and granddaughter Mara had perished in the fire after Glenmorgan. This wasn't making a lot of sense. She shook her head and tried again. “Who were the other noble families, and where is the King?”

“Tell this to no one, Meghan, and do not mention it to me again even when we are alone.” He looked around carefully again to ensure there were no listeners, and casually drew his sword, holding it horizontally between them. “Blades like these have been used in the Irish Isles for more than fifteen centuries. Originally, there were just the four swords of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Logres, each with a separate origin and tradition. In 1051, families O'Brien, Meathe, O'Conor and O'Niall made the first compact of the throne, guaranteeing that after Cormac Meathe, rulers would be chosen by merit and consent from among the high nobility. They pledged their swords to protect the high kingship from being taken by an incompetent or a despot.

“In 1551, a generation after the Irish conquered England, the by-then thirteen high families of Ireland formalized their compact of the throne, and had twelve unique swords fashioned of an alloy mixed especially for the occasion. Each had a slightly different engraved emblem placed into the blade about here.” He touched a spot about three cents along the blade from the hilt. “There is an encrypted sub-design worked into the detail, making it impossible to forge. Both the crests and the chemical signature of the alloy were recorded by the Heraldry Society, which has the equipment to verify authenticity.

“The original four swords of the Isles were engraved at the same time. So were two ceremonial blades—one for the bards, the other for the Church. Those two can only be used by permission, and are useless to anyone else who might steal them. In fact, they have no edge and are mere decorations.

“The owners must protect their swords, for they constitute their royal right. If they lose them...” He turned the sword in the light. “Do you see a shiny patch?”

She nodded.

“That is a metallicized wax. If you heated the sword gently in a cool flame, such as that of a candle, you would reveal the crest under the wax.” Carefully refraining from saying its name, he sheathed it again, continuing his lecture. “Besides the four ‘surviving’ houses you mentioned, the blade of Rourke is believed hidden, and the King had three on the wall of his apartments, for his ancestor came to the throne by the old rules.”

“That leaves the one you have shown me, and one, or is it two, others?”

Her father stopped to think. He was not telling Meghan the whole truth, double counting some swords, and leaving others out. The issue was confusing, as indeed it was meant to be. He reviewed his dissembling to make sure it had no inconsistencies she could readily spot. She didn't need to know it all yet, certainly not about the three fake swords. “Actually, it leaves three, because the King took one of his blades with him. His other two were confiscated by the court, but the one he or his family now has can be taken away only by force. There is this one, and...” He stopped, and Meghan waited for more, but he

seemed to change the subject entirely.

“When I was a child, my father and I spent a lot of time here on the Dennison estate. Like any six-year-old, I prowled around a lot, getting into places I wasn't supposed to. One day, when I was alone in the library, I became interested in the swords hanging there, and drew several. Having seen the crest on one, I asked my father about it, for I knew he had a similar weapon. He didn't ask me to sketch the device, seeming to know about it already. He told me some of what I have said today, and made me swear as I have done you, never to relate this outside our own family. Apparently Lord Dennison got one of the king's swords when he was named.”

Meghan's mouth made a big round “oh,” as she realized, “then our name is not really McIlhargey.” She seemed uninterested that the Dennison family was also part of the great secret.

He looked carefully at her again. “Meghan, dear, you remember the story we told you about how Karen went into the house just before it burned, and how she rescued you?”

She nodded solemnly. That was an old yarn she had heard many times. Suddenly, she had a premonition there was about to be much more.

“Karen was a servant of the house. She was taken in after her immediate family were killed in the same accident that left her confused, and unable to grow up inside. Brian McIlhargey was the house trainer, just as he is at Manse Dennison.” He paused, allowing her to assimilate the news that their little family was not what she had always thought.

Her mind whirled, dread seized her, and she began to shake. His hands gripped her shoulders tightly, but she scarcely noticed the pain. Her world was coming apart.

Brian clenched his jaw and steeled himself for the task he had set. What he was about to tell Meghan was a tissue of literal truth hiding several layers of deep and subtle lies. But she was becoming too religious, too soft and sentimental. He was determined to harden her edge. She had to be more than a high lady, she had to be a weapon of the finest steel. That required hammer and anvil, tools of the forge, not of the Church. Out of her suffering could come his revenge. It was worth the pain he would inflict.

He spoke abstractly, deliberately, and in the third person. “Sergeant Brian McIlhargey existed solely for the training of officer cadets. He belonged entirely to the army, and never had a wife or children of his own.”

Her head in a dizzy swirl, unable to think, Meghan blurted out the first thought that came to mind. “Karen's real name is...”

“O'Toole.” He went along with the interruption. “Her grandfather was hereditary lord of that name, and had two sons. Karen's father was the older, and the heir. When he died, the younger son, Patrick, took the family sword. He and his wife Colleen had twins Patrick, Jr., and Patricia, but the girl and her husband, John Maguire, were lost at sea six years ago, leaving no heir. The son is Lord Patrick O'Toole today, and also has no children. So someday, Karen could be the last.” He made no mention of Jane O'Toole, sister to Karen's grandfather, wife of Solomon Transky, and Hannah's mother. After all, the Meathes were all dead, weren't they? His stomach rebelled at the remembrance, and he had to fight for control of his own emotions.

Meghan barely listened. She was struck with cold horror, and her next words could scarcely force their way out. “Then, if I am not her sister ... Is Karen my mother?”

“Karen has never known a man, dear. She is an innocent, and can never be other than what she is.” He took a deep breath. “Your true name is Mara. You are heir of Devereaux and Rourke. Someday, you must...” He got no further. Part of her mind registered who Mara Devereaux-Rourke was, but it scarcely mattered. What if she hadn't perished in the fire at the manse? She felt like she was dying in this one.

She abruptly cast his hands from her shoulders, shrieked, threw her arms about him and passionately embraced the man who had always been her father. “I don't care about anything else. You will always be my Da.” Her voice broke in a paroxysm of sobs.

He held her close and stroked her unruly red curls. There was much more he wanted to tell her, but his little one had grown up too much for one day. It was enough cruelty, enough manipulation.

“You are my precious child, for always and for ever. Do not worry, little one. I will care for you.” His jaw tightened as he found himself uttering more true lies, and he determined to say no more.

Father and daughter stood in their embrace for a very long time before returning home that night, and did not speak again of the matter for many months, as other troubles intervened first. But it was apparent from that day forward that Meghan, though she lost none of her youthful playfulness and spirit, gained an adult fire and resolve. Where her schoolwork had been brilliant, it was now stellar. Where her fencing with the noncombatant's wooden practice sword had been adequate for her age, it rapidly became skilled, then superb. Brian McIlhargey smiled grimly as he saw it happening. His weapon for vengeance upon his enemies at court was being forged.

The early 1950s were a turbulent time throughout Greater Ireland. After the assassination of the first Donal in 1945, the reign of former Head Brehon Rory Doran under the ceremonial name of Donal II was a quiet affair, and he presided first over a clean and effective court and the quick disposition of the Great Asian War, the first in that region for centuries not involving Japan.

However, his accidental death in late 1951 saw the ascension to power of the ineffective and corrupt Cullin Cunningham as Donal III, and several new conflicts began, most notably in Africa. Not a year later, Iron Kate Evans-Rourke engineered his replacement with her husband Matthew Rourke as Donal IV. He was at once the most skilled swordsman of his generation, and, next to Armand O'Tighernaugh (Donal VIII) the ablest and best liked of the first eleven Donals. However, Iron Kate got most of the headlines as commander of the court forces against the West African rebels in the 1953 campaign.

With all eyes focused either there or on Tara herself, few paid attention to still volatile Irish North America, where the royals were at times hard-pressed to keep the Peace. An incident that year at Edwardston is typical...

—from *The Royal Family in INA*, by Richard Kent.

Chapter Sixteen

Sally and Lucy, New Tara and Edwardston, 1953 (Hibernia)

Lucy Dennison looked up from her electronic tablet. It was a larger version of the PIEA she carried on her belt, but with bigger screen, more controls and capacity, and higher speed access to the network. She was skimming the latest week's release of the Tara General Journal of Medical Practice of which she was now an associate editor. A lively debate had been running for several issues on whether the ban on

the use of gene editing techniques for humans ought to be relaxed in some cases.

An African MC had advocated allowing application of such methods to the enhancement of intelligence for the good of the realm, and Lucy, who had researched mutagenic damage in the years since getting her own MC, offered a refutation. Several rounds of vigorous discussion ensued with participation from several others, and in this latest issue the original writer conceded defeat.

She set the tablet aside, unsatisfied despite the victory. Her husband James was away with their seven-year-old son David on some interminable piece of royal business with Jack Devereaux and his son, and she was feeling lonely.

Their marriage had been a happy one, and normally she found the manse on the island opposite New Tara comfortable and secure, but today she was restless and apprehensive—it felt like a storm was about to break.

She had assisted in so many missions to keep Ireland's Peace. The first had been when she was seven months pregnant with Dave. She had been standing in this very spot looking out at the city.

* * * *

“Interested in a trip to Centralia, love?”

Lucy turned to meet her man, and kissed him. Amazing how a giant could move with such cat-like grace. He could almost always sneak up without her knowing. They held each other for several long moments in mutual affirmation.

“Why South America?”

“A matter of justice, Luce. We've got to answer a summons. It's our duty before the Lord of Heaven.”

Like his three cousins, James was a brehon. As domain holder, he held legal court one day a week to handle the more difficult cases. But from time to time calls for justice were relayed from distant places by other brehons who found themselves for one reason or another unable to render a decision. On the one hand, it was an absolute of Irish law that nothing of value could change hands in its administration. Anyone caught accepting money in connection with the justice system could be executed. On the other, brehons had to answer a call for justice, and could impose on anyone for hospitality while doing so.

“Why you, and why all the way to Centralia?”

“New Tara is the senior domain in the Americas, Luce. Sometimes the responsibility stops here.”

“And we must keep the Peace.” Lucy sighed. It wouldn't be a long journey on the fast jet, but she knew the domain lord at Centralia was no friend of the royals, and her advanced pregnancy had her bone weary much of the time. There was always risk in such endeavours. Her husband's first wife, Sarah, by all accounts not only strikingly beautiful but highly skilled with the sword, was killed during such a mission less than a year after arriving at New Tara. Some of the servants had been reluctant to accept Lucy, but she eventually won them over as they realized she was not only lacking in jealousy, but as winsome and capable as their beloved Lady Sarah in her own way.

“Come, pack a few things, and I'll explain as we go.”

Explain he did, though it took some time to answer all her questions. The only son of one Edmund Whelan, a minor nobleman in Centralia, had disappeared. He and his wife thought their boy had been kidnapped, but the police classified the case as a runaway, and refused to investigate. When Domain Lord Malachy Fogarty also declined help, Whelan began a fast against him for justice. Fogarty still did nothing, so Whelan appealed to Dennison as “Lord Protector.” Whelan was a distant relative of the royals, and could have involved the family even if James were not representing the crown at New Tara.

“So we have to investigate to see if this fellow Whelan has a case?” Lucy asked, when she had heard the story.

“That was done yesterday,” James informed her. “He does, and Fogarty is wrong, but the stubborn old unbeliever won't admit it. We have to go to his court, and embarrass him into doing right.”

“Is that why you left your sword at home, and are taking only your chain and staff?” The brehon's chain was a formal badge of office, and the wearer's judicial decisions absolute and final. The wooden staff was a weapon often carried by brehons. Twice as long as a stick, it was a potent symbol of justice by virtue of also being the modern standard measure of length—two metres in the Tirdian French system, or about six feet eight inches, Lucy reckoned. You had to be about that tall yourself to fight it well, though. Besides the four royal cousins and Hannah, she had met only a couple of others who could do so effectively. Otherwise, it was merely symbolic. “What if he refuses, or even attacks us?”

“That is also why you are wearing a bard's tabard over the ruffled white shirt proclaiming you to be with child,” James replied. “He will not touch us. We command his respect by putting the most powerful icons of the Irish Peace before the man—a brehon, and a pregnant woman who is also a bard. If he violates our persons, his own men would tear him apart.”

There was more to James's precautions, as Lucy had already half guessed. They arrived for the audience, sweeping into the manse courtroom, and adding the fasting Edmund Whelan to their retinue at the door. Lucy was still nervous, but within seconds, picked out Seamus, Jack, Hannah, and six of Patrick's agents among the guards. She assumed there were more, and decided Fogarty must be all but unconscious not to have noticed.

The affair turned out to be far more complicated than a mere audience. Oh, the confrontation went as James anticipated. The surly Fogarty immediately, albeit ungraciously, conceded, and ordered an investigation into the case, whereupon James “volunteered” to direct the inquiry, with Jack and a local priest assisting. However, after several days the boy was found dead, and in circumstances that indirectly implicated Malachy Fogarty himself in a smuggling operation. The end result was the dismissal of the Fogarty family for incompetence and corruption, and the awarding by Tara of the domain to family Jones in their place.

Lucy thought this a victory, but on the way back to New Tara, James was ominously silent.

“A crown for your thoughts,” she asked him.

“We were set up,” James replied. “More than that, we suspected it the whole time.”

“What do you mean?”

“Fogarty was an incompetent and a smuggler, but had nothing to do with the Whelan boy's disappearance. Family Jones arranged that to discredit him and acquire the domain. Worse still, Jones is part of clan MacCarthy, so now we have an enemy to the south.”

“You knew, but went along with it?”

“Had to. Whelan fasted for justice, and to do justice is more important than whether we lose ground in our war with MacCarthy, which we might have, anyway. Edmund's boy must have seen or heard something that made him a fortuitous victim for family Jones. Jack and I hoped we would find him in time, or gain hard evidence to expose the truth, but failed on both counts. Now we owe Whelan heavily for the failure. Ah, well, Jones will have a tough time governing Centralia, and perhaps it will sap energy from their clan at Tara. The Lord of Heaven knows best.”

* * * *

Lucy paced as she mulled over that old Centralia trip, and thought about other events of the last few years. James had only last week escaped the fourth assassination attempt since their marriage. True to the law he upheld, he had personally commanded a police action to clean out a nest of bandits on what would in her original world be the Carolina coast. “A true lord never sends, he takes,” was his answer to her objections.

It had been a trap. James stumbled and fell while leading a charge, and his troops rushed past him, or the explosive that killed his sergeant and lieutenant would have destroyed him. Four men had later been hung, not for treason, but for the far more serious crime of “homicide with a prohibited weapon.”

The incident had been the latest in a long line of perils for the royals. Ireland might be at peace with her client nations, and Lucy at peace with her Lord in Heaven, but the war between the factions of Ireland's noble families never ended. Would she and Sally be soldiers and coppers till the day they died? How could the Peace be kept when the families couldn't stop playing the Irish game?

Lucy shuddered at the recollection, and glanced around the study. James had been building his manse before they met, but she had overseen the finish design and decoration. The walls of the room were richly panelled in teak. Two had shelves to hold the Dennison collection of genuine antique printed books and magazines, all over a century and a half old. One was a priceless second edition Bible from the original O'Sullivan printing press in 1170. Those shared space with more recent items from her home planet, but the society and technology they depicted seemed hopelessly primitive by comparison with what she knew here.

The manse was an enormous building, home to the ten families who were its servants, and workplace for nearly fifty more who administered the domain. Twenty more worked in the city proper, overseeing the port and municipal government. Other domain staff “worked out”, performing their duties from various parts of the vast but lightly populated territory for which New Tara kept the Peace. They stayed in touch over the network using MTs or PIEAs.

Here, there were several MT wall screens that, when not being used for work, displayed artwork images rented from various museums. Against a side wall was one of the conference platforms for three-dimensional meetings with up to ten people. Sometimes she visited Sally there, talking for hours in an environment almost real enough to touch each other.

“You could make this room the command centre for a world,” Lucy thought. Of course, you could almost do that from any MT. It had taken her a long time to get used to having an electronic network spanning the world, one that allowed anyone to obtain any information, any time or place. From the big 3D unit like the one here to the hand-held PIEA, few people were out of touch for long, unless deliberately.

Each domain system stored data for its own people, including copies of commonly accessed general works. The palace machines at Tara had far more, but the routing software could find any material in seconds. Here, in a leading manse, Lucy was at most two communication satellite hops away from any other major node.

She glanced toward the other end of the room at the wall behind the two big desks she and James used. The centre was occupied by a huge coat of arms consisting of an elaborate heraldic shield surmounting three lions arranged vertically. Lucy had looked up the device, and discovered the top portion was identical for all twelve royal families. Some had different animals underneath, but four others had lions differing only in colour from these. The public database had no information on which were the king's colours; only the four cousins, their wives, and the Buffalos knew that.

Around the shield hung several swords, including the royal one James called "O'Conor." The same heraldic device was engraved in its steel blade, but in monochrome. Apparently a special scanner was required to tell the royal swords apart. James insisted this blade never be spoken of except between them, and had shaken his head several times over the habit both Jack Devereaux and Seamus Meathe had of carrying theirs. "The one Seamus wears is a fake, but its loss would be damaging, just the same. Jack's is the real thing. What if he were taken? This one," he averred, "will be kept secure for our grandchildren, even if all the others be lost."

Seamus and Hannah had designed the manse security systems, and Lucy felt safe here most of the time. However, there had been the incident with the cook and the false priest, both of which showed that no amount of electronic security was proof against subverting people.

Public places were not safe, either. At the last feiseanna, a man in the audience threw a knife when James accepted accolades for his victory in the senior sword event. Seamus saw the motion, and reacted instantly with blades from his own holsters. Lucy had never seen anyone throw knives with both hands at once.

One knocked the other's weapon from the air, and the second buried itself in the assassin's throat. Lucy sighed. There was so much to get used to. Dying, the assassin signed James, and the latter ran him through the heart with his sword. To her astonishment, the crowd cheered what she thought was unnecessary brutality. Afterward, her husband explained that though the fellow had forfeited his life by throwing a knife, to die by that weapon was dishonourable. He had given a man he recognized as a former soldier a portion of his honour back by killing him with the sword instead, thus allowing him to be buried in a military cemetery.

Lucy sighed again and walked to the window to stare uneasily over the manse grounds and out at the city across the water. People called the skyline of the distant port unforgettable, but New Tara was nothing like New York. This town spread lazily over only a part of what she still thought of as Manhattan, otherwise including only the manse, its airstrip, and a small village here on Long Island. Where stood the Brooklyn bridge on Tirdia, here was a ferry taking only foot passengers, as no groundcars were permitted on the island. Otherwise, the countryside was dotted with occasional small cultivated landholdings amidst dense forest. Lucy shook her head. Where in her native world there stood a metropolis of millions, here there lived no more than a hundred thousand. And this was a big city on Hibernia. There were only few, including Tara herself, that were larger.

Sometimes Lucy couldn't believe what she and Sally had done. Imagine getting married on three days' acquaintance with your man. If Seamus, James, and Jack had won their way, it would have been two, or one if they hadn't first had to pass the requirement of genetic screening for compatibility. However,

Colleen and Deerfoot insisted on more preparation time to put together a ceremony and invite guests. It was amazing how many came on such short notice. Father O'Grady and his wife also demanded six counselling sessions before agreeing to perform the weddings, and even kings must give way before the Church sometimes. As James put it, "When the king's path crosses the Priest's, they must walk beside each other. They do not wear the same shoes."

It was no romantic prospect of marrying into the royal family that persuaded Sally and Lucy. They simply knew it was right. God had led them here and given them and their men to each other, and that was enough. Being madly in love didn't enter into it much at the time, though it did later, but neither she nor Sally doubted then or since.

Patrick O'Toole's wedding gifts were new legal identities for the two women using their own names, something he did routinely for security agents and in witness protection. Rather than build childhood histories and complete family trees, he petitioned them into the New Tara database as "persons with records lost in war."

The wedding guests included some fascinating people. Various cousins she scarcely had straight after all this time, some civil servants from Tara, and enough senior military officers to run a war had descended on Edwardston. In fact, given that Michael and Elizabeth Ryan were there with their teenage daughter Elizabeth and infant son Liam, and so were Stan and Carol Reilly, Kate and Matthew Rourke, and various O'Tooles, Holdoms, Devereaux and others, the long house had held nearly the entire general staff of the army.

But no media representatives or members of other noble families were present, and the news channels ran no mention of the event. More than a thousand Stoney and Blackfoot came, though, and Lucy still got shivers up and down her spine thinking about them thumping their sticks on the ground in unison when the two couples had vowed "until death parts us or Jesus comes."

She asked James about the morality of bribing news reporters, but he said since it was not to report a falsehood, but to ignore something, it wasn't serious. The intent was to protect life, not to do harm. She was dubious, but let it go.

James' and Lucy's David was born nine months later almost to the day. About three months after, Hannah's Jack and Sally's Jack, Jr., came into the world mere hours apart in adjacent beds at People's hospital in Moody, with Lucy and Colleen attending. Lucy wondered about all the Jameses and Jacks, and her husband said it was out of respect for James III, during and after whose reign the name had surpassed "Seamus" and even "Patrick" in popularity.

Jack Meathe was still an only child, a not uncommon occurrence, but whenever he and young Jack Devereaux were together, they acted like the identical twins they appeared to be. Colleen O'Toole had been luckier than the other three, having had twins Patricia and Patrick, Jr., about a year after the rest.

Lucy had three other pregnancies. The second and fourth had miscarried, and the third was still a point of anguished contention between her and James. She was shocked to her core partway along when he told her a second child must be fostered out. It was the way things were done by the Irish royalty, both for security and to improve genetic variability for the next generation. A third could be kept, and there were families from whom they might foster, but a second born must leave their home. Lucy stormed and raged, but James pointed to the example of his grandfather. The prolific Conn III and Queen Ann had fostered in Ann, Jr., as their second after James III, then fostered out the twins Daisy and Maisy, kept Patricia (Patrick O'Toole's mother), given up Elizabeth (now the wife of General Ryan) and finally kept Carole (now the wife of General Reilly.)

So, they had given up three and gotten one, something for which their subjects had deeply loved them, because it demonstrated as few other things could that no one was above the ancient custom that was virtual law. In the next generation, James III and his wife fostered out their second and fourth sons, James and Conn, though the latter had later died. Their first had been William, who was assassinated along with his father. James's foster parents had died, but whether they had lived or no, he could still by blood and sword be heir to the throne. Daisy was their fifth. They had fostered none in.

It had broken Lucy's heart to part with the little girl with the clubbed foot shortly after her birth, but in the end she had obeyed, and her precious child had gone to Tara to grow up as Tia McManus. Sally had the same experience a year later when her second son Doyle was fostered out to the Whelans, the Centralia family chosen in payment for what Jack and James insisted was a debt of honour. Their descendants, too, might claim the crown if no other royal could. It was insurance.

It was hard for a brief while not to be jealous of Colleen, who, with two firstborns, was allowed keep both, but Lucy got over it quickly. You couldn't stay envious of the irrepressibly happy Colleen—she could make a friend of anyone.

Lucy longed for an opportunity to visit Ireland and see her now four-year-old. James had promised for next fall, and she was determined to suffer no delays. Didn't men understand visiting via the 3D MT was not the same as picking up a child and holding her?

James and Seamus had also worked out a risky sounding scheme that would see Jack and Sally leave Moody for the Emerald Isles within two years to expand royal activities to home island politics. It would probably result in one of their enemies taking Moody, a place where they felt his activities could be more constrained. Lucy had her doubts. From what she knew of Gerald Monde, his evil couldn't be contained. Moreover, she had to resign herself that New Tara would remain her home indefinitely. On the one hand, it was the economic engine that powered all the royals' enterprises. On the other, the royals had decided that no Dennison would enter the court until the ban on the throne expired.

Lucy still hoped for another child, but it was unlikely. She knew what the problem was. James had a mutated gene that made him somewhat infertile, and caused most pregnancies that would take to be non-viable. Sally confirmed Jack Devereaux was likewise affected. Both women doubted their husbands could have become fathers if they hadn't married off-planet. Confronted one day with this, James shrugged it off.

“It was always in the hands of God. Sarah and I could have been fertile together, but delayed too long.”

“But what of your duty to the throne?”

James gave Lucy an odd look, and proclaimed, “Others could fulfil that. Besides, you are more precious to me than children or thrones.”

Lucy knew the “you” was plural, and included the long departed but never forgotten Sarah. Far from being jealous, she loved her man the more for his loyalty. It guaranteed her own security.

She knew how to fix the genetic flaw, too. The right nanomachine could substitute that one wrong base, and repair the DNA helix. “Knew how,” nothing; she had done it. A little spray in her husband's orange juice and her tiny machines would have gone through his whole body, made the changes, and disintegrated in a matter of days. Instead, once she finished the exercise, she destroyed the nanomachine she had created. It wasn't right. Genetic manipulation of plants and animals was one thing, but playing

with the stuff of human life was a horror that had to stay forbidden. It had more potential abuses than good uses. On telling Sally, she discovered her friend had gone through the identical exercise, and come to the same conclusion. What was more, her Dave and Sally's Jack had not inherited the defect, and ought to be as fertile as anyone on Hibernia.

However, she and Sally had used their time well for other things besides raising children. Both took a year to validate their medical certificates to Hibernian standards and learn the broadsword. They were not tall enough to use a staff effectively, and even stick fighting had come hard, but once Lucy was confident her officer's rating was legitimate, she had participated in a couple of peacekeeping expeditions with James and others. Later, the two women earned their GACs, but that had been much more difficult, because administrative theory was rooted in the history and economy of this planet, and they began with none of the educational prerequisites. Still, they finished among the top five candidates for their year, and their husbands praised their results as outstanding.

Hibernian scholars devoured Tirdian journals for every scrap of information on history, technology, and other fields. Lucy was now Ollamh in languages here on Hibernia, too, with the added advantage of being a native English speaker, so could illuminate the finer points of electronic debates on the MT network concerning the Tirdian sources. Sally was recognized as Ollamh in History, and had become somewhat famous after publishing an encyclopedic tome on the linkage between seventeenth century Hibernian and Tirdian events.

However, they met few of their fellow scholars in person. Both longed to visit Ireland, and their husbands were working on the possibility, but there was always one more "incident" to deal with. The thought of Sally brought a tear to Lucy's eye. They sometimes didn't see each other in person for six months or more, what with living on opposite sides of the continent. Lucy brushed at her eye and turned from the window, deciding to go outside for a walk across the lush grounds of the estate and through the streets of the village.

The good-humoured people of New Tara loved their liege lord and lady. They invariably cheered her up and provoked her to the kind of service for which James insisted nobility was designed. "No one is noble by birth," he declared, "only by practice." She knew young Dave would become Lord of New Tara after James only if he were the most able in his generation from among all those in the Dennison household. Should a servant girl show more talent, ability, and success in her studies, she would inherit instead. Lucy once asked why Ireland hadn't appointed her recent kings the same way, instead allowing one family to rule for a hundred and fifty years. James replied it was a convenience to keep the nobility from killing each other whenever there was a vacancy. She suspected it was rather that the royal family had indeed produced the most able in each generation, but he was too modest to allow talk like that.

Neither would he permit the people of New Tara to call them "King" and "Queen" (literally, "High Lord" and "High Lady"), though as holders of the senior domain on the continent they were entitled. "There are no more kings," he would say, emotionless.

Just as Lucy was about to speak to the study door, a chime announced an incoming call.

"MT four answer," she called absently toward the ceiling microphone. An abstract painting on a wall screen cleared, to be replaced by the faces of Colleen O'Toole and Walking Buffalo. They were not smiling. Lucy assumed it was serious business. Without waiting to hear them out, Lucy absently greeted with, "Sorry, James is still away. You'll have to catch him via satellite link on his PIEA, if he has it on."

"It's you and Sal we need, Luce," Colleen informed her briskly and sombrely. "Can you drop everything and fly up here right away?"

“You mean, today?”

“Can you leave now?” Colleen asked, and Lucy thought Walking Buffalo looked like thunder as she said it.

* * * *

“Déjà vu,” Lucy thought, as the military O'Meara Jet thundered down the Edwardston runway to a stop beside the same building where she had been held captive years before. Flying almost into orbit at several times the speed of sound, then back down at the same impossible angle, the flight took only an hour. The little jet often did service for medical emergencies, and this wasn't the first time Lucy had used it.

New Tara was fully recovered from the war, and thriving, so the Dennisons could not only afford a domain jet but also finance improvements in other parts of the continent.

The economy was tougher for Jack and Sally out on the west coast at Moody, so they had no jet, but the port was starting to come around now that shipping had been rebuilt on the Great Western Ocean. Here in the interior, though, there was enough poverty, disease, and other problems to tax the royals' resources to the limit. Tara ignored everything but the two coastal trading centres, and it was nearly impossible to get trained medical personnel into the hinterlands.

Edwardston was one of the few permanent settlements in a vast region. Apart from Edwardston, the military town of Toronto, and a village of a hundred or so at Detroit, there was nothing between New Tara and Moody but transient native villages that relocated with the seasons and the buffalo, and not to the same spot each year.

It was remarkable, Lucy thought, that some places had the same names as on her earth, yet the most powerful nation there didn't exist here. Hibernia's Europeans never had the motivation to migrate to the new world, so all the great cities of the United States she had once known were here just buffalo pasture, swamp, mountains, and forest. Where stood vast cities on Tirdia, you could walk for days in Irish North America, and not see one human being. In the east, clouds of passenger pigeons periodically darkened a sky that saw no more than a handful of aeroplanes daily.

It was different on the two coastlines where there were several permanent fishing settlements, but the Los Angeles of this world, for instance, was a wretched little collection of shacks overseeing a rail line and a tiny port that dispatched one or two ships a week. Lucy visited there occasionally, and doubted there were a hundred people within miles of the place. No metropolis, no Hollywood, no palatial estates. It amazed her every time she saw it. Though accurate census figures were hard to come by, Lucy questioned even the official estimate of two million inhabitants total for all of Irish North America, with perhaps seven percent living in the two urban centres. The southern continent had roughly double that total, but its people were much poorer, even in its single major city of Centralia.

Moody was far smaller than New Tara, and clung to the end of the inlet that in her world hosted the thriving city of Vancouver and its various suburbs. Here, it was the only city on the west coast of Irish North America, with the next place of importance to the south being the village of a couple of hundred a grandiosely named Canal City that oversaw the ocean connector.

On the other hand, even the nomadic groups of the interior had access to broadcast power, and carried portable satellite uplinks, so shared in the universal literacy, with access to all levels of education. There were native North Americans who could hold their own in the Academy discussions with the most

learned Europeans, though they would never meet, nor be accepted socially if they did.

However, things like medical work require personal teaching. Sally and Lucy ran schools over the network for the natives, but brought the more promising students to live in their manses and practice in the coastal hospitals to finish their training. It was starting to pay off.

So were other initiatives. Flying over the little town of Edwardston, she saw it was starting to prosper in small ways. Walking Buffalo was a wily administrator, and the energetic, vivacious Deerfoot was beloved of everyone in the area. They had cemented their nations into a whole, turning Edwardston from a fortified battleground into a pleasant village boasting a library, school, fairgrounds, and trading centre. Given a few more years to rebuild with some help from the royals, it would be the life-blood of the great plains. Tribal tensions from the war were still present, but lasting peace seemed possible.

Today, Lucy was worried. Colleen refused to say what was wrong, except they needed the best two doctors in the world, and two hours ago at that. She checked her timepiece. Sally should have arrived on the regular passenger plane minutes earlier. She worried more. There wasn't a registered physician living in the entire Edwardston domain.

“Steps are on the ground, my lady,” the pilot of the ten-seater informed his only passenger.

“Very well, Lieutenant.” Lucy saluted as she rose to disembark. “You may return to standby duty at New Tara, and await instructions from Lord Dennison.” She had picted a message to her husband telling him where she was going, but had no reply.

“Certainly, my lady,” the young lieutenant replied, saluting again.

She hefted her medical kit, and strode down the stairs to the trio waiting outside the terminal door beside one of only six groundcars in the domain.

“What's wrong with Deerfoot?” Lucy asked as soon as she was close enough to take in Walking Buffalo's blackly tense countenance between the worried faces of Colleen and Sally. It had to be Deerfoot; she was the only one missing.

“Wait till we get there, Luce,” was all Colleen would say. They entered the groundcar in silence. Walking Buffalo put the controls on manual, and drove to town like a madman. Arriving, he pulled up sharply in front of his manse, and bolted inside as if a herd of his namesake were after him.

Tightlipped, Colleen urged her friends to follow, and they hurried after. They entered a side door, and Colleen led the way into the room that served as first-aid station and infirmary for the little town. One look at the unconscious Deerfoot, and the two abruptly switched to frenzied action. The town's synthesizer and magnetic resonance scanner, gifts from Lucy for those occasions when the need arose, were standing by. Working as a team, they had the first readouts on Deerfoot's blood and internal condition in seconds.

Colleen provided background. “We went for a walk by the Knee Joint River below Irishman's Hill to pick chokecherries and what you call ‘saskatoons.’ I bent down, there were two loud ‘pops’ from off to one side, and Deerfoot fell. I carried her back and she's been unconscious since. She has an unusual wound in her abdomen and one in each side with only slight bleeding. Her breathing is ragged. A high fever developed an hour later, and we called you.”

“Got it on the scope,” Sally announced.

Lucy whistled and moved the view around to assess the damage. “Bad one, that. You remember how after all these years?” Then she looked at the blood analysis and began to sweat. “Look here, Sal.” She pointed to the monitor, and her friend's face whitened.

“What is it?” Colleen demanded, as Sally and Lucy cut away the rest of Deerfoot's clothes.

“You're a medical assistant, aren't you?” Sally asked as they worked. “Get scrubbed for surgery. Our instruments are in our bags. We need them sterile, lots of hot water, and some O-type blood, about six litres. Buffalo, we need this bed raised up ten cents and some high intensity lights overhead, pronto.”

“Say what it is,” Walking Buffalo choked out in an agony of emotion.

“Deerfoot's been shot.”

“Shot?” His voice choked, and Lucy suddenly remembered there were supposedly no guns available on Hibernia.

“Yes, shot. Looks like a thirty calibre bullet lodged against her spine; another went right through.” Lucy turned and faced him as she started to wash in the basin Colleen brought. “Look, Buffalo, both ovaries are badly torn up. She'll never be able to have a child.”

Already stunned over the news of the impossible nature of the attack, the stricken man let his jaw drop. “But,” he stammered, after a moment or two, “But she's two months pregnant.”

Lucy whirled on Sally, who was starting an intravenous chemical drip. “Belay that,” she said sharply. But Sally had already turned it off.

“You're sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Confirmed,” said Sally, shuffling settings on the scanner, and checking another readout on their stricken friend's blood.

“Look here, Buffalo,” Lucy said earnestly. “Deerfoot has a bad infection, apparently from deliberately contaminated bullets. The intention was to kill slowly if the slugs didn't do so quickly. If we don't get some antibiotic and other soup into her and do some fast surgery, she isn't going to make it. But if we do, there is a good chance the baby will develop deformed or will abort. Not only that, our best chance to patch everything properly was for us to go through a corner of the uterus, which would kill the child. Saving the baby is going to make our work a lot more difficult, and in the end we could lose both. Most doctors from our world would say ‘save the adult and let the child go.’”

He stared at her several long seconds. “You know that's not right. Do what you have to do to save both, and I will pray.”

It took five hours, and was the longest operation they had ever performed. Were it not for their near telepathic partnership, and Colleen's skill as an assistant, Deerfoot would never have made it. As it was, they almost lost her twice before they closed, and once again a few hours later just before the fever broke.

"I've assisted on sword repairs, but I've never heard of surgery like this before," Colleen said quietly afterwards as they sat near the bed watching the monitors. "There isn't another physician in the world who could've done it."

"Frankly, Colleen," Sally said in a tired voice, "I doubt we could repeat the job."

"If she makes it, will she walk again?" Colleen whispered, glancing at Walking Buffalo, who was bent over his wife in prayer. They had removed two broken chips from adjacent vertebrae where the bullet had struck with some force.

"Maybe," Lucy said, equally grimly. "It's in the Lord's hands. So is the baby."

"So are we all," Colleen added grimly.

Lucy turned to her and raised an eyebrow.

"That bullet was intended for me," Colleen added, simply. "If I had not bent down to adjust my boot lace, I would be there." She pointed to the bed and shuddered. "Or dead," she added.

"But why?" Sally asked. "What's the point?"

"Think," said Colleen. "If the Palace Security Chief's wife were killed by a bullet, and it were blamed on one of the nations, it could spark a new war with Ireland."

Walking Buffalo looked up and growled. "If Deerfoot dies, there will be war anyway. Find out who did this, and bring justice."

Lucy glanced at the monitors again. There was nothing to do but wait. Either the repairs, regrow, and antibiotics would work, or they wouldn't. Old instincts took over. It was time to become spies again. "Colleen, show us where the attack took place."

* * * *

An hour later, Lucy was watching the riverbank near the spot, and staying out of sight. Sally, having won the coin toss, was the bait. Disguised as Colleen, she had made her very public way back to the location where Deerfoot had fallen, ostensibly to look about for evidence.

Sally worked her way back and forth along the path several times, and Lucy was about to give up when a shot rang out, and her friend fell. Suppressing the urge to run to her aid, she waited. After several minutes' silence, a man wearing a feather in his hair walked out of the bushes carrying a rifle, and bent over Sally's body to examine his kill. He didn't notice the trap until too late.

"Don't move, buster," Lucy said from behind, her sword tickling his neck. "Now, drop the gun, take your sword by two fingers and place it carefully on the ground."

He began to comply, but tensed as if to make a break. Sally forestalled this by rising to her feet in front of him.

"I couldn't have missed," the prisoner exclaimed, shocked. Then he did a double take, and Sally guessed he realized he had shot the wrong woman, for he said nothing more.

Sally grinned. The risk had been that he would try for a head shot. The sword-proof fabric all the royals now wore was the latest invention of James and Seamus. A carefully designed and tested weave of polymers and a nanomachine-grown carbon monofilament they called diamond thread, it looked, felt, and acted for the most part like any other fabric. Each garment had to be woven to custom order, however, because the outer layer could not be cut. Moreover, a blow from a sword or other object resulted in most of the energy being dissipated longitudinally along the fibres of the second layer, which acted as a shock absorber. The wearer could be badly bruised, even suffer a broken bone, but the material was an effective shield from other forms of damage. Now it had been proven in the field to be proof against small calibre bullets.

