

An Interview with the Halfling Prince

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Prologue

Article published in the *New York Times*, May 27, 1987.

MILITARY COUP SUCCESSFUL IN LORISHAN

Associated Press

YIRBANDI — Democracy has fallen. Early in the morning of May 26 a small faction of military leaders headed by General Rashiv Demis Strail seized control of the south-pacific island nation's government. The take-over culminated a long period of tension between the military leaders and the duly elected officials of the government. The Lorishi ambassador to America, Olin Dowd, expressed his deep concern for the welfare of his nation. "It is a catastrophe that the military leaders would interfere with the democratic processes of government," he said in a press conference today. He strongly urged the United Nations Organization to put pressure on the military leaders of Lorishan to withdraw from Yirbandi and return the government to the people.

The Lorishi government just came off turbulent elections in which the incumbent president of the island state, Kain O'Brien, was re-elected for a third term with what can only be called a landslide. Immensely popular in his own country, President O'Brien seems to have made some potent enemies within the despotic military which is now trying to crush the democratic spirit that has bloomed in Lorishan almost as long as it has in the United States.

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STRAIL PROCLAIMED KING OF LORISHAN

Associated Press

YIRBANDI — Lorishan has a new ruler. General Rashiv Demis Strail, the architect of the military coup launched on May 26, has declared himself king of Lorishan. In his inaugural address aired on Lorishi television, he spoke out strongly against what he called the corruption of the O'Brien government. He is directly quoted as having said, "The people need a strong leader to bring them out of the bondage of media politics and foolish lies of leaders preoccupied only by the desire to enrich themselves." Strail then went on to accuse President O'Brien's democratically elected cabinet of "running Lorishan as a strip-mine."

Ambassador Olin Dowd, has strongly objected to the statements issued by Strail. "General Strail is living in an age long-passed, benighted, foolish, and unable to see that democracy can heal itself. It does not need the 'help' of small-minded control freaks who want to sway the public with their demagoguery to fulfill their need for power."

It is rumored that General Strail and his cohorts have received substantial support for their coup from the Soviets, something that Dr. Brennan Wallace, Strail's public spokesman, strongly denies. The issue is long from resolved, as the deposed president of the Republic of Lorishan is expected to address the United Nations assembly in New York city later this week.

King

The cold light of the south pacific fall filtered in through the windows of Rashiv Strail's bedroom windows. He stood quietly in these wee hours of the morning trying to mentally prepare himself for the ordeal that lay ahead. Yesterday they had celebrated one year of independence from the claws of O'Brien's despotic rule. Yesterday had been the first anniversary of his coronation as supreme monarch of the island of Lorishan. It had been a hard year, he reflected, having to deal with the die-hard democrats and the ones who wanted to remain in power at all costs. The revolution had been relatively bloodless, but the way the

international press had treated it, Rashiv might have led every single member of the House of Representatives and the Senate out into Republic Square and shot them personally. There had been twenty-six killed in the whole operation, all but two on the other side, all of whom were bodyguards of the hated president of the Republic. He was not going to apologize for that.

"It was war, dammit," he muttered under his breath, and turned back to his dresser where he picked up the golden cuff-links engraved with the Strail crest—an inheritance from his father, dead now some fourteen years. He slipped them through the button-holes of his shirt cuffs, picked up his tie, in the white, violet, and gold of the Lorishi flag, and carefully knotted it around his neck with the precision of one who had done so for a very long time. As a matter of fact, as a soldier he'd done so every morning for as long as he could remember.

He looked at the face in the mirror, the clearly Loresh lines of it, but the dark hair, dark eyes, and slight swarthiness of his skin, hinting at his paternal grandmother and his maternal grandfather's heritage as Ishi. He was truly the Halfling Prince by blood, from noble lineage on all sides of his family. His father's father could trace his line all the way back to the ancient Dun-Bendel rulers, as could his mother's mother. His father's mother's family was once one of the princely families of Hindanit province during the Three Kingdoms and his mother's father could not only draw a direct line back to the kings of Praditha, but even was blood related to the ancient rulers of the Indian subcontinent. Yes, he was royalty by blood, and he knew it, but this world did not seem to want to recognize it. *His* people did, but *those* ones, out there, could never understand.

"Good morning, darling." Danya's face appeared in the mirror beside him, rounded features radiant with the freshness of her shower. Her dark brown hair glowed in the light and her soft green eyes glimmered tenderly as she looked at her husband's reflection with genuine affection. Rashiv turned and gave her a soft peck on the lips.

"Good morning, sweetheart," he replied.

"You were worrying again, Rashiv," she told him evenly. That was Danya, directly to the point. That was one of the things that endeared her to him, that and the fact that he knew she was strong enough to be the wife of a soldier—and now she was queen.

"Hm," he grunted in reply, fiddling with his tie knot, then picking up the small gold tie-pin with the crest of Lorishan on it.

"It's the interview, isn't it?" She always knew what was bothering him, he reflected, putting the pin in place. Twenty years of marriage would do that to a person.

"Yes," he admitted after a moment. "I am not looking forward to this Amanda Robinette."

"She's American," Danya pointed out. "It's a very important interview. Now the Americans can finally hear what you have to say."

"That's precisely the problem," Rashiv sighed, reaching up to touch the hand she'd laid on his shoulder. "The Americans could never *understand*. They don't know what we've gone through, and I see the signs that it could happen to them, too. And they don't have a Halfling Prince."

