

The Law of Congregation

Interlude

The room was spacious, yet barely lit. Last sparks of the dusk trickled over the mask of a man, standing close to the wall.

Apart from the man, hiding his face, there were three more people in this room. The first was dressed in a simple doublet, that fitted him a few years before, when new pounds of muscle still didn't lay over his shoulders. Another one, dressed into a blue camisole embroidered with golden threads, kept a half-smile on his face. The last, yet hardly least, wore a usual coat, which was usually used by people, who considered their aura of power more important than mere clothing.

"Beroni is dead," said a masked person in a steady voice.

"We already know that. But how did he die?" asked the muscleman.

"Only princeps Orseolo knows that. I cannot tell you anything I'm unsure about."

"Well-well, it means that Jerrome keeps something a secret from us, doesn't it?" a hardly warm smile appeared on the face of a rich-clothed person. "That's unusual for him."

"We need a new governor. Who will become one?"

"This is up to the Council of Prefects, dear sirs," soft words came from the fourth man.

"This bunch of fools has made enough decisions, when Ordo Vendramin was appointed a princeps of Saldea," the soldier sniffed, "no, this is up to us."

"Then why didn't we invite other princesses, Felix?" asked the blue camisole.

"This wasn't my idea."

"Correct," the masked man leaned forward from the wall, "I have made an assumption that we should speak alone."

"Did you?"

"Yes, my masters. Gertrude Gerardi has come up with a proposal during the recent Council's meeting. She thinks that Langobert Galbaio is a good candidate for governor's position."

"Galbaio?" asked muscle, glancing with a surprise on a cold mask. "Jerrome's step-son?"

"Curious..." a rich-clothed person was drawing the words, bowing his head to the side, "So you want to appoint the Incident's main character a governor?"

“Duran Gazzo has a very... specific personality. He may actually form a proper relationship with the one who ended Ordo Vendramin’s regime.”

“And we can control him. He’s said to be idealistic,” the last person noted.

“An idealist with blood on his hands? Amusing, don’t you think?”

A man, wearing a blue camisole, stood up and came to the window. Soldier was tapping his fingers on the table, then, frowning, turned to him. As if he could feel the glance, the man turned.

“Well, shall we give it a try?”

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Sunlight was streamed from broad windows, reflecting from every shining item in the room. I sat up in bed and glanced into the view before the windows. There, before my eyes, lay both fountains and, coming away into the tree shadow, sometimes reappearing on open lawns, roads. I stood up and came to the wardrobe. After choosing a doublet of a colour so purple that it would almost seem black, and a suitable shirt, I dressed up and went into the hall. A butler appeared at the very time of my entry.

“Would you like to have breakfast, milord?”

“Yes, it would be good.”

I grimaced. Such a name was... unpleasant.

“Will be done, milord.”

He rushed down the ladder to the kitchen, while giving orders to all the servants around. I sighed and moved to the dining room. There are no lords in Congregation. Never been one. For hundreds of years the republic lived without them – and flourished. I am no lord. I am Langobert Galbaio, legate of the Trade Congregation. This would be barely understandable for the servants. This particular one was a newcomer, arelian. I have no idea why my father decided to hire them, but it seemed quite difficult for the descendants of the Arelian Kingdom to understand the idea of the republic.

I found only Jorran by the table reading something. He noticed me and nodded, without deviating his attention. I chuckled. We never were friends, though neither were enemies. I guess it was just not easy for him to accept that his father brought an orphan into their family. Yes, we do not have lords, but we have trade houses. My stepfather was a prefect of one of the leading ones. He was actually also a princeps – which means that he has the highest authority over our Saldean island. A servant brought a basket with crunchy bread and a salad with honey and goat cheese. It does sound strange, but nevertheless it's delicious. The cook was a longtime servant of ours and perfectly knew our preferences.

