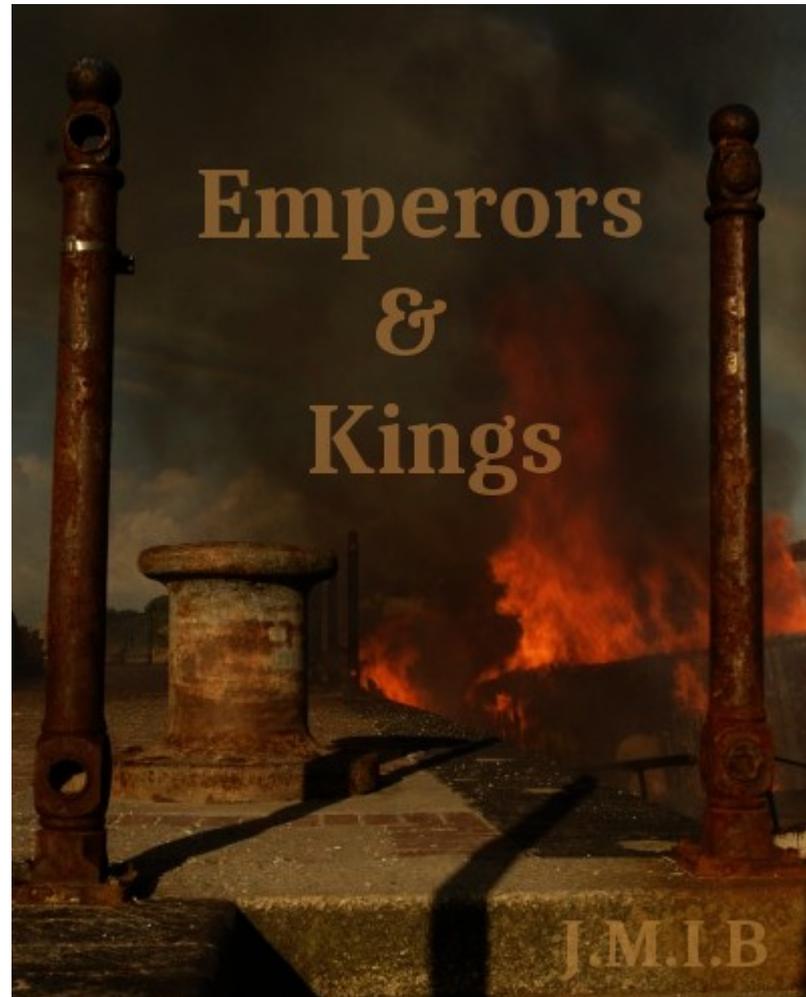


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# Emperors And Kings

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- [Chapter 1](#)
- [Chapter 2](#)
- [Chapter 3](#)
- [Chapter 4](#)
- [Chapter 5](#)
- [Chapter 6](#)
- [Chapter 7](#)
- [Chapter 8](#)
- [Chapter 9](#)
- [Chapter 10](#)
- [Chapter 11](#)
- [Chapter 12](#)
- [Chapter 13](#)
- [Chapter 14](#)
- [Chapter 15](#)
- [Chapter 16](#)
- [Chapter 17](#)
- [Chapter 18](#)
- [Chapter 19](#)
- [Chapter 20](#)
- [Chapter 21](#)



[Book Index](#)

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[Next](#)

---

# Emperors And Kings

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---



[Book Index](#)

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[Previous](#)

[Next](#)

---

# Chapter 1

The Western Coast Lands were historically seen as dangerous and hostile. They were in a constant state of flux due to conquering Kings and invading Emperors, added to by everlasting internal wars and battles.

The Agalian Empire was vast but was always fraught by internal uprisings and

political plots. This was often due to the physical geography of its administrative capital city. The huge city of Agalia was split in two by a considerably sized strip of land that was virtually unusable. Crops refused to grow on it and buildings simply sank into it. This led to the people moving to more productive areas to the West and East. These regions soon adopted the titles of West Agalia and East Agalia for clarification but soon the friction began. No matter how impartial the Emperor was, he'd forever be accused of bias from one side, then the other. Agalia was pulling itself apart.

After two attempts on his life in as many weeks, by both regions, Emperor Jullit worked on a plan that would completely revolutionise the Agalian economy, structure, overall way of life, and lead to one of the strongest Empires in all of history.

Instead of one Emperor, there was to be two. One in the West and one in the East. Each Emperor would appoint himself a Regent, or successor. On a pre-decided date, both Emperors stepped down and their Regents ascended. One of the duties of an Emperor was to fortify this dual rule with pacts, trades, partnerships and arrangements that were legally binding. One of the most widely known methods was marriages. An important family from the West would arrange a marriage with a similarly placed family in the East, and vice versa.

This monumental change in Agalia's entire structure didn't happen overnight, but after the years since Jullit's death, Agalia was seen as unshakable and the whole city, East and West, was thriving.

The current Emperor of the West was Kerrin Ilvia. He came from a family of administrators and scribes and this gave him an outstanding knowledge of both politics and academia. Kerrin's Regent was his only son, Nian. Nian was already betrothed to a Lady of high standing from the East and this was important. Kerrin was a widower with no siblings of his own and therefore no bloodline other than Nian. Although the appointing of blood relatives wasn't mandatory, it was often preferable because the family history was already known.

The East was ruled by Waylon Boon who came from a long line of politicians. It had been quietly rumoured that Waylon's political skills were quite inferior to that of his sisters, Lydia and Kez, although Kez was considerably younger than both siblings. Agalia may have been revolutionised, but it wasn't quite ready for an Empress. Waylon was named as Regent of the East by his uncle, and ascended accordingly. Waylon named Lydia's son, Lafi, as his Regent.

South of the Agalian Empire was a massive region made up of small shires, quite a contrast to the organised and structured Agalia. The Shires' internal troubles were, naturally, caused by Shire fighting Shire. These battles were quite crude compared to the political machinations of past Agalia, but no less destructive to the Shires as a

whole. King Hovolt Ludrig didn't inherit his title, in fact there was no King of any sort. Hovolt proved to be a proficient negotiator, as well as an able fighter. He managed to amalgamate, through talks, some of the Shires. These new, larger shires amalgamated other shires. If there was any resistance, Hovolt simply overran them, although he always claimed that that was a last resort. His oldest son, Keegan, often doubted that claim. Hovolt had had three wives and had nine offspring. Keegan's mother had died of the fever and Hovolt remarried shortly after due to sheer loneliness. Despite the children, the union was doomed and Hovolt granted his wife a divorce. Whether she actually wanted one or not was irrelevant, Hovolt did. The third union was ideal, as the first one had been, and still going strong. After unifying the Shires, Hovolt did exactly what everyone expected him to do. He built a Castle, called it Ludrig, and declared himself King. Because of the stability of the Shires, and the security that provided, no one really objected. King Ludrig looked after his people.

To the north of Ludrigshires and the south of Agalia was Golon. Golon stretched out east and could probably rival the Agalian Empire in size, if not numbers. The population was thinly spread out and nowhere near as large as Agalia, or Ludrigshires. This was mainly due to hostile territory full of swamps, shiftsands and dense woodland, contrasting with areas of desert and scree. The largest city was also called Golon and was situated in the far west of the region, where it poked out into the bordering lands of both Ludrigshires and Agalia. Golon was naturally protected by mountains and swamps that were just as hostile as its natives. The Golon were a crude people. Ludrig had once said that he hadn't thought it possible to more vulgar than a Shireman, until he'd seen the Golon. Ludrig and Agalia were both experienced in keeping the Golon in check.

Overall, the Coastal Lands was stable. Ludrig had stopped trying to attack Agalia, because it was futile against such organisation. The Agalian army had stopped trying to incorporate Ludrigshires into the Empire because that was futile against sheer numbers and brute force. The only glitch was Golon but as long as Ludrig, and Agalia, had them under watch, they posed very little threat.

There was an exception to the fixed Agalia-Ludrigshires boundary positions. Luh, and its surrounding area, was a port town on the west coast. The reason for the exception was Luh's importance because it had a triple dock and was vital for overseas trade. It was the only area that was still disputed because of this. The days of bloody battles, and even violence, was long gone as far as Luh was concerned. Now-a-days either Agalia or Ludrig simply moved into the barracks and small military camp while the other moved out. The Luhans just shrugged and stocked the local Inn accordingly. As per tradition, the Golon were the problem. Golon snaked out dangerously close to Luh and the only reason they hadn't tried to take this valuable town was the military presence of either Ludrig or Agalia.

Luh was Agalian and had been for the last five years. The Agalian division based there, lead by Captain Zarsan Holt, went through endless drills, equipment checks,

scouting missions and routine tasks because there was no military activity.

Zarsan had begun his own scouting mission three years ago when he'd first noticed Harper Bright, daughter of Mayor Elias Bright. She was the most beautiful creature that Zarsan had ever seen and he wondered how he'd missed her for two years. Harper was seventeen at that time, Zarsan twenty seven. Had they been in Agalia, such an age gap was quite proper, providing the pair had the approval of the younger party's guardian. Harper only had her father, who absolutely doted on her. Her mother had died in a fever epidemic when Harper was very young. Zarsan did the proper thing and went to Elias, but he hadn't approached Harper at all. The first she knew of it was when she got home one day and saw an incredibly handsome soldier having tea and cakes with her father. Harper and Zarsan had been almost inseparable for the three years since.

"So after we're married, we'll live in the Marble District in West Agalia." Zarsan sat on the dockside with Harper and watched the seagulls overhead.

"I'll be as old as my father by the time we have the money to live there!" Harper laughed. "It would be lovely though." She smiled at Zarsan.

"Right. We'll live in the barracks." Zarsan nudged Harper in the ribs and laughed. "Ah we'll get there Harper. For a Captain, I really hate military law at times." Military law stated that spouses must adopt dual citizenship if they weren't already Agalian. This meant them living in Agalia with their army husbands, obviously. Zarsan and Harper had another year to wait because of Harper's age. She was twenty and the legal age for wedlock was twenty one. Even then, they'd need somewhere to live and even the most modest of homes would still be a stretch for Zarsan's pay. "Isn't it frustrating?" Zarsan snorted. "I can't take you to Agalia because we've nowhere to live and I can't look for somewhere to live because I'm posted out here!"

"You'll get reposted while we marry though." Harper pointed out.

"Yes then you'll have to come back here until I find us a decent home that isn't in the Fly Quarter. I envy the soldiers who have families to accommodate new wives. I wouldn't be in a dilemma if I had one." Zarsan sighed. Zarsan's mother passed away giving birth to Zarsan, leaving him and his General father who he was very close to. Lomas Holt was killed during a riot in an outlying town when Zarsan was sixteen. He'd lived in military accommodation ever since.

"I have Elias. I've done just fine with him up to now." Harper hugged Zarsan. "He wants to know if you'll fix the fence at the Town Hall."

"I'll go after shift change." Zarsan nodded.

"Shift? Someone's putting in a shift? Where?" Leader Jonas Marsh was standing

behind the happy couple. Zarsan got up and helped Harper to her feet. "Really Harper, I wouldn't marry him. There isn't a day's work in him."

"I'm pleased to hear that you wouldn't marry me Jonas." Zarsan pulled a face. "I'm sure there's nothing occurred where you need me to hold your hand. I'm not your mother."

"I'm pleased to hear that you're not my mother Zarsan." Jonas smirked at Harper. "Actually I thought you were out on patrol, I didn't know you were with Harper. Nothing important."

"It's fine, Jonas. I promised to help my father with his leggers." Harper stood on tiptoe to kiss Zarsan's cheek. "Come for tea, then you can go and sort the Town Hall fence." She waved and made her way back towards town.

"Have I ever told you what a lucky old dog you are?" Jonas commented. "Lazing around in the sun with a beautiful girl. I've a mind to report you."

"Well we're not exactly taxed out here are we? As long as every man's duties are carried out and everything's in order, anyone can do the same." Zarsan reminded him.

"Laze in the sun with Harper? I'll polish my buckles beforehand." Jonas grinned at his superior officer.

"Try it and your buckles will be hurled off the end of that pier." Zarsan laughed. "So what's so crucial that you had to interrupt my day in such a cruel and inconsiderate fashion?"

"Not important, like I said. I thought we'd draw up the report for Agalia. I didn't know you were with Harper. It's fine. It'll wait." Jonas assured him.

"Come on. We may as well get it out of the way. 'Dear Officers, nothing to report here, not ever.'" Zarsan rolled his eyes.

"Well they still haven't offered any ideas on that bit of the Golon Swamp." Jonas and Zarsan entered the map room next to the barracks.

"I'm tired of telling them." Zarsan spread a map of the area on the table. "We need to collaborate with Ludrig because his Castle and city is closer to that peninsular of swamp. We work with Ludrig to surround and isolate that finger. We only need cut off that neck area and the swamp is less lethal there. That's how the Golon have raided settlements in the past. Once we isolate it, we give it, and the surrounding areas, to Ludrig."

"And thereby lies the problem." Jonas told Zarsan what he already knew.

"Collaborating with Ludrig would cause the government to have a seizure, and Ludrig's lot to have apoplexy. Agalia handing anything over to Ludrig is a concept they just don't understand."

"And in the mean time, we wait and see if the Golon stop brawling long enough to have a thought. All they have to do is to distract Ludrig on their south border and that will leave the swamp peninsula vulnerable. Not even the Golon can get through the mountains at the north of that swamp, so that just leaves the northern edge of the peninsula. Our Division patrols that area, as well as Luh, but it's not ideal. We need a permanent solution to it." Zarsan rolled up his map. "I'll write it in the report, yet again."

[Book Index](#)    [Emperors And Kings](#)    [Next](#)

## Chapter 2

The Town Hall fence had been fixed for three months and Zarsan was on to the paintwork as his off duty hobby. His on duty hobby was still Harper. One afternoon found him sitting with Harper in the cottage she shared with her father, Elias being out at the Town Hall.

"Baby?" Zarsan was just staring at Harper as though he hadn't understood what she'd been saying. Harper looked at the floor and nodded. "How? No, not how. I mean how much? When?"

"Nanny Crook reckons I have about six months left. I'm sorry Zarsan." Harper muttered.

"Huh?" Zarsan unfroze and Harper looked up at him. "Sorry for what?"

"The baby will be here before I'm twenty one. We won't be married and we won't be together in Agalia." Harper tried not to cry.

"Oh Harper I don't care!" Zarsan jumped at Harper and lifted her into the air. "So things have been reordered a bit? It's not a big issue. I love both of you!"

"So it doesn't matter if we aren't married? It's not an issue here in Luh but I think Agalia is a bit more ... sophisticated." Harper laughed uncertainly.

"It doesn't matter in the slightest." Zarsan put Harper down and smiled at her. "Have you told Elias?"

"No not yet. I'll tell him this evening." Harper felt tears of relief running down her face.

"In that case, I'll stay right here with you until he gets home, then we tell him together." Zarsan made himself comfortable by the fire. "Tea, woman."

"In the pot, man." Harper made herself comfortable next to Zarsan.

Harper was big, round and irritable by the time another five months had passed.

"This baby has huge feet like you." She grumbled as Zarsan helped her up a slight incline that lead to a beautiful glade just behind the military grounds. Zarsan laughed.

"Not long now. What did Nanny Crook say this morning?" He lowered Harper to a sitting position against a tree.

"Five weeks, maybe four. That's ages away!"

"Oh it is not." Zarsan smiled and ran his hand over Harper's round belly. "It is a wriggler, isn't it?"

"That is not a wriggle. That is an all out assault." Harper put her hand alongside Zarsan's hand. "I'm a bit scared actually Zarsan. What if I'm a useless mother?"

"Don't talk offal Harper." Zarsan told her. "Why in the Realm would you be? You're just a bit nervous. Don't worry, so am I."

"Zarsan ... I mean Captain Zarsan, sir." Jonas was standing on the edge of the glade. The reason for his switch to the formal was the presence of another man. Zarsan knew straight away that he was either an Agalian Administrator or a Councillor, by his blue clothing.

"Yes Leader Jonas. What is it?" Zarsan got to his feet.

"I'm sorry to disturb you on your off-shift sir, Miss Bright. This is Councillor Florian Drake. He came looking for you in the barracks." Jonas took a step back and the Councillor came forward.

"I'm here to deliver a message, Captain. It's quite urgent and very important, hence my presence rather than that of an ordinary Scout. I'm to stay at your service, sir." Florian handed Zarsan a sealed scroll. Zarsan recognised this seal immediately.

"A missive from Emperor Kerrin?" Zarsan said in surprise. Even if he was being reposted on military business, the message would have come from one of the Generals, not from the Emperor. Florian said nothing. Zarsan broke the seal and read the message. The colour drained from his face as he read it a second time, then a third.

"Are you ill, Zarsan?" Jonas asked in concern.

"Regent Nian has been killed in a riding accident. He's to be interred in seven days time." Zarsan looked at Florian's expressionless face, then back to Jonas. "Jonas, the Emperor has promoted me to General and appointed me as his Regent."

"He's ... he's done what?" Jonas said in shock. "Regent?"

"I always did have a good and respectful relationship with Emperor Kerrin but ...

but ... Florin are you sure?" Zarsan asked the Councillor.

"Am I sure about what, Captain?" Florian replied with a question.

"About the Emperor appointing me his Regent!" Zarsan shrieked.

"Well do you think he'd consult me on the matter? That's an authentic message and I was tasked with delivering it. That's what I'm sure about." Florian said calmly. "A small party will arrive here in a week to escort us back to Agalia for Regent Nian's burial. I believe you'll be instated as Regent immediately after."

"I can't take this in." Zarsan shook his head. "Why did ..."

"Zarsan?" Harper was rolling around in a vain attempt to get up.

"Harper! I'm so sorry. Here let me ... ah Harper? What's all that ..."

"The baby Zarsan! The baby's coming!" Harper sobbed.

"No it isn't, Harper. It's not time." Zarsan said warily.

"Try telling that to the baby! Are you going to lift me? Or maybe I'll roll all the way home?" Harper snapped.

"Jonas! Go and tell Elias to go home then go and get Nanny Crook. Pardon me, Florian. Emergency." Zarsan lifted Harper and headed for the town. Jonas sprinted off at full speed. Florian shrugged his shoulders and followed on.

Zarsan, Elias, Jonas and Florian all crowded into Elias' tiny patch of garden at the front of his house.

"Something's wrong. They've been in there for ages." Zarsan fretted, glancing at the door.

"Don't even think about going in there. Nanny Crook will beat you senseless, General or not." Elias advised.

"Five hours Elias! They have another ten minutes then I'm going in."

"Five hours he says." Elias laughed. "Zarsan that's no time at all when it comes to this. My Marree took fourteen hours to have Harper."

"How long?" Zarsan yelped. "Fourteen as in four and ten? Together?"

"Well she wasn't born in installments. Yes of course together! Just sit yourself on that

bench and take it ..."

Nanny Crook appeared at the door and all four men ran at her. She stopped them in their tracks with a glare that would melt glass.

"One at a time!" She rasped. "That doesn't include you, Jonas, or you, whoever you are." The latter being directed at Florian.

"Go on Zarsan." Elias smiled and sat back down. "Trust me, these times are precious. You don't want to miss any of it." Zarsan nodded and took the wooden stairs up to Harper's room three at a time.

"Zarsan, look!" Harper was damp with sweat and tears streamed down her flushed face. "We have a son. He's beautiful."

"Harper he's perfect." Zarsan's vision was blurred with tears of his own as he carefully sat on Harper's bed as she cradled their baby. "He's so tiny! I can't believe I made him."

"I can. See his dark hair and eyes?"

"Big feet?"

"Not yet." Harper laughed. "We can call him Zari, little Zar. He is like his Daddy afterall."

"Thank you, Harper. How about Zari Elias?" Zarsan suggested and Harper was delighted. "One short week before I have to go to Agalia. It's the last thing I want to do."

"You must." Harper nodded. "From what I know, Emperor Kerrin is a very fine man and his son was a credit to him. You have to go and give your respect."

"I know, I know." Zarsan sighed heavily. "I'm sure to get back here for a while before your birthday. I most definitely will be here for the day itself. The day after you'll come with me to Agalia and we'll be married. Harper I'll have us somewhere to live before you know it. I'll be on five times the pay I am now. You'll only have to be here for a little while once we're wed."

"Zarsan you make it sound like a Golon dungeon!" Harper laughed. "It's no hardship for me and Zari to stay here with my father until you're ready for us. I love it here and I've lived nowhere else."

"That's not what I meant." Zarsan said gloomily. "We'll be apart."

"I'm not keen on that part of it either." Harper held Zarsan's hand. "Like you just said, it won't be for long. I'll write you a letter every single day we're apart. That way, you won't miss out on anything." She looked at her incredible baby in awe. "We'll both wait for you."

[Book Index](#)

[Emperors And Kings](#)

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)

### Chapter 3

Zarsan rode in the middle of the escort party, alongside Florian. His mood was quiet, dark, and very miserable.

"Do you have a family, Florian?" He asked.

"I have a wife and a daughter, sir. My daughter is thirteen though, not a babe in arms. You miss them already." Florian answered.

"I do." Zarsan agreed. "Aside from the million other things waiting for me in West Agalia, I must also secure a home for Harper and Zari, preferably in three months."

"You'll be provided with a guest villa on our return but I'm not sure how suitable it is for a family. It's a pity a Regent's villa didn't come with the job, like the Emperor's villa." Florian smiled and Zarsan was developing a genuine liking for the calm and friendly Councillor.

"Designed to promote self sufficiency, so I believe. It would come in useful though." Zarsan rolled his eyes. "I'm still stuck with three months no matter which way we look at it. Harper's twenty first birthday."

"Ah I see." Florian nodded. "Still, she has a good father back there, if I may say so."

"Absolutely." Zarsan agreed. "It will still be the longest quarter of my life."