"That is not your worry, Rashiv," his wife told him evenly, stepping away just slightly to make her point. "Your task is to represent yourself and what you believe to that reporter. Let the Americans do what they want with it."

"But I have always admired them, their country, their freedom," the king said, lowering his voice, a note of sadness creeping in. "We modeled ours on theirs and yet now we have had to turn to this again." He paused for a long moment. "They have forgotten the truth about where the authority comes from."

"As has western Europe," Danya pointed out. "Don't try to reform the world, Rashiv," she said seriously then. "Just work on Lorishan. That is enough."

"You're right as always, dear," he replied quietly, smiled, and straightened. "By the God, it's good that I don't have to deal with this until *after* the affairs of state this morning. For once I'm looking forward to my desk in the Ministry again." And with that he kissed her, took his jacket, and headed out of his apartment to go to work.

Reporter

Amanda Robinette was what one might call the quintessential reporter. She had been a favorite of her local TV station when it came to hard-hitting news. Nothing was too dangerous, too dirty, too dark to keep her away from it. She could not be turned away from a topic once she'd dug her claws into it and it was this that had brought her to the attention of the *60 Minutes* producers.

Now she was here, in Lorishan, a forgotten island nation in the south Pacific, preparing to interview an absolute monarch, a self-proclaimed autocrat who styled himself king. Everything in her liberal American upbringing rebelled against that idea, and that was precisely what had made her *want* this story. She wanted to expose this man for what he really was: a threat to world democracy. He was an affront to all the ideals she'd been taught about the freedom of the human being to self-determination, to the freedom of speech, to freedom, period.

"No walls," she liked to tell her friends, "no boundaries."

Amanda was known to be a ruthless reporter, someone who thought very little about what she called "other people's morals," which was rather surprising to her friends, as she'd been brought up in a conservative Christian home, her father being a Baptist minister in Vermont. Over his protests she went to Harvard where she'd got her journalism degree and had launched herself on this very self-satisfying career. She loved the kick she got from exposing self-seeking little pricks like her father and showing them off to the world. And the best part about being in the press is that you could get away with it.

"And I'm going to do it again," she told herself, grinning. But the smile faded as she looked over the folder of information she'd put together on Rashiv Demis Strail, Sovereign of Lorishan. There was a glossy black-and-white photo of a young officer in uniform without his hat, half-leaning towards the camera, his dark hair extremely short, his face severe, his eyes portraying a strange mingling of emotions which Amanda was unable to read. The caption made it clear that this had been taken on the day when he'd been promoted to general, at the tender age of 35. She pushed the picture aside to uncover a family candid shot of the Strail family at the beach perhaps ten years ago. A much younger Rashiv Strail smiled out, attired in a pair of loose swim-trunks, his upper body fully defined. Beside him was a striking woman in a one-piece bathing suit with a short-sleeved blouse over it, just about his size, smiling broadly into the camera, Danya Meertissi Strail, now queen of Lorishan. Two children, a girl of about six and a boy of four stood next to them, Shauna and Richard. They were a happy family it seemed, but Amanda still wondered what lurked beneath the façade. Maybe Strail beat his wife? Or had he abused his children? Maybe he'd simply neglected them and this was just a farce, kept up for the public eye?

But, no, this picture was from when he was still merely a captain in the army. Maybe things had changed. She moved that picture to the side to retrieve the newest one: a full-color glossy picture of the royal family. His highness, King Rashiv Strail, sat in a high-backed chair, face straight but eyes bright, his wife seated beside him, a glowing smile on her face. Their three children stood behind them: the lovely Shauna, now seventeen, shapely, golden-brown hair falling to her shoulders, her face and eyes open with delight and joy, her features a perfect mingling of her parents'; the serious young Prince Richard, fourteen, heir to the throne, attired in a blue suit identical to his father's; and the youngest, Roland, a curly-haired boy of nine, smiling broadly, very much his mother's son, one hand resting on her shoulder. The picture showed the image of a happy nuclear family, something that Amanda knew to be a lie. It was not possible for such powerful families to stay together in "normal" circumstances. The freedoms dictated by the American Constitution had to *transcend* the family, she believed, and the family was the last hindrance to total freedom.

She pushed the photo away with disgust and turned to the one she liked the best. It was an enlargement of Rashiv Demis Strail's passport picture. It was by no means flattering, but he was smiling nicely, and she thought that here, in this one image, she could see what he was really like: a dark, self-centered despot who was just ready to come out and destroy the world with his self-glorifying autocracy. That's what she read in

his eyes, his face, and she would show everyone that this was true. But when she put the paper down and looked at her notes from interviews with friends and foes, she found almost nothing damning against Strail. From all accounts he was the perfect soldier, a good husband, though rather distant at times, a fair father, a competent commander, a devout follower of the Loreshi indigenous religion, and now—seemingly—a compassionate ruler.

There was no denying the reforms he'd made in Lorishan had been good. The inflation rate had bottomed out in this last year. Production had increased as the state-owned factories, most appropriated from the O'Brien Industries conglomerate, were now staffed by workers who were gladly trying to "build a better tomorrow." Crime had virtually disappeared in that year, due to first the military then later the strict police force, and it seemed no one had anything bad to say about King Rashiv. As a matter of fact, she'd had a lot of trouble finding even die-hard democrats that didn't admire the man. What one of them had said had stuck with her especially.

