

Emperor Galant IV, Scion of the True and Holy Line, Defender of the Five Provinces, Premier Justice of the Realm, Regent to the Throne of Rhouden, and Lord of the Southern Isles, snapped his head up just as he started to nod. He sat in a narrow room with vaulted ceilings, at the head of a sparsely populated table, with old stone and faded tapestries on one side and dusty windows on the other. He looked around the table, wide-eyed, to see if anybody had noticed him sleeping. Nobody was looking at him. What were they talking about? The drought in the plains. The Seer was talking.

"...consider extending our tax amnesty for Ikan Province. Even after our winter amnesty, many of the plains farmers are abandoning their land and moving into the towns and cities."

The Seer Corvyne was a small man, for a former warrior. He was balding, he sat with a hunch, and he wore spectacles, but he had served in the Holy Campaign in Rhouden, along with Galant's uncle, Dilluther, and the Elder General Blackwell. All three men had gone north, as Knights of Quelestel, fighting their way across the Addenines, to root out the warlike priests that practiced foul rites in the Blue Forest and win the fealty of the barbarian king of Rhouden.

Galant wondered if there would be a war in his lifetime. His men told him that he showed great promise with the sword and the bow. He had barely been walking at the time of the conquest of the Southern Isles. He wondered if his advisors would even let him take part in a campaign now. His father had directed the conquest of the Southern Isles himself, but most people agreed that it had cost him his health and eventually his life. Still, it made Galant's heart quicken to imagine his father leaping from the landing ship as it ran aground, his armor shining, striking down his enemies as they rushed at him from all sides.

Galant looked quickly back to Lord Corvyne.

"...while keeping the city granaries at a comfortable level." Lord Corvyne finished.

Ashir Corvyne's career in the knighthood had been distinguished, but brief. Not long after the campaign in Rhouden, he had become the youngest man ever to be named Seer. Now he sat, balding and bespectacled, hunched over a parchment, reading in a scratchy voice. He was a wise and good man, but he was very dull.

Emperor Galant sighed in spite of himself. Quickly, every eye was on him. He sat up straight, blushing.

"Is this notion displeasing to you, my lord?" The Seer asked.

What had they been talking about? Galant tried not to panic.

"No," Galant said carefully, trying to decide whether he might bluff his way through an answer. "I admit that my mind was wandering." He sighed again, and said glumly, "the plight of the farmer is indeed grave when the whims of fate work against him."

This seemed to satisfy his advisors. Galant sat back, relieved, and vowed to pay closer attention. He was, after all, the Emperor.

The Vaultkeeper cleared his throat, and said, "I believe that the matter of the raids on our mines can no longer be ignored. General Hinesmore reports that the attacks have become more frequent and better organized. In the two months since the mountain passes have thawed, we lost nearly two hundred pounds of bullion..."

"And yet Lord Brinehall does nothing?" The Elder General Blackwell wondered with a smile, pushing a handful of thinning, sandy, hair out of his face. Blackwell glanced at the empty seat next to him. It was unlike Dilluther to miss an appointment. The two Elder Generals had squired together in the Steppelands, fought side by side in Rhouden, and each commanded a legion in the Southern Isles. Now they served together as Elder Generals. Blackwell was as fair in his countenance, voice, and mood, as Galant's uncle Dilluther was dark, and yet they had always been a pair.

The Vaultkeeper cleared his throat diplomatically, and said, "Lord Brinehall believes that no man can be spared from the defense of Sorenhall without leaving it vulnerable."

The Mouse let out a loud, derisive, snort. When everybody looked at him, he waved them off, and said impatiently, "Please, go on."

The Vaultkeeper unfolded a letter with knobby fingers. He was another old man, very wise and distinguished. Sometimes Galant was overwhelmed with love for all these old men. It was true that they often made him feel like he was back in his lessons with Master... Master

What's-His-Name... who had instilled Galant's distaste for letters and numbers. Nevertheless, Galant knew that he was incredibly privileged to have such a wealth of knowledge and experience at his disposal.

Galant studied the seal on the letter from across the table. His sharp eyes made him an excellent archer, his men told him. The seal was a scythe, surrounded by various ornaments. That seal belonged to... Galant furrowed his brow... to General Hinesmore. Of course.