///

Emperor Kerrin and Emperor Waylon, plus Waylon's Regent, Lafi, were in West Agalia's Governmental Hall. The topic of conversation was Kerrin's unconventional choice of Regent.

"Waylon, I wasn't as fortunate as you and I wasn't blessed with an extensive family. With Nian gone, I looked elsewhere. Zarsan Holt comes from an outstanding military family. His father was a decorated General and widely known as a strategical genius, as was his father before him. His mother was an accomplished scholar and had many contacts in the world of academia who came forward after her death to ensure Zarsan's education. He's probably more qualified for the position than I am." Kerrin rubbed his tired eyes. He was exhausted and the burial arrangement for his son were seriously wearing on him. Waylon seemed not to notice this.

"He's not a politician." Waylon snapped. Kerrin's immediate thoughts were 'nor are you' but he kept that comment to himself.

"I'm of the opinion that 'politician' is a learned and aquired set of behaviours, Waylon. It's a part of you, rather than a defined position." Kerrin had devised and rehearsed that because he knew it was going to be a point that Waylon would raise every time.

"Kerrin he's a soldier!" Waylon said in exasperation. "As outstanding as his family military records are, he's still not Noble."

"He's more noble than half the government." Kerrin felt his temper bubbling. Snobbery irritated him hugely but it infuriated him when coming from the Emperor of East Agalia. "He's not exactly a peasant, Waylon, and it says nothing in our Laws about selecting our Regents from the Noble classes. It was purposely devised that way. I respected your reasons and your selection of your own Regent. Kindly grant me the same courtesy."

"You're making a mistake, Kerrin. I'll blame your tiredness and your grief for it." Waylon said stiffly.

"Oh so you did notice that." Kerrin muttered under his breath. "Waylon you must excuse me for now. I still have preperations to make." He walked briskly out of the main hall before Waylon could raise more 'points of concern'.

Zarsan's 'unsuitable for a family' villa was twice the size of Elias Bright's cottage. It was light and comfortable and Zarsan wondered how far he'd get with smuggling his family in. Not very. He smiled to himself. He was quite impressed to find that his few belongings and fewer clothes had been moved into the villa. He changed into full dress regalia, befitting the burial of a Regent, then walked into his sitting room. Florian was in there, standing by the door.

"The carriage is here." Florian informed him.

"Carriage?" Zarsan laughed. "Florian I could walk to the Crypts in five minutes."

"May I suggest something?"

"Of course."

"You're a General and a pending Regent. Get over it." Florian sniffed and Zarsan laughed loudly.

As expected, the burial of Regent Nian Ilvya was a very grand affair. Zarsan noticed Emperor Kerrin and saw how exhausted the man was. He seemed to have aged too much since their last meeting. Zarsan also noticed Emperor Waylon who was chattering to Regent Lafi, both of them periodically glancing at Zarsan. He concentrated on the service in an attempt not to think about the next service where

he'd be the subject. In due time, the burial party departed to the Government Hall in order to give the mourners an opportunity to offer condolences to Kerrin.

"Emperor Kerrin, I'm so sorry about Nian's death." Zarsan eventually got to speak to the Emperor. "You look tired, sir."

"I'll be fine and thank you for your condolences. These days the death of a Regent is quite rare. It's so rare that there isn't a standard time for appointing a successor. The longer the role was empty, the longer I'd be reminded of my son's absence. I made the decision to appoint you immediately. I hope my decision didn't inconvenience your arrangements in Luh too much. I know it was very short notice." Kerrin explained, although he wasn't obliged to explain anything.

"I understand, sir. I remember when my father died and I was unsettled until one of the other Generals took over his duties. I'm sorry if that's a foolish comparison." Zarsan hoped he was saying the right thing.

"Not at all. Thank you Zarsan." Kerrin smiled. "I'm sure your position in Luh is in good hands. Jonas Marsh is an excellent soldier."

"It's all in hand, sir." Zarsan assured him. Now wasn't the time to bother the Emperor with his own domestic situation.

"We should make our way to the Oaths." Kerrin referred to the Hall of Oaths, where business such as Imperial appointments were conducted.

The Oaths was quite austere. The Crypt Home was twice as lavish and ornate. Kerrin stood behind a rich oak table that had taken four men to lift. Waylon stood to his right, and Lafi stood to the right of Waylon. Along the edges of the room, various members of the Government were seated and the Swearer of Oaths sat at his own smaller table. Zarsan walked confidently to the front of the room and caught the look of distaste on Waylon's face. All that did was increase Zarsan's confidence out of sheer stubbornness. The service itself was spoken largely by Kerrin, with the occasional input of the Swearer of Oaths. Zarsan lost concentration after twenty minutes so he admired Kerrin for having memorised the entire forty five minute ceremony. At last, Kerrin took two gold bands and clamped them on Zarsan's wrists. Everything was finalised by a list of signatures, including those of Waylon and Lafi.

Under the circumstances, Regent Zarsan's ascension banquet was quite modest, much to Zarsan's relief. He was pleased Florian was there, at Zarsan's request, otherwise he'd have known no one on a conversation level. Overall, Zarsan found it taxing and rather pompous, despite the reduced numbers.

"Regent Zarsan." Emperor Kerrin's smile was genuine. "I'm getting word from the streets out there that you are a very popular Regent."

"I am?" Zarsan was quite surprised.

"The people know you Zarsan. They've seen you out there with them as an ordinary citizen. Sometimes people don't even get to see their Regents until they're appointed due to them being from the Classes in the Clouds." Kerrin smiled in amusement.

"You'll be an excellent Regent Zarsan. I know these things."

"I appreciate your confidence in me. I have much to learn and I know you're an excellent teacher."

"Lesson one is tomorrow morning in the Hall. Emperor Waylon insisted on a meeting." Kerrin couldn't repress an irritated sigh and Zarsan tried so hard not to notice. "Oh it's fine for you, young Zarsan. The man's trying to see me off through lack of sleep."

"You really should rest, sir." Zarsan told him. "Even Emperors need time to themselves on occasions."

"You're right. Emperor Waylon is distracted by the wine table. I'll escape through the library. Until tomorrow morning."

"Until tomorrow morning." Zarsan reciprocated. It would be another three hours before Zarsan could make his own exit.

[Book Index](#)   [Emperors And Kings](#)   [Previous](#)   [Next](#)

## Chapter 4

Two weeks passed by and Zarsan's first task every morning was to read Harper's letters and to reply to them.

"Florian! Harper says Zari slept all through the night." Zarsan beamed proudly.

"Lady Harper is very lucky, in that case. My Flora kept Phylis and myself awake for three years. I'll take your letter to the Scouts."

"Many thanks." Zarsan stood and put on his cloak. "I've been called to the Hall. I was supposed to be inspecting the barracks this morning."

"Would you like the carriage?" Florian asked with a smirk.

"Florian I can all but see into the Hall windows from here. See you later in the day." Zarsan waved and left for the Hall. It wasn't a surprise to see Emperor Waylon in there, as well as Regent Lafi, in the company of Emperor Kerrin. Waylon had spent a great deal of time in the West, which was quite normal after the appointment of a new Regent.

"Zarsan. Apologies for the short notice." Kerrin indicated a seat for Zarsan. "Emperor Waylon brought my attention to a ... point of concern. As you know, a Regent's position is fortified and the stability of Agalia is strengthened by various pacts and trade deals. You may not be aware of Regent Lafi's own betrothal to Lady ... umm ... Crowfoot who ... "

"Clayfoot." Lafi corrected.

"Quite. Lady Clayfoot who comes from a very respected scholastic family right here in West Agalia. This is a prime example of the types of alliances that keep Agalia strong." Kerrin tried to fathom out Zarsan's expression.

"Political marriages. Yes I'm aware of them." Zarsan answered carefully.

"You object to them?" Kerrin asked warily.

"No, sir, not at all, if the circumstances are right. I know of many such marriages that have lasted a lifetime and been very happy unions. Sir, I think I'd like to speak with you in private." Zarsan had a feeling as to where this was going.

"*Regent Zarsan.*" Waylon heaved. "This is a very straightforward matter. You don't need Emperor Kerrin's personal attention."

"It's fine, Waylon, it's fine. Members of the Government know they have my ear should they need it." Kerrin said reassuringly.

"Defeating the purpose of an Imperial meeting." Waylon said shortly. "What Emperor Kerrin is trying to say is that I think it would be productive and beneficial if you entered into a marriage with a party from the East, as Lafi did with his betrothal."

"Emperor Waylon, it would be productive and beneficial, I'm sure." Zarsan was feeling light headed. "In my case, I must request that another form of alliance be found. I've recently invested in the building trade, I'm sure I could organise a trade alliance with a business in the East."

"We need more than that!" Waylon raised his voice. "This is the Agalian Empire we're talking about!"

"Waylon, please." Kerrin got to his feet. "I knew we shouldn't have just sprung this on him. Zarsan, Emperor Waylon went to the trouble of selecting a Lady with whom you're familiar. He ..."

"Sir I really must speak with you alone." Zarsan said urgently.

"You do not interrupt an Emperor!" Waylon snapped and Kerrin let out a weary sigh. "I graciously propose my younger sister, Kez, for this marriage. She's thirty three and I'm sure you'll agree that she's a Lady of the highest order and standing."

"Emperor Waylon, I certainly have had the honour of meeting Lady Kez on quite a few occasions and honour is the correct word. I admire and respect your sister enormously." Zarsan said truthfully. Lady Kez Boon was intelligent, refined, funny, gracious and beautiful. He never could understand how siblings could be so vastly different.

"I'll have her informed and brought here ... "

"I have a family already!" Zarsan blurted out. Both Emperors, and Lafi, stared at him in astonishment. "In Luh. I have a month old son. I know, I should have mentioned it." He said to Kerrin.

"It would have been useful, yes." Kerrin snapped.

"It makes no difference!" Waylon shouted. "The fact that his wife isn't here in Agalia with him, means that she hasn't got Agalian citizenship. A divorce would be all but automatic, bar a few minor details."

"That isn't an option, Emperor Waylon." Zarsan glared at the Eastern ruler, deciding not to correct the assumption regarding his marital status. "Your proposal is extremely gracious and I know I'm certainly not worthy of Lady Kez but I love my family a great deal. No divorce."

"Your refusal of my sister is a huge insult to me." Waylon hissed nastily.

"I'm sorry you see it that way, sir." Zarsan replied. "Obviously that was never my intention. As I said earlier, I hold Lady Kez in the utmost esteem."

"Lady Kez who is an Agalian Lady." Waylon growled.

"Clearly this needs further discussion." Kerrin interrupted loudly. The last thing anyone needed was bigoted comments regarding a person's geographical location. "We weren't aware of your domestic situation, Zarsan so obviously that wasn't regarded as a factor. I'm sure you'd agree that under different circumstances, Emperor Waylon's offer would be more than pleasing." Kerrin knew Waylon was furious. He'd been embarrassed and also saw the whole thing as a personal refusal of his family by a man who he saw as inferior to himself. There was also the matter of the Regent's wife being Luhan, and his son being half Luhan.

"Absolutely. That was the point I was trying to make earlier, albeit in a very clumsy fashion." Zarsan tried to explain. He could tell by Waylon's face, however, that the damage had been done. "I apologise again for not making my situation clear straight away."

"And indeed you should." Kerrin said sternly. "You may leave us now, Zarsan. Emperor Waylon and myself have much to discuss." Zarsan nodded and gratefully left the Hall. He needed time to take in what he'd just heard. Would Lady Kez see it as an insulting refusal? Had her brother even mentioned any of this to her? He genuinely did like Lady Kez and would hate to think she'd be offended by him. Was he to blame? This marriage was probably proposed in good faith because neither Emperor knew about Harper and Zari, and that was Zarsan's fault. One thing he did know for certain, he'd never give up on Harper as long as they both breathed, and he would not have her insulted, as Waylon was about to do a few times had Kerrin not interrupted.

"Oh Harper, I need you here with me." He sighed, sinking into one of the chairs in his sitting room. "The longest three months of my life."

"This cannot be allowed!" Waylon roared as soon as Lafi had been dismissed too. "He must divorce this woman and marry Kez. I've refused many offers on her hand for such a situation as this and what does your new Regent do? Wed a Luhan and father a half Luhan son! It cannot be allowed, Kerrin! It will take us both to force the

divorce."

"That's only a piece of paper, Waylon. He won't give them up. I've known Zarsan all his life and I know it will take far more than the both of us to make him disown his family. Had I known he had a family, I'd never have collaborated with you on the notion of a marriage to Lady Kez. I was as shocked as you were and Zarsan was wrong in not telling me." Kerrin actually sided with his Regent, secretly of course. His own marriage to Celeste had been of their own free will and he couldn't imagine forfeiting that for anything.

"Wrong? Wrong? It's inexcusable! If he won't give up on this Luhan in favour of Kez then he should resign his position as Regent." Waylon shouted.

"A bit extreme, Waylon." Kerrin scowled at his counterpart. "Also a bad idea. Have you taken notice of the people out there? Not just here in the West, but in the East too. Zarsan's the most popular Regent appointed in modern times. His resignation would raise a few questions out there."

"So we answer those questions! A Regent who will not attempt to strengthen our Empire is a weak Regent."

"Waylon, come and sit down." Kerrin indicated a seat for the furious Emperor. "Our citizens are ordinary folk who work hard for a living. Of course they're concerned and interested in the stability of Agalia, but a good old style love story will soon get their attention. You must also remember that Zarsan isn't from our Noble classes. He was raised out there with our people, Waylon. When I appointed him my Regent, I effectively created a peoples' hero. If he does resign, and I do think he will if he's pushed into it, and the reasons for that resignation are given, we, as Emperors, will be about as popular as the pox. The citizens don't put the true importance to political marriages because they have no need to enter into them. We need our people, Waylon. The Empire is nothing without its people."

"I hold you responsible for this, Kerrin." Waylon pointed his finger at the Western Emperor. "It was a disaster waiting to happen right from the start!"

"If it makes you feel better, then yes I take the responsibility." Kerrin told him. "Marriages are a good way to secure stability but they aren't the only way. An alternative will be found. Meanwhile, I have issues to raise with my Regent. Excuse me Waylon. We'll speak of this again, I'm sure."

"We'd better." Waylon said darkly. "I'll be in my villa, should any apologies or changes of view arise. Good day, Kerrin." The Emperors left by opposite doors.

Emperor Kerrin simply walked into Zarsan's villa while he was writing to Harper.

"Emperor Kerrin!" Zarsan leapt to his feet.

"Easy, Zarsan. Sit back down." Kerrin waved towards the chair before lowering himself into a more comfy one. "Not the wisest of omissions. Why in the Realm didn't you tell me you had a wife in Luh?"

"It hardly seemed appropriate, or important, sir, given the situation here. I was wrong. Of course it's important for an Emperor to know of his Regent's domestic situation. I'm genuinely sorry for all the embarrassment that caused you, and Emperor Waylon. I hope Emperor Waylon will come to accept that it isn't a personal snub and reassures Lady Kez likewise." Zarsan said truthfully.

"I'm not completely sure that the Lady even knows of this so put that from your mind." Kerrin told him and Zarsan was very relieved. "As lovely as Lady Kez is, she'd actually be a dubious choice and concerns would surely have been raised."

"How so? I thought someone like that would be ideal. In other circumstances, of course, not mine."

"Think about it. His nephew rules the East, his neice's husband rules the West. Potentially, Waylon could end up with two decendants ruling the whole of Agalia. I'll not point that out to him if you don't." Kerrin laughed. "Seriously, Zarsan, any other surprises? Now would be a good time to say before I try and negotiate an alternative alliance method."

"I'd hate a repeat of this mess." Zarsan took a deep breath. "I'm not married."

"What?" Kerrin looked quite close to slapping Zarsan. "Would you care to explain?"

"My betrothed isn't twenty one for another three months so she can't obtain Agalian citizenship, nor marry. I'm in the Military, sir. I cant marry anyone who isn't an Agalian citizen, or has dual citizenship."

"I see." Kerrin nodded slowly. "So your family will be here in three months? All married and legal?"

"Yes. My biggest obstacle was finances, but I'm in a much more stable position than I was in Luh." Zarsan told him.

"Very well. I suggest we keep this between ourselves. The situation is tense enough. Florian?"

"He knows, sir. He was there when my son was born. Er ... well not there as such, in the garden." Zarsan waffled. "I trust Florian but I'd appreciate your advice."

"Florian is a fine man." Kerrin got to his feet. "Despite this confusion, you're doing an excellent job, Zarsan."

"Thank you, sir." Zarsan watched the Emperor get into his carriage, then he went to finish his letter.

[Book Index](#)   [Emperors And Kings](#)   [Previous](#)   [Next](#)

## Chapter 5

Emperor Waylon and Regent Lafi sat in Waylon's villa in West Agalia. The Emperor was not in a happy mood.

"This can't happen!" Waylon growled.

"The effrontery of him!" Lafi snorted in outrage. "We are far better than that, Uncle. Put it out of your mind."

"You don't get it, do you? It goes way beyond the effrontery of the man. If he marries Kez then I'll have my niece's husband as Regent in the West, and my nephew as Regent in the East. Once the lot of you get to reproducing, I'd have two family members on both Agalian seats. Family loyalties are the strongest of all, Lafi." Waylon explained.

"I never thought of that." Lafi conceded.

"You haven't thought of much. Do we really want a Luhan village girl as an Emperor's Consort? We'd be a complete laughing stock to the entire Realm! Even more serious is her son. Zarsan has a ready made Regent in waiting and he's a half-breed. It makes a mockery of everything that Agalia is. It takes an Agalian to run an Empire. Ludrig's shower have proved that. They're all left to the wind down there. What next? Prince Keegen in charge here? Some random Golon madman? Agalia is what it is because we're Agalian, Lafi."

"I couldn't agree more." Lafi nodded. "I can't see a way through it, though. We can't force him to disown his wife and son and if we force his resignation there'll be riots out there."

"Blast the man and blast Kerrin for being so useless. There's always a way through. It's just a matter of finding it." Waylon pursed his lips. "We need to look harder, Lafi."

///

"Only another three weeks." Zarsan smiled and handed Florian his daily reply to Harper's letters. "Our villa up on North Ridge should be in perfect order by then."

"It's looking really good Zarsan. I was up that way yesterday evening. Lady Harper will love it. Anything else for me to do?" Florian pocketed the letter.

"Nothing exceptional, no. I'm in an Administrative meeting this morning, then checking the rotas in the barracks after that. See you later in the day, Florian."

///

"Are you sure he's the right one?" The jailor of the city prison lead Regent Lafi down a damp, stone tunnel and down to the worst dungeons that East Agalia had to offer. "I've never known a Pardon for a Golon spy in all the time I've worked here."

"Daclar Hood. He's the right one. The details of the legalities are not your concern." Lafi stood before a filthy cell containing a filthy looking prisoner. "You can leave us, Jailor. I'll make my own way back."

"I'd rather stay, sir. He's a nasty set of goods."

"I trust that three inch thick, solid wooden door. Thank you, Jailor." The jailor shrugged and ambled back along the tunnel.

"Did he say Pardon? A Pardon for me? I really do believe that." Hood laughed. "Whatever it is you can shove it." He spat on the floor.

"That's fine. I believe Fynn Olgan is down here somewhere." Lafi feigned disinterest.

"Wait! Fynn Olgan is scum and that Pardon doesn't go to the likes of him. I'm listening."

"I thought you might."

///

Zarsan was almost at the barracks when an errand boy caught him up and told him he was wanted urgently at the Hall. Both Emperors and Lafi were already there.

"Zarsan." Kerrin welcomed him. "We have a situation in Jullit. Farmers and merchants are rioting in the streets due to increased taxes on grain. This message was sent to East Agalia and by good fortune, Regent Lafi was there on business. Obviously he came straight here with the message." Zarsan took the missive and read it. He was actually quite surprised at this news. Jullit was a sizable city about five days ride north of Agalia. Because of its remoteness, Jullit had been granted a large degree of independence, including an Administrative Government and its own army division.

"It seems that lives are in danger, Zarsan." Kerrin said. "There have been numerous reports of injury and damage to property."

"I'm surprised it was too much for their own army. I've worked with them and they're very efficient." Zarsan nodded.

"Be that as it may, they need help." Waylon retrieved the missive. "Regent Lafi has offered to lead a section of our troops to Jullit to quash these riots." Lafi nodded although he clearly had misgivings about this. Zarsan only just stopped himself from

laughing. Lafi Boon couldn't lead a sing-song let alone a military party and Zarsan had actually seen Lafi on a horse. It amused him for days. Waylon continued. "However, Lafi would be the first to admit that he's not qualified for the task. He saw it as his duty as the longest serving Regent between the two of you."

"That's quite astonishing." Kerrin said in bewilderment and Zarsan had to suppress another laugh. "An astonishing offer to make, I meant. Quite noble of you, Regent Lafi. May I suggest that we ask Regent Zarsan to lead these troops? It seems rather ridiculous to send Lafi when we have a trained General sitting right here with us. Zarsan?"

"I'd see it as part of my duties, sir." Zarsan accepted and Lafi deflated in relief. "I agree with Emperor Kerrin, Regent Lafi. That was a very brave and admirable offer to make. I'd be honoured if you'd like to accompany us."

"I feel I must decline." Lafi smiled. "I'm not a trained soldier and I fear I'd be a hinderance."

"If that's your wish." Zarsan said smoothly. "Right! I'll take Blue Squad. They're already kitted up for the border patrol. I have a problem, sir."

"One we can resolve, I hope." Waylon said testily.

"The Division in Luh is due to change over. I have detail lists and was about to have them delivered by an escorted Scout." Zarsan said.

"I'm sure we can sort that out." Waylon smiled.

"Thank you. They are quite important lists, sir, that's why they go with an armed escort." Zarsan reinforced the point.

"Understood. I'll see to it personally, as a response to your understanding of Lafi's limitations in the military department." Waylon said graciously. "Good luck."