There was no point in telling him any of this, He could find out when they put the clothing on the market in six months.

Later, at the manse, he opened up freely when Walking Buffalo realized immediately he was neither Stoney nor Blackfoot, but European, and quietly hinted death by slow torture might await someone impersonating one of the People under such circumstances. Lucy knew the gentle domain lord well enough to be sure he could do no such thing, but the suggestion terrified the man into talking freely.

Yes, Colleen O'Toole had been specifically targeted, as had other Europeans in the area and several prominent Stoney. Yes, men dressed as Blackfoot were supposed to be seen carrying guns after the attacks. Yes, he thought the weapons would be offered to both sides in an attempt to escalate the conflict. No, he didn't know where they were stored. He had been hired by two men, the older of whom was called "Spike" by the younger. Yes, he would tell them where the meeting place was. Just don't hang him from a tree by his thumbs.

"Got to be our old friend the colonel," Lucy said to Sally after the gunman, one Hank Hendergrast, was removed to the manse lockup. "He was released from custody two months ago."

"A nice piece, this." Lucy disassembled the rifle to fit it into the case they retrieved from Hendergrast's firing station. It was from their own world, and German made, with precision optics. It was of a type that assassins there favoured because it could be hidden in a small package, yet when assembled, was amazingly accurate over long distances. European spies called it the "long gun," and worried about coming into its sights. Sally and Lucy assumed it had been imported several years earlier for the same purpose, and the cache only now resurrected with the former colonel having served his time for his earlier crimes.

"O.K, Sally. Here's what we need to do next. Colonel MacCarthy knows me better than he does you, and might recognize me even in disguise, so you're going to front us this time."

* * * *

Spike MacCarthy looked searchingly at the dishevelled woman his adjutant ushered into his office at the back of an east end groceteria, and wrinkled his nose in distaste. She was tall, redheaded, and might have been a looker once, but her face was covered with scars, she walked with a limp, and she reeked of cheap whiskey. She wore a common kilt that looked like it had come from a secondhand store, but was armed with stick and sword. It was unusual to see a woman warrior in these parts. However, she was not wearing a uniform jacket, so was no soldier. Indeed, her dirty bare arms were also scarred, attesting to many fights and poor medical attention. She had a brightly coloured but dirty scarf bunched around her neck and held in a knot by a large shiny piece of what appeared to be cheap glass jewellery.

He wondered briefly if she was a prostitute, but dismissed the idea. Not only did her kilt properly cover

her knees, but the strait-laced Buffalo would never allow such in his domain. He grimaced at the thought. Imagine calling an ignorant savage “Domain Lord.” Well, he would put a stop to it, and get his commission back in the process.

“What do you want?” She had persistently demanded to see him, and his underlings were too cowardly to turn her away.

She got to the point. “I’m a friend of Hank Hendergrast’s.”

“So?”

“He showed me the piece he got from you.”

MacCarthy tensed. If this woman tried to blackmail him, he would kill her on the spot.

“I want one.”

“Impossible.”

The woman looked around with wild eyes, and he wondered if she was crazy. She confirmed the guess with her next words.

“They eat babies, you know,” she whispered.

“What are you talking about?”

“The Indians. They kidnapped my baby and ate him.” She tried and failed to focus her eyes. “Hank said if I got a gun from you I could kill me some Indians.”

He leaned back in his chair speculatively, and casually asked, “Even supposing I had one, would you know how to fire it?”

She looked at him in disgust. “I was an army officer,” she asserted flatly, her eyes seeming to clear. “I was the best shot in my class.”

“Ahh,” he thought. “Another one in disgrace.” Officers, though not enlisted troopers, took firearms training, in case they needed it someday.

He decided. “All right, we’re riding out now from the livery stable, and you’ll come along.”

The woman stood unsteadily a little longer, then turned and left without a word, stumbling as she went. He snorted contemptuously at her back.

* * * *

The quick departure caught Lucy and Colleen unprepared. Just before Sally went out of range of the town transponders, Lucy’s voice came into her ear from the tiny implant they were testing.

“Sal, the reception from the camera and microphone at your throat has been great, but we’re going to lose audio and visual shortly. We see the direction you’re heading, and I’m getting trackers out there right away. Hopefully, we’ll be back onto you in a hurry. Hang in there, girl. Now listen, Sally. Keep your eyes

open. The Meathes were here a few days ago. They left their Jack with a Stoney family out that way, but he went missing last night. Hannah and Seamus are on their way back to town. There may be a connection..." She had apparently been going to say more, but the last words faded into static, and Sally was on her own.

She thought at first they would continue along the Clearwater, called the Bow back on her home earth, because that was where the MacCarthys had headquartered eight years earlier when she and Lucy first arrived. Instead, a short distance from town, the party turned sharply south in the direction of the smaller Knee Joint River. At that, Sally began to worry. Lucy wouldn't be expecting this. Would the others find her? Well, she would have to go along, and do her best to manage the situation.

* * * *

Meanwhile, Jack Meathe was grumbling to himself about his carelessness the previous evening. Left by his parents with the family of the Stoney chief for his ongoing education in their ways, he had been exploring the woods near Knee Joint Falls, when he found an old trail showing fresh boot tracks. Curious, he followed them to an abandoned farm a mile from the falls.

It was no longer deserted. Using what he thought was good woodcraft, he sneaked up on the buildings to peer through a window. Inside, he saw men opening a box. One took a long straight object from the crate, wiped it, and handed it to another. Several minutes passed while he tried to puzzle out what was going on.

Suddenly he realized. "Guns," he said to himself. "Wait till Running Bear and Dad hear about this." He turned to speed away with the news, but ran directly into the arms of the man silently standing behind him. Jack was tall for his seven years, but no amount of struggling could free him. He was firmly caught.

"Well, what have we here? What is your name, little vermin?"

Jack was dressed in buckskin trousers and fringed shirt, and his skin was deeply tanned from the time he had spent outdoors while his parents tended to business in the area. His father had drilled into him that when playing a role he was to make the part his own. Thus, though he answered without thinking, he gave his tribal name. "I am Red Lions' Paw, Sir. Please let me go."

"Why were you trespassing and looking in the window?"

"I thought I was on tribal land, Sir. If you don't want me here, I'll leave."

"None of that. You're going to visit us for a short while. My name is 'Spike,' and I don't care for spies, even if they are little boys who say they don't know what they're doing. We'll dispose of you when I get back from town tomorrow." He set Jack down, took his hand in a vice-like grip, and marched him to the house, where he locked him securely in a basement room.

Jack pounded fruitlessly on the door a while, and once tried to escape when a surly unshaven fellow in a dirty uniform jacket brought him some supper a few hours later, but was brought up short by a second door the guard had locked behind him while entering the cell.

Now he brooded. For the kid with the highest tested ability quotient of anyone alive under ten years old (he'd hacked into the test centre's database to make sure), he'd been exceedingly dumb.

He rubbed the bruises on his face where the man had boxed his head before throwing him against the

wall of the room. Well, perhaps there was more than one way out. They hadn't searched him, so his next step was to try his PIEA, but there were no transponders nearby, and the weak signal it produced couldn't reach a satellite. "Still," he thought, "the Lord of Heaven must intend some advantage by letting me have it." He dredged out of his near eidetic memory everything his father had said about the little device. It had a low-power transmitter, and depended on being near a network access node. It wasn't intended for distances greater than a few furlongs, perhaps a mile under perfect conditions. Suddenly he thought, "What if there were a really big antenna?"

He looked around the dim room. It had a single tiny window, already dismissed as too high and too small for an escape. Then he noticed an electrical outlet. Remote houses like these were not connected to a fusion-powered grid, instead, they took transmitted power from orbit via beamed microwave. The light switch did nothing, so his captors evidently had not bothered to connect. Perhaps the receiver was too old and didn't work. He looked overhead and grinned. There was all that nice wire running through the walls, and likely out to the barn as well. Maybe...

* * * *

Lucy pounded her saddle in frustration. She and Colleen, along with several parties of warriors, had combed the hills west of Edwardston for two hours trying to pick up Sally's tracks or a signal on their high gain portable communicator, but the hard-packed clay ground left no evidence of a trail, and there was only silence. Where could they have gone? She was getting worried. There had been no further word about Jack Meathe, either. How could she face Hannah? How could she face Jack Devereaux?

She wished she could run a search pattern from an aircar, but there were none in the domain, and groundcars were not much use in this terrain.

"Connections, connections, surely the two are related." She opened up a channel. "Walking Buffalo, where was the village young Jack was staying?"

"It's a Stoney settlement over to the south by Knee Joint Falls. He was with Deerfoot's family."

Lucy looked around. Slightly to her south was one of the treeless clay hills with which the area abounded. She urged her roan up the slope, and scanned the valley to the north and west with the sensitive directional pickup. Nothing. She turned around and tried off to the south. No signal from Sally, just static. She was about to give up when the PIEA at her belt chimed. She holstered the scanner and thumbed the device on, but there was nothing. Then she realized. There were miles between her and the nearest transponder, so only another PIEA nearby could have done that. Curious, she aimed the scanner pickup on her big communicator to the south once again while keeping the PIEA on. If she got a hit, the big machine's receiver could act as a network node, connecting her PIEA to the sender.

The moment she centred the signal, the screen flashed, and a text message appeared. "A man named Spike has me prisoner at a farm near the Falls. Come quick; he plans to kill me. A man named Spike..."

Lucy stared dumbfounded at the repeating message for a few seconds. The digital signature was Jack Meathe's. He must have entered the text and put his PIEA on automatic. She began to bark over the other channel.

"Buffalo. Jack's being held by Spike MacCarthy over by Knee Joint Falls. Sally must be there, too." As she wheeled her horse in the indicated direction and prayed to the Lord of Heaven for success, her eye caught the three parties of warriors down below the hill as they turned to gallop behind her.

* * * *

“Show me,” Spike MacCarthy demanded, handing Sally a rifle and pointing to the distant target.

Sally glared at him, then inspected the weapon. She was desperate to buy time. The guns were here all right; she had seen the three crates, and watched this piece taken from one of them. But there were at least ten rather desperate-looking men present besides the former colonel, and she could scarcely take them all down. Where was Lucy? Hadn't she been able to track her?

She scrutinized the gun carefully, spat on the ground, and growled at MacCarthy. “This piece has been fired and not cleaned afterwards. Bring me one that's better taken care of.”

He glared back but complied, sending one of his men on the errand. Sally stalled longer, as she checked and loaded the new gun. This one was a fixed barrel self-loading gas-operated carbine. She had used a prototype at the Camp X firing range in '43, but didn't know they had gone beyond the experimental stage. Obviously the MacCarthys had stolen a lot more things eight years back than the royals knew at the time. She bit at her lip. It wasn't a very noisy piece, either. Lucy had better be close.

“Quit stalling and show me,” MacCarthy insisted again.

Sally looked at him with watery eyes, turned, took a bead, and fired twice. Then she turned back around, spun rapidly, fired three more times, and put the rifle on a stand. “Go look,” she said, simply.

Seconds later, one of the scruffy men retrieved the target for MacCarthy, and held it out for inspection. There was a ragged tear in the centre of the bull's-eye.

“I only see three holes,” the former colonel said, skeptically.

“There were five slugs in the tree, Sir. The other two must have gone through the three spaces.”

Spike MacCarthy froze in place a few seconds looking at the target. Then, he glanced at the house. “Mick,” he barked at one of the men, “get that native kid I caught last night out here, and make sure he's securely tied so's he can't run off.” He turned back to Sally. “All right, you can shoot. But I want Indians killed with these. Show me you'll do it, and the gun is yours.”

It was the ultimate test, Sally realized. Here on Hibernia, anyone other than an officer in training caught in possession of a gun was subject to plantation labour for the crime. However, a person who fired at another human being faced the death penalty. MacCarthy wanted to ensure he controlled her as a fellow outlaw.

“Bring me some whiskey while you're at it,” Sally called to the man's back. She conceived a wild idea about throwing some in the men's faces and making a run for it, but decided to await developments—especially since there was a prisoner to consider.

Moments later, a man emerged from the house carrying a bottle, followed shortly by two more with what appeared to be a native boy slung between them.

Sally couldn't see the captive's face at first, but took one look at his moccasins, and her stomach, already churning, nearly revolted altogether. She had made them for Jack Meathe the previous Christmas. It had to be him. She hoisted the bottle, and pretended to take a swig to hide her surprise. She prayed to the Lord of Heaven to send help soon.

“Show us. Kill him.” MacCarthy ordered abruptly.

Sally put the bottle down, then stumbled over to the boy. He was hanging between the two men, secured with loops of tangle about his wrists, thighs and calves. The lower two were quite long, and the ends stuck out to one side. Sally thought fast. Tangle was, like the common bandage wrap, a genetically engineered living organism, but drawn out into a ropy shape, and having no medicinal value. While inert, it was smooth, featureless, and slightly slippery. When fired from a tangle gun or struck against something in the manner of a whip, the kinetic energy activated enzymes that behaved like glue. Then, it clung to a surface or to itself until heated somewhere on its length, when it would release and go quiescent. It could not easily be cut, and a prisoner secured with it could never escape without a hot tool.

“A bullet should do nicely,” Sally thought to herself. As she bent over the boy and blew alcoholic breath into his face, she began to hum and then sing a few words of an English hymn she had taught all the boys. She hoped she sounded to the others like a raving drunk. “I woke, the dungeon flamed with light.”

Jack's eyes widened mere cents from her face as he recognized his aunt and started to speak, but she put her hand over his mouth, repeated her drunken verse, and winked. His expression became impassive, and she straightened up. He knew the verse continued with the words, “My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.” He had better act on it.

Sally turned unsteadily and spat out, “Stand him by the target, and I'll show you what shooting is. Have him start by holding a crown between his fingers.” It would get his hands loose if they would comply. She would take care of the legs.

MacCarthy smiled cruelly and ordered it done. The guards heated the tangle to remove the bonds from Jack's wrist. Leaving his legs tied, they set him on his feet by the tree where the target had been, stationing themselves nearby in case he tried to escape. Sally waved them farther away, and when they didn't move fast enough, let off a maniacal shriek, and followed this with a round in the dust by their feet to encourage them. Then, she put a second one between Jack's thumb and forefinger that sent the little coin spinning off. Give the boy credit, she thought, he didn't flinch. Did she trust God for the help they needed as much as Jack trusted her?

Just then she heard a burst of static in her ear. It must be Lucy getting into range. If she could only stall a little longer.

But Spike MacCarthy was having none of it. “Stop playing, and do it, woman,” he demanded.

She turned and looked the group over. Besides the two near Jack, there were eight men nearby. One carried a gun like hers, and the others were armed with swords and sticks. Only the colonel would have a high sword rating, but she couldn't hold the others off very long.

“Do it, or I will.” MacCarthy took the gun from the man beside him.

“No stealing targets,” Sally informed him tartly. She turned, raised the gun, and began to hum crazily for her throat microphone from the Frank Sinatra and Gloria De Haven tune, “Come out wherever you are.” Lucy had better be getting it.

With that, she fired twice at the dangling ends of the tangle on Jack's legs and ankles. She watched long enough to ensure she had hit both, then whirled on MacCarthy as he raised his own gun a few steps away. She fired at the mechanism from the side, destroying it and sending the gun flying from his hands.

Behind her, she heard a guard shout, "She shot the tangle; the kid's getting away." Sally threw her carbine with the now empty clip to the ground and drew her sword. With a head start of ten staves or so, Jack could outrun the pair to the woods, and once there, could make himself impossible to find. She wished she could have worn the sword-proof material, but a proper disguise had dictated otherwise. She would sell her life dearly for Jack's, but she was ready. She was at peace with the Lord of Heaven.

* * * *

What seemed like an eternity later, Sally slowly opened her eyes through a vague red haze into the glare of overhead lights in the manse infirmary room, and tried to remember what had happened. She recalled sparring with MacCarthy a few strokes, and other men closing in on her, but nothing after that. She made a slight noise, and her husband appeared over the bed. "You'll be all right, Sally," Jack assured her.

She turned her head and saw the two younger Jacks and Dave to one side with Lucy. She winked at her friend.

"You're the lucky one this time, Sal," her friend said. "We got there just as you went down. But your arm ought to grow back in a couple of months."

Sally hardly took in the import of that.

"How's Deerfoot?" she asked in a whisper.

Lucy answered in clipped tones. "Stable. Fever gone. Pregnancy still viable. Going to be a boy by the blood test. Buffalo says he's going to call him David, so we'll have two of those, as well."

"A European name?"

"He's grateful, and there are enough Jacks already."

"Good," Sally replied in a coarse whisper. "Deerfoot should be all right."

Seamus came to the bed with Hannah. Sally had never seen the man so emotional. He tried three times to say something, and finally could only get out, "We owe you life's blood, soldier."

"Praise the Lord of Heaven, for you, my sister," added Hannah, with tears in her eyes. "You nearly died for our boy."

Sally took her hand with hers, "Any of us would do it."

Next, the younger Jacks presented themselves. "Thanks, Aunt Sally," Hannah's Jack said, as each put a hand over hers. That was when she turned the other way and saw her right arm ended just below the elbow in a mass of bandages. She stared dully, but could feel nothing.

"It was Jack's signal from his PIEA that led us to the location," Lucy informed her friend. "He attached it to the house wiring, and hid it under a sack so it kept transmitting even after they brought him outside. Otherwise, we would never have found you in time, or perhaps at all."

Later, when Sally recovered, they would tell her two guards pursued Jack into the woods, where he ambushed one, knocking him unconscious with a stick. Moments later, he threw the tangle that had bound him at the other's legs, and downed him, as well. When the party of warriors with Lucy and

Walking Buffalo arrived, he was striding back into the clearing, clumsily holding the first guard's sword, and had to be prevented from joining the brief fight.

Walking Buffalo took on the former colonel, and killed him. Four more of the European party MacCarthy had recruited were also dead, and the rest were prisoners. Records found there indicated all the guns were accounted for.

“We kept the Peace,” Sally sighed quietly, squeezing both boys’ hands as she drifted off to sleep. “We kept the Peace.”

Irish physicians made many of the great advances in medicine—from determining the causes of the Black Death in the fourteenth century to discovering vaccinations and wiping out smallpox and other diseases in the sixteenth. Irish scientists working for the great houses also caused some very dark episodes.

Biological warfare began in the late sixteenth century when Spanish gunners fired contagion into Irish encampments. Although the use of such weapons provoked the Irish to the extent that they subsequently prosecuted and won the war on sheer berserk rage, it galvanized their own research in subsequent decades.

That an engineered virus caused the plague of 1755 is solidly established. All the high families had the technology, but the actual culprit was never determined. Not only did nearly half the population of the world die before a cure was found—more in some places—but the altered smallpox was also mutagenic. In subsequent generations, a significant percentage of children aborted or were born with gross deformities. While later genetic work solved the worst problems, the population had by then fallen to its present levels, and there remain to this day subtle combinations of lethal genes. This is the reason for the biogenetic laws—anyone wishing to have children must first submit to a genetic scan. It is tragic for a couple to learn they cannot bear healthy children, and this remains so in about one percent of pairings in the same ethnic group.

Thus, people will go to extraordinary lengths to have children, whether by marrying into another culture for a better mix of genes, fostering out every second child, or even adopting an heir from one's household servants. The high families of Ireland, who are all to some extent inbred, have the lowest birth rate of any demographic group.

All this has not stopped some from violating the 1800 “Covenant of the Living,” banning chemical and biological war. There were man-made plagues on three occasions in the nineteenth century and during both great wars of the twentieth.

Officially, the incident at Prairie Chicken in the summer of 1955 was an isolated accident. That it was not was apparent to everyone involved. That it resulted in a remarkable revitalization of the Blackfoot people and a substantial population increase over the next two generations was due to the restraint shown by the leaders of the People, who could well have called for yet another disastrous war on Ireland. Instead, the health of people in and around Edwardston is today demonstrably the best in all Irish North America.

—from *A Medical History of Greater Ireland*, by Sunshine Rainmaker (with Richard Kent).

Chapter Seventeen

The Royal Cousins, near Edwardston, 1955 (Hibernia)

A pair of riders made their way across the dry prairie grass just east of Edwardston on a hot afternoon in mid-July of 1955. Strung out behind them were three packhorses laden with medical and other supplies. They had not far to go. Their destination lay only a couple of miles from where the grass had now erased all trace of the shantytown that had once sprouted beside the first part of the trail they took. No aircars were available, nor had they expected any in so remote a place. Neither did the local military have skimmer craft. They had checked.

The two had almost reached the small Blackfoot village where so many sick and dead awaited, but were still deep in the argument they started as soon as they heard of the mysterious plague that brought them here.

“Hannah, you are foolish to come. What if you die as so many others have?”

“Seamus, is the Lord of Heaven in control of this situation or not?” she replied, as she had already several times when he tried to persuade her to stay in town.

The two had just that morning been in the Los Angeles area investigating the activities of a group of bandits in the hill country to the north of the little coastal shantytown when Seamus's PIEA rang. He fished it from his belt holster and thumbed it on in one easy motion.

James Dennison spoke abruptly and without greeting. “I'm using the land line because the satellite link is down. Jack and I are in Edwardston for the rodeo, and we're in a situation. How fast can you get full medical kit and synthesizers to us here in Prairie Chicken?”

Seamus thought a moment. An hour back to town, a plane to Edwardston, then get a pack train together because there were no aircars available. The area was too rough, so a groundcar would never make it. “I'll call in James's manse jet from New Tara, and pick up extra synthesizers in Edwardston. The Lord of Heaven willing, we'll be in Prairie Chicken late this afternoon.”

“We'll expect you. Look, Seamus. Don't bring Hannah. Whatever is killing off the People attacks everyone, but it's sex-linked and the fatality rate is ten times higher for women.”

“It's a virus?” Seamus asked.

“No doubt. Neither of us can go back to town to get a scanner-synthesizer to isolate the molecule. We've quarantined ourselves in.”

Seamus swallowed hard. “Are Sally and Lucy with you?”

There was slight hesitation at the other end, but James's expression didn't change. “They and Deerfoot were promoted. Don't bring Hannah,” he repeated emphatically.

There was a much longer pause, and James's voice lowered as he explained further. “We left the boys in town with Running Bear's relatives to reply to an invitation to visit the village, supposedly to be inducted as honorary chiefs. It turned out no one here sent the message, and we found twenty women and three men dead, with many others in bad shape. We're doing what we can, but this thing works very fast. It can kill a fit and healthy woman in half a day. Several more have died in the few hours we've been here.”

“What does Tara say?”

“Communication between Edwardston and Tara is down. We assume the link was sabotaged.”

There would be no help from the Health Domain for a couple of days, then. “It was a trap,” Seamus observed.

“Can't be much doubt of that. I'm guessing our friend Monde is responsible—a message, so to speak. He could have killed us all. Now, what needs to be done is this. You've got to do a thorough blood workup to establish a base line before you get in, and again a few hours later to find the difference. I would ask you to drop the machines off for us, but that won't work because neither of us has done a workup for some time, and there's no way we could isolate the killer molecule without a clean control sample to compare with a contaminated one.”

Seamus shrugged. They knew what was necessary in cases like these, and actually suggesting the easy way would have been tantamount to counselling dereliction of duty. “Got to be a virus-vectored nanomachine with a sex-linked targeting mechanism.” He had already turned his horse, and was headed back to Los Angeles at a brisk trot as he discussed symptoms and palliative treatment. Hannah said very little, but had the gist of it from Seamus' end of the conversation.

When he broke the connection, she said, “If we take three pack horses, we can get one of the big synthesizers in there along with our two portables and some spares.” Like Jack and James, both of them had their MCs, and spent a great deal of time in native villages teaching modern medical techniques and providing practical treatment. Hannah had gotten her certificate four years after marrying Seamus, in the midst of a blur of studies and sword work.

“You're not coming,” Seamus declared sharply.

“Try to stop me,” Hannah countered.

“Look, Hannah, we're dealing with a virus that makes men sick, but kills women. I don't want to bury you there. What would Jack do without a mother?”

It made no difference to Hannah. “I'm Metan, remember. It might not affect me the same way. Besides, if it is sex-linked, you have to run a woman's blood before and after infection, and I'm the only one you can take.”

“It might affect you even more. Jack says it kills the healthiest most quickly.”

They argued, Seamus pleaded, but Hannah remained adamant. They picked up their Jack in Los Angeles and took him to Edwardston, there to be left with David Dennison and Jack Devereaux, Jr., among the Stoney. The boy had accepted the arrangement with a subdued attitude, and they guessed he had an inkling what was happening. It was hard to hide anything from their nine-year-old prodigy.

The argument continued while they loaded medical supplies, and it raged along the trail that went by way of the hill overlooking the plain where the Blackfoot village located each summer.

They stopped a few hundred staves from the tents, where Seamus unpacked and assembled the big synthesizer, then ran their blood analysis on it and on both portables, storing extra copies of the results on removable data cubes just in case. They put the gear back on the pack horses, and the discussion started again.

“For the last time, Hannah, won't you please go back to Edwardston with the boys?”

“I’m glad it’s the last time, Seamus dear, for I’m tired of repeating myself. I will not go back. I’m a better healer than you, and you need me. It’s my duty to enter that village, and the sooner the better, so our blood results don’t change. I’ll stop long enough to commit our work in prayer to the glory of the Lord of Heaven, but if you continue arguing, I’ll go ahead without you.

“Listen, Seamus. You royals are forever talking about duty, and how the Lord of Heaven has put it in your hands to serve people, even if it costs your lives. Do you think this applies only to you and not to me?”

Seamus looked at the impossible woman whom he loved with all his heart, and almost gave way to tears. How she had changed from the awkward, impossibly thin, but steely brave girl he had married. Now she was an achingly beautiful, elegant giant of a woman, with a silver tongue and a heart of gold. He thought her in that moment even more lovely, and knew both thanks and anguish. But he said no more, just bowed his head, and after a few moments’ meditation prayed aloud. “Oh, Lord of Heaven, we come to do your work at pushing back the boundaries of sickness, death, and evil. We plead for success, not for ourselves, but for the glory it brings to you.”

“Amen.” Hannah shouted enthusiastically, then, “Race you there. Last one past the first tent is a Prairie Chicken himself.” With that, she turned her mare’s head, and galloped off, leaving Seamus to follow with the pack horses.

He rode in a hundred staves behind her, past two rows of fresh mounds on the hillside overlooking the village. Seamus counted forty now, some much smaller than others. James hadn’t mentioned the children, but the deadly killer was clearly taking them, too. He could see more bodies awaiting burial.

When he arrived, Hannah was already in the big permanent longhouse that was the centre of the tent village and now served as field hospital. Walking Buffalo, Jack Devereaux, and James Dennison met him and helped unpack equipment from the horses and take it inside. The young chief was stone-faced, and said nothing. Seamus knew there would be a horrible reckoning for this crime, if they survived. He and Hannah had brought two additional portable scanner-synthesizer units besides the ones in their own kits and the big machine. They got these set up and connected to the solar generator that was already providing power. Neither of his friends spoke while doing this, but Jack broke the silence as they finished.

“She came. I knew she would. The People love the ‘giant witch woman’ as they call her, and think now she’s here, the dying will stop. She was a fool to come, Seamus. There are only fifteen post-pubescent females left alive here, and no more than one or two will last out the day. Neither will Hannah if we can’t stop it within a few hours.”

Seamus looked at his friends with compassion and pain of his own. “Would Sally, Lucy or Daisy have done anything different if it had been them?” he asked quietly.

“No,” James said, and Jack shook his head to agree.

“All right, you’ve got blood samples waiting, I suppose?” Seamus waved at a nearby refrigerator, wanting to get them into useful action.

“We have three from everybody in the village. One was taken just after we arrived, another every three hours since. For those who died after we got here, we have four additional samples taken at death.”

“All right, divide the samples into groups, run two of the extras through all five machines to ensure

calibration, and then start gathering data.” Seamus glanced at Hannah, who was leaning over a bed holding the hand of a very sick-looking young woman, and gazing intently at her. Hannah had the healing touch all right, something they both thought must come from her Metan heritage. More than once she had apparently willed a patient back from the brink of death, or looked deeply into the eyes of someone with a serious injury, only to have it start to heal immediately. She couldn't explain what she did, other than picturing their bodies whole again, and praying to the Lord of Heaven for healing, but there had been several rather spectacular incidents.

“I will take samples from Hannah and myself to run against our reference points hourly,” he said, resolving to take one from the woman Hannah had touched, as well. You never knew.

When he did check the bed, he was startled to discover the patient was Sunshine Buffalo, sister to the Blackfoot chief. No wonder the man was tense; his sister was dying before his eyes. There could be no doubt a European was responsible for this atrocity. Seamus wondered if it would spark a war, despite all their efforts to keep the Blackfoot nation in the Peace.

He looked around the room, and spotted a crib in the corner. It held an infant, sound asleep and oblivious to the tragedy around. He guessed it was young David, the child in whom the Irish, Stoney, and Blackfoot had been united, and who was now without a mother. The sight brought tears to his eyes, but he brushed the child's cheek and felt his healthy breathing, then willed his eyes dry. Duty to the living was more important than duty to the dead. Mourning for the lost could come later.

Each sample took several minutes to prepare and run, and the work had to be done with the utmost care to avoid contamination. They had no idea what to look for, as any molecule found in the blood of the sick that was not in his reference samples was a candidate. As they worked, Seamus reviewed the symptoms as they had been described to him in several MT calls since the first.

The patients first felt tired, and eventually the women all lapsed into several hours' sleep. When they awoke, it was to high fever, swelling of the lymph nodes, and severe lung congestion. This was rapidly followed by heart distress. How long the patient lasted after that depended on their physical condition. Paradoxically, the more fit and athletic women went down the fastest, and those in poor physical condition tended to linger. Only a few men had such symptoms; the rest recovered after a mild fever, but the fifteen remaining of both genders who had gone into the initial sleep and still survived were failing fast.

The proximate cause of death was variously lung congestion, heart failure, or complications following a ruptured spleen or appendix. One woman died when swollen lymph nodes in her throat shut off her air supply, and no one noticed until too late. Autopsies showed badly swollen or ruptured ovaries in the female victims, all but two of whom were post-pubescent. Twice in the first hour alone, Seamus heard outcries of grief, and supposed more lives had ended. He disciplined himself to work carefully and diligently. So far, the software in the main synthesizer, to which the other four had been slaved, had identified several thousand candidate molecules needing to be checked.

Hannah came over and ran a sample of her blood, then of Seamus's. He had her draw some of Sunshine's, as well, and she stayed to help. “I ought to be infected by now, so I might as well operate a machine,” she said.

Another hour passed, and they had done about half the samples. A pattern was starting to emerge, and Seamus converted two of the analysers to check urine specimens, while he carried on with blood workup.

He noticed Hannah had not moved for some time and became concerned. He looked over. Her eyes

were bloodshot and her face muscles sagged, but she was determined to finish what she was doing. "Look here," she said, when she noticed his attention. She pointed to the screen where she had magnified several blood cells, and Seamus nearly kicked himself for not doing a gross cellular structure test before this, instead of just searching for invaders at the molecular level. It was clear from the micrograph that the lymphocytes were both abnormal and far too numerous.

"How many like that?" he asked.

"Ten so far, all I've checked." Her answer seemed to come from far away, and even as he watched, her eyes closed, and she slid from the chair. Seamus picked up her long frame and carried her to a bed. There was a cry of dismay and despair from several people who saw. If the giant witch woman was herself afflicted so quickly, what hope was there for the rest?

Seamus stayed with her a few moments, holding a limp hand and praying. He took another blood sample from her, and went back to work. He added "Reilly-Connor virus" to his list of hypotheses for the software to check, and continued to run tests. He finished two more before the background program called for attention. Bringing it to the front, he discovered the guess was correct. Every sample so far had a gross chemistry and antibodies compatible with Reilly-Connor that were not present in the reference samples he had taken from himself and Hannah before entering the camp. They also all contained a virus the software had labelled "unidentified."

He told the others, and called up another process that would sequence the DNA of the unknown virus and compare it with the stored data on Reilly-Connor, then went back to his samples, starting with Hannah's from just a few minutes prior.

He had just finished the last one, and was feeling exhausted, when there was a tap on his shoulder, and a voice said, "I am a registered medical assistant, and have finished my MC except my last practical. I know how to run this equipment. May I help?"

Seamus turned, then started in disbelief. It was Sunshine Buffalo. He glanced around her, and confirmed it by the empty bed. "What are you doing up?" he demanded. Somehow, what Hannah had done had brought her around, another inexplicable healing miracle.

"I feel fine," was her answer.

She didn't look all that fine, but he wasn't going to argue. "Sit here," Seamus ordered, and proceeded to take several blood samples. When he had them, he put her in charge of the patients, feeling that with machine work nearing a climax, there were more important priorities than adding another technician. Seeing Sunshine up and around might give others renewed hope. Among other things, he told her to connect the most seriously distressed to the portable monitors he'd brought. Out of the corner of his eye, he noted her putting Hannah on one, and he prayed for his wife's survival even as he worked.

A half hour later, they had their first real answers. It was the Reilly-Connor virus all right, but modified at several locations on the DNA chain, which was why the software had marked it "unidentified" at first. As near as the three men could tell, two of the modifications accelerated the reproduction of the virus, one caused it to target X-chromosomes in affected cells, a fourth made it damage the lungs and ovaries in addition to the lymphatic system, and a fifth altered the signature sequence normally used by the conventional Reilly-Connor vaccine to identify its target.

After more work, they extracted an organism from Sunshine's blood that proved to be a more efficient and general version of the standard antivirus for Reilly-Connor. As a health worker, she had received the

vaccine years before. Apparently in her body, the nanomachine, itself a programmed virus, had recombined with the altered Reilly-Connor, acquiring additional genes. It could now identify both the original and the altered Reilly-Connor, and multiplied faster than the virus itself. Seamus thought about how Hannah held Sunshine's hand, and wondered for a moment if her Metan healing touch had somehow worked this change. It was no matter. The solution was at hand, and hours faster than they could have built it from scratch.

He was that close when a monitor alarm went off nearby, and he heard a respiratory signal go flat. The three men were deeply into the design of a complex section of the gene and the virus vector to carry it, and none could leave their machines without compromising the task. That it was Hannah who had died he could not doubt, for the alarm was very close. Seamus swallowed hard, again pushed aside grief for later, and absorbed himself in work. This duty came before family. There were many sick people to save, not just one. The sounds of Sunshine working frantically on life support systems for Hannah and ordering surgical equipment went over his head, so completely was he concentrating.

They made a few more alterations to the version from Sunshine's blood on the sequencer, and began production of a first run of vaccine on the big synthesizer. They drew some off and began tests in vitro. Under the big microscope Hannah had first used to discover the damaged white blood cells, they watched as their anti-virus multiplied and attacked the modified Reilly-Connor. It took less than a minute for the sample to appear clean, but they ran it through the analyser just in case, and found no trace of viable virus particles. They put all the synthesizers to work making more, and only as the first flask filled with what they hoped would be the stuff of life for the rest of the infected did Seamus think again of Hannah.

He looked at her monitor, expecting to see it had been turned off or moved. To his amazement, she was still alive. He went to where Sunshine stood at Hannah's bedside, and saw that she had done an emergency tracheotomy.

Sunshine explained. "The lymph glands in her throat swelled shut, cutting off her breathing. She lost air for less than a minute while I got a tube in, but her lungs are filling with fluid now and, she can't last much longer."

"Is there anyone else in worse shape?" Seamus asked.

"No. Two about the same, but none worse," she replied.

"Bed numbers for them?" he asked.

"Seven and ten."

Seconds later, he was back with a syringe. There was an IV hooked up, so he shot the vaccine through the valve closest to her skin. Jack and James were doing the same at the two beds Sunshine had indicated. After giving the injections, they sat down to wait. Unless someone became much worse, they would do no more until they saw what happened with these three.

It took three hours, and they did inject four more in that time who came to be in immediate danger. Seamus was dozing in a chair beside Hannah's bed, tired partly from the effects of the work, and partly from the action of the virus on him. There was a noise above him, and he came instantly alert. Hannah moved her hand. As he watched, her eyes opened with a frightened look.

"Don't move," he said to her. "You've got a tube in your throat." He checked her vital signs on the

monitor, and found them almost returned to normal. He felt the lymph glands in her neck, and found them slightly swollen, but not dangerously so. "Hannah, we've given you a vaccine we built," he advised. "You were the first, and we need to check your blood for side effects before we go on. I'll run the test, and have Sunshine take your tube out as soon as possible." He shone a light in her eyes, and asked her a rapid-fire series of questions for which she was to blink once for 'yes' and twice for 'no.' Satisfied, he drew the samples he needed and returned to work.

Two more hours went by as they checked blood every ten minutes from the first seven vaccinated patients. At the end of that time, the virus was completely absent from the first three. White blood count was stable, and they were confident no obvious side effects had been generated. As the regular Reilly-Connor vaccine was well known and had been used for decades, they thought it unlikely they would have further problems, and proceeded to vaccinate the remaining women and girls. By this time, the manse jet Seamus had ordered dispatched to Tara had returned, and two volunteers from the palace Health Domain joined them with additional equipment and more synthesizers.

There was only one more death in the village—an older man with a history of heart and lung problems who had a massive heart attack, and died in his tent. Three days later it was apparent the vaccine would do all they needed, and they gave it to the men as well. Meanwhile, they started in on animals. Horses, cattle, and dogs tested fine, but cats and pigs were infected, though asymptomatic. For a whole day they sprayed the entire perimeter of the camp for some distance around in case any small mammals had contracted the virus, and trapped prairie dogs to ensure they would not carry it out. By that time, the hospital was empty except for the medical staff. They continued to work on the vaccine molecule, and succeeded in coding it to destroy the altered gene sequences wherever it found them. This, Sean explained, was so that if the perpetrator used the same genes to modify another virus, the vaccine would remain effective.

They wrote up the episode for the Health Domain MT journal along with a recommendation that the vaccine be widely deployed once it had undergone further tests. Nothing was said to the Health people about their suspicions of Monde, but Jack arranged to mail a letter outlining events to him with some of the antidote encapsulated by spores on the paper. On opening, they would disperse, infect Monde and, they hoped, also his experiments. He would get the same immunity as they had, but with luck, his work might also be set back.

After two weeks, they decided to lift the quarantine and return to town, but cancelled all flights and trains out of Edwardston for a few days, just in case.