After finishing my meal, I must say, without any word exchanged with Jorran, I left the manor. The fresh air with a solid taste of sea salt was nicely invigorating. Sea is our only natural place of life, most precious among others. I suppose that habitants of Erenclate's island, where the Kingdom of Trester lived, could understand us, but they were still very far from such islanders like us. After crossing my father's little park to the gates, I reached the cobblestone street. A carriage rode by. I inhaled deeply, enjoying the smells of this city. I loved Saldea. She is called a Pearl of Congregation. It is well-said. Located on the biggest of all islands, it rules over all the republic. Saldea was a capital and the largest harbour, heart of all Congregation's trade routes and a staging point for hundreds of ships. There are also minor settlements on the island, occupied mostly with farming, but the trade house Orseolo's residence was in the rich part of Saldea for a long time already. I was walking down the streets: magnificent monuments, trade contours and halls of lawmen.

I was walking, until I reached the final point of my march – the Ministry. Saldean guards were, well, guarding the entrance, sticking their two-handed sword into the ground. I nodded, passing by, but there was no reaction. Though I didn't expect any: guards are hardly known for either their sense of humour or friendliness. Many corridors left behind, I came into the right place. More guards were standing there, and they decided to check if I'm carrying any hidden weapons. Though any other person, close to the prefect, would already be outraged, I experienced it with a mere patience. That's what my father always told us: patience can buy more than arrogance, and your position in society is not something unchangeable. He always considered it important for his kids to understand: no matter how related you are to the Court of the Five you are still a person of Congregation. Mere people. Yet Jerrome Orseolo was one of his kind. Most of the other prefects were much more prideful and haughty, which is probably something that you will once become anyway, if you are a person of power, but still – should be mourned.

Knock, and I enter the cabinet. Rather ascetic place was strange for me – I was here before, but this never ceased to surprise me. It reflected the personality of the man that almost lived here, rather well. Raising his gaze from some papers, the minister nodded to me.

“Legate Galbaio, you are finally here. Excellent.”

“Greetings to you, minister!”

Minister of internal affairs Theodor Venier was unlikely to be recognised by commonfolk. An important figure, preferring to do great things from the shadows. Dry built, pale skinned. Short hair, unkempt, but not messy. Eyes of a pure blue colour, yet so cold that you imagine a dead-heart fish predator instead of his face. A moment before he was examining his notes on the table, but now looked at me, evaluating.

Venier spent his youth on Castel'oro, third amongst largest islands of Congregation. His not cheap, yet simple in their way, clothes made his past hardly recognizable. As I am, he was an offspring of the common family, but princeps of Castel'oro noticed him amongst other clerks in his palace and became close to himself, changing him from a simple accountant to an important asset. Still, I didn't feel any special affinity with this person. People like us evolve from common folk rather swiftly.

“I suppose, you would like to know your new assignment?”

“Yes, your Excellency.”

My career may seem quite strange to a person, who is distant from both our culture and political life. It is true that for countries of the Continent and islands placing children of high blood to a formal, powerless position is quite usual. They may even seem important to some people. But my title of Legate was assigned to me not after a certain age, but as a coincidence of one event, called the Saldean Incident.

“Magnificent. You've managed to get noticed. Your work as a steward at Orseolo's trading post on Eriskea, as well as your... participation during the well-known events of last year, helped us understand that you possess rather developed administrative skills.

I shivered. It was the first time that someone of importance mentioned the Incident to me. And not just of importance, but a minister of Congregation. They knew most of the terrible truth but refused to admit that it occurred. I managed to take myself under control.

“My thanks, Minister, it is an honour.”

“As it is supposed to be.”

He frowned for a moment and glanced at the room for a moment, then concentrated his attention on me again.

“You are assigned to an important task, legate. Directly by the order of the Court of Five. You are to go to Boldia.”

“Boldia, your Excellency?”

I couldn't help my amazement. A former province of the Arelian Kingdom, that recently joined our brave state was unfamiliar to me, though I have happened to hear that there is still no permanent governor there. Venier continued.

“Yes. You are supposed to become our governor and realise development plans for this province”.

Still surprised, I listened. The Saldean Incident was, unquestionably, a victory to both Saldea and the trade house Orseolo, and me and Jorran became legates right after that, but to assign me on such an important task?..

I was confused.

“May I ask what happened to the previous governor?” I asked out of idle interest, not expecting the following answer.

“An accident. I am afraid he fell from a tower. But the minister of secrets will tell you more about that.”