Zarsan made time to write another letter to Harper, telling her he'd still write every day but for her not to worry if his letters were delayed. Blue Squad were so organised that they'd sorted themselves out and were ready to go. Zarsan led his men out of the city gates and it felt wonderful. He loved being soldier and he missed being on active duty. Despite the seriousness of riots, Zarsan was quite looking forward to it. He'd been on the Jullit route many times and knew there were established spots to make camp. Zarsan intended to make good time and stop at camp two.

"What's the plan sir?" Captain Gwyn asked as they made camp.

"Meeting with Overseer Granger. We can help better if we know all the

circumstances. Grain riots! I thought they came to an end decades ago." Zarsan shook his head.

"Well something's gone wrong quite quickly. My brother was in Jullit not two weeks ago and all was fine." Gwyn shrugged.

"We can't underestimate the situation. We work on the assumption that there are full blown riots and be prepared accordingly." Zarsan said and Gwyn nodded his agreement.

The situation couldn't have been more overestimated. Overseer Granger met Zarsan at the city gates and looked rather confused, moreso when he saw five dozen men behind him.

"Riots?" Granger blinked a few times. "Sir, we had absolutely nothing that could constitute a riot."

"Evidently." Zarsan was very annoyed indeed. "I'm not sure how such a miscommunication happened but it's unacceptable."

"It most certaily is!" Granger agreed. "My Advisor was with me when I sent out the report and I mentioned no riots. Why would I?"

"So what necessesitated this report in the first place?" Zarsan asked testily.

"A drunken brawl outside the City Hall." Granger sighed heavily. "The local Watch had it sorted out in minutes. The City Hall door was damaged during the fight and I'm legally obliged to notify Agalia when government property is damaged due to a violent act. I did mark the letter accordingly, sir, as a low priority issue."

"That's not the letter I read, in that case." Zarsan exhaled loudly. "May we look around the City, Overseer Granger? That's for my own report. I owe you no mistrust."

"Certainly, Regent Zarsan. I can't imagine what's happened here. I feel like I must apologise to you. I'm sure the Agalian army has better things to do and I know the Regent must have." Granger lead Zarsan and Gwyn into Jullit.

"I doubt it's your fault, Granger." Zarsan said, much to Granger's relief. "Low priority missives are just ordinary letters delivered by ordinary Scouts. Am I right in saying that many messeges are collected at once then sorted out by region? We have a similar system in Agalia."

"That's right, sir. The collections destined for Agalia make the usual stops at the camp sites, then the collections are handed over to your own Scouts in Agalia." Granger

explained.

"It's my guess that your message will turn up eventually, swept under some collection hut cupboard or it's been blown to the winds. Lost accidentally, Granger. It happens every day." Zarsan theorised.

"But you did receive a scroll from Jullit. We've had no Grain Riots for over twenty years, sir. I can swear to that."

"That I'm not sure about. I'll speak with Regent Lafi on our return. I'm sure we can unravel this between us." Zarsan assured the Overseer. "Have you no objections to us making camp outside your south wall?"

"None at all. I'll have rooms provided for you, Regent Zarsan."

"There's no need, the camp will be fine." Zarsan smiled at the look on the Overseer's face. "You can't take the soldier out of the man, no matter how many titles you give him."

[Book Index](#)

[Emperors And Kings](#)

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)

## Chapter 6

"Waylon there's no need for you to go yourself." Kerrin smiled at the other Emperor.

"I assured Regent Zarsan that I'd attend to the issue in person and I will. I'll leave for Luh in a few hours." Waylon answered.

"Only if you're sure. I'll organise an escort. Regent Lafi?" Kerrin asked doubtfully.

"He'll remain here. Please see him as your own Regent in mine, and Zarsan's absence."

"Thank you, Waylon. This is really very noble of you and I'm sure Zarsan will think so too." Kerrin said seriously.

"It's the least I can do. Regent Zarsan and I didn't get off to a very good start, did we? And he did spare Lafi a five day trek to Jullit." Waylon shrugged his shoulders.

"Your initial meeting was based on a series of misunderstandings, Waylon, that's all. It's in the past." Kerrin assured Waylon. He was actually quite impressed that the Emperor was trying to make amends, in his own way. "Have a safe journey."

Waylon avoided the barracks completely and went to join his escort at the gates. His horse skills were better than those of his nephew but he still hated the wretched things and treks through the Empire weren't his idea of fun at all.

"We stop at that smudge of a village to the north of Luh." Waylon ordered his escort.

"Gilby, sir." One rider answered. "Do I ride ahead and secure accommodation, sir? It is only a very small village and barely suitable for an Emperor."

"Oh don't fuss. Do you think I'm going to be there long?" Waylon snapped.

"Of course not sir. Wouldn't you prefer Luh? It's only an extra mile and a bit more comfortable."

"Are you questioning my order?" Waylon shouted. "Gilby!" The rider simply nodded and went to tell the rest of the escort.

The same rider, a man named Hannet, was sent on to Luh to escort Leader Jonas to Gilby to meet the Emperor.

"What? Are you mad?" Jonas said in surprise. "What in the Creek is he doing in Gilby and why weren't we informed?"

"Feel free to ask him yourself, sir. I like my job, my pay and my house." Hannet said ruefully.

"The place has gone mad. Come on." Jonas swung onto his horse and headed north.

Emperor Waylon had taken over the only Inn in Gilby. He was busy ordering the Innkeep around when Jonas was shown in.

"Sir. I trust all is well?" Jonas said in concern.

"I assume so yes. Calm yourself Leader Jonas." Waylon waved his hand. "Just a minor holdup I'd imagine. The Division that was meant to relieve you had been called away on urgent business in Jullit. The Divisional Generals saw no need to delay the entire shift so you are to allow two Squads of your men to return to Agalia. The rest will join them once they're relieved, as per schedule."

"Sir we only have three Squads in total. You're certain the Generals said two Squads?" Jonas was extremely doubtful. That would leave Luh virtually defenseless.

"I didn't think I'd need a written assurance that I was telling the truth, soldier!" Waylon snapped. "Or is it my memory you're questioning? Two Squads!"

"Sir the men here won't mind delaying their shift until their relief gets here. One Squad will leave Luh very exposed." Jonas argued.

"You are trying my patience, soldier. I've relayed the order and now I'll give it to you directly, as your Emperor. Send two Squads back to Agalia immediately." Waylon shouted.

"Yes sir." Jonas said stiffly. "Sir? It's an honour to meet you. I didn't expect to see an Emperor out here in Gilby."

"Yes well this is a favour to Regent Zarsan." Waylon said arrogantly. "He wanted me to apologise for any inconvenience. My being here in person, is an act of good faith."

"Yes sir. I'll go and speak to the men." Jonas excused himself, his brain in a state of confusion. Zarsan had endorsed this? It was sheer stupidity! Luh had been protected fully for four years, despite the lack of activity. "Orders from the Emperor, Jonas. You haven't alot of choice."

Waylon exhaled loudly in relief. This plot had gone remarkably smoothly and that

made him edgy. He smiled to himself when he thought about the origins of his plan. It was actually Zarsan that had provided the idea. He's outlayed it step by step, and in detail, every time he sent a report from Luh. Distract Ludrig and thin out the Agalian troops in Luh, was the groundwork. The tricky bit was informing the Golon and including them in this groundwork, namely the distraction of Ludrig. Then the Golon were welcome to Luh. This proved to be a simple matter to address. The jails were full of Golon convicts who'd be glad of a chance of glory among their people and orchestrating an attack on Luh would be glorious indeed. Not that Golon would be allowed to keep the town, it was far too important. Waylon was confident that Ludrig would soon recapture the place. The jailor was already dead and so was the Scout from Jullit. Jonas could get a reprieve if he believed this order came from Zarsan. Anyone else could be dealt with as any issues arose.

[Book Index](#)

[Emperors And Kings](#)

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)

## Chapter 7

King Ludrig of the Shires sat on his beautiful horse and addressed a large group of men, also on horseback. His son, Prince Keegan, was at his father's side on an equally impressive beast.

"Right you lot!" Ludrig raised his voice. "We need a dozen men from each Gang to form a Sixth Gang. That's the one after Five." Ripples of laughter rumbled around the men. "Keegan and myself will lead Gang Six. The rest of you patrol the same areas as last time, and the time before that, and the time before that. Good! Sod off."

"Where is Gang Six going?" Someone shouted.

"There's always one nosy sod eh?" Ludrig rolled his eyes. "Our Scouts have reported Golon sightings on this edge of the Swamp. I believe Finnus and his thugs saw a group of them building a bridge. Over what, I have no idea. There's bugger all there except swamps. Anyway, Finnus went and gave them a hiding and trashed their bridge. There have been a few more sightings of the sods loitering about and on two occasions they managed to set fires on my land. Little shits. Basically, we want to make sure they're just being pains in the arse and not up to anything more sinister. Now will you sod off! Please? Come on Keegan." Ludrig moved out.

"They're just making a nuisance of themselves." Keegan said. "Finnus breaking their bridge won't have helped." He laughed.

"He did right! We can't have that rabble constructing things at random. Why a bridge anyway? There's nothing to bridge to or from. That's a bit iffy Keegan." Ludrig nodded wisely.

"Fire!" One of Gang Six shouted. "Copstan Wood!" This was on Ludrig's land.

"Right! They're for it this time." Ludrig headed for Copstan Woods. "I want to know why they're doing this crap. They know the fires won't spread in this dampness."

"Fire! Tannisland scrubs!"

"What in the Creek ..." Ludrig spun round.

"Another fire, sir! Draftwood Cops!"

"Get Gang Five, Keegan!" Ludrig ordered. "One fire wont spread. Four could."

"Fire! Uhm Bunkers!"

"I'll get to it." Keegan rode off. In the short time he was gone, eight more fires sprang up along the Golan-Ludrigshires border.

"Blast and pox!" Ludrig swore "Get Gang Four to the Bunkers! The stables are near there!" Keegan swung round and galloped away.

"Fire! Sir! Luh's ablaze!" Someone bellowed. Ludrig's innards turned to water. He looked north and could see the orange glow above Luh, and the swirling, as filled clouds.

"Sacrad shit." Ludrig said in horror. "To Luh! We've been duped! Get to Luh, all of you!" He roared as he galloped towards the town.

"What in the Realm is going on?" Keegan shouted, keeping up with his father.

"The Golon grew a brain!" Ludrig replied. "Where the crap are the Agalians?"

"Blessed Stars." Keegen almost sobbed when Luh was in sight, or what was left of Luh. Everything was alight and the Golon ran amock, butchering and slaying anyone in sight.

"You bastards! Attack at full fury!" Ludrig's roar was reciprocated by the rest of his men. "For Luh! You scum!"

Waylon could hear the din and smell the smoke. It made him physically sick. Up until now, he'd pushed the Golon's notorious barbarity and cruelty out of his mind. Now he was a mere mile from it.

"Where is my rescue party!" He shrieked hysterically at the Innkeep.

"I've sent my stablelad to Agalia sir. He has the fastest horse and he's the best rider in Gilby, sir. Please, I beg you to take cover in my cellar. Your escort are there already." Inkeep babbled.

"I will not hide in a cellar!" Waylon was in tears of sheer shock at what he'd caused.

"Then I'll stay here too, sir." Inkeep stood bravely behind the bar.

The noise and the smell persisted on for seven hours before the yells and screams lessened in volume. The Agalian army would be on its way down by now, but without General Zarsan. Waylon took a deep breath and walked shakily out into the Inn yard. The fight was tailing off and Waylon knew that Ludrig had routed the Golon. If he

still needed any help, the Agalians would be there within the hour. Gradually, Hannet and the rest of the escort appeared in the yard.

"You cowardly scum. I'll see you all punished for deserting your Emperor." Waylon snarled. "Take the chance to redeem yourselves and accompany me to the outskirts of Luh. We go on foot." He strode off and the escort looked at each other uncertainly. "The penalty for deserting an Emperor in a battle is beheading." Waylon's voice reminded them they had little choice.

"Mercy save us." Hannet said in horror when he saw the carnage in Luh. Everything in sight was charred and black and bodies of men, women and children littered the streets. Ludrig's men moved among the desolation in silence, many of them in tears. Waylon turned away and vomited violently at the sight in front of him. Hannet didn't have the sentiment to ask if he was coping. He didn't care if he was or not.

"Hannet I have special orders for you." Waylon gasped, dabbing his mouth with a handkerchief. "Two people from Luh are of a very special importance to Regent Zarsan. The Mayor's daughter and her son. We owe it to the Regent to find out the fate of those two."

"I think we could take a good guess." Hannet said in disgust. He knew Regent Zarsan had a wife and son here. He'd heard that Waylon wouldn't grant her dual citizenship, but that may have been gossip.

"I don't want to guess and I'm sure the Regent wouldn't want to either! Go and see what you can discover, then get back here to me." Waylon walked away, towards a line of trees, so he didn't have to look at the wreckage of Luh while the rest of the escort remained and simply stared in petrified shock.

Hannet was only gone for twenty minutes when he returned and made his way quickly to Waylon.

"Sir, sadly the Mayor was killed inside his home. It was the first place they attacked. Scum!"

"His daughter and grandson?" Waylon asked impatiently.

"Sir they survived!" Hannet smiled and Waylon felt the colour drain from his face. "Ludrig's men found them under the pier along with other survivors. They were taken to Ludrigshires with the other refugees."

"That's fantastic." Waylon felt sick again. All this for nothing? "Did the others see you returning, Hannet?"

"No sir, I don't think so. I came round that way. I'll go and ..." Hannet felt the blade

slide between his ribs and never finished his sentence. The rest of the escort were still in shock and Waylon found them huddled together where he'd left them.

"Back to Gilby. We wait for my rescue party." Waylon announced.

"We don't wait for Hannel?" One of them asked.

"Hannel is dead. He saw fit to race off into that carnage and I saw him slain. Back to Gilby." Waylon set off quickly and walked straight into King Ludrig.

"Waylon Boon. I thought it was you lurking about. What in black torment are you doing here?" Ludrig's voice rumbled.

"I was on my way to deliver a message when this battle broke out. I was stranded in Gilby." Waylon tried to sound aloof, and didn't really manage it.

"Emperors deliver messages these days in Agalia? Things must have gone downhill."

"I was under an obligation of decency, Ludrig. Excuse me." Waylon tried to sidestep the big man.

"Not yet, Waylon. Did you come from Gilby just to be morbid? I doubt that. What do you want?" Ludrig asked flatly.

"I was an associate of the Mayor's." Waylon lied. "I'll enquire at a more appropriate time."

"I'll save you the job. A huddle of bodies were found at the Mayor's house. I recognised a Mayoral seal on the finger of one of them. He's dead, Waylon." Ludrig informed him.

"And his family?" A huddle of bodies?

"I didn't know he had a family." Ludrig shrugged.

"Sir! The pier is going to collapse and the Agalians are coming!" Someone shouted to Ludrig.

"I'll return to Gilby and await an armed escort home." Waylon went to join his original, unarmed escort.

[Book Index](#)   [Emperors And Kings](#)   [Previous](#)   [Next](#)

## Chapter 8

Zarsan and his men were on the homestretch headed towards Agalia when he saw a single horserider who appeared to be in a hurry to get to them. Zarsan could tell by the erratic style that the rider wasn't an expert.

"Gwyn, would you go and see if that man needs ... wait a minute." Zarsan squinted at the figure. "That's Florian!. I'll go." He sensed immediate danger and set off at a gallop.

"Zarsan!" Florian called and almost toppled off the horse as he attempted to slow it down. "Zarsan it's Luh."

"What about Luh?" Zarsan grabbed the reigns of Florian's horse.

"The Emperors are waiting in the Hall for you but I couldn't sit any longer. Luh was completely sacked by the Golon. The place ... Zarsan!" Zarsan set off at breakneck speed for Agalia.

Both Emperors and Lafi spang to their feet when Zarsan burst into the room.

"What happened?" He demanded. "How did that happen? I told you and better told you about that cursed vulnerability! Are the Golon still there?"

"Sit down, Zarsan." Kerrin said firmly. The glare that accompanied the order made Zarsan drop heavily into a chair. "No the Golon are not still there, Ludrig interveined and routed them but not before they'd completely demolished the place. I'm sorry, Zarsan, Ludrig himself found the Mayor's body."

"No." Zarsan shook his head. "No it can't be true. His ... my ... "

"Waylon inquired in person about your family, Zarsan. Ludrig reported that others perished with the Mayor and this was in his home. I'm so sorry." Kerrin said sincerely. Zarsan just stared at the table in numb shock.

"Zarsan, may I offer my deepest sympathy." Waylon said.

"Where was the Luh Division?" Zarsan mumbled.

"Most of them were on their way back here, Zarsan. The men left in Luh were to return when your Squad returned from Jullit to relieve them." Waylon told him.

"What?" Zarsan turned to look at him. "Why? That isn't how it's done. We don't split a patrol division. Who endorsed that?"

"I did and I'll regret it for the rest of my life." Waylon hung his head. "I allowed the men to come back here because Luh has been so stable for four years. I thought I was granting the men a sort of reward. I had no business doing that Zarsan, I'm not a soldier. The results were catastrophic and I don't know how I'll live with myself."

"In all fairness, Ludrig was distracted." Regent Lafi spoke up. "Reports say that there was barely two dozen men at that border. Even if there was no Agalian troops at all in Luh, Ludrig could have kept them out normally."

"Luh had the misfortune of both these occurrences happening at once. I can't ever remember such a tragic coincidence in all my years." Kerrin said sadly.

"Ludrig has taken responsibility for rebuilding the town but Agalia has given a large contribution. I also gave a sizable donation from my family accounts." Waylon said but Zarsan just nodded blankly.

"Zarsan?" Kerrin said gently. "The Scouts informed us of the miscommunication regarding Jullit. Don't worry about it. Go and rest."

"I can't." Zarsan said in daze. "I have to go to Luh."

"No, Zarsan, no." Kerrin rested his hand on Zarsan's shoulder. "If I thought there was anything to be done, I'd be right there with you. Leave it to Ludrig, lad. Don't torture yourself."

"I can't ... I don't know ... "

"Regent Lafi, could I ask you to send for Councillor Florian, please, Physician Tallow too. Don't object, Zarsan. I know grief and I've seen what it can do. Let people help you." Kerrin was extremely distraught and his pity for his Regent was overwhelming. Zarsan nodded numbly and left when Florian arrived.

///

Some of the Luhan refugees couldn't remember aspects of the attack, or their evacuation to Ludrigshires. Harper wasn't so lucky. She remembered every detail of it. Because it was a warm evening, she'd taken Zari out for a stroll by the harbour when the Golon struck. She'd spent over seven hours cowering in an old fishing boat under the pier before one of Ludrig's soldiers found her. Her and Zari had been moved by cart over the border and never got the chance to see her home again. The farmers and workers that were close to the border provided shelter for the refugees and Harper and Zari spent a week in some stables, complete with three horses. Harper offered to tend the animals in exchange for food and accommodation that wasn't

shared with them. She didn't know the first thing about horses or Shiremen. As it happened, the men trusted only the best to tend their horses, often paying grooms and stablelads more than some soldiers were paid. The stable owner, however, quite admired Harper's willingness to work and was rather amused at her naivety. He gave her single roomed shack which was animal-free and gave her a job scrubbing yards and sweeping floors. Every evening, when they were alone, Harper told Zari all about his handsome father who was an Imperial Regent. She wrote to Zarsan every day, and read her letters to Zari. Sadly she knew of no way to get her letters to Agalia.

"We'll go back to Luh once King Ludrig's fixed it." Harper kissed her six month old son and lay him in a makeshift crib. "Then we can let Daddy know we're there. All three of us can bury Granda Elias properly." This still broke Harper's heart. She'd seen the flames engulf their cottage and heard by gossip that the Mayor had died. Harper had kept quiet. She told no one in the Shires that she was the Mayor's daughter incase it lead back to Zarsan. Obviously Harper was extremely grateful to Ludrig for coming to their rescue, and for giving the Luhans shelter but it was still the Shires, age long adversary of Agalia and Zarsan was the West's Regent. She didn't know enough about politics or truces to take any risks. Zari was the Regent's son and Harper would never put him at risk of any sort. "I love you, Zarsan." Harper sighed sadly and looked out of the tiny window at the clear, star flecked sky. "We're not dead. Please don't think we're dead. Please." A big tear rolled down her cheek. This was the only reason that Harper could think of as to why Zarsan hadn't come for them. She squeezed the thought from her head and made her bed by the dying fire.

Harper had been collecting firewood from the forest floor. She returned to her shack before it got dark, a sling of wood on one hip, and a sling for Zari on the other. Her employer, Stiggs, was throwing all her belongings into the yard.

"Mr Stiggs!" Harper dropped her wood and trotted as fast as she could towards the scene. "Mr Stiggs? What's hapened?"

"Two pregnant sows." Stiggs ambled into Harper's shack.

"What?" Harper followed him. "I'm not with you, Mr Stiggs. I'll take those!" She grabbed her box of letters and diaries out of his hands.

"My sows need the room. Are you with me now?" Stiggs grabbed an armful of blankets and tossed them into Zari's crib, before picking it up and taking it outside.

"Hey! You're throwing me out to make room for your pigs?" Harper said in disbelief. "You can't do that! Zari's just a baby!" Stiggs just shrugged his shoulders. "Where am I to go?" She put Zari in his outdoor crib and began collecting her meagre possessions into a pile. "Mr Stiggs! Stop ignoring me! I have nowhere to go!"

"That isn't my problem. I never agreed to anything long term. You've been here six

months. I need the room." Stiggs planted his fists on his hips.

"Six months and I've worked hard for you!" Harper said angrily. "I've all but repaired every stick and stone in that shack, as well as scrubbing your yards and fixing your fences!"

