

ERETZEL
A PTI Press book

ERETZEL
The Sword of Fire-Book Two
By William R. McGrath

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CHAPTER 6

AFFAIRS OF STATE

Hide me from the secret counsel of the wicked; from
the insurrection of the workers of iniquity:

-The Book of Psalms 64:2

MY Lord, the woman is here,” said the chamberlain.

“Yes, yes, show her in,” said Antiochus with a dismissive wave of his hand. He rose. Anshelm and Ferragus, seated on either side of him at the long council table, did likewise.

“Affairs of State, gentlemen,” he said. “Remember to ask the questions as I have instructed you to. As for the rest of it, just follow my lead. She can be a difficult woman to deal with, but she will be useful in the new order.”

They had known the priestess’ ship had arrived before she had taken her first step ashore of course; but for a good half hour now they had also heard her, or rather, had heard the twenty young women who walked beside her, and sang, if one could call it that, the entire way up the road from the harbor to the fortress. Antiochus’ spies said that these women were quite beautiful, though wearing the weapons and armor of foot soldiers. They were also reported to be the consorts of the priestess, whose sect rejected men.

As the young women drew near, no words and no melody could be detected in their song for it had none. The women simply inhaled and then breathed out a long note, each of the women a different note, each starting and ending at a different time, however long their breath lasted. Anshelm found the sound annoying. To Ferragus it was a bit unnerving in a way he could not define. Antiochus simply sat and waited.

They could hear the strange singing coming closer. Anshelm judged them just outside the chamber doors when the sound abruptly ended.

The doors opened, and the chamberlain entered.

“The High Priestess Rhiannon,” he sang out.

A slim, middle-aged woman dressed in brown robes entered. Her auburn hair was streaked with gray and plaited into a coil atop her head. The only adornment she wore was a bronze dagger that hung from the chain mail belt that rode upon her hips.

Antiochus bowed, Anshelm and Ferragus following a moment later. “Friend of the Earth Mother, welcome,” said Antiochus.

“Antiochus, we remember you when you were no more than an ambassador. Now look at you,” said the woman as if addressing an inferior.

“The Wheel of Life does bring us a surprise every now and again,” replied Antiochus. “Thank you for coming to meet with us here. How was your voyage?”

“The sailors leered at my women the entire trip from Erie,” replied the high priestess. “Men are no better than dogs when it comes to keeping themselves under

control.”

“Sadly all too true,” said Antiochus. “But even dogs know when to stay in their season, something men have yet to learn, so out of touch we are with our Earth Mother. That is the very reason like-minded spirits like ours should join forces, all the better to battle the ignorance of wicked men.”

“And these men?” asked Rhiannon.

Ferragus raised a Gaulish eyebrow at Anshelm, but said nothing.

“Ah yes, may I present Ferragus king of Gaul and Anshelm king of the Goths,” said Antiochus.

The two kings bowed again. Rhiannon merely nodded her head. Servants poured wine into crystal goblets and then left. Sunlight was streaming in through a window behind Anshelm. The light hit his goblet and flashed so brightly that it pained his eyes. He moved the goblet out of the light and into his shadow.

“Thank you for accepting my invitation to meet with us,” said Antiochus. “As you know, the Council of the Unicorn Kingdoms—”

“A body that we do not recognize,” said Rhiannon.

Antiochus smiled graciously, “Because they did not merit your recognition at the time. But as the scribes tell us, ‘what is past is past.’ As I was saying, the kingdoms have decided to form our countries into an empire, and I have been named as its first Emperor. Due to some unfortunate incidents at the last council, three of our member countries currently have no one to rule over them.”

This sparked Rhiannon’s interest. “Go on.”

“It is in my power as Emperor to appoint a ruler over each vacant throne. As the fame of your wisdom has reached even these dull ears, I have heard of you and would ask that you serve as Queen of Erie.”

For a brief moment Rhiannon was at a loss for words, “Queen of Erie.” She thought for a moment and then her eyes hardened. “A queen who serves under an Emperor still serves, which is something I do not see myself doing.”

“Oh no, please do not misunderstand. The kings and queens of our new empire will sit together at the council table as equals. Each of us will take our turn serving as emperor, while the rest will retain full power and authority over their own realms. We sit in council only to agree on common goals and ways to accomplish them. The emperor serves merely to help implement those goals.”

