**Chapter 26**

**July 27, 1929, Ila Rouge, Seychelles, The Commonwealth**

John Purdue considered himself a healer first and a man of God second. And since the Good Book highly recommended charity towards one's fellow man, after obtaining his medical degree he had sought service in charitable organizations, bringing the benefit of professional medical care to those who would otherwise be left bereft. For thirty years he had traveled the world offering his medical services wherever he felt it would be the most needed. He had treated cholera among the poor of Londinium in the 1890s, the smallpox victims of the Punjab in the 1900s, and the malaria victims in Africa in the 1910s. Through the years of the European War, he'd helped run an emergency clinic for war refugees, and later joined the fight against the flu epidemic that sprung up in the Low Countries in '25. In that time he'd considered marriage but never pursued it, instead dedicating his life to his patients.

It was in late 1926 that he took what he felt would be his final assignment - chief (and only) physician to the lepers of Ila Rouge. The island had been a leper colony for going on a hundred years when Dr. Purdue, just past the age of sixty, took his post.

The small island was a natural paradise, warm weather all year round, beautiful forests, pristine waters, and gorgeous red sandy beaches that gave the island its name. It was, however, not very conducive to human life, lacking any source of fresh water outside the regular tropical rains. The people who made the isle their home suffered from a variety of disfiguring ailments, from the benign (if unsightly) to the crippling. Dr. Purdue himself was the only permanent staff. He was aided in his work by volunteers from the nearby populated islands, and when necessary the healthier patients would take up the slack. A regular ferry would supply the island with medicine, rations and fresh water.

Purdue would admit that his responsibilities rarely exceeded those of a general practitioner. The diseases most of his patients suffered from were effectively incurable, and his work mostly came down to treating everyday injuries and ailments. However, Purdue felt he served a far greater purpose in his unofficial role as the island's confessor and chaplain. While the island did have a priest coming by every Sunday for services, it was Purdue who was there for the patients 24/7. Most of them had lived normal lives before fate had sent them to exile on this red island. Despair, depression, and violent outbursts were painfully common, particularly among newcomers. It was he who gave them a shoulder to cry on, and helped them come to terms with their new life.

Right now though, Purdue was feeling rather optimistic about the future. While he would never wish the fate of a leper on anyone, the fact remained that a significant portion of the colony's budget was covered by contributions from the patients' families. And with their latest patient, they seemed to have hit the jackpot.

The first inkling of the changes had been when a new boat had showed up at the pier, loaded down with workers. These workers had immediately fenced off a portion of the island and gotten to setting up a proper bungalow that was as far from the main settlement as one could get. On questioning what was happening, Purdue had learned that apparently the daughter of some rich industrialist had come down with a case of leprosy, and the girl's distraught father was paying to ensure his daughter's exile would be a comfortable one.

The house, when finished, was almost on par with the Seychelles Governor's mansion on Mahe. More importantly for the colony, this gentleman was also donating the resources to modernize the entire island. There would be a desalination plant for drinking water, telegraph and radio connections, a coal-fired generator to power the aforementioned facilities and electrify the island as a whole, as well as an expanded pier to serve as a dock for a seaplane. All this was accompanied by a generous cash donation to the leprosarium itself.

Now, John Purdue was waiting by the newly expanded pier, watching a recent-model seaplane taxi to a halt. Once the seaplane had moored, the passengers stepped out.

The first woman out was a stern looking European beauty in her mid-twenties, black of hair and eye and about five and a half feet tall. She was dressed in sensible looking clothes of ordinary quality, and Purdue suspected her to be some kind of domestic. Sure enough, after looking around for a moment, she reached into the vessel and gently helped out what had to be the patient. She was a tiny thing, a little over five feet and slim of figure. Her clothes held to a cream and grey theme and were of excellent quality, but every inch of her skin was covered by long sleeves, gloves, hat, and scarf. Red curls peeked out from under the hat, and her eyes were a pale blue. From the free way she moved, Purdue immediately understood that she was one of the lucky souls whose condition was almost entirely cosmetic in nature. She was followed by a third woman, this time a pretty girl of around sixteen, some inches taller with red hair and brown eyes, dimpled cheeks and freckles. This girl had a devil-may-care glint in her eye that went all too well with the fiery shade of her hair.