On their last afternoon in Prairie Chicken, Jack, James, Seamus, and Hannah left the longhouse for a final inspection of the village, and to hold a private war conference just outside it. Walking Buffalo came with them, still grimly silent. But before they left the shadow of the main building, they were met by Sunshine. She had a fresh rosy hue on her cheek, and on her arm was a handsome young warrior armed with a sword. She was fingering a new ring in which Hannah at once caught the gleam of jade.

"My lords, my lady," Sunshine bowed as to superiors, "may I present my intended husband, George Rainmaker."

All four immediately bowed back, but as to equals. Startled, the young Haida warrior hesitated, then copied them.

Jack Devereaux brightened despite the sombreness of the day. He recognized the grave and serious young man from Moody. "Certainly I know George. If I am any judge of men, he will be High Chief of the Coastal bands some day. You have a fine man there, Sunshine. Treasure him well."

Hannah was more enthusiastic. She ran to the couple, gathered them both in her long arms, embraced them heartily, and admired Sunshine's ring appropriately. Glancing back, she saw even Walking Buffalo smiling for his sister, despite the heart-wrenching losses.

George spoke for the first time. "My lords, my lady, you have given me back my life by saving Sunshine. I owe a warrior's life debt to you all." He bowed again, pulled out his sword to make formal salute, and began a ceremonial older than Tara's throne. "My family are your family and yours are mine, my home is your home, my salt is your salt, and my bread is your bread, for as long as the rivers shall run and the hills shall stand." It was evident from the blade that he, like Walking Buffalo, was trained as an Irish officer, though he also was not wearing his colours.

The cousins and Hannah drew their own swords and acknowledged the oath, one that was different from but equivalent to Irish friendship fealty.

Then Hannah announced. "We have something for Sunshine, don't we, my lords?"

Seamus beamed. "Indeed we do." He and Hannah had been elected for the task, so he fished in his pouch for the little insignia that had come that day by the first mail courier they had allowed to enter the village.

"Stand forward, Physician Sunshine Buffalo."

Knowing immediately what this manner of address must mean, and in a daze of double happiness, Sunshine released the grip George had on her arm, took two steps toward Seamus, and came to attention.

Seamus cleared his throat. "Having reviewed your examinations, and having participated in a practical demonstration of your skills, we, being qualified senior physicians, have formed a duly constituted medical examining board. We have registered your MC with the Medical Academy over our signatures, and it gives me great honour to present your insignia. Wear this with pride, serving both the Lord of Heaven and the People with honour and integrity in your chosen profession."

He held out his hand, and the twin snakes of the little physician's broach glistened in the summer sun. "I might add that in view of your exam results and performance here, we have inscribed your certificate 'with great distinction', and we anticipate you will bring much honour to the practice of healing."

When Sunshine didn't take it right away, Hannah snatched the medallion from her husband's hand, and pinned it to her friend's vest for all the world to see, with the words, "The Lord go with you, my sister, and may my family and yours ever be bonded." She gave her another hug.

Unnoticed by them all, the solemn little face of four-year-old Alice Cloud peered out at the proceedings from behind a nearby tent. Her mother was dead, a catastrophe that had not as yet registered in her young mind. Like several other orphan children, she would be adopted into a family of the Blackfoot nation, but for Alice it was merely the first of many steps along the way in what would for years be a hard, harsh life.

After George and Sunshine drifted off to visit her relatives and friends, the other five made their way out of the village and up the hill toward the makeshift cemetery. There, they visited the more than sixty graves, one by one. All the bodies had been disinterred and soaked with the antigen to prevent problems if any were exhumed later, so the mounds were fresh.

Walking Buffalo grunted, speaking to them for the first time. "Someone of Ireland did this to my People, and Ireland must recompense."

There was no denying the fact. Walking Buffalo had doubtless been told by his sister about the nature of the infection. Moreover, he had an Irish military education, and surely knew such a virus must have been engineered as part of the endless wars among the high families. The four visitors might be celebrated heroes in the eyes of the People now, but if Walking Buffalo or Sunshine spoke of what they knew, the life of every European in the area would be endangered over the heinous crime.

"What have you in mind, friend?" Seamus asked. If the young chief had already decided to provoke his people to war over the matter, he would not be holding this discussion.

"The People are not numerous, and the gene pool has little variability." His voice was flat and emotionless as he recounted the background for what was to be a major request. "We encourage marriage between nations, but the birth rate is very low."

Seamus nodded. It was the same in Ireland, and he already guessed what Buffalo would ask. It was the right thing to do. Such problems were part of the fallout of the biological wars, and one of the reasons certain types of research were banned, a ban not everyone observed; witness the atrocity here. The high families were particularly affected because they were related. Marriage among them might foster political alliances, but it transmitted the genetic makeup of the family only if there were children, and all too often there were none. This was the reason some tolerated subject marriages alongside convenience ones, the subject being chosen from another nationality so as to make children more likely. Others, like the Ryans, made it a policy to marry outside Ireland in the first place.

Walking Buffalo continued. "I now have sixty men aged thirteen to fifty who have lost their wives or their prospects. Other villages in the area cannot supply women voluntarily. What are these brothers of mine to do, go on the warpath to steal women as in the old days?"

"I see," said Jack Devereaux. "The price of a continuing alliance with Ireland is that she supply replacement wives."

Walking Buffalo looked around at the others. "I will not dissolve my word, even though so many were gathered. The alliance we have is between you royals and me, not between the peoples we represent. However, you must do something for my nations."

"I agree," put in James. "We are honour-bound to solve the problem, even if it is not of our making, for obviously someone of the nation we represent to the People did this thing."

Seamus rubbed his chin. "The people of this village are believers in the Lord Christ?" he asked.

"They were and are, every one," the chief replied, firmly.

Seamus was thinking. The obligation was clear enough. Moreover, there were many daughters of Ireland, especially among the high families, who failed the genetic screening and would never be allowed to have children because of the high probability of deformities, casualties of shortsighted inbreeding among the families.

In the Irish context, if they were not the heirs of their name, they were unmarriageable. He knew women who had committed suicide, but many simply entered a convent and lived out their lives away from the

sight of men and children. A few of the highborn whose families could afford it moved away from Ireland. Because of constant battles fought by the still mainly male armies, there was a substantial surplus of women on the home island, and those who could not have Irish children were consigned to the genetic rubbish heap. He rubbed his chin again. Surely there were sixty who would consent to leave Ireland, move here, and become one with the People for the chance of having the children they could never hope for by an Irish father. Some might bear three or four with the unions they would make, and find it more than worth coming. It would take time, money, extensive testing, and much persuasion, but...

Hannah knew her husband too well. When he thought deeply, his ideas spoke aloud in her brain. "What will you do about Monde's petition?" she asked Jack Devereaux, in an apparent irrelevancy.

One of the first items they had seen on the MT when communications were restored following the five-day satellite failure was that Gerald Monde had petitioned the court to have the Devereaux family grant of Moody revoked, and the domain awarded to him instead. He cited all kinds of economic advantages to the realm of having a larger and more established family in charge, and there were indications he would win the application.

"It's as we anticipated, though sooner than we planned. He will expect me to fight him," Devereaux said, "but there is little point in that. He would prevail anyway, for I will not go to court to counter his bribes. However, we felt all along it will be best this way in the long run, because he will be away from Tara much of the time. Gerald has a boy, Thomas, I think, whom I hear he dotes on, and that might help keep him out of our lives, too."

"I thought Gerald never married," Hannah said, surprised.

"Don't think he did," Jack replied. "But he has a son, nonetheless. Apparently looks a lot like his father."

"I'm uneasy about the People," Hannah put in. "Monde will be no friend of theirs."

"Their chiefs and I have discussed a few measures to ensure that they can continue as effective leaders of their nations," Jack replied. "Family Monde will have a difficult time doing much outside the urban area. The coastal territory is too vast, too thinly populated. Initially the People will have the advantage of bugs we've planted in the manse and other government buildings in the European quarter."

"What about the research labs in the mountains?" James wanted to know. "Surely we can't let Monde have those."

"Oh," Seamus responded offhandedly, "he won't get anything from them. Health closed them both, and moved experiments to a new secure facility on the home island a year ago, the same building as the national fertility lab. Patrick and I blew up the old ones in case there was any contamination."

James raised his eyebrows at this news. The fertility lab was part of a project they had all quietly championed. It would one day allow any couple to have a child, in the process rendering the biogenetic laws moot. But the move of the experimental lab to the same location had been kept so secret that even he knew nothing of it.

Jack summarized. "All in all, we have little to protect at Moody any more, and if Gerald moves there, we should be more able to establish an effective base on the Emerald Isles. Patrick has already put a tentative offer on a manse, the old Morgan place, and I'm inclined to tell the court Monde can have Moody, say, at the start of next year. There's no reason not to advance our plans by six months. I have a standing invitation to teach medicine and the sword at Kilkarney, and think I could be more effective

there than here, especially now.” He waved a hand at the fresh graves.

Walking Buffalo looked from one to the other, not sure where the thread was going. The Irish could be as obtuse as his own people in a complex situation.

James made his contribution. “New Tara has a defensible manse, and the police force is effective and loyal. It's our revenue source. We need to hold it, and when Dave's old enough, I would rather he went to Toronto cadet school than move to Ireland and attend Kilkarney. The farther away from Tara I live out my days, the better.”

Seamus turned to Hannah. “What do you think, love? Shall we stay here in Irish North America with James, or go to Ireland? If we went, the young Jacks could do their schooling together.” He argued the case. “As I recall, there's a small home on the Morgan place we could use, and it's not far from Kilkarney. We could both instruct there, and, I think, still make summer trips here. Now that Matt and Kate Rourke are running things at Tara, it ought to be safe for our families, especially with Gerald Monde away at Moody much of the time.”

Hannah looked from face to face around the circle. She loved this country, and it would be a shame to leave it, but she and Seamus had to settle down soon for the sake of their nine-year-old son's schooling. They had been wandering too much. A little distracted thinking about her Jack, she nodded so slightly only Seamus saw it.

He turned to their petitioner. “All right, Buffalo, that settles it. We will return to Ireland at least for as long as it takes to find wives for you and your warriors, say three years, then decide whether to come back here. You give us personality profiles and ages, and we'll find you the very cream of Ireland to match them, believing women of good character who will beg to come for the chance of being mothers, and who will make good and loving wives. Scramble up the genes, and who knows how much you can build your nation.” He elbowed Hannah in the side. “We'll get Hannah to screen them all personally.”

She had been thinking it over, and the more she considered it, the more the project appealed to her. The convents might suffer, but they could surely spare sixty or so strong young women whose only crime was that their parents had not given them a healthy enough mix of genes to allow them to marry Irishmen. A woman who entered a convent was not bound to remain; her vow of celibacy was only so long as she freely chose. She thought about all the dead here, and her heart was overwhelmed with sorrow. But the living had to go on. There was no doubt James was the stronger of the two men, and his situation was very secure. It was the Devereaux family that would need help and protection. That quickly, she was settled in her mind, and thanked the Lord of Heaven silently for giving her peace.

Aloud, she concluded, “I think I would like Ireland for a while, but on one condition. I stay in the country, and will not visit Tara.”

“Very well,” Walking Buffalo said. “On that basis, I will continue to counsel my peoples that the Irish are honourable. We will accept whoever you send as one with us, and they can make up their own minds. If they stay and marry, fine, but if some return home and reduce their number, we will not hold you responsible.” He saw Seamus place fingertips on his sword, and waved him off. “No, there will be no oaths. We have done that. Now, we must trust.”

Agreed, they bowed heads over the graves, and wept freely. After each prayed, the five drew swords, but it was to salute the dead one last time.

On the one hand, it was as if the dead had been part of their conference, and on the other, this was their

last good-bye, though they would return with enduring tombstones to mark the place.

There is much truth in the centuries-old saying “If information isn't power, it's the next best thing,” for it is the means of establishing and destroying power. Of course, gateways to the house of power are defended and can only be stormed with carefully selected and skilfully wielded weapons. These may take years to assemble.

—Basic notes in information sciences, by Commander Devereaux, Kilkarney cadet school.

Chapter Eighteen

Brian and Meghan, New Tara, 1987 (Hibernia)

Brian McIlhargey employed numerous information gathering techniques during his long conflict with his enemies. It was no accident he chose to work with security systems, for they made the perfect cover to conduct information searches. Each query was carefully constructed so as to appear to seek innocuous material, and at first he had to do so without directly accessing either the court machine or any of the regional databases controlled by the nobility. All those had traps to record visitors, and he wanted to ensure no attention came his way. Piece by piece, he had begun to assemble the facts behind the facade the standard reference works called “the Devereaux rebellion.”

A major regional node itself, the Dennison system was larger and more capable than any he had controlled thus far, and he had made more progress in the last year than for all those prior, because he could bend security to his own purposes, ensuring his personal work went unrecorded.

He was careful to disguise his data requests as searches for material that would only peripherally yield what he really wanted, and to make the requests at intervals of every few weeks, lest anyone become curious about his activities. Patience, patience. There was plenty of time. Sometimes he piggybacked his inquiries on Meghan's, whose school account was expected to channel the unpredictable and strange.

On this, a night shortly after the traumatic tenth birthday talk with Meghan, he had gone late to the Dennison Manse, and was working on obtaining economic statistics for the Reilly and Monde domains around the time of the battle of Glenmorgan. He was not sure what he was looking for, but reasoned if either or both of the two ambitious officers had been corrupt at the time, there might be unusual monetary patterns yielding evidence to bring one or both down. After all, the law regarded breach of public trust as a more heinous crime than murder.

He was intent on the work, stripping routing information from the info-robot he was inserting on a Russian machine he had subverted several years before, and almost didn't notice the slight breeze on the back of his neck until too late. Suddenly aware, his hand instantly brushed three keys, concluding the transaction and altering the display to show a routine security check on the Dennison system. His information gathering program would sit on the Russian machine for months before transferring itself to another node in South Africa where it would do its work, transfer itself again to Poland, then sit dormant monitoring for attempts to subvert or read it for several more months. He might not decrypt the data it gathered for as much as a year, and it would be from yet another machine to which he could not be tracked. When he did read it, the entire info-bot would self-destruct without a trace. He made no paper or electronic records, instead memorizing each carefully gleaned fact.

“What are you doing here at this hour?” The voice was steeped in hostility.

Brian did not turn around, lest surprise be seen in his face before he collected himself. "Greetings, Master Dennison," he stated in cold, unemotional tones. "What black luck," he thought, "that Alfred Dennison would come prowling around at this hour." He resolved this would be his last session here. Indeed, it was time to move to a new base of operations.

"Well, what are you up to?" came the demand again.

For answer, Brian displayed the night's activity log on the main wall screen. When it was visible, he said quietly, still not turning, "You will note item three. It triggered a fault alert at level four on my PIEA monitor, so I came over to see what the difficulty was. As you can observe from items ten through fifteen, the problem was a failed link box in the connection to the Metalibrary network. I have swapped out the bad hardware, and am testing the system to ensure the new part is functional and secure." He mentally commented first on the completeness of his preparations, then on the unlikelihood Alfred Dennison would understand what he was seeing, much less be able to penetrate that the fault was prearranged.

There was a long silence behind him, then a hand rudely seized his shoulder, and young Dennison snarled, "Face me like a man when I talk to you, merc."

Brian resisted the combat instinct that insisted he spin in his chair, slap the hand up, move to one side, then slash down with the edge of his own hand with just enough force to break young Dennison's wrist before knocking him to the floor and demanding his submission.

Instead, he froze in place long enough to send the message that he would respond in due time, then slowly rose, pushing the restraining hand away as if absently brushing aside a fly.

"So long as I am performing the duties Lord Dennison has assigned, I am his arm." He emphasized the word "his."

The flat, calm response was at once justification for his own actions, and veiled challenge. Lord Dennison had pointedly refrained from making Brian subject to his son, so he could order the young man from the security room and expect to be obeyed, for he had the full authority of Alfred's father in this place.

As he turned, Brian calmly surveyed his accoster. Alfred was a tall, wiry fellow of perhaps twenty, and fairly strong despite the amount he drank with his friends, but lacked the conditioning and training to stand against him. In the current outlandish style, he had dyed his hair black, and affected a long, thin moustache that was waxed into a curl at each end. Somewhat a fop, he wore a shirt and vest of a flowered design with gold brocade at the collars and cuffs, and a wide lace ruffle running down his chest. "If it weren't for the hair on his face and the colour of his shirt, you'd take him for a noncombatant woman," was Brian's disparaging thought.

Not at all intimidated by the bigger and older man, Alfred continued aggressively, "I don't like you or trust you. Someday I shall teach you your place with the edge of my sword."

"I train troops for a living," Brian pointed out, hoping to signal the lad he could be in danger.

"What are enlisted men but clumsy sword mechanics? I am an artist who could sweep any of you aside in seconds, and paint your body with your own blood in the process. My father and grandfather may have been content to live here." He waved about him as he sneeringly dismissed the opulence around, and continued to boast. "But I shall one day take our hereditary place and stand at Tara, where there is no telling how high I shall rise. So keep a civil tongue in your head, especially when you are not being my

father's arm.” With that pronouncement, Alfred Dennison turned on his heel and pranced from the room.

Brian McIlhargey sighed and gathered up the instruments he used to detect and correct the fault he had induced with a software time bomb inserted in the system that afternoon. There was no explaining to such as Alfred that should, say, the chambermaid's daughter prove more learned and skilled than he, she would take the family name from him and go to court as Dennison instead. On the way home he wondered how much damage Alfred could do at court—if he got that far—before someone tired of the dandy, and killed him for the practice. Even the lesser hereditary nobility, who did not always possess the skills to stand near the front of the court, would not long endure the blot on their company such a one as Alfred would represent.

Meanwhile, tomorrow would see his own resignation. It was time to move quietly along to another place.

Things did not work out that way. When he told Meghan the next morning, Wednesday, she was neither surprised nor upset, but begged a few days to finish and present the play her class was preparing for that Friday evening, the last public event of the school year. He relented, deciding it should be possible to avoid young Dennison that long. It would give him time to consider where they could go now that New Tara was no longer suitable.

There were good schools in eastern Europe and South Africa that tried to emulate the Kilkarney model on behalf of the lesser nobility who could not afford or lacked the prestige to send their children to the elite cadet academy, but he needed a more obscure safe haven. Besides, Meghan couldn't cadet for a while yet; she still had upper school. They could move again when that time came. Perhaps they could make do with well-connected MTs and his own tutoring for a few years. But what place was impossibly out-of-the-way, yet had a modern public library?

Unbidden, the image sprang to mind of a large brownstone building amidst a few neatly laid out streets nestled against two winding rivers. The more he thought about it, the more sense it made. Edwardston was perfect. He grinned and began to whistle a low tune. Meghan looked up from her homework to smile at him and Karen. How she loved her little family. What did it matter if they weren't close blood relatives?

Friday night came, and the whole population of the little village adjacent to the Dennison Manse made its way to the theatre for the middle school performances. His lordship also attended in his role as “Patron of the Academy,” dragging the reluctant Alfred along in order to school him in his public duties.

Following opening prayer by the local priest and the always stirring singing of “Rule Hibernia”, two classes offered a series of musical presentations, and there were three short plays from younger students. After intermission, Meghan's class, the oldest in the school, presented a longer drama. Her group had chosen “Death in the Glen,” a sappily sentimental, popular, anonymous work based on the battle of Glenmorgan. Brian suspected Meghan had a lot to do with the choice.

From the time the introductory banner unfurled on the large electronic backdrop, he spent forty-five minutes on the edge of his seat, his normally placid heart beating rapidly, his eyes filled with tears, as the all-too-wrenchingly-familiar story played out. He had attended other productions of the play with less emotion, but Meghan played the part of Lady Katherina with such sympathy, conviction, and force that he saw the mother rather than the daughter throughout.

He could not help afterwards glancing around at his neighbours and wondering whether Meghan had overdone the role to the point that someone might identify her. But Katherina Rourke had not been well

known beyond inner court circles and, he reflected, it was unlikely anyone here could see the resemblance he did. The young lad who played opposite her as Jack Devereaux seemed in awe of his taller, more vigorous Katherina, but delivered his own lines with a flair and panache that bode well for a stage career, if he so chose.

The playwright, likely with the integrity of his own neck in mind, had included none of the treachery and manipulation of the court and its forces, but did portray Devereaux and Rourke as sympathetically as possible. Meghan and her young friend created classic tragedy as they made one fatal choice after another along the way to a bloody end. Instead of showing Katherina dying in the fired manse, as everyone knew had happened, the story ended with grand simultaneous sword fights centring around Katherina and Jack on different parts of the battlefield. The co-stars hammed this part up for all they were worth, extracting the maximum tear-jerking sympathy from their audience as they both went down for the last time, each pierced by numerous swords, their companions all dead or seriously wounded. No mention was made of the fire.

“The author must have been there,” Brian decided, as every time he saw the play, for the plot clearly reflected a firsthand view of battle conditions that fateful day, even though parts were obviously wrong. Much as she would have wanted to, Katherina had been far too ill to have gone near the battlefield. “Romantic poetic license,” he concluded.

The performance ended to thunderous applause as the resurrected cast held hands and bowed several times. When the audience stood, Brian remained rooted to his seat, still pondering the reality behind what he had just seen. Preoccupied, he was only vaguely aware of blows, shouts and a noisy scuffle at the rear of the theatre. He absently noted Karen spring up beside him and race down the aisle to congratulate her sister.

Thus it was he found himself staring vacantly into the very space at the front where Alfred Dennison jumped to his feet, moved to one side into the aisle and glared, annoyed, at the source of the disturbance behind the audience. Karen, pigtailed hair flying behind, arrived at the spot that very instant, collided with him at top speed, knocked him sideways into the end seat, and nearly fell to the floor herself.

“Oh.” She put her hand over her mouth as she turned to face him. “I’m terribly sorry. I didn’t see...”

Alfred Dennison, recovering quickly, cut her off. “You filthy dirt eater. Show respect to your betters.”

Karen got a vacant look, and started to say, “I don’t understand. It was an accident...”

“Do obeisance or draw a sword,” he demanded. Alfred’s voice was slurred, and it was evident he had been drinking.

Lord Dennison put his hand on his son’s lower arm. “It’s the half-wit woman. She’s a noncombatant. Leave her be, Alfred. She wasn’t challenging you.”

Young Dennison shook the hand away angrily. “She struck me, and if she won’t fight I am entitled to have her swear obeisance.”

This was not strictly true, of course. All had seen the collision was accidental, and as a noncombatant, Karen could not be required to give satisfaction; but Alfred’s temper had risen, and he would not let the matter go.

Karen looked about her, then back at Alfred, confused. “I can’t swear to anyone,” she stammered in her

meekest little-girl voice, “because Da says it's not allowed.”

“I'll teach you...” Losing his temper altogether, Alfred Dennison balled his fist and took a swing at the girl's face that lifted her from her feet with the force of the blow, sending her flying into the now deserted orchestra pit to lie tangled among chairs and music stands.

There was a scream from the stage as Meghan realized what was happening, and ran to her stricken sister. Young Dennison also took a step in that direction with the clear intention of inflicting more damage, but was brought up sharply by a hand clamped firmly to his shoulder.

He turned, more furious still at being interrupted, to find himself face to face with Brian McIlhargey. The latter had been slow to react, but the entire affair had taken only the few seconds it required to bolt to the front himself.

Over the sounds of the continuing scuffle at the rear, Brian's stern voice could be heard throughout the theatre. “You, young Master, are a cowardly swine. You call out a harmless noncombatant woman who cannot defend herself, and strike her over a trivial accident. You are unfit to hold authority, or even to live.”

There was sudden silence, and Alfred reacted first with astonishment, then sadistic glee. “You insult me, vile merc? Draw your sword, and we shall see who is the better man. Or, better yet, swear to me yourself, and I won't kill you.” He backed two steps and put his hand on the hilt of his own weapon. Then he cocked his head drunkenly, and grinned. “I've never been beaten, you know.”

“I was once,” conceded Brian gruffly, “but it took a troop of men on the battlefield, and they were seasoned veterans, not callow boys the likes of you. I will not draw first, and I offer you the opportunity to apologize to Karen and escape a thrashing.”

“Apologize to the slut of a merc? You're out of your mind.”

Brian remained calm under the further insult, and began to lecture his opponent. He was dimly aware that Lord Dennison, Meghan, and several others were now bent over Karen, but could not spare that part of the scene any of his attention.

“Karen suffered severe brain damage in an accident as a child, and is incapable of thinking or acting as an adult. She is an innocent and cannot fight. For the record, I say Karen is my daughter, and I defend her honour against you or anyone else who impugns her. You are a foul-tempered drunkard who has not yet grown to adult responsibilities yourself, but if you apologize to my daughter, we will forgive you, and that will be the end.”

At this, Alfred Dennison burst into high-pitched, almost maniacal laughter. “You? Forgive me? Who do you think you are, a High Lord?” The idea appeared to enrage him, and he stepped back again to make room in the space before the front row, swayed momentarily, then abruptly drew his weapon. “I say the lot of you are vile scum with no honour, and the earth is best rid of you. Defend yourself, if you can.”

Brian could smell alcohol on Alfred's breath, even at a distance of a couple of staves. Drunkenness did not remove responsibility, but he did not immediately respond in kind. Instead, he called out to his employer in the crowded, but now eerily silent room. “My Lord Dennison. Have Master Alfred and I your leave to settle a matter of honour with the sword?”

Dave Dennison's reply was wan and tired. “I would take it as a kindness if there was no killing, but it

must be dealt with. You have permission.”

“Enough nonsense,” the younger Dennison blurted out, making a rush at Brian McIlhargey, who still had not drawn his own weapon.

Alfred never did understand what happened next. One moment he was bearing down on a defenceless man, the next his opponent was no longer before him. In a third, he felt himself knocked off balance with a shove to one side. Before the fourth, he felt a mighty stab of pain across his buttocks, and found himself falling face first, sprawling on the floor. He heard a few giggles and tentative chuckles from the crowd, whose attention was now riveted to the fight, the evening's entertainment and the earlier scuffle all but forgotten. They had seen the calm grey-haired man move to one side, strike the young Master, draw his sword, and give the lad the flat of it in a single motion. Yet it was done so quickly, many weren't entirely sure what had transpired.

Alfred got clumsily and painfully to his feet, and as he did, Brian McIlhargey calmly announced. “I have disciplined you across the backside with the flat of my sword as you deserve. Now, will you apologize and withdraw from the field, or is it necessary to give you further lessons?”

Enraged, Alfred sprang toward him, swinging his sword wildly. Brian easily turned the younger man's blade aside, twisted slightly to lock weapons, then grappled face to face. Little by little, he forced the two swords down across Alfred's chest, cutting the gold buttons from his vest one by one with his own trapped sword as he went. With rising panic in the face of vastly superior strength, young Dennison brought his left hand around to free himself, and gave a shove. As he did, Brian casually flicked his sword, cutting across the other's left wrist. “You'll strike no more defenceless noncombatants or children with that hand for a while. I've severed the tendons.” He tossed his own sword to his left hand. “But to even things up, I'll fight your good arm with my other one.”

Alfred, staring at the blood streaming from his wrist, could have known himself beaten, but refused to admit it. Instead, he crouched into fighting stance, warily preparing to fight defensively until his head cleared from the pain.

Brian strolled casually toward him, and in another lightning motion, casually slapped Alfred's sword aside, delivered two swift, precisely-gauged strokes and moved away. There was a gasp from the crowd as they saw a line of red appear across young Dennison's chest where the first cut through his vest and shirt, and two more on his upper thighs where the second sliced apart the front of his kilt, much of which now sagged almost to the floor.

“Will you concede and apologize?”

In answer, Alfred, now in a cloud of pain, again rushed wildly. Brian turned aside the clumsy downward stroke, stepped past a second, and gave another lazy flick and twist of his own weapon to send the unlucky young man's sword flying through the air. In the same motion, he duplicated the previous injury, cutting the tendons on Alfred's right wrist. He then rested the flat of his sword against the young man's neck. It was over. Brian was not breathing hard, and Alfred had failed to land a single blow.

“Let's have done with this. Go to the girl.” He nudged Alfred toward the waiting group at the edge of the orchestra pit where a medic had now strapped Karen to a carry board. Alfred, clutching his ruined wrists under opposite arms, stumbled in the indicated direction. When he was yet a staff from Karen, Brian withdrew slightly and slapped him across the backside once more with the flat of his weapon, driving him to his knees over the prone girl. Then, he returned the edge to his neck. “Tell her you were mistaken and say she is a woman of honour. Ask for forgiveness. I won't require you to swear fealty, because you are

worthless to her, but you will swear to defend her honour with what little you may ever have of your own.”

Alfred hesitated momentarily, but felt the edge of the sword moving back and forth along his neck. He could see his father glaring distaste at him.

“Say it,” Brian demanded.

“I say,” Alfred choked out through tears of pain, rage, and humiliation, “that you are a woman of honour, and I was in the wrong.” He hesitated, and once more felt the cold blade rubbing close to his throat. “I swear honour to you, as well.”

Brian looked to Karen, and saw her smile at her now harmless tormenter. “I forgive you,” she whispered. “Jesus will forgive you, too, if you ask him.”

“My Lord.” Brian saluted and bowed to Dave Dennison, wiped his blade on his son's shoulders, and sheathed it. A sigh went around the room.

“I accept my son's life back from you with gratitude, and am in your debt.” Dennison turned to his aides. “Smith, Wilson, take the lad to the infirmary. He can wait for the doctor to finish here. Fetch him a commoner's tartan to cover his shame while you're at it. He'll have to earn the family pattern back. Return his sword to the armoury. He won't need it until the regrow takes effect.” When Alfred had been escorted away, he stood and motioned to the doctor tending Karen.

Dennison introduced them with minimum words. “I present Joanne Horse Woman and Brian McIlhargey. Joanne is physician for the manse and village; Brian is my chief for security.”

“An honour to meet you, my lady.” Brian bowed formal acknowledgment. He knew who she was, but the two had not previously spoken.

She returned his bow with grim countenance. “I wish it could be under better circumstances. The girl is your daughter?”

“She is.”

“I'm afraid her injuries are exceedingly grave. The blow broke her neck rather high, and she struck a chair in her midsection when she landed. At the very least, she will be paralysed for some time, and...”

“And at the worst?”

“I have called for medical transportation, but her life is in immediate danger from serious internal injuries I cannot treat further here.”

“I will see to her until they arrive. Thank you for your skilled work.” Brian bowed again and went around Dennison and the physician to kneel at Karen's side. They followed close behind.

“Hello, Brian.” Karen's eyes were bright and lucid. “I think I grew up all of a sudden.”

“You remember things, now?” He took her hand.

“I remember the man in the blackberries.”

“Yes.” He suddenly didn't care as much about the past as about the future.

She was insistent. “I saw him on the MT today from the palace at Tara. He's a great lord now.”

Brian reached to touch her face, hardly listening.

She changed topics. “Mostly I know I have always loved you, my Brian. I only regret I could not have been your woman, but I know she...” Karen paused a moment, before remarking absently, “She was here tonight.”

“Who was?”

“Why, Lady Katherina.”

“It was me, Karen,” Meghan put in from the other side. “I played the part of Lady Katherina on the stage.”

Karen looked annoyed and tried to speak again, but Brian interrupted.

“Hush, my dear Karen. We will have you to the infirmary before long, and you will be fit and healthy soon.”

“No. I hear Jesus calling me home, and I must go. Good-bye, my Brian. I knew your deepest secret all along, and kept it because I love you.” She turned her eyes from him. “Meghan, dear, you have been my little sister, and how you must have thought in my state of mind I was your little sister instead.” She went on, rushing to finish while she could still speak. “I, Karen Bridget O'Toole do say you are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” She used the standard formula for a will. “All I am and have in this world I say is yours from this day forward as my sole heir. Especially take care of my Brian, and do not be harsh with the man who hit me. I love you, dearest sister Meghan.”

Following this uncharacteristically adult pronouncement there was silence until first Meghan, then the physician reached out a hand to touch Karen's neck. There was no pulse. Slowly, tears began to run down Meghan's face, and she made her own farewell speech. “Good-bye, Karen. I'm glad you grew up at the very end, and I'll defend your honour forever.” At this, she broke down completely, put her head on Karen's stilled chest, and began to sob.

Brian McIlhargey looked a question at the doctor, but she shook her head sadly, and waved off the approaching medical transportation attendants. The two slowly stood, facing each other over Karen's lifeless form.

“I'm sorry, Sir. Even had the injuries been sustained on the very premises of the hospital, it is doubtful she could have been saved. It is nothing short of a miracle she lasted as long as she did, much less was able to speak.”

“You did your best, my lady.” He bowed with a grace derived from instinct alone. Cold numbness stole over him with the loss. Karen had lived twenty-seven hard years, and been an adult for mere minutes of those. He felt Meghan's hand creep into his, as it often had when she was much younger. He could hear her breath coming in quiet, shuddering gasps.

Dave Dennison faced them, his face red with mortification and anger. “I shall have Alfred confined to

magisterial custody. His life is forfeit to you for this wicked, careless slaughter.”

“I do not think that to be necessary,” Brian replied deliberately. “But you heard her last words. It is up to Meghan.” He turned to his remaining daughter. Her costume was in disarray, her hair dishevelled, and her face streaked with tears. To stay in control, he spoke in those deadly polite, measured terms commonly employed at court, where slips of the tongue can result in death.

“My Lady Katherina,” he began, addressing her alter-persona in an effort to get beyond her grief for a few critical moments, “The life of one Alfred Dennison, son of Lord Dennison, Holder of New Tara, is forfeit to Lady Karen. As her heir, you have the right to that life. What will you order done with the young man, my lady? Will you take it in servitude, or shall he be executed?”

Meghan started at the form of address, but took the hint it implied, drew herself up and reverted to the character of her mother, as she interpreted her. She took her right hand back from his, then extended her arm with palm face up to Lord Dennison in the manner of one making a noble grant. “It pleases us,” she responded in the most formal and imperial tone she could muster, despite shaking with grief, “to say we remit the life of the said Alfred Dennison into the hands of his father, upon the condition he keep the pledge he swore to defend the honour of Lady Karen for as long as he shall live.”

She bowed slightly to conclude the grant, and awaited a response. Despite the emotional fragility of the moment, Brian couldn't help thinking that Katherina, who, far from being formal and courtly, was a character with more crusty edges even than her mother Kate, and would have snarled something more like, “Take his rusty penknife of a life if you really want anything so worthless, but if he ever has the effrontery to cross swords with me again, I'll slice his guts into dog meat.” He ground his teeth at the thought, sternly reminding himself that Katherina Rourke was no more, despite Karen's vision.

Dave Dennison returned the bow, deadly serious. “My lady,” he replied, drawing his sword and holding it point upward between them. “I say the house of Dennison is in debt to you forever. We accept your remission and terms. Moreover, my house hereby swears fealty of honour to you and to yours. From this day forward, we will defend your honour loyally, or forfeit our very lives.” He placed the tip of his sword on the floor before her.

Without hesitation, Meghan reached out to cover his hand on the hilt with her own, as one without a sword of her own must do. “I say my house accepts your fealty of honour.” She knew that as a royal himself, it was all he could swear. She removed her hand, hesitating a bare moment before adding, “Go with God, my lord.”

Dave Dennison reversed his sword again, bowed his forehead to the flat in salute, sheathed it, spun on his heel, and marched off, aides scurrying behind to keep up. As they swept out of the theatre, one of them could be heard excitedly explaining the earlier scuffle at the rear of the theatre. Apparently, the notorious terrorist Rosie Bolivar had been recognized, subdued, and handed over to Penal City officials. The latter had been right there in the theatre, following hot on the trail of the only successful prison escapee in fifty years. Dave Dennison scarcely acknowledged what, at another time, would have been extraordinary news.

Also uninterested, Brian McIlhargey felt Meghan's hand catch his as she reverted to being his little girl. “Da, can we go?” she choked out.

He assented, caught the eye of the waiting medical transportation team, and waved them in the direction of Karen's body. He would make burial arrangements in the morning. He and Meghan turned to walk up the theatre aisle. As they did, the several hundred people present seemed to wake as one from the

oppressive silence events had imposed. A cacophony of applause rolled through the theatre, the unarmed slapping hands on their breasts or belts, the armed on their scabbards.

Those who had clogged the aisle scurried apart to give the pair walking space, and half a dozen or so on each side of the aisle drew swords and angled them high over their heads as they passed. The cacophony of cheers became a rhythmic “hail, hail, hail” called out in time with the slapping of hands. The two made their way out of the building and onto the street as king and queen in the hearts of the villagers. Few liked the arrogant Alfred Dennison, so they rejoiced not for his life, but for the opportunity to witness a display of true nobility.

The two scarcely spoke on the walk home, and once there, Meghan watered her prayers with a rain of tears, then went quickly to bed, consumed with exertion and grief. It was hours before Brian could sleep, and he got very little as his mind feverishly replayed the evening's events, and he raged at the heavens.

Was he right to suggest Meghan spare Alfred? The wretch was royal, but threatened the throne's integrity and honour as much as any of Ireland's enemies. Could there be a God in Heaven who allowed such things? What had the child-woman done to deserve such an end? Did the presence and operation of manifest evil in the world verify what the Bible said about the universal need for salvation in Christ? But what purpose did it all have? The sound of Karen confidently saying Jesus was calling her plagued his mind, and he wondered. What if he died? Who awaited him? Tortured aeons later, he could think no more, and fell into fitful sleep.

Next morning he rose early as always, forced himself to eat a little food in the strangely silent, haunted kitchen, and hurried to the Dennison Manse, letting Meghan sleep, but leaving a note on the table telling her to stay home from school. She would miss the few weeks remaining to the one month summer break, so one Saturday morning made little difference.

At eight o'clock sharp, he presented himself to Dave Dennison's secretary, who, unlike other days, rose and bowed in greeting. “Lord Dennison expects you. Please go right in.” He pressed a button under his desk, and stood beside the ornate panelled study door as it opened. He waited as Brian entered, bowed again when he passed, and closed the door behind him.

Brian had been here before, in the days of Lord James and Lady Lucy. He scarcely noticed the conference stage, the high, ornate bookcases filled with rare volumes, the priceless original artwork hanging throughout the study, and the swords and MT screens occupying the rest of the wall space. Other things were on his mind, and he was halfway across the room before realizing Dave Dennison was not seated behind his desk, as usual, but stood before it at stiff attention, sword raised in the same salute he had given Meghan the night before. Brian glanced at the empty scabbard on the wall, and the second sword on the side table. It was the royal blade Dennison held.