“Yes, but such goals as nine men might agree on, may be quite offensive to me,” replied Rhiannon.

“But that is the very reason we need you to sit beside us,” said Antiochus. “We hardheaded men will need the voice of reason that only a woman of your wisdom can offer us.”

Antiochus raised his goblet and held it in a shaft of light. “And there is yet another reason that you should join us.” He looked at the goblet, slowly turning it this way and that so that it flashed in the light.

“Think of all the good you could do with your own country to rule.”

Another turn of the goblet, and his voice softened.

“Think of the people of Erie. You could correct every injustice that exists among them.”

Sunlight flashed from the crystal.

“You could protect the weak.”

Turn and flash.

“Punish those who prey upon the helpless.”

His voice was a whisper now. The goblet turned and flashed again.

“Punish them as they deserve to be punished.”

His voice hardened.

“Hold in your hands the power of life and death.”

He stopped speaking then but continued to turn the goblet in the light.

Antiochus caught Ferragus’ eye, and the Gaul took his cue.

“Do you need more time to decide on so weighty a matter, my dear?” asked Ferragus.

Rhiannon, whose eyes had increasingly become bright and far away as Antiochus spoke, flinched as if struck by the last two words of Ferragus

“It is a decision that carries great responsibilities, my dear,” added Anshelm. “The administration of justice is no small thing in a country like Erie.”

Rhiannon’s head snapped towards Anshelm, her eyes flashing fire. “Small! You think me capable of only small deeds?” She turned to Antiochus. “Yes, I will join your council Antiochus and become Queen of Erie, and in me you will find a Queen equal in strength of will and as firm in my justice as any man!”

“Excellent,” said Antiochus. “Let us drink then to Rhiannon, Queen of Erie.”

A scribe brought the decree to be signed by both Antiochus and Rhiannon. Anshelm and Ferragus affixed their seals upon it as witnesses. The details of her coronation ceremony would be worked out later between their servants. Never one for small talk, Rhiannon left them then, the strange singing resuming as soon as she was out of sight.

Ferragus shook his head. “Antiochus, I do not understand your choice of this woman. I do not say that I doubt your judgment, but she does not appear to be the malleable type of person that we need in our new rulers.”

“That is because you do not recognize her ‘nose,’” said Antiochus.

“Her nose?” asked Anshelm. “But that is plainly on her face.”

“When I was a boy, my family’s estate had many cows for milk,” began Antiochus, despite the puzzled looks from his companions. “To produce milk, cows must have calves. To have calves, the cows must meet with a bull.

“Have you ever seen a bull up close gentlemen? They are very large, strong-willed beasts. One day, my father gave me a lesson I have not, in all these years, forgotten. He brought me to the paddock where our stud bull was kept. Our men were about to move the bull to the pasture where our cows were waiting.

“Now a bull is not like a horse; you will not break its spirit with any force short of killing it, so you cannot just tie a rope around its neck and pull it behind you. But our bull did have a weak spot. When it was young, our men put a ring through its nose. They would then lead the young bull around by a rope tied through this ring. The young bull did not wish to feel the pain of the ring pulling in its nose, so it would follow where you led it. By the time the bull was older and strong enough to resist the pain, it was too late: the bull has become too used to being led by this ring and would not resist.

“My father told me that day, ‘If you wish to control someone, first find their nose, and then attach a ring.’” Antiochus smiled his thin diplomat’s smile. “I have found Rhiannon’s ‘nose,’ gentlemen; now it is just a matter of attaching the ring.”

“And so, what is her ‘nose’?” asked Anshelm.

“Men,” replied Antiochus.

“But clearly, she hates men,” said Ferragus.

“The ‘nose’ can be what you love, but more often it is what you hate or fear,” said Antiochus. “With Rhiannon, her feelings for men began just as a mild annoyance. She had three older brothers, you see...”

He closed his eyes a moment, and then he began to whine in the voice of a young and petulant girl-child:

“It’s not fair! They are older and stronger than me. They only want to play boys’ games, and they always win at those. It’s not fair, not fair, not fair!”

Antiochus was an extraordinary mimic. One could hear an echo of Rhiannon’s own voice as he spoke. He switched into a sadder, slightly older voice:

“Then daddy died, and the boys went away to find work. Why did they do that and leave mommy and me alone? Why?”

Antiochus reverted back to his own voice. “And then came the final and greatest blow.”