After stepping out, it was the covered lady who took the lead to approach him. "Dr. Purdue, I presume? A pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Teresa May Thompson. I will be joining your little community for the foreseeable future."

She did not offer a hand, but her voice was warm, friendly, and remarkably unaccented, with just a hint of uncertainty. In fact, if it hadn't been for the full-body covering, Purdue would have immediately accepted her as a demure and well brought up young woman trying to make the best of her difficult situation. However, thanks to the concealing clothes, Purdue had instinctively focused on her eyes. The icy blue eyes peering out from under the hat had rendered him momentarily frozen. They seemed to pierce right through him, before moving on to scan the surroundings. There was something utterly unfeeling in that gaze that put Purdue uncomfortably in mind of the occasional sharks that came close to the island.

After a quick look around, that cold gaze focused back on him, even as the voice continued to be full of warmth of good feeling. "The lady to my left is Gretel Richter, my personal assistant and also my friend, who has done me the honor of staying by my side during this trying time." The black haired woman smiled and extended her hand for a firm handshake. Purdue found himself liking this woman greatly, especially since hereyes had the warmth so missing from her companion. Thompson continued her introductions, now pointing to the teenager, "And this hellion is my cousin June Thompson. She's decided to spend the rest of her summer vacation getting me settled in here. I apologize in advance for any trouble she may cause."

June strode forward to shake his hand enthusiastically. "Aw, don't listen to her, doc. Teresa's just a bit down that she has to be stuck here... no offense. But she used to be quite the hellraiser herself, back in the day." she said with a faint but unmistakable Irish lilt.

"June." came the repressive reply from Sally. Yet, Purdue noticed that those ice cold eyes briefly grew a trifle warmer. *Maybe she just doesn't deal well with strangers?* wondered the doctor.

Turning back to him, Sally said, "While it is good of you to meet us, doctor, I hope you will not take it the wrong way if I say I don't expect to see you very often. While hideous, my condition is only skin deep, and I am otherwise in excellent health. My primary physician has already provided me with a course of treatment, and Gretel is trained to see to all my needs. I generally preferred to keep to myself even before my illness, so I doubt you'll be seeing much of me."

"I quite understand, Ms. Thompson, some of my patients prefer to remain solitary as well. Still, may I ask after your symptoms? I like to think I have some experience in such matters, and I may have some insights to offer."

"Of course. In fact," Sally accepted a folder that Gretel dug out of a valise and passed it on to him. "This folder contains my full medical history. While I don't expect to need your services, emergencies can happen."

"Thank you Ms. Thompson. And while I understand the urge to hide away from the world, might I suggest you take the time to look around your new home? It may be small, but I have traveled a lot in my time, and this is by far one of the most beautiful locations I have ever encountered. God willing, I plan to make this place my retirement home."

Sally Thompson gave him a slight nod. "Thank you, doctor. I shall certainly take it under advisement. But for now, I feel the need for solitude, maybe try and make sense of how everything came to this point."

By this time, the seaplane's pilot and engineer had finished unloading the ladies' luggage. Now the five of them made their way towards the new house at the foot of the small hill that dominated the island. As John Purdue watched them leave, he felt fade the last of his doubts about the enigmatic Sally Thompson. No matter how cold her gaze, there had been a note of sincerity in her last statement. The doctor was left with an image of a proud young beauty struck down by a disfiguring illness in the prime of her life, now struggling to make sense of a world that had changed so irrevocably. John could only sigh in sympathy. "No wonder she seems so frozen inside," he muttered sadly. "It's probably all the poor girl can do not to lash out or break down."

The doctor pondered for a moment how he might best help her. Given everything else, she probably got the best medical advice money could buy, so he doubted he'd be able to contribute anything by studying her medical file. However, in his own dark moments the doctor had always found solace in religion, as had many of his patients. "Tomorrow's a bit too soon, I'll give them some time to get settled in. But I think I'll go down next week and invite them to next Sunday's service. Faith can get someone through even the worst of times."