"King Rashiv himself said it's just temporary, until the country gets back on its feet," he'd explained. "Once we have our moral, economic, and social bases back in order Lorishan will become a democracy again." That had shocked her. If this was true, then her image of Rashiv Demis was wrong.

But she wasn't going to let any facts to the contrary influence her decisions until she met him in person. Today was that day, this very afternoon at three in the king's personal study. And once there she would tear him limb from limb in her patented, aggressive interviewing style. She would expose him for what he really was.

Introductions

At precisely two pm, Loreshi time, the *60 Minutes* crew was admitted into the Ministry of the King off of Strail Square in Unity, the capital city of Lorishan. The building was a mingling of the old and new, its foundations and outer walls dating back nearly five hundred years, once the winter seat of the Eshkvet family clan in the city, then later the winter palace of the Vahl dynasty, the last kings of Lorishan. Now the new regime had renovated this sprawling complex over the last year, modernizing the interior and putting in the most advanced technological accoutrements possible. The building had been finished just in time for the first anniversary of the rebirth of the Loreshi monarchy and had been opened to the public for the first time the day before. As the film crew walked in, they could still smell the freshness of the paint mingling with the scent of aged stone.

Amanda looked up to the high stone vaulted ceiling of the entryway, magnificent in its old-world charm, ponderous, to her mind dangerous. The Loreshi flag, similar to the Union Jack, but in white, yellow, and violet and with a six-pointed star in the center, hung against the wall directly in front of them. The others were decorated with the flags of the six provinces. In the center was a large, semi-circular desk at which two women and a man sat, answering phones, peering at computer screens, trying to make themselves comfortable in their new working environment. Amanda could definitely get a sense of discomfort from these people. They were not yet used to this place; the whole government just having been moved to Unity from Yirbandi about a month ago.

"May I help you?" the man at the desk queried in flawless English, albeit tinged with the trademark Lorishi twang.

"I'm Amanda Robinette," the reporter explained imperiously, "and this is the *60 Minutes* crew. We have an appointment with the king."

"Yes, we have been expecting you, Ms. Robinette," the guard replied politely, surprising the American woman with the use of the title she preferred. "Colonel Punjab is alerted and will be here in a few minutes. If you would like to take a seat over there," he pointed to a cluster of benches off to one side, away from the draft of the door, "he will meet you there." Amanda simply nodded, jerked her pretty head towards the bench and walked off, her crew hurrying to catch up with her.

As she walked, Amanda couldn't help but think of the puzzling time she'd had while visiting the king's house. This was an unexpected treat, something that hadn't been planned, but that she'd wanted to do. She'd been openly shocked, first by its relatively small size, then by the simplicity of the decorations and accommodations. True, everything was arranged tastefully and elegantly, but if she'd not been told that this was King Rashiv's home, she would never have guessed it. There was little difference from the middle-class homes of the people she'd interviewed while trying to get to learn about the "real" Rashiv Strail.

The other puzzle was Queen Danya. She'd personally guided the tour, not hiding anything from Amanda Robinette's prying eyes, and her grace and openness had stunned the cynical reporter. Here was a woman who believed what she said and did not hide behind masks. It very disconcertingly reminded Amanda of her mother.

Danya was quite a bit shorter than the 6-foot-tall American, with dark-brown hair cut in a distinctly feminine style, bright green eyes, strongly Ishi features, but fair skin. She held herself erect, confidently, and in such a way that she seemed to be taller than she really was. Her voice was bright, warm, cheerful, and friendly and the way she acted with a candor that seriously disconcerted Amanda. She was slated to interview the queen the next morning and now, having caught a glimpse of her, suddenly was not looking forward to that, because some sixth sense told her that this was the *real* Danya Strail she'd met. But maybe, just maybe, if she could provoke her....

By this time she and her crew had sat down on the padded benches: lovely wooden benches covered in leather, something that could definitely have been found at Buckingham Palace. The crew sat around, gawking, and making remarks about the place. The camera man and sound girl resumed their interminable card game. Amanda glared at them, annoyed at the fact that they were having fun here. Didn't they realize how *serious* this was?

"Ms. Robinette?" She turned to see a tall young man in a green uniform standing there. His hair was dark, cut short, carefully combed, his skin a rich coffee brown, his face strongly carrying the features of his East Indian descent. He stood there, relaxed, hands behind his back, at ease.

"I am Benedict Punjab," he announced in a surprisingly American accent, "aide-de-camp to his highness, King Rashiv."

"It's nice to meet you, colonel," Amanda replied formally, rising and offering her hand. Punjab hesitated for a moment, uncertain of what to do, but then smiled formally, took her fingers, bent, and lightly kissed her knuckles. She gaped at him, stunned, unaccustomed to such treatment. But then she got a hold of herself as he released her hand.

"If you will follow me, ladies and gentlemen," Punjab exclaimed, turned on his heel and marched away towards the broad stairs at the back of the entrance hall. The crew scrambled to follow him. He turned left past the stairs and led them to a pair of silver doors – an elevator.

Once inside, Amanda turned to their guide.

"Are you American, colonel?" she asked.

"No, ma'am," he replied, back ramrod straight, eyes watching his own reflection in the silver doors of the elevator. "I spent four years in college there, though, ma'am, courtesy of the government."

"Where at?" she wanted to know.

"Yale, ma'am."

"Not exactly a military school."

"No, ma'am, but an excellent one, none-the-less, especially when studying politics and sociology." She raised her eyebrows.