"...reports that several large settlements have been located in the Addenines," the Vaultkeeper was saying when Galant remembered that he ought to be listening. "With two legions from Merendir, General Hinesmore believes that he can simultaneously assault each of the known strongholds of the mountain men. Routing them now, he believes, would break their strength for several years, at least."

The Vaultkeeper placed the letter in the center of the table and pursed his lips. He looked remarkably like a fish, Galant thought. He thought back to his visit to the Imperial Aquarium. There had been many wonderous and, he had to admit, frightening, creatures in those tanks. It was not the sea creatures that had so captivated him, though. Galant tried to picture the young woman who had guided him among the pools filled with the bizarre denizens of the sea. He let his imagination linger on her thighs, which had been emphasized so nicely by...

"...My Lord?"

Galant snapped back to attention. The Elder General Blackwell was addressing him. When Blackwell's pale blue eyes sparkled, as they often did, Galant could see why the man had once been reknowned for his handsomeness. They sparkled now, in an unconscious show of amusement, and Galant flushed.

"In your opinion," Blackwell repeated, while Galant stared at the table, humiliated, "can two legions be spared from the defense of Merendir for a period of several months in order to destroy the strongholds of the raiding mountain tribes in the Addenines, thereby providing reprieve from attack for the mining communities of the Northern Province?"

Galant pondered this for a moment, while his advisors watched. The Imperial Army

contained ten legions. Of these, three were stationed in Merendir, one each in each of the five provinces, and two kept order in the Southern Isles.

"It seems to me," Galant chose his words carefully, "that Merendir is under no imminent threat of attack. It seems to me also, er, it also seems to me, that the two legions in the Southern Isles were stationed there several years ago, when rebellion was a much more imminent..." Galant wished that he had not used the word 'imminent' twice in as many sentences, "...possibility." He surveyed the faces of his advisors. They were nodding in agreement. Galant pressed on with renewed confidence. "Therefore, I propose that two legions be sent north to aid General Hinesmore in his assault on the mountain strongholds of our enemies, and that one legion be recalled from the Southern Isles to reinforce the garrison in Merendir. That will also allow one legion to continue the campaign in the mountains, if the possibility of further decisive victories should arise."

"A very reasonable suggestion," the Shepherd said, smiling proudly at Galant. The Emperor beamed. The Shepherd continued, "though, I wonder if it is wise to reduce the garrison in Merendir to a single legion, even if it is only for a matter of weeks."

The Mouse, the Shepherd, and the Hawk were the central figures of the Imperial Council. The Mouse concerned himself with Merendir, overseeing such bureaucratic organs as the Sweepers, the Gaurd, and the Lamplighters. The Shepherd was concerned with matters of the Empire, and he governed the Riders, the Wagoners, and the Assessors, as well as a variety of lesser departments. The Hawk's responsibilities lay beyond the borders of the Empire. His men were called the Ambassadors, and they fulfilled a variety of functions, with varying degrees of secrecy. Then there was the Seer, who was the personal advisor to the Emperor, the two Elder Generals, the First Admiral, and the Vaultkeeper. All of them were much older than Emperor Galant. The youngest, the Mouse, was old enough to be Galant's father. The Shepherd was the oldest, and though Galant had heard that the man was a ruthless strategist, and had been a fierce warrior before that, Galant could only imagine him as a wispy old man, gentle and quick with his smiles.

"I suggest," the Shepherd continued, his voice strong in spite of his years, "that we seek military aid from the Church. The mountain men worship strange gods and the Church might be willing to lend us knights for this campaign."

"That is a wise suggestion." Galant said and nodded at Lord Blackwell. "If you would be so kind as to discuss this matter with The Candle, I would be much obliged. The march to the mountains should take three weeks..."

"Four weeks," Lord Corvyne corrected, gently.

"...and so we should deploy our soldiers quickly-- within the week, if possible," Galant concluded.

The First Admiral Stilde said, "I will send a ship immediately to the islands, recalling one of the legions. If the winds are good, we should have another legion in Merendir by the new moon."

"Very good," the Seer said, looking down at his notes. "Moving on to the upcoming races and tournament. We will start by discussing..."

The Seer Corvyne was interrupted when the door to the council chamber crashed open and the Elder General Dilluther stalked, glowering, into the room.