The doctor knew that the knowledge that God was still watching over them was a great comfort to many of his patients. After all, was not Lazarus one of His saints? Once she'd had a chance to get settled in, he was sure Ms. Thompson would appreciate the reminder.

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**July 30, 1929, Berun Military HQ, The Empire**

Zettour considered the briefing papers in front of him. Around the meeting table were... well, he'd call them political allies. Uncharitable souls might call them co-conspirators. They were few in number. His first and oldest ally Rudersdorf, the 'grand old man' of the Imperial Navy Admiral Tirpitz, the very wealthy and connected Baron Johann von Spritzen, and finally Max von Bulow, the Secretary of Commerce. The five of them represented the new up-and-coming bloc in Imperial politics, with Zettour as their nominal leader.

There were, of course, many other supporters to their cause, scattered among the nobility, the military, and the civilian government. But it was the five of them that wielded the most influence. All of them were united by one common thread - a belief that the Emperor's power needed to be checked.

In times past, while the Emperor might possess absolute power, it was generally understood that he would not wield that power without at least consulting his ministers and generals... and if he was feeling particularly democratic, the Reichstag as well. This gentleman's agreement had served the Empire well since its founding, allowing the various political groups to make their voices heard while enabling rapid decision making in times of crisis. However, the fact remained that the Emperor was an absolute monarch, with all the power that implied. It had never bothered Zettour before, but now as the Empire struggled in the aftermath of the single greatest war it had ever fought, the downsides of their current system of government became apparent.

Truth be told, if anyone had told him winning a war could be dangerous for a country, Zettour would have thought them mad. And yet, that was what was happening. The Kaiser's political credibility had taken a serious hit when he surrendered Major Degurechaff to the war tribunal. In response, the Kaiser had not only removed all the austerity measures that had been put in place during the war, but then had proceeded to fund a slew of public projects, celebrations, and subsidies, all to reassure the populace that the benefits were well worth the cost of one disobedient soldier. And frustratingly, for a time it had worked. While a few stubborn souls continued to protest the betrayal, most of the general populace had allowed themselves to be lulled by the newfound largesse. Zettour supposed there was a reason the Roman Emperors had indulged so often in bread and circuses.

Of course, the money for all those projects had to come from somewhere, and the Imperial government was completely tapped. So the Kaiser had stepped in, employing his own personal fortune, in exchange for what amounted to a lease on the newly acquired Congo. The exact legalities were hellishly complex, but what it amounted to was that the Kaiser got a significant amount of control and income from the Congo until the Imperial government could pay him back.

 There had been an unpublicized but severe shitstorm in the highest reaches of government as many people questioned the ethics and constitutionality of forcing your own government into debt. But that had been nothing compared to the aftermath. For at the end of the day, both the Kaiser and the civilian government had been banking on one thing to stabilize the massive public debt they were racking up - the reparation payments. Billions of marks promised to them by the Francois Republic and Legadonian Entente as the price for the Empire giving them their countries back. Marks that failed to materialize in anywhere near the promised amounts when the first bill came due.

Oh, the excuses for their failure were myriad. Some of them were even true. But the bottom line was that the Empire was deep in debt, the Kaiser was deep in debt, and suddenly their newly acquired African holdings became the only cash cow the Empire had. Which led directly to today, and the papers Zettour and the others were studying.

It was Bulow, the Secretary of Commerce, who broke the silence. "It's official gentlemen. The Empire is facing an economic and political crisis. And the idiot in the Chancellor's seat has only managed to make things worse."

"That bad, huh?" grumbled Spritzen.

"Yes," came the curt response. "The morality of slavery aside, the brutal measures enacted in the Congo had temporarily succeeded in infusing some much needed cash in the Empire's and the Kaiser's coffers. The rebellion among the plantation workers threatened that income. And now this global recession has hammered the last nail in the coffin. The copper mines are shutting down with the steep drop in demand. While other products still remain profitable, those were two of the big ones. The Imperial African Trading Company is on its last legs, and the Katanga mining corporations aren't much better. And that's before Interpol stuck their noses in."