“My Lord?”

Dave Dennison bowed to his sword in reply, and Brian stopped. Slowly, he drew his own sword, placed it point down on the floor, then whirled it upward, bowed exactly the same amount, and sheathed it in an abrupt but fluid motion. His salute accepted, the owner of the office repeated Brian's motion with his own blade, but remained stiffly at attention, staring intently at his security officer.

Brian felt a rising tension as the realization of what this all meant sank in, and he broke the silence. “You know, then. What gave us away?”

“I was vaguely suspicious the first time we met, but when I saw the play last night, then how you used

your sword, there could be no doubt. Remember, you were often here as a child with your father, so once I was on to the idea, the resemblance even for you, let alone for the girl, is unmistakable.”

Brian sighed. “Well, let's at least be at ease, and discuss it as gentlemen.” He waved to a pair of stuffed chairs, inviting his employer to relax.

When the two were seated, Dennison began to fill in details at random. “Lady Kate was here numerous times when I was a young boy. My father knew her well from many years before.”

“Katherina's mother.”

“Yes, some called her ‘Iron Kate’ already, although she was not Kate Rourke until later.”

“Your father, James, knew her during the great war, then.”

“At the beginning. He served with her as adjutant, and not in operational command at first. His combat experience came in the last campaign, starting with the battle of the Alamo, and concluding with the destruction and re-capture of New Tara a few days later. A few weeks later, the North American stage of the war quietly fizzled out, and she transferred to the European front under General Ryan. Lady Kate spoke highly of our fathers when she was last here at New Tara, claiming their tactics were personally responsible for ending the war on this continent.”

“None of that helped the crown, though.”

“No, Tara's nobles were too far removed from the situation, and saw in him and the results here only what they had already decided to see. Kate went along with the deposition, but only because the four royal cousins asked her to avoid bloodshed.”

“And so, three of the four cousins ended up here in Irish North America.”

“Yes, and with them out of his way, the first Donal made Iron Kate General of the Armies. She was loyal, but couldn't prevent his assassination. Later, it developed her ambition was as great as his. After his first successor died, she got rid of the third Donal, and put her husband Matthew in the chair as the fourth one. It's strange. After all that scheming, you'd expect he wouldn't have lasted long himself, but he was the only one of the lot to retire from the job.”

Brian picked up the thread. “By that time Katherina was eight, and used to life at the court. She always wanted to go back and live in the First's suite in her own right. I met her then at Glenmorgan and got to know her well over the next fifteen years, and again for a while at the very end, before Glenmorgan.”

The pair was silent for a few moments, then Dave Dennison observed, “The girl looks incredibly like her mother and grandmother, though she is taller at ten years than either of them ever got. She's going to be a giant of a woman. Different personality, though.”

“You seem to have followed the Rourkes closely.”

“Yes, I did, and your family, too. After all, we're all blood cousins.”

“Except for Kate and Matthew. She was an Evans from the Welsh protectors, and he was son of Ann, the daughter King Conn and Queen Ann fostered in. So, Katherina's blood connection to the royals was several generations farther back than ours, though she was our legal cousin.”

Dave Dennison grew reflective. "It's tragic how things came apart for her, with her father dying just after she went to Kilkarney, leaving her heir to a name and sword, but nothing else. After graduation, she did well as head of security at Tara until the General died, when she was falsely accused of his murder, and outlawed." He paused, put his fingertips together on his nose, and peered over them at his guest. "And so Katherina Rourke sought refuge with you, and in the end, perished along with Jack Devereaux and their daughter Mara at the battle of Glenmorgan."

"Until being brought back to life again last night," Brian mused.

"Quite so. It was a blow to the stomach to see both Lady Kate and Lady Katherina on the stage. The moment the girl opened her mouth, my mind knew what my heart guessed the day I first saw her." His voice became very quiet and husky with emotion. "Mara, heir of Devereaux and Rourke, somehow cheated Old Rust to survive Glenmorgan."

"So you knew me, as well?"

"That didn't connect until I saw you handle a sword. I was never at Kilkarney to be trained by Brian McIlhargey. I'm not sure how good you are, but there's one man alone who could have taught you those moves, given you the inheritance of grace to carry them off, yet had you spare your opponent. He didn't teach many to that extent, so it's not hard to narrow it down. Now I can see past the face to who you really are, I wonder it was not obvious the day you walked in here. Perhaps it was even then; I wasn't planning on hiring a Master of Security until you talked me into it. I was sure before I drew your response to my salute just now, but of course I recognize your blade as a duplicate of mine, even with the crest waxed out, and that confirms it."

"There is at least one person, perhaps more, who would kill us both over this knowledge," Brian observed.

"Yes, that does not surprise me. You have nothing to fear from me. I pledged honour to your father and his house, and no Dennison has ever forsworn. Besides, the manse itself has proven secure, though there have been many attempts here already, for obvious reasons. But listen. Karen spoke during that shameful charade of a duel about one she called 'the wicked colonel who killed Lady Katherina.'"

"Yes. There was one particular man who engineered it, and she met him, but Karen has never been lucid enough to tell me much, excepting his military rank."

"She told Meghan and me before the doctor arrived that the same colonel had been on the MT news channel that very evening."

Brian remembered a similar comment, and leaned forward eagerly. Was the very clue he needed to identify his old enemy going to come out of all this trouble? "You checked?"

"I ran a search on ex-military for yesterday's news, and came up with this." Dave glanced away, speaking to the room's electronic butler. "MT on, and run stored search results."

At this, a large screen on the opposite wall cleared the image of an old master musician that had been displayed there. This was replaced by a cut into an item from one of the Emerald Isles channels, "Hibernia-News." A bored announcer was intoning, "...present today for the opening of the expanded tunnel from England to Greater Holland which cost nearly a billion shamrocks, and the lives of ten of its builders."

The camera cut from the studio to the scene, and Dennison halted the item. "Unless I am mistaken, there's your man. None other than Donal XII, First Lord of Tara, and formerly Sean Reilly, Colonel and Field Commander of the court forces at Glenmorgan."

Brian had seen the item. "Run it ahead a few frames," he asked, and when Dave complied, "Stop there. Do you know this man?"

"Yes, he is Lord Monde, Domain Executive for Transportation. His name came up in the search too, but as a major at Glenmorgan."

"He was a colonel before the battle, but broken in rank afterwards for being out of camp while supposedly on duty. There was suspicion he was involved in the death of an enlisted man found nearly cut in half on the Devereaux estate, but nothing was proven, and he regained the rank of colonel six months later, following one of the Afghan campaigns." Brian put his fingers together under his chin. The two had been speaking very softly, the sound of their voices absorbed in the cavernous study, but now his words were barely audible. "Monde didn't kill the fellow."

"Because you did?" Dave expanded upon Brian's air of certainty.

"He tried to rape Karen."

Dave grunted. "I recall something of the story from reading the dispatches. Now that you mention it, there were references to 'the two colonels' in news reports."

"The MT reporters called them that before the battle. After Glenmorgan, Donal XI promoted Sean to Brigadier General, but got paid back the next year by the coup that saw Sean take the chair as Donal XII and appoint Thomas Monde to transportation in return for his help. Neither has been active military since. I've been certain all along one of the two was the murderer, so Karen's information adds nothing, I fear. Fact is, I believe both were complicit. Still, I am much obliged for your diligence and concern."

"It is the least I could do under the circumstances," Dennison replied. "However, you cannot stay here. You've attracted too much attention for New Tara to remain a safe haven for long. Once last night's events pop out of their news filters, two or three families will have agents scrambling after you."

"I had concluded that already. We will want to have a funeral as soon as possible, but by the end of tomorrow at the latest, Meghan and I must be far from here."

"Where will you go?"

"Eventually to Tara, and the mouth of the lion, but not until Meghan doesn't need my protection and can't be denied her own name and place. In the meanwhile, I have much more to learn about our two friends there." He waved at the picture still frozen on the screen. "I am within two people of knowing the who of the matter, but understand little of the how and the why."

"I have arranged for your pay and several months' severance. Officially, I fired you and ordered you out of New Tara." Dave handed him an envelope filled with cash. "Anyone can be traced by MT use these days, of course."

"Yes, certainly. I can only hope if I'm not at hand for the initial enquiries, the case will be thought not interesting enough to pursue us closely. I can live off cash for a while and avoid MTs. It could take a little

while to find us.” He grew thoughtful. “About your boy...”

Dennison cut in hurriedly. “He is sober and much chastened this morning. He has spoken at length to the priest, and his repentance seems genuine. The shame of killing an innocent noncombatant will never leave him, and neither will that of being so thoroughly and publicly thrashed. I think he is done with both the friends and the bottle that have so misled him, and understands he must earn his place in the family.”

“I would expect as much. However, if he is ever to be of any use to fulfil the oath her Ladyship inherits, let alone to his obligations to the throne, he must learn the sword properly, and much more.”

“He will. He thought himself more skilled than he was, and resisted attending the academy. Now he understands the truth, and concedes he must go.”

“Good. I believe he should join Kilkarney. It is not what it once was, but remains the best.”

Dennison was startled. “I had thought perhaps Toronto, where I went. Our family should not risk...”

“Risk is one of the things he must win through to be worthy of others’ fealty. As to the rest, give my name quietly to the commander, and it will be done, provided of course he passes the minimum entrance test, and you pay the full fee. His sword is too poor for entry on a merit scholarship.”

Dave raised an eyebrow. “Which of your names do I give?”

“The name of Sergeant Brian McIlhargey should suffice.” He rose, as did Lord Dennison. Without further words, the two repeated their earlier salutes, and Brian left, hurrying through the outer office and into the hallway without seeming to notice the secretary hovering there.

The secretary went to the inner office door, and inquired, “My Lord?”

Dennison waved him off. “I do not wish to be disturbed for an hour or so.”

“Very well, my lord.”

The secretary closed the door, hurried to his desk, and called out a special number he had been given. The screen lit up, but there was no face, just a disembodied voice that said, “Report, please.”

“Agent Deep at New Tara with a priority ten report.”

“Priority ten, you say? Better be worth it.”

There was a pause, and a second voice came on, this one through a scrambler so as to be unrecognizable even to the most sophisticated analyser. “What have you got, New Tara?”

The secretary gave a synopsis of as much of the conversation from the inner office as he had been able to make out. The voice on the other end was unemotional.

“Let's get this sharp. The girl is called Meghan, she is a noble heir, but you didn't catch her actual name?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And this Brian McIlhargey is actually a royal relative, but you don't know the connection?”

“He and Lord Dennison saluted as equals. You have all the information I could obtain, my lord. They spoke very quietly.”

“Very well, if you learn more, get in touch. The two are already in our database, and we'll look after them when necessary. In the meantime, it's only a priority four, not a ten, so don't bother me personally with it next time.”

The connection broke, and the secretary leaned back, disappointed. Well, it had seemed important enough to risk using the office machine for a fast report...

He did not notice the hall door ease the rest of the way shut.

“As I thought,” mused Brian McIlhargey, who had heard the conversation. He had suspected the secretary was listening, and had restrained his comments. He would slip a message to Dennison to let him know his office harboured a traitor.

He reviewed the conversation. What they had said was enough to provoke a spy to report, but not sufficient to give them away completely. “Time to head for obscurity. Problem is, I know nothing more than before, and Meghan and I must leave at once, now the palace knows about us.” He hurried off, making plans. “We'll stop in the woods at Karen's favourite place for a memorial, and that will have to do us if we're to avoid a watch on the ferry to the mainland.”

Academic work can be done anywhere in the Federation, either by self study using the MT, or via formal courses. Anyone can establish a school, but the various academies examine candidates for the certificates under their jurisdiction with great care and ruthless impartiality. For one aspiring to high office, the General Administration Certificate, or GAC, is the basic starting point, and it has its own academy. The MBA on Tirdia is sometimes said to be its equivalent, but the requirement of extensive knowledge of history, sociology and numerous mathematical and economic techniques suggests a Tirdian Ph.D. in the sciences is a better comparison.

The three bardic orders run the academies for justice, history, and the fine arts (the latter including what on Tirdia are known as the humanities). Other academies include various specialities in medicine, engineering, science, and philosophy (incorporating mathematics and ethics). The rank of major equates to a military certificate and requires both formal schooling and practical command experience. A Security Certificate (SC) can be earned in the military/policing category, or in the computing and networking speciality, though the latter has been comparatively rare since applications and systems standardized in the early part of the nineteenth century. Para runs an academy for advanced business theory and practice, and another for space-based science and technology.

There is no separate education academy, it being assumed one cannot do something unless one can also teach it. All academies require their members to maintain themselves in top physical condition, and many careers are combined with military service.

As a result, the most prestigious schools are not the great universities or bardic institutes in Tara, Rome, Moscow, Jerusalem, New Tara, Tokyo, and such places. Rather, they are the exclusive military academies that may require a certificate or two (or an obscene number of shamrocks) just to enter. For the four centuries preceding the battle of Glenmorgan, the best of the best was Kilkarney school on the home island.

Chapter Nineteen

The Royal Cousins, Ireland, 1956-1958 (Hibernia) It was, Hannah thought, an idyllic life at the newly minted Devereaux estate. Locals persisted in calling the place “Morgan's” after the family that had lived there for many generations until having fallen on hard times, and eventually dying out. By pooling resources, Dennison, Devereaux, and O'Toole purchased the entire place from the executors in the fall of 1955, then arranged for renovations over the next couple of months. Seamus, Hannah and their Jack arrived at the cottage an Irish mile from the manse in early December to establish security. A week later the Devereaux family moved into the main building. They brought with them a household of servants and the nucleus of what would become a well-trained military force.

Jack called on the local army commander shortly after to go through the formalities of placing his officers and troops under the royal line of command for the area. Captain O'Donnell reciprocated by recognizing Jack as her senior, and subordinating her own command to that of the manse. Jack and Seamus both joined the faculty at nearby Kilkarney, bringing along some of their more skilled men as assistant trainers.

Not long after, Hannah contacted Bridget Mally, her friend and distant relative from Old Town Tara days, and the latter at once asked if she could move to the cottage as the Meathes' servant. Seamus was reluctant, but when Hannah pointed out Bridget now had sword training and experience as a security officer, he relented and allowed the arrangement, reasoning they could always use another blade. It also made Hannah less conspicuous to go about with another woman her own height.

Christmas in Ireland that first year was a happy time despite the tragedies of the previous summer. Jack invited a large number of guests to join the two families for their celebrations. For three evenings before Christmas, a group of twenty to thirty mingled in the great salon of the ancient manse. Some were regaled by Iron Kate with tales of her campaigns, others pressed the flesh, working the room for various political causes they intended to advance at the next session of court, and still others considered or consolidated various family alliances.

Ever since 1952, when Kate's husband Matthew, now Donal IV, challenged and killed the short-ruling and corrupt Cullin Cunningham, Donal III, Ireland had been a happier and safer place. Kate herself had a narrow escape during a rebellion in Africa the following year, but her eventual military success there finally terminated the series of brush fights that had continued there since the Three Worlds' War ended seven years earlier. Moreover, so dominating and comprehensive was the force of Iron Kate's authority, there had been no battles in the Emerald Isles themselves for nearly three years. Ireland was completely at peace for the first time in two generations, and there was a lively spirit of optimism throughout her dominions.

Matthew Rourke, the fourth Donal, was a huge man, skilled with the sword, handsomely photogenic, a consummate politician, and well liked by everyone. His most endearing quality was that he had utterly no personal ambition. As that of Kate's was boundless, theirs was a perfect match. Matthew knew as well as anyone that he had become Donal by Kate's manoeuvring, and loved her none the more nor less for it. He was a good administrator, ran the court well, and the realm prospered under his leadership. But he would have been as happy running the Rourke family estate and tending his garden as governing the Federation of Worlds, and was unpretentious about his position. People said of him that he was the best Donal so far for the sole reason that he hadn't sought the job.

The nine-year-old Jacks, Devereaux and Meathe, were fascinated by what they saw and heard as they

wandered about the Christmas gathering unnoticed. They hung on every word of Iron Kate's adventures in the Great War, fighting alongside James IV in Irish North America, as adjutant to General Ryan in the European theatre, and, more recently, as commander of the Afghan and African campaigns. In the manner children can achieve, they also took advantage of the spirit of optimism around them to make new friends from among the visitors in rapid-fire fashion.

The first was Liam Ryan, who arrived with his retired parents and much older sister Elizabeth as the very first guests of the manse. Liam, a year older than the Jacks, was much slighter of build, but moved so quickly and had such incredible strength in his upper arms that he became leader of the little band at first. The following day, when the Reilly family arrived with eight-year-old Sean, the "Knights of the Glen" became a foursome.

Elizabeth was Lady Ryan and holder of the house sword. The first woman in history to achieve front row status, she stood second at Tara, and was almost as skilled as the Donal and Iron Kate. The latter never entered the court, disdaining all its trappings for the simplicity of army camps. Best of all, from the boys' point of view, Elizabeth paid attention to them. The day she came, she rounded up the four boys, named them her cadets, and began giving them lessons with wooden practice swords. Jack Meathe wondered if it was because she was unmarried and had no children of her own. He puzzled about that, because she was a very beautiful lady, and in his child's way he half fell in love with her the moment he saw her. He and the other three followed her about as an honour guard for a couple of days.

Then Iron Kate arrived, or, more accurately, invaded the premises, and the centre of the universe changed. The four boys still took sword from Elizabeth, but the sun rose and set around Kate Rourke, wherever she was, and the situation was mirrored in her daughter Katherina's relationship to them. At eight, and along with Sean Reilly the youngest of the group, she simply annexed the whole lot, much as her mother did the adults. The boys were simultaneously wary of and fascinated by the little dynamo whom Iron Kate and Matthew Rourke had not so much raised as dragged up. Smaller, wirier, and even quicker than Liam, she was an irrepressible package of energy who never stopped moving from early morning to late at night. On the second day, she found a small clearing by the river between the manse and the Meathe cottage that she dubbed "Katherina's place," and promptly turned it into her miniature council chamber and woodland court.

Fiery red pigtailed flying this way and that in her boundless enthusiasm, she sent out spies over the adult world, ruling her private version of Ireland with four knights who fought her battles and provided security for her Tara. Only Jack Meathe held back enough to maintain some independence; the other three were content to have Katherina run their lives that entire week and for countless other visits that would follow. One day, she confided in him when the other three were not about, "When I am older, I shall marry one of you four, well, not you, Jack Meathe, you are just too, well, too royal, if you know what I mean, and then I shall make him my Donal, and I shall roam the world fighting wars and making things safe for Ireland, and live in the palace whenever I want, and have even more servants than we do now."

That on the very next day she gushed over finding the vanished king and marrying him to become the Queen of the worlds instead was apparently no contradiction whatever in her mind. Neither were her glorious last-stand battles and numerous theatrical battle deaths. Katherina-mouse (her code name) would be First Lady, or die in the attempt.

Jack Meathe was glad when the Rourkes left immediately after Christmas. He preferred a quieter life, and was keen to get back to his studies with Jack Devereaux. The two set a goal to have their GACs by the earliest legal examination age, twelve years old, and were racing each other for the top marks at the exam that was still over two years away.

When she was not drilling the children in the ways of the sword, Elizabeth Ryan lobbied the other families to support her drive for amendments to the human genome research laws to allow research on germ line repairs. Like many in the high families, her own genetic makeup was sufficiently damaged by inbreeding that she could never marry another of her own class and hope to have normal children. Yet, she was committed heart and soul to Ireland, and could imagine living and marrying nowhere else. Ever since Matthew and Kate Rourke came to power, she had openly advocated the resumption of research officially banned for over a century.

“We could repair damaged genes, and eliminate the scourge of biological warfare from centuries past,” she argued. “The technology has been available for decades to fix the gene sequences that keep so many Irish women barren. We could eliminate birth defects forever.”

Others of the High Nobility listened politely, but Hannah could tell Elizabeth was making no progress, and several times she heard very negative comments. These were out of Elizabeth's hearing, of course, because no one dared offend the realm's third sword. Reluctant to approach her at first because she lacked noble upbringing, Hannah finally got up the nerve to talk to Elizabeth on Christmas Eve. The two were out for a walk with just-arrived Colleen O'Toole, and Elizabeth was declaiming on her favourite topic, when Hannah suddenly said, “Suppose the court never approves your proposal?”

There was dead silence, and she feared she had gone too far. Then Elizabeth replied, “Surely they must. It is patently unjust to many fine Irish girls that they cannot have children because of a damaged genotype that is not their fault.”

“But,” Hannah persisted, feeling it was as good a time as any to bring it up, “they could marry men of other countries, and most could have healthy children.”

She heard a sharp intake of breath from beside her, and when she looked, she thought Elizabeth's eyes were watering, but her new friend took hold of herself and quickly replied, “Men of other lands are not yet well accepted here in Ireland, and it would be hard for a loyal Irish girl to leave.”

“Even to become a mother?” Colleen O'Toole asked, but Elizabeth, tight-lipped, said nothing further, and they walked on in silence for a while before starting to talk about less consequential matters. None appeared to notice two little heads of red hair disappear behind the bushes where they had been recording everything so as to report back to their own First Lady.

That Christmas celebration began the best of times for the two families of Glenmorgan, as the area surrounding the manse was called. The O'Tooles, Ryans, Reillys, and Rourkes were frequent visitors over the next several months, and many an adventure played out in the woods between the homes of the two Jacks. People took to calling them “the twin pines”, for their great height and strong resemblance. Hannah mothered both boys, and they shared a room in one or the other of the two houses far more often than they slept alone.

Hannah quickly enlisted her gold-hearted friend Colleen O'Toole in the cause of finding wives for the Blackfoot nation, and they sent a steady stream of volunteers to distant Edwardston. By the first summer, even Elizabeth was partly persuaded to their cause, and referred several of their most promising recruits. Hannah was careful to orient the women to their new culture, and either she or Colleen accompanied each group of five or six who went out, then stayed with them for a couple of weeks. All were tested and found to be genetically compatible with some or all the men of the village. So far, about three-quarters of those who went had found husbands, and none had returned. Four were radiantly pregnant, and Hannah was delighted at how things were going.

Seamus and Jack Devereaux, Sr., divided their time between Kilkarney and the estate. Jack said Glenmorgan was as close as he would go to Tara. He didn't mind visiting other estates, but refused entering the royal city. By contrast, Seamus made numerous forays to Tara on behalf of the Blackfoot brides project, usually as Jack Devereaux or Patrick O'Toole. He had several other disguises, but young Jack didn't know what business his father conducted in them, though he was fascinated by the way all three men could simply become one of the other two, so completely that even he could not always tell which was which. He did notice however, that his mother Hannah and he were never left alone. If his father went into the city, one of the other two men was always there playing Seamus Meathe, and carrying a sword the entire time.

One day, both young Jacks, who looked remarkably alike as it was, happened to be dressed much the same way while at the manse, and the head steward confused them. This, plus their fathers' example gave them notions, so of course they had to try swapping roles for a few days. They fooled both their fathers, Elizabeth Ryan, and some of their visiting friends, but not Hannah, who acidly remarked, "It's a child's game trading names and faces around, and if you ever marry, it will go hard on your wives. At least your father is never gone overnight these days, so there's no more nonsense about impostors sleeping on cots at the door of my room." Katherina was there at the time, and continued to address them correctly, apparently not even noticing their trade. She could also tell when the men swapped around, and found it immensely funny to suppose anyone could think of tricking her.

Life was good, the study and play endless, and the two Jacks revelled in the immortality and optimism of youth. When they weren't working, they practised with wooden swords, co-opting any available adult blade into their instruction, whether it be their fathers, Patrick O'Toole, a visiting officer, or Elizabeth Ryan. The latter gradually became a frequent visitor, ostensibly to the Devereaux Manse, but spent all her time in the Meathe household. One day when the two Jacks were instructing Katherina on the practice blades, Hannah herself got into the act, and Jack learned his mother was every bit as skilled as their other instructors.

The idyll lasted two-and-a-half years to mid-1958, at least for the twin Jacks. However, the world around them began to unravel before that. During their third Christmas, Elizabeth Ryan was very sombre and subdued, and her teaching perfunctory. Twice, Jack Meathe saw her crying, and his heart ached for her. But what could an eleven-year-old boy do for a grown woman?

Hannah was more direct, and it didn't take her long to ask some hard questions. "All right, Elizabeth," she said one day when she got her outside alone by the river, "you've moped around here ruining our Christmas celebrations long enough. What's going on?"

Elizabeth sighed deeply a couple of times, and the spying boys saw tears in her eyes. "Calaghan MacCarthy has asked me to marry him."

"That's so bad?" Hannah asked. All she knew about the man was he was MacCarthy Mor, head of his clan of families, and a powerful force at Tara. Once King James's First Executive before being dismissed, and demoted again when James IV came to power, he was said to have engineered the latter's deposition. Later, he had advanced again through the front row ranks. Hannah had seen him standing third next to Elizabeth in news features on the court.

"He will support my petition to change the genetics research laws if I become his wife and turn over the sword of Ryan to him."

Hannah was horrified. "He wants your heritage, not you. Don't do it, Elizabeth."

Her new friend broke into tears. “It is my only chance to get the law changed. With clan MacCarthy support, it is sure to be said in court, but without it, I have just as certainly lost. Ah, Hannah, I have worked so hard for this; I don't want to lose it all.”

“When does he want to know?”

“By spring session of the court this coming May.”

Hannah knew it was for her own prospects of children that Elizabeth wept. She put her arm around her friend to comfort her, glaring a sharp message at a spot in the woods.

Startled that she was looking right at them, the two Jacks silently glided away. Had mother Meathe known all along about their spying? At times she seemed to read minds.

Hannah arranged for a group of six women to go to Edwardston right after Christmas, and talked Elizabeth into helping her escort this time to get her mind off her own troubles. She was mildly annoyed with Seamus for insisting he accompany them as usual. After all, couldn't two of the top swords in the realm protect themselves?

In the end, it was just as well he did, for she spent almost no time with Elizabeth once they arrived. Oh, her friend helped her with the other women, listened to the orientation Seamus and Hannah gave, and watched as they were each adopted into a family, but Elizabeth was completely distracted by her own emotions, and unable to concentrate on anything else.

Neither Hannah nor Seamus had ever before seen a case of “love at first sight”, and the two alternated between discreet chuckles and complete exasperation. Hannah wasn't sure if the stress of Elizabeth's problems at Tara had overwhelmed her senses, or if she ought to take her friend seriously, but in the end she had to concede that some overwhelming force had swept Elizabeth Ryan and the widowed Walking Buffalo into each other's arms, and nothing could stop the match.

When Elizabeth first stepped off the plane at the end of the little procession of would-be brides, Walking Buffalo's eye caught hers; she looked at him; and the two were simply gone on each other. They made up ridiculous excuses to bundle up against the biting cold to go for long walks in the frigid air, and spent hours sitting inside by the fire in intimate conversation when it was simply too cold outside. The intended two weeks stretched into three and then a month, and Elizabeth might never have returned if catastrophe had not intervened at Tara.

Seamus announced it by arriving one afternoon at Prairie Chicken in a cloud of dirty snow. He pulled his horse to a stop in front of the main one of the ten large lodges the band had built thus far, following their decision to make the village a year-round home, dropped the reigns on a post, and dashed inside.

“Hannah,” he said as soon as he saw her. “Bad news from Ireland. Kate Rourke has been murdered. We must go back at once.”

Hannah was shocked. Kate had been so alive and vigorous at Christmas just weeks before, so full of plans for her own future and that of the Federation. That she could be dead was inconceivable. “How?” was all she could get out.

“She was with her husband Matthew, Patrick O'Toole, and ten or so of his security men on the way to church for some state ceremony—you know Kate likes to walk rather than ride to such things—and they were attacked by over a hundred men in broad daylight on the streets of Tara.”

By this time, Elizabeth was also listening in horror as Seamus continued. “There was quite a fight, and nearly thirty of the attackers were killed, but they got what they were after. They managed to separate Kate from the rest, and one of them stabbed her in the back. Their masked leader apparently ran her through the heart as she fell, then broke off the attack, but not before killing three of his own wounded, presumably to protect his identity. The attackers appear to have been street ruffians and criminals recruited along the docks of Dublin, and no one knows or will say who is responsible.”

Hannah had her hand over her mouth. “What about Patrick?” she asked.

“Cut up a little, but not seriously wounded, and the same is true of Matthew. Apparently Lords Monde and MacCarthy have gone on the public news channel to demand Patrick's resignation and a shake-up of security. Hannah, I'm sorry, but Patrick and Jack need our support. There will be harsh times in Ireland for a while, and we need to be there as soon as possible.”

So, the prolonged visit was finally cut off. Seamus and Hannah returned to Ireland with Elizabeth, who was also determined to do her part for her country. However, Hannah noticed her friend slip a ring with a sparkle of green into her pouch when she turned away from Walking Buffalo for the last time at the airport, and knew Elizabeth would return for good once the crisis had eased.

It didn't pass, at least not for some time. By the day they arrived at the Devereaux estate, it was to find Ireland a collection of armed camps. A strong Devereaux force waited at the airport to escort them to Glenmorgan, where Patrick and Jack had by now quartered two hundred soldiers of the regional force, with more arriving all the time. The roads were unsafe for travellers because of bandits, and regional inter-family fighting broke out in several parts of the country. The city streets were no safer, and local police had to be supplemented by troops. A couple of days later, Patrick O'Toole sent Colleen and their twins Patricia and Patrick to the Devereaux Manse under another heavy guard, while he and Seamus manned Tara Security, valiantly trying to restore order.

It appeared they had succeeded when Kate's funeral was able to be held with thousands following the procession and not a single incident, but just as the situation seemed to be settling down, Matthew Rourke went on the MT news channel on April first to announce his resignation as Donal and his intention to retire to an Evans family country estate in Wales to spend his time breeding roses. The underlying message was obvious to the people. Their beloved Donal was turning his back on Tara and her nobles, while implying his plants had more honour and were more worthy of his company than they. The announcement was prerecorded, and he had already left Tara with a force of loyal officers and men when rioting broke out in the streets. The populace had loved Iron Kate and trusted her husband as Donal, and now cast wildly about for someone to blame for their loss.

O'Toole and the city police put down the riot at Tara with relatively small loss of life, but the government forces at Galway lost too many officers in the early going, and lost control, pursuing and killing members of the crowd for hours even after dispersing the mob from the main streets, in what came to be known as the Galway massacre. There were also riots in the north, but with fewer deaths. The next day, the general of the home army resigned, but there were no further incidents. It was as if the country recoiled in shock and horror at what it had wrought. At Tara, Seamus and Patrick spent hours in a long teleconference over the MT that included James in New Tara, and Jack, Hannah, Elizabeth, and Colleen at Glenmorgan.

They were pretty sure who was behind the unrest, and it seemed power at Tara was about to shift radically, but who would make the best Donal? What they feared might happen under the circumstances, and didn't want, was an expendable puppet ruler whose strings were being pulled by one of the powerful lords who could stay in the background and evade direct responsibility, perhaps ruling for years from the

sidelines.

They listened to the gossip, picking up ideas from MacCarthy clan members who talked too freely about Calaghan's ambitions. Gradually, a plan of action developed. If it worked, they would give the man more than he wanted, and at the same time gain stability, but not so much as to allow him to rule as tyrant. The key was Elizabeth. She was reluctant to believe the man who had asked her to marry him had conspired to bring about the troubles and was apparently responsible for Kate's murder, but the evidence for the former gradually became overwhelming, though they could not directly connect him to the latter.

Finally agreeing to help, Elizabeth Ryan made a discreet call to Tara with their suggestion, and within hours, Gerald Monde and Calaghan MacCarthy eagerly stepped into the power vacuum. With the endorsement of Ryan and three lesser houses, they called for a sword truce and Dial of all the high families for the fifteenth of the month on neutral ground at Armagh.

Jack and Seamus tossed a shamrock to choose one to go, and Seamus lost when he called "leaf" and the coin came up "king" instead. So, he went to Armagh, while the others stayed in the manse surrounded by trusted troops to watch proceedings on the MT as they unfolded.

In the early going, several lords and ladies spoke passionately and sometimes eloquently of their vision for greater Ireland, disparaging the events of the last couple of months. But it was all talk and no progress until young Joe Haggerty stood up and gave a stirring address deploring the softness of the previous regime, and demanding a harder line against criminals and renegades in the future. Into the ambiguous silence at the end of his speech, he proposed Gerald Monde for Donal.

There was initial enthusiastic cheering over this idea, but this was quickly matched, then drowned out by a chorus of boos and catcalls. Hannah grinned as the camera zeroed in on Monde, and caught him looking about furiously to mark his many enemies. At this point, Calaghan MacCarthy strode, grinning, to the microphone. According to Seamus's information, he was intending to make a second and even more emotional speech culminating in the nomination of kinsman Brian Davis, a good sword, who could hold the position against challenge, but a weak and ineffectual man whom he could easily control.

Instead, Elizabeth Ryan slipped in front of him from the opposite direction, and took the microphone to give the talk of the whole affair while Calaghan waited to one side.

She reviewed the history of the realm and the way in which Ireland had stood for centuries against the dark ages, and been the civilizing force that brought learning back to the ravaged countries of Europe. She spoke of Brian Boru, and how he had united Ireland and brought about the golden age of the early part of the realm. She reminded them how differently things had turned out on Tirdia, where Ireland herself had become the slave of her neighbours, because her peoples could not act together despite a common land, culture, language, and religion.

She reviewed Ireland's own Dark Age—the spiritual wasteland of the eighteenth century in which scientific and technological progress became the god of the nation, while the Lord of Heaven was forgotten. She recalled how scientism and materialism in a self-centred society culminated in strife and violence that nearly destroyed civilization. She reminded them that Ireland was saved by the intervention of the Metans, recounted the founding of the Federation, the opportunities this had created to see first hand how wrong things had gone on Tirdia, and the great spiritual revivals afterward. She gave a brief description of the dynasty that followed, ending with the deposition of James IV, then backtracked to the children's revival of the thirties that her own mother had led, and appealing for a like commitment to the Lord of Heaven.

Then she spoke of Iron Kate, and there were tears in her eyes as she described the woman whose heroics, next to the king's own, were responsible for ending the Hibernian version of the Three Worlds' War. She described the days of Iron Kate's influence and the rule of Donal IV in glowing terms, and by the time she was done, her audience was punctuating her remarks with cheers and sword thumping applause.

At that moment, she could have asked them for anything, including the chair as the first Dona, and they would have given it to her, but Elizabeth had no remaining agenda at Tara for herself, only for the Peace of Ireland and the glory of God. She ended with a ringing appeal to the consciences of her hearers to consider carefully, then do what was right—what would promote peace and serve the Lord of Heaven. Finally, she introduced the next speaker as one whose words were well worth listening to in a time of crisis. The stage was set.

She stepped back to enthusiastic and prolonged applause, then Calaghan MacCarthy took the microphone.

“Wasn't that wonderful?” he announced with an expansive smile. “There is a true woman of Ireland, with a heart for her people, a tongue of silver, and a skill with the sword rivalling Iron Kate herself.”

Hannah, watching from home, felt sick. Even though things were going as they had planned, MacCarthy's clear intent to manipulate Elizabeth's speech for his own ends made her want to turn off the MT and wash her eyes afterwards. The camera zoomed in on her friend as Callaghan went on in the same vein, revealing Elizabeth's face as it reddened in embarrassment. MacCarthy then turned to his own ideas for stabilizing the realm and advancing the Peace, building on the momentum Elizabeth had created, and carefully weaving her themes into his own. He was a consummate politician and skilled orator. Despite her revulsion, Hannah had to admire the man's adaptability in seizing on Elizabeth's eloquent words as the vehicle to advance his own agenda. He began to hint there was a man he was prepared to put forward as Donal.

During this, Elizabeth turned and walked quietly from the platform. Her role was finished. The next act was away from the stage, and once that was done she would have no further interest in Tara politics. At home, Hannah grinned to see the uniformed security agent who met her at the foot of the dais to escort her away. Seamus could be so transparent. She almost missed MacCarthy's next words as he took one more tie-in to Elizabeth's speech, ending with: “Is it any wonder I have asked the good lady to join her house to mine in marriage?”

That was the moment several carefully placed friends had been waiting for. There was a slight silence, several cheers, and then someone called out “MacCarthy Mor, MacCarthy Donal.” In seconds, the chant was all around the room, and MacCarthy's stumbling attempt to divert the nomination to the head of the Davis clan could not be heard. Moreover, it would now appear Calaghan had prearranged this for his own benefit. The camera fixed on Gerald Monde briefly, catching an angrier expression than before. “Ah,” thought Hannah, “you understand he used you, too.”

Just like that, it was done. Lord Chamberlain entered the stage, demanding to know if any objected to the installation of the new Donal, and the crowd of nobles who had been so raucous a moment before suddenly sobered as they looked about and saw security was being provided not by O'Toole's palace troops, but by forces wearing MacCarthy tartans. As only Elizabeth Ryan and Matthew Rourke were known to have a higher sword rating than Calaghan, no one dared put themselves forward to test his blade. Calaghan MacCarthy was, for just long enough, speechless. He had definitely not wanted to be stripped of his clan title and wealth, to be installed in the position of Donal. Now, the knives that would have been out for the expendable Davis would be targeted at his own back. He could do the social

calculus. He would be lucky to stay alive five years.

In the silence following, the Lord Chamberlain banged his mace three times, intoning, "So let it be said, so let it be done." At that moment, Calaghan MacCarthy was no more, and First Lord Donal V began his term of office.

While all this was happening behind her, the MT newshounds caught up with Elizabeth and her security escort. She found herself facing a forest of microphones and portable scanners. At home, Hannah saw Seamus slip out of video range beside another guard whom she realized must be Patrick O'Toole, but she knew they would not be far away. It was time for the second act.

"Congratulations are apparently in order, my lady Ryan, or should I say 'Lady MacCarthy?'" said one of the reporters.

"You are quite mistaken," she responded, straightening her shoulders, and facing them, flushed and upset. "First of all, as of this noon," she looked at her watch, "in one minute, to be precise, when my legal deposition takes effect, I am no longer head of family Ryan. The sword of Ryan passes to my underage younger brother Liam, to be held in trust by our parents for him until he can defend it at his majority."

