

The spiral tower

From the bridge above the stream, Asdra looked on dreamily while the ducks splashed below, hurrying frantically each time one of them noticed another bit of bread she had thrown in. She tried to fling them near the smallest and ruggiest, but on top of that that the unfortunate creature was obviously shortsighted, or retarded, and kept looking gormlessly the other way while the others scampered to guzzle the morsels. She often wondered what it was like to be a duck. It looked like the world and worries of the silly flappy things ended at the banks of their stream, never thinking of anything without – and yet they would sometimes fly off to places where she had not been, never getting lost. Instinct, Mandalski claimed, they don't really think. Perhaps that's what Mandalski and the rest of them said of her when trying to explain how she managed to arrive at those invariably right decisions while the intellects of all the emperor's viziers and wise men stumbled about in the darkness.

'Astra, here you are! I should have imagined I'd find you here'.

The old man emerged from the meticulous fringe of firtrees that bordered the wood, shaking his stick like some grotesque, reproachful finger. No one had ever witnessed him use it for purposes of leaning.

'His Majesty wishes to see you at once'.

'Hi there. Are you quite all right, Mandalski? You look a bit nervous'.

'Nervous? Heavens no, little one. Though if I'm to be candid, I should mention that the emperor did give the impression of being slightly... anxious. Come, let us make haste'.

Asdra hurled the rest of the bread into the water and followed her tutor. When they had brought her to the palace to live, he had been put in charge of her.

She hadn't then realised, but now, at thirteen, Asdra was conscious that babysitter probably wasn't the most longed-for post of this wrinkled and pointy bearded old man, with his curved nose and penetrating sunken eyes which, in the manner of wise men, seemed to betray a constant commicity inappreciable to everyone else. He had, however, always striven to carry out his duties as best he could, although these were now reduced to sporadic classes of history and philosophy. And for her part, out of kindness or simply some sort of inertia, she continued to ask him questions, no matter how laughably simplistic the answers.

'What made you think the emperor was anxious?'

'Frown, abnormally brisk manners, tone of contained fury...' Mandalski waved his stick this way and that as if to illustrate a wide field of clues to imperial discontent. 'Perhaps he just got up in a bad mood, but I believe I sensed mishap'.

The sound of their feet on the gravel of the path brought to Asdra's mind the scenes they had shown her that morning of those enormous monsters crunching and chewing every sort machinery they came across in she no longer remembered what inhospitable planet. She was sick of the war.

'The captain of the guard wished to speak with me, I assume he must want my advice', mentioned her tutor as if something routine that he hadn't even realised any pride could be taken in, as soon as they had left the ring of trees that surrounded the tower, 'I must leave you. Don't worry even if His Majesty is angry. You know he loves you more than anyone'.

With this he inclined his head slightly to the left, his characteristic version of a little farewell bow, turned suddenly on his heel with the obvious intention of making his long blue cape fly, and strode off. Asdra began to climb the spiral staircase that coiled round the great pink cone. When she reached the imperial abode's entrance, she stopped for a moment – fully aware that he would be watching her through the slits between curtains – to contemplate the sunset.

The sky was clearer than usual, and down past the hill that fled away at her feet, beyond the vast plain freckled sparsely with white-roofed little round hoes, over the skirt of ocean, today her sight reached five... maybe six of the small islands. She often missed those days when they would navigate the archipelago with all their attention on the interminable games of xiastra.

She turned and entered the room. Emperor Valtriesa, sitting on his throne at the back of the room, deposited the remains of an apple on a tray held for the purpose by a tall pale servant, and solemnly got down to meet the child. In terms of stature, he didn't out-measure Asdra, who was not tall for her age, in more than a finger or two, but while her head was covered only with short hair surrounded by a read cord, his boasted during every moment of vigil a huge, purple, cylindrical hat. Whichever the original intention of this garment, it had the happy consequence of conferring to the emperor a noble and elegant gait, as he strove to maintain verticality.

Asdra bowed. Valtriesa lifted a stern eyebrow, whispering, 'good morning, pupil', and with an outstretched open palm motioned her into the adjoining chamber. There they waited a few moments for the invisible sphere occupying most of the room to fill with gas and then, the whole floor lighting up, inside the ball could be seen, once again, reduced in scale if not in splendour, that remote portion of universe that so occupied them lately.

'Perhaps they weren't in so great a need of fuel after all', commented the emperor. 'Perhaps they foresaw our manoeuvres. Perhaps you weren't concentrating hard enough when you assured me I needn't worry about Stipula, that they would head for the nebula first. The crude fact remains that

Stipula is now no more than a fading memory in our nostalgic mind... and who knows what this weakening might lead to'.

He looked at Asdra inquisitively, inviting her, it seemed, to answer some question she didn't recall having been asked. She bit her lower lip and avoided the megalomaniac's eyes by focusing on the image. Valtriesa sighed.

'When I brought you here to the palace, an orphan with no future, I did so because you were the only person, even then, so little, capable of beating me at xiastra, since the game is pointless without the possibility of loss, and life is pointless without xiastra. Nevertheless, if in the game you make a mistake once in a while and loose, you can forget about it and start anew. War is different.'

The emperor slid behind his young strategist and rested his hands rest on her shoulders.

'Ever since I trusted you with this new role, and I repeat I have put my whole confidence in you, you have carried out your duties beyond all recompense, astonishing everyone and sewing in me what I can only describe as paternal pride. All I ask of you is to continue demonstrating your innate mastery until victory is ours. You know these are delicate moments, that the situation could swing either way. Will you do this for me?'

Asdra nodded without looking round at him.

'I am infinitely grateful. Now I'll leave you so you can devote, this time, your entire concentration to your task. I'll be with the Council'.