The cruel treatment of the natives in parts of the Congo had been one of the Empire's dirty little secrets. Only now that dirt had hit the fan with the very highly publicized Interpol investigation. While Interpol had no power to arrest anyone in the Congo, they could and did submit a very detailed report (with photographs) on the myriad of ways that Germanian corporations were violating the Empire's own laws in the treatment of their workers. Their government had done their best to censor and discredit the report, but the Empire had enough freedom of press that more and more people were questioning what exactly the Kaiser was doing in the Congo.

The answer was that the Kaiser had very little to do with the atrocities in the Congo... but he had also turned a blind eye to the works of others as long as the money kept flowing. And now that policy was coming back to bite him. Combined with the Colombian debacle, his personal credibility was plummeting.

And in the middle of all this came a second Interpol report, this one thankfully secret. Tanya von Degurechaff had been spotted in Elisabethstadt. Apart from confirming the sighting of the girl in the Congo, the report had also mentioned circumstantial evidence that Degurechaff was involved in arming the various native rebellions. In fact, the report suggested that Degurechaff had spent months deep in the Congo interior interacting and trading with the natives, and it was a fact that the natives seemed to be getting their hands on a lot of Colombian military surplus gear.

"Speaking of Interpol," spoke up Tirpitz, and Zettour mentally braced himself, "Zettour, can't you keep your little she-devil in check? Yes, embarrassing the Kaiser and Chancellor Siegfried serves our purposes. But her little bout of rabble rousing is putting egg on ALL our faces."

"You act as if I have any control over what Degurechaff does," Zettour replied.

Tirpitz was not so easily put off. "Bah! We all know you're the closest thing the ex-203rd mages have to a patron. Are you telling me it’s a coincidence that Degurechaff showed up in the one place where half the mages are her former subordinates? It's one thing to use her to rake up some muck, Zettour. It's quite another to let her spark some kind of native revolt and lose us on of our colonies! And don't tell me I'm exaggerating, we both read the same reports!"

Zettour was tempted to bury his face in his hands. When he had originally mentioned the Congo to Serebryakov, he had done so in the expectation of extending shelter to an impoverished fugitive. And, yes, he had hoped to gain a powerful tool for his own purposes. Then he had heard of Degurechaff's doings in Colombia, and had resigned himself to losing her to a foreign government. Finding out not only was she in the Congo, but exactly what she had been up to, had come as an unpleasant surprise.

Now Zettour was in a quandary. He could admit that he hadn't even known Degurechaff was in the Congo until the Interpol report had hit his desk. A protestation that his allies would either disbelieve and grow angry, or believe and think him a fool. Or he could claim that the Major was going well beyond anything he would have asked of her. In which case he'd be the incompetent who couldn't control one teenage girl. Well, as Bonaparte had declared, 'Always audacity!' So Zettour looked Tirpitz in the eye and said, "Even back in the army, I would never second guess the Major. I gave her an objective, she would find the best way to carry out it. Collateral damage is but an unfortunate side effect of any military operation."

There was some grumbling, but ultimately, none of them really cared about the fate of some black serfs. Yes, a native revolt was embarrassing, but all the colonial powers had faced worse in their time. And in the meantime, the whole thing was affecting the Chancellor much worse than it was them. The rest of the meeting was taken up in strategizing for when the Kaiser would inevitably be forced to dismiss his current Chancellor. The writing was very much on the wall there, now it only remained to ensure that Zettour was at the very top of the list of alternatives.

It was some hours later, and Hans von Zettour was relaxing with a drink alongside his friend Rudersdorf. The older general took a deep pull at his cigar before remarking, "You know, at this point they're pretty much convinced you have Degurechaff in your back pocket. In fact, a significant portion of our support base is comprised of people who think you have the Argent Silver's approval."

"No, really? I hadn't noticed," Zettour deadpanned.