It was a clever move, thought Hannah, and one Elizabeth had insisted upon. The sword could not be taken by challenge from the boy or his parents until he reached the age of seventeen, and he had the makings of a swordsman fine enough to retain it against all comers by then. Moreover, it would stay in Ireland where it was needed for the defense of the realm. Elizabeth was cutting her ties, and had no intention of returning.

Another reporter thrust forward. "Don't you think this action will compromise your alliance with the new Donal?"

"Not in the least," Elizabeth replied, with what seemed like perfect composure. "I am afraid my lord Donal V was premature in his announcement." She fished in her pouch and pulled out a ring, then held it before the camera so the viewers could take note of its emerald. Then she slipped it on her finger with a triumphant smile.

A bright young female reporter misunderstood and spoke up. "You mean to tell us your marriage to the Donal will be a love match, not a political alliance?" She began to gush. "How nice."

The first ring on, Elizabeth held up a second emerald before the camera. Ignoring the questioner, she stated in the most formal tones, "With this ring, I accept and offer the proposal of a love marriage to Lord Walking Buffalo, Chief of the Blackfoot and Stoney Peoples, Grand Chief of the Plains, and Domain Lord of Edwardston. I accept his offer of love fealty, and say my own fealty to him for as long as we both shall live, or until the Lord Christ comes for us." She looked around at the circle of reporters. "We shall be married upon my arrival in Edwardston later today."

There was a moment of silence while the media folks digested her remarks, then pandemonium, with one after another shouting questions and shoving microphones forward. Patrick and Seamus pushed in to restore order, and after a few minutes' delay, Elizabeth answered the single most pressing question about her political intentions.

"I remain loyal to the throne of Tara and to the cause of truth and righteousness under God that the throne represents. I believe our thousands of Blackfoot and Stoney warriors will join me in pledging loyalty to the new administration. I wish the new Donal success in his speakership, and urge all citizens to

serve the crown and its duly constituted representatives, as shall we. I bid you good day, my friends, and may the Lord of Heaven go with you all.”

With that, Elizabeth signalled to her escort. Seamus and Patrick pushed through the crowd, whisking her away from the Dial still going on inside, and leaving the reporters scrambling to do follow-up stories. Most attendees would not know about Elizabeth's stunning interview until much later. Hannah switched off the large MT screen, and leaned back in her chair. What a day this had been. MacCarthy would have to rule personally, not through another as he had intended, but his hold on power would be far less secure than it would have been the other way. Elizabeth would be the celebrated figure of the day, not him, and the plotting to replace the new Donal would no doubt start as soon as the nobles saw the recordings of her interview, if it hadn't begun already.

Hannah called up the ticket reservation program, and confirmed Elizabeth's seat on the next available plane to New Tara and on to Edwardston. The plan called for Seamus and Patrick to take her from Armagh by aircar, and to have her at the Tara airport in an hour. The MacCarthy knives would soon be out, and she wanted her friend surrounded by all those warriors as soon as possible. Elizabeth's message to the MacCarthys was clear. There would be no overt opposition to the new government, but any attempt to get personal revenge at Edwardston would provoke a war Tara could ill afford, for none of the Irish North American domains could be counted on to assist him now that he had alienated Monde, as well.

* * * *

That night, Calaghan MacCarthy sat with his lieutenants watching the news coverage of the day's events. He was frustrated and angry, but there was little he could do. He had been outmanoeuvred, and could hardly change things. Davis might not be very bright, but if he tried to give him the job now, even he would surely see he was being used, and refuse. No, there was no hope for it. He had to govern Greater Ireland and the Federation himself. He knew he'd been manipulated into the Donal's chair, and would now have to divide his attention between being First and staying alive, neither of which tasks he expected or wanted.

Thus he was already sour, and even though he had been briefed on what Elizabeth said, when he saw her on the screen rejecting him before the whole world, his already angry countenance turned a dark purple. “Fill me in on Edwardston,” he demanded, when the recording had finished.

This last was to his cousin Joe Haggerty, whom he had appointed as second in Security to another cousin, a civilian administrator who would take over from Patrick O'Toole. The latter he had summarily dismissed. He was going to replace as much of the old administration as possible with clansmen. Perhaps he could squeeze out six years instead of five.

Joe pulled up a file on the screen of his PIEA, and began to read the information he had hastily collected. “It's a little dump of a place by the great mountains, your lordship. Not bad in the summer, but truly awful winters. It's domain headquarters for a pretty big area, but there's nothing much there. Gets one train a day, and the plane only lands once in a while.”

“Never mind the tourist information. Tell me how it ties in to the royals.”

Haggerty quietly skimmed over the rest of the detail before continuing. “There was a plague near the place a few years ago. Probable cause listed as assassination attempt against Devereaux and Dennison who were in the area at the time. Seems to have affected the women the most, and a lot of them were killed, including this Buffalo fellow's wife.

“Afterwards, Devereaux bought the Morgan place, and came to Ireland with a Seamus and Hannah Meathe, whose names appear on the medical write-up as co-designers of the modified vaccine developed to end the plague. The latter two have been active in recruiting Irish women as wives for the savages who lost their women. Looks like they hooked Elizabeth Ryan into the scheme, and she fell for the chief.” He editorialized. “I can’t imagine what would get into the head of someone like her to marry a dirty savage, boss; you’re a lot better off without her.”

Calaghan MacCarthy glared at his young cousin. It was time for him to learn his opinions didn’t matter. He glowered angrily over his public humiliation, but there was no point in risking a full scale war by going after Elizabeth. She could rot in the savage’s tent, for all he cared. However, he wanted the satisfaction of revenge. “These Meathes that talked her into it, Haggerty.” His tone was cold and demanding.

“Yes, my lord?” Haggerty suddenly realized it was time to be formal.

“I’m promoting you to major, and John Malone to captain. Wait a couple of months until the dust settles, and then take some men to their house and wipe them out. Don’t leave a dog alive.”

Haggerty was shocked. He had done some pretty low things for his clan head in the past, not the least of which was leading Monde on, then betraying him. But killing people in their own homes seemed too much, even to him. He started to protest, but the Donal interrupted, “Oh, and Haggerty, two more things. ‘Meathe’ is too convenient a name. I’m guessing there’s a crested sword around their place somewhere. Find it and bring it back. Second, when you do go, make sure there’s no witnesses who can tie it to me. In the meantime, get to work on that list of people I want arrested.” When Haggerty hesitated, he added. “Go on, man, get out. You’ve got work to do.”

* * * *

Summer came, and with the warm season, Ireland settled down. The new Donal was an able administrator, and it was now in the interests of his own survival to put down the lawlessness he had previously encouraged. Gradually the bandits disappeared from the roads, and the extra troops stationed at Devereaux, because it was the main manse in the area, were dispersed to the smaller holdings from whence they had come. In July, the Meathes moved back into their cottage, and life resumed as before. In the late spring sitting of the GAC, the twin Jacks tied for the highest mark, and there was some fuss by the academy, as only one other twelve-year-old in history had ever received the certificate.

At the beginning of August, Hannah heard from Elizabeth again. She and Walking Buffalo had married first and done the genetic tests afterward, and it now appeared their chances for children were not as great as she had hoped. But her new friend was happy anyway, and busy establishing herself as a mother over little David and the two nations Walking Buffalo served as chief. She missed Hannah and Ireland, but not the court.

A last group of women went with Colleen O’Toole in July, and the project was now officially ended. Jack, Seamus and Hannah began to talk about going back to Irish North America for a few years until it was time for the boys to start cadet school.

Patrick and Colleen settled down in the countryside not far from Glenmorgan in a home adjacent to the O’Toole estate, which was held by Patrick’s older brother. Seamus continued to visit Tara from time to time, but was winding down his involvement, and considering moving away from Ireland in the fall.

On the morning of the fifteenth of August, Hannah awoke with a grim foreboding. Seamus was up

already and putting on his disguise for a trip to Tara. It was not practical to go to town as O'Toole any more, but Jack was no one's enemy at the moment, so he borrowed him, dressed as a street woman, or worked in the very palace as a guardsman, as it suited him. This, he promised Hannah, would be his last such trip. But despite the fact that Jack, Sr., would spend the day here, and Jack, Jr., would be coming to study supplementary GAC materials with her Jack, Hannah was filled with fear. She tried to persuade him to stay home, but he dismissed her concerns, and as soon as Jack Devereaux arrived from the manse, Seamus was off down the road to the east, enjoying the morning sun, and singing softly to himself about the goodness of God.

He walked about ten minutes with the wind at his back when a noise that breeze brought arrested his steps. Seamus had spent too much time in the military not to recognize it as the clash of swords. He heard shouts and estimated distances, and in an instant, turned and ran back the way he had come as fast as he could. The cottage was under attack. Hannah, Jack, and the boys were in danger.

* * * *

Night fell on the day of infamy, and as the wind picked up, young Brian A'Devereaux, sergeant of the guard at Glenmorgan and sometimes Kilkarney assistant trainer as "Brian McIlhargey," shivered in his light summer uniform. It was not from cold. The wind picked up, becoming a banshee's howl. He edged a little closer to where Lord Devereaux stood with his son Jack looking down the darkening path leading to the Meathe cottage, anxious over the safety of his charges. That he had a half-dozen other guards stationed about the clearing was scarcely consolation after the massacre earlier in the day.

When the young master had arrived breathless that morning at the manse to tell of an attack in progress, Brian and his captain had mustered every available trooper, and run them at top speed to the Meathe home, only to find they were too late. Only Lord Devereaux and the Meathes' servant Bridget Mally still lived. His lordship was ambulatory, though quite cut up about the face and arms, but poor Bridget was in critical condition from serious wounds, and might not recover. Numerous attackers had perished before overcoming Hannah and Seamus, but by the tracks, most had escaped.

Two survivors would surely hang for their part in the foul murder, but it wouldn't bring the dead back. Neither was Tara security interested in investigating the atrocity, passing it off to general lawlessness, and suggesting the manse was responsible for not supplying its tenants more protection. Brian shook his head. It would scar young master Jack for life to lose his close friend along with his whole alternate family in the brutal attack. It was particularly unfortunate that Master Jack had been the one to find Jack Meathe, cut down by the side of the road, with the pet dog they shared beheaded nearby. What would it make of the lad, Brian wondered. Would he get his revenge someday, or would tragedy continue to follow his steps and see him end in like manner, yet another battlefield victim in the never-ending Irish family feuds?

His own duty was clear enough, he reflected grimly. Tied to Devereaux by oath and kinship, it was his calling to protect the lord of the house. He shuffled closer to the pair whose family's survival he was sworn to guarantee with his own life, and shivered again. Where might such a severe duty take him?

It is often tritely said that in our day and age anyone can find out anything about anybody using the Metalibrary. While essentially true, this presupposes the person you want to track is also using the system. It may seem incredible to you cadets, but there are ways to avoid such use, ways to disappear. Here are some methods of the masters. You may need them someday.

—from a standard lecture in security and tracking methods, Kilkarney cadet school.

Chapter Twenty

Brian and Meghan, Edwardston, 1987-1990 (Hibernia)

It had, Brian reflected, been a difficult three years since he and Meghan made their hasty departure from New Tara. He had returned home to find Meghan, dry-eyed, with two travel bags and food already packed. He approved her preparations, then asked, "Your practice sword?"

"Too bulky. We can carve a new one when we get a chance. Our data cubes are in the bottom of your bag in the box of papers, and I have spare clothes for both of us, the ultra-light tent and cooking pots. We have to leave immediately, don't we?"

"We do."

They stopped in the woods as he planned, and Meghan's tears flowed freely there as they made a memorial by carving a cross in a tree, and praying in the very glade where she and Karen had often played at "Court and Council." But she dried her eyes with resolve, and they caught the next ferry to the city. As it left the dock, Brian spotted two large, rough-looking men scurry down the wharf to take up positions.

When they arrived at New Tara proper, he bribed a steward to permit them use of the service gangway so as not to pass under the scrutiny of anyone watching the passenger ramp. Minutes later, he subverted the electronic security lock and alarm on the freight area adjacent to the docks. The pair shortly found themselves wandering between the lines of rail cars looking for a suitable hiding place that could also take them away from the city.

Already overwrought, Meghan was initially frightened by the rows of unfriendly rail car doors on either side, her imagination seeing enemies behind each. But when Brian noticed her distress and pointed at the bright blue sky above, she felt much better. Eventually he found what he wanted,, and opened the lock of one of three groundcars that had been loaded on a carrier for shipment by train to various points on the continent. Irish North America had too few people to justify local groundcar assembly lines, so all such vehicles were imported from Europe and transshipped through New Tara on the east coast, or Moody on the west. Including the two urban centres, there were barely two million people on the whole continent, and little demand in the interior for groundcars, so they were fortunate to find any.

Since the car was deactivated, the windows were, by default, opaque from the outside. They could see out, confident no one would guess they were there. After an hour or so, they felt the train get underway, and they soon left New Tara far behind.

They changed modes of transportation several times, gradually working their way west, then north, eventually arriving at the principal rail centre on the east side of the great mountains at Edwardston. Built on the junction of the Knee Joint and Clearwater rivers that rose in the distantly visible mountains, and went on from here to join the Cree, before flowing to the great Northeast Bay, the little settlement was named after an early European settler in the area, romantic journalist and novelist Bob Edwards. It had grown up around a military outpost and his homestead starting in the late nineteenth century, and become a permanent town as a few natives adopted European ways. Devastated in the Three Worlds' War, it had been rebuilt afterward and expanded since.

Nearly a century after its founding, Edwardston was not much to look at, just a few hundred people crowded into half a dozen neatly landscaped streets near the site of the original fort, with a separate Stoney village off to the west and a Blackfoot one to the southeast. There had once been a European

slum at the east edge of the main centre, but no trace of that remained now, and several farms that once surrounded the town were now abandoned.

Apart from the cattlehands who came once a year from several hundred miles around to buy supplies and attend the annual July rodeo and feiseanna, the few outsiders who knew the place thought of it as impossibly isolated. Rail crews who worked the daily train between Toronto and Moody stayed overnight in a hotel, and “kicked the dust” as soon as possible the next morning. The rail yards were nothing much, just three or four sidings for storing trains in transit, a repair shop, a weather-beaten office and a tiny whistle-stop station where few people ever got on or off.

Occasionally, the daily transcontinental rocket plane landed at the airport on the high prairie to the northwest, but usually it flew by, too far overhead to see.

Just to be there was a step down. Edwardston was even more remote than Detroit, for there was nothing else other than a few sheep ranches and farms here and there for five hundred Irish miles in any direction. At least at Detroit one could visit the nearby military town of Toronto.

Edwardston's people were respectable, stolid citizens, almost all natives, and busily engaged in making a living, but with little interest in the politics of distant places. Tara was seldom mentioned on the local news channel. European visitors were welcome, provided they stayed sober and kept the peace, but few remained more than a few days.

Besides their own languages, everyone spoke the Gaelic “Lingua Universalis,” and the native People of the plains, unlike those elsewhere in Irish North America, could easily have been mistaken for the slightly darker southern Europeans. Today, there were many recognizably Irish heads on the streets, for the Blackfoot/Irish mix that had begun years earlier had proven prolific indeed, and both Stoney and Blackfoot nations continued to recruit a steady trickle of men and women from Ireland to bolster their genetic stock and keep the population at sustainable levels.

Edwardston was domain centre for a vast region, consisting of mountains, grassy prairies, and wildlife, but very few people. It was administered by sixty-year-old Lord Walking Buffalo, whom the locals addressed as “Chief,” and his second wife, Elizabeth. There, as in many of the smaller places the Peace of Ireland had come, the indigenous people had taken the training to look after local government infrastructure, and Tara didn't interfere, provided her ten percent share of the taxes was regularly forwarded. In all of Irish North America, only the cosmopolitan ports of New Tara and Moody, and the tiny rail port of Los Angeles, were directly governed by Europeans. Outsiders seldom came to the sleepy interior.

On this earth, unlike Tirdia, there had never been much population pressure in Europe, so there was little motivation for the common person to trade a relatively comfortable life there for a much meaner existence here, where most people still lived as they had before the Irish came, except that they were no longer permitted war or slavery. Indeed, the majority of the small population of the domain lived in tiny nomadic groups that roamed the area fishing and hunting, and only occasionally entered town to trade for consumer goods.

Since the Three Worlds' War, which had seen the Blackfoot join most of the People against the Irish and their Stoney allies, the two nations had managed to cooperate peacefully, accepting Edwardston as a neutral administrative centre. Walking Buffalo, Blackfoot by birth, was chief of both nations by virtue of his first marriage to Princess Deerfoot of the Stoney. Their son David was widely regarded as a worthy successor.

There wasn't much of an economy to administer. Edwardston traded leather merchandise, wool, partially cured hides and various grains grown on the vast prairies for a modest supply of high tech goods, but was otherwise self-sufficient. It was well known there were oil deposits in the area, for the records of Tirdia were closely scrutinized for natural resource discoveries, as that planet was geologically identical to this one. However, petroleum products were in little demand, and Edwardston was too far from markets where they could be sold in quantity, so the village used the plenteous natural gas, but apart from what was run through one small refinery and almost entirely shipped to Moody, the oil stayed in the ground. Trains refuelled here, but not planes, and the town's half-dozen groundcars and few trucks were all electric.

However, to disappear even there, Brian had to move back down a notch in society, returning to being a "low merc," working at odd jobs for cash and/or found, and not using an MT account in his own name. Occasionally, he joined one of Walking Buffalo's hunting parties, and bartered some of his share of the proceeds for household goods. He had taken a job or two on farms when work was short in town, but preferred to stay close to Edwardston as much as possible because of its single useful asset, one engendered by its very paucity of other resources.

Edwardston had a town library in the grand old style. Built of large blocks of brown stone (called edwardstone) that you scratch sand from with a fingernail, the most imposing structure in the village boasted no fewer than twenty MTs with full network access. The only other public building was the nearby government manse known locally as the longhouse, where, in the style of the place, Walking Buffalo both lived and worked.

In a burst of egalitarian generosity by certain town patrons, and with the blessing and encouragement of the domain lord, the library terminals were free and open to universal access. That is, unlike the identical machines in the local schoolhouse, their users needed no account identity or password to gain full network use. Visiting nomads and local residents wandered in, did their research, wrote their letters, and left, not named, accounted for, or tallied in population records or network logs. Walking Buffalo duly forwarded Tara's ten percent of whatever tax he collected, but kept no records of who paid it, and the palace never questioned him on the matter.

There might be no other such facility in the world, and it was the reason Brian had come here. Knowledge of such things was, he reflected, what kept the two of them alive. Meghan could not get course credit under her own name, but did, under a pseudonym he devised for her, complete her general administration certificate, or GAC, by her thirteenth birthday.

It is unusual for anyone under the age of twenty to attain the qualification, and this was only the fourth time one so young had obtained all-Federation honours standing. She was now, under yet other names, working on courses in military history, tactics, and electronic engineering. In her spare time, she took (and gave to younger children) pipe and harp lessons, and had recently won a local pipes competition for her age group. Her interest in theatre remained strong, and she joined a junior players' company that performed small dramas two or three times annually. By the end of her second year in Edwardston, Meghan had been accepted into the fourth of its seven levels by the local bardic association, and was assisting the Ard Filea, or Head Bard of the domain, to organize cultural events for the next feiseanna.

Her real musical love was the harp. Meghan rendered a variation of an O'Carolan piece, recorded it and entered it under her GAC pseudonym in a palace-sponsored contest. It took first place in her age group, though she never claimed the prize or told the local Ard Filea, but she was secretly more proud of this achievement than of her GAC.

Brian took it all in stride. After all, Jack, his father, and the other Jack had both earned their GACs just

after turning twelve, so it was not, in his view, so very remarkable. Meghan might have done the same except for the strictures under which they worked. For the first two years, she had always used the one library terminal that faced a blank wall, inserted their security cube before working, and afterwards uninstalled the rerouting routines it employed to make “James Dillworth” appear to be studying from South Africa.

There really had been such a person, and he would be about twenty years old if still alive, but he had died in a train wreck at age ten, and as sometimes happens in smaller places, his name had not been properly expunged from the school system. Brian McIlhargey had collected a number of identities for himself and Meghan over the years, but seldom used one for such a length of time as this. There were numerous holes in the modern universal information system, and it was a good thing for them.

Working for cash and found is none too lucrative, so Meghan supplemented their income by tutoring students after school hours. The most satisfying of these arrangements was with Walking Buffalo and Elizabeth's young daughter Rainbow, who was three years younger than she. Finding the girl initially surly and uninterested, Meghan won her over by promising to be her horseback riding student in return for Rainbow's attentiveness to school lessons. Within days, they established an easy friendship. They rode together at least twice weekly, and Rainbow's work turned around immediately.

Every night in her prayers, Meghan thanked the Lord of Heaven for giving her a new younger sister, but she never forgot her older one, and each summer on the fateful anniversary, wove a wreath of prairie flowers, and hung it on the inside of their house door. It was what Karen often had done, and was a remembrance.

One day, when the two girls had finished lessons and were just visiting, Meghan pointed to a gold chain around Rainbow's neck that disappeared down the front of her shirt.

“What's on the end of the chain?”

Rainbow pulled the pendant out to show her. It was of a translucent, shell-like material, and a liquid could be seen inside when it was held to the light.

“It's my amphora.”

“What's that?”

“You know, my perfume jar.”

“I don't get it.”

“My aunt Sunshine gave it to me last time she came to visit from Moody. I'm supposed to wear it to say I won't have any man before my husband, then break it at my wedding when I do have one.” Rainbow turned red, giggled, and put the ceramic pendant back, dismissing the subject.

Meghan wasn't ready to drop the matter, and asked Rainbow several more questions she couldn't answer before giving up, determined to bring the matter up further with her da. But when she left for the day, Rainbow's mother Elizabeth stopped her.

“Meghan, I heard you ask Rainbow about her amphora.”

“Yes, my lady, I did. Can you tell me more?” Meghan had an exaggerated respect for the very Irish, yet

very Blackfoot, Lady Elizabeth Buffalo, and hung on her every word.

“It is an ancient custom the young women of my mother's generation adopted at the suggestion of King Conn during the great children's revival of 1925. The girl who wears one vows she will be married only to Jesus until her wedding day. Do you know what that means?”

Meghan blushed. She had studied the theory of human biology, but found it hard to imagine such intimacy. “Yes, I understand,” she agreed. “It's a witness, like being baptized.”

“That's right,” Elizabeth Buffalo agreed, then following up the connection, “Have you been baptized?”

“I wanted to at New Tara, but my da and I ended up moving.”

“Rainbow has asked to be baptized, and the elders will do it at the end of the month, as we have no priest just now.”

“I'm twelve and I'm a Christian. Could I be baptized, too, and also wear an amphora?” Meghan asked, excited.

“Do you know Jesus as your personal Saviour, and could you keep a promise like that? It would be better not to make it than not to keep it.”

“Yes, I do, and I may be too young to make a legal oath, but as my Saviour Jesus the Lord of Heaven gives me strength, I will always keep my promises.” Meghan drew herself up to her considerable height, and concluded her rush of words firmly, “It's a matter of honour.”

“Then,” Elizabeth Buffalo announced, looking fixedly at the tall, gangly young girl with the sophisticated air of a great lady, “because you have been so good for Rainbow, I shall be your aunt.” When Meghan looked puzzled at this, she added, “It is an aunt's duty to give her niece the amphora.”

And so, a few weeks later, the elders of the little Edwardston church gathered much of the town together by the Knee Joint River, where Meghan and Rainbow, on confession of their faith in Jesus as their Saviour, were both baptized. Brian grumbled that it was all unnecessary, but Elizabeth ignored him, and held an impressive ceremony at the reception she gave afterward to present Meghan with her amphora. Later, when the adults were busy with their affairs, the two girls slipped outside at Meghan's suggestion, and swore a fiercely worded vow of friendship. Meghan reasoned that though neither could make binding oaths to an adult, they could to one another, and from that day on, the two were closer than ever.

“We shall be sisters forever,” Meghan vowed.

Even in Edwardston, a good education and hard work were the keys to progress in life, and its citizens still reminded each other about one of theirs, George Laine, who had once stood in the third row at Tara, right behind the great lords and the bards. “Hard work and skill can achieve anything” was their watchword, and they were, for the most part, a sober, diligent lot. There were exceptions, of course, and it was this fact that a year before, just after the baptism, landed Brian his first full time job since leaving New Tara. Rainbow's father, Walking Buffalo, while indulging in his namesake, ambled past the public fencing yard while Brian was giving lessons to a group about to travel the more remote roads, where they would be none too safe from thieves. The chief watched for a few minutes, then called him over.

“Ho there, Master McIlhargey.”

“Your Lordship,” Brian acknowledged, succinctly.

“You know of Law Officer Fergus.” Buffalo always came directly to the point.

“I'd heard he broke his neck in a fall while hunting a mountain lion, but I didn't know him well.” Brian was puzzled.

“We've looked after his family as best we can,” Buffalo commented, “but the town needs help.” He rubbed his chin as though in deep thought.

“What have you in mind?”

“Would you be interested in the position?”

“Me?”

“You seem a law-abiding sort, good with people, and ready with the sword. There's only occasional work, but I think you could handle it for us.”

Brian readily agreed, and moved into the law office quarters with Meghan the next day. The job carried a minimal stipend that Walking Buffalo agreed to pay in cash without asking inconvenient questions. He would apparently rather not know why a skilled Irish swordsman would stoop to live in Edwardston, so long as he was willing to do productive work for the community.

More important, the job carried a food voucher for the pair, valid at any store or restaurant in the village, with all transactions on Walking Buffalo's account, so no record of their names appeared in the system. Best of all, the office had a high security, unlimited, lawman's MT, registered on the net in the name of the office, rather than its holder. After checking carefully to ensure the machine was indeed what it purported to be, and there were no packet sniffers attached to its node, Brian cautiously resumed his search for information that could lead him to identify which of the two Glenmorgan colonels was his nemesis, why, and what he could do about it. Moreover, Meghan was then able to work at home, and needn't be concerned whether anyone would see her using the re-router to compromise network security protocols.

Apparently his late predecessor had paid little attention to the periodic wanted bulletins that arrived regularly in the electronic law enforcement newsletter. Three times there had been notices warning recipients to look for a large-framed middle-aged man travelling with a tall red-haired girl, the pair being wanted on outstanding court warrants. No list of crimes or pictures were given, and the descriptions were none too accurate, but an alert lawman should have spotted them. Brian quietly deleted the files, and no one was the wiser for the extra security he gained.

In return, he had to patrol the streets, watch for potential break-and-enters, and stop in at the two bars once in a while to discourage patrons from fights that might require him to offer them tenancy in his secure room. He successfully investigated one murder, three assaults, two thefts, and refereed affairs following two traffic accidents. The latter never happened in large cities, but here, use of the automatic vehicle guidance system was non-mandatory.

From his office windows, Brian could usually see all six of Edwardston's groundcars and the two or three trucks that were in town at any given time to unload cattle, sheep, or hay. Many drivers insisted on disconnecting the automatics and running the machines manually. One had been drunk and driven his car off the edge of a road into the Coldwater River, and another had fallen asleep at the controls and crashed

into a streetlamp pole.

It troubled Brian to become too well known even among the people of such a remote place, but the benefits seemed worth the cost. From Meghan's point of view, he realized, things were not so good. He spent time in the bars, and accepted a number of free drinks in the average evening, so he often stumbled home somewhat under the effects. Meghan got upset every time this happened, and he had determined on numerous occasions not to accept freebies, but his resolve always broke down under the urging of the bar owners, who were honestly grateful for his presence. He had "shown steel" only a few times, but it was enough to send the message that this was one lawman who could not be crossed with impunity, and the town was now much quieter at night than it had been a year ago. This was no consolation for Meghan, who saw less and less of her father, and when she did, not in the best of circumstances. Increasingly concerned, Meghan pressured him hard about the matter, and when he refused to swear off alcohol, it became the first major breach between them.

The matter of the priest widened the rift. When they first arrived in Edwardston, Brian agreed to attend church with Meghan, though he cared very little for what went on there. Initially, there was no pastor, and the local elders conducted services to which he paid no attention, but shortly after Meghan's baptism, one arrived in town, and the church voted to appoint him. To his surprise, Brian found the man an affable sport who didn't push doctrine or the Holy Books, and who preached sophisticated sermons filled with literary and scientific references he suspected were beyond the education of most clerics.

Meghan had a different view, and unburdened herself of it after the fourth week of this, when she came home from Sunday service obviously angry.

"What's wrong, Meghan?" he asked, noting her scowl.

"That man calls himself a priest of God, but you would never know it by his sermons."

Brian was taken aback by this, as he had already struck up a friendship with the cleric. "I rather like his talks. The man is very erudite."

"In four weeks, he has yet to mention the Gospel of Jesus Christ a single time. He as much as implied this morning that everyone will go to heaven in the end because of God's love, whether they believe or not. What of sin? What of the cross? What of grace? When I challenged him afterward on the basis of God's justice, he brushed me off in a way that said he didn't care, and moreover doesn't like young girls questioning him. If you ask me, he's not a real priest at all, but a phoney."

The dispute over the priest and his beliefs, or lack of them, simmered for some time, but flared up in earnest once they settled at the law office, for in making the rounds of the pubs, Brian encountered Father Kees VanBuren there, and was delighted to discover he made an excellent drinking companion. When he foolishly mentioned this fact to Meghan, she was outraged.

"That settles it. What man of God uses alcohol? I'll wager if we could ask Tara's bishop, we'd find there's no priest in those robes, just an opportunist looking for an easy living, and drinking his way through his stipend. For that matter, what's an officer of the law and a gentlemen doing in such low dives?"

"Keeping customers away from our door," Brian responded in a lame attempt at good humour.

"The two of you needn't become drunkards yourselves to achieve that," she retorted.

“Aren't you being judgmental, Meghan?”

This cut silenced her for a time, but she made sure the tithe of their meagre earnings was clearly designated to the local hospice for the poor from that day forward, and all subsequent expressions of her father's good will toward Father VanBuren served only to exacerbate tensions between them.

In part to mollify her, he purchased from their little store of savings a fine steel blade for her to practice with him. This was strictly illegal, of course, for while fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds are allowed to “set aside wood” privately to learn with a steel blade in preparation for their seventeenth birthday when they may wear one in their own right, it is considered reckless endangerment and even child abuse to allow one younger to do so. But the law office was separated from the nearest building by a half-dozen staves, and had a high-ceilinged, soundproofed basement for prisoners, so when the place was without guests—most of the time—they could fence with real blades without fear of detection.

Already skilled, Meghan progressed rapidly, and before the next year was out, Brian estimated she was at an officer's skill level. Her height and reach were complemented by speed and a natural instinct for the game, and she appeared at times to know his moves before he made them. A wolfish grin stole over his face, as he pictured Meghan becoming the finest sword of her generation.

However, if he thought by drawing her into something illegal he could mollify her concerns about either his drinking or the priest, he was mistaken. Indeed, the combination of the three put an end to Edwardston as a hiding place.

The affair started one Friday evening when Brian was feeling particularly good about his day. He and VanBuren had been out fishing that afternoon in the small Knee Joint River (so called because of the sharp bend it took a mile before joining the larger Coldwater by the old fort). Both had done well, and Brian enjoyed having a little liquid refreshment with his friend while boasting of their catch to others at the pub. One thing led to another, and the pair were quite jolly by the time they staggered to the law office several hours later.

“C'mon in for a little nightcap,” he suggested to VanBuren at the door.

“I don't want to bother your daughter. She doesn't like me.”

“Doan matter. She went to the longhouse to tutor Buffalo's girl. Won't be back till late.”

Father VanBuren affably accepted the invitation. When they seated themselves at the only table in the combined office and kitchen, he pulled a small flask of his own from beneath his robes.

“Been saving this Centralia Brandy for a special occasion. Get a couple of glasses, and I'll pour you some liquid gold.”

Brian was happy enough to comply, and a few more moments saw him quaffing the proffered drink. The priest raised a glass to his own lips, then hesitated. “What do you think of it?” he asked.

“A fine preparation,” Brian replied, “but a little heady.”

As the slow stupor stole over him, he had just enough seconds to realize VanBuren had doped his drink and to stupidly wonder why before dropping the glass and slumping unconscious against the table.

After what seemed like an interminable time, but turned out to be fewer than thirty minutes, he regained

his senses to a cacophonous ringing in his ears. It took several seconds for his befuddled brain to recognize the sounds and realize there was a fierce sword battle going on all around him, and that Meghan was shouting.

“Da, wake up! Wake up, Da!”

It was a while longer before his head cleared enough to raise it and take in what was happening. When he did, more time passed before his mind made sense of it.

Meghan, back to him just now, was in a duel for her life with Kees VanBuren, who was evidently not the man of peace he made himself out to be, for he was fighting in the classic military style, not to subdue or disarm, but to kill.

VanBuren saw him awaken, and launched a savage attack at that very moment. Meghan, beaten back by his greater strength, parried skilfully, shouting again, “Da, wake up.”

Brian tried to lift himself from the chair, but found he could not gain his legs, and slumped back. Just then, Meghan's foot caught the edge of a small rug, and she began to fall backward. VanBuren, failing to realize what had happened, didn't follow up his advantage, but Brian, finding at least his voice, called out sharply the standard drill, “fall recovery two.”

Hearing him, Meghan immediately and automatically, as he had trained her, drew up her legs, got her off-sword hand behind her, and as her backside hit the floor, bounced and pushed herself off to the right, springing back to her feet before her opponent could react. Brian called out two simple defensive patterns to steady her, and soon all three were concentrating on the fight, with no other conversation. He used their private set of signals, not the ones taught soldiers, so VanBuren, who clearly had officer's training, could not intercept and use them against her.

The man's greater strength was cancelled out by the girl's speed, longer reach, and better finesse, but Brian realized VanBuren could eventually wear her down. So, when he had Meghan settled into a steady rhythm, he tested the weapon he had fashioned by calling, “rube.”

This was a “sucker” manoeuvre, and had to await the right stroke from the opponent to begin its execution. Moments later, it came. VanBuren slashed heavily toward her from the top right quadrant, and Meghan allowed her sword to give way even as she stepped back and to her right somewhat, planting her feet solidly for maximum purchase. The movement was designed to overextend the opponent in an awkward posture, and she completed it with a twist of her weapon to take the topmost position, pushing VanBuren's blade almost to the floor, then stepping forward and trapping it momentarily with her left foot. The timing had to be perfect, for if you misjudged the strength of the stroke or were slightly late moving, you could lose your foot. As she had done dozens of times in the basement, Meghan executed perfectly. Before VanBuren could recover, she repositioned over his ruined guard, moved forward on her right foot, and thrust hard.

When she practised with her father, he knew the move was coming, and ducked aside to complete the drill. But this was not practice and VanBuren was not expecting it, so her blade went cleanly through his abdomen and out the back.

Meghan was as much in shock for a moment as he, and for several seconds the two stood stock still, paralysed in the death embrace. Brian shouted “withdraw” and, on automatic reflex, she yanked the sword from VanBuren's body, back to a guard position. Relieved of the small support of the blade, and cut again by its exit, VanBuren folded up and collapsed to the floor. Meghan looked at him, then at her

blade. Unable to take in the enormity of what had happened, she remained rooted to the spot, stunned.

Brian ignored her, and levered himself clumsily out of the chair to crawl to the injured man. He grabbed a fistful of VanBuren's hair, turned his face about, and demanded, "Who are you working for?"

But all he could extract from the dying man was the fragment, "great lord ... Tara." VanBuren's face took on a sudden pasty colour, his throat emitted a short rattle, and his eyes closed.

"Is he ... Is he..." Meghan stuttered, horror-struck.

"Clean your sword," Brian barked without looking back, and began to rifle VanBuren's pouch. His first find was two identity cards. One was a licensure of ordination proclaiming VanBuren a priest of the Christian Church, duly signed by the ecclesiastical registrar of Armagh. The second was a standard military identification for Lieutenant Kees VanBuren, but lacking any house affiliation. It was understandable that he was unattached. A military man could become a priest; but it was a capital crime to take a sword to hand while actually wearing the brown robes, and a lord who ordered it done was equally liable. Both IDs had to be genuine. They scanned properly in his office machine, and neither their DNA-keyed data foils nor their encrypted holograms could be faked. That meant VanBuren had both a lord and a bishop behind him, a discouraging development, for it meant their enemies had subverted at least one high churchman.

There was a great deal of money that he didn't touch, numerous keys, and a pocketbook filled with passwords and account names, which he scanned into his own PIEA. Tightly folded up at the bottom of the pouch was a single sheet of plastipaper, which, when opened, turned out to be a partial copy of one of the warrants describing the two of them, but, in this case, demanding the recipient report their whereabouts if located, but take no independent action. Brian reflected a moment, then decided VanBuren must have wanted to try for some larger reward by investigating on his own. He had not turned the two of them in when he first had the chance, for the warrant was almost eight months old. It was written in the style of high command, and must be from the fellow's liege lord, but there was nothing to say which one. Had VanBuren communicated with Tara recently?

Further search revealed a second small, flat pouch under the man's robes. Brian pursed his lips in a low, almost soundless whistle as he went through its contents. Three pill cases, a garrote, an executioner's hood, four curiously shaped knives, thumbscrews, a nerve prod, pliers, wires, and several other small instruments spilled onto the floor.

He examined and smelled the pills, drawing on the extensive knowledge of pharmacopoeia he had imparted to so many cadets. The first was a deadly poison, the second a knockout chemical used with drinks, and the third a will-destroying truth serum. None was effective for very long against the expensive soup of nanomachines that ran in every senior officer's veins, the secret of which was revealed upon being promoted to major and getting the injections as precaution against illicit interrogation.

Evidently Kees VanBuren, far from being a priest, had been torturer-executioner for some high house. Well, he would ply his vile profession no longer. The false priest must have been surprised to see him wake up so soon, he grimly reflected. Brian hadn't had a booster shot since just before Glenmorgan, or the stuff wouldn't have worked at all.

He returned to the troubling identity cards, and thought things over. Neither the belligerently irreligious Thomas Monde nor the skeptically agnostic Sean Reilly was likely to have suddenly begun cultivating church connections. He also doubted either would take the chance of being caught attempting bribery of a bishop to obtain false ordination papers from Armagh. Both had themselves achieved high military rank,

so neither would equip a man with drugs like these if they knew who they were sending the fellow against. "What about a house lord who's a real bishop?" he suddenly asked himself, and with the question, there at once sprang into his mind the image of Philip Desmond.