His voice changed back to that of a young girl, but with each sentence Antiochus spoke, his voice aged perceptibly, going from a young child to the woman they had seen that day. The effect was eerie and the venom in the voice as he ended the tale chilled the hearts of Ferragus and Anshelm.

“Then Mother and I moved in with uncle. Mother had no time for me after that; she was away working in town all day. Then, the summer after we came to his house, uncle did THAT TERRIBLE THING to me. And he kept doing it—for three years he did it, even allowing his friends to have me. Until at last I knew that I would die if I stayed there any longer, and so I ran away.

“Out on the road, alone and afraid, the daughters of She Who Made All found me. And they were kind to me. And they loved me. And I loved them back. In my loneliness I loved them.

“But *men*, men I came to despise; men I came to hate—the men who had left me alone and the men who would not, the men who had disappointed me and the men who had hurt me; all men, everywhere, for they are all the same, and I hate them all!

“But one day *I* will have power. I will have such power that I will fear no man on earth ever again! And more than that, I will have my revenge on them. All those men with their filthy faces, staring at me with their filthy eyes, touching me with their filthy hands—I will make them know the fear that I have known. I shall have my revenge!”

“And so you see how it is with her,” said Antiochus, coming back to his own voice so suddenly that it made Ferragus jump in his chair. “Her hatred is her nose, and her desire for revenge is the ring we shall use to control her.”

“But how can you know these things?” asked Ferragus, amazed.

“The spirits that Rhiannon seeks so earnestly to appease in her worship of sacred groves and standing stones are the same spirits who readily speak to me every day,” said Antiochus. “They have opened for me all the secret places of her heart: things she herself refuses to look upon.”

“And the two remaining open thrones?” asked Anshelm. “Who have you chosen, and what is the ‘nose’ of each?”

“As I have told you, Logres shall not be the seat of my power,” said Antiochus. “I

shall return to Etrusca once my business here is concluded. To take the place of Anak on the throne of Logres I have chosen a man whose beliefs fit in well with my plans for Unicornia. His name is Lrak Xram, and he is a teacher of philosophy and political theory at a large university in this country. He says his calling is as an educator,” said Antiochus. “But tell me, gentlemen, what is the purpose of education?”

“To teach the young facts about the world and how to think with a logical mind,” replied Anshelm.

“When I was young,” said Ferragus, “my father used to say to me, ‘The purpose of learning is to learn *how* to learn.’ He would also say, ‘Once you learn the skill of learning in one thing, then you can learn anything.’ Of all the things he taught me, that is the principle I still use to this day and the one that has brought me the greatest riches.”

“So you would say then that the purpose of education is to teach the truth or at least how to search for the truth,” said Antiochus. He saw the two men nod in agreement. “Well, Xram and the philosophers of his school—their name for this theory is *Relativism*—would call your basic premise flawed. For you see, in his world there is no truth; there are only subjective opinions, and one man’s opinion on a subject is no better than any other.”

“This fool Xram may be able to get away with such thinking in a philosophy class,” said Ferragus, “but when one of my shipwrights says that a ship will hold so many tons of cargo without sinking, it had better be a fact and not mere opinion.”

“Oh, I am not saying that we ourselves should abide by the philosophy of Xram,” said Antiochus.

“Then how can this man be of use to us?” asked Anshelm.

“Because he will help us weaken our enemies,” replied Antiochus. “For his philosophy does not limit itself to things we might agree are subjective like art or literature, but extends to all things. But it is especially in the area of moral teaching that he will be the most helpful to us, for Xram does not believe that moral judgments are really judgments at all. They are merely opinions produced in a people by their traditions and superstitions, and differing from one group to another. To say that a thing is right or wrong is to do little more than to express our emotions about it; and those are the emotions we have been trained by society to have. He sees the heart of man not as something with needs and desires common to all men, but as an infinitely malleable organ that the state can mold to its will.

“Xram hates the western classical view of government and economics, though he has done very well for himself in the west. He teaches a political theory with the cumbersome name of ‘Vertical Collectivism’, which is his name for the system used by the Magog, the Han and other countries of the east, wherein the king should be not just the ruler of the people, but the owner of all the farms and businesses as well. This in exchange for what he calls a ‘parental care’ of the state for the subjects, so that all of the needs of the people are met by the state. ‘*From* each according to his abilities, *to* each according to his needs,’ as he says. Xram wishes to return the west to the days when there was no middle class who owned their own land and businesses, but only serfs working the king’s land ruled over by an elite few—a *Nomenklatura* as he calls it, a new royalty of those favored by the state because of their leadership and wisdom. Men—I am sure there is no doubt in his mind—exactly like himself.”