"And you go along with this king stuff even after being educated in the U.S.?" The question was definitely derisive and Punjab's dark eyes flicked down to her, a mixture of anger and contempt mirrored there.

"Ms. Robinette, you only speak that way because you don't understand the importance of the king. Begging your pardon, ma'am, you did not live under the last years of our republic. So please do not presume to call our monarchy evil, simply because it is *different* from the way things are run in the United States of America. Every country must be run in the way that suits it best, ma'am, and for Lorishan that is now a

monarchy.” He then turned away from her and stared back at the door. Amanda was still looking for a good rejoinder when the bell above the door rang and it slid open to reveal the third floor of the building.

“This way, ladies and gentlemen,” Punjab said genially, gesturing towards the hall. He turned to the right and briskly led them down past several wooden doors, all rounded at the top. The floor of the hall was covered with a heavy red-and-gold carpet, the walls hung with tasteful paintings, light coming from brass electric candelabras set against the white stone walls. All in all, it struck Amanda as a strange mingling of a medieval castle and modernity, which this kingdom surely was.

“The king’s study,” the colonel announced swinging wide the door. Again, Amanda was disappointed by the austerity of the room. To be sure the blue rug on the floor was thick and warm and the walls were lined with bookcases, but at the same time there was a Spartan quality to it. There was a single large wooden desk, plain, square, stained a reddish-brown. A simple white lamp was bolted to the side of it and there was nothing to denote royalty about the room at all. Drapes framed the window behind the desk and the only other pieces of furniture in the room were the high-backed, aged captain’s chair behind the desk, and a matching loveseat and recliner chair next to a low coffee table on the other side of the room. Both of the chairs were clearly old and much-used, though they were leather, and clearly well-made. There were even a few stains on the arm of the recliner, presumably a spilled beverage of some sort.

“Is this it?” she asked, surprised, looking around at the myriad of books against the three walls. There were certainly older ones here and there, but most were more modern works. She walked over to one and noted a simple white label stuck to the shelf, clearly printed out by a dot-matrix printer. It simply said “Philosophy.” She looked there to see various books that she knew, such as Nietzsche and Descartes, some she did not, and was even surprised to find Augustine and Origen there. She walked on, looking at more of the selections. By far the largest number of books were historical in nature from all around the world. She found some books on military tactics, and was even surprised to find a sizable selection of Christian commentaries and a New International Version Bible sitting next to a copy of the Yusuf Ali’s interpretation of the Holy Qur’an. There was also a Bhagavad-Gita, the Ramayana, the teachings of Lao Tzu, and various other religious texts, including a heavy leather volume with the simple words *Lore Me* engraved on the back: the religious book of the native Loreshi religion.

“Is everything in order, Ms. Robinette?” Punjab’s voice cut into her reverie.

“Why, yes,” she replied, returning to herself, and drawing away from the interesting taste in reading that Rashiv evidenced.

“Has he read all of these?” she asked the aide-de-camp.

“I believe so,” the soldier replied, but Amanda was drawn away from him by her camera crew and producer who were deciding how to set things up. The time swirled away and in no time at all she had applied her make-up, worked through her notes and looked at the corner where the interview was to take place. The producer had wanted to move the love seat and arm chair to a different position, but Punjab had said no, making sure that all stayed as it was.

“His highness is very particular about his surroundings,” he pointed out. “It would not do to move anything.” Amanda took this as a hint that Strail truly was the control-freak she felt he had to be.

Once all was in place, Punjab drew the crew around himself and instructed them in the proper decorum for being in the presence of the king.

“You are to address him as ‘your highness’, ‘sire’, or ‘my lord’, as you choose,” he explained. “His highness is quite tolerant of those who are visiting with him, but do not provoke his anger. We would request that you give a bow when he arrives and when he departs.” He turned to Amanda. “Ms. Robinette, we request that you be respectful and circumspect in your questions. I do not believe that there are any that he won’t answer, as long as they are posed in a respectful manner. I hope you understand.” The reporter glowered, said nothing. Punjab glanced at his watch.

“Very well, then,” he concluded. “His highness will be here any minute now.” No sooner had he said that than the door to the study opened and King Rashiv himself strode in. Every eye turned towards him, and Amanda was surprised at how much shorter he was in real life than she’d imagined. She was definitely taller

than he was, but at the same time he brought an atmosphere into the room that could only be called greatness. His aura was almost tangible, and it caused the *60 Minutes* team to almost automatically bow to this modern-day monarch. Amanda followed suit, noticing that Rashiv colored just a bit.

“Please,” he said, raising his hands. Once they had straightened, he bowed to them slightly and then turned to Amanda.

“You must be Ms. Robinette,” he said, walking over to her and extending his hand. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine, my lord,” she replied, the epithet coming to her tongue automatically, embarrassing her. King Rashiv smiled genially.

“Please, call me ‘sir’,” he said softly. “Only my loyal subjects call me ‘my lord’. I find it is more fitting that way.” He gestured towards the chairs in the corner under the lights. “Shall we?”

She bristled slightly, noticing how he had instantly taken control of the situation, without any effort at all. *She* was the one who was supposed to be conducting this interview! She hid her feelings, nodded, gave a small smile, and followed him into the lights. He sat down in the armchair and leaned back, fixing her with those bright, dark intelligent eyes.

“What do you think of my library, Ms. Robinette?” he asked, carefully gauging her response.

“It is fascinating,” she replied, trying to compose herself to return to control of the situation. “I’m surprised it’s so small, though.” He laughed at that.