"...the accommodations for the visiting nobles," Corvyne continued, and watched as Dilluther took his seat beside Blackwell. Dilluther leaned forward, clasped his hands on the table, and stared straight ahead, breathing deeply and evenly with his jaw clenched. Blackwell slumped back in his chair so he could watch his old friend, and chewed his lip, wondering what might be the matter.

"Arman," the Seer addressed the attending knight, "please show in the Castellan."

The knight Arman was nearly of age with many of the council members, but he was fit and lithe and fierce with a blade in the training yard. He too had served in Roudhen, and upon returning to Merendir, he had been raised to the Emperor's private guard, which he now commanded.

Arman bowed and pushed his way through the wide doors to the hall. The Castellan

Lanick came in to stand before the council, with heavy eyelids and unkempt hair. His embroidered tunic was wrinkled.

"My Lords," the Castellan addressed them, fighting a yawn, "We have erected six new houses so that every lord of a fief will have a place near the pleasure gardens. We are waiting on another wagon of geese, but we have been plucking with fervor, to be sure that the Imperial guests have luxurious mattresses and pillows.

"The lawns, hedges, rock gardens, topiaries, and arbors are all manicured. We are skimming and dredging the lake, so that it will be clear of unsightly foam and scum, and the rainbow fish have been introduced. The boats are being repaired and repainted.

"We have commandeered the best inns on this hill for the favored guests of our lords. We are working night and day to put up new barracks in the third ring for the men-at-arms, but we will have to take volunteers-- which should not be lacking-- to stay in commandeered inns on the Street of Fools."

"Thank you, Castellan," the Emperor Galant said, staring at the tapestry that covered half the wall of the conference room. The tapestry was from the wild northern country of Roudhen. It had been a gift from the king, after the knights had spared his life and allowed him to continue his rule in the service of the Emperor. It was a fine tapestry by any standards. It depicted a hunter-- a fierce, bearded, nobleman in dark leather with gold arm bands-- on a rearing stallion, thrusting a spear through the heart of a boar. Galant had only been hunting on a few occasions, but he hoped to go again soon. He had never brought down a boar, but he had shot a stag on his last outing, and he had brought down nearly a dozen pheasants over the years.

There had been a common girl on the last hunt who had tended to the horses when the hunters stopped for refreshment. She had had lovely fair skin and golden hair. When he brought down the stag, he had smiled at her. When she looked back at him and the sun caught her blue eyes, he thought his heart might stop. His cousin Jackal-- actually, his name was Wester-- had teased him, of course. She was a servant, and Galant was the Emperor. If

Galant wanted her, he should have taken her. Jackal was right that Galant needed to be more assertive, but Galant did not want to upset anybody. Sometimes, he was mildly surprised when he realized that he was the Emperor.

It was customary for the various lords-- his lords, that is-- to go hunting the day after races and tournaments. Maybe she would be back, and he could ask her-- tell her, that is-- that he meant for her to... what? And what if she said no? Could she do that? He was the Emperor. Galant thought that he would impress her with his bravery and prowess and then she would not want to deny him. Maybe they would find a boar. Then Galant would call her over and hand her his bow and quiver. He would take up a spear and charge the beast, slaying it like the warrior in the tapestry. Maybe he would take a wound-- nothing severe, but something that looked bad-- and make light of it, insisting that they finish the hunt.

The conversation around him had stopped. Galant looked around quickly, and was relieved to see that all eyes were on the Vaultkeeper, who was consulting a ledger and chewing his lip. Galant had not noticed the Cellarmaster enter, but the dashing dark-haired fellow stood before them now in a luxurious wine-colored robe, with lips to match. He wore a broad smile, but his eyes were sunken and bloodshot. It was no secret that the Cellarmaster entertained his close friends, and frequent lovers, lavishly from the Emperor's casks. It was a traditional benefit of that office, and though the current Cellarmaster benefited a bit more enthusiastically than his predecessors, he also performed his duties admirably.

"My good man," the Cellarmaster entreated the Vaultkeeper, loudly, "will we quibble over a pittance, when there is so much good will to be won?"