“As for Svartalfheim,” continued Antiochus, “I have a dwarf in mind. His name is

Unwert Beleidigung, and he is a physician who is in love with death. He takes only those patients who are terminally ill and suffering great pain. He then gives them potions to commit suicide. These are the patients he is starting with now, those whose 'quality of life,' as he puts it, does not justify living, but his plan is not to end there. He would remove from society... what is the term he uses? Ah yes, all 'nonproductive eaters': the mentally deficient, the deformed, the paralytic and those elderly who did not plan ahead and now live off the public dole: anyone who would take from society more than they give, he would kill."

"I still do not see how this aids us," said Anshelm.

"I will explain momentarily," said Antiochus, "but first let me tell you of the man's 'nose,' for it tells much about the man."

"As you wish," said Anshelm.

The sunbeams from the windows had moved from one end of the flagstone floor to the other and now were climbing the walls, heralding the setting of the sun. Anshelm was not a patient man by nature, but he had learned long ago to let a man like Antiochus run with his lead. All the better to learn his true intentions.

"Beleidigung was sent off at a young age to boarding school far from home," continued Antiochus. "A traumatic enough experience for a child, but in those days it was thought to instill a sense of independence in boys. Well at this school the lash was used to instill discipline. Not unusual and many a young man has gone through such a school gaining from its rigors. But this place had an old graybeard of a headmaster who believed in punishing the boys not just for rebellion or sloth, but also for failing to give the correct answer to a question. And not just a question they should have known, but even for questions that they had no hope of knowing. 'Give me the Etruscan for *candlestick*,' he would shout. And if a boy did not know it he would have them stand before the class while he struck the child with a switch. If the boy protested that they had not been taught that yet, he would be set before the entire school, stripped naked, tied to a tree and lashed until bloody. All this had nothing to do with discipline of course; the headmaster was simply the kind of man who desired the sight, the smell, I suspect even the taste of blood. He was, to be precise, a man who lusted after the pain of others. Now Beleidigung, of all the boys at the school, did not hold up well under such treatment, and he suffered greatly under the constant strain of not knowing whether he was going to incur the headmaster's wrath that day or not. Year after year this went on, until one day he found the secret to his survival. If he could not avoid receiving pain, he could hold it within him, like gold in a bank, to be repaid, if not to the headmaster himself, then to other smaller, weaker creatures that Beleidigung himself could bind and torture and kill.

"He began with insects, but soon found this quite boring as they did not scream as he wished to hear the headmaster scream. So he moved on to rabbits and other small animals he could trap near the school. Once he graduated, he moved up to stray dogs and cats he lured into his home. But even this proved less than fully satisfying, so he turned to the lowest women of the streets, women of the night who would not be missed by family and whose friends were few and would fear going to the authorities.

"He would offer them money, bring them home and then have his bloody way with them. Still, there are only so many women in a town who fit his needs and only so many times a year he might get away with such activities without getting caught, so

Beleidigung must set limits on his fun. My men discovered all this after I sent them to learn more about this doctor whose specialty I found so useful.

“That then is the ‘nose’ of Beleidigung: his appetite for cruelty; and our ring though his nose is our ability to satisfy that appetite freely.”

In their youth, both Anshelm and Ferragus would have been offended by such talk, but now many years of doing whatever needed to be done to fulfill their plans had burned their consciences down to the point where nothing was left but old scar tissue and their greed, and so they said nothing.

“I will put Beleidigung in charge of a plan that would give free medical care to all of Unicornia,” continued Antiochus. “Of course, once the state begins to pay for something, the price of that thing inevitably goes up as producers learn they can charge more because those paying are paying with other people’s money. So what then is the problem this will solve? We in the west are the victims of our own success. Clean water and better sanitation have caused a shift in our populations. The commoners are now living far too long beyond their working years, and thus we have far too many old people among the lower classes. Their state pensions are costing us far more than was anticipated when the pensions were first put in place. Beleidigung will help thin the herd to manageable levels by forming ‘health committees’ in each country, made up not of physicians but of clerks and bookkeepers, that will determine who shall receive medical treatment and when. If a treatment is deemed to not be cost effective for that person, which means the person will not live long enough to pay back to society the cost of that treatment, then they shall simply not receive that treatment.