"And I said it's not my problem! Now get off my land and take your rubbish with you!" Stiggs drew back his foot and prepared to throw a kick at Zari's crib. Harper jumped in front of him and Stigg's big boot took her clean off her feet.

"What in torment is going on?" A man of around thirty years, mounted on a beautiful horse, rode out of the woodland. "Nesh Stiggs! I'm talking to you." His loud voice made Zari cry and Harper scrambled to him. "I think you'd better explain all this, man."

"Nothing to explain." Stiggs shrugged again. "She's been staying in my barn and now I need it."

"For his poxy pigs." Harper snarled at Stiggs. "Pardon my language."

"Is that true, Stiggs? You're evicting her to make room for your pigs?"

"I need the money, Keegan! Pigs bring in money. She doesn't. After six months, it's time she was on her feet." Stiggs folded his arms.

"Six months? You're a Luhan?" The man called Keegan did the adding up. Harper nodded. "Just you and the baby?" Another nod. "Collect your belongings and I'll send for you first thing in the morning. Stiggs, one more night won't make a difference. Let her get her own things together and stay away for the night. Do yourself a favour and don't argue." Stiggs swore horribly and barged away from the shack. "Can you stand on that leg?"

"Yes, I'm fine." Harper struggled to her feet. "Thank you. Had I known he was going to throw me out, I would have looked for another job, and somewhere to stay. Thank you, again."

"Be ready tomorrow and don't aggravate Stiggs. His temper never was too mild." Keegan nodded and rode off into the woods. Harper caught a glimpse of an etching on the leather of the saddle and just looked at Zari in surprise when her brain made a few connections. The etching was the Regal Seal of Ludrig and everyone knew that the King's oldest son was called Keegan. No wonder Stiggs had backed off. Prince Keegan Ludrig was 'sending for her'?

"Well don't we meet some lofty ones, Zari?" Harper smiled. "We'll just take it as it comes."

[Book Index](#)

[Emperors And Kings](#)

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)

## Chapter 9

Regent Lafi and Lady Gertrude Clayfoot were married in East Agalia's Administrative Hall, and a predictably grand banquet ensued. It was the first time that Zarsan had attended a social function since he'd become Regent and it was the first time he'd left West Agalia since the destruction of Luh, a whole year ago. It was also the first time in at least six years that Zarsan had seen Lady Kez Boon. He immediately wondered if Waylon had ever mentioned that proposition to her. The thought made him feel very awkward indeed and his mood hadn't been bouyant to begin with.

"Zarsan! You remember my sister, Kez? Of course you do." Lafi's mother, Lydia looked completely delighted with just about everything.

"How could I forget?" Zarsan smiled politely. "I trust you are well, Lady Kez?"

"Absolutely." Kez smiled in return. Lydia positively beamed and hurried off to socialise. "That couldn't have been more staged if they had thespians and scripts." Kez exhaled heavily. "Forgive my family's lack of tact, Zarsan. I'll drift off shortly."

"There's no need." Zarsan shook his head. "Good company is good company and I'm glad of it."

"I'm also aware of the date, Zarsan. Please don't think we've all forgotten about the destruction of Luh. I know Lafi's wedding is on a very unfortunate anniversary but I doubt Lydia contrived it that way." Kez took a seat on a long couch.

"Im certain she didn't." Zarsan agreed. "How much do you know of my ... connections with Luh?" He asked awkwardly.

"Zarsan, I know. Please don't feel uncomfortable. Waylon told me, or rather shouted it at me. He shouldn't have proposed what he did. I knew nothing of it." Kez said sadly.

"Emperor Waylon wasn't to blame, Lady Kez. I was. I didn't tell the Emperors that I had a wife and child in Luh. It just didn't seem important next to Regent Nian's death. I regret it. It lead to a few hurtful and embarrassing situations." Zarsan said.

"I think we should leave the misunderstandings in the past." Kez smiled and Zarsan agreed completely. Embarrassing Waylon didn't worry him half as much as the thought of embarrassing Lady Kez. "Compassionate situations are rather different. I never did get the chance to offer my condolences to you. I do that now."

"Thank you. Had it been three weeks later, they wouldn't have been there. Harper was to come here and the work on our house on North Ridge was almost complete. Three

weeks." Zarsan said sadly.

"That's tragic, Zarsan. I'm so sorry. Waylon tells me he went to Luh in person."

"He did, yes. I was on my way back from Jullit. I think he was trying to make amends for the rough start we both got off to." Zarsan smiled. "Emperor Waylon and myself always seem to be just out of step with each other."

"That's a polite way of putting it. Thank you." Kez laughed. "Waylon isn't the easiest of people to get along with. Between you and me, nor is Lydia. Poor Claudia Clayfoot was relegated out of the arrangements months ago." She smiled and nodded to where the bride's mother was sitting in a very inconspicuous corner by the fish pond. "Seriously, Zarsan, I've seen three generations of my family go through Regency, to Emperor and I've seen how isolated it can be. I don't mean professionally or politically, I mean friendships. Don't be afraid to class me as a friend."

"I'd be honoured." Zarsan said truthfully. She was absolutely right about the isolation. Zarsan only had a handful of friends, Florian being the main one. "I hope you'll excuse this friend for now, Lady Kez. It's been a long day."

"Of course. Rest well Zarsan."

///

Harper started work in Ludrig's Castle kitchens doing bottom rung jobs. She didn't mind at all. Her and Zari had two rooms next to the kitchen that were warm, dry, and endlessly better than Stigg's piggery, or his stable. Harper had just finished washing Zari in the big tin tub that was used for anything that called for a big tin tub.

"Daddy! Da Da!" Zari stretched from Harper's arms in the direction of four boxes, containing Harper's writing for Zarsan. There were letters, diaries, stories and scribbles from Zari.

"Daddy, yes!" Harper laughed and sat on the floor, her son supported against her legs. "You write him a letter and I'll write him a letter. Yes?"

"Yes. Nettet." Zari clutched the pencil in his chubby hand and scrubbed furiously and the tattered parchment in front of him.

"He took his first steps today." Harper said out loud. She got into the habit of speaking thoughts before writing them down. This was for Zari's benefit so he'd always know how important Zarsan was to them. "The King's horses galloped by us this morning and they looked so big! I stepped back out of the way but Zari tottered towards them with his arms out! I grabbed him and he howled like a dozen banshees. He's so much like you, Zarsan. He has the same eyes and the same hair and he has the same dark skin. Soldiers are the only Agalians that are any good with horses so he must take after you with that too. Ludrig's been surveying the Golan Swamp today. From what I can gather, he only has to seal off one narrow part of it and the Golan will be cut off from that outcrop. It can't happen soon enough. It's time to put this in writing and add it to the rest of your reading. You're going to be a very busy man, Zarsan Holt." Harper smiled and took the pencil from Zari who'd

fallen fast asleep. She added his piece of shredded parchment to the collection, then carried him to the bed they both shared. "He'll come for us soon, Zari.

Ludrig stamped up the staircase towards his private rooms, Keegan following him.

"I hate that scum riddled swamp!" Ludrig raved. "I'm sure the buggers breed in it. How can one, tiny stretch of bog be so tiresome? Eh? I can piss further for blast's sake!"

"It has to be bridges." Keegan nodded. "Four or five bridges over that neck that are wide enough for us to patrol. It's not ideal but ... " He turned round when he discovered he was talking to himself. Ludrig was half a dozen steps behind, frowning at a large tapestry on the wall.

"Who put this up?" Ludrig asked. "I'd forgotten about this. The Battle for the South West Shires."

"Not really a Battle, Father. They'd all took off to the East when they knew you were coming." Keegan reminded him.

"So I'm awesome! Must you nitpick? Anyway, it looks good there." Ludrig approved.

"It's always been there." Keegan rolled his eyes.

"Has it buggery, Keegan. A different one was here this morning."

"That was a dust sheet to hide a dirty great crack in the wall. The tapestry's been cleaned, father. We can actually see it now." Keegan laughed.

"Is that what it is?" Ludrig was quite impressed. "Who cleaned it? They've done an excellent job." Ludrig peered at his embroidered self on the wall.

"One of the kitchen maids. She's been here about six months." Keegan also admired Harper's hard work. "I think she was doing old mistress Ginny a favour. The old girl is nearly seventy and she can't manage alot of her duties above stairs."

"So why is the old crow still here? Give this new girl the job." Ludrig sniffed and Keegan laughed.

"Ginny's been here for fifty years, father. We can't just turf her out. We'll create a new position for the new girl. Head Housekeeper. We'll just keep Ginny occupied with polishing the loot or something." Keegan decided.

"I do the ideas, Keegan." Ludrig grumbled. "Have her moved up here into the Castle." He decided. "Any advancement on that? Hmm?" He asked challengingly. "Good. Sort it." Ludrig flicked an invisible speck of dust off his nice clean tapestry and continued upstairs.

///

Agalia had left an assistance squad in Luh and Captain Jonas Marsh jumped at the chance to lead it. Apart from helping the people and the town that he'd been part of for so long, he knew he couldn't stomach the political wrangling and governmental manoeuvring. Jonas was, of course, loyal to his city and his Emperors but he knew he'd be out of the loop in Agalia and that wasn't what he wanted, not ever.

"Use the original stone foundations, Lek." Jonas and one of Ludrig's men were working on rebuilding the barracks. The building had been burned to the ground.

"We don't need the building that big." Lek argued. "We dig new foundations fifteen feet that way."

"You aren't building on soft swampland like you do at the Shireside. This is the same ground that runs up the coast and forms the Northgate Cliffs." Jonas explained.

"You sure?" Lek prodded the ground with his boot.

"We couldn't never drill wells here. We had to use the ones in the town. It'll take you longer to dig out new foundation trenches than it will to build an extra fifteen foot of building. It'll cost more too."

"Fair comment." Lek nodded. "So you were when all this kicked off?"

"Right here, literally. This space used to be the common room. I've never seen any manoevers so fast in all my time in the army. Of all the times to be two squads light, it was when that lot developed intelligence." Jonas scowled. That still didn't sit right with him.

"I heard that Waylon Boon took it all badly. Almost cracked him up, didn't it?" Lek asked.

"I heard that too." Jonas shrugged his shoulders. "He sent the men back to Agalia. He says it was an act of good faith but to me, that's no excuse, Lek. He had no business making military decisions at all, let alone by himself."

"He's an idiot. He always was. That nephew of his is worse! It's a good job at least one half of Agalia is ruled by sense." Lek said what Jonas was thinking. "I've heard the Luhans saying that Regent Zarsan had a wife and son here. Is that true?"

"Sadly, yes." Jonas nodded. "That's probably why he's never been down here. He's a very fine man, Lek. He didn't deserve that. No one does."

"Those swamp dwelling bastards have a lot to answer for." Lek began marking off the area for the barracks.

[Book Index](#)   [Emperors And Kings](#)   [Previous](#)   [Next](#)

## Chapter 10

Luh was gradually rebuilt and its people gradually returned home. Harper stayed in Ludrigshires. Over the years, her brain had lead her to accept that Zarsan presumed her and Zari dead. Her heart, however, held on to hope.

"So if this tiny wheel is strapped to the big one, then both wheels move together. See?" Harper pointed to a drawn diagram on a scrap of paper. She'd been teaching Zari as best she could and about everything she could. He was only five and yet he could manage basic writing, reading, and numbers. He could also understand how things worked in a way that would be beyond his mother in a few years. "That way, alot of movement can be produced with only a little bit of movement from here. I think."

"Can I go dig in the garden?" Zari completely ignored the diagram.

"We do some reading later. Digging in the garden won't give you a big brain." Harper smiled at her son.

"I'll get big muscles though." Zari flexed his arms and made Harper laugh. "King Ludrig can't read very well and he's big!"

"Prince Keegan can read and he's big too. Reading later, otherwise I'll hide your shovel." Harper nodded. Zari squealed and grabbed his spade from the corner before fleeing through the back door.

"I'm sure that boy grows three feet every time I see him." Keegan said from the door.

"Prince Keegan. I didn't see you there." Harper bobbed her head. "Zari's five now and yes, he's growing so quickly." She said proudly.

"You're educating him yourself?" Keegan pointed to the papers on the table. "That's very impressive."

"Well I'm no teacher but I can teach him what I know. That's not much, by the way." Harper laughed.

"I disagree. That's the basic mechanism for a turbine." Keegan said and Harper wasn't sure what to say. "The only place in Luh where this is used is the army barracks cooling ducts. I remember when the King had them built."

"Yes. I believe so." Harper said quickly. Zarsan had told her all about the cooling ducts when she'd asked about them.

"I don't believe for one second that you frequented the barracks on your own, Harper." Keegan sighed in exasperation. "If Zari's father was an Agalian soldier then his family would be entitled to an insurance, but only if you were in Agalia. Was he a soldier?"

"Yes." Harper's voice trembled. "I can't go to Agalia, Prince Keegan. I have no citizenship. This is the only home Zari's ever known."

"I can understand that. I can quite believe that a widowed mother would fare better here in the Castle than struggling at the bottom in Agalia." Keegan said, looking out of the window. "So you don't want me to look into it for you?"

"No thank you, Prince Keegan. I'm happy here." Harper fought with the tears. She'd come quite close to revealing who her and Zari were on a few occasions. No one would believe her, not now. Even if they did, would that lead them to being used as pawns of some sort? The Regent's son could prove quite useful in the wrong hands. Harper had no doubt that there was nothing wrong at all with King Ludrig's hands. She'd received nothing but kindness from the Ludrigs. Not all Ludrig's subjects were like him, however, and skirmishes still happened. Would she ever be in a position to go to Zarsan herself?

"Your boy is tipping worms on his head." Keegan sniggered and Harper ran out to stop him.

///

Zarsan sat in the Hall with Emperor Kerrin. The Imperial date of abdication was getting ever closer and Zarsan's days as Emperor was on the horizon.

"It's time to consider the future, Zarsan. You know this as well as I do." Kerrin handed his Regent a glass of wine. "Five years isn't long to get over the tragedy you suffered so I sympathise wholly with you. I don't think I've ever gotten over Celest's death. In another five years, you'll be Emperor of West Agalia."

"With no connections in the East and no wife and no heir." Zarsan said wearily. "Despite Emperor Waylon's paranoid wailings, I'm not being purposely stubborn just to annoy him. Don't you think that tale is a bit old and worn now?"

"It was old and worn long ago." Kerrin agreed. "Disregarding Emperor Waylon for now, it is time to think of the future. Your future and the Empire's future."

"I have!" Zarsan stood up. "At times, I think of nothing else. A marriage to Lady Kez would be unfair. It would be unfair to me but it would be even moreso to her. I love Harper and Zari even though they aren't here to love me in return. I can't help it, sir. Lady Kez doesn't deserve that. She doesn't deserve to live in the shadow of Harper's memory and that's exactly what she'd be doing. I'm just incapable putting a political marriage into practice, even though I appreciate the values theoretically."

"A married Emperor isn't compulsory." Kerrin massaged the back of his neck. "Let me look into it further."

"No, sir." Zarsan shook his head. "You've fought this battle for me for far too long. I still need time but I'll resolve this myself."

"I'm sure of it." Kerrin nodded. "Now to other business. Waylon refused my suggestion to appoint an Ambassador to Ludrigshires. He won't say directly, but he's basically against any sort of association with Ludrig." He drummed his fingers on the table. "This traditional concept of a long running feud with Ludrig needs addressed, Zarsan. I'm quite certain that Waylon doesn't see the Shires as an absolute enemy, but the notion has become so ingrained we assume it as normal. It isn't. You'd think that a catastrophe like Luh would be an ideal platform for negotiations and discussions so why wasn't it?"

"The whole shock of it, I think. Everyone was so utterly stunned that the thought of political negotiations didn't occur to anyone. Since then, Ludrig has been busy rebuilding the place very effectively. Very basically, we've had no reason and no opportunity to all sit round the table." Zarsan theorised. "The Squad down there is part of the plans to bridge that neck of swamp so we *can* work together. It's just making it official that's a headache."

///

Keegan looked out of a landing window that overlooked the rear yard. Harper was beating the dust from the mats from the dining room and Zari was trying to catch that dust in his hands.

"Good taste, Keegan. Just like me." Ludrig frightened the life out of his son.

"I'm not looking at her ... well not much ... I'm looking at the boy."

"What?" Ludrig barked. "I'll hack your ..."

"Not like that! For crap's sake!" Keegan shuddered. "Does he remind you of anyone?"

"He's under four foot tall and not on a horse. They all look the same to me. Why? Who is it?" Ludrig looked out of the window to where Harper was wiping his face with her apron.

"Luh Refugees. The boy's father was killed in the battle, according to his mother. Agalian."

"Sad but it happened, son. So who should he remind me of? He's nothing like his mother, that's for sure." Ludrig observed.

"No he's not. Don't worry about it. I just thought he reminded me of someone."

Keegan shrugged. "How would you feel about helping with his education?"

"His who?" Ludrig looked at his son in surprise. "Well he looks bugger all like you either so you're out of the parent picture."

"I told you. His father was an Agalian soldier." Keegan said in exasperation. "Harper, that's his mother down there, is trying to educate him herself. Most women in her position wouldn't bother. They'd have him working in the fields at five years old. I just thought she deserved a bit of help. It won't cost us anything to provide decent paper and a few pencils. There's a stack of them in mother's library." Ludrig's first wife had been well educated and insisted on her own son's education, even though Ludrig was only semi literate. Keegan had received all his lessons in the library and that library had been closed for years, since Keegan's mother's death. Ludrig just looked at his son in confusion. He never had grasped the importance of education. "Tactless idea. Forget about it. I'm sorry"

"No, not tactless. I just don't get it. Take all the papers you like. They're of no use to me. The other brats have lessons out in the village." Ludrig referred to his other children. "Keegan? Is there a reason for this that you aren't telling me? The girl, maybe?"

"Just a sudden whim of mine." Keegan shrugged his shoulders. "No, not the girl. We don't all think like you."

"Well you should. Maybe you wouldn't be unwed and childless at thirty five if you did." Ludrig sniffed and swaggered off along the landing.

[Book Index](#)   [Emperors And Kings](#)   [Previous](#)   [Next](#)

## Chapter 11

Zarsan did as he said he'd do and resolved the issue of his lack of Eastern connections. Three years after that conversation with Emperor Kerrin, Regent Zarsan Holt married Lady Kez Boon. The couple sat on the balcony of their new villa in West Agalia and watched the celebration festivities in the streets below.

"Still friends, Zarsan. A parchment scroll doesn't change that." Kez smiled at Zarsan's troubled face. "I know this isn't ideal for you."

"And you know why." Zarsan stood and poured himself and Kez some wine. He'd discussed this at great length and in considerable depth with Kez. No misconceptions and no omissions. "I wonder if it will ever feel right? By the Stars, even saying that sounds so cruel."

"It isn't cruel and you'll get used to not regarding it as such. The more I'm in your confidence, the more honoured I feel." Kez explained.

"Is that enough for you? Kez you deserve so much more. You deserve a full marriage and not just a political arrangement." Zarsan had lost count of the number of times he'd said that.

"We have more than a political arrangement and we have had for years."

"We have, yes." Zarsan smiled. "That makes me very fortunate, Kez, and very happy. Speaking of happy, did you see how drunk Emperor Kerrin was?" They both laughed. "I think he's just relieved that I've stopped fretting him to distraction."

"Waylon was drunk just because he got his own way." Kez tutted.

"He'll have nothing to pester everyone about now. We'll all think we've gone deaf." Zarsan laughed. "Ah we'll be fine, Kez. Friendship, like you said."

"Friendship." They touched glasses and drank.

///

Harper was cleaning the huge fireplace in the Castle Hall and eight year old Zari was 'helping' by getting right inside of it.

"Zari!" Harper laughed. "You have soot everywhere. Don't you dare come out until I get these sheets down." She turned round when she heard the door being unlatched. "Zari, quickly. It's the King and Prince Keegan." She wrapped a sheet around her

sooty son and tried to brush it from his hair.

"From what I've heard, Kez Boon would make ten times the Emperor of that fool of a brother of her's. I suppose it's a good thing she wasn't just shunted off to some fat old administrator with bed sores." Ludrig helped himself to a jug of ale from the sideboard. "Have you met the Regent?" Kez froze and almost crushed Zari. "He was the commanding officer in Luh for long enough. I've never met the man."

"I've seen him a few times, but never actually met him. Zarsan Holt." Keegan nodded.

"He's talking about Da!" Zari whispered at a volume that could be heard in Luh.

"Zari, hush. We shouldn't be in here." Harper felt her blood turn to water at the feeling she was getting from the conversation.

"She certainly married a good Regent. He's the most popular one Agalia's had in decades." Keegan said and Harper let out a loud sob. Zarsan had married Lady Kez Boon? Her Zarsan? "Harper? Just leave that for now." Keegan was standing right behind her. Harper could barely see for tears as she tried to pick up Zari, and her buckets and brushes, all at the same time.

"I'm sorry." She whispered.

"Leave the buckets, you can get them later. Are you all right?" Keegan took the buckets from her.

"Yes. We shouldn't be in here. Excuse me." Harper hitched Zari onto her hip and ran from the hall.

"Ma? Why has Da married Lady Boob? What about you?" Zari asked as Harper began dragging the filthy clothes from him.

"Lady Boon." Harper sobbed. "Climb in the sink, Zari. No one's here."

"I'm eight, Ma. I'll have a bath in our rooms. Ma? Don't cry. I'm sure you're prettier than Lady Loon." Zari stood shivering in his vest and britches. "Is he not coming for us now?"

"Oh baby come here." Harper held Zari close to her. "Daddy doesn't know we're here. He thinks ... thinks ... "

"He thinks we died with Granda Elias in Luh?" Zari asked and Harper nodded. "So he's married Lady Boom in your place?"