Feeling a little concerned about that, I glanced at Venier with a question, trying not to show my fear. I was aware of city tales about a grim prison under the Court's castle and a mysterious leader of Congregation's secret police.

“Minister of secrets?”

Venier noticed my confusion.

“Don't be so concerned. He will merely instruct you. More direct instructions you will learn in the papers that have been sent to your residence. Tomorrow a ship will depart for Asteria. You should become its passenger.”

I was a little stunned. Is the assignment really that urgent?

“My apologies, your Excellency, but is this necessary? I still have unfinished business in Saldea. I can go later, perhaps?”

He glimpsed at me for a moment with a certain amount of surprise, and then the mask of concentration returned.

“No. I understand that this may seem unsettling to you, but it is your duty, and you will pursue it, even if it is imperative to leave your business unattended.”

It was all mixed in my mind. I have expected something similar to this assignment, however the rest of it surprised me. If the death of the previous governor was to be a mere accident, I would be sent now to the prison, where the minister of secrets stays (and where I held no desire to be). I’ve heard too many stories about torture mechanisms that are disposed there. But there was not so much of a choice, which is why I’ve begun a walk towards the castle of the Court of Five.

Saldea’s buildings are organised in a certain way: the outer part is separated from the city with a wall (not so tall, though), leaving the port side of the town. The port itself was also protected by walls and two gates: one leading to the city, and the other one – to the road on the north. It was done so for two reasons: first, it was imperative that the city is protected from naval attack (which you should expect, ever since there are no other big ports on the island). The second reason was purely economical, because, the more patrols are stationed in the port, the less will the sailors have to smuggle something into the city. The arriving ships were carefully checked, before the crew had the opportunity to visit town.

Inside of the walls lie administrative districts, where dozens of clerks read and write all the papers, orders and all other uninteresting bureaucracy. Lawmen are usually boring, which is understandable, knowing how much time they spend, reading all these terrible texts in a dull language. These places are mixed with living quarters, where dock workers, lawmen and other low people stay. It is to be said as a definite virtue and, I would even say, pride of Saldea, that there are no poor neighbourhoods here. Of course, there are less expensive and more nice places, but you won’t find a district where the poor languish, spending their last money on alcohol and sluts. In any case, all town folk have a labour, even if it is less legal sometimes.

In the centre of the city on a large hill the Inner Castle is placed, where the Court of Five is placed – the highest ruling council of the Congregation, where five leaders of the most important trade houses are gathered and are to define the future of the state. My father was one of them. Some may say that the Council of Prefects will take all the power soon, but, believe me, this is nonsense.

I was stopped by the gates of the castle and questioned. A guard was waiting for me and came into my direction. Knowing our destination, I felt a little uncomfortable. The Minister’s cabinet was below, somewhere in the castle’s dungeons. A complete silence was getting on my nerves. A guard left me by a door, looking way too simple for a place like this. I knocked.

The cabinet was hardly lit, only a few lamps were glooming in darkness. My master was standing by a shelf with scrolls and was reading one. On my way in, he turned his back on the shelf and looked at me. I shuddered. His face was covered in a mask – silver or porcelain, it was hard to say. Mere human face with no expression and a carving on sides. I haven’t felt better now.

“Legate?”

I nodded. His voice was of a man around forty, yet a bit too high. Could he be a woman? Difficult to say as well. No one knew this person's identity (except for the Court of Five). Rumours in my trade house suggest that my father knew him years before, that he was a guard or any other enclosed person. Yet it was unlikely that my father never mentioned it to me or Jorran. Though, maybe the minister's life was the case: accepting the mask meant leaving your life behind, in order to serve Trade Congregation in a new, secret way. Knowing what people say of this man, I couldn't hold fear in the presence of he who crushes people's lives with only a signature.

“Perfect. Fascinated by the surroundings?”

“Hardly.”

My answer was nothing but bravado, and he knew that. A strange noise came from a masked person – a sigh, perhaps?

“Is that so?”

He walked towards his table, looking for something in mixed papers, then glanced at me again.

“Irrelevant. What do you know of former Asterian governors?”

“Not too much, I am afraid. One of them fell out of the window?”

“The first one resigned. Under pressure, as we suspect. The second? Killed.”