“I can see one of Beleidigung’s clerk’s now: ‘I’m sorry sir, but this treatment will only improve your chance of survival by fifty percent. I’m sure you will agree that it is not cost effective for the government to pay for anything below a sixty percent chance of success. Now move along.’

“Of course our own loved ones will not suffer these indignities as they will not receive treatment at a government hospital in the first place and will go to private physicians for treatment. No, it is not our own but the ‘nonproductive eaters’ in the poor and middle classes that this plan will cull. Beleidigung says that old people must come to accept the fact that they must make room for society’s more productive members once they have outlived their working years: that they should die willingly as a sacrifice for the good of society.”

“But how can we sell such a foolish plan to our people?” asked Anshelm. “The Goths have some of the finest physicians in the world. My people are happy with their healthcare and will not easily be persuaded that they need such a program.”

“Ah, but there is where Xram and that silver tongue of his comes in,” said Antiochus. “He will remind the people of Unicornia that not everyone in the empire can afford a doctor. ‘If even one person in our land suffers, then we all suffer,’ he will say. He will give heart-wrenching examples of some poor person who has died because they could not afford the best of care. He will put in people’s hearts a desire for the perfect society and a belief that simply by having the right program, they can attain that perfection. Of course in moving from ninety percent to ninety-five percent success in most things they will find that the cost of that five percent improvement will equal all the first ninety percent of progress. What they don’t know is that no society has ever gotten to one hundred percent success in anything and that they will bankrupt

themselves in the process if they try. ”

A thought came to Antiochus, and he smiled his cold, diplomat’s smile.

“Of the three new rulers, Xram is by far the most dangerous, for he truly believes he is working to improve mankind. He will seek to apply his philosophy over every citizen and do so with all the zeal of the most fervent religious zealot.

“Rhiannon will one day tire of her revenge, Beleidung will cull only the weak from our herd, but Xram will not be satisfied until all mankind fits his view of perfection. A despot who is greedy for wealth still realizes that there is a limit to what he takes from his people, less they produce no more. Xram however will not stop until he makes his people perfect, even if it kills them.

“He believes he is right and that he has fate on his side. Facts cannot shake him from his faith. If you were to say to him that history shows that his political theory has failed everywhere it has been tried, he will just respond that it has never been tried in its pure form.

“He will say that what he does, he does for 'the good of the people,' but when you point out to him how many people have suffered under his theories, he will simply reply that it is acceptable for a minority to suffer for the good of the majority.”

“An odd collection to rule over countries we wish to profit from,” said Anshelm.

“At least they should make for interesting council meetings,” said Ferragus.

“Do I discern a hint of concern in your comments, gentlemen?” asked Antiochus.

“Of course we do not question your judgment, Antiochus,” replied Anshelm, “but still, we do not allow such people to hold positions of power in our own businesses. Such people are unpredictable and often make decisions based not on logic, but on hidden things that rest on unstable foundations.”

“As for Xram and his theories,” said Ferragus, “that way has bankrupted the Magog and all others who tried to follow them. Why bring such practices here? Having the king rule all is fine, but I do not wish to meddle in how a man runs his tavern or shop. Each province and each town are different, and it is simply more efficient and brings the royal treasury more gold if each man, knowledgeable in the ways of his local area, runs his own affairs. Just send me a percentage of their profits in taxes, and all is well.”

“Antiochus, such people as these three rulers you propose bring disorder to any enterprise they are involved in,” added Anshelm.

“But that is precisely why I chose them for their thrones,” replied Antiochus.

Seeing the puzzled looks on the faces of the two kings, Antiochus continued.

“Divide and conquer, gentlemen, divide and conquer. We shall make the dwarf physician who loves death our Minister of Health. We shall make the woman whose only thought is of revenge our Minister of Justice. And we shall make the man whose philosophy has bankrupted every country where it has been tried our Minister of Finance.

“Rhiannon will turn men and women against each other. Beleidung will turn the young against the old. Xram will create for us an economic crisis that will panic the people.