Philip was nephew to Calaghan MacCarthy, whose vengeful ambition originally provoked the king's deposition. He was the son of Calaghan's sister Bria, later banished for her own attempted coup, and brother to the late William Desmond, once Donal XI, also known as "Willie the pervert," under whose rule had come the attacks against Glenmorgan.

Philip Desmond had slunk away from Kilkarney after Katherina caught him stealing from other cadets, and joined the seminary at Armagh the next day. After graduation, he had been ecclesiastical governor of various outposts, and was a recently elected bishop. Moreover, he had been Lord MacCarthy ever since William gave up the title upon his involuntary investiture as Donal.

Brian ran a quick search on the MT, and struck an artery immediately. A Kees VanBuren had been military adjutant to Philip Desmond while the latter was governor of Penal City. Both had left at the same time, about a year ago when Desmond made bishop. He got curious. Who had succeeded them? Thomas Monde. Who had recommended both appointments to the court? Sean Reilly, Donal XII. Brian leaned back in his chair, appalled. "Why didn't I check on VanBuren before?" he berated himself. "We've more enemies than I imagined," he concluded. "The cancer is spreading."

Brian heard Meghan slide her sword into its sheath at the side of his desk. "Tell me what happened," he demanded, anxious to extract maximum information over minimum time.

Her voice was weak and unsteady. "I came home from the longhouse because Rainbow and I finished early, and I was worried about you." Now she was started, the words tumbled out. "I was afraid you were drinking again, and wanted to be home. I came in quietly as you've instructed me to, so he didn't hear. When I looked in the room, you were slumped over the table in front of a bottle, and he was going through your desk drawers. I asked, 'What are you doing?'"

"He claimed, 'Your father's had some kind of an attack. Does he have medicine in one of these drawers?' He was so smooth I almost believed him. Then he came over to me with a smile on his face, reached out to take my hand, and turned ugly. He said we were wanted criminals, and he was doing his duty but nobody would mind if he had a little fun first." She touched the place where her amphora hung, and hesitated. Her head was hung, her face crimson. "He was going to rape me, Da. I had to defend my honour."

"You did right, daughter. What happened next?"

"I pulled away, and when he yanked me back, I pretended to stumble as I turned, then hit him in the stomach with my free hand. When he doubled over and let go, I drove the heel of my palm into his chin as I straightened up. It worked just like you said, but he was awfully angry when he got up off the floor."

Brian nodded encouragement for her to continue. This was one of the simplest ways he had shown her to break a hold. He taught noncombatant women to go for the nose or eyes, completely disabling or killing an attacker, but one who knew the sword was expected to offer its more honourable death instead. Still, he made a mental note to work on sharpening her reflexes and ensuring she didn't pull her punches. With her strength, she should have been able to kill VanBuren with one blow.

"I ran between you and your desk, then shook you to wake you up, but nothing happened. He cursed, and it was awful to hear such language coming from a priest. Then he drew a sword from under his robe,

and threatened to kill you if I didn't submit. I pretended to cower behind your back, moved left and away, then drew my own sword from where we keep it beside the desk. I told him my rating, and offered to spare his life if he surrendered. He laughed like a maniac, said now he would cut me to pieces slowly, and attacked first. I defended myself, and kept trying to wake you up.”

“The important thing is that you reacted under battle conditions as you were taught.”

“It was hard to fight a priest.”

“It was legal. If he ever was a priest, he ceased to be the moment he touched a sword.”

She paled again. “I killed him, didn't I?”

“He killed himself by attacking a superior fighter, and ignoring your offer to accept his surrender.” Brian's head was rapidly clearing of the drug, so he rose, went to her and gently took her by the shoulders. At fully a staff, she was his height now, but in his eyes, her stature had grown immensely in these few minutes. “You did well. To survive, it is sometimes necessary to wound or kill. When the dishonourable die at the hands of the honourable, the world is done a service.”

“You are not angry with me?”

“I am proud of you. Why would I be angry?”

“I killed your friend.”

“Meghan dear, I was wrong, and you were right. He was no friend of ours. Moreover, he was no priest, but an agent and a torturer for one of the high families.” He showed her the warrant, hood and garrote, but didn't share the rest of his deductions. She looked at them, and at the body lying in a growing pool of blood. Suddenly the enormity of what she had done rushed to her head. She spun away and ran to the washroom. A moment later Brian heard her throwing up. He sat at his desk, still a little unsteady himself, and thought things over.

There had been nothing that could give them away in the room itself. His data cubes were hidden under the floorboards above the furnace pipes. He checked and found the hatch undisturbed. Chances were VanBuren had learned nothing. Brian examined the booklet from VanBuren's pouch. One of these accounts must be what he used to report, but exploring the possibilities would have to wait until there was more time.

VanBuren must have worked for someone at Tara, so prompt action was necessary. However, they could not leave Edwardston without help. Isolation made the place hard to get to, but harder to get away from. Who dared he involve? There was only one person who could help, just one way to get out undetected. Deciding, he reached for the MT keyboard to tap out a series of instructions. It had voice control, as they all do, but that mode was insecure. You never knew who might be listening outside a window.

Meghan returned, looking pale and drawn, and sat down heavily on the chesterfield. “We have to leave Edwardston, don't we?”

He looked at her with overwhelming pride. “It's hard the first time,” he sympathized, addressing her real concern, “but you get used to it.”

"I'll never get used to killing people," she averred. "What will Jesus think of me for this?"

Her father was spared the necessity of concocting an answer by a light knock at the door. Meghan started and checked the window. "It's the chief," she said, in near panic. "What do we do?"

For answer, her father called out, "Come on in, Walking Buffalo." Then he turned to her adding, "We have to trust someone. I asked him to step over."

Walking Buffalo halted in the doorway to survey the scene—furniture scattered, drapery and upholstery cut, bottle on the table, and the body on the floor. He sniffed the air and remarked, "So, VanBuren was the spy." He turned him over, examined the wound briefly, walked to the desk, and lightly touched the hilt of the sword hanging beside it. Then he addressed himself, not unkindly, to Meghan, "Was he any better with the sword than as a priest?"

"He had a lieutenant's training, but was out of practice," was her frightened reply.

"As well. I was afraid he might have been a senior officer. You would have had a tougher time."

At this, realizing he knew, she put her hand over her mouth, and gasped, "How could you tell it was me..."

"Who killed him? Not difficult. Your father is sicker than he is drunk, and has, I think, been unconscious. Consider the smell of vomit and that it has no alcohol in it. Observe the size and depth of the cut, that the smaller sword is still warm, and that it is you who is winded. My conclusions are obvious, aren't they?"

Brian interjected. "You knew he was not a priest?" he demanded.

"I wasn't certain until now. At first I thought you were the spy. The way you walk, how you sit in a crowded room to watch all the doors, how you handle your sword. I've had the training, too. Then I got this about a year back." He pulled a faded piece of paper from his pouch, and passed it to Brian. It was a duplicate of a warrant he had deleted from the office system. "That's when I decided to make you the town officer. If you were 'armed and dangerous', you might as well be working for law and order as against."

"Why didn't you turn us in?"

"Because these warrants are forgeries."

"They originate with palace security. There have been three on this machine," Brian observed.

"Yes, I know. They are forgeries, nonetheless. My son David works in security at Tara, and advises that although the warrants are in their database, they did not originate with their office. After I tipped them, they set a trap for whoever had been tampering, but failed to catch anyone. They now believe someone in the office reported the discovery and scared off the perpetrator. The warrants were withdrawn and machine security altered, but there can be no doubt someone at the palace was involved. Doubtless it is the same person who has engaged in other conspiracies, because we have seen a steady stream of spies for years. Most have been too obvious to accomplish much, but after the last one left town suddenly and did not appear to be replaced, I worried a professional had taken over.

"When my law officer accidentally died, it seemed too convenient, so I decided to forestall a takeover of the position. If you were an enemy of my enemy, I reasoned you might be a friend, so I put you in a place

where you would attract attention, and waited to see who would be flushed out. Somehow, I am not surprised it turned out to be Kees VanBuren. I never accepted him as a priest. I wondered if he was even a believer. I was half convinced several months ago, and have tapped his line ever since, but he has not reported, so I had no proof until tonight.”

At this point Meghan interjected, outraged. “You used us for bait to catch a spy?” Her voice was high, almost shrill.

Walking Buffalo's face was already quite dark, but he now seemed embarrassed. “I set the trap using two people I thought were wanted by palace security before I learned better. Once it was done, I couldn't change anything without attracting attention. When I heard my new law officer had bought himself a second sword, and enquired after the make and weight, it was apparent it could not be for himself. I decided you must be capable of defending yourself also, or a gentleman such as your father would not endanger you so. Consequently, I bided my time.”

“Why would someone at the palace set spies on you?” Brian asked. “I thought he was here to catch us.”

“No,” Walking Buffalo replied, “This all predates your run-in with the authorities at New Tara.” Brian looked startled, so he added, “I'll come back to that in a minute. Evidently some of the great lords have again decided we ‘filthy aborigines’ should not be in governance. This is part of a move to depose us, and either add our domain to Monde's at Moody, or bring in outsiders to rule here. That the fellow also found you appears to be coincidence.”

Brian nodded. It made sense. VanBuren couldn't have been sent here after them. If their enemies had known where they were, they would have come against them in force, and made sure of them.

“It would be foolish to change holders here,” Meghan interjected. “Everybody knows you are a good chief. The people love you, and wouldn't have anyone else. No European could rule better than you have. The economy would take a forty percent downturn if the palace introduced direct rule. I say Tara should leave things in your hands.” In her indignation, colour returned to her face. She seemed to forget about the body on the floor, and her part in putting it there. “Moreover,” she added as an afterthought, “It would take a decade or more of subversive activity to bring about such a change.”

Walking Buffalo became quite thoughtful at her pronouncement, stared at a spot on the ceiling a few moments, then remarked absently, “We've had several years of it already. But that's roughly what Dave Dennison said at the INA domain lords' meeting when we last talked about the matter.” He appeared to reach a decision, but announced it rather oddly. “However, it is a double compliment coming from you, my lady.” He bowed.

Meghan looked confused, but her father had started to grin at the mention of Lord Dennison, and now chuckled aloud. Meghan looked at the two with some annoyance. “How about letting me in on the secret?”

Instead of doing so immediately, Lord Buffalo changed the subject entirely. “My daughter Rainbow is the child of our old age. Elizabeth and I were both over fifty when she was born, if you can imagine that.” He grinned at himself. “However, it has been far more difficult to motivate and teach her than it was her half brother David. We have long thought if she had someone closer to her own age as role model, we could turn the situation around. So when her lack of interest in education became a serious problem, I arranged for you to teach her privately.

“You had already established a reputation as student and tutor, and we found that incongruous with the

image of a wanted criminal. We monitored things very closely at first, but much less when we cleared the warrants, and your good character became obvious. You understand,” he added, with a gesture in her direction, “It is always more important who teaches, than strictly what subject matter is taught. People are not data cubes to fill with mere words or facts.”

Meghan blushed slightly at his remarks, and waited for him to get to the point. She had not had any previous explanation for the arrangement, but guessed something of the sort. Rainbow had certainly responded well, going from being a lethargic, mediocre, and uninterested student to the top of her class in little over six months.

“Elizabeth and I were as proud of you as we were of Rainbow the day you both were baptized, and it was your influence, by the way, that led her to ask, not so much ours.”

He shifted topics again. “One of the times you came to the longhouse, there was no blank paper, so you fetched a used scrap from your pouch to show her a puzzle and capture her interest. I later retrieved it from Rainbow's book and looked it over. Nice network treatment of the philosophers' problem, by the way.

“You see,” he continued, changing the subject once more as he ambled about his explanation, “When I was a young man, I realized if my family were to secure and retain the domain for the People's self-rule, we would have to be not just adequate but superior administrators, so I took the GAC while I was in cadet school at Toronto. Years later, I became interested in the workings of the academy and eventually joined the board. I have been one of the three exam regents for the last several years.

“This year, a student named James Dillworth, purportedly from South Africa, obtained the highest score in the history of the test. Discreet enquiries by the regents lead nowhere, and the account from which the exam was done has been closed. The real Dillworth, it seems, died many years ago.

“The last question was a particularly difficult one, reflecting a problem I myself once solved privately, but only with several hours' work. It's one of those things you put on a test to see if there are any truly exceptional people writing, but for which you never expect to see a solution. Well, there was one correct answer, and it was on the paper to which I refer.

“You can imagine my surprise when I discovered the scrap you left with my daughter had on the reverse the rough work for that very solution. Incidentally, I now note your struggle with my vague wording of the question, and have to agree with the other examiners that you made a perfectly good choice for the slack variables, after all.”

“The answer was within two percent either way,” Meghan observed, by this time quite red-faced.

“Quite so. Well, all of this is a rather long way around to tell you I do not just appreciate your comment about our economy, I agree with it professionally.” He paused and thought again. “More important, you said it.” He emphasized the words “you” and “said.” “That means a lot to me and my house.” He turned to Brian.

“Even before Dave Dennison commented, I had you placed. There were things about you that nagged at my memory. A turn of phrase, the way a man walks—some things don't change even from boyhood. So, I invited you hunting, and watched carefully. You rode and tracked as one of the People, and already knew the terrain intimately. By the end of the first day, I saw the boy, not the man.” He glanced at Meghan. “I never met your mother, but did know Iron Kate. There's a resemblance, but it is not deep. You remind me of your other grandmother...”

He stopped as Brian shook his head vigorously. Then he abruptly rose, drawing his sword. This startled Meghan, who flinched involuntarily. But he held it point upward and bowed to the flat side. When he made no further move, she turned to her father, who remarked, drawing his own blade and offering it, "Take his oath on my sword. It will be yours someday, so it is fitting."

Bewildered, she accepted the proffered hilt, stood the requisite three paces from the chief, and put the point of the blade toward the floor.

Walking Buffalo bowed again and intoned, "By this, I and my house do swear fealty of honour, and friendship to the house of..." He caught a sharp nod from Brian in Meghan's direction, and amended, "to the person and the house of Mara Devereaux-Rourke, whose honour we will defend and whose cause we will uphold from this day forward."

She was taken aback that the chief knew their deep secret, but even young children know protocol for oaths of fealty. She glanced at her father first, and received an enthusiastic nod. The Chief had sworn more than honour, but less than service—a puzzling oath. It was only later that she realized he could not bind his house, and therefore his son David, to service. Uncertain, she made the most general of the standard replies.

"I, Mara Devereaux-Rourke, also known as Meghan McIlhargey, being underage, but with the permission of my father, hereby accept your fealty. I and my house swear to fulfil all the obligations of this fealty by dealing with you and yours in all honour and integrity from this day forward." With this, the two reversed sword positions, his down, hers up. Walking Buffalo looked up at the tall slender young woman who stood so nobly before him. What could he say to her? She was kin by both his first marriage and his second. Like both his David and Alfred Dennison, she was of the generation that must right the wrongs at Tara. She was ... Tears filled his eyes. He reached out and stroked the long red hair flowing over the child-woman's shoulders.

"I name you 'Red Lions' Mane' and say from this day forward, that you are of the People, both Blackfoot and Stoney. My salt is your salt, and my bread is your bread, so long as the mountains stand, and the rivers run. Your grandparents were friends to me and my people, and we remain exceedingly deep in their debt," he added, then surprised her by abruptly kneeling before his sword and touching his forehead to it. She looked to her father, confused. This ritual was unknown to her.

"Place the flat of your sword over his head and confirm his right to hold the domain, in the crown's name," he instructed. "You will be bound to defend your oath on his behalf when you stand at court."

Meghan complied, but had to make up words as she went. "This day we do say and confirm the right of you and your house to rule the domain of Edwardston and surrounding areas under fealty to the throne of Tara and in perpetuity."

As Walking Buffalo got to his feet and bowed again before sheathing his sword, she heard her father murmur, "So let it be said, so let it be done," but when Meghan returned his sword, he added, more loudly, "Now we have all that out of the way, we need to get away from here before our late friend is missed by whoever sent him. When Meghan is old enough, she'll need to find VanBuren's master, and call on him to execute justice."

Hearing him, Meghan gritted her teeth as she thought of all the dead—her parents and grandparents, along with so many other family members, friends, and allies. Her da couldn't stand at Tara; she knew that. She could, however. She was Devereaux. She was Rourke. And when the ban ended ... She

glanced again at the corpse of the man she had killed, and felt fresh revulsion at the thought of having to do it again, perhaps many times. However, it was her duty to her families to take revenge, and to Ireland and the Lord of Heaven to exact justice. She determined never to rest until all the murderers paid for their crimes. She would be harder, more grown up, more like her father. She straightened. She would restore the family name.

* * * *

Two eventful decades have passed since the morning Meghan and her da left Edwardston. I didn't see her again until I was a student at her school in Moody several years later, and not after that until I shared her apartment at Tara. It is trite to call her 'sister,' for I owe her my very life in more ways than one. I shudder to think what I might have become without her. She got me back on the right path, reconciled with my parents, and following the Lord of Heaven.

Today, she's a high lady and a general, but she's still the friend I rode the prairies with as a girl. What memories we have from all the years. And how I remember the morning she left.

The sun shone so brightly in the grey-blue sky it made your eyes ache. My parents and I saddled for a family ride, but I knew the truth at once when we met the McIlhargeys outside town, and I saw their packs. They did it that way partly for security, but mostly for my benefit. See, you can cry when only family and the buffalo are watching, but it would be shameful in town.

We didn't ride directly to the airport and the waiting domain jet that would fly my father and the McIlhargeys to Los Angeles. For that, a groundcar would have sufficed. Instead, we made to the southeast over terrain that to this day has never seen a road. My parents and Meghan's da told us stories about the "old days" as we went and after we arrived at the old village. That's our way. The tales of the People are not mere musty accounts of the past. They explain our reason for being, our relationship with the Lord of Heaven, and our motivation for continuing on. It's the same with the Irish, and perhaps that's why we get on so well, when we're not fighting. History isn't merely a series of events; it's a way of expressing who you are in the context of a flow of heritage from past to future generations.

I rode double in front of Meghan with my own horse trailing behind, and my big sister hugged me the whole time, and told me we would always be together in the family of the Lord of Heaven.

We had both heard before of Hannah and Seamus, Sally and Jack, Lucy and James, Colleen and Patrick, but the telling that day was most pointed and poignant. It was our parents' way of beginning to pass the royal peacekeeping swords to our generation. Meghan and I never spoke a word though the recitations. Nor could I ask what I always wanted to know—which of the cousins was the king. Later, when I questioned my mother about the royal succession, she would only say that if one of our generation was to sit on the emerald throne, I must help ensure it would be the noblest and most able of all, for the sake of Ireland's Peace. Her answer left me with plenty of unsolved mysteries, but after puzzling over the stories a long time, I eventually decided who the king must have been. That I turned out to be completely wrong testifies how well he and his cousins created their initial confusing tangle of deceit, and how they took advantage of subsequent events to bury the truth ever deeper.

To this day, whenever I return home from Tara to Edwardston to spend time with my parents, we invariably ride out to that same place, called "Irishmen's Hill," (though the original in our tongue follows older custom, and sounds more like "Scotsman's Hill"). There we commune with the Lord of Heaven, remember, and tell each other the stories again so we can faithfully pass them to our own children and theirs.

From the top of the hill, you can see the whole of Edwardston to the northwest. The village of Prairie Chicken is immediately below the hill and beside the rail lines to the East. It is hard to imagine that on Tirdia, this same hill is in the middle of the great city of Calgary and stretches to the horizon in every direction. Here on Hibernia, Edwardston is a tiny place, unknown to most. It is ironic that the royal roads all cross here.

It was here my father first told me of the royals, and our place in the family, including the stories we heard again that day. Imagine, both my half-brother David and I have King Conn and Queen Ann for great-grandparents—him by James and Daisy, and me, of course, by Elizabeth Ryan, my mother, through Princess Elizabeth, the sister of James III.

It was on that hill, just outside the gate in the iron fence that marks off a very special section of the cemetery, that my mother first recounted to me how she came to Edwardston as an escort for would-be brides and fell wildly in love herself. My father was the last to remarry, but says he got the very best, and I have to agree, for though I, too, have wept over the ones whose mortal remains lie on that hillside, I never knew them, and would never have existed had they lived.

Invariably, we clear the grasses from around a wide stone that stands out among the many other identical granite markers by virtue of spanning three graves. Sometimes Alice Cloud comes with me, and we stand together, for her mother's stone is beside our family's. On other occasions, I have been there with various of my cousins who have survived the troubles. Most times, it is my brother David and I who pray there. Always, we salute with our swords—I with a stick as, now being married to a priest, I'm not permitted to carry my blade any longer—and we say aloud the inscription on the monument, swearing it as our oath to carry on their task after them. The words remind us as few other things can do, of both our duties and our vulnerability. The left panel reads:

Enthroned With the Lord of Heaven
Officers, Scholars, Queens
Promoted to Glory
July 9, 1955

In the middle is a raised carving depicting three women embracing, their faces shown in priceless detail. I'm told it is a remarkable likeness, and I'm sure it's Hannah Meathe's only carving outside high family ownership or the royal museum. Why, a far lesser piece depicting James IV sold recently at Murphy's auction for six figures.

The right panel bears the names:

"Deerfoot, Princess of the Peoples
Sally, Lady Devereaux

Lucy, Lady Dennison"

Underneath, surrounded by carved shamrocks, and extending across the whole stone is the legend that is their epitaph on the one hand and our inspiration and command on the other. Mara uses portions as her military school motto and as watchword for the army she assembled in our quest to wrest Tara from the usurpers. It reads:

Faithful to justice under the Lord of Heaven.
Friends of the day, take back the night,
Keep the Peace after them.

May the road rise to meet you,

May the wind be always at your back,
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
The rains fall soft upon your fields and,
Until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of His hand.

—an Irish blessing.

Epilogue

We can also explain the rise of the group now known as the “Friends of the Day”, who played such a key role in what is popularly called “Lady Mara's coup.”

Third through fifth volumes, covering events of the years immediately prior to the nexus are also planned, as is a separate and larger work explaining the role of key nexus figures who originated on other earths but played an important part in our own history.

—the general editors

Watch for “The Friends,” Volume two of “The Interregnum,” at a bookseller near you.

Appendix—The Characters

Greater Hibernia's Royals and Donals

The Three-Swords Dynasty

1792—1815 Conn I

1815—1880 Seamus II

1880—1885 Seamus III

1885—1912 Conn II (m Gertrude Cavanaugh)

1912—1932 Conn III (m Ann of Meta)

1932—1940 James III (m Maeve O'Brien)

1940—1941 James IV

The Descendants of Conn III (The Prolific) and Ann to 2000

(m = married, d = died, f= fostered out, a = fostered in, c = clone, v = in vitro)

1890 James (m Maeve) [James III]

—1914 William (d 1940)

—1917 James (f deposited 1941 and vanishes) [James IV]

—1918 Conn (d 1923)

—1920 Matthew (f, d 1925)

—1931 Daisy-Deerfoot (m Walking Buffalo, d 1955)

—1954 David

1890 Jamie (f, MacTavish, m Gordon Donald 1918)

—1919 Gordon (m Mary 1940)

—1967 Gowan

—1973 Trish

—1920 Daisy (m Robert MacAllister 1941)

—1942 Angus (m Mercy McKitrick, clan Graham 1965)

—1967 “Day”

1892 Ann (f, m Rory Rourke 1910)

—1913 Matthew (m “Iron Kate” Evans) Donal IV

—1947 Katherina (see Jack Meathe)

—1977 (v) Mara (Rourke-Devereaux-Meathe a.k.a Meghan McIlhargey)

1893 Daisy (f, m Brian Devereaux)

—1918 James “Jack” (m Sally O'Neill 1945)

—1946 Jack (d 1958) [name and place taken by Jack Meathe]

—1950 Doyle (f Whelan, m Jana)

—1983 Cullin

1893 Maisy (f, m Richard Holdom)

—1918 James (Later Dennison, m Lucy O'Brien 1945)

—1946 Dave (m Gwen)

—1967 Alfred (m Sheanna O'Toole)

—1949 Tia (f McManus, m Driscoll Derry)

—1968 Maeve

1894 Patricia (m Derek O'Toole)

—1914 Robert (m Ailie, d 1968)

—1960 Karen (d 1987)

—1915 Maisy (f Para, m William 1949)

—1952 William "Bill" (m Celia)

—1977 Bal

—1917 Patrick (m Colleen)

—1947 Patricia (m John Maguire)

—1981 Sheana (m Alfred Dennison)

—1947 Patrick (m Anna 1975, to Para as "Atri" after Glenmorgan)

—1978 Ari

—1978 Ona

1900 Elizabeth (Michael Ryan 1927)

—1930 Elizabeth (m Walking Buffalo 1958)

—1981 Rainbow (m Fr. Cam O'Grady 1998)

—1999 Meghan

—1945 Liam (m Maria Scrobogna 1977)

—1983 Catherine (c Eider)

1910 Carole (m Stan Reilly)

—1947 Sean (Donal XII)

—1950 Paul (f McNeil)

—1975 Rena (m Sven Johansen)

The descendants of Frederick O'Toole and Janet

1890 Derek (m Princess Patricia—see above)

1895 Jane (m Solomon Transky, the Metan Salmon)

—1923 Hannah (m Seamus Meathe*)

—1946 James “Jack” [takes Jack Devereaux’ place] (see Katherina Rourke)

* According to palace records, Conn III had a younger brother James who took the surname Meathe. His only child (1891) was famous Commereceman John Meathe, to whom Seamus Meathe was born in 1917, a second cousin to James IV. (James Holdom-Dennison, Jack Devereaux Sr., and Patrick O’Toole, by contrast, were first cousins.)

The First Lords of the Interregnum (to 2000)

1941—1945 Donal I (Donal Tobin)

1945—1951 Donal II (Rory Doran)

1951—1952 Donal III (Colin Cunningham)

1952—1958 Donal IV (Matthew Rourke)

1958—1962 Donal V (Calaghan MacCarthy)

1962—1968 Donal VI (John O’Flaherty)

1968 Donal VII (Gerald Monde)

1968 Donal VIII (Friel O’Tigernaugh)

1968—1970 Donal IX (Cameron O’Nial)

1970—1975 Donal X (Armand O’Tigernaugh)

1975—1980 Donal XI (William Desmond)

1980—2000 Donal XII (Sean Reilly)

Appendix—Hibernia's Weights and Measures

Summary

The Federation uses the Tirdian metric system for all weights and measures, except for length units, where the following special names apply (common ones in bold):

—**staff**(two Tirdian metres) This is the basic length unit. (A “fathom” on Para)

—stick (or “sword”) (one metre) A half-staff

—foot (obsolete except on Para) a sixth of a staff

—centistaff (or “**cent**”) a hundredth of a staff, hence two centimetres

—furlong (uncommon) 100 staves

—**mile**(Irish) 1000 staves or about 6562 English Earth Tirdian feet

—acre a thousand square staves or a thousandth of a square (Irish) mile

Characters of The Peace

Disclaimer: Any resemblance between the names and/or actions of any character in this work and any real person whether living or dead is purely coincidental. All the characters are entirely fictional.

Meta and Tirdia:

Elbon—the Builder, chairman of the Metan council, a.k.a**John Dominic**

(Lucky) Lucy O'Brien—MD and Ollmah in languages; Irish spy; marries James Dennison

(Salty) Sally O'Neill—MD and Ollmah in history; Irish spy; marries Jack Devereaux Sr.

Father Damon—their cell leader in Irish intelligence

Betsy Maguire—Sally & Lucy's landlady at Dublin

Michael Sloane—RCMP commander at Calgary

Karl Schmidt—former German agent, now working for the KGB

Carlos Cortez—Spanish agent

Douglas Boone—FBI agent; but a double for the Russians

Bolo—Argentinian who works for the Japanese.

George Dowd—Irish Russian double agent who steals the Manhattan secrets

Pastor Fred—of a Presbyterian Church in downtown Calgary

Ortho's Nobility:

James III—king until assassinated in 1940

William—crown prince who dies with James III

James IV—The banished King

Donal Tobin—the first Donal, whose name becomes the title of the office

Sean Reilly—heir of the Reilly clan

Stanley Reilly—his father; commands eastern forces in 3WW

Kate Rourke (Evans) (Iron Kate)—a royal, powerful courtier and wife of Matthew

Matthew Rourke—royal family, marries Kate, becomes Donal IV, retires when she is killed

Katherina Rourke—daughter of Iron Kate and Matthew

Elizabeth Ryan—head of household and holder of sword until she gives it to Liam to go to Edwardston and marry walking Buffalo

Liam Ryan—younger brother of Elizabeth

Solomon (Salmon) Transky—Metan agent who marries on Ortho

Jane O'Toole/Transky—his wife; aunt to Patrick

Seamus Meathe—third cousin and personal agent to James IV.

Hannah Transky /Meathe—his wife

Jack Meathe—son of Seamus and Hannah

James (Jack) Devereaux Sr.—made Lord of Moody after the banishment

Sally Devereaux—his wife

James (Jack) Devereaux Jr.—their son

Brian McIlhargey—cadet trainer at Kilkarney, survives Glenmorgan and goes into exile

Patrick O'Toole—a cousin of James IV, head of security

Colleen O'Toole—his wife

Patrick O'Toole Jr.—their son

Patricia O'Toole—their daughter; twin to Patrick

Albert Maguire—Lord at Edwardston, assassinated

Elbon—the Builder, chairman of the Metan council, a.k.a **John Dominic**

(Lucky) Lucy O'Brien—MD and Ollmah in languages; Irish spy; marries James Dennison

(Salty) Sally O'Neill—MD and Ollmah in history; Irish spy; marries Jack Devereaux Sr.

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Karl Schmidt—former German agent, now working for the KGB

Carlos Cortez—Spanish agent

Douglas Boone—FBI agent; but a double for the Russians

Bolo—Argentinian who works for the Japanese.

George Dowd—Irish Russian double agent who steals the Manhattan secrets

Pastor Fred—of a Presbyterian Church in downtown Calgary—his son, kidnapped

Karen Bridget O'Toole—a niece of Patrick; severely brain damaged in an accident

James Dennison—(orig Holdom) appointed Lord of New Tara in the time of James IV

Sarah Dennison—his first wife, whom he marries before going to New Tara

Lucy Dennison—his second wife

Tia McManus—daughter of Lucy and James, fostered out

Gustav Friedrich—son of Kaiser Gustav I, General of Germany in the 3WW

Ito Miyamoto Sr.- Daimyo and alternate emperor in the early 1940s

Gerald Monde—holder of the Monde sword in 1951

Thomas Monde—a Colonel in the royal army at Glenmorgan, clone of Gerald

Calaghan MacCarthy—MacCarthy Mor in the time of Hannah and Sean; Donal V (1958-62)

Spike MacCarthy—nephew to Callaghan; colonel in the time of Sally and Lucy

Others at Tara:

William (Bill) O'Grady—priest of Old Town in Tara in Sean's time

Gertrude O'Grady—his wife

Charles & Marilyn O'Connell—run a security safe house near Old Town in Seamus's time

Malachy Fogarty—lord at Centralia in Lucy Dennison's time

Armand Derry—a clerk in security at the time of the King's deposition

Karina Tansey—Kilkamey grad, later Security officer

Patrick O'Dwyer—servant to James, high King, given a protector's sword

Molly Byrne—a cook in the day of James

Patsy—scullery girl killed at the assassination

At Edwardston:

Alex O'Brien—gang leader in Edwardston in 1951

Rose Cloud—the Blackfoot woman he rapes

Alice Cloud/O'Brien—Alex' illegitimate daughter

Running Bear—Stoney Chief in 1951

Deerfoot—his adopted daughter; originally Princess Daisy; marries Walking Buffalo

Walking Buffalo—Blackfoot chief from 1950

David Buffalo—his son by Deerfoot/Daisy

Elizabeth Buffalo—his second wife

Rainbow Buffalo—much younger half sister of David, and daughter of Elizabeth

Hank Hendergrast—ruffian hired by Spike MacCarthy near Edwardston in 1953

Sunshine Buffalo/Rainmaker—sister to Walking Buffalo

Kees VanBuren—a spy who poses as a priest at Edwardston and is killed by Mara

Appendix—The Interregnum—Glossary of terms

aircar—a four-to six-passenger short range jet

Alicia and Aileen—A.I. programs created by Nellie Hacker

amphora—a crystal or stone perfume holder worn by a woman on a chain around her neck as a promise of her virginity. The amphora or a substitute is broken at her wedding (cf. crossed heart)

Amsterdam—largest Orthan cadet school does field commission upgrades as well as regular officer training

Architect, the—Metan name for God

ard—high, head, chief, first

Armaugh—old Church centre, now houses the low armoury

Armory, high—orbital, nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons stored there

Armoury, low—at Armaugh, guns stored there for emergencies

Babylon—capitol of Para, sometimes used for the planet

bard—a brehon, a seanacha, or a filea

Berea—the orphanage Elbon (John Dominic) runs on Tirdia

bishop—an elected local church administrator

Boru, Brian—High King of Ireland at Clontarf, founder of Ortho's enduring kingdom

brehon—an Irish judge

Builder, the—chairs the council of elders on Meta

bushido—Japanese, similar to Irish “honour”

cent—abbrev. centistaff, hundredth part of a staff measure, 2 centimetres

Centralia—seat of government for South America

certificate—Orthan term for a credential equivalent to a doctorate

Chamberlain, Lord—a court official who convenes the house and announces decisions with a staff of office

"Christian Doctrine in Faith and Practice"—title of the Bishops' 1801 encyclical defining and defending Christian doctrines

client state—a locally governed region of Ortho responsible to the crown

Clontarf—location of the 1014 battle where the Irish defeated the Norse

Commerceman (woman)—a non-noble engaging in business or trade

Conclave of Jerusalem—1795 meeting of bishops that began the great reformation

Covenant of the Living—1801 ban on nuclear, chemical and biological warfare, later extended to projectiles and all human genetic engineering

crossed heart—a pendant on a chain; worn by a man as a promise of his virginity until marriage (cf. amphora)

Crown—Ireland's crown, used in both physical and abstract senses

crown—ten pennies, the tenth part of a shamrock

daimyo—Japanese for lord

Desert—a timestream world with a large tracts of land uninhabitable because of radioactivity from a nuclear war

domain—either a territory or an executive (cabinet) post held directly under Tara's authority

domain lord—holder of a domain

Donal—for Donal Tobin, became the title of his office of First Lord

dull—a. unfortunate b. slow witted

EEC—electrical engineering certificate

East West War—1745-1750 only nuclear war on Ortho (Japan bombed)

Edwardston—small settlement in location of Tirdia's Calgary, seat of government for central INA

emerald—used on Ortho to signify a betrothal

emerald shamrock, the—an emerald carving made for Seamus' mother

Enemy, the—Metan name for Satan

Executive—one or all of the high ministers of Tara's crown (about fifteen)

Federation—Babylon (Para) and Hibernia (Ortho); formed 1801

feis—a festival or a contest

feiseanna—multiple festivals or games in a single venue

First Lord—a. first speaker in the house of lords b. a local ruler (king)

fostering—Irish term for adopting out or in

Friends, the—a. those of Katherina b. Mara's organization

front row—the fifteen highest-ranked (by sword) of the court's nobles

GAC—General Administration Certificate

Gaelic (also Orthogaelic)—language of Hibernia

giri—a Japanese term for mutual obligation

Glenfinnan—location of Scottish games; seat of Scotland's protector

Glenmorgan—Morgan's glen before purchase by family Devereaux; site of battle in 1977

great hall—central foyer in Tara's palace giving access to courtroom, offices, living quarters

green chair—Ireland's carved jade throne

groundcar—a four- to twelve-passenger hovercraft

H.E.I.O.U.—Ireland's motto, variously rendered as: “Hiberniae est imperare orbi universo” or “Hiberniae Erit In Orbe Ultima”, respectively “Hibernia (will) rule(s) over all (the world)” or “Hibernia will exist until the world ends.”