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It was nighttime by the time Asdra entered the great hall seven floors below. The seventeen wise-men who formed the Council all turned parsimoniously round towards her at the sight of the emperor, seated in front and slightly elevated, like a teacher before his class, who lifted his gaze and smiled humourlessly at someone in the entrance. Every one of them had instantly guessed who it was. Each member sat on a cushion and had between his hands a small sphere, identical with the one Asdra had just been studying.

'Have you arrived, dear pupil, at a decision?'

'So I have, Your Majesty'. Instead of skirting them, she walked straight between the wise-men up to Valtriesa and gave him a piece of paper. After staring at it for a few seconds, he breathed in, tightened his lips slightly and, without looking at the owner of the most able mind in his empire, glided the tips of his fingers over his sphere. There immediately arose from the members of the Council murmurs of surprise, unease and indignation. One of them, an obese middle-aged man in a white robe with a small goatish beard, started to

get up but, on second thoughts, restrained himself half way and remained kneeling.

'But Your Majesty', he whined in a nasal voice, 'that goes completely against all our conclusions'.

'True', answered Valtriesa in the tone of someone who wishes to be reasonable and just despite his impulses, 'and that is why I invite my indisputably bright, but on this occasion as yet of obscure motives, pupil to explain why we should divert a great portion of our defences from the enemy's trajectory to install it in places where its purpose remains elusive'.

'I'm sure that will not be their trajectory. And those places Your Majesty speaks of will become key points. I can't explain why, but I would wager my life that I'm right, intuition tells me so, and also that this decision is of vital importance'.

'Yes, and I suppose you would have wagered your life also about Stipula, isn't that so?,' intervened a member from the back dressed in an colourful string costume.

Asdra looked at the floor and said nothing.

'In any event', the emperor reminded them, 'there is no more time to loose. I will pay heed, as in so many fortunate past occasions, to my little Asdra'.

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The next morning, Asdra woke up to the sound of a little bell. It was the method Mandalski had been using for something more than a year, when it must have occurred to the tutor that it was inappropriate to see the young lady in her bed robes. Nevertheless, it was in these robes, in fact more like a yellow poncho, that she emerged this morning from the curtains, rubbing her eyes and smiling. But he didn't smile.

'Good morning, O reverend tutor'.

'I just hope it's not too bad a one. The emperor wishes you to present yourself immediately in the Great Hall'.

'All right, no problem'.

'If only that were so.'

Walking down the stairs round the outside of the tower, Asdra wondered once again how a place of such opulence could lack certain commodities that she remembered were of daily use even in the impoverished land of her infancy. At last they entered the Great Hall. This time only two or three of the heads turned, and these only to cast scathing disdain at her out the corners of their eyes. This time the emperor didn't smile.

'Come here, child'. His look was penetrating but the order hardly audible.

'Pray, peer into my globe'.

Asdra approached, cautiously did as she was bid, and went slightly pale.

'Tell me', whispered Valtriesa, 'do you maintain your wager now?'

'Your Majesty, I recommend she be tried for high treason.' The proposal came from the obese man with the pointy beard.

'Your Majesty', intervened Mandalski, who till then had remained at the entrance, 'you cannot take reprisals against the girl, however misguided her decisions may have been...'

'Mandalski, I'm not interested in your opinion, leave the Hall'.

'Your Majesty, she has reached puberty, you cannot expect the same results...'

'Mandalski, out of the Hall!'

Asdra scanned the wise-men's faces. They were obviously worried, but on some of them there was a plainly written feeling of triumph at seeing her dishonoured in this way and deprived of the protagonism she had stolen.

'I am a just man. If after close analysis of the situation I find there was no malign intent behind your errors, you have no reason to worry. But now I have more important affairs to attend to than yours. Take her to the Tip and let her remain there until new order'.

Again on the stairs. It seemed longer had passed, but the sun was hovering almost as low above the horizon as when she had seen it upon getting up.

When they arrived at the highest room, one of the guards who had accompanied her in silence opened the only door in the tower.

'If you need anything, just call', he said, trying to sound comforting. 'We'll bring you your food at the usual time'.

Asdra swallowed and nodded rapidly a couple of times, only fixing her watery eyes on the guard's for an instant, but one which would remain recorded on his retina and in his heart.

'Thank you'.

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At nightfall she was still in the tip of the tower, contemplating the sky. The room's walls formed a transparent cone, allowing her the best view of the sky she had ever enjoyed at night (she had never been in space). Dorostein was at an advanced stage of crescence and Thus was almost full. No doubt it would be on Asnitla, hidden below the horizon, were the most fierce battles were being fought; but on Dorostein and Thus splendid sprouts of colour could also be appreciated. For the first time the war sprung from being an abstract

nuisance to a real and immediate plane. Now she realised, in terms of lives and worlds, not just statistics, just how much power she had been playing with from back here in her gilded cage. There was a fleeting image of four or five hyperbolae of white light from the islands to the base of the tower. Not long afterwards she started to hear shouts and raucous fuss from lower down. Then the door opened, and a tall young man in an awkward black suit appeared, with what must have been some sort of weapon in one hand.

'Greetings, you are Asdra, if I have not been villainously misled.'

'And you, I presume, captain Trauten? Delighted to meet you in person.'

'As am I. It fills me with joy to inform you that the tyrant has fallen. Your help in achieving this has been of incalculable value. We can leave whenever you wish.'

Asdra looked once more out of the wall, this time at the river. She wondered whether the ducks had flown away before the attack. She was sure they had, and that they would return to their stream, even if by then she was further than they would ever migrate.

'All right, let's go'.