"No." Harper smiled through the tears. She wrapped a blanket round Zari and sat him on the table. "Can you remember when I told you all about Agalia? The West and the East? I told you how they do all the trades and make friends with people from their opposite halves. Remember that?" Zari nodded. "Lady Kez is from the East. She's very important, Zari. She's Emperor Waylon's sister! Her and Daddy have done a very important thing here, and a very admirable thing. They got married to make both Agalias even stronger than they are now. He's the Regent, Zari. He wants to do all he can for the Empire."

"But he wouldn't have married her if he knew we were here, I know he wouldn't! We have to get ... get ... " Zari trailed off and Harper spun round. Prince Keegan was standing at the door with two buckets.

"Zari go and get cleaned up." Harper dried her eyes. "I'm fine. Go on, you grub!" Zari reluctantly headed up the narrow wooden stairs that lead to their rooms. "I can explain." Harper swallowed hard and turned to Keegan.

"You're going to tell me they're made up stories to keep yours and Zari's spirits up." Keegan walked in and sat on the table. "Zari told me that too. It works for an eight year old, not an intelligent, adult woman." Harper looked at the floor and couldn't think of a single thing to say. "I should have pushed you on this long ago. I could have maybe helped. Even from the bits and pieces I've picked up over the last few years, it wasn't too difficult to put it together. Zari looks exactly like him for a start. Zari means 'little Zarsan'. You have a very good knowledge of Agalia, especially its army and you don't get that from your usual Luhan, let alone a young woman. I didn't actually need all Zari's childish slips to confirm it, Harper." Harper sank onto a bench by the table. "Why didn't you say something? We could have had you in Agalia years ago!"

"I couldn't. You and King Ludrig have been wonderful to us and I know we're safe here. To speak up would be like painting a target on my son. There are immoral people all over the Realm, here and Agalia. I kept quiet." Harper felt suddenly exhausted. "Zarsan thinks we're dead. He married Lady Kez. I don't know what to do."

"Are you sure he presumes you dead?" Keegan asked.

"He clung on for eight years, Prince Keegan. He loves me and Zari a great deal. Only the assumption of our deaths would keep him from coming for us. I'm absolutely certain of that." Harper said firmly. "He hasn't just forgotten about us. Never."

"You just didn't know what to do about it." Keegan exhaled loudly.

"As time went by, the chances of anyone actually believing me became less and less. Despite that, as long as there was even a small risk to my son, I stayed quiet." Harper

told Keegan. "Now it's too late." She hung her head and tears splashed to the stone floor. "Me and Zari have to move on."

"I don't see that happening soon." Keegan sighed. "Go to Zari. He'll need you."

Ludrig was in his private sitting room, cleaning his weapons.

"Do we declare today a holiday? They are in Agalia." Ludrig mused to Keegan. "Ah stuff it. We aren't Agalian. Bunch of milkmaids. What's up with you? Too much grain in your breakfast?"

"Oh it's nothing. A friend of mine needs support just now. That's all. Holiday? Typical Agalians. Anything for an alefest."

Harper was awake well into the night. She'd read every single letter and note in her collection.

"We'll be fine here, Ma." Zari walked in and curled up next to Harper on their battered couch.

"You should be asleep." Harper kissed Zari's thick mop of hair. "We'll always be fine. We have each other."

"He's still the best in the Realm, isn't he Ma? Even if he is in Agalia with Lady Fez. We still know he's great." Zari nodded.

"Yes we do. He's still the best in the Realm no matter what happens. Hey this isn't an excuse to get out of diary writing! Prince Keegan goes to the trouble of getting us all these books so we'd better continue filling them." Harper tossed Zari a book and a pencil. She promised Zarsan she'd write to him every day and that's what she would do. Harper doubted she could have stopped even if she tried.

[Book Index](#)   [Emperors And Kings](#)   [Previous](#)   [Next](#)

## Chapter 12

Harper gripped the fence and suppressed another squeal. She doubted she'd ever get used to this. For the past year, Prince Keegan had been teaching Zari horsemanship and had even given him his own horse. The sight of her little boy galloping round the paddock with Keegan set every nerve she had on edge.

"He's a natural." Keegan pulled up by the fence.

"So is Zarsan. He told me it took him an age to learn how to ride but I doubted that." Harper waved for Zari to come back.

"He's an Agalian General. Why doubt it?" Keegan dismounted and led his horse into the yard. Harper backed away accordingly.

"I didn't doubt his talent, just that it took an age to learn. It doesn't take Zarsan long to learn anything." Harper smiled. "You Shiremen are born in the saddle. People always said the Luhans were all born in fishing boats."

"You mean you aren't?" Keegan smirked "Zari! Come on! We'll stable the horses before we eat." Zari waved and swung his horse round.

"Both hands!" Harper shrieked. "You don't drive it with just one hand!" Zari got off his horse and both him and Keegan rolled their eyes. "What? It's dangerous! Don't take too long in there. Cook will throw your lunch to the pigs, Zari!" She watched Keegan and her son disappear into the stables.

"He's doing great." King Ludrig gave Harper the fright of her life when he spoke from directly behind her. How did such a big man do that?

"He is sir. I'm very proud of him." Harper wiped her hands self consciously on her apron.

"You've done a good job with the lad, Harper. It can't have been easy on your own." Ludrig complimented.

"We were lucky sir. We came here to the Castle when Zari was just a baby. We've been treated very well here." Harper said truthfully.

"I'm not one for formality but sometimes it's useful, and necessary. You could do a lot worse than Keegan, you know. He thinks a great deal of you and he's extremely taken

with the lad. As soon as you're married, both you and Zari will be a legal part of the Ludrigs." Ludrig explained and Harper felt very light headed indeed. "I know, he's bloody useless. Why he didn't ask you earlier is beyond me."

"Sir I don't ... "

"Father!" Keegan came racing out of the stable. "What are you doing? Actually I know what you're doing. You shouldn't ... "

"Oh come on Keegan! Why the delay? Because you don't want the fuss, that's why. Tough. The fuss is necessary for legal reasons." Ludrig said flatly.

"Father you have it wrong." Keegan sighed. "Harper take Zari indoors. I'll have to explain to him."

"But ... " Harper started to object.

"Everything will be all right, I promise you. You're both safe here and King Ludrig will swear to your continued safety." Keegan said.

"Of course they're bloody well safe! Everyone in my Castle is safe!" Ludrig shouted at Keegan. "Are they in danger? Keegan you are trying my patience!"

"Harper, go indoors." Keegan nodded to where Zari was standing at the stable door. She nodded and ushered him into the kitchen.

"I don't like the feel of all this. Out with it." Ludrig said bluntly.

"Father, Harper and Zari aren't who you think they are." Keegan said carefully and Ludrig's scowl never changed. "I'll just say it as it is. She's already married ... "

"So why is she here scrubbing yards?" Ludrig bellowed. "Who is this layabout husband of hers? I'll use his for target practice."

"Harper's worried about targets too, but on Zari. Father don't interrupt me! Do you want to hear this or not? It's important. Harper is Regent Zarsan's wife." Keegan watched Ludrig very carefully. "Zari is his son and you'd see that straight away if you'd met Zarsan. Say something."

"Who in torment told you that?" Ludrig erupted into laughter. "The boy? Keegan it's a tall tale from normal lad wishing for better things. You really are a fool."

"Harper. Harper told me but she didn't really need to." Keegan told his father about all the little, and not so little things that had emerged over the years. All of them added up to Harper and Zari being the Regent's family.

"Am I right in saying he thinks they perished in Luh?" Ludrig said in disbelief.

"Harper says so, yes."

"You sound doubtful. Does he assume them dead or not?"

"I have no way of knowing, do I?" Keegan said testily. "You know what Agalia's like. Marriages that aren't real marriages all for the good of the empire."

"So he could have simply brushed them under the very expensive rug and moved on?" Ludrig didn't sound impressed.

"I don't know, Father." Keegan sighed wearily. "We'd only know that if we were in West Agalia. There are trecherous folk all over the realm who'd exploit Harper and Zari to the maximum. So she kept quiet for all these years. She really believed that Zarsan would come for her, she probably still does. As time went on, she saw she had no means of contacting him by herself and to include us, or anyone else, would expose Zari. His marriage to Lady Kez Boon was a step too much for her."

"Poor girl." Ludrig said sadly. "I'm not feeling much sympathy for Regent Arsehole just now, though. So he didn't even bother checking if they were alive or dead? I don't care how many reports I'd read or if they were all written in gold, I'd need something a bit more definite than that!"

"That's the bit that gets me too. So what do we do? If we just wander up there and say 'Hey Regent Zarsan! We have your wife and son in Ludrig's Castle!' there will be chaos. He's taken another wife." Keegan exhaled loudly.

"More than that. Don't you think they'll want to know why we've kept them hidden here for nine years? As you say, trecherous people both here and in Agalia." Ludrig frowned.

"Sirs?" Harper was in floods of tears by the yard door. "I have to accept that I can't be reunited with Zarsan. Agalia has Lady Kez and the trouble I'd cause would be a disaster. I don't know what evidence Zarsan had of our deaths but it was enough for him."

"Harper, as the King said, that evidence would have to quite unshakeable if he loved you as much as you say." Keegan said gently.

"Don't say that, please. You don't know him like I do. No one does." Harper dried her eyes on her apron. "You speak of evidence. I'd need unshakeable evidence to convince me he'd just abandoned us."

"And if he has?" Ludrig asked bluntly.

"Father!" Keegan said in dismay. "Tact? Diplomacy?"

"Arsing about?" Ludrig added. "Look, I understand how devastated you must be right now, Harper. I'm quite sure the hurt will lessen over time. It did in the years following Luh's sacking, didn't it? Give yourself twelve months to reconcile yourself to this ... astonishing ... situation. After that, you may feel like considering Keegan as your suitor."

"Father it's not like that." Keegan began to protest.

"I need to think." Ludrig ignored the protestations and walked out of the yard. Keegan knew that arguing with Ludrig was like knotting water but he ran after him anyway.

"Father! Father slow up will you? Father!" Keegan darted in front of his preoccupied parent. "I know it's a bit of a shock."

"It's a bloody headache, is what it is!" Ludrig flung open the hall door and headed for the staircase. "If any dissidents in Agalia get wind of this there will be all torment to pay. They won't simply accept that we 'didn't know'! How weak does that sound? We need a fight with Agalia like we need the blackflea plague. Not at bloody all!" He booted open his chambre door and flung himself into a chair. "We need this lot in the Shires trying to use them as a bargaining piece even less. She should have said something years ago! Yes I know, she was confused and frightened, save the heartstrings, Keegan." He pointed to a bottle of strong ale on the dresser and Keegan obliged. "I don't want to sound cruel, or unfeeling but a marriage to you will distract any curiosity as to her identity. Yes I'm an arsehole. Say it if you'll feel better."

"You're ranting." Keegan helped himself to another ale. "What you say makes sense, as always." He nodded. "I know your views on arranged marriages and there is no way you'd force one. Father I'd marry her tomorrow, as you correctly observed, but she's devoted to Zarsan. This needs clarification." He rubbed his throbbing temples. "Does he think she's dead or has he abandoned her? Harper's reactions depend on the reason. I'm going Agalia."

"What? Don't be an arse!" Ludrig shouted. "What for? Are you going to stride into the Government Halls and just ask him? You'll cause full scale riot and the whole Agalian army will be down here! You pap."

"Will you stop ranting? I've not been to Agalia for over ten years. No one will recognise me if I pose as a trader of some sort. I need to be out there on the streets, Father. We need to know what Zarsan thinks and believes and we find out through his people. It's a desperate move but we're at a stanstill down here." Keegan explained.

"You aren't a spy. We have men for that." Ludrig had huge misgivings about this.

"It's too important to hand down to the spies. The less people who know about this whole situation, the better." Keegan said. "Twelve months, you told Harper. It'll take me a few months here to feel the mood of our own people. I worked out who Harper was so I need to know if anyone else suspects it."

"At least you have the sense to do groundwork. If all this blows up, we need to know how everyone, Shire or Agalian, will react." Ludrig nodded.

"I need to know for Harper." Keegan said.

"You big flowergirl." Ludrig snorted. "Go and test the mood of this lot here. If they act up, I'll go and flatten their villages."

"One more thing, Father." Keegan said from the door. "If it turns out that Harper is right and Zarsan does think she's dead, then we have to devise a way of telling him without making it an empire wide issue. Like you said, we don't need Zarsan Holt as an enemy. I'll need to get him to Luh."

"And if he's abandoned her just get yourself back here and sod him. Harper will be a queen within eighteen months."

[Book Index](#)   [Emperors And Kings](#)   [Previous](#)   [Next](#)

## Chapter 13

Six months after Zarsan and Lady Kez's marriage, Keegan had set up a credible business in West Agalia as a pottery merchant. He was now known as Leon and had been in the city for a month. He was quite puzzled as to the information he'd gathered so far. Very few people actually knew about the Regent's family in Luh and they'd certainly never lived in Agalia. If it wasn't for a handful of people they really did insist on their existence, Keegan would have been forced to consider that Harper had made the whole thing up. So why did no one know her? Why had she not lived here with her husband? Only one answer presented itself. She hadn't been able to. Why? Because she had no citizenship here. Why? Her and Zarsan weren't legally married.

"Something else you didn't tell me, Harper." Keegan muttered, setting up his stall in the market square. She must have realised what a flimsy position she was in, especially regarding any political claims to the Regent so she'd kept quiet. She was very good at that.

"When did Luh start trading again?" An elderly man asked Keegan.

"I'm from Jullit." Keegan answered. "I believe Luh does trade though. The place has been rebuilt quite well from what I've heard."

"I've not been for years." The old man mused. "Lovely little town. I used to go quite often when my wife was alive."

"When it was Agalian?" Keegan began setting out his stock on his stall.

"Yes. There was a Division based down there. To think, the reason it was heavily guarded was the cause of its destruction. Poxy Golon scum." The old man said in disgust.

"Wasn't the Regent in charge of the Division back then? Or am I getting that wrong? We're a bit out of the way up in Jullit." Keegan bluffed.

"He was back here by then, as Regent. He grieved for years over that town." The old one said sadly. "It was more than that though. I heard he had a girl down there and he loved her very much. I believe it too. I've never seen a man so struck by grief."

"So his girl was killed? That is tragic." Keegan sympathised.

"Along with the Mayor, her Da." The old one nodded. "According to talk, the Emperor himself went to identify her. Waylon, not Kerrin. He owed Zarsan a favour or something."

"Emperor Waylon identified her body?" Keegan asked in surprise. "I wonder why Regent Zarsan didn't go himself. I would have if it was my girl." He said casually.

"He was away on duty at the time of the attack. If I'm not mistaken, he was up by your neck of the woods. Jullit."

"Is that so?" Keegan wasn't sure if all this meant anything or not, but it was all news to him. "So Waylon did the noble thing."

"Spared him a very unpleasant sight, no doubt." The old man shuddered.

"Yes, quite. So Waylon gave Zarsan the news of his girl's death?" That could easily be evidence enough for Zarsan, the word of an Emperor.

"Out of respect." The old man nodded solemnly. "Anyway! He seems to on the up now. Lady Kez is a very fine lady indeed and ten years is long enough to grieve. The news of this baby ... "

"Baby? What baby?" Keegan felt his head reeling.

"I thought you merchants knew everything!" The old man laughed. "It was announced this morning! Lady Kez is expecting her first child in three months time. Isn't that fantastic? I wish my wife was alive to see it. She was a strong believer in the Empire." Announced this morning so it would be around six days before the tidings filtered through to Ludrigshires. Keegan would just have time to leave his business and get back to the Castle.

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Keegan made it to the Castle in five days. The news of Lady Kez's pregnancy made it there in four.

"She's handling it remarkably well." Ludrig told his son, referring to Harper. "She knows more about Agalian society than any woman I've ever met! All for the Empire eh?"

"All for the Empire." Keegan repeated wearily. "He does think Harper and Zari are dead. It seems he grieved for years over them."

"This is ... crap. Just crap." Ludrig said angrily. "Do we tell him about them? Privately I mean. He'll be the Emperor soon. I'm sure he can arrange something. No?" He saw Keegan shaking his head.

"There are two Emperors for a reason. It's to make sure one doesn't amend rules to

suit himself, among other things. Zarsan is allowed one wife and he has one wife."

"Harper was there first and she has Zari who looks exactly like the man." Ludrig reminded him.

"She wasn't, Father." Keegan watched the look of confusion on Ludrig's face. "They were never married for whatever reason. Her chances of laying claim would have been slim as it was, seeing as Lady Kez is Waylon's sister. Now she'd have no claim at all. Regent Zarsan has his family, a legally binding family. Yes it is crap. Crap for Harper and Zari. If Harper can't bring herself to be named Harper Ludrig, Duchess of Ludrigshire, then I'm happy for her to stay Harper Bright." He smiled.

"Bright? Hmm Bright." Ludrig frowned in thought. "Where have I heard that name before?"

"She was ... "

"The Mayor! Luh's Mayor was called Bright. Edgar or something. Harper is related?" Ludrig asked.

"Daughter." Keegan nodded.

"I didn't know he had ... a ... Waylon Boon." Ludrig just stared at Keegan and Keegan was lost. "Boon was in Gilby when the Golon attacked. He came to Luh and asked me specifically about Mayor Bright's family. I told him I didn't know he had a family. Why is he in among all this? His own soldiers were dead and dying in the streets yet he asked about the Mayor's family. Why?"

"As a courtesy to Zarsan apparently. That would explain Zarsan's acceptance of the news. If an Emperor tells you something from first hand experience then you tend to believe them."

"Bull's nuts." Ludrig said dismissively. "I wouldn't believe anything that man said. I told you when he became Emperor that he was a toad." Keegan rolled his eyes. "He had no first hand experience, anyway. I told him I was unaware of a family, which I was. I didn't say anyone was dead. Our men were shifting survivors by the cart load over the border. Why not assume Harper and Zari were on one of those? He went straight back to Agalia and told Zarsan his family was dead. The Regent's family, Keegan. He made no effort at all to look into it further."

"Maybe you're looking too far into it, Father. This is East Agalian's Emperor and you're accusing him of some sort of conspiracy to keep the truth from his counterpart's Regent." Keegan said carefully.

"That Regent who went on to wed his sister." Ludrig stated. "Something not right

here."

"I do know one thing. Under no circumstances are we going to tell Harper this. We have no proof of anything and it would be pointless to cause her more upset. Her claim to Zarsan is invalid. Let's not add to her distress." Keegan decided and for once, Ludrig nodded his agreement.

Harper was sitting by the orchard staring numbly at nothing. A baby would very much seal things between Zarsan and Lady Kez. Keegan had told her that Zarsan thought they'd perished at Luh, and that was some consolation for Harper. He hadn't simply abandoned and forgotten about them. She'd never doubted that. Could she move on and marry Prince Keegan? Harper felt like it would be another ten years before she could make that decision. Keegan deserved better. He didn't deserve someone who's heart belonged to someone else.

"Ma? I have an idea." Zari interrupted her thoughts and sat next to her. "Even though Da married Lady Daz, I'll still be the new baby's brother. Is that right?"

"Sort of." Harper wondered if Zari's spark would last forever, just like her own. "It's different because we're here and Da is in Agalia."

"Ma, I'm ten." Zari said patiently. "It is not different at all. I'm still the big brother because Da is still Da. Twice. Umm yes. So when I'm twenty one and old enough I'll go and get the baby and bring it here to see you. Maybe it can stay here for a few days. I'll be a proper grown up by then so I'll be responsive."

"Responsible." Harper smiled and hugged her son. "That's a lovely idea, Zari."

"I think so." Zari nodded proudly. "Hey how about if we have two homes! We can all sometimes stay here and all sometimes stay in Agalia! Da won't mind if you and Lady Baz are both there."

"Er ... one idea at a time, Zari." Harper laughed.

[Book Index](#)   [Emperors And Kings](#)   [Previous](#)   [Next](#)

## Chapter 14

Lafi Boon and Zarsan Holt ascended to Emperor and Waylon Boon and Kerrin Ilvia Stepped down. The ceremony itself lasted for eight hours and both East and West Agalia celebrated long before, and long after. By late evening, Emperor Zarsan was feeling the tiredness. Kez had gone through a troubled pregnancy fraught with sickness, exhaustion and back ache. This meant Zarsan had gone through it with her, complete with lack of sleep. Florian provided the means to leave the celebrations but Zarsan would have continued for weeks had he been able to change that reason. Lady Kez was very ill and the baby was on its way, a month too soon.

"Kez!" Zarsan threw off his cloak and ran to his wife's bedside. She was pale and damp and obviously in pain. "Physician Tallow is on his way, Kez, so is Mistress Olga. You're doing just great." He grasped her hand and all Kez could do was gasp for breath. "Stay with me Kez. Stay awake! Florian! Bring wash cloths please. Kez?"

"Baby." Kez whispered before a huge wave of pain doubled up her weak body.

"Tallow won't be long." Zarsan took the cloths from Florian. "You have to stay awake Kez."

"We'll take it from here." Physician Tallow and Mistress Olga had arrived. Florian had to physically guide Zarsan into the sitting room.

"Why does all this happen to me?" Zarsan sobbed. "Why, Florian?"

"She's in good hands, Zarsan." Florian handed Zarsan a large glass of wine. "Come on. Stay strong."

"Surely life can't be so cruel to take two wives and two children from me?" Zarsan gulped at the wine.

"Zarsan, Physician Tallow is the best physician in the realm." Florian said gently. "We wait and we stay strong."

On the stroke of midnight, Lady Kez Boon, wife of Emperor Zarsan Holt, drew her last breath. At the same time, Zarsan's newborn daughter let out her first cry, the first of many.

///

Scouts took it in relayed turns to dispatch Agalia's tragic news. Ludrig and Keegan told Harper on the day of Lady Kez's funeral, two days after her death. Harper was heartbroken. She was heartbroken for Lady Kez and devastated for Zarsan. The fact that he'd called his baby daughter

Kezia, after her mother, told Harper how much he actually did think of her.