“These are merely the books I use when at work. My wife has doubtless shown you our small collection at home.” That she had, a whole basement full of books, some ancient, some new, including copies of the ones she’d seen here. She bristled again.

“I have watched some of your reports on satellite television here,” King Rashiv told her. “I have often been impressed by the energy you pour into putting together your stories. The exposé on corruption in the American business place was particularly thought-provoking.” She nodded, unable to keep herself from smiling. That had been her latest triumph that had made it to the screen. This had been the next one she’d sunk her teeth into and suddenly she felt that she had bitten off more than she could chew.

“How is your makeup?” she asked the king.

“Quite well, thank you,” he replied. “My aide applied it according to your specifications.” He leaned back and smiled. “Ms. Robinette, I am yours for the next two hours.”

Interview

Rashiv sat back, calling up the calm that had so often availed him in years past in difficult situations. He looked at this woman, tall, blond, shapely, dressed in a no-nonsense red suit, her freckled neck visible above the sheer white shirt underneath the jacket. Her lipstick was bright red and her blue eyes sparkled with a mix of anger and challenge. What had he gotten himself into? he wondered. This was a she-devil, there was no question about it. She would pull no punches.

“Your highness,” she began, smiling sweetly, yet eyes glinting sardonically, “many in the world community were shocked by the fact that you performed a coup d’état in a democratic country, deposing a democratically elected president and congress and installing yourself in its place. How would you explain your actions to the listening world?” She’d come up swinging hard and Rashiv had to forcibly calm himself at the attack.

“You would have to understand the history of my nation, Ms. Robinette, to realize why things had to be done they way they were done.” He leaned back. “The injustices of the supposedly ‘democratic’ régime of Lorishan were undoubtedly not painted in their boldest colors in the world press. We may have outwardly been a peaceful country, but inwardly we were corrupt, ready to crumble at a moment’s notice—much like the corrupt businesses you so aptly described in your report.”

“So you felt it was your duty to remove the corruption?” She was still smiling, but he could tell she was warming to the fight.

“It was my duty, first as advisor to the president, and then later being forced to depose him in a most un-democratic manner,” he replied. “And believe me, Ms. Robinette, there was none more reluctant to that than I was.”

“And yet you did.” The statement implied a grievous sin.

“And yet I did, and today I understand that it was the only possible step.” He looked straight at her, willing her to ask the question he wanted next.

“Seizing power by force is *never* the only possible step,” she shot back.

“In a perfect world, perhaps, but not in this one,” he replied evenly. “Freedom is costly, Ms. Robinette, especially to the guardians of that freedom. The leaders of this country no longer guarded freedom, they exploited it, making their personal enrichment more important than the welfare of their constituents.”

“But they could have been voted out of office then!” Amanda exclaimed, her anger showing through just slightly now.

“Yes, they might have in a less corrupt society.” He looked her straight in the eye. “At that time there was no other choice. Almost everyone in Congress was actually an employee of O’Brien Industries and with 87 representatives and ten senators that meant that the government was effectively a dictatorship already. We simply changed dictators.”

“But there were *elections!*” the reporter pressed. “Surely they counted for something!”

“I voted for the other man,” Rashiv replied evenly, “as did those in the country who had the courage to, and yet O’Brien won with a landslide, breaking our constitution while he was at it. I don’t think that’s very democratic.”

“So you justify your extremely un-democratic decorum by blaming your opponents of the same thing?” she asked incredulously. “That’s pretty two-faced.”

“Not at all, Ms. Robinette.” The king smiled, knowing that the conversation was going exactly where he wanted it to. “I and my associates *never* made any bones about how we planned to rule the country. We don’t hide our autocratic rule behind the lies of a hollow democracy.”

“So you admit it is an autocratic rule,” Amanda said with some satisfaction, unable to keep the smirk off her face. “What makes you think that an educated, modern-day people needs an autocratic ruler with a few self-proclaimed leaders thinking for the masses? This is no longer the dark ages!” Again, Rashiv smiled genially.

“That is precisely the point, Ms. Robinette, the Lorishi inhabitants have *forgotten* how to think for themselves. Television, entertainment, opinion polls, the press have all thought for the people, interpreted events for them, taught them what to think, what to say, how to vote. The people would look to their entertainment sets and their newspapers before uttering an opinion. The teachers in the schools preached ‘democracy’ and evicted spirituality. They said that the way they thought was the only way to think; the way they acted the only way to act. Is that a people that can think for themselves, Ms. Robinette?” He paused for a fraction of a moment before plunging on. “The people must learn to think for themselves again, to look at both sides of a question and make an intelligent decision. They are content to be spoon-fed. Well, let someone who cares about them spoon-feed them and train their children to think again.”

“Does that mean that you view your totalitarian dictatorship as temporary?” the woman asked, unbelieving. Rashiv just smiled.

“It is here now,” was all he replied secretively.

Amanda looked down at her notes, trying to think, to find her next attack. She’d never looked at it the way he had, and she bristled at his remarks about the press. They were the guardians of the truth not a propaganda machine! And yet somewhere deep inside she sensed that what he’d said was right. She had to try a different tack.

“Be that as it may, your highness,” she began again, “we live in a day and age where people are ruled by their own will. How can you proclaim yourself king of a nation at such a time?”

“Let me ask you a question in return, Ms. Robinette,” he replied. “Where do you believe that sovereignty comes from?”

“Why from the people!” she exclaimed.

“But where do the people get it from?” he asked in return.