“Then, when all is in chaos, I shall remove these three foolish ministers and rescue the people from the brink of destruction. Such is the nature of mankind that the common people will not blame me for the crisis I helped create, but blame these ministers instead. I shall of course be ‘shocked, shocked!’ at the poor judgment of these

three, remove them before they have done any permanent damage and replace all their laws with my own. When prosperity returns, I shall then go from the emperor of the people to their god.

“That is the ultimate goal, gentlemen,” said Antiochus in response to the curious looks from his two companions. “First, we must move the people from viewing their government as their servant to viewing it as their parent. In most of our counties the majority of the poor are where we want them in this regard, but there are still a large percentage of the middle class who are quite stubborn, clinging to their outdated values of independence and liberty. We must change this, for once all the lower classes see the government as their parent it is only a small matter to shift their belief so that they look upon the Emperor as their god. And that, gentlemen, is where true power lies.”

“But why?” asked Ferragus. “Why go through all this trouble in the first place? Can we not simply rule our new empire with the same laws we ruled our individual countries for these many years? They have worked well up to now, and collectively we would be even stronger against the Magog than we have been as separate countries.”

Antiochus shook his head. “The Magog are far too enmeshed in their own troubles to invade an enemy as strong as we are now. No, the thing that an empire such as ours fears most is not invasion, but revolt. Let us examine then who it is that leads such revolts.

“Is it the rich? No. They have far too much to lose to stick their necks out in such matters.

“The poor? No again. They may fight and die in revolutions, but they do not start or lead them. Give the poor their free food and free entertainment, and they will care little for such abstract ideas as freedom or liberty.

“No, gentlemen, it is the middle class and especially the young men of that class, which we must fear. This class, above the others, tends to believe in absolutes, to see things as black or white, right or wrong.

“A belief in such absolutes inclines a people to hold the judgments of their government to a fixed standard, something no emperor can long endure if he wishes to have true power.

“Empires of the past have made the mistake of trying to kill off their middle class in order to prevent revolts, but that destroys the very foundation of your economy and often causes the revolt you tried to prevent in the first place.

“Our populace is our livestock, gentlemen. But unlike Xram I do not intend that we kill our best stallions; instead we shall turn them into geldings, obedient but still able to pull a plow.”

Antiochus smiled a mirthless smile. “And since we wish them to provide us with future generations of workers, we shall not literally geld them. No, we shall not take their stones from them, but their spirits. We shall make the men of the middle class question the value of their morals, their honor, their courage, their history, all the things that makes them men. We cannot change their ways in a single day, but we can ensure what the middle class holds as honorable is ridiculed by our press and in our universities, see that our theaters belittle their morals and everywhere else define their brand of courage out of existence.

“What is History? Is it not simply lies told by those who won the war?”

“What is Honor? Can you see it, taste it, touch it? Does it put food on the table?”

“What is Courage? That is just the foolishness of little boys talking.’

“Morality? What you hold to be evil, I hold to be good. Why should your morality be held above mine?”

“These questions must be asked by those malleable minds in the press and in the universities whom we support, and then—and it will not take too long—we will have the populace asking it of themselves. We must by then get the populace so addicted to the emperor’s gold and guidance that they can do nothing for themselves and will thus follow the emperor as if he were their god.”

“And how will setting the mentally unstable upon a throne help us with this?” asked Anshelm.

“In this way,” began Antiochus. “Every ship that sails the sea has a compass. This compass is set into a thick post standing before the ship’s wheel. If you were to take a hammer and smash the compass, all the crew would see that the instrument was damaged and, knowing they were in danger, take alternative measures to find their direction.

“No, the best way to destroy a compass is to destroy its accuracy without leaving a mark, thereby keeping the crew’s trust in the instrument. Instead of a hammer, one should set a strong magnet nearby and close enough to north that no one will notice the change of heading. Then, day by day, you can change the position of the magnet just a few degrees at a time until you have reversed the course of the ship and no one is the wiser.”

“Ah, but I see a problem with your analogy,” said Ferragus. “The problem is the sun, which always rises in the East and sets in the West. Your sailors will know something is wrong when the sun seems to change position.”

“Yes, in the physical world we would have to rely on clouds that we can not control to make our deception work,” said Antiochus. “However, while we cannot control the physical world, we can send clouds and spread magnets in the moral world wherever we wish. Do we not own the largest press houses, the highest and the lowest theaters, the richest universities? Since we control what the public hears we can send clouds of words to blind our enemies to our plans.