High Bishop—the bishop of Tara, votes the Church's sword, ex officio an Executive member

high family—one of Tara's noble families

High King—constitutional ruler of Ireland, hence of Hibernia and the Federation

holder—one entrusted with a domain under the crown of Ireland

INA—Irish North America

interregnum—the sixty years James IV and his descendents were banned from the throne 1941-2001

Kilkarney—elite Irish cadet school

king—a loosely used term equivalent to first lord, can apply regionally

Lagos—seat of the West Africa domain (Nigeria)

landsman (woman)—a non-noble holder of land

lawyer—someone who charges money to administer or interpret the law or dispense justice (a capital offence), by extension, anyone condemned to death

Limerick—home of all-Ireland feiseanna every fourth year

lord—title due a domain or family head, executive member, bishop or senior military officer

Lord of Heaven—Hibernian name for God

Manse—headquarters of a domain

MC—Medical Certificate, the credential of a physician

Meathe—a. a common surname b. the commons c. the ard of all swords, both royal and of the islands d. surname of Cormac, second High King

Meta—the earth clockwise from Hibernia in the timestream; also “Builder's World”

Metalibrary—all knowledge stored and accessed electronically

Monaco—location of exclusive resort owned by Kildare and MacAllister

Moody—large town and capitol on west coast of INA, east of Tirdia's Vancouver

MT—Metalibrary Terminal

mutagenic wars—mid-eighteenth century biological war on Hibernia

nannie—short for nanomachine

nanomachine—a molecular-sized machine, whether specialized or programmable

New Tara—small capitol city on East coast of INA where New York is on Tirdia

nexus—the division of a world into two; the decision causing this

noncombatant—one who by station or choice may not fight or be fought

Old Rust—Hibernian name for Satan

Old Town—the original palace compound at Tara

Ollamh—seventh level (doctorate) in fine arts, humanities, mathematics, or pure science

Ortho—also Greater Hibernia or Greater Ireland; between Tirdia and Meta

Orthogaelic—language of Hibernia

palace—originally the king's home, now expanded as the seat of Hibernia's government

Para—Hibernia's Federation partner, also called (Greater) Babylon after its capital

Pax Hibernia—the peace of Ireland

Penal City—Australia's one small city, home of Hibernia's only prison

People, the—name used by the nations of INA to describe themselves

PIEA—Personal Intelligence Enhancement Appliance

priest—a trained pastor who takes a vow of non-violence except in self-defence, and who may not carry a blade

priest's wife—same qualifications expected and same restrictions apply as to a priest

Prime—the most populated of the earths; between Waterworld and Hibernia (c.f. Tirdia)

Protector—a. of England, Scotland or Wales, a high noble b. of the throne, wielder of a sword for same

Red Lion—a. device on royal coat of arms b. name of a pub in Old Town

rock—abbrev. shamrock

royal—refers to a member of the royal dynasty after 1800

royal cousin—one of James IV, Seamus Meathe, Richard Dennison, Patrick O'Toole, Jack

Devereaux, Sr.

royal family—one of MacCarthy, Ryan, Rourke, Reilly, Monde, Meathe, O'Toole, Devereaux, O'Niall, O'Conor, O'Kelly, O'Brien, Kildare

royal sword—one of thirteen; three enthrone a king, two deny the throne

rust—an expostulation

seanacha—a historian. The term is usually reserved for an ollamh

sensei—Japanese Bard

shamrock—basic unit of currency on Hibernia

shillelagh—Irish version of fighting stick with knobs on one or both ends

staff—a. basic unit of measure, six feet, two Tirdian metres b. a weapon one staff in length carried as a sign of a brehon's authority; not commonly used by warriors

stick—a. common fighting weapon b. obsolete unit of measure (half-staff)

subdomain—a contracted-out domain responsibility

sword—a. weapon b. obsolete unit of measure (half-staff)

Sword of a Protector of the throne—three can enthrone a king unless two other holders object; includes the royal, church, bardic, and island blades, as well as two made for commoners (Transky and O'Dwyer) in 1941

Sword of the Bards—an ornate blade with authority of a royal sword

Sword of the Church—an ornate blade with authority of a royal sword

Sword of the Islands—one of Meathe (Ireland), Alba (Scotland) Wales, and Logres (England); the original four, authority equivalent to a royal sword

Tara—capital of Ireland, seat of her high kings

terebinth—currency on Para

Three Swords Dynasty—founded 1792 by kings who owned three blades

Three Worlds' War—the war of 1939-1945 on Waterworld, Tirdia (WW II), and Hibernia

timestream—the medium in which all the worlds exist

tithe—the tenth of income owed to a. one's domain b. the crown by a domain c. the church

Tirdia—(God's world) the common Irish name for the world called Prime by the Metans and by Hibernian scholars

Toronto—cadet school in INA, also offers search and rescue

Traveller, the—Metan name for Joshua Caine, ally to the Destroyer

troubles, the—refers to the Japanese conflicts caused by political and religious divisions between the eastern and western parts of the country

used room salesman—an insulting comparison to those who sell used rooms for (modular) houses

Waterworld—the Earth between Desert and Tirdia, no large continents

white—a. as clothing, indicates a non-combatant, b. cowardly

Wild Geese—Hibernian exiles on Para

About The Author

Richard J. (Rick) Sutcliffe, is Professor of Mathematics and Computing Science at Trinity Western University in British Columbia, and has been Adjunct Professor in the nearby School of Computing Science at Simon Fraser University. At TWU, Rick coordinates academic computing curriculum and facilities, serves on numerous campus committees, and has also spent two years as Acting Dean (Faculty of Natural and Applied Sciences.)

Sutcliffe represents Canada on international computing standards committees and has published a text in computing science, written one on ethical and social issues in technology, and has authored more than fifty articles and reviews in a variety of trade and technical publications. He has been a columnist for several magazines and newspapers (The Northern Spy, Anodidacticus, The Dialectical Apple, Through a Glass Darkly). He coined the terms “New Renaissance”, “Metalibrary”, “concinnity”, “Fourth Civilization” and “wired campus”, has been a leader in electronic publication, and has been active on the Internet since the 1970s. He has also been an invited speaker at numerous churches, educational and computing conferences, and technical symposia at local, national, and international levels.

Rick Sutcliffe is the author of several fictional works in various stages of publication. Most of these are Irish-flavoured Christian science fiction and deal with a variety of technology and ethical issues in thought-provoking plots set on alternate earths. His first novel, “The Peace” was published electronically in June 2000 and became its publisher's best-seller. Others in the same series followed. He revived The Northern Spy electronically, and also has a Philology site at opundo.com. Affiliated companies sell domain names and do web hosting.

Prior to his academic career, he taught secondary school for twelve years in Langley, BC, last at Mountain Secondary School. There, he served as his school's math/computer science department head, physics teacher, staff chairman, club sponsor, and scholarship counsellor. He brought the International Baccalaureate programme to public schools for the first time, was active in curriculum development and was among the first to use microcomputers in secondary schools.

He has research interests in standards, programming languages, data structures, and in the social, ethical, and religious aspects of high technology. He is active in Aldergrove Fellowship Baptist Church, having been chairman, treasurer, deacon, elder, youth worker, librarian and Bible teacher. He has built two houses, gardens, writes software, and been active in politics. He has also been appointed as external

advisor in the accreditation of several local schools. He has travelled extensively as a speaker and to represent the Canadian Standards Association and the Standards Council of Canada at ISO meetings. He presently resides in Bradner, B.C. with his wife Joyce and their two sons Nathan and Joel.

OTHER BOOKS AVAILABLE FROM WRITERS EXCHANGE:

This is the first novel that Rick has had published with Writers Exchange but the rest of the series will be released with us in the future. The next book in the series, *The Friends* is due out at the beginning of June 2003, with the third book, *The Exiles* due out soon after.

You can keep track of his books at <http://www.writers-exchange.com/epublishing/sutcliffe.htm>

Chapter Twenty

Brian and Meghan, Edwardston, 1987-1990 (Hibernia)

It had, Brian reflected, been a difficult three years since he and Meghan made their hasty departure from New Tara. He had returned home to find Meghan, dry-eyed, with two travel bags and food already packed. He approved her preparations, then asked, "Your practice sword?"

"Too bulky. We can carve a new one when we get a chance. Our data cubes are in the bottom of your bag in the box of papers, and I have spare clothes for both of us, the ultra-light tent and cooking pots. We have to leave immediately, don't we?"

"We do."

They stopped in the woods as he planned, and Meghan's tears flowed freely there as they made a memorial by carving a cross in a tree, and praying in the very glade where she and Karen had often played at "Court and Council." But she dried her eyes with resolve, and they caught the next ferry to the city. As it left the dock, Brian spotted two large, rough-looking men scurry down the wharf to take up positions.

When they arrived at New Tara proper, he bribed a steward to permit them use of the service gangway so as not to pass under the scrutiny of anyone watching the passenger ramp. Minutes later, he subverted the electronic security lock and alarm on the freight area adjacent to the docks. The pair shortly found themselves wandering between the lines of rail cars looking for a suitable hiding place that could also take them away from the city.

Already overwrought, Meghan was initially frightened by the rows of unfriendly rail car doors on either side, her imagination seeing enemies behind each. But when Brian noticed her distress and pointed at the bright blue sky above, she felt much better. Eventually he found what he wanted,, and opened the lock of one of three groundcars that had been loaded on a carrier for shipment by train to various points on the continent. Irish North America had too few people to justify local groundcar assembly lines, so all such vehicles were imported from Europe and transshipped through New Tara on the east coast, or Moody on the west. Including the two urban centres, there were barely two million people on the whole continent, and little demand in the interior for groundcars, so they were fortunate to find any.

Since the car was deactivated, the windows were, by default, opaque from the outside. They could see out, confident no one would guess they were there. After an hour or so, they felt the train get underway, and they soon left New Tara far behind.

They changed modes of transportation several times, gradually working their way west, then north, eventually arriving at the principal rail centre on the east side of the great mountains at Edwardston. Built on the junction of the Knee Joint and Clearwater rivers that rose in the distantly visible mountains, and went on from here to join the Cree, before flowing to the great Northeast Bay, the little settlement was named after an early European settler in the area, romantic journalist and novelist Bob Edwards. It had grown up around a military outpost and his homestead starting in the late nineteenth century, and become a permanent town as a few natives adopted European ways. Devastated in the Three Worlds' War, it had been rebuilt afterward and expanded since.

Nearly a century after its founding, Edwardston was not much to look at, just a few hundred people crowded into half a dozen neatly landscaped streets near the site of the original fort, with a separate Stoney village off to the west and a Blackfoot one to the southeast. There had once been a European slum at the east edge of the main centre, but no trace of that remained now, and several farms that once surrounded the town were now abandoned.

Apart from the cattlehands who came once a year from several hundred miles around to buy supplies and attend the annual July rodeo and feiseanna, the few outsiders who knew the place thought of it as impossibly isolated. Rail crews who worked the daily train between Toronto and Moody stayed overnight in a hotel, and "kicked the dust" as soon as possible the next morning. The rail yards were nothing much, just three or four sidings for storing trains in transit, a repair shop, a weather-beaten office and a tiny whistle-stop station where few people ever got on or off.

Occasionally, the daily transcontinental rocket plane landed at the airport on the high prairie to the northwest, but usually it flew by, too far overhead to see.

Just to be there was a step down. Edwardston was even more remote than Detroit, for there was nothing else other than a few sheep ranches and farms here and there for five hundred Irish miles in any direction. At least at Detroit one could visit the nearby military town of Toronto.

Edwardston's people were respectable, stolid citizens, almost all natives, and busily engaged in making a living, but with little interest in the politics of distant places. Tara was seldom mentioned on the local news channel. European visitors were welcome, provided they stayed sober and kept the peace, but few remained more than a few days.

Besides their own languages, everyone spoke the Gaelic "Lingua Universalis," and the native People of the plains, unlike those elsewhere in Irish North America, could easily have been mistaken for the slightly darker southern Europeans. Today, there were many recognizably Irish heads on the streets, for the Blackfoot/Irish mix that had begun years earlier had proven prolific indeed, and both Stoney and Blackfoot nations continued to recruit a steady trickle of men and women from Ireland to bolster their genetic stock and keep the population at sustainable levels.

Edwardston was domain centre for a vast region, consisting of mountains, grassy prairies, and wildlife, but very few people. It was administered by sixty-year-old Lord Walking Buffalo, whom the locals addressed as "Chief," and his second wife, Elizabeth. There, as in many of the smaller places the Peace of Ireland had come, the indigenous people had taken the training to look after local government infrastructure, and Tara didn't interfere, provided her ten percent share of the taxes was regularly forwarded. In all of Irish North America, only the cosmopolitan ports of New Tara and Moody, and the tiny rail port of Los Angeles, were directly governed by Europeans. Outsiders seldom came to the sleepy interior.

On this earth, unlike Tirdia, there had never been much population pressure in Europe, so there was little motivation for the common person to trade a relatively comfortable life there for a much meaner existence here, where most people still lived as they had before the Irish came, except that they were no longer permitted war or slavery. Indeed, the majority of the small population of the domain lived in tiny nomadic groups that roamed the area fishing and hunting, and only occasionally entered town to trade for consumer goods.

Since the Three Worlds' War, which had seen the Blackfoot join most of the People against the Irish and their Stoney allies, the two nations had managed to cooperate peacefully, accepting Edwardston as a neutral administrative centre. Walking Buffalo, Blackfoot by birth, was chief of both nations by virtue of his first marriage to Princess Deerfoot of the Stoney. Their son David was widely regarded as a worthy successor.

There wasn't much of an economy to administer. Edwardston traded leather merchandise, wool, partially cured hides and various grains grown on the vast prairies for a modest supply of high tech goods, but was otherwise self-sufficient. It was well known there were oil deposits in the area, for the records of Tirdia were closely scrutinized for natural resource discoveries, as that planet was geologically identical to this one. However, petroleum products were in little demand, and Edwardston was too far from markets where they could be sold in quantity, so the village used the plentiful natural gas, but apart from what was run through one small refinery and almost entirely shipped to Moody, the oil stayed in the ground. Trains refuelled here, but not planes, and the town's half-dozen groundcars and few trucks were all electric.

However, to disappear even there, Brian had to move back down a notch in society, returning to being a "low merc," working at odd jobs for cash and/or found, and not using an MT account in his own name. Occasionally, he joined one of Walking Buffalo's hunting parties, and bartered some of his share of the proceeds for household goods. He had taken a job or two on farms when work was short in town, but preferred to stay close to Edwardston as much as possible because of its single useful asset, one engendered by its very paucity of other resources.

Edwardston had a town library in the grand old style. Built of large blocks of brown stone (called Edwardstone) that you scratch sand from with a fingernail, the most imposing structure in the village boasted no fewer than twenty MTs with full network access. The only other public building was the nearby government manse known locally as the longhouse, where, in the style of the place, Walking Buffalo both lived and worked.

In a burst of egalitarian generosity by certain town patrons, and with the blessing and encouragement of the domain lord, the library terminals were free and open to universal access. That is, unlike the identical machines in the local schoolhouse, their users needed no account identity or password to gain full network use. Visiting nomads and local residents wandered in, did their research, wrote their letters, and left, not named, accounted for, or tallied in population records or network logs. Walking Buffalo duly forwarded Tara's ten percent of whatever tax he collected, but kept no records of who paid it, and the palace never questioned him on the matter.

There might be no other such facility in the world, and it was the reason Brian had come here. Knowledge of such things was, he reflected, what kept the two of them alive. Meghan could not get course credit under her own name, but did, under a pseudonym he devised for her, complete her general administration certificate, or GAC, by her thirteenth birthday.

It is unusual for anyone under the age of twenty to attain the qualification, and this was only the fourth time one so young had obtained all-Federation honours standing. She was now, under yet other names,

working on courses in military history, tactics, and electronic engineering. In her spare time, she took (and gave to younger children) pipe and harp lessons, and had recently won a local pipes competition for her age group. Her interest in theatre remained strong, and she joined a junior players' company that performed small dramas two or three times annually. By the end of her second year in Edwardston, Meghan had been accepted into the fourth of its seven levels by the local bardic association, and was assisting the Ard Filea, or Head Bard of the domain, to organize cultural events for the next feiseanna.

Her real musical love was the harp. Meghan rendered a variation of an O'Carolan piece, recorded it and entered it under her GAC pseudonym in a palace-sponsored contest. It took first place in her age group, though she never claimed the prize or told the local Ard Filea, but she was secretly more proud of this achievement than of her GAC.

Brian took it all in stride. After all, Jack, his father, and the other Jack had both earned their GACs just after turning twelve, so it was not, in his view, so very remarkable. Meghan might have done the same except for the strictures under which they worked. For the first two years, she had always used the one library terminal that faced a blank wall, inserted their security cube before working, and afterwards uninstalled the rerouting routines it employed to make "James Dillworth" appear to be studying from South Africa.

There really had been such a person, and he would be about twenty years old if still alive, but he had died in a train wreck at age ten, and as sometimes happens in smaller places, his name had not been properly expunged from the school system. Brian McIlhargey had collected a number of identities for himself and Meghan over the years, but seldom used one for such a length of time as this. There were numerous holes in the modern universal information system, and it was a good thing for them.

Working for cash and found is none too lucrative, so Meghan supplemented their income by tutoring students after school hours. The most satisfying of these arrangements was with Walking Buffalo and Elizabeth's young daughter Rainbow, who was three years younger than she. Finding the girl initially surly and uninterested, Meghan won her over by promising to be her horseback riding student in return for Rainbow's attentiveness to school lessons. Within days, they established an easy friendship. They rode together at least twice weekly, and Rainbow's work turned around immediately.

Every night in her prayers, Meghan thanked the Lord of Heaven for giving her a new younger sister, but she never forgot her older one, and each summer on the fateful anniversary, wove a wreath of prairie flowers, and hung it on the inside of their house door. It was what Karen often had done, and was a remembrance.

One day, when the two girls had finished lessons and were just visiting, Meghan pointed to a gold chain around Rainbow's neck that disappeared down the front of her shirt.

"What's on the end of the chain?"

Rainbow pulled the pendant out to show her. It was of a translucent, shell-like material, and a liquid could be seen inside when it was held to the light.

"It's my amphora."

"What's that?"

"You know, my perfume jar."

“I don't get it.”

“My aunt Sunshine gave it to me last time she came to visit from Moody. I'm supposed to wear it to say I won't have any man before my husband, then break it at my wedding when I do have one.” Rainbow turned red, giggled, and put the ceramic pendant back, dismissing the subject.

Meghan wasn't ready to drop the matter, and asked Rainbow several more questions she couldn't answer before giving up, determined to bring the matter up further with her da. But when she left for the day, Rainbow's mother Elizabeth stopped her.

“Meghan, I heard you ask Rainbow about her amphora.”

“Yes, my lady, I did. Can you tell me more?” Meghan had an exaggerated respect for the very Irish, yet very Blackfoot, Lady Elizabeth Buffalo, and hung on her every word.

“It is an ancient custom the young women of my mother's generation adopted at the suggestion of King Conn during the great children's revival of 1925. The girl who wears one vows she will be married only to Jesus until her wedding day. Do you know what that means?”

Meghan blushed. She had studied the theory of human biology, but found it hard to imagine such intimacy. “Yes, I understand,” she agreed. “It's a witness, like being baptized.”

“That's right,” Elizabeth Buffalo agreed, then following up the connection, “Have you been baptized?”

“I wanted to at New Tara, but my da and I ended up moving.”

“Rainbow has asked to be baptized, and the elders will do it at the end of the month, as we have no priest just now.”

“I'm twelve and I'm a Christian. Could I be baptized, too, and also wear an amphora?” Meghan asked, excited.

“Do you know Jesus as your personal Saviour, and could you keep a promise like that? It would be better not to make it than not to keep it.”

“Yes, I do, and I may be too young to make a legal oath, but as my Saviour Jesus the Lord of Heaven gives me strength, I will always keep my promises.” Meghan drew herself up to her considerable height, and concluded her rush of words firmly, “It's a matter of honour.”

“Then,” Elizabeth Buffalo announced, looking fixedly at the tall, gangly young girl with the sophisticated air of a great lady, “because you have been so good for Rainbow, I shall be your aunt.” When Meghan looked puzzled at this, she added, “It is an aunt's duty to give her niece the amphora.”

And so, a few weeks later, the elders of the little Edwardston church gathered much of the town together by the Knee Joint River, where Meghan and Rainbow, on confession of their faith in Jesus as their Saviour, were both baptized. Brian grumbled that it was all unnecessary, but Elizabeth ignored him, and held an impressive ceremony at the reception she gave afterward to present Meghan with her amphora. Later, when the adults were busy with their affairs, the two girls slipped outside at Meghan's suggestion, and swore a fiercely worded vow of friendship. Meghan reasoned that though neither could make binding oaths to an adult, they could to one another, and from that day on, the two were closer than ever.

“We shall be sisters forever,” Meghan vowed.

Even in Edwardston, a good education and hard work were the keys to progress in life, and its citizens still reminded each other about one of theirs, George Laine, who had once stood in the third row at Tara, right behind the great lords and the bards. “Hard work and skill can achieve anything” was their watchword, and they were, for the most part, a sober, diligent lot. There were exceptions, of course, and it was this fact that a year before, just after the baptism, landed Brian his first full time job since leaving New Tara. Rainbow's father, Walking Buffalo, while indulging in his namesake, ambled past the public fencing yard while Brian was giving lessons to a group about to travel the more remote roads, where they would be none too safe from thieves. The chief watched for a few minutes, then called him over.

“Ho there, Master McIlhargey.”

“Your Lordship,” Brian acknowledged, succinctly.

“You know of Law Officer Fergus.” Buffalo always came directly to the point.

“I'd heard he broke his neck in a fall while hunting a mountain lion, but I didn't know him well.” Brian was puzzled.

“We've looked after his family as best we can,” Buffalo commented, “but the town needs help.” He rubbed his chin as though in deep thought.

“What have you in mind?”

“Would you be interested in the position?”

“Me?”

“You seem a law-abiding sort, good with people, and ready with the sword. There's only occasional work, but I think you could handle it for us.”

Brian readily agreed, and moved into the law office quarters with Meghan the next day. The job carried a minimal stipend that Walking Buffalo agreed to pay in cash without asking inconvenient questions. He would apparently rather not know why a skilled Irish swordsman would stoop to live in Edwardston, so long as he was willing to do productive work for the community.

More important, the job carried a food voucher for the pair, valid at any store or restaurant in the village, with all transactions on Walking Buffalo's account, so no record of their names appeared in the system. Best of all, the office had a high security, unlimited, lawman's MT, registered on the net in the name of the office, rather than its holder. After checking carefully to ensure the machine was indeed what it purported to be, and there were no packet sniffers attached to its node, Brian cautiously resumed his search for information that could lead him to identify which of the two Glenmorgan colonels was his nemesis, why, and what he could do about it. Moreover, Meghan was then able to work at home, and needn't be concerned whether anyone would see her using the re-router to compromise network security protocols.

Apparently his late predecessor had paid little attention to the periodic wanted bulletins that arrived regularly in the electronic law enforcement newsletter. Three times there had been notices warning recipients to look for a large-framed middle-aged man travelling with a tall red-haired girl, the pair being wanted on outstanding court warrants. No list of crimes or pictures were given, and the descriptions

were none too accurate, but an alert lawman should have spotted them. Brian quietly deleted the files, and no one was the wiser for the extra security he gained.

In return, he had to patrol the streets, watch for potential break-and-enters, and stop in at the two bars once in a while to discourage patrons from fights that might require him to offer them tenancy in his secure room. He successfully investigated one murder, three assaults, two thefts, and refereed affairs following two traffic accidents. The latter never happened in large cities, but here, use of the automatic vehicle guidance system was non-mandatory.

From his office windows, Brian could usually see all six of Edwardston's groundcars and the two or three trucks that were in town at any given time to unload cattle, sheep, or hay. Many drivers insisted on disconnecting the automatics and running the machines manually. One had been drunk and driven his car off the edge of a road into the Coldwater River, and another had fallen asleep at the controls and crashed into a streetlamp pole.

It troubled Brian to become too well known even among the people of such a remote place, but the benefits seemed worth the cost. From Meghan's point of view, he realized, things were not so good. He spent time in the bars, and accepted a number of free drinks in the average evening, so he often stumbled home somewhat under the effects. Meghan got upset every time this happened, and he had determined on numerous occasions not to accept freebies, but his resolve always broke down under the urging of the bar owners, who were honestly grateful for his presence. He had "shown steel" only a few times, but it was enough to send the message that this was one lawman who could not be crossed with impunity, and the town was now much quieter at night than it had been a year ago. This was no consolation for Meghan, who saw less and less of her father, and when she did, not in the best of circumstances. Increasingly concerned, Meghan pressured him hard about the matter, and when he refused to swear off alcohol, it became the first major breach between them.

The matter of the priest widened the rift. When they first arrived in Edwardston, Brian agreed to attend church with Meghan, though he cared very little for what went on there. Initially, there was no pastor, and the local elders conducted services to which he paid no attention, but shortly after Meghan's baptism, one arrived in town, and the church voted to appoint him. To his surprise, Brian found the man an affable sport who didn't push doctrine or the Holy Books, and who preached sophisticated sermons filled with literary and scientific references he suspected were beyond the education of most clerics.

Meghan had a different view, and unburdened herself of it after the fourth week of this, when she came home from Sunday service obviously angry.

"What's wrong, Meghan?" he asked, noting her scowl.

"That man calls himself a priest of God, but you would never know it by his sermons."

Brian was taken aback by this, as he had already struck up a friendship with the cleric. "I rather like his talks. The man is very erudite."

"In four weeks, he has yet to mention the Gospel of Jesus Christ a single time. He as much as implied this morning that everyone will go to heaven in the end because of God's love, whether they believe or not. What of sin? What of the cross? What of grace? When I challenged him afterward on the basis of God's justice, he brushed me off in a way that said he didn't care, and moreover doesn't like young girls questioning him. If you ask me, he's not a real priest at all, but a phoney."

The dispute over the priest and his beliefs, or lack of them, simmered for some time, but flared up in

earnest once they settled at the law office, for in making the rounds of the pubs, Brian encountered Father Kees VanBuren there, and was delighted to discover he made an excellent drinking companion. When he foolishly mentioned this fact to Meghan, she was outraged.

“That settles it. What man of God uses alcohol? I'll wager if we could ask Tara's bishop, we'd find there's no priest in those robes, just an opportunist looking for an easy living, and drinking his way through his stipend. For that matter, what's an officer of the law and a gentlemen doing in such low dives?”

“Keeping customers away from our door,” Brian responded in a lame attempt at good humour.

“The two of you needn't become drunkards yourselves to achieve that,” she retorted.

“Aren't you being judgmental, Meghan?”

This cut silenced her for a time, but she made sure the tithe of their meagre earnings was clearly designated to the local hospice for the poor from that day forward, and all subsequent expressions of her father's good will toward Father VanBuren served only to exacerbate tensions between them.

In part to mollify her, he purchased from their little store of savings a fine steel blade for her to practice with him. This was strictly illegal, of course, for while fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds are allowed to “set aside wood” privately to learn with a steel blade in preparation for their seventeenth birthday when they may wear one in their own right, it is considered reckless endangerment and even child abuse to allow one younger to do so. But the law office was separated from the nearest building by a half-dozen staves, and had a high-ceilinged, soundproofed basement for prisoners, so when the place was without guests—most of the time—they could fence with real blades without fear of detection.

Already skilled, Meghan progressed rapidly, and before the next year was out, Brian estimated she was at an officer's skill level. Her height and reach were complemented by speed and a natural instinct for the game, and she appeared at times to know his moves before he made them. A wolfish grin stole over his face, as he pictured Meghan becoming the finest sword of her generation.

However, if he thought by drawing her into something illegal he could mollify her concerns about either his drinking or the priest, he was mistaken. Indeed, the combination of the three put an end to Edwardston as a hiding place.

The affair started one Friday evening when Brian was feeling particularly good about his day. He and VanBuren had been out fishing that afternoon in the small Knee Joint River (so called because of the sharp bend it took a mile before joining the larger Coldwater by the old fort). Both had done well, and Brian enjoyed having a little liquid refreshment with his friend while boasting of their catch to others at the pub. One thing led to another, and the pair were quite jolly by the time they staggered to the law office several hours later.

“C'mon in for a little nightcap,” he suggested to VanBuren at the door.

“I don't want to bother your daughter. She doesn't like me.”

“Doan matter. She went to the longhouse to tutor Buffalo's girl. Won't be back till late.”

Father VanBuren affably accepted the invitation. When they seated themselves at the only table in the combined office and kitchen, he pulled a small flask of his own from beneath his robes.

“Been saving this Centralia Brandy for a special occasion. Get a couple of glasses, and I'll pour you some liquid gold.”

Brian was happy enough to comply, and a few more moments saw him quaffing the proffered drink. The priest raised a glass to his own lips, then hesitated. “What do you think of it?” he asked.

“A fine preparation,” Brian replied, “but a little heady.”

As the slow stupor stole over him, he had just enough seconds to realize VanBuren had doped his drink and to stupidly wonder why before dropping the glass and slumping unconscious against the table.

After what seemed like an interminable time, but turned out to be fewer than thirty minutes, he regained his senses to a cacophonous ringing in his ears. It took several seconds for his befuddled brain to recognize the sounds and realize there was a fierce sword battle going on all around him, and that Meghan was shouting.

“Da, wake up! Wake up, Da!”

It was a while longer before his head cleared enough to raise it and take in what was happening. When he did, more time passed before his mind made sense of it.

Meghan, back to him just now, was in a duel for her life with Kees VanBuren, who was evidently not the man of peace he made himself out to be, for he was fighting in the classic military style, not to subdue or disarm, but to kill.

VanBuren saw him awaken, and launched a savage attack at that very moment. Meghan, beaten back by his greater strength, parried skilfully, shouting again, “Da, wake up.”

Brian tried to lift himself from the chair, but found he could not gain his legs, and slumped back. Just then, Meghan's foot caught the edge of a small rug, and she began to fall backward. VanBuren, failing to realize what had happened, didn't follow up his advantage, but Brian, finding at least his voice, called out sharply the standard drill, “fall recovery two.”

Hearing him, Meghan immediately and automatically, as he had trained her, drew up her legs, got her off-sword hand behind her, and as her backside hit the floor, bounced and pushed herself off to the right, springing back to her feet before her opponent could react. Brian called out two simple defensive patterns to steady her, and soon all three were concentrating on the fight, with no other conversation. He used their private set of signals, not the ones taught soldiers, so VanBuren, who clearly had officer's training, could not intercept and use them against her.

The man's greater strength was cancelled out by the girl's speed, longer reach, and better finesse, but Brian realized VanBuren could eventually wear her down. So, when he had Meghan settled into a steady rhythm, he tested the weapon he had fashioned by calling, “rube.”

This was a “sucker” manoeuvre, and had to await the right stroke from the opponent to begin its execution. Moments later, it came. VanBuren slashed heavily toward her from the top right quadrant, and Meghan allowed her sword to give way even as she stepped back and to her right somewhat, planting her feet solidly for maximum purchase. The movement was designed to overextend the opponent in an awkward posture, and she completed it with a twist of her weapon to take the topmost position, pushing VanBuren's blade almost to the floor, then stepping forward and trapping it momentarily with her left

foot. The timing had to be perfect, for if you misjudged the strength of the stroke or were slightly late moving, you could lose your foot. As she had done dozens of times in the basement, Meghan executed perfectly. Before VanBuren could recover, she repositioned over his ruined guard, moved forward on her right foot, and thrust hard.

When she practised with her father, he knew the move was coming, and ducked aside to complete the drill. But this was not practice and VanBuren was not expecting it, so her blade went cleanly through his abdomen and out the back.

Meghan was as much in shock for a moment as he, and for several seconds the two stood stock still, paralysed in the death embrace. Brian shouted “withdraw” and, on automatic reflex, she yanked the sword from VanBuren's body, back to a guard position. Relieved of the small support of the blade, and cut again by its exit, VanBuren folded up and collapsed to the floor. Meghan looked at him, then at her blade. Unable to take in the enormity of what had happened, she remained rooted to the spot, stunned.

Brian ignored her, and levered himself clumsily out of the chair to crawl to the injured man. He grabbed a fistful of VanBuren's hair, turned his face about, and demanded, “Who are you working for?”

But all he could extract from the dying man was the fragment, “great lord ... Tara.” VanBuren's face took on a sudden pasty colour, his throat emitted a short rattle, and his eyes closed.

“Is he ... Is he...” Meghan stuttered, horror-struck.

“Clean your sword,” Brian barked without looking back, and began to rifle VanBuren's pouch. His first find was two identity cards. One was a licensure of ordination proclaiming VanBuren a priest of the Christian Church, duly signed by the ecclesiastical registrar of Armagh. The second was a standard military identification for Lieutenant Kees VanBuren, but lacking any house affiliation. It was understandable that he was unattached. A military man could become a priest; but it was a capital crime to take a sword to hand while actually wearing the brown robes, and a lord who ordered it done was equally liable. Both IDs had to be genuine. They scanned properly in his office machine, and neither their DNA-keyed data foils nor their encrypted holograms could be faked. That meant VanBuren had both a lord and a bishop behind him, a discouraging development, for it meant their enemies had subverted at least one high churchman.

There was a great deal of money that he didn't touch, numerous keys, and a pocketbook filled with passwords and account names, which he scanned into his own PIEA. Tightly folded up at the bottom of the pouch was a single sheet of plastipaper, which, when opened, turned out to be a partial copy of one of the warrants describing the two of them, but, in this case, demanding the recipient report their whereabouts if located, but take no independent action. Brian reflected a moment, then decided VanBuren must have wanted to try for some larger reward by investigating on his own. He had not turned the two of them in when he first had the chance, for the warrant was almost eight months old. It was written in the style of high command, and must be from the fellow's liege lord, but there was nothing to say which one. Had VanBuren communicated with Tara recently?

Further search revealed a second small, flat pouch under the man's robes. Brian pursed his lips in a low, almost soundless whistle as he went through its contents. Three pill cases, a garrote, an executioner's hood, four curiously shaped knives, thumbscrews, a nerve prod, pliers, wires, and several other small instruments spilled onto the floor.

He examined and smelled the pills, drawing on the extensive knowledge of pharmacopoeia he had imparted to so many cadets. The first was a deadly poison, the second a knockout chemical used with

drinks, and the third a will-destroying truth serum. None was effective for very long against the expensive soup of nanomachines that ran in every senior officer's veins, the secret of which was revealed upon being promoted to major and getting the injections as precaution against illicit interrogation.

Evidently Kees VanBuren, far from being a priest, had been torturer-executioner for some high house. Well, he would ply his vile profession no longer. The false priest must have been surprised to see him wake up so soon, he grimly reflected. Brian hadn't had a booster shot since just before Glenmorgan, or the stuff wouldn't have worked at all.

He returned to the troubling identity cards, and thought things over. Neither the belligerently irreligious Thomas Monde nor the skeptically agnostic Sean Reilly was likely to have suddenly begun cultivating church connections. He also doubted either would take the chance of being caught attempting bribery of a bishop to obtain false ordination papers from Armagh. Both had themselves achieved high military rank, so neither would equip a man with drugs like these if they knew who they were sending the fellow against. "What about a house lord who's a real bishop?" he suddenly asked himself, and with the question, there at once sprang into his mind the image of Philip Desmond.

Philip was nephew to Calaghan MacCarthy, whose vengeful ambition originally provoked the king's deposition. He was the son of Calaghan's sister Bria, later banished for her own attempted coup, and brother to the late William Desmond, once Donal XI, also known as "Willie the pervert," under whose rule had come the attacks against Glenmorgan.

Philip Desmond had slunk away from Kilkarney after Katherina caught him stealing from other cadets, and joined the seminary at Armagh the next day. After graduation, he had been ecclesiastical governor of various outposts, and was a recently elected bishop. Moreover, he had been Lord MacCarthy ever since William gave up the title upon his involuntary investiture as Donal.

Brian ran a quick search on the MT, and struck an artery immediately. A Kees VanBuren had been military adjutant to Philip Desmond while the latter was governor of Penal City. Both had left at the same time, about a year ago when Desmond made bishop. He got curious. Who had succeeded them? Thomas Monde. Who had recommended both appointments to the court? Sean Reilly, Donal XII. Brian leaned back in his chair, appalled. "Why didn't I check on VanBuren before?" he berated himself. "We've more enemies than I imagined," he concluded. "The cancer is spreading."

Brian heard Meghan slide her sword into its sheath at the side of his desk. "Tell me what happened," he demanded, anxious to extract maximum information over minimum time.

Her voice was weak and unsteady. "I came home from the longhouse because Rainbow and I finished early, and I was worried about you." Now she was started, the words tumbled out. "I was afraid you were drinking again, and wanted to be home. I came in quietly as you've instructed me to, so he didn't hear. When I looked in the room, you were slumped over the table in front of a bottle, and he was going through your desk drawers. I asked, 'What are you doing?'"

"He claimed, 'Your father's had some kind of an attack. Does he have medicine in one of these drawers?' He was so smooth I almost believed him. Then he came over to me with a smile on his face, reached out to take my hand, and turned ugly. He said we were wanted criminals, and he was doing his duty but nobody would mind if he had a little fun first." She touched the place where her amphora hung, and hesitated. Her head was hung, her face crimson. "He was going to rape me, Da. I had to defend my honour."

"You did right, daughter. What happened next?"

“I pulled away, and when he yanked me back, I pretended to stumble as I turned, then hit him in the stomach with my free hand. When he doubled over and let go, I drove the heel of my palm into his chin as I straightened up. It worked just like you said, but he was awfully angry when he got up off the floor.”

Brian nodded encouragement for her to continue. This was one of the simplest ways he had shown her to break a hold. He taught noncombatant women to go for the nose or eyes, completely disabling or killing an attacker, but one who knew the sword was expected to offer its more honourable death instead. Still, he made a mental note to work on sharpening her reflexes and ensuring she didn't pull her punches. With her strength, she should have been able to kill VanBuren with one blow.

“I ran between you and your desk, then shook you to wake you up, but nothing happened. He cursed, and it was awful to hear such language coming from a priest. Then he drew a sword from under his robe, and threatened to kill you if I didn't submit. I pretended to cower behind your back, moved left and away, then drew my own sword from where we keep it beside the desk. I told him my rating, and offered to spare his life if he surrendered. He laughed like a maniac, said now he would cut me to pieces slowly, and attacked first. I defended myself, and kept trying to wake you up.”

“The important thing is that you reacted under battle conditions as you were taught.”

“It was hard to fight a priest.”

“It was legal. If he ever was a priest, he ceased to be the moment he touched a sword.”

She paled again. “I killed him, didn't I?”

“He killed himself by attacking a superior fighter, and ignoring your offer to accept his surrender.” Brian's head was rapidly clearing of the drug, so he rose, went to her and gently took her by the shoulders. At fully a staff, she was his height now, but in his eyes, her stature had grown immensely in these few minutes. “You did well. To survive, it is sometimes necessary to wound or kill. When the dishonourable die at the hands of the honourable, the world is done a service.”

“You are not angry with me?”

“I am proud of you. Why would I be angry?”

“I killed your friend.”

“Meghan dear, I was wrong, and you were right. He was no friend of ours. Moreover, he was no priest, but an agent and a torturer for one of the high families.” He showed her the warrant, hood and garrote, but didn't share the rest of his deductions. She looked at them, and at the body lying in a growing pool of blood. Suddenly the enormity of what she had done rushed to her head. She spun away and ran to the washroom. A moment later Brian heard her throwing up. He sat at his desk, still a little unsteady himself, and thought things over.

There had been nothing that could give them away in the room itself. His data cubes were hidden under the floorboards above the furnace pipes. He checked and found the hatch undisturbed. Chances were VanBuren had learned nothing. Brian examined the booklet from VanBuren's pouch. One of these accounts must be what he used to report, but exploring the possibilities would have to wait until there was more time.

VanBuren must have worked for someone at Tara, so prompt action was necessary. However, they could not leave Edwardston without help. Isolation made the place hard to get to, but harder to get away from. Who dared he involve? There was only one person who could help, just one way to get out undetected. Deciding, he reached for the MT keyboard to tap out a series of instructions. It had voice control, as they all do, but that mode was insecure. You never knew who might be listening outside a window.

Meghan returned, looking pale and drawn, and sat down heavily on the chesterfield. “We have to leave Edwardston, don't we?”

He looked at her with overwhelming pride. “It's hard the first time,” he sympathized, addressing her real concern, “but you get used to it.”