"Who's there for him?" Harper tried to stop the tears, not very successfully. "I don't care if he is the Emperor, someone has to be there for him."

"There will be." Keegan said gently. "Do you want us there when you tell Zari?"

"No, thank you. I'll explain it in a way he'll understand. Excuse me." Harper hung her head and trailed out of Ludrig's sitting room.

"This is bloody awful." Ludrig got to his feet. "She's miserable, he's miserable and they'll stay that way because age old politics still influence everyone in the realm. If I ever hear one of our lot dragging any Agalian through the shit, I'll beat him stupid. Well stupider. No one can remember the rifts between us and them so why try and keep it going? Eh? Because people are stupid and I hate the bloody lot of them." He sat back down again. "Ranting, yes I know. Sod off. Harper has us lot here in the Castle, for what it's worth. Will Zarsan cope? I don't think I would after all the crap he's been dealt. Get yourself back up there and keep your eyes open. Something like this is enough to lead to a gap where an Emperor should be. As a very last resort, devise a plan to get him to Luh, out of the way of Agalia, and bloody well tell him. This can't go on Keegan, it's destroying everyone involved. Last resort, remember."

"Only if you're sure. Do you think you can explain it all in a believable way? You said months ago, we don't want Zarsan crashing down here because he thinks we've been holding his family for ten years." Keegan pointed out what Ludrig knew already.

"He won't have to believe me. I'll take Harper to Luh myself. I doubt he'd disbelieve her." Ludrig exhaled and rubbed his eyes. "I was utterly shattered when your mother died, Keegan. I didn't think I'd ever get over it. As you know, I married Neffu for the wrong reasons, so we'll ignore her."

"Yes well you did that while she was here too." Keegan smiled at his Father. It wasn't often he opened up like this. "I know you loved Mother a great deal."

"More than I could ever put into words. At least I still had you though. Oh stop grinning, I never liked you that much." Ludrig sniffed. "Zarsan thinks he lost Harper and Zari and I know how that feels, Keegan. It's torture and you never fully get rid of the feelings. Now he has it all to look forward to again after losing Lady Kez. The chances of him not coping are high, and very real. I'd crumble to nothing if I ever lost Kendra."

"Father you'll always have me and the rest of your brood of offspring." Keegan said sincerely.

"Oh mirth." Ludrig said dryly. "Go and assemble your pottery and sod off to Agalia. I need to think, and get roaring drunk."

///

The new Emperors and the Advisory Emperors were in the Hall. It was the day after Lady Kez's funeral and Kerrin had tried everything to get Zarsan to stay at home for a while. Zarsan preferred the Halls just now because he'd received a 'charitable offer' from Advisor Waylon.

"Zarson you aren't thinking clearly. You cannot raise a baby yourself!" Waylon said in exasperation.

"Not just *a* baby, *my* baby and yes I damned well can!" Zarsan snapped. "I'm sorry, Waylon." He apologised less tersely. "I do appreciate your family's offer to take Kezia in but I'm her father."

"And Lydia is her aunt. Kez's sister. Tell him, Kerrin, for pity's sake! Men, especially men of status, do not raise their own children and certainly not alone!" Waylon persisted.

"Well it isn't conventional, no." Kerrin said awkwardly. He'd been quite surprised himself, at Zarsan's decision to raise his daughter. "It's a break in tradition, I agree, but he's perfectly entitled to do it. I looked into it, just incase." He looked sharply at Waylon. He *had* looked into it just incase Waylon had any loopholes up his sleeve. Kerrin knew what was irritating Zarsan. The offer was genuine and sincere and Zarsan wouldn't dispute that. What was enraging the new Emperor was that Waylon had simply gone ahead and arranged everything without even mentioning it to Zarsan. Lady Lydia had even bought a crib and ordered decorations for a nursery. All this in the short hours following the death of the baby's mother.

"I don't intend bringing Kezia to the Halls with me, Waylon." Zarsan said testily. "Floian's daughter, Flora, is proving to be a very able Minder for her."

"So Florian's daughter is more able than a blood relation who has the experience to raise a child? I think Lafi here is a testament to his mother's capability." Waylon snapped.

"I'd not doubt her capability." Zarsan barked. "I'm not doubting anything, including your offer! I'm telling you, Kezia stays with me. I stood up to you when I was first made Regent, Waylon. I can do the same again but with more ease. I'm no longer Regent."

"Is that a threat?" Lafi twittered but only after Waylon had glared holes through him to prompt him. "You're on equal footing to me, Zarsan Holt, no more."

"For crying out loud!" Zarsan shouted. "What's so difficult here? My daughter stays with me, her father. I've lost her mother and I've no intention of losing her, even if it is to a good family." He smiled falsely at Waylon and Lafi.

"A better family than the last one you had." Waylon retorted then immediately regretted opening his mouth. Zarsan went crimson with rage and lunged for Waylon. Kerrin sprang to his feet and upturned the table just to bar Zarsan's way.

"No! Zarsan, no. Don't do it." Kerrin grabbed the Emperor's arms. "Waylon, for

torment's sake! What sort of thing was that to say? They perished in Luh. Show some tact and respect."

"Don't you lecture me, Kerrin Ilvia!" Waylon backed away from Zarsan. "Tact and respect for someone who's probably a whore for the Shiremen by now?"

"Uncle!" Lafi shrieked. "We'd better leave. Please excuse my uncle, he's under a lot of stress just ... shit!" Zarsan had leapt across the room and knocked the new Emperor clean off his feet. Waylon looked terrified as he backed against the wall. Kerrin tried in vain to pull the furious Emperor away from the Advisor.

"Explain or I'll slit your throat." Zarsan snarled viciously. "Don't believe me?" He dug the tip of a blade into Waylon's flesh.

"I was angry! I just lashed out." Waylon tried to wriggle free and the blade dug deeper. "I never saw their bodies!" He sobbed. "Ludrig told me the Mayor was dead. He didn't know his daughter, or her son."

"Are you telling me they escaped that slaughter?" Zarsan growled.

"I don't know! I swear I don't know." Waylon shrieked. "If they did, they'll have fled over the border. Ludrig will have them! He's been holding them for all this time Zarsan!" Zarsan dropped the blade to the floor and was frozen to the spot. "Yes, that's it. It has to be it." Waylon edged along the wall.

"I thought this had been verified?" Kerrin asked in shock. "Waylon if there had been any doubt, you should have reported back so it could have been looked into further!"

"I must ask you to let me escort my uncle to our rooms." Lafi intervened. "Advisor Kerrin, you have to remember that my uncle was witnessing the aftermath of a massacre, something he's certainly not used to. Could you think clearly in those circumstances? I'm definitely sure I couldn't. Excuse us." He half escorted, half dragged Waylon from the Hall.

"By the Stars." Kerrin felt light headed. "Zarsan, say something, man." Zarsan was still staring at the floor, his eyes flooded with tears.

"They're still alive?" He said eventually. "They've been alive for all these years and he *knew*?"

"We don't know for certain if Waylon knew, Zarsan and Lafi had a good point about him witnessing the carnage. Listen to me, Zarsan." Kerrin steered the Emperor onto a chair. "There's still a chance that they didn't make it. Waylon's recount is patchy to say the least. I just don't want you suffering all over again."

"And there's a chance that they did make it. I should have insisted on more proof at the time." Zarsan brooded.

"He was the Emperor." Kerrin said simply. "I doubt Ludrig has them captive, if they did get over the border."

"Which they did. Ludrig had better not have them captive otherwise he'll feel the force of the Agalian army."

"Which would be a catastrophic act, General Zarsan." Kerrin pointed out. "We need to employ tact, Zarsan. We don't know anything for certain and we can't just wade into Ludrig with an unfounded accusation. Why in the realm would he hold them captive for ten years? It makes no sense. If they are in Ludrigshires, then they've kept their identity secret, Zarsan, probably to protect the boy from political machinations. Is that a more sensible theory? It's certainly more palatable."

"So she never tried to contact me? Not once in ten years?" Zarsan said in despair.

"How?" Kerrin shrugged. "She'd need an ally down there and quite a loyal one. We're talking about Ludrigshires, Zarsan. She won't have known anyone at all, let alone a trusted ally. This is all speculation and you're in no state to speculate on anything. By the Stars man, you've just buried Lady Kez. Give yourself a chance."

"If Waylon ... "

"Ignore Waylon." Kerrin said sternly. "Seriously, discount him completely. His information is flawed and unreliable. Work round him. First, you get yourself home and rest with your daughter." He smiled. Zarsan nodded and headed for the door.

"One thing I'm truly grateful for, Kerrin. Kez isn't here to witness her brother's *speculation*." He closed the door quietly.

[Book Index](#)   [Emperors And Kings](#)   [Previous](#)   [Next](#)

## Chapter 15

The most obvious place for Zarsan to go first was Luh. The only people he'd taken into his confidence were Florian and Kerrin, who he trusted implicitly. As a military General, he was perfectly entitled to visit a town where Agalian troops were still based, however, as an Emperor he'd only have drawn too much attention to himself. It took a few days to organise suitable reasons for his pending absence and he and Florian decided to simply leave, unannounced, at first light. They didn't get the chance. West Agalia seemed to erupt in the dead of night. Fires simply sprang up and panic tore through the city.

"Florian!" Zarsan met the Administrator in the street. "What in the Creek is going on?"

"I don't believe it, Zarsan. From what I can tell, the people from the East are running riot through the West." Florian said in disbelief.

"What?" Zarsan shouted in shock. "Why?"

"I've no idea but they're causing alot of damage and the Westerners are retaliating."

"Go and get your wife and daughter, Florian. Bring them here and hole up in the cellar where it's safe. I'll go and see what caused all this."

Within two hours, West Agalia was a battle zone. Zarsan headed Squads of troops to try and get the situation under control. Florian had been right. The Eastern citizens had attacked the West. Most damage was being done to businesses and property, rather that to the actual citizens.

"What in the realm caused all this?" Kerrin was frantically trying to find armed scouts to get a message through to Lafi and Waylon. "Have they all gone mad?"

"I have no idea. Stay inside, Kerrin. People are simply claiming property as they come across it!" Zarsan steered his horse round.

"Soldiers!" Someone shouted. "East Agalian soldiers!"

"Kerrin! Get inside!" Zarsan rode towards the shouting. The sight he saw made him reel in shock. Thousands of Agalian soldiers were surging into West Agalia.

"Waylon?" He shook his head in disbelief. Only the Emperor could order this number of men on the offensive but Waylon could quite easily get Lafi to do just that.

"Sir!" General Brock Tam galloped towards Zarsan. "Sir they've declared war on us!"

"This is ... unbelievable." Zarsan watched the West Agalian army surge forward.

"I have all seven divisions at the ready, sir." Brock said.

"No." Zarsan held up his hand. "The army is not to be mobilised en masse. Is that clear?"

"But sir! They're destroying the city!" Brock objected.

"We do not want ten thousand fully trained soldiers carrying out a full blown battle in a populated city!" Zarsan shouted. "I'm surprised at you, Brock."

"Sorry, sir. It was an automatic reaction. Awaiting orders, sir."

"Squads only and defense only. We aren't the aggressor here, Brock. Try and draw the conflict out of the city." Zarsan ordered. General Brock nodded and moved out.

///

"In here!" Keegan, or Leon Ferson, as he was known, herded three families into the cellar of his warehouse. "I need you menfolk to go and tell people to open up their cellars for those who don't have one. Alehouses have three cellars, go to those first." The men nodded and hurried off. Keegan took a few minutes to take in his surroundings. It was just getting light now and the fighting showed no sign of abating. That was hardly surprising with the East Agalian army in on the action!

"I have a grain cellar." An old man tugged on Keegan's sleeve and he looked vaguely familiar. "We spoke about Lady Kez and Zarsan a mere three months ago."

"I remember. Go to your cellar, it's too dangerous out here." Keegan told him.

"Why is this happening? Agalians don't attack Agalians! Why?"

"I have no answers for you. It would appear that the East citizens were told they had free pickings of any business or property over here." Keegan repeated what he'd heard.

"And they believed that?" The old one said in disbelief.

"Men will always be greedy, no matter where they're from. As for the army? They saw the squads here as an open invite, I think. They're all insane." Keegan shook his head again. "Go. Go and take shelter. It's not safe."

///

King Ludrig could see the orange battle glow from where he stood on one of Luh's docks. He'd received a message from 'Leon' that afternoon. The scout he'd employed had been paid more than he'd usually earn in a quarter.

"I can't take this in." He said in astonishment. "The realm's gone insane."

"The men are ready to leave, King Ludrig." Captain Jonas referred to the Agalian soldiers in Luh. "I'm not comfortable with leading men out of this place. I know what happened last time."

"Luh will be fine. I have a gang of big hairy arsed riff-raff just that side of the border. So you were here for the Golan attack?" Ludrig asked.

"I was. I doubt I'll ever forget it." Jonas replied.

"We'll eventually create a monument here for all who lost their lives. I understand the Mayor died trying to protect his people." Ludrig fished.

"Elias Bright. He was a fine man." Jonas said sincerely. "I'd like to think his daughter and grandson survived but it's impossible to know for sure. No wonder Zarsan never returned."

"Oh yes! I heard something about that." Ludrig nodded slowly. "Such a tragedy. So what do you reckon to that?" He pointed towards Agalia."

"I have my own ideas but they're only speculation. Let's just say that Advisor Waylon and Emperor Zarsan never did see eye to eye. Oh let's also say that Advisor Waylon is a horse's arse, seeing as he isn't Emperor any longer." Jonas said flatly. He'd never forgiven Waylon for ordering those Squads out of Luh, no matter what his intentions were. "May I go to my men?"

"Yes, of course. You're still agreeable to keep me informed of the situation up there?"

"I see it as my duty." Jonas nodded and went to lead his men back to Agalia.

///

Harper was hysterical for a few reasons. Agalia seemed to have been gripped by madness and there were running battles in the streets, as well as military activity. Zarsan and baby Kezia were in the middle of a battle zone and Harper could barely keep the memories of Luh from swamping her completely. On top of all that, she couldn't find Zari. She'd been all over the Castle grounds and the surrounding pasture land. She'd been in every barn, shed and even the stables. It was a slight relief to see Zari's horse still there.

"Zari!" Harper saw her son walking from one of the Castle annexes. He was in the company of a beautiful lady that Harper had seen, but never met. Queen Kenan Ludrig. "Oh Zari what have you done?" Harper ran to meet them. "Queen Kenan. It's a genuine honour to meet you. Er ... Has Zari been where he wasn't meant to be?"

"He has but I understand why." The Queen nodded. "So you're the rightful Empress of West Agalia?"

"Zari, for crying out loud!" Harper almost fainted. "I'll take him home, Queen

Kenan."

"Ma someone has to help us!" Zari exclaimed. "Queen Kenan is fantastic and I told her all about everything."

"Queen Kenan I really do apologise. Zari told you the truth but ... but ... Zari! What do expect the Queen to do?" Harper squealed hysterically.

"She's the Queen." Zari shrugged. "The Agalians are all fighting each other and even King Ludrig doesn't know why. Isn't that right, Queen Kenan?"

"Quite right and very worrying." Kenan nodded seriously. "Zari thinks Ludrig should go up there and sort them all out, then bring his Da down here for you."

"He's only ten, Queen Kenan. He doesn't really understand the ... impracticalities involved. Zari you really shouldn't have worried the Queen with all this." Harper felt tears of all manner of emotions spilling down her cheeks.

"Come on." The Queen turned round and headed for the annex.

"Queen Kenan ... "

"I doubt you can outargue me, Harper. I'm used with Ludrig. Come on." The Queen repeated and Harper grabbed Zari's hand and followed her.

Harper was lead into a very comfortable house complete with four childred. This was obviously where the Queen came with her childred to spend a bit of time with them. All four ran at Zari as soon as he returned. He'd clearly been making friends.

"I also understand why Zari came to you, Queen Kenan." Harper sighed wearily. "I was just so worried about him. Him and everything else. He won't understand why the King can't just charge up there and help his Da."

"Do you understand why he can't just charge up there to help his Da?" Kenan asked.

"Of course. One of the first rules of the military, stay out of a civil war." Harper said.

"Soldier's wife." Kenan smiled and Harper returned the expression. "I meant his Da in particular."

"He'd hardly do that with no information at all. We don't know what caused all this. We don't know who, or what, is at fault. Queen Kenan I've been here with Zari for ten years and I'm so sorry I had to deceive you all for most of it." Harper felt exhausted.

"I'd have done the same. Don't worry over it. I'm surprised Ludrig didn't try and pair

you off with Keegan. Ah. He did." Kenan grimaced.

"That's when we had to tell him who I was. Keegan had already guessed due to Zari's looks. I'm so mixed up and I feel so useless. Can I ever tell Zarsan I'm still alive? If so, when? How? Will it lead to trouble for Ludrig? For Agalia? For Luh?" Harper exhaled loudly. "I've kept Zarsan alive and raised him up to impossible heights for Zari. Maybe that's why he can't let go. I can't let go because I know he deserves those heights. I love him." She felt the wretched tears again. "I'm as damp as that rotten swamp out there. I'm not usually such a wreck."

"The only trouble for Ludrigshires and Agalia will be down to antiquated politics that only exist in a few stubborn minds these days. That's men for you, they're block headed mules. Why should their ingrained bias keep you and Emperor Zarsan apart? Why should they keep Zari from his father? Also, there's a tiny princess in Agalia who needs a mother. It's time the outdated stalemates were broken, Harper." Kenan nodded.

"Yes. Yes I agree with you." Harper said eagerly. Could she possibly be reunited with Zarsan after all? "How? How do we break them?"

"Damned if I know." Kenan tutted. "Think about it, Harper. Our men aren't your average men are they? They're two of the most powerful men in the entire realm! An Emperor and a King and they can't dismiss biased rifts that haven't existed for years? As my Ludrig would say ... bull's nuts."

"Queen Kenan!" Harper burst into laughter. "They just need to get round the same table and ... do something. There are two Emperors remember? They're hacking the giblets out of each other right now. Our men need to sort that out first, well my man does. He can sort out anything."

"All we need to do is remind them on that roaring and bellowing is for Golan swamp creatures and that we all should use indoor voices." Kenan sniffed loftily and Harper was useless with laughter. "That probably applies to Ludrig more than Zarsan. He roars more than he breathes."

[Book Index](#)   [Emperors And Kings](#)   [Previous](#)   [Next](#)

## Chapter 16

It took five days for the bulk of the fighting in Agalia to migrate outside of the city walls. Civilians were still fighting each other but the lethal force of a military presence had been drawn away from the civilian population. West Agalia had suffered. Buildings and businesses had been burned to the ground and many people had been injured.

"Sir the squads outside the city walls are starting to suffer. They're no match to the East's army." General Brock reported to Zarsan.

"And the East army is still low enough to keep on attacking them." Zarsan said in frustration. "Kerrin has still had no luck in contacting Waylon and reports say he's holed up in his family villa. This madness will continue unless we persuade Lafi to call off the military."

"Why has he ordered this?" Brock was still in shock over this. "A direct takeover bid is an insanely risky thing to do in this day and age."

"And yet here we are, Brock." Zarsan sighed wearily. He had other ideas as to Waylon and Lafi's motives, equally as insane. Harper and Zari. Even with the East army behind him, Lafi had no hope of marching into either Luh, or Ludrigshires to get to them and that would be his only option. He had nothing to offer in negotiations with Ludrig without exposing Waylon, and his own parts in Luh's sacking. Zarsan, on the other hand, would be exonerated of all involvement because he *wasn't* involved. In fact, he was in Jullit. He could simply go to Luh and talk to Ludrig without much risk. All the loopholes that Waylon had thought he'd covered, were unravelling. Attacking West Agalia would divide its army, both halves equal in expertise, but with no chance of intervention from Ludrig. Lafi would be on an equal footing to Zarsan, only Lafi wouldn't be out among the fighting, Zarsan would. So far, no one had managed to eliminate Zarsan but once he was gone, there'd be no more talk of Luhan spouses and heirs. The Boon family would be rulers of all Agalia.

"One division is already trying to sort out the situation in the city, sir." Brock said meaningfully. Zarsan snorted angrily.

"This should never have happened. Make the other divisions visible Brock, and use minimum force in a defensive capacity only."

"We may need to do more than defend." Brock said.

"I know. Hold out as long as possible just keeping them in check. Remember, Brock, they're Agalian soldiers, just like we are. We're all Agalian. Even if they have been ordered into this, I won't order any soldier to attack his brother." Zarsan said.

"Yes sir. I understand that." Brock nodded. "I will raise one point though sir. As you say, we're all Agalian soldiers so we've all been trained to the same high standard. This could go to a lock that could go on for months and cost lives from both sides."

"Which is why we need to shake some sense into Emperor Lafi and his uncle." Zarsan frowned in annoyance. "Defensive position, Brock. I should be out in the streets for now."

"Right away sir."

///

Ludrig and Keegan were in conference with Ludrig's Administration committee and Ludrig only recognised six of them.

"So have I always had an Administration Committee?" He whispered to Keegan.

"Yes. You prefer your brawling committee so you don't see much of this lot." Keegan told him.

"True." Ludrig nodded. "Right! You two, you, and you three, stay here. The rest of you go and arrange some scrolls or something." He pointed at the six he recognised and dismissed the rest. Keegan rolled his eyes and shook his head. "I don't usually meet with Administrators because they get on my nerves. However, Keegan thinks that the situation needs your input. Start inputting." The Administrators looked at each other in confusion.

"On which situation are we inputting?" Senior Administrator Perrin Fletcher asked warily.

"For buggery's sake! Does no one have a thought of their own in this dump?" Ludrig exclaimed and Keegan tried to keep a straight face. "The situation up there!" That didn't make it any clearer for the Administrators.

"The King means Agalia." Keegan provided.