“What do you mean?” she demanded.

“What is the source of the authority of the people to bestow sovereignty on their leaders?” He cocked his head to one side, a slight smile playing around his lips, dark eyes shining as he touched on his favorite subject. “How many people does it take for them to be able to give someone authority? Ten? A hundred? A thousand? A million? Perhaps even five billion?”

Amanda fidgeted uncomfortably under his gaze, unable at first to come up with an answer, then something from her childhood crept to the fore.

“You’re talking about God!” she gasped, unable to hide her horror at that thought.

“Yes, I am, Ms. Robinette,” he replied. He gestured towards the bookcase that was behind them. “I believe you took some time to look at my books while you were setting up, is that not correct?”

“Yes, your highness,” she returned, biting off each word.

“Did you notice anything about them that disturbed or intrigued you?”

“Well, there were a lot of philosophical and religious ones among them,” she said after a moment’s deliberation.

“What is it that all religions save modern humanism have in common?”

“Is this a lesson in religion or an interview?” she snapped back.

“Forgive me, Ms. Robinette,” Rashiv replied, leaning back into his chair again. “Let me make my view plain. Every religion besides modern humanism takes the idea that authority of men over men on earth is an extension of the authority of the god or gods over men themselves. It is granted to men not on their own merits, but because they are the creation of the true Authority. Am I making sense?” Amanda had to grudgingly nod. This was something that her father had often expounded on.

“Now, if we look at the supreme deity as being the one who gives authority of men over other men, then even your president is responsible not only to the people of your nation, but also to the God who created him. And believe me, that is a much higher authority to be responsible to than the will of the people.”

“You sound like you are a Christian,” Amanda shot back, trying to regain her footing, making the epithet sound like a curse.

“I am not,” the king replied in return. “I am a Nemkhigh, a follower of the ancient religion of Me-Nemkhet of my people. But we hold similar views to those that the Christians, the Jews, and the Muslims do. We believe in a personal God who is supremely over the affairs of men and that judgment before him is more important than the opinion of our human friends.”

“Many people have said that before,” the reporter said bitterly, openly glowering now, “and they’ve used this ‘divine right’ to do whatever they pleased. I bet you’ll tell me that they didn’t really understand that, though, right?”

“That is eminently correct, Ms. Robinette,” Rashiv replied, smiling warmly. “Your intelligence is most well-honed. If a person truly believes in their God and following his decrees, then he will live according to those prescriptions as much as he can, holding them higher and more important than his own life. Someone who uses his ‘divine right’ to do as he pleases does not really love his God or his people, but views himself as God and not as the subject of the true king.” Amanda fidgeted under his words.

“So you see yourself as responsible first and foremost to your God?” she asked cynically.

“That is correct.”

“And you think that your accountability to him is greater than that to your people?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re only human! You can’t be that good as to always do what is best for your people!” She nearly leaped off her seat at that remark.

“Again, you are very correct, Ms. Robinette,” King Rashiv laughed. “That is why I try to surround myself with clear-thinking men and women who know what my people need and what they want. Would it surprise you to find that some of my closest advisors are staunch democrats?” The look on her face answered the whole question. “I even have two people from my predecessor’s government helping me rule better.”

“And yet you make all the decisions,” she asked angrily.

“Yes, as does your president. I listen to the varying opinions, and I carefully weigh the options and choose what seems to be best at that point. That is no different than what your president does.”

“But there are no checks and balances on your power!” she exclaimed.

“That is not entirely true,” he replied. “My aide-de-camp and advisors have the duty to oppose me if they believe what I am doing is not in the best interests of my people. The prime minister can even recommend my deposition.” He leaned back and shook his head. “Ms. Robinette, I know better than anyone my weaknesses, the flaws of my humanity. I know that my decisions are not always the best and are more often insufficient. But I do my best. I am in this position as king of Lorishan and it is my responsibility to see that my people live safely and to keep justice in the land.”

“That is how you speak today,” Amanda snapped. “What will you say ten years from now?”

“Ms. Robinette, I believe that you had the honor of visiting my home today,” he replied evenly, the smile never leaving his squarish face. “What were your impressions?” The question caused them to rush over Amanda again unbidden: the simplicity, elegance, *poverty* in comparison to other royal houses.

“It wasn’t quite what I expected,” she admitted grudgingly.

“How so?” he prodded.

“You don’t live like a king,” she snapped. “Your house is a middle-class home.”

“Which is precisely the way I intend to keep it.” He leaned back. “I have two palaces, did you know that, Ms. Robinette? I will have my people escort you to them in the next few days, if you wish. I never go there, because it disassociates me from my people, from the way they live. I tend to walk to work every morning, even though I might take a car or even a helicopter from my front door to the Ministry. I do my best to keep in touch with the people—as a king should. Even the president in your country is cut off from his people directly. I intend to never let that happen.”

“Even if it causes security risks?” she asked, eyebrows raised.

“If I am near to my people, they will be the best guards I can have,” Rashiv replied with conviction. “A beloved king is safer alone among his subjects than a hated one in the midst of his bodyguard.” Amanda could find no answer to that and tried to find another question to ask. This man had so rattled her composure that she was unable to get herself back under enough control to launch an attack on him. This was utterly frustrating! And what was worse she was starting to *like* him, to see things from his point of view. She flipped through the list of questions, looking for one that she could pitch at him, then glanced at the producer who was waving at her, signaling her that the interview was half-way through. She had to get through this.