“Therefore we must confuse the morals of the middle class before we can mold their minds to our liking. That is the first part of my plan.”

“There is more?” asked Anshelm.

“Yes, we must prevent the middle class from accumulating wealth and then passing that wealth on to their children. We must raise every tax we can invent upon that dangerous class. We must tax them when they earn, we must tax them when they spend, when they invest and when they reap the rewards of that investment, and most of all, we must tax them when they die, so that they cannot pass on their wealth to their children, who would one day join the ranks of the rich and powerful while still retaining their dangerous middle class morals and political beliefs.”

“And how will you do this while still protecting our own wealth and positions?” asked Ferragus, with a slight edge in his voice.

“Do not fear, gentlemen; your own wealth will be well protected before I begin.

“I will sell these taxes to the masses as a way to ‘soak the rich.’ Many in the middle class, blinded by their jealousy of the rich, will go along with the new tax, never realizing that they themselves are the true targets. As for our own class, well, there are ways to

write the tax laws so that our own treasuries are never touched.”

Antiochus looked carefully at Anshelm and Ferragus and asked, “Are the many private charities that do good works taxed?”

“No,” said Ferragus, “they are not taxed so that their money may go fully to their work.”

“There is your protection then,” said Antiochus. “Each of you shall start a charity and put all your family’s wealth under its name. Since you own nothing, you shall be taxed nothing. You will pay less in taxes under my new law, which I will sell to the masses as a way to make the rich pay their ‘fair share,’ than before these taxes were raised. Spend even a tenth of what you would have been paying in taxes on these charities and you will be hailed by your victims as ‘men of compassion’ while we fleece them.”

There was a bowl of fruit on the table between them. Antiochus looked the bowl over and selected a cluster of grapes. He drew a small knife from his belt and cut a single grape in half, then flicked out the seeds with the tip of his knife. He did not then eat the grape halves, but set them aside on a small plate on the table before him. After he had lined up ten such grapes, he withdrew from a pouch on his belt the smallest spoon Ferragus, who was no stranger to the gourmand’s dining table himself, had ever seen. Antiochus took the tiny spoon and scooped out the inside of the grape a small bit at a time and fed these bits into his mouth. Through the whole operation Anshelm and Ferragus remained silent, wondering what the significance of this was.

“But all this is just laying a foundation for our Empire,” continued Antiochus with an abruptness that again made Ferragus jump, but which Anshelm now suspected was a deliberate technique of the former Etruscan diplomat designed to keep those he negotiated with off guard.

“For true power to come to us,” said Antiochus, “we need a great army, one that the other nations of the earth will fear. I intend to raise such an army made up of men who know no other parent but the Empire, who have no god to judge us by, whose loyalty is to the Emperor and the Emperor alone. To do this we must first breed children without any familial ties.

“Our first step is to take away the social penalty for having a child out of wedlock. As things stand now, if a young man gets some farm girl he has been dallying with pregnant, societal pressures and his own misguided guilt force the lad to marry the girl, lest the child they’ve made grow up fatherless, which usually also means growing up in poverty.

“But what if we could change that? What if, instead of his choice being marry the girl or abandon the child to poverty, his choice included allowing the state to pay for the raising of the child? Without the animal guilt associated with abandoning one’s own offspring, young men will feel free to sow their seed in as many fields as they can. These children will be raised at first by their mothers; then, just as a generation of young women comes to realize how difficult it is to raise a child alone, the state will step in, offering to take these children off of their hands and house the children in boarding schools were they can be raised and educated in ways that benefit the Empire. The poor, since they generally have the least self-control, will supply most of these children, but, men being men, the middle class soon will follow.”

“But what of the female children?” asked Ferragus. “You do not intend to put

women in your army?”

“No, we shall keep the females for what only they can do,” replied Antiochus. “While there is nothing that a woman can do in combat that a man cannot do better, there is of course one thing only the female of our species can do. No, gentlemen, we shall not put our women into combat, but, as on any farm, the females that we create will be our future breeders. Our soldiers will need entertainment when not in training, yes? We will provide them with such in ‘pleasure houses’ that we shall own, operate and reap the profits from.”