"Well of course I mean Agalia! What other situation is there just now?" Ludrig said testily. "So? Eric, isn't it?"

"Perrin. Perrin Fletcher. I'm not sure in which area we're meant to be inputting. It's an internal conflict and to intervene on one side or the other could be damaging for Agalia's own economy." Perrin nodded. "That sort of input?"

"My eight year old daughter could have inputted that!" Ludrig shouted.

"You don't have an eight year old daughter. Calm down." Keegan said discretely.

"Yes I do. Yay big with red hair, good with a slingshot."

"Ellen and she's eleven. Do you want to continue here?" Keegan nodded to the bewildered Committee.

"Huh? Oh yes! As I was saying before Keegan interrupted me with his rubbish. What to do about the fools in Agalia?"

"The conflict doesn't affect us. I mean that in a political way, not a sympathetic one." Perrin said. "It would take quite a monumental event for us to ever be involved in combat with either side of Agalia. We've been at peace for years."

"How dull." Ludrig sniffed. "How's this for a monumental event? We have Emperor Zarsan's wife and son in the vegetable field. What if he was to barge down here causing trouble?"

"I presume this is hypothetical." Perrin smiled and Ludrig just looked at Keegan, who had to lower his head to hide a grin. "Even if Emperor Zarsan presumed we'd imprisoned this wife and son, he can do nothing about it just now. He's the head of the Western army, as well as West's Emperor."

"He's a military genius, Derek. All he's doing now is holding off the Eastern lot in the hope of getting some explanation from Waylon and his jester ... I mean nephew. Zarsan knows the value of the ordinary citizens too. No one likes a leader that takes them into a pointless war and an Emperor is dependant on his people. How long will Zarsan hold out knowing his wife and son are here? Once he reaches his limit, he'll waste the Eastern army who will be depleted by then due to fatigue, deflections to the West and overall pissed offness. Then what? As a non aggressor and a striver to keep the peace in Agalia, he'll be as popular as a virgin in a cat house. They'll be down here in droves. Have I clarified that enough for you?" Ludrig smiled falsely at Perrin.

"Entirely so." Perrin nodded. "In that case, we'd need to speak to Emperor Zarsan before he got to the charging down here in a rage stage, which we can't because he's got his work made out for him in Agalia. Anyway, I'm sure you'd agree that the scenario is too extreme to even consider. Zarsan's wife died a month ago and his child is a daughter, in Agalia."

"No not that wife, the other wife. We have one here. She isn't called Hypothetical, though. No idea who that could be." Ludrig shrugged. "It's real, Peggy. She's been right here in the Castle for ten years and we only just found out who she was. It was a complete waste of time asking for your input. You've talked nothing but offal since

you got here. I was hoping you could offer an alternative plan to Keegan going back to Agalia. It's sheer luck that no one's recognised him in the past, but in war time, peoples' suspicions are at a high. Also, it's my belief that Zarsan has been the subject of severe political skullduggery. We have to devise a way to discretely let him know our sympathies lie with him."

"That's 'sympathies' not a few hundred horsemen in battle armor." Keegan clarified. "It looks like it's unavoidable that I've got to go back to Agalia. You're coming with me, Perrin. We need a meeting with Zarsan in a situation where meetings will be the bottom his list. You'll negotiate with his own, personal Administrator, a man called Florian Drake. He's utterly loyal to Zarsan so you must earn the man's trust. We need Zarsan in Luh at a time where every military obligation he has will be in Agalia."

"Well you did better than he did, Keegan." Queen Kenan swept into the room from the balcony, sending everyone into startled shock. "Isn't this supposed to be more secure?"

"Kenan!" Ludrig yelled. "Are you mad? What are you doing lurking about out there, woman? What do you mean, secure? We're four floors up!"

"Harper? He's quite a normal colour and he's not salivating." Kenan moved the curtain and Harper peeped into the room. Ludrig went purple and began salivating. "No shouting, dear."

"Queen Kenan. Er ... can we help you? Harper?" Keegan felt an irrational and very hysterical giggle forming in his stomach.

"You really do complicate things." Kenan tutted. "Perrin. Go with Keegan and ingratiate yourself into Agalia. So far so good."

"Kenan it's a warzone! Ingratiate? Are you drunk? Come on, out of here. You too Harper." Ludrig nudged Harper towards the door and Keegan snorted a laugh.

"You meet with this Florian Drake, as Keegan said." Kenan nudged Harper back into the room. "Why try and get him to convince Zarsan to go against his military and political obligations? Just tell him! Tell him that Harper and Zari are here and he'll be out of the city gate like a shot."

"Actually, I'd already suggested that." Ludrig sulked.

"Of course you did, dear." Kenan smiled at her husband.

"I did! Before they all started battering each other. Didn't I Keegan?" Ludrig protested and Keegan couldn't even answer him due to pent up laughter. "Arse." Ludrig muttered. "Zarsan could suspect a trap. Ha! Had you thought of that?"

"You'll just have to convince him otherwise. Why would he suspect a trap, anyway? The only thing that would do is ensure that Waylon and Lafi secure the whole of Agalia with your help. Harper doesn't think Zarsan would believe such bilge." Kenan stated.

"Oh?" Ludrig asked and all eyes moved from Kenan to Harper.

"Although I don't think Zarsan ever met King Ludrig, he's lived all his life with the peaceful understanding between Ludrigshires and Agalia. Eight of those years was in Luh, right next door to him. Ludrig values this peace as much as Zarsan does and Zarsan knows this. I'm in quite a unique position here. I'm acquainted with both men." Harper smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "All this needs pieced together. Don't you see? Ludrig knows some things, Zarsan knows some things, Waylon knows some things, I do, Keegan does, and because none of it was put together, we have a civil war in Agalia."

"And the only thing that will drag Zarsan away from his duties is his family. Harper can tell him herself that she wasn't held prisoner." Kenan said and smiled at Harper.

"I suggested that too!" Ludrig butted in and Kenan nodded at him. "I did! I'd take her to Luh and ... and ... This is *my* meeting Kenan and I had everything under control. You shouldn't even be here! Meetings aren't for women."

"I know dear, I'm sorry." Kenan squeezed Ludrig's arm. "We couldn't help but overhear, could we Harper? We were just trying to help. We'll leave you to your chat. Come on Harper." She steered Harper out of the door.

"Chat?" Ludrig shouted. "This isn't a chat! It's a meeting! Infernal woman. Does she know what happened to the last woman who interfered like this? Eh?" He ranted.

"You married her. My mother planned the counter attack on Pipersville." Keegan reminded him and Ludrig gave him a dirty look.

"Excuse me?" Perrin put up his hand. "Do I prepare to leave for Agalia with Prince Keegan?"

"Of course you do! What do you think we've been on about for the last hour?" Ludrig barked. "I need a word with the Queen. I could have sworn I had an eight year old daughter."

[Book Index](#)

[Emperors And Kings](#)

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)

## Chapter 17

Three months of war was taking its toll on Agalia and no end was in sight. Ludrig's predictions of deflections to the West had been quite accurate, both among the civilians and the military. Still, Zarsan's troops held off from a full scale pushover assault. The option of getting Lafi to call off the army was becoming more remote with every day as the Emperor and his Advisor simply couldn't be contacted. Rumours circulated that they were in Jullit, Hecia, Lombat and even Luh. Other rumours circulated that they'd both gone mad or that they were both dead. Nothing could be verified.

"Why don't they just give up?" Keegan, who was Leon once again, said to Perrin. The two men could hear the shouts from yet another raid by the Eastern army on the Western divisions. "All they're doing is prolonging the standoff."

"The same could be said about the West. It depends on your view. All the West are doing is fending them off. Why don't they just take them?" Perrin countered.

"Zarsan's bound to be close to making that decision. How are the talks with his Administrator?" Keegan asked.

"Not much past the introductions I'm afraid. He's an exceptional Administrator as well as a close personal friend of Emperor Zarsan's. This means he's constantly with him just now. As far as I can tell, no mention of King Ludrig has ever been made, which suggests that no one sees him as a threat, enemy or collaborator. That's a good thing, by the way." Perrin said.

"We're getting nowhere and neither is Agalia." Keegan said in frustration. "I'm distributing food to the homeless tonight. I'll leave you to close shop." He left his warehouse and headed for the grain store near the government halls. It was the only store left intact due to its proximity to an official building.

"Hey! You sir!" Someone shouted and Keegan turned to peer along the darkened street. "Hold up, man. I need your help." Keegan was very surprised to see Emperor Zarsan himself, hurrying towards him and quite out of breath. "Thank you, sir."

"Leon Feron, sir." Keegan bobbed his head. "You need the help of a humble pottery merchant?"

"Urgently. I need you to go and bring Physician Tallow to Advisor Kerrin's home." Zarsan handed Keegan a note. "Do it in under five minutes and I'll double this." He also handed over a purse of coins. Keegan nodded and ran in the direction of the city centre. Zarsan ran back to Kerrin's villa.

"Not too good." Mistress Olga shook her head. Zarsan nodded his thanks and entered Kerrin's bed chambre. The former Emperor lay still on his bed, his skin a dull grey colour. The man's heart was collapsing.

"Kerrin. Tallow is on his way." Zarsan clutched the Advisor's hand.

"Waylon ... " Kerrin whispered.

"Shh. It's under control." Zarsan said gently.

"Emperor Zarsan." Physican Tallow had arrived with the merchant in a carriage. Zarsan gave Keegan another purse of coins then hurried back to Kerrin's side, next to Tallow. Tallow shook his head slightly and Zarsan swallowed hard.

"Zarsan." Kerrin croaked weakly. "Fix it. Fix it all."

"I will, Kerrin. Rest." Zarsan let the tears come.

"Now, Zarsan. Go to Ludrig and end this madness. We both know what Waylon and Lafi did and it's time we stopped edging round it. Go to Ludrig."

"Kerrin, Ludrig can't join in the war." Zarsan looked at Kerrin's ashen face.

"Oh to buggery with the war. I don't mean the war." Kerrin's breathing became laboured. "Straight away. Too long."

"I'll go as soon ... "

"Now, Zarsan. Swear."

"I swear. Sleep now, Kerrin, you've earned it." Zarsan held the hand of one of the finest men he'd ever known and watched him draw his last breath. Keegan had witnessed the whole event. Zarsan barely paid him any attention as he fled from the villa and Keegan promptly followed him. Keegan managed to stay out of sight while Zarsan spoke to Florian outside of the Imperial Villa.

"No soldiers, as we discussed? Are you sure Zarsan? Things have changed since then." Florian asked in concern.

"No soldiers. We don't want to draw attention to any change here, Florian. I'm the only one who can offer the people explanations for my absence and I don't have time to do that now. Also, we need Ludrig to know we're there in good faith. Gather up the Scouts that we agreed on and assemble by the south gate." Zarsan said.

"The rough scouts who are all capable of beating folk up. Yes." Florian rolled his

eyes.

"And the two Administrators. I'm sure they'll keep them all in check." Zarsan smiled.

"One was suspended for a drunken brawl involving the blacksmith and a cudgel and the other one suspected of arranging illegal fist fights." Florian reminded him. "It's good to know people in low places at times. South gate." He disappeared into the night and Zarsan went indoors. Ten minutes later, Keegan followed Zarsan to the barracks stables.

"I really don't have time for you. You were paid well." Zarsan didn't even turn round as he entered the stables.

"Sir, I'd like to volunteer to come with you, me and my assistant." Keegan said decisively.

"I'm sorry. You can't." Zarsan said flatly, then sighed as he turned round. "I appreciate your offer. You don't even know where I'm going. Or do you?"

"South, sir. I didn't mean to eavesdrop but I heard Advisor Kerrin. Agalia is a mess, sir. I want to help." Keegan said. "I'm experienced with horses, sir and everyone needs grooms."

"I suppose you better had come with us. You weren't meant to know of any of this." Zarsan said in irritation.

"My silence is yours, sir." Keegan went to collect Perrin, and their horses.

///

Dusk was falling when the small party of twelve men set off from Agalia's south gate. Keegan noticed that Perrin and Florian struck up a conversation almost immediately and wondered why. Ludrig and Zarsan were going to get their meeting. In fact, Perrin's position had become redundant once Zarsan had made the decision himself.

"Leon." Zarsan rode up beside him and spoke quietly. "I see you're armed with daggers."

"So is Perrin. Do you expect trouble?" Perrin asked.

"Yes and quite soon. We've been followed by at least twelve men for the last mile or so. They're Agalian so I'm presuming I'm the target."

"Can we outrun them? Scouts may be faster than soldiers." Keegan pointed out.

"Ah so you noticed them too." Zarsan looked at Leon the merchant and frowned. "I doubt we'd outrun them before we got to Gilby, let alone Luh and definately not before Ludrigshires. Most of the scouts are ... "

"Ex thugs with daggers. I heard. Can they keep these soldiers distracted? Daggers are no match for swords but as a distraction?" Keegan asked.

"You're suggesting that I tackle them with my sword while everyone else pokes them with daggers?" Zarsan asked suspiciously. "I doubt you're that foolish, Leon. On the other hand, you could be about to tell my why your cloak isn't sitting right on your shoulders. Quickly, merchant."

"Bow and arrows. Perrin is similarly armed. I told you sir, I want to help." Keegan held Zarsan's eye.

"Right. Florian!" Zarsan motioned for the Administrator. "Florian, get our two Administrators, and yourself together. Get the scouts to dismount and order their horses into a circular wall. Got that? Good. Make sure the Administrators stay within that circle. We're expecting an ambush."

"Administrator Perrin?" Florian asked as calmly as he could.

"Leon needs him here." Zarsan nodded and Florian left to speak with the men. "I'll stay mounted. My sword is designed for horseback combat, their's aren't."

"Good luck, sir. If this starts to go wrong, make a break for it and head straight for Luh. They're sure to recognise you." Keegan and Perrin steered their horses noiselessly into the woodland at the roadside.

The attack happened as soon as the soldiers realised that Zarsan's scouts were forming a defense. Zarsan had to blink a few times when four of the solders simply slid from their horses in rapid succession. He knew archers were fast, but these two were exceptional. The scouts divided themselves into two groups. One group ringed the horses and the other stood with Zarsan.

"Just taunt them lads!" One of the scouts shouted. "Let the General get a chance. He has a sword, same as they do. Sacrad shit! More arrows took out another two soldiers and Zarsan went into action. The archers threw the mounted men into a state of confusion and panic, making the scouts' 'taunting' even more effective. Zarsan unseated two soldiers as the scouts chopped at their knee joints with daggers. Three more soldiers were thrown from their horses and it took Zarsan a few seconds to discover why. The three Administrators were using slingshots and pelting the horses with pebbles! Zarsan laughed loudly as the remaining handful of men fled in the direction of Agalia.

"Leave them!" Zarsan ordered as his scouts began to persue. "Injuries?"

"Not to us." Florian emerged from the wall of horses. "Archers?"

"Very good ones." Zarsan said as Perrin dropped out of a tree and Keegan lead two horses from the woods. "Hey! Away from those corpses!" One of the scouts was rifling through the clothing of a soldier. "Take them over by the roadside and lay them properly. We don't have time to bury them."

"Bury them? They attacked us!" The scout shouted.

"They're Agalian, just like you. They're soldiers, just like me. If anyone wants to drop their standards to that of the Golan, then the swamp is that way." Zarsan began moving the bodies.

It made sense to head for the nearest point of civilisation, which was Gilby. The Innkeep almost burst into tears when he saw yet another Emperor riding into the village. To his relief, all this group wanted was stables and few kegs of ale. Zarsan left the men to their beer and went to sit in the stable yard. What would those returning soldiers report and to whom? That Zarsan was on his way for reinforcements from Ludrig? That would be enough to get all those deflectors to re-deflect and this violence would go on for months and months. He was starting to think he should never have left Agalia, especially with Kerrin gone. He'd ordered Brock not to release the news of his death incase the people in the West became incensed and the riots would inflame threefold. Instead, the army was to proclaim loudly and clearly that attacking fellow Agalians was not the way. Hopefully the few remaining resistors would concede before rumours were generated regarding Zarsan's absence. Keegan wandered by carrying a bucket of water and a soft hand brush.

"Leon." Zarsan got his attention and Keegan put down his bucket and went to join him. "If you're a pottery merchant then I'm a dancing girl. Also, if you're from Jullit then I'll eat that brush. Not many men would spend this long tending horses when they, themselves are exhausted. Not many men can wield a sword in the saddle, let alone use a bow in the saddle. In fact, the only elite archer division in the history of the realm was from Ludrigshires. After that, they were the only ones who could pass on such a skill to such a level. Now I know that King Ludrig doesn't adopt the divisional organisation for his army like his predecessors did, but his archers are still invaluable. Why would one, possibly two, Ludrigshires elite archers be posing as potters in Agalia? You're a spy."

"Of sorts." Keegan sat on a low wall. "Obviously I'm not out to facilitate any harm to Agalia otherwise King Ludrig would have acted."

"I worked that out myself." Zarsan said flatly. "So what are you out to do?"

"To get you to Luh for talks with Ludrig." Keegan shrugged and Zarsan just looked at him in disbelief. "I speak the truth, Zarsan. It's easily verified, this close to Ludrigshire. People in Luh will recognise me. I'm Prince Keegan Ludrig, heir to the crown of Ludrigshires."

"I don't believe for one second that Ludrig has any political or military plans regarding Agalia. He may be rough, but he's not stupid. What else would be so important that he'd send his son and heir on a spying mission? I don't believe you, Leon." Zarsan said warily.

"There are other things more important than politics, Zarsan." Keegan tried to formulate what he was going to say next.

"Harper." Zarsan looked at Keegan and his eyes opened wide. "Harper? You've seen Harper? My son?"

"They've both been living in the Castle, with all the security that entails, since they were rescued from Luh ten years ago. The King realised how unbelievable it would sound when he told you that we had no idea who she was. None at all. That's why he wanted you in Luh. He intends to bring Harper there and let her tell you herself. She's a remarkable woman and your boy is a credit to you." Keegan said truthfully.

"Start at the start, Leon. I want times and I want reasons for her silence. Make it good. I make no allowances when it comes to that subject." Zarsan said flatly. Keegan started with the sacking of Luh and left nothing out. All he knew, he told Zarsan. The man deserved the whole saga in it's entirety, to the best of Keegan's knowledge. Both men sat long into the night. Zarsan had no doubt that Leon was Prince Keegan and that Ludrig's heir had treated Harper and Zari like his own family. Despite the pangs of jealousy, Zarsan knew he owed the Prince a debt he'd struggle to pay.

[Book Index](#)   [Emperors And Kings](#)   [Previous](#)   [Next](#)

## Chapter 18

Early the following day, Zarsan and Florian entered Luh for the first time in almost eleven years while Keegan headed for Ludrig Castle. The work that the Luhans and Ludrig had done here was remarkable. All the harbours were fully restored and businesses were doing well. The two men stood in a square of public gardens and Zarsan let the memories flood through his head. The last time he'd stood in this garden, it had been in front of Elias Bright's house and Harper had been inside nursing their newborn baby.

"Rest well, Elias." Zarsan knelt on the grass before a flowerbed. "This fence is a disgrace. I'll get right on it." He smiled, then stood up while Florian paid his respects. Word spread quite quickly that Zarsan had returned to Luh and that caused quite a bit of excitement.

"Zarsan?" He had to alter his eye level to look at the bent old woman standing by his horse.

"Nanny Crook!" Zarsan knelt on the ground once more, in order to speak to the old nurse's face. "This place has changed since you told me off in that garden."

"Noisey man. You and him over there. I remember you." Nanny pointed at Florian. "Poor Elias. I tried to get them out of there, I really did. He was discussing some sort of schedule in there with his elders. Elders!" The old woman laughed. "All Elias' cronies were elderly, me included. Ah it's good to see you lad. I knew you'd come back one day."

"I should have come sooner, Nanny. Ludrig's done this himself and it's shameful that I didn't come and contribute." Zarsan said regretfully.

"If I had good news about Harper and the child, I'd have walked all the way to Agalia to tell you. No one had much definite news about anyone. It was just complete chaos and slaughter." Nanny said sadly. Zarsan just nodded. Despite his urge to run around yelling that Harper and Zari were alive in Ludrigshires, common sense had prevailed. He needed Ludrig's presence to look after his family when he returned to Agalia. He also needed the situation in Agalia resolved completely before he produced Harper and Zari. "I'm so sorry about Lady Kez. She had a beautiful reputation down here."

"A well deserved reputation. Thank you Nanny. She was a very fine lady and she's a big miss to many people." Zarsan told her.

"And the little Lady?"

"Kezia. She's as beautiful as her mother was."

"Zarsan, the Inn's organised." Perrin had stayed to offer his services and Zarsan was far more approachable than Ludrig. Keegan must have been exactly like his mother.

"Take care, Nanny. I'm quite sure we'll see each other again." Zarsan stood up.

"Yes and don't leave it ten years. I can still dish out a scolding that would blister paintwork, Emperor or not." Nanny Crook winked at Zarsan and hobbled away.

"Is Ben Foley still in the Inn?" Zarsan asked Perrin.

"The very same. He was asking after you, Florian. Something about trampling on his turnips while dressed in his wife's nightgown? I'm intrigued." Perrin and Zarsan both laughed.

"I'd forgot about that. Why is he moaning on? Have you ever tried to trample a turnip? It can't be done, I'm telling you. All I ended up with was two sprained ankles." Florian pointed out.

"Hardly the point, Florian. Why were you doing it and why do it in Mrs Foley's nightdress. More to the point how in the Creek did you end up with her nightdress? I've seen her. I think she's probably Luh's secret weapon." Perrin shuddered.

"Don't be crass." Florian sniffed. "That was some party. We were all celebrating the birth of Zari. Remember Zarsan? You paid for the ale then went home." He rolled his eyes. "I was dancing on the turnips. No, I don't know why. The nightdress was on the clothesline and to suggest otherwise is just ... just ... strange."