“Your highness, how do you respond to the attacks launched upon your régime by the United Nations and your predecessor?” she queried after a few moments. “Surely you have heard of their attacks on your person and your integrity.” Rashiv frowned slightly. He’d hoped to avoid this.

“I wish I could respond in detail to everything said, Ms. Robinette, but then we’d be here for the next day or so.” He sighed. “Let me give you some basic ideas. First, the United Nations do not know what they are talking about in their condemnation of this régime. They have not taken the time to look at what it is like in this country and how the people live now. Besides, we have only been in power for a year. It is hardly fair to judge the merits of a ruler on such a short amount of time. I ask them to be patient and to watch and see if what they have claimed of me is true or not. I am fairly confident that an honest observer will understand that what I am doing to help my people is not bleeding them dry but helping them to get back on their own feet. One day we may have a free economy again, but not until work ethic is reinstated and people can take pride in their own productivity. That is true of any nation.

“As to Kain O’Brien’s remarks about my rule, you must realize that I am now filling the position that he wanted and that I am not exploiting it as he has. He will pull whatever trick out of the bag that he can to discredit me, including inventing a court martial that never happened and moral deviations that are untrue. Ask my friends, look at the records in the archives. I can assure you that we have carried over all records from the past. I will not whitewash where I came from. I will not deny my heritage or what I have done in the past. I take responsibility for those and will stand up for them.”

“Then you take responsibility for the murder of Admiral Frank Jostens of the Lorishi Navy?” she asked.

“If you can call self-defense murder,” he replied with a shrug. “Besides, I did not pull the trigger and the one who did received his just desserts afterwards. General Byrd was dishonorably discharged and was taken to civilian court. I believe that he was found not guilty of murder but was convicted on manslaughter.” He sighed sadly. “That was mercy. He should have been court-martialed and hanged for murder.” He fixed her with a piercing look.

“Ms. Robinette, I want you to understand that Chris Byrd was and still is a close friend of mine. I will not forsake him, but at the same time I will not keep justice from being done to him. He is serving his time. On the other hand, Kain O’Brien is my enemy, but that does not mean that I will not show him mercy if he will let me.”

“Some mercy, exile,” Amanda replied icily. Rashiv had to smile at that.

“It is a two-edged sword. He has escaped with his life, but he has lost what is important to him. If I had done as my fellow generals had wanted, O’Brien would have been hung.”

“That brings me to another point,” the reporter said, grabbing on that. “We have heard that you have reinstated capital punishment after years of a more enlightened form of punishment. How would you defend *that*?” She smiled at him, eyes glinting, inviting. He assumed that this was a pet topic of hers, one that she would exploit to the best of her abilities. How should he answer? He paused for a moment, smiling.

“I understand that the death penalty is a prickly topic in America,” he replied then. “It is not so here. Under O’Brien’s rule we had prisons that were overflowing with murderers and perverts, many of whom were waiting for the death penalty, but who would not receive it because O’Brien wanted to flatter his foreign allies.”

“Those terms are a little harsh, sir,” Amanda cautioned.

“They are accurate none-the-less, Ms. Robinette,” he replied benignly. “We have retried about half the cases and those who were found guilty a second time were executed. The rest were set free.” He shrugged. “It saved our people from having to pay the cost of keeping them alive and it has served as a deterrent to crime for a while now.”

“But for how long?” the reporter asked. “And besides, the death penalty is inhumane.”

“Inhumane to whom? To the accused?” He shook his head. “What about the people who have suffered from this person? What about the fact that justice must be served? These questions are not answered clearly. In my humble opinion it is more humane to execute a murderer than it is to feed and pamper them in a situation that is much better than many of the honest, law-abiding citizens of the country. *That* is what I call inhumane, Ms. Robinette.”

Amanda bristled, trying to think of what else to say, somewhere else to attack this man who seemed to have his armor tightly in place. Perhaps the best place would be to attack his sense of royalty.

“According to people I have talked with, you seem to put a lot of stock in the pedigree of your blood, sir,” she said after a few minutes. “And through it you have exploited a supposed legend to solidify your claim to the throne. What makes you more qualified than anyone else to hold that position?” Rashiv smiled, skillfully hiding the annoyance that arose in him.

“I will try to answer this question to the best of my abilities, Ms. Robinette, even though I do not believe you will be content with what I have to say.”

“Try me,” she sneered, feeling his armor chip away.

“The issue of blood-right doesn’t exist in your country for the simple reason that you have never had any rulers by blood-right and because your leaders were afraid of that. And I believe there is something to that

idea, when society is well-balanced and focused on their supreme Authority, as we discussed earlier.” He paused, gathering his thoughts. “In our land,” he continued, “we’ve long had the legend of the Halfling Prince, one man who would arise and unify the nation after a time of terrible strife and oppression. He would take the ancient throne and bring the people back to prosperity.”

“And you believe you’re this Halfling Prince?” she demanded snidely.

“Yes, I believe I am,” he replied softly. “My bloodline has fulfilled all of the requirements. I’m born of two Halflings, my father being the son of a Loresh noble and an Ishi woman and my mother the daughter of an Ishi man and a Loresh woman. That was the primary requirement and I believe you have the information in your possession that proves that Quinn Strail and Raedin Rutledge were who they said they were. My mother is still alive, and you can speak with her if you wish. She’s a much better source when it comes to the ancient legends.”

“I take it your people ate this up?” The reporter cocked one eyebrow, insinuating that all of this was quaint nonsense.