“Killed,” I repeated. I've known death before – the Saldean Incident is well known, but I felt no desire to become a governor to thousands, who killed my predecessor. “People's wrath?”

“Unlikely. We suspect a conspiracy. It has come to our knowledge that former ruling families of Asteria are planning to overthrow our authority. Many of our agents ceased to correspond too.”

“Were there a lot of them?”

“You don't suggest we annexed Arelian province without certain preparations, do you?”

He mocked me, amused by my uncertainty. I felt like a fool. This man made fun of both my fears and my surprise. I wonder if that's a gentle approach to all appointed governors.

“Why don't you intervene then? Dispatch army, hang all the bloody feudal, crucifying all their minions around the city streets?” I asked, willing to change the course of discussion.

He was silent for a few seconds, then proceeded with what I thought was doubt.

“I consider these explanations weird, but if they are necessary... We cannot just rush into the city and slaughter everyone with doubts – you will hardly have a town after. A tokenistic authority doesn't mean a real one. There are those among the families who consider our

influence... positive. Yet the majority of them are against us. And their rule over the town is, trust me, a real one. They've grown their power over the province for decades, and even though the ruling duke was, as you would say, hanged on a city street, others are still there. Your task is to find and eliminate the roots of this unrest. But you must do it in a formal, legal way. The people must find no tyranny in what we tell you to do. They must understand that it is the Law of Republic they must live with, not our feelings.

I glanced at him in confusion, barely keeping myself silent. My experience was administering my father's trade point, and they want me to conspire? Minister noticed my feelings and raised a hand, preventing me from saying anything.

"It may seem that this task doesn't fit your skill. Maybe, you are surprised that a young man such as yourself is assigned to a responsibility of that rank. But it is also political: as a member of trade house Orseolo, controlling the capital, you must show yourself intelligent, agile and subtle. It will strengthen the positions of your stepfather and will explain to the Council of Prefects that you are worthy of your title."

"Then why isn't Jorran assigned to this task? He is the trade house's heir, not me."

This question, it seemed to me, was expected, and the minister sighed, most likely annoyed by my verbosity. I hold my tongue, restraining myself from any further questions.

"Jorran Orseolo is definitely a legal heir of princeps," he said mordantly, "however, he has a pernicious, hardly fitting attachment to opium. It is somehow acceptable for an ambassador, which is his usual job, but a governor, who is a public person and an example to rabble, it is completely unacceptable."

I hemmed in agreement. Jorran's bad habit, if not an addiction, concerned me for a while already. I fear to think what our father thinks of it. My step brother started smoking it after the Saldean Incident. I must admit that I have also allowed myself to drink lots of alcohol after it, but in my case, it was a mere two-weeks journey, not a new way of life. Yes, it seems now that Jorran isn't the best candidate for this position. But truth be told, why am I better?

"You won't be alone in your work. Due to your... family connections, a squad of saldean guards will be dispatched to insure your protection under the command of captain Lufar. He will be your bodyguard as well as a personal assistant. You may trust him with anything, because the captain is completely on our side. Also, an agent of ours will meet you in Asteria. A merchant. Manfoldian."

I raised my brows.

"And what exactly are our allies' thoughts of hiring their people?" how extremely difficult it is to speak with a person in a mask! I could barely understand my companion, but my question probably annoyed him even more.

"It is not up to you to think of their thoughts, legate. The only thing that must matter to you, is our orders," he wanted to say something else, but I bowed my head in agreement.

"Was only planning to clarify, your Excellency. You must understand: I'll have to hold diplomatic relations with them," I said calmly, but was enraged deep in my heart. It is

certainly time to cut off my fool tongue. He has, however, accepted my explanation as a logical one.

“He will say certain things to you. “A legate is a creature of many faces. While being an instrument, he is a dream of a craftsman, since is ready to do almost anything”. It will be a password and a sign that you will have to speak in private.”

I was surprised by the exact words, but held my thoughts to myself.

“Understood, your Excellency,” I said loud and clear.

Minister glanced at me for a few more moments, then said his last words to me.

“Don’t stray from our orders, legate Galbaio. You will regret the coincidences.”

I bowed and left the cabinet, trying not to show my satisfaction from the end of this conversation.