Rudersdorf was not amused. "This time you managed to play off Degurechaff's antics as part of your master plan. What will you do when reports of whatever insanity she does next starts to come in?"

Zettour didn't directly reply. Instead, after a pause he asked, "Do you think I should have let them know I have absolutely no control over that girl? Back when the subject first came up?"

Rudersdorf snorted. "God, no! Your position as the only one who might one day bring her back to the Empire is one of the reasons we have as much support in the military as we do."

Zettour shrugged. "Then all I can do is brace myself for Degurechaff's next masterpiece."

A brooding silence persisted for several minutes. Rudersdorf broke it, saying, "Why do you think she chose to start a native revolt of all things? Revenge against the Kaiser?"

"I wish I knew," muttered Zettour. "I doubt its simple revenge, though. The Major never struck me as one to act on emotion. I would find it more believable if she now considers the Kaiser an enemy, and chose this method to deny her enemy resources."

Rudersdorf laughed. "Maybe she wants her own country. Queen Tanya of the Congo, perhaps?"

"Don't even joke. I have nightmares about waking up with that for a headline."

"You really think she'd try something like that?"

Zettour considered the question before replying, "In the long term, I'm sure Degurechaff knows how unlikely she is to succeed in such a ploy. In the short term, though, I can think of few things more embarrassing for the Empire.  I would not put it past her to do such a thing just to make everyone look like a fool."

"And if she does do it?"

"Why do you think I'm bracing myself? Ah, but the energy of youth," came the sardonic reply.

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**August 8, 1929, Lusaka, Rhodesia**

To every appearance, the young woman was enjoying the afternoon breeze on the balcony, with a cup of coffee by her elbow and a book in her lap. And to be fair, she was. But underneath her carefree demeanor Elya Roth was struggling with a problem that had been worrying her since her encounter with the former Major Tanya von Degurechaff, a little over a month ago.

There were several things about that encounter that were undoubtedly worth close consideration. However, each and every time, all Elya could come back to was the cold pistol barrel pressing into the back of her neck, and the knowledge that the woman she considered her best friend in the world was one heartbeat away from killing her.

When this mess had first started, Elya had thought her choice was simple. Tanya von Degurechaff was a hero of the Empire. More importantly, she was someone Visha greatly admired. The war tribunal had clearly been a political ploy for the losing countries to save face by scapegoating a young girl. As a good Imperial, Elya had felt it both her duty and pleasure to aid Visha in helping the Major escape. That Visha had been her best friend had only made the decision easier - Elya had always cared more about people than about rules.

After joining Interpol, it had again been an easy decision to continue passing information to Visha. Whatever good Interpol might end up doing in the future, the team she was part of was dedicated to locating Degurechaff. It was an effort to hunt down an innocent girl and haul her in for a spurious trial, and one Elya didn't have many qualms about sabotaging. Along the way though, she had realized that Visha's feelings for her superior went beyond mere admiration, and closer to an almost religious devotion.

Yes, Elya decided. She had realized just how much Degurechaff meant to Visha. But she hadn't thought through the implications for their own friendship.

Oh, Visha had been deeply and sincerely apologetic once the initial crisis had been dealt with. Elya had even been honest when she had accepted Visha's apologies. They'd had the chance for a long conversation, and the two of them had once more reaffirmed their friendship to one another. None of that changed the fact that when push came to shove, Visha had chosen Degurechaff over her.

Elya took a deep breath to settle herself. It was hard to get past the whole gun-to-the-head thing, but she had to try and be objective. Could she really be upset that she had been demoted on Visha's priority list? No, not really. After all, she would have expected the same if and when Visha got married. God knows she and Degurechaff were as close as any husband-and-wife pair.