Galant saw the Vaultkeeper's eyes narrow and his lip chewing increase in intensity, and he suddenly understood that the Vaultkeeper-- proper, pious, and lonely-- did not like the flamboyant Cellarmaster, and wanted very badly to refuse him. If Galant had only been paying attention when the matter had been introduced, he might have come up with a compromise. As it was, he could only watch for a few more uncomfortable moments, until the Vaultkeeper smiled wanly and nodded his assent.

"Emperor," the Vaultkeeper addressed Galant, "is this acceptable to you?"

Galant had no idea what topic was on the table, but it seemed to be monetary in nature, and if the Vaultkeeper found it acceptable, Galant had no doubt that he would find it acceptable, too. He pretended to ponder the issue a moment, trying to think of a way to flatter the Vaultkeeper and ease the man's distress.

"My good Vaultkeeper," Galant said, wincing when he realized he had unconsciously echoed the Cellarmaster's words, "when it comes to the incomes and expenses of the realm, my trust in you is absolute."

And when it came to sampling the vintages of hundreds of vineyards, from the south coast to the mountains, and choosing the best for the Emperor's cellars, Galant's faith in the Cellarmaster was absolute.

The Vaultkeeper seemed somewhat appeased by the Emperor's kind words, and he gave the Cellarmaster a haughty look as he announced, "Thirty weights of gold will be added to the Cellarmaster's account, for the purpose of purchasing a cask of new wine for every guest house."

The Cellarmaster bowed deeply, with a flourish that threw him off balance and nearly sent him to the floor. He rose, beaming, and addressed the room with an expansive gesture.

"My Lords, Your Excellence, Master Vaultkeeper, Sir, I assure you... your names are legends."

With that, the Cellarmaster swept out, at least as far as the great oaken double door, which he had trouble opening. The knight Arman opened the door from the outside, and came into the room as the billowing burgundy robes of the Cellarmaster disappeared.

Arman stood at attention in the doorway. His burnished plate armor and immaculate blue cloak stood out in contrast to the dusty windows, the faded tapestries, and the scarred wooden table.

The Seer Corvyne addressed the council, and then the knight.

"Let us turn now to matters of security for our visiting nobles. Arman, please show in



Althurre Barwell."

Lord Dilluther stood quickly, bashing his legs against the table and nearly upsetting his chair. He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Althurre Barwell will not be joining us today," Dilluther said, glowering in turn at the Emperor, the Seer, and Blackwell. "There was... an accident at the forge. The Captain of the Guard is dead."

There was no uproar at Dilluther's announcement, just a long silence. He sat, and refused to meet anybody's eyes, staring instead at the table. Galant's skin was cold, and his stomach was twisting. He knew Dilluther. They all knew Dilluther. He was lying, and very poorly.

"Well!" Blackwell finally exclaimed, leaning back in his chair and smiling as if somebody had just told a joke. The expression only emphasized the wrinkles and pockmarks in his once-handsome face. He brushed the thinning mop of blonde hair from his face and reached over to squeeze Dilluther's shoulder. When still nobody spoke, Blackwell announced, as if he had been waiting all day for this very moment, "I believe we still have the matter of shipping tariffs on the Badwater to discuss."

While the Shepherd and Corvyne discussed the finer points of trade and politics along the Badwater, Galant stared at his uncle Dilluther. It took several minutes before the man looked up and accidentally met Galant's eyes. Dilluther looked at the Emperor sadly, and then lowered his head, and Galant knew everything.

"...between a few minor fiefs a thousand miles away..." the Mouse was grumbling, while the Shepherd frowned and shook his head. Dilluther stood abruptly and left the room. Blackwell rose with him, and opened his mouth, but said nothing and sat again as the door thudded closed.

Galant thought of Celani.

"My Lord?" Eventually, another question came, this time from Lord Corvyne.

"What?" Galant stared at the table in front of him.

"Lord Brinehall comes to the races with five hundred men-at-arms," Corvyne repeated

patiently, pushing back his spectacles on his nose.

Galant did not need his advisors to explain the subtleties of the situation. Lord Arren Brinehall was the newest head of the ancient and belligerent Brinehall family. Bringing five hundred men to the races was a test to the Emperor's hospitality and patience, and might also be a veiled threat. It was also a slight, as it implied that he did not trust his safety to the Emperor's men. The question was whether to allow Brinehall's men to attend the high feast, as was customary for a Lord's travelling party, or to consign them to the commoners' feast. Five hundred men would be as many again as had been expected for the high feast.