Foley's Inn was one of the very few buildings in Luh that was untouched by the sacking. Ludrig reckoned even the Golon weren't that disrespectful. The sight that met them in the common room had them roaring with laughter. Ben Foley was standing behind the bar wearing his wife's nightdress.

///

Harper strode around the Castle hallway and Keegan had a headache. He'd only been in Ludrigshires for an hour and Harper didn't seem to grasp the concept of rest or food.

"When can we go? Has he changed? I think not. What did he say when you told him? Did you tell him that Zari looks like him? What about all our books? He has to read them all. Did you tell him ... "

"Harper you're melting my brain." Keegan smiled and stood up. "You can ask him all

this yourself soon. Where's Zari?"

"Dressing his horse. He's been in there for hours." Harper said.

"Do you mean grooming it? He dresses himself, Harper, not the horse." Keegan laughed. "I still think you should get on the back of mine."

"The trap will be fine, thank you." Harper said ruefully. "I can't believe this is happening, Keegan. Eleven years."

"I don't think he can believe it either. Oh come on Ludrig, you old ... "

"Fart." Ludrig finished, coming through the doors. "News for Zarsan, Keegan, rather unexpected news. That shower of Easterners up by their north gate have moved. Instead of conceding or retreating they're making their way north. What does that suggest?"

"Lafi and Waylon are alive and up north somewhere." Harper answered so Keegan closed his mouth. "Jullit?"

"I'd say so yes." Ludrig nodded. "The worry is that they'll repleat their troops from Jullit's army."

"Not if they're intercepted before they get there. Lafi and Waylon will be isolated." Harper pointed out. "Is it still a bad idea for you to get involved? I just mean a little tiny bit, not a big marauding assault. Teeny tiny bit? In fact, if we get the details right, no one will see them and no one will know it was you."

"That's because it wasn't me, it was you. Get on with it." Ludrig scowled at Harper who smiled brightly.

"Zarsan gets some of his soldiers to herd the other soldiers north and to block off their path back to Agalia. You can have your archers on the cliffs, hiding behind the ridges, and they'll be trapped. I know Zarsan won't want soldier attacking soldier but the cost in lives is dragging on and on and on. It'll flare up dramatically if that division gets to Jullit." Harper reasoned.

"Are you sure Jullit will side with East Agalia?" Keegan asked.

"It's Agalia, Keegan. Jullit is part of the Agalian Empire and its obligations are to Agalia as a whole. The eastern army is Agalian." Ludrig shrugged. "So this archer business. Who's idea was that?"

"Mendir Ludrig's." Harper replied. "That'll be your great grandfather."

"I've read about him." Ludrig nodded. "A fight a day or he was a bad mood."

"Oh I wonder who he's like?" Keegan rolled his eyes. "You've been studying our ancestry Harper?" He asked in surprise.

"Just the good bits, like the battles with Agalia." Harper nodded.

"Girl after my own heart. Keegan, you're just a girl. Carry on Harper." Ludrig nodded.

"The Shiremen were the only ones skilled enough on horseback to negotiate the dry and stoney ground. That meant they could get up the west coast quite quickly. Zarsan told me that the ground on the west coast is the same type as the cliffs and Mendir will have known this too. He sent combat soldiers to draw the Agalians out to the north, then the Archer Elites peppered them from the cliffs. Even the best horsemen in Agalia couldn't match the Shiremen. It was impossible for them to get onto the cliff tops. Mendir knew his terrains."

"I'll discuss it with Zarsan." Ludrig decided. "It would have to be vitally discrete and I'm not noted for that. I suppose you could lead it, Keegan, seeing as Harper will be busy. So are you going to sit here talking like a man just to show Keegan up? Go and get Zari. Your man's waiting in Luh."

[Book Index](#)   [Emperors And Kings](#)   [Previous](#)   [Next](#)

## Chapter 19

"I'm so pleased you came too, Kenan." Harper gripped the edge of the trap as it bounced along, despite it being expertly driven by the Queen.

"Well Ludrig and Keegan have things to discuss with Zarsan, er ... or so I heard. Heard quite clearly actually. I was under the stairs." Kenan grinned and made Harper laugh. "Anyway, did they think of you? Did they torment. What are you meant to do while they're yammering on about soldiers and the like?"

"I'm afraid I won't can wander around the town, not just yet. I'm to be kept a secret until the last minute, for mine and Zari's safety. That's why I have this hideous green cloak to wear." Harper pulled a face.

"It's monstrous, and it's a man's. Under the seat there, I brought you one of mine. Time for your horse ride." Kenan smiled and Harper didn't. The last leg of her trip was to be on Zari's horse, shrouded in the cape. Zari, in his own ugly cape, was to lead the horse to Foley's Inn. The Royal party would already be there, probably to the unnerving of the townsfolk. All in all, they had a King and Queen, a Prince, an Emperor and two Regal Administrators. Ludrig had ordered soldiers and more soldiers to patrol the swamp area, as well as doubling their numbers on the New Bridge.

"Zari, wait a minute." Harper got her son to halt the horse. The horse was probably as relieved as Harper seeing as she'd almost tugged out his mane. "Help me down."

"Ma we have ... "

"Please Zari. I need your company for a while." Harper almost fell on Zari in her haste to get off the creature. "Are you doing well?" She put her arm round his shoulders. He was almost as big as she was now. "Yes I know, you're almost eleven but you'll always be my Zari."

"Ma." Zari gave her an awkward smile. "I'm doing well. Sort of. I'm a bit nervous. Are you?"

"I am. Eleven years is a long time. You must be extra nervous though. You're meeting him for the first time."

"Because of you, I've known him all my life, Ma. Come on, he'll be waiting for us." Zari patted his horse and Harper ignored it and set off walking.

"Kenan I don't care! I'm not buying you an Inn. Women don't own Inns." Ludrig threw open the Inn door only to see Ben Foley in a nightdress, getting Zarsan and the Administrators some ale. "Kenan. I will buy you an Inn." Ludrig sat down and Kenan sat politely at his side, Keegan at the other. "Emperor Zarsan. You have no idea the number of headaches you've given me." The King smiled at the Emperor.

"I can imagine so. None of them intentional. Sir, Queen Kenan, I owe you everything for keeping Harper and Zari safe. I believe your hospitality has been remarkable and I'll be indebted to you as long as I live. I've already thanked Prince Keegan, but I thank him again." Zarsan said humbly. "I thought they'd be here by now." He clasped his hands and glanced at the door. "Keegan tells me Zari is like me."

"Exactly so." Kenan replied. "Keegan is like his late mother."

"Yes. Take that as you will." Ludrig said dryly. "We have business to discuss after you've ... you've done ... met Harper."

"Oh no you don't, Harvold Ludrig." Kenan chided. "You're not to hurry this. They take as long as they like. We can all go in the other room and eat."

"I don't think you grasp the gravity of the overall situation, Kenan." Ludrig glared at his wife. "That is to say, the realm is all going to buggery!"

"So it can wait. Now do you see why my presence is necessary, Keegan?" Kenan asked.

"Absolutely." Keegan tried not to laugh. "Will you let Harper 'advise' you, Zarsan?"

"He's soft in the head if he does." Ludrig grumbled. "Innkeep! More ... must you wear that?"

"Emperor Zarsan." Ben stood aside and showed Harper and Zari into the common room. Zarsan jumped to his feet and sent the table, and his chair, flying.

"You missed my birthday, Emperor Zarsan." Harper smiled and the tears streamed.

"Harper! By the Stars you're still beautiful." Zarsan ran around the bar then skidded to a halt when he saw Zari standing in the doorway, clutching Harper's arm. "Sacred Mother! Zari?"

"Yes." Zari looked at Harper who nodded her encouragement. "Zari Elias Bright, secretly Zari Elias Holt, same as you." Zari stuck out is and Zarsan shook it. "Does my baby sister look like us too?"

"Zari ... "

"It's fine Harper." Zarsan knelt down in front of his son. "Kezia looks alot like her Ma did. She's not here any more."

"Yes I know. I'm very sorry. We were all so sad in the Castle. Can Ma look after the baby? She's really good at it and she is my sister afterall." Zari asked eagerly.

"We can sort that out later, Zari." Harper looked apologetically at Zarsan. "I wrote to you every day, like I promised. So did Zari."

"And I'll read every single word, I promise." Zarsan held Harper's hands. "I can't believe you're

here. I want to know everything, Harper. I don't care how long it takes."

"I want to know everything too. You can sort the realm out later."

///

Many hours and many tears later, Harper and Zari went to join Kenan in the eatery and the men went to talk about 'soldiers and the like' in the common room. Zari was soon fast asleep by the fire after a good meal of stew and bread.

"Have you stopped crying yet?" Kenan smiled.

"I'm going to be sodden." Harper dried her eyes for the tenth time. "Why is Ben Foley wearing a nightgown?"

"Does he not usually? I've no idea. He was like that when we got here. Each to his own, I say." Kenan shrugged her shoulders. "Where do you see this ending Harper?"

"I learned eleven years ago not to make predictions." Harper sighed heavily. "Having said that, I have Zarsan now so any future will be a good one."

"Do you not regret the time lost with him?"

"Regret? No. I'd have planned it differently, I love him, but I don't think regret is the right word. Look what I've gained in the last eleven years. You, Ludrig, Keegan, life in a royal Castle and a whole wealth of experience. There's also Zarsan himself. He had the chance to love a very fine Lady, Kenan. Yes he did love her, I'm sure of that. He also has a baby daughter in Agalia. I think that something good comes from most situations. Mine and Zarsan's lives apart are no exception." Harper leant over and kissed Zari's head. "Tomorrow morning is going to come too soon."

"Just what I was thinking." Kenan stood up. "Ludrig! It's late."

"Kenan, please. Men talking." Ludrig's voice sounded through the door.

"More sense in my herb garden." Kenan sniffed. "Men drinking, not talking. The man in the nightgown started getting more ale once the soldier talk as over."

"So? It's the same thing, woman!" Ludrig's voice got louder.

"Either get your face out of that tankard, or Harper and myself are coming in there to rescue Zarsan from you ourselves."

"Huh?"

"Why would he want the company of you lot when his wife's in here! Eleven years? Yes? Don't make me come in there."

"Blasted woman. An hour and we'll be done."

"Ten minutes. Come on Harper. I'll help you with Zari."

///

Harper, predictably, cried all the way back to Ludrig's Castle.

"Ma there's no need to cry!" Zari said in excitement. "Da and King Ludrig are going to sort it all out! This is what we've wanted for all those years, Ma."

"I know it is. It's fantastic, Zari." Harper smiled. The archer solution to Agalia's stalemate was to go ahead. After that, it would be a matter of finding Lafi and Waylon Boon. Eventually, a new Emperor would be appointed. There wasn't much doubt that Waylon had orchestrated the sacking of Luh and had even gone to the extent of collaborating with the Golon. Everything the man had ever said for the last eleven years was lies and everything he'd done was to prevent Agalia from having a half Luhan Regent, and future Emperor. It was actually too horrible to comprehend fully.

"Da says Keegan can still give me archery lessons and I'll have to come here for the horses." Zari commented.

"You can spend as much time here as you like. You're very lucky, Zari. You aren't worried about going to Agalia are you? I've only been once and it's a big, big city." Harper said.

"I think it's exciting." Zari nodded. "Keegan said it will be like having two homes. Is that right? Da is my Da afterall."

"He'll always be your Da no matter where you're staying. What about baby Kezia? We have to bring her to Ludrigshires to visit Queen Kenan and all the children. She'll have two homes too." Harper explained.

"I'll teach her riding and archery." Zari decided. "I'll be a great big brother. You'll see. Do you think Lady Kez would have minded, Ma? She'd have been good with me and you looking after the baby, wouldn't she?"

"Da says it's what she would have wanted. He knew her better than anyone else." Harper smiled. "We have to stay out of the way just now, Zari. Ludrig and Keegan have quite a bit work to do."

"That's fine. I'm going to Queen Kenan's for tea."

"How very grand!" Harper laughed. "Bath and changed first. I'll race you for the tub!"

[Book Index](#)

[Emperors And Kings](#)

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)

## Chapter 20

"How many Eastern troops are still out there?" Zarsan asked, walking into the barracks.

"Zarsan!" Jonas dragged him off to one side. "You went to Luh to ask Ludrig for his archers? Why in the Creek didn't you say anything?"

"There were other reasons, Jonas. I'm sorry for being so secretive. I never hold back from my men unless it's vital that I do so. You know that." Zarsan apologised. "As for Ludrig's archers? It's time, Jonas. We need this bloodshed ended."

"Before they get to Jullit. I had theorised on that. There aren't many of them left, Zarsan. A huge number of them simply walked away and refused to participate in something so pointless. Our barracks was like the market square on a feast day at one point."

"We need them thinned out even more. I know the archers are the utter last resort but I'm still not happy with herding Agalian soldiers to their deaths." Zarsan said.

"I have a suggestion but I don't think you'll be happy with that either." Jonas told him. "We have Lafi's wife, Gertrude and Lady Lydia, his mother, in the guest villa. They stayed in East Agalia until it was obvious that they were in danger. They fled in disguise and turned up at the Halls yesterday."

"Waylon just abandoned them?" Zarsan asked in disgust.

"They both genuinely believed that they'd be sent for. I feel sorry for them and Lady Gertrude is a bit ... slow ... if you get my drift. There's a guard outside the villa in case they're approached, but they're being looked after."

"Good. And this suggestion I'm not going to like?" Zarsan prompted.

"Lady Lydia. We can escort her out there and she can tell the men that they're out of options. She only need appeal to a few and word will circulate. Your own tactics, Zarsan." Jonas shrugged.

"I'm not comfortable with using a lady in that situation." Zarsan frowned.

"I knew you wouldn't be. Me or Brock just wouldn't be believed and you'd be dead in minutes if you went out there without the army. She'll be well protected, you have my word and she'll never be in range of any weapons. I'm of the opinion that she'll jump at the chance. The male Boons aren't high on her estimation list just now." Jonas said. "Decision is yours, Zarsan. I know it's unconventional."

"I'm willing to try anything to get those numbers down. Keep her safe, Jonas." Zarsan left the barracks and headed for home. He'd just mentioned abandonment by people who were responsible for you and yet he was here, ignoring his own daughter. Florian was already there. His wife and daughter had moved in for security when the city went mad. Flora, Florian's daughter, was Kezia's minder.

"She's so good, sir." Flora handed the baby to Zarsan.

"I hope you know how thankful I am to you, Flora, and to you Phylis. I'd never have managed recently if it wasn't for you both." Zarsan cradled his baby and the women smiled and left him to it. "Harper will love her, Florian."

"Of course she will." Florian poured two glasses of wine. "I can't believe that was the first time I'd seen them for eleven years. I can't believe any of this."

"You were there right from the start, Florian and you've been there ever since. I class you, Phylis and Flora as my family too." Zarsan smiled at his daughter. "She's so much like her mother. I miss her, Florian. Ironic seeing as I was against the marriage for so long."

"Your circumstances were unique and complicated. Of course you miss her, I do too. She was a very remarkable Lady." Florian, as usual, knew the right thing to say.

"It would seem there are more remarkable ladies in the realm than anyone thought." Zarsan stood up and gently put Kezia in her crib. "Hopefully, Kezia will grow into one too."

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"Just you lead the way, General Jonas!" Lady Lydia barked and Lady Gertrude sobbed into her handkerchief. "Oh don't cry, Gertie. I'm still here for you." Gertie snivelled her thanks. "See? Do you see what our menfolk have done? I agreed with my brother on so many things, General. I supported him and spoke up for him and he simply turns tail and leaves us in danger. As for Lafi? It's not easy to speak against your own son but he is like his late father. No backbone, General, no backbone." That made Gertie sob louder. "It's the truth Gertie and we have to accept that. May I ask a question of you?" Lydia hauled Jonas into the doorway. "I'm not a stupid woman, General Jonas. All this is headed towards the capture of Waylon and Lafi. What will become of them? My feelings are quite high just now, I admit, but I wouldn't want them physically hurt if it can be avoided. Jail? Exile? I'll look after Gertie."

"I have no answer for you, Lady Lydia. I don't have the authority to pass judgement. That would be up to the governmental courts of East and West Agalia and that would depend on what they were charged with. It's way out of my field. Sorry." Jonas smiled at Lady Lydia. She was clearly extremely distraught and very worried about Gertie who she obviously thought a great deal of. He reached the private conclusion that Waylon must have been a foundling.

"Thank you for explaining." Lydia took a deep breath. "Shall we go? Those soldiers need to know they're on a road to nowhere."

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"Zarsan she was ... amazing." Jonas had lead Lady Lydia's escort and was extremely impressed at her communication skills. "We'll see what the cover of night brings but I'll be surprised if they don't scatter before morning. We could probably intercept the archers en route and save them a trail up the cliffs."

"Well she's certainly impressed you. What did she say?" Zarsan was impressed too. He hadn't held much hope for the plan.

"The truth, basically. She told them that Lafi and Waylon were finished. She told them if there'd been any hope for them, then she'd not have come to the Western army for shelter. Can't really argue with that." Jonas shrugged. "She reckons Waylon had some sort of breakdown that had been coming on for years and I can well believe that. She pointed out that an unfit Emperor couldn't make fair decisions on behalf of the Empire, including its army. She said it maybe wasn't his fault but he was putting them all in danger without realising it. She made it know that Waylon was mad without sounding like a vengeful family member who's been left destitute. Very articulate." Jonas said respectfully.

"I wish I'd witnessed it." Zarsan was very pleased indeed. "I was speaking to Florian earlier about remarkable women. It looks like we've found another one."

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Zarsan met up with Keegan on the coastal grounds north west of Gilby.

"We could still send a few up there just incase." Keegan squinted into the sun.

"As you see fit but I doubt there'll be the numbers to cause any trouble. Just let them through. The sight of a few stragglers will finalise the demoralisation of any potential replacements." Zarsan reasoned. "How are Harper and Zari?"

"Looking forward to being with you." Keegan laughed. "Ah this has been a long time late in coming, Zarsan. I don't just mean you and Harper, I mean everything."

"We still have a fair way to go Keegan. Agalia has to be restabilised for a start." Zarsan pointed out.

"Appointing another Emperor. Yes I know. Ludrig says you should tell them all to bugger off and do it yourself like he does." Keegan rolled his eyes and Zarsan laughed. "Don't start with stabilising Agalia, Zarsan, start with your family. Torment knows you all deserve it."

"Did you ever hate me, Keegan?" Zarsan asked awkwardly. "Harper would have

married you had her heart not been in Agalia, even after I wed Lady Kez."

"I never hated you, Zarsan." Keegan shook his head. "I respected Harper's feelings for you and I knew you presumed she'd perished in Luh. If your attitude was anything other than ignorance then I could have thought differently of you."

"You're a good man Keegan. Thank you. I'll send scouts to Jullit to send back reports."

"I'll go and tell Ludrig he hasn't missed a fight afterall."

[Book Index](#)   [Emperors And Kings](#)   [Previous](#)   [Next](#)

## Chapter 21

Waylon and Lafi were arrested by Overseer Granger in Jullit before Zarsan's scouts even got there. The pair were trying to form a rebel group in the hopes of securing Jullit and using that to attack Agalia. The loyal and peace loving Jullits soon reported them to the Watch. A week after that, they were confined to a small, securely guarded villa in West Agalia. Despite their atrocious crimes, Zarsan knew what would happen to them in jail. They wouldn't have lived for more than a week. He appealed to the courts for humanity and had the secure villa adapted accordingly. A month after their imprisonment, Harper and Zarsan were married, on Harper's thirty second birthday. Both East and West Agalia became one huge party, as did Luh and most of Ludrigshires.

"Ludrig is enjoying himself." Harper said to Kenan. Ludrig had drank enough ale to sink a fishing boat and was now teaching Zari a very crude Shires battle song.

"Ludrig always enjoys himself." Kenan laughed. "What a fantastic day Harper, everyone's so happy. Is Zarsan ever going to put the baby down?" Zarsan had spent the majority of the day with Kezia in his arms.

"He'll hand her over to Flora soon." Harper smiled. "It may be a good idea to go and rescue Keegan from Lady Lydia. She's rather keen on finding a husband for Lady Gertie." Kenan grimaced and threaded her way through the guests.

"Lady Harper." Jonas came up quietly behind Harper. "I have a message from the villa. It's Waylon Boon, he's dying. He took a seizure about an hour ago." He handed Harper a note and Harper went out onto the balcony to read it. It was a full and detailed confession of everything Waylon and Lafi had participated in during that long eleven years. Everything was there, the name of the Golon spy, Daclar Hood, details of the killing of the Agalian soldier, Hannet, the Jailor and the unknown delivery scout from Jullit. This must have tormented Waylon for years, Lafi too. Harper felt sick and disgusted. The man had the nerve to beg for forgiveness before he died.

"Still all about him eh?" Harper snapped. "Jonas was Lafi even there when Waylon sealed a sentence in exile for him?"

"I've no idea, Harper. It wouldn't have mattered. Waylon was always going to be in charge, right to the end. I think he's hanging on for a reply. Do I take the note to Zarsan too?"

"I don't think so." Harper knew there was every chance of Zarsan absolving a dying man and she wasn't ready for that. "I could tell you to go and inform Waylon that he'll go to his grave unforgiven. However I'd never give anyone such a disturbing message to deliver. If you prefer, you can just sit it out until he dies." Even Jonas flinched at the coldness in Harper's voice. "If it's any consolation to anyone ... " Harper held the letter to an open lantern and watched it burn. "No one is exiled."

"I'll return to my post." Jonas nodded and smiled at Harper. "Congratulations. It's about time too."

Zarsan saw his wife at the other side of the Hall and smiled happily. He raised his glass to her and Harper smiled and did likewise.

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[Book Index](#)    [Emperors And Kings](#)    [Previous](#)