So, no, she couldn't blame Visha for her priorities. The real issue was how little hesitation there had been. Visha had been the *first* to pull a gun. And instead of aiming it at Sioux, she had aimed it at Elya. Tactically it had been the correct choice. But the fact that Visha could make that tactical decision in the face of their friendship.... yes, that was really what was sticking in Elya's craw. No matter how much she thought about it, Elya couldn't see herself ever so unhesitatingly drawing on Visha. Did that mean Visha had been lying when she said she still considered Elya her friend? No, Elya didn't think so. Visha had a brilliant poker face, but keeping blank and faking sincerity were two different skill sets. So, did that mean Visha would pull a gun on her friends if circumstances warranted it? That was.... Elya blinked as she realized the truth. That very well may be the sort of person Visha had become.

Elya hadn't been lying when she told Sioux that she had fled from every enemy mage she'd encountered during the war. In fact, even now, she did not have a single confirmed kill to her name, mage or mundane. Visha was the exact opposite. For two years, she'd been repeatedly thrown head first into the cruelest, most brutal fighting in the war. And Visha just hadn't survived the experience, she'd thrived.

Except... what did that sort of experience do to a young woman? There was Degurechaff's example, but not even Visha would ever claim that girl was normal. Elya thoughtfully bit her lip as she realized she and Visha had been some of the youngest recruits in the war. There had been a few others of similar age, but like Elya they had almost all been assigned to roles away from direct combat. Some of them might have gotten unlucky and seen fighting anyway, but not like Visha. Elya couldn't verify it right now, but she was fairly certain Visha and Degurechaff were the only aces in the war below the age of twenty.

It was disheartening. For the first time Elya realized there was a vast part of Visha's life that she didn't and couldn't understand. No wonder Visha no longer saw Elya as her dearest friend. Elya hadn't even noticed the enormous gap that existed between the two of them. Visha had seemed unchanged by the war, and Elya like an idiot had accepted it at face value.

Elya nodded to herself. She could feel some of her tension leaving her as she mentally realigned her relationship with Visha. Were they still very good friends? Yes, they were. Were they best friends? No. They had grown too far apart for that to be true.

Now that she could put the state of their friendship into perspective, what did that mean for Elya's own choices? Elya had listened as Mary Sioux revealed everything she had learned during her undercover operation. While Degurechaff might be innocent of the crimes she was accused of, it was clear she was guilty of quite a few other crimes during the course of her fugitive career. In fact, if even half of Sioux' suppositions were true, Degurechaff had become the epitome of the international criminal that Interpol was created to pursue in the first place.

The irony was not lost on Elya. But it also meant she could no longer persuade herself that she was a hero helping an innocent young girl evade an unjust trial. The trial was still unjust, but the young girl was anything but innocent. Did she then continue helping Visha when the opportunity arose? Or would her next message to Visha be one where she formally broke off their alliance and declared her support of Interpol? The trouble there was that while Degurechaff might be a criminal, justice required she be punished for things she had provably done, not be thrown behind bars for spurious reasons.

After many long minutes of wrestling with this conundrum, Elya decided on the simplest answer. Procrastinate. Right now Visha was going deep into hiding, so Elya couldn't get in touch with her directly even if she wanted to. She might as well do her best as an Interpol investigator. So far, all of Sioux' accusations against Degurechaff fell somewhere between 'circumstantial' and 'paranoid'. Furthermore, as Sioux' reports on the plantation workers had showed, there were plenty of other crimes that Elya could investigate with a free conscience.

Revealing abuses of the common man, shady dealings and corrupt practices, arresting rapists and traitors and slavers, Elya could get behind all of that. Let Degurechaff and Visha and all the annoying moral quandaries they represented be future Elya's problem. Their Interpol team might be in Rhodesia in the hopes that Degurechaff had fled across the border to here, but that didn't mean there weren't things Elya couldn't poke her nose into. While the Albish might not be mistreating the natives the way the Empire had, that didn't mean there weren't other corrupt practices waiting to be revealed. Mary had really pulled a fine trick when she got Interpol to set precedent on investigating any crime that in any way crossed international borders.

This determination had put her in a much better mood. Elya was one of those people who always preferred to keep things lighthearted, and there was only so much soul-searching she could stand. So when she heard Mary coming in to their shared rooms, Elya stood up, undid her dressing gown to reveal the skimpy lingerie underneath, and went to greet her roommate.