Galant spoke with sullen conviction. "Brinehall is looking for a slight. We will show him the utmost hospitality. We will need to move the feast outside to accomodate such numbers, but that will only emphasize Brinehall's pettiness."

The Vaultkeeper looked pained at Galant's announcement, but nodded, and began making figures in his ledger.

A long time later, after the sunlight had turned orange and the dusk birds had started their songs, the Imperial Council called an end to their meeting, and Galant stood and stretched. Outside the stout doors of the conference room, a short walk down the hallway took him out into the second ring of the palace. Arman and Stennan fell in beside him, donning their crested helms as they left the building. Galant hardly noticed the knights any more-- two of the finest knights that the Church had to offer, in gleaming mail, with brilliant blue cloaks, fastened with the emblem of Quelestel, that swept the ground as they walked.

The light was dwindling, but many people still moved purposefully around them as they walked. Sacks of flour were being delivered to the baker. Casks were being wheeled to and from the cellars. Guards marched briskly toward their posts while other guards, newly relieved, ambled back toward the city. Men and women dressed in finery milled around, enjoying the mild evening. Galant recognized none of them. They knelt respectfully as he passed, and did not mob him with favors or innuendos, so Galant assumed they were merely retainers for his lords and ladies.

Galant and his knights skirted an improvised joust between two dark-haired youths, which had drawn a small crowd. Cheers and hoots of laughter marked every charge, as the youths assaulted one another other with long-handled brooms, yelling insults and cajoling the crowd. One pair of minstrels sang an improvised harmony, while another pair of minstrels crouched on the cobblestones throwing knucklebones with an off-duty Wagoner. Galant gave his blessing to everybody who knelt at his approach, but many did not even notice him.

The knight attending the inner gate blew a long, clear note on his ivory horn as the Emperor approached. A moment later, the thick steel gates slid quietly back into the stone walls, and they passed beneath the wall into the shade of the ancient sycamores. Beside the path, cool, crystalline streams murmured among jagged rock formations and gnarled trees. Then, all at once, the trees melted away and the innermost palace stood before them, its slender white towers burning in the fading sun.

Galant was accustomed to these wonders, and took no notice of them. He nodded to Ersaphis, the quiet, pious, knight stood like a statue beside the ornate silver door to the private tower of the Imperial family.

Inside, the hard heeled footfalls of the knights echoed around Galant, as they moved through the marble the halls of the dimly lit palace. For all of its grandeur, the palace was cold. Its arched windows and sky lights let in plenty of light, but somehow the light seemed distant. After dark, the hallways were disquieting, and not only because of his poor, shuffling, muttering, mother.

Galant knocked quietly on his sister's door.

"Come in," came a soft reply. Galant gestured for his knights to stay outside, and they silently took their positions on either side of the door as he pushed it open.

His sister's room, like most rooms in the palace, was expansive and elegantly panelled with dark wood. A scented fire burned in the fireplace, not for warmth, but to take the dampness from the air. His sister lay, pale and exhausted, in a massive canopied bed in the center of the room. He took a seat on the edge of her bed, stared at the finely carved

scrollwork around her floor-length mirror, and began to smooth her dark hair, tangled and damp from sweat and tears. She murmured wordlessly and put a trembling hand on his.

Galant tried to think of something to say, but could only wipe a fresh tear from Celani's cheek. She looked up at him reluctantly, and he saw fear and hopelessness in her face. He squeezed her hand.

"Dilluther..." he said, and she sobbed.

"I'm sorry..." Celani whispered, and repeated, "I'm sorry."

Galant shook his head slowly and smiled at her. He kissed her forehead and took her clammy hand in both of his. She was sobbing, looking at him with sad, grateful eyes.

"You have to be more careful," he said, gently.

Celani's sobs stopped. She took her hand abruptly from his and turned, without a sound, to bury her face in her pillow.

"Celani?" Galant asked, touching her suddenly rigid shoulder. He sat for a while in silence, watching her pretend to sleep. He stood with a sigh and let himself out of her room. His knights fell in beside him and escorted him through the cold, empty, hallways to his own chambers.