“Some did and some did not,” he said evenly. “I know my heritage and I know that I was born in this time and that where and when I was born has had a great effect on who I am now and why I am in charge of this country. Some day perhaps your people will be able to understand what it means to have been born into a royal position. My children will undoubtedly suffer in some ways from having royal parents, but I intend to not let my position do more to them than I can hinder.” He looked at her. “And you must understand that I will even now be looking for a successor who can and will carry on the work in a caring manner. I do not mean this to end with my death.”

“You mean like Franco passing on the rule of Spain to Juan Carlos? Aren’t you afraid that your successor will destroy this beautiful monarchy you’ve built for yourself?”

“I have not built the monarchy for myself, Ms. Robinette,” he sighed, just slightly exasperated at her one-track mind. “And, no, I am not afraid that this man will destroy the monarchy. For one thing, I have not found him yet. When his time comes, he will do what is best for the country—what he feels is best for the country, and then it will be his responsibility. Mine is now to rule to the best of my abilities with the best interests in my subjects in mind, and then, later, to train my successor to do the same.” He shrugged. “Things change. They always do and when the time comes for them to change, anyone who resists the change or tries to force the change for the *worse* needs to be dealt with.”

“Like President O’Brien.”

“Yes, like O’Brien,” Rashiv echoed wistfully, then smiled. Amanda looked over and saw her producer signaling her again. The two hours were already up and while she didn’t have enough material to really *hang* him, at least she could paint a portrait—of what? She still didn’t know, but shelved the thought and turned back to the man across from her.

“Thank you very much for the interview, your highness,” she said, not even trying to hide the cutting tone in her voice.

“It was my pleasure,” he replied genially.



And with that it was over. Rashiv stretched just a bit before rising and shaking Ms. Robinette’s hand. He knew he’d given them plenty of ammunition to twist as they chose. He would see later how that would be put together. The producer had promised him a tape before it aired, so that he could comment on it.

He turned to leave the office, his two body guards coming up behind him, and opened the door.

“Sir?” He turned back to see Punjab standing there.

“Yes, Benedict?” he said.

“I’m not comfortable with this,” the aide-de-camp began. “She’s going to butcher you.”

“I have said what I’ve said, my friend,” Rashiv replied evenly. “It is up to the rest of the world to decide what it means.” He paused. “Will you be coming to dinner tonight?”

“As usual,” the colonel answered with a half-smile, nodding. “I hope your daughter isn’t cooking tonight.” Rashiv smiled, remembering the disaster of the last time Shauna had tried her hand at making dinner.

“I think it will be a while before Danya lets her do something like that again,” he laughed. “I’ll see you this evening.” He turned away, then remembered something.

“Oh, and, Benedict, make an appointment for me to visit Chris before the weekend. I haven’t seen him in a while, and we still have a game of chess to finish.”

Conclusions

“King Rashiv Demis Strail, a man of principle, and a man who says he seeks the best for his people,” Amanda Robinette said into the camera. “If even half of what he says is true, then he may really be what Lorishan needs at this time. And yet, we know the dangers that monarchs pose to the freedom of people, so the international community must be watchful of this little nation to keep any more atrocities from occurring under this unusual man’s rule.”

Amanda’s producer motioned to his secretary who hit the stop button on the VCR.

“That was interesting,” he said after a long moment.

“Thank you, I think,” Amanda replied uncertainly.

“I was expecting you to be a little more unforgiving, Amy,” he said to her, using the nick-name she hated. She looked up at him, uncertain of what to say.

“After all, he’s a dictator and a danger to the free world,” the producer continued, tapping his lips with his pen. Then he swiveled towards her. “Well, you did a fine job anyway. Not every production can be absolutely perfect, and I’d say we’ve got a seven out of ten here. Pretty good for a second-timer.” He looked at her through his glasses, face serious. “Just be more direct next time, okay?”

“Okay,” she returned, not being able to think of anything else. She’d done her best to be as hard-hitting as possible, but the final product was not nearly what she’d wanted. There simply was no dirt to be had on Rashiv, and even the juiciest pieces of the interview couldn’t be pulled out of context, because the way he’d put it made it so that grabbing sentences wouldn’t make sense at all. The final portrait that had emerged had been unflattering, but at the same time had painted the picture of a man who was great, to put it simply, a man who was royal and who wore this royalty better than anyone she’d ever met before. This made her very uncomfortable as she went back to her desk and on to her next assignment.

I’m not going to think about him or his country any more, she decided and tried to push the thought away. Still, something that Queen Danya had said in her interview made her pause.

“The firmest anchor we have in this drifting world is our family,” she’d told Amanda. “If our family is strongly knit together, then we can withstand just about anything.” Amanda sat, pondering for a long moment, and then reached for her phone and dialed a number.

“Hello, mom?” she said into the receiver after a moment. “It’s me, Amanda.”



“Well, that could have been worse,” Rashiv commented when his aide-de-camp turned off the video tape.

“I think it was quite well done,” Danya pointed out.

“You really said all that stuff?” Shauna asked, unbelieving. “And you meant it?”

“You know me, girl,” the king laughed. “I can’t keep my mouth shut. And, yes, I meant it.” He paused, thinking for a minute.

“I hope this gets aired,” Benedict put in, sitting down next to the princess. “If the Americans hear only half of what you had to say, it might do them some good.”

“That I hope, my friend,” Rashiv sighed. “That I hope.”

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