“But I can foresee two problems,” said Anshelm, “inbreeding and disease. You know how soldiers are. They will enter your state brothels and behave like rabbits in heat. How will we know if a soldier is not bedding his own sister or cousin or even daughter in the chaos of the many children your plan is sure to produce? And what of the diseases that always accompany the use of such establishments?”

“This is where Beleidung and his philosophy come to our aid,” said Antiochus. “Beleidung is now confined to aiding those who wish to die. While it is illegal for a physician to aid in a suicide in Svartalfheim, the ever-efficient dwarvish government there has turned a blind eye to the practice in the past. With Beleidung as king of Svartalfheim, he will be free to remove from that country all those whose lives are not worth living, whether they wish to live or not.

“After a time, we can spread this philosophy throughout our empire. When a child is born in our state brothels and found to be defective in a way that prevents its useful public service, even in a coal mine for the males or in the brothel for the females, it can be disposed of without a murmur from a society who will, by that point, be accustomed to the efficient use of human resources.

“And we can prevent many of these problems before they occur by changing our soldier’s assignments every five years or so. That will accomplish two useful things. Firstly, they will not risk bedding their sisters if they are kept out of their country of birth, and secondly, they will have less affection for the local people this way and will be more ruthless in the quelling of any rebellions that crop up.

“As for disease, we shall have the brothel workers regularly tested and when such a disease is found, we can ship them off to one of several ‘Islands of Quarantine’ that I shall assign and let the natural course of the disease do the task of execution and disposal in the most efficient and least expensive way possible. Meanwhile, our army will be growing in numbers, loyalty and strength. It will take a generation or more to accomplish our goals, but it can be done.”

Anshelm and Ferragus looked at each other a moment, unsure of what to say. That Antiochus’ plan involved the use of children like cattle did not afflict their hearts with guilt, for their own children would not be touched by his plan. But there was something that was just as dear to them that would be.

“Antiochus, I do not understand,” said Anshelm. “How are we to profit from a plan that takes so many years to fulfill?”

“You two may not be here a generation from now, but I will be,” he said simply. Antiochus saw that the two men were waiting for an explanation. “The beings who guide me have told me that preparations are now being made that will enable me to live for a thousand years. Within three or four years, I will be a new man; and more than that, a new type of man.”

“And how does this benefit us?” asked Anshelm.

“This is a new age, gentlemen,” replied Antiochus. “You must be willing to sacrifice your own desires to serve the greater good.”

Anshelm looked about to speak, but a restraining hand upon his arm from Ferragus stopped him.

“My lord Antiochus,” said the Gaul, “you have our faith and our trust. We know that serving you will be to our mutual benefit, if not to us directly, then to our children. We will do as you say.”

“That is good news, gentlemen,” said Antiochus, “for as you have seen, the beings who guide me have great power, and knowledge of things unseen beyond even that which I have disclosed to you.” He stood. “You would do well to obey me.”

The two kings bowed.

“Our new king of Svartalfheim wishes to meet with me alone before he comes to this chamber. No doubt he desires to hear in private of all the benefits that serving under me entails. When we are finished, I shall return with him for the signing of the documents. Please wait here until then.”

With that Antiochus left.

They sat in silence for a time. Then Ferragus, mindful that Antiochus might have a servant listening from a hidden space, moved his chair closer to Anshelm and asked in a voice only the Goth could hear, “Well, what are you thinking?”

“About what he said?” asked Anshelm, also keeping his voice just above a whisper.

“Of course,” said Ferragus.

Anshelm thought carefully before replying. “If I had not seen with my own eyes what he did to Anak, I would have some trouble believing that he can do what he says he can do, especially that part about his living for a thousand years, but now? Now I do not know.”

“And what do you think about us ‘sacrificing’ our fortunes for his great new age?”

“That I am not concerned with.”

“No?”

“No, he needs us too much,” said Anshelm. “He is a diplomat, not a merchant. He has no experience in making money and does not understand its ways. Today he speaks of sacrifice, but in the end I doubt he would ask us to do what he knows we would never do.”

“And if he does,” asked Ferragus, “what then?”

“We will deal with that day when it comes,” said Anshelm. “Our houses have not stood for a thousand years because they were led by foolish or weak men. But let us speak no more of this. He should be returning soon.”

At each corner of the chamber an eye blinked from a small hole in the wall. Four of Antiochus’ scribes, chosen for this task because each was deaf and skilled at reading lips, returned their quills to their inkwells in their hidden passage and waited for their master’s return.