Elya preferred men to women and Sioux was the same, but that didn't mean Elya couldn't have fun flirting with her. No matter how uptight she acted, Sioux couldn't hide that she found the attention flattering. Watching her pretend to be offended was some of the best amusement Elya had these days. Besides, Mary Sioux the flustered eighteen year old was far more tolerable than Mary Sioux the hypocritical moralizing crusader. Some day Elya was going to find the girl's high horse and sell it to the glue factory.

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**August 19, Ila Rouge, Seychelles, The Commonwealth**

I smiled sweetly at my young charge. "Now, now, surely you can go a few more rounds."

The only response was a muffled groan from where Jenny was lying face down on the sand.

Smirking, I walked over to her and took a firm grip on her fiery red hair. I didn't yank on it, as that was unnecessary. A few firm tugs was enough for her to get the message and start regaining her feet. On the way up, she delivered a quick hit to my hand that broke my grip on her hair, and then she tackled me to the ground.

Given our respective sizes, it was a pretty good choice. Jenny was only 5'3", but that still put her three inches above my current height, and her frame was tight with corded muscle from her regular workouts with Velvet Iron's agents. Alas, I was pretty fit too. And even though I'd put aside my M27, I still had the ability to reinforce myself, if not to the same extreme level as I could with a combat-rated orb.

Even as she pulled me down to the ground, I wrapped an arm around her neck, tucked her head under my right arm, and wrapped my legs around her hips. I vaguely recalled this move having some kind of fancy name in my last life, but what mattered was that I was now positioned to squeeze her neck and she had no leverage to break free.

A couple of seconds was enough for Jenny to realize the same thing. Which is when her right hand came up to grip my face, and she tried to gouge out my eye with her thumb.

I couldn't help but feel satisfaction at this. It was always good to see your student learning. Still, I couldn't actually let her get away with that. A quick twist and bite, and I had two fingers of that hand gripped between my teeth, hard enough I tasted blood. A single tug told her she wasn't getting her hand free without leaving something behind. It was at that point she tapped out. After I released her, she immediately curled up around her injured hand.

"Ow ow ow," she whined, clutching her fingers. I rolled my eyes. I'd barely broken skin, she'd gotten nastier injuries from the sand. Over the past few weeks, Jenny had become intimately acquainted with 203-style training. The kind of training where you had access to accelerated healing, meaning you could afford to leave way more bumps and bruises than ordinary sparring. Her whining was just her way of buying more time to rest, and we both knew it.

I decided to allow it anyway. Truth be told, Jenny had taken her disciplinary drills rather well. She whined and grumbled and groaned, but in the end she did everything I told her to and she did it to the best of her ability. I signaled where Visha was standing to the side, and she brought forward water bottles and disinfectants. Magical healing, at least at the level we could perform, amounted to little more than boosting the body's natural healing and magically sealing injuries. Such things were best left for the end of training.

As I took a sip of water, I paused to admire the view. We were in an open patch of sandy ground off to one side of my house. Stands of trees and fencing provided us privacy, and through the gaps you could see the pristine blue waters that surrounded the island. And of course, there was Visha. Even in the modest shorts and shirt that comprised our training clothes, there was much to admire. And well, I suppose Jenny had grown into a stunning young woman as well, but somehow thinking of her that way just felt weird. Maybe because she acted so much more childish than either of us. Well, that, and... "Are we done, *Dad*?"

I blame Visha. She just had to repeat her joke about me and Lena sharing parental duties for Jenny within her hearing, and the brat had immediately latched on to the idea. My feelings towards that nickname were complicated. In my last life, even though I'd been so focused on my career, a part of me had always toyed with the idea of marriage and children. Now each time I heard that word, part of me was happy at the thought, part of me angry at what I had lost, and most of me confused on what to do about it. So I defaulted to taking mock offense, shouting back "I am not that old you brat!" and taking pleasure at Visha and Jenny's amusement.

"I suppose we can call it a day here," I said.

"Hmm... I think I can go one more round." Jenny's faux innocent tone tipped me off. Even as she took a guard position next to me, I could see Visha circling around to the side. This too had become something of a tradition. Most days, we'd end our training with Jenny and Visha ganging up on me.