“I'll never get used to killing people,” she averred. “What will Jesus think of me for this?”

Her father was spared the necessity of concocting an answer by a light knock at the door. Meghan started and checked the window. “It's the chief,” she said, in near panic. “What do we do?”

For answer, her father called out, “Come on in, Walking Buffalo.” Then he turned to her adding, “We have to trust someone. I asked him to step over.”

Walking Buffalo halted in the doorway to survey the scene—furniture scattered, drapery and upholstery cut, bottle on the table, and the body on the floor. He sniffed the air and remarked, “So, VanBuren was the spy.” He turned him over, examined the wound briefly, walked to the desk, and lightly touched the hilt of the sword hanging beside it. Then he addressed himself, not unkindly, to Meghan, “Was he any better with the sword than as a priest?”

“He had a lieutenant's training, but was out of practice,” was her frightened reply.

“As well. I was afraid he might have been a senior officer. You would have had a tougher time.”

At this, realizing he knew, she put her hand over her mouth, and gasped, “How could you tell it was me...”

“Who killed him? Not difficult. Your father is sicker than he is drunk, and has, I think, been unconscious. Consider the smell of vomit and that it has no alcohol in it. Observe the size and depth of the cut, that the smaller sword is still warm, and that it is you who is winded. My conclusions are obvious, aren't they?”

Brian interjected. “You knew he was not a priest?” he demanded.

“I wasn't certain until now. At first I thought you were the spy. The way you walk, how you sit in a crowded room to watch all the doors, how you handle your sword. I've had the training, too. Then I got this about a year back.” He pulled a faded piece of paper from his pouch, and passed it to Brian. It was a duplicate of a warrant he had deleted from the office system. “That's when I decided to make you the town officer. If you were ‘armed and dangerous’, you might as well be working for law and order as against.”

“Why didn't you turn us in?”

“Because these warrants are forgeries.”

“They originate with palace security. There have been three on this machine,” Brian observed.

“Yes, I know. They are forgeries, nonetheless. My son David works in security at Tara, and advises that although the warrants are in their database, they did not originate with their office. After I tipped them, they set a trap for whoever had been tampering, but failed to catch anyone. They now believe someone in the office reported the discovery and scared off the perpetrator. The warrants were withdrawn and machine security altered, but there can be no doubt someone at the palace was involved. Doubtless it is the same person who has engaged in other conspiracies, because we have seen a steady stream of spies for years. Most have been too obvious to accomplish much, but after the last one left town suddenly and did not appear to be replaced, I worried a professional had taken over.

“When my law officer accidentally died, it seemed too convenient, so I decided to forestall a takeover of the position. If you were an enemy of my enemy, I reasoned you might be a friend, so I put you in a place where you would attract attention, and waited to see who would be flushed out. Somehow, I am not surprised it turned out to be Kees VanBuren. I never accepted him as a priest. I wondered if he was even a believer. I was half convinced several months ago, and have tapped his line ever since, but he has not reported, so I had no proof until tonight.”

At this point Meghan interjected, outraged. “You used us for bait to catch a spy?” Her voice was high, almost shrill.

Walking Buffalo's face was already quite dark, but he now seemed embarrassed. “I set the trap using two people I thought were wanted by palace security before I learned better. Once it was done, I couldn't change anything without attracting attention. When I heard my new law officer had bought himself a second sword, and enquired after the make and weight, it was apparent it could not be for himself. I decided you must be capable of defending yourself also, or a gentleman such as your father would not endanger you so. Consequently, I bided my time.”

“Why would someone at the palace set spies on you?” Brian asked. “I thought he was here to catch us.”

“No,” Walking Buffalo replied, “This all predates your run-in with the authorities at New Tara.” Brian looked startled, so he added, “I'll come back to that in a minute. Evidently some of the great lords have again decided we ‘filthy aborigines’ should not be in governance. This is part of a move to depose us, and either add our domain to Monde's at Moody, or bring in outsiders to rule here. That the fellow also found you appears to be coincidence.”

Brian nodded. It made sense. VanBuren couldn't have been sent here after them. If their enemies had known where they were, they would have come against them in force, and made sure of them.

“It would be foolish to change holders here,” Meghan interjected. “Everybody knows you are a good chief. The people love you, and wouldn't have anyone else. No European could rule better than you have. The economy would take a forty percent downturn if the palace introduced direct rule. I say Tara should leave things in your hands.” In her indignation, colour returned to her face. She seemed to forget about the body on the floor, and her part in putting it there. “Moreover,” she added as an afterthought, “It would take a decade or more of subversive activity to bring about such a change.”

Walking Buffalo became quite thoughtful at her pronouncement, stared at a spot on the ceiling a few moments, then remarked absently, “We've had several years of it already. But that's roughly what Dave Dennison said at the INA domain lords' meeting when we last talked about the matter.” He appeared to reach a decision, but announced it rather oddly. “However, it is a double compliment coming from you, my lady.” He bowed.

Meghan looked confused, but her father had started to grin at the mention of Lord Dennison, and now chuckled aloud. Meghan looked at the two with some annoyance. “How about letting me in on the secret?”

Instead of doing so immediately, Lord Buffalo changed the subject entirely. “My daughter Rainbow is the child of our old age. Elizabeth and I were both over fifty when she was born, if you can imagine that.” He grinned at himself. “However, it has been far more difficult to motivate and teach her than it was her half brother David. We have long thought if she had someone closer to her own age as role model, we could turn the situation around. So when her lack of interest in education became a serious problem, I arranged for you to teach her privately.

“You had already established a reputation as student and tutor, and we found that incongruous with the image of a wanted criminal. We monitored things very closely at first, but much less when we cleared the warrants, and your good character became obvious. You understand,” he added, with a gesture in her direction, “It is always more important who teaches, than strictly what subject matter is taught. People are not data cubes to fill with mere words or facts.”

Meghan blushed slightly at his remarks, and waited for him to get to the point. She had not had any previous explanation for the arrangement, but guessed something of the sort. Rainbow had certainly responded well, going from being a lethargic, mediocre, and uninterested student to the top of her class in little over six months.

“Elizabeth and I were as proud of you as we were of Rainbow the day you both were baptized, and it was your influence, by the way, that led her to ask, not so much ours.”

He shifted topics again. “One of the times you came to the longhouse, there was no blank paper, so you fetched a used scrap from your pouch to show her a puzzle and capture her interest. I later retrieved it from Rainbow's book and looked it over. Nice network treatment of the philosophers' problem, by the way.

“You see,” he continued, changing the subject once more as he ambled about his explanation, “When I was a young man, I realized if my family were to secure and retain the domain for the People's self-rule, we would have to be not just adequate but superior administrators, so I took the GAC while I was in cadet school at Toronto. Years later, I became interested in the workings of the academy and eventually joined the board. I have been one of the three exam regents for the last several years.

“This year, a student named James Dillworth, purportedly from South Africa, obtained the highest score in the history of the test. Discreet enquiries by the regents lead nowhere, and the account from which the exam was done has been closed. The real Dillworth, it seems, died many years ago.

“The last question was a particularly difficult one, reflecting a problem I myself once solved privately, but only with several hours' work. It's one of those things you put on a test to see if there are any truly exceptional people writing, but for which you never expect to see a solution. Well, there was one correct answer, and it was on the paper to which I refer.

“You can imagine my surprise when I discovered the scrap you left with my daughter had on the reverse the rough work for that very solution. Incidentally, I now note your struggle with my vague wording of the question, and have to agree with the other examiners that you made a perfectly good choice for the slack variables, after all.”

“The answer was within two percent either way,” Meghan observed, by this time quite red-faced.

“Quite so. Well, all of this is a rather long way around to tell you I do not just appreciate your comment about our economy, I agree with it professionally.” He paused and thought again. “More important, you said it.” He emphasized the words “you” and “said.” “That means a lot to me and my house.” He turned to Brian.

“Even before Dave Dennison commented, I had you placed. There were things about you that nagged at my memory. A turn of phrase, the way a man walks—some things don't change even from boyhood. So, I invited you hunting, and watched carefully. You rode and tracked as one of the People, and already knew the terrain intimately. By the end of the first day, I saw the boy, not the man.” He glanced at Meghan. “I never met your mother, but did know Iron Kate. There's a resemblance, but it is not deep. You remind me of your other grandmother...”

He stopped as Brian shook his head vigorously. Then he abruptly rose, drawing his sword. This startled Meghan, who flinched involuntarily. But he held it point upward and bowed to the flat side. When he made no further move, she turned to her father, who remarked, drawing his own blade and offering it, “Take his oath on my sword. It will be yours someday, so it is fitting.”

Bewildered, she accepted the proffered hilt, stood the requisite three paces from the chief, and put the point of the blade toward the floor.

Walking Buffalo bowed again and intoned, “By this, I and my house do swear fealty of honour, and friendship to the house of...” He caught a sharp nod from Brian in Meghan's direction, and amended, “to the person and the house of Mara Devereaux-Rourke, whose honour we will defend and whose cause we will uphold from this day forward.”

She was taken aback that the chief knew their deep secret, but even young children know protocol for oaths of fealty. She glanced at her father first, and received an enthusiastic nod. The Chief had sworn more than honour, but less than service—a puzzling oath. It was only later that she realized he could not bind his house, and therefore his son David, to service. Uncertain, she made the most general of the standard replies.

“I, Mara Devereaux-Rourke, also known as Meghan McIlhargey, being underage, but with the permission of my father, hereby accept your fealty. I and my house swear to fulfil all the obligations of this fealty by dealing with you and yours in all honour and integrity from this day forward.” With this, the two reversed sword positions, his down, hers up. Walking Buffalo looked up at the tall slender young woman who stood so nobly before him. What could he say to her? She was kin by both his first marriage and his second. Like both his David and Alfred Dennison, she was of the generation that must right the wrongs at Tara. She was ... Tears filled his eyes. He reached out and stroked the long red hair flowing over the child-woman's shoulders.

“I name you ‘Red Lions’ Mane’ and say from this day forward, that you are of the People, both Blackfoot and Stoney. My salt is your salt, and my bread is your bread, so long as the mountains stand, and the rivers run. Your grandparents were friends to me and my people, and we remain exceedingly deep in their debt,” he added, then surprised her by abruptly kneeling before his sword and touching his forehead to it. She looked to her father, confused. This ritual was unknown to her.

“Place the flat of your sword over his head and confirm his right to hold the domain, in the crown's name,” he instructed. “You will be bound to defend your oath on his behalf when you stand at court.”

Meghan complied, but had to make up words as she went. “This day we do say and confirm the right of you and your house to rule the domain of Edwardston and surrounding areas under fealty to the throne of Tara and in perpetuity.”

As Walking Buffalo got to his feet and bowed again before sheathing his sword, she heard her father murmur, “So let it be said, so let it be done,” but when Meghan returned his sword, he added, more loudly, “Now we have all that out of the way, we need to get away from here before our late friend is missed by whoever sent him. When Meghan is old enough, she'll need to find VanBuren's master, and call on him to execute justice.”

Hearing him, Meghan gritted her teeth as she thought of all the dead—her parents and grandparents, along with so many other family members, friends, and allies. Her da couldn't stand at Tara; she knew that. She could, however. She was Devereaux. She was Rourke. And when the ban ended ... She glanced again at the corpse of the man she had killed, and felt fresh revulsion at the thought of having to do it again, perhaps many times. However, it was her duty to her families to take revenge, and to Ireland and the Lord of Heaven to exact justice. She determined never to rest until all the murderers paid for their crimes. She would be harder, more grown up, more like her father. She straightened. She would restore the family name.

* * * *

Two eventful decades have passed since the morning Meghan and her da left Edwardston. I didn't see her again until I was a student at her school in Moody several years later, and not after that until I shared her apartment at Tara. It is trite to call her ‘sister,’ for I owe her my very life in more ways than one. I shudder to think what I might have become without her. She got me back on the right path, reconciled with my parents, and following the Lord of Heaven.

Today, she's a high lady and a general, but she's still the friend I rode the prairies with as a girl. What memories we have from all the years. And how I remember the morning she left.

The sun shone so brightly in the grey-blue sky it made your eyes ache. My parents and I saddled for a family ride, but I knew the truth at once when we met the McIlhargeys outside town, and I saw their packs. They did it that way partly for security, but mostly for my benefit. See, you can cry when only family and the buffalo are watching, but it would be shameful in town.

We didn't ride directly to the airport and the waiting domain jet that would fly my father and the McIlhargeys to Los Angeles. For that, a groundcar would have sufficed. Instead, we made to the southeast over terrain that to this day has never seen a road. My parents and Meghan's da told us stories about the “old days” as we went and after we arrived at the old village. That's our way. The tales of the People are not mere musty accounts of the past. They explain our reason for being, our relationship with the Lord of Heaven, and our motivation for continuing on. It's the same with the Irish, and perhaps that's why we get on so well, when we're not fighting. History isn't merely a series of events; it's a way of expressing who you are in the context of a flow of heritage from past to future generations.

I rode double in front of Meghan with my own horse trailing behind, and my big sister hugged me the whole time, and told me we would always be together in the family of the Lord of Heaven.

We had both heard before of Hannah and Seamus, Sally and Jack, Lucy and James, Colleen and Patrick, but the telling that day was most pointed and poignant. It was our parents' way of beginning to pass the royal peacekeeping swords to our generation. Meghan and I never spoke a word though the recitations. Nor could I ask what I always wanted to know—which of the cousins was the king. Later,

when I questioned my mother about the royal succession, she would only say that if one of our generation was to sit on the emerald throne, I must help ensure it would be the noblest and most able of all, for the sake of Ireland's Peace. Her answer left me with plenty of unsolved mysteries, but after puzzling over the stories a long time, I eventually decided who the king must have been. That I turned out to be completely wrong testifies how well he and his cousins created their initial confusing tangle of deceit, and how they took advantage of subsequent events to bury the truth ever deeper.

To this day, whenever I return home from Tara to Edwardston to spend time with my parents, we invariably ride out to that same place, called "Irishmen's Hill," (though the original in our tongue follows older custom, and sounds more like "Scotsman's Hill"). There we commune with the Lord of Heaven, remember, and tell each other the stories again so we can faithfully pass them to our own children and theirs.

From the top of the hill, you can see the whole of Edwardston to the northwest. The village of Prairie Chicken is immediately below the hill and beside the rail lines to the East. It is hard to imagine that on Tirdia, this same hill is in the middle of the great city of Calgary and stretches to the horizon in every direction. Here on Hibernia, Edwardston is a tiny place, unknown to most. It is ironic that the royal roads all cross here.

It was here my father first told me of the royals, and our place in the family, including the stories we heard again that day. Imagine, both my half-brother David and I have King Conn and Queen Ann for great-grandparents—him by James and Daisy, and me, of course, by Elizabeth Ryan, my mother, through Princess Elizabeth, the sister of James III.

It was on that hill, just outside the gate in the iron fence that marks off a very special section of the cemetery, that my mother first recounted to me how she came to Edwardston as an escort for would-be brides and fell wildly in love herself. My father was the last to remarry, but says he got the very best, and I have to agree, for though I, too, have wept over the ones whose mortal remains lie on that hillside, I never knew them, and would never have existed had they lived.

Invariably, we clear the grasses from around a wide stone that stands out among the many other identical granite markers by virtue of spanning three graves. Sometimes Alice Cloud comes with me, and we stand together, for her mother's stone is beside our family's. On other occasions, I have been there with various of my cousins who have survived the troubles. Most times, it is my brother David and I who pray there. Always, we salute with our swords—I with a stick as, now being married to a priest, I'm not permitted to carry my blade any longer—and we say aloud the inscription on the monument, swearing it as our oath to carry on their task after them. The words remind us as few other things can do, of both our duties and our vulnerability. The left panel reads:

Enthroned With the Lord of Heaven
Officers, Scholars, Queens
Promoted to Glory
July 9, 1955

In the middle is a raised carving depicting three women embracing, their faces shown in priceless detail. I'm told it is a remarkable likeness, and I'm sure it's Hannah Meathe's only carving outside high family ownership or the royal museum. Why, a far lesser piece depicting James IV sold recently at Murphy's auction for six figures.

The right panel bears the names:

"Deerfoot, Princess of the Peoples
Sally, Lady Devereaux

Lucy, Lady Dennison"

Underneath, surrounded by carved shamrocks, and extending across the whole stone is the legend that is their epitaph on the one hand and our inspiration and command on the other. Mara uses portions as her military school motto and as watchword for the army she assembled in our quest to wrest Tara from the usurpers. It reads:

Faithful to justice under the Lord of Heaven.
Friends of the day, take back the night,
Keep the Peace after them.

May the road rise to meet you,
May the wind be always at your back,
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
The rains fall soft upon your fields and,
Until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of His hand.

—an Irish blessing.

Epilogue

We can also explain the rise of the group now known as the “Friends of the Day”, who played such a key role in what is popularly called “Lady Mara's coup.”

Third through fifth volumes, covering events of the years immediately prior to the nexus are also planned, as is a separate and larger work explaining the role of key nexus figures who originated on other earths but played an important part in our own history.

—the general editors

Watch for “The Friends,” Volume two of “The Interregnum,” at a bookseller near you.

Appendix—The Characters

Greater Hibernia's Royals and Donals

The Three-Swords Dynasty

1792—1815 Conn I

1815—1880 Seamus II

1880—1885 Seamus III

1885—1912 Conn II (m Gertrude Cavanaugh)

1912—1932 Conn III (m Ann of Meta)

1932—1940 James III (m Maeve O'Brien)

1940—1941 James IV

The Descendents of Conn III (The Prolific) and Ann to 2000

(m = married, d = died, f= fostered out, a = fostered in, c = clone, v = in vitro)

1890 James (m Maeve) [James III]

—1914 William (d 1940)

—1917 James (f deposited 1941 and vanishes) [James IV]

—1918 Conn (d 1923)

—1920 Matthew (f, d 1925)

—1931 Daisy-Deerfoot (m Walking Buffalo, d 1955)

—1954 David

1890 Jamie (f, MacTavish, m Gordon Donald 1918)

—1919 Gordon (m Mary 1940)

—1967 Gowan

—1973 Trish

—1920 Daisy (m Robert MacAllister 1941)

—1942 Angus (m Mercy McKitrick, clan Graham 1965)

—1967 “Day”

1892 Ann (f, m Rory Rourke 1910)

—1913 Matthew (m “Iron Kate” Evans) Donal IV

—1947 Katherina (see Jack Meathe)

—1977 (v) Mara (Rourke-Devereaux-Meathe a.k.a Meghan McIlhargey)

1893 Daisy (f, m Brian Devereaux)

—1918 James “Jack” (m Sally O'Neill 1945)

—1946 Jack (d 1958) [name and place taken by Jack Meathe]

—1950 Doyle (f Whelan, m Jana)

—1983 Cullin

1893 Maisy (f, m Richard Holdom)

—1918 James (Later Dennison, m Lucy O'Brien 1945)

—1946 Dave (m Gwen)

—1967 Alfred (m Sheanna O'Toole)

—1949 Tia (f McManus, m Driscoll Derry)

—1968 Maeve

1894 Patricia (m Derek O'Toole)

—1914 Robert (m Ailie, d 1968)

—1960 Karen (d 1987)

—1915 Maisy (f Para, m William 1949)

—1952 William "Bill" (m Celia)

—1977 Bal

—1917 Patrick (m Colleen)

—1947 Patricia (m John Maguire)

—1981 Sheana (m Alfred Dennison)

—1947 Patrick (m Anna 1975, to Para as "Atri" after Glenmorgan)

—1978 Ari

—1978 Ona

1900 Elizabeth (Michael Ryan 1927)

—1930 Elizabeth (m Walking Buffalo 1958)

—1981 Rainbow (m Fr. Cam O'Grady 1998)

—1999 Meghan

—1945 Liam (m Maria Scrobogna 1977)

—1983 Catherine (c Eider)

1910 Carole (m Stan Reilly)

—1947 Sean (Donal XII)

—1950 Paul (f McNeil)

—1975 Rena (m Sven Johansen)

The descendants of Frederick O'Toole and Janet

1890 Derek (m Princess Patricia—see above)

1895 Jane (m Solomon Transky, the Metan Salmon)

—1923 Hannah (m Seamus Meathe*)

—1946 James “Jack” [takes Jack Devereaux’ place] (see Katherina Rourke)

* According to palace records, Conn III had a younger brother James who took the surname Meathe. His only child (1891) was famous Commereceman John Meathe, to whom Seamus Meathe was born in 1917, a second cousin to James IV. (James Holdom-Dennison, Jack Devereaux Sr., and Patrick O'Toole, by contrast, were first cousins.)

The First Lords of the Interregnum (to 2000)

1941—1945 Donal I (Donal Tobin)

1945—1951 Donal II (Rory Doran)

1951—1952 Donal III (Colin Cunningham)

1952—1958 Donal IV (Matthew Rourke)

1958—1962 Donal V (Calaghan MacCarthy)

1962—1968 Donal VI (John O'Flaherty)

1968 Donal VII (Gerald Monde)

1968 Donal VIII (Friel O'Tigernaugh)

1968—1970 Donal IX (Cameron O'Nial)

1970—1975 Donal X (Armand O'Tigernaugh)

1975—1980 Donal XI (William Desmond)

1980—2000 Donal XII (Sean Reilly)

Appendix—Hibernia's Weights and Measures

Summary

The Federation uses the Tirdian metric system for all weights and measures, except for length units, where the following special names apply (common ones in bold):

- staff**(two Tirdian metres) This is the basic length unit. (A “fathom” on Para)
 - stick (or “sword”) (one metre) A half-staff
 - foot (obsolete except on Para) a sixth of a staff
 - centistaff (or “**cent**”) a hundredth of a staff, hence two centimetres
 - furlong (uncommon) 100 staves
 - mile**(Irish) 1000 staves or about 6562 English Earth Tirdian feet
 - acre a thousand square staves or a thousandth of a square (Irish) mile
-

Characters of The Peace

Disclaimer: Any resemblance between the names and/or actions of any character in this work and any real person whether living or dead is purely coincidental. All the characters are entirely fictional.

Meta and Tirdia:

Elbon—the Builder, chairman of the Metan council, a.k.a**John Dominic**

(Lucky) Lucy O'Brien—MD and Ollmah in languages; Irish spy; marries James Dennison

(Salty) Sally O'Neill—MD and Ollmah in history; Irish spy; marries Jack Devereaux Sr.

Father Damon—their cell leader in Irish intelligence

Betsy Maguire—Sally & Lucy's landlady at Dublin

Michael Sloane—RCMP commander at Calgary

Karl Schmidt—former German agent, now working for the KGB

Carlos Cortez—Spanish agent

Douglas Boone—FBI agent; but a double for the Russians

Bolo—Argentinian who works for the Japanese.

George Dowd—Irish Russian double agent who steals the Manhattan secrets

Pastor Fred—of a Presbyterian Church in downtown Calgary

Ortho's Nobility:

James III—king until assassinated in 1940

William—crown prince who dies with James III

James IV—The banished King

Donal Tobin—the first Donal, whose name becomes the title of the office

Sean Reilly—heir of the Reilly clan

Stanley Reilly—his father; commands eastern forces in 3WW

Kate Rourke (Evans) (Iron Kate)—a royal, powerful courtier and wife of Matthew

Matthew Rourke—royal family, marries Kate, becomes Donal IV, retires when she is killed

Katherina Rourke—daughter of Iron Kate and Matthew

Elizabeth Ryan—head of household and holder of sword until she gives it to Liam to go to Edwardston and marry walking Buffalo

Liam Ryan—younger brother of Elizabeth

Solomon (Salmon) Transky—Metan agent who marries on Ortho

Jane O'Toole/Transky—his wife; aunt to Patrick

Seamus Meathe—third cousin and personal agent to James IV.

Hannah Transky /Meathe—his wife

Jack Meathe—son of Seamus and Hannah

James (Jack) Devereaux Sr.—made Lord of Moody after the banishment

Sally Devereaux—his wife

James (Jack) Devereaux Jr.—their son

Brian McIlhargey—cadet trainer at Kilkarney, survives Glenmorgan and goes into exile

Patrick O'Toole—a cousin of James IV, head of security

Colleen O'Toole—his wife

Patrick O'Toole Jr.—their son

Patricia O'Toole—their daughter; twin to Patrick

Albert Maguire—Lord at Edwardston, assassinated

Elbon—the Builder, chairman of the Metan council, a.k.a **John Dominic**

(Lucky) Lucy O'Brien—MD and Ollmah in languages; Irish spy; marries James Dennison

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Michael Sloane—RCMP commander at Calgary

Karl Schmidt—former German agent, now working for the KGB

Carlos Cortez—Spanish agent

Douglas Boone—FBI agent; but a double for the Russians

Bolo—Argentinian who works for the Japanese.

George Dowd—Irish Russian double agent who steals the Manhattan secrets

Pastor Fred—of a Presbyterian Church in downtown Calgary—his son, kidnapped

Karen Bridget O'Toole—a niece of Patrick; severely brain damaged in an accident

James Dennison—(orig Holdom) appointed Lord of New Tara in the time of James IV

Sarah Dennison—his first wife, whom he marries before going to New Tara

Lucy Dennison—his second wife

Tia McManus—daughter of Lucy and James, fostered out

Gustav Friedrich—son of Kaiser Gustav I, General of Germany in the 3WW

Ito Miyamoto Sr.- Daimyo and alternate emperor in the early 1940s

Gerald Monde—holder of the Monde sword in 1951

Thomas Monde—a Colonel in the royal army at Glenmorgan, clone of Gerald

Calaghan MacCarthy—MacCarthy Mor in the time of Hannah and Sean; Donal V (1958-62)

Spike MacCarthy—nephew to Callaghan; colonel in the time of Sally and Lucy

Others at Tara:

William (Bill) O'Grady—priest of Old Town in Tara in Sean's time

Gertrude O'Grady—his wife

Charles & Marilyn O'Connell—run a security safe house near Old Town in Seamus's time

Malachy Fogarty—lord at Centralia in Lucy Dennison's time

Armand Derry—a clerk in security at the time of the King's deposition

Karina Tansey—Kilkarney grad, later Security officer

Patrick O'Dwyer—servant to James, high King, given a protector's sword

Molly Byrne—a cook in the day of James

Patsy—scullery girl killed at the assassination

At Edwardston:

Alex O'Brien—gang leader in Edwardston in 1951

Rose Cloud—the Blackfoot woman he rapes

Alice Cloud/O'Brien—Alex' illegitimate daughter

Running Bear—Stoney Chief in 1951

Deerfoot—his adopted daughter; originally Princess Daisy; marries Walking Buffalo

Walking Buffalo—Blackfoot chief from 1950

David Buffalo—his son by Deerfoot/Daisy

Elizabeth Buffalo—his second wife

Rainbow Buffalo—much younger half sister of David, and daughter of Elizabeth

Hank Hendergrast—ruffian hired by Spike MacCarthy near Edwardston in 1953

Sunshine Buffalo/Rainmaker—sister to Walking Buffalo

Kees VanBuren—a spy who poses as a priest at Edwardston and is killed by Mara

Appendix—The Interregnum—Glossary of terms

aircar—a four- to six-passenger short range jet

Alicia and Aileen—A.I. programs created by Nellie Hacker

amphora—a crystal or stone perfume holder worn by a woman on a chain around her neck as a promise of her virginity. The amphora or a substitute is broken at her wedding (cf. crossed heart)

Amsterdam—largest Orthan cadet school does field commission upgrades as well as regular officer training

Architect, the—Metan name for God

ard—high, head, chief, first

Armaugh—old Church centre, now houses the low armoury

Armory, high—orbital, nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons stored there

Armoury, low—at Armaugh, guns stored there for emergencies

Babylon—capitol of Para, sometimes used for the planet

bard—a brehon, a seanacha, or a filea

Berea—the orphanage Elbon (John Dominic) runs on Tirdia

bishop—an elected local church administrator

Boru, Brian—High King of Ireland at Clontarf, founder of Ortho's enduring kingdom

brehon—an Irish judge

Builder, the—chairs the council of elders on Meta

bushido—Japanese, similar to Irish “honour”

cent—abbrev. centistaff, hundredth part of a staff measure, 2 centimetres

Centralia—seat of government for South America

certificate—Orthan term for a credential equivalent to a doctorate

Chamberlain, Lord—a court official who convenes the house and announces decisions with a staff of office

"Christian Doctrine in Faith and Practice"—title of the Bishops' 1801 encyclical defining and defending Christian doctrines

client state—a locally governed region of Ortho responsible to the crown

Clontarf—location of the 1014 battle where the Irish defeated the Norse

Commerceman (woman)—a non-noble engaging in business or trade

Conclave of Jerusalem—1795 meeting of bishops that began the great reformation

Covenant of the Living—1801 ban on nuclear, chemical and biological warfare, later extended to projectiles and all human genetic engineering

crossed heart—a pendant on a chain; worn by a man as a promise of his virginity until marriage (cf. amphora)

Crown—Ireland's crown, used in both physical and abstract senses

crown—ten pennies, the tenth part of a shamrock

daimyo—Japanese for lord

Desert—a timestream world with a large tracts of land uninhabitable because of radioactivity from a nuclear war

domain—either a territory or an executive (cabinet) post held directly under Tara's authority

domain lord—holder of a domain

Donal—for Donal Tobin, became the title of his office of First Lord

dull—a. unfortunate b. slow witted

EEC—electrical engineering certificate

East West War—1745-1750 only nuclear war on Ortho (Japan bombed)

Edwardston—small settlement in location of Tirdia's Calgary, seat of government for central INA

emerald—used on Ortho to signify a betrothal

emerald shamrock, the—an emerald carving made for Seamus' mother

Enemy, the—Metan name for Satan

Executive—one or all of the high ministers of Tara's crown (about fifteen)

Federation—Babylon (Para) and Hibernia (Ortho); formed 1801

feis—a festival or a contest

feiseanna—multiple festivals or games in a single venue

First Lord—a. first speaker in the house of lords b. a local ruler (king)

fostering—Irish term for adopting out or in

Friends, the—a. those of Katherina b. Mara's organization

front row—the fifteen highest-ranked (by sword) of the court's nobles

GAC—General Administration Certificate

Gaelic (also Orthogaelic)—language of Hibernia

giri—a Japanese term for mutual obligation

Glenfinnan—location of Scottish games; seat of Scotland's protector

Glenmorgan—Morgan's glen before purchase by family Devereaux; site of battle in 1977

great hall—central foyer in Tara's palace giving access to courtroom, offices, living quarters

green chair—Ireland's carved jade throne

groundcar—a four- to twelve-passenger hovercraft

H.E.I.O.U.—Ireland's motto, variously rendered as: “Hiberniae est imperare orbi universo” or “Hiberniae Erit In Orbe Ultima”, respectively “Hibernia (will) rule(s) over all (the world)” or “Hibernia will exist until the world ends.”

High Bishop—the bishop of Tara, votes the Church's sword, ex officio an Executive member

high family—one of Tara's noble families

High King—constitutional ruler of Ireland, hence of Hibernia and the Federation

holder—one entrusted with a domain under the crown of Ireland

INA—Irish North America

interregnum—the sixty years James IV and his descendents were banned from the throne 1941-2001

Kilkarney—elite Irish cadet school

king—a loosely used term equivalent to first lord, can apply regionally

Lagos—seat of the West Africa domain (Nigeria)

landsman (woman)—a non-noble holder of land

lawyer—someone who charges money to administer or interpret the law or dispense justice (a capital offence), by extension, anyone condemned to death

Limerick—home of all-Ireland feiseanna every fourth year

lord—title due a domain or family head, executive member, bishop or senior military officer

Lord of Heaven—Hibernian name for God

Manse—headquarters of a domain

MC—Medical Certificate, the credential of a physician

Meathe—a. a common surname b. the commons c. the ard of all swords, both royal and of the islands
d. surname of Cormac, second High King

Meta—the earth clockwise from Hibernia in the timestream; also “Builder's World”

Metalibrary—all knowledge stored and accessed electronically

Monaco—location of exclusive resort owned by Kildare and MacAllister

Moody—large town and capitol on west cost of INA, east of Tirdia's Vancouver

MT—Metalibrary Terminal

mutagenic wars—mid-eighteenth century biological war on Hibernia

nannie—short for nanomachine

nanomachine—a molecular-sized machine, whether specialized or programmable

New Tara—small capitol city on East coast of INA where New York is on Tirdia

nexus—the division of a world into two; the decision causing this

noncombatant—one who by station or choice may not fight or be fought

Old Rust—Hibernian name for Satan

Old Town—the original palace compound at Tara

Ollamh—seventh level (doctorate) in fine arts, humanities, mathematics, or pure science

Ortho—also Greater Hibernia or Greater Ireland; between Tirdia and Meta

Orthogaelic—language of Hibernia

palace—originally the king's home, now expanded as the seat of Hibernia's government

Para—Hibernia's Federation partner, also called (Greater) Babylon after its capital

Pax Hibernia—the peace of Ireland

Penal City—Australia's one small city, home of Hibernia's only prison

People, the—name used by the nations of INA to describe themselves

PIEA—Personal Intelligence Enhancement Appliance

priest—a trained pastor who takes a vow of non-violence except in self-defence, and who may not carry a blade

priest's wife—same qualifications expected and same restrictions apply as to a priest

Prime—the most populated of the earths; between Waterworld and Hibernia (c.f. Tirdia)

Protector—a. of England, Scotland or Wales, a high noble b. of the throne, wielder of a sword for same

Red Lion—a. device on royal coat of arms b. name of a pub in Old Town

rock—abbrev. shamrock

royal—refers to a member of the royal dynasty after 1800

royal cousin—one of James IV, Seamus Meathe, Richard Dennison, Patrick O'Toole, Jack Devereaux, Sr.

royal family—one of MacCarthy, Ryan, Rourke, Reilly, Monde, Meathe, O'Toole, Devereaux, O'Niall, O'Conor, O'Kelly, O'Brien, Kildare

royal sword—one of thirteen; three enthrone a king, two deny the throne

rust—an expostulation

seanacha—a historian. The term is usually reserved for an ollamh

sensei—Japanese Bard

shamrock—basic unit of currency on Hibernia

shillelagh—Irish version of fighting stick with knobs on one or both ends

staff—a. basic unit of measure, six feet, two Tirdian metres b. a weapon one staff in length carried as a sign of a brehon's authority; not commonly used by warriors

stick—a. common fighting weapon b. obsolete unit of measure (half-staff)

subdomain—a contracted-out domain responsibility

sword—a. weapon b. obsolete unit of measure (half-staff)

Sword of a Protector of the throne—three can enthrone a king unless two other holders object; includes the royal, church, bardic, and island blades, as well as two made for commoners (Transky and O'Dwyer) in 1941

Sword of the Bards—an ornate blade with authority of a royal sword

Sword of the Church—an ornate blade with authority of a royal sword

Sword of the Islands—one of Meathe (Ireland), Alba (Scotland) Wales, and Logres (England); the original four, authority equivalent to a royal sword

Tara—capital of Ireland, seat of her high kings

terebinth—currency on Para

Three Swords Dynasty—founded 1792 by kings who owned three blades

Three Worlds' War—the war of 1939-1945 on Waterworld, Tirdia (WW II), and Hibernia

timestream—the medium in which all the worlds exist

tithe—the tenth of income owed to a. one's domain b. the crown by a domain c. the church

Tirdia—(God's world) the common Irish name for the world called Prime by the Metans and by Hibernian scholars

Toronto—cadet school in INA, also offers search and rescue

Traveller, the—Metan name for Joshua Caine, ally to the Destroyer

troubles, the—refers to the Japanese conflicts caused by political and religious divisions between the eastern and western parts of the country

used room salesman—an insulting comparison to those who sell used rooms for (modular) houses

Waterworld—the Earth between Desert and Tirdia, no large continents

white—a. as clothing, indicates a non-combatant, b. cowardly

Wild Geese—Hibernian exiles on Para

About The Author

Richard J. (Rick) Sutcliffe, is Professor of Mathematics and Computing Science at Trinity Western University in British Columbia, and has been Adjunct Professor in the nearby School of Computing Science at Simon Fraser University. At TWU, Rick coordinates academic computing curriculum and facilities, serves on numerous campus committees, and has also spent two years as Acting Dean (Faculty of Natural and Applied Sciences.)

Sutcliffe represents Canada on international computing standards committees and has published a text in computing science, written one on ethical and social issues in technology, and has authored more than fifty articles and reviews in a variety of trade and technical publications. He has been a columnist for several magazines and newspapers (The Northern Spy, Anodidacticus, The Dialectical Apple, Through a Glass Darkly). He coined the terms "New Renaissance", "Metalibrary", "concinnity", "Fourth Civilization" and "wired campus", has been a leader in electronic publication, and has been active on the Internet since the 1970s. He has also been an invited speaker at numerous churches, educational and computing conferences, and technical symposia at local, national, and international levels.

Rick Sutcliffe is the author of several fictional works in various stages of publication. Most of these are Irish-flavoured Christian science fiction and deal with a variety of technology and ethical issues in thought-provoking plots set on alternate earths. His first novel, "The Peace" was published electronically in June 2000 and became its publisher's best-seller. Others in the same series followed. He revived The Northern Spy electronically, and also has a Philology site at opundo.com. Affiliated companies sell domain names and do web hosting.

Prior to his academic career, he taught secondary school for twelve years in Langley, BC, last at Mountain Secondary School. There, he served as his school's math/computer science department head, physics teacher, staff chairman, club sponsor, and scholarship counsellor. He brought the International Baccalaureate programme to public schools for the first time, was active in curriculum development and was among the first to use microcomputers in secondary schools.

He has research interests in standards, programming languages, data structures, and in the social, ethical, and religious aspects of high technology. He is active in Aldergrove Fellowship Baptist Church, having been chairman, treasurer, deacon, elder, youth worker, librarian and Bible teacher. He has built two houses, gardens, writes software, and been active in politics. He has also been appointed as external advisor in the accreditation of several local schools. He has travelled extensively as a speaker and to represent the Canadian Standards Association and the Standards Council of Canada at ISO meetings. He presently resides in Bradner, B.C. with his wife Joyce and their two sons Nathan and Joel.

OTHER BOOKS AVAILABLE FROM WRITERS EXCHANGE:

This is the first novel that Rick has had published with Writers Exchange but the rest of the series will be released with us in the future. The next book in the series, The Friends is due out at the beginning of June 2003, with the third book, The Exiles due out soon after.

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