Fighting Visha hand-to-hand was a completely different proposition to fighting Jenny. At 5'6" she was the tallest and strongest of us, and she was almost as good with orbless reinforcement as me. It was only my extensive training with Joe Barrow that let me win the majority of our spars. With Jenny helping her, most of the time I went down in painful defeat. Not that I shied away from the challenge. Hard training is the best training.

Later that evening I was face down in bed, relaxing as Visha massaged away the bruises of the day. As she was finishing up, she spoke. "Tanya, how long are we going to be like this?"

"Well, Jenny will be on her way back in a few days. Hopefully a little better behaved. But I don't think that's what you meant?"

"I'll miss her," admitted Visha. "But I meant like this. This carefree living in this island paradise."

"I still have pretend to be a leper for visitors. And have to put up with that annoying god-botherer," I pointed out.

"You shouldn't have been so cruel to the poor doctor. I mean, seriously." Visha sat up and pitched up her voice in an imitation of my own, " 'If there is a god he is a cruel and malicious being. So I prefer there be no god and nothing in the Universe but cold pitiless indifference'." I saw her shaking her head from the corner of my eye. "Just because you have no faith doesn't mean you have to be so harsh to the ones that do."

I rolled my eyes. "I wasn't cruel because he had faith. I was cruel because he was annoying me with it."

Visha wisely recognized a losing battle, and went back to her original topic. "Well, those little annoyances aside, you have to admit, this has been by far the most peace we've had in... forever. How long do you think it'll last?"

"Why? Are you bored already?" I could admit to some genuine worry. Knowing what I now did about Visha's natural wildness and love for battle, I was worried she might start a fight or create some scandal just to make things exciting.

"No! Not at all! In fact I'm very happy! It's just... I'm worried something will come along and spoil it."

"Well, it won't happen anytime soon," I said confidently. "We've got Emilie keeping an eye out in Victoria, Koenig keeping watch in Africa. We've managed to completely fudge our trail, and this entire region is out of mage detection range." I took her hand in my own. "Trust me Visha. We'll be tired of the sun and sand long before anything remotely dangerous can happen."

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**August 23, Port Victoria, Mahe Island, Seychelles, The Commonwealth**

The elderly brown skinned Punjabi gentleman with the distinguished short gray hair held out his hand to the young blond Europan woman. "My dear lady, I am in your debt for helping to protect me from these ruffians. Shiv Kumar Patel, at your service," he said in flawless Albish.

The woman that Tanya knew as Emilie Ernest (although looking quite different) glanced around the wrecked bar with several unconscious men, mostly white. Taking the man's hand, she shook it firmly. "Linda Louise. And it was my pleasure. You were talking a lot of sense up there. Only fair that the folk doing all the work get paid properly for it. These clowns got no call trying to hurt you... or saying such horrible things about your family. I seen that shit elsewhere. It was ugly then, it's ugly now."

"Alas, intimidation and oppression is ever the tool of those in power who are also in the wrong. Tell me, would you like to join the Oceanic Affirmation Party? It is clear you feel strongly about our primary platform of securing fair working conditions for the laborers on these islands."

"Um... is that all right? I’m not exactly...."

"Dark-skinned?" Patel chuckled. "It wouldn't be much of an equality movement if we excluded on grounds of race now, would it?"

Emilie sighed. "Look, I'd love to help you, but I'm here on a job, and a pretty important one. Can't afford to be distracted too much. I'll help when I can, but that's all."

"Of course."

The two of them left the bar, talking on the way. A few minutes into their conversation, something Patel said piqued Emilie's interest: "Right now, our biggest concern is breaking the monopoly the local plantation owners have on basic necessities. It doesn't matter if we can secure a fair wage, if all the shops then turn around and double their prices."

"So... what you're saying is, you need to be able to get all sorts of goods and supplies into the islands at something like a fair price?"

"Ideally, yes. You seem to have an idea?"

"Let's say I might know some people..."