

News Comes to Edonomee

Maia woke with his cousin's cold fingers digging into his shoulder.
"Cousin? What . . ." He sat up, rubbing at his eyes with one hand. "What time is it?"

"Get up!" Setheris snarled. "Hurry!"

Obediently, Maia crawled out of bed, clumsy and sleep-sodden. "What's toward? Is there a fire?"

"Get thy clothes on." Setheris shoved yesterday's clothes at him. Maia dropped them, fumbling with the strings of his nightshirt, and Setheris hissed with exasperation as he bent to pick them up. "A messenger from the court. *That's* what's toward."

"A message from my father?"

"Is't not what I said? Merciful goddesses, boy, canst do *nothing* for thyself? Here!" He jerked the nightshirt off, caring neither for the knotted strings nor for Maia's ears, and shoved his clothes at him

again. Maia struggled into drawers, trousers, shirt, and jacket, aware that they were wrinkled and sweat-stained, but unwilling to try Setheris's ill temper by saying so. Setheris watched grimly by the single candle's light, his ears flat against his head. Maia could not find his stockings, nor would Setheris give him time to search. "Come along!" he said as soon as Maia had his jacket fastened, and Maia followed him barefoot out of the room, noticing in the stronger light that while Setheris was still properly and fully attired, his face was flushed. So he had not been wakened from sleep by the emperor's messenger, but only because he had not yet been to bed. Maia hoped uneasily that Setheris had not drunk enough metheglin to mar the glossy perfection of his formal court manners.

Nervously, Maia ran his hands through his hair, fingers catching on knots in his heavy curls. It would not be the first time one of his father's messengers had witnessed him as unkempt as a half-witted ragpicker's child, but that did not help with the miserable midnight imaginings: *So, tell us, how looked our son?* He reminded himself it was unlikely his father ever asked after him in the first place and tried to keep his chin and ears up as he followed Setheris into the lodge's small and shabby receiving room.

The messenger was maybe a year or so older than Maia himself, but elegant even in his road-stained leathers. He was clearly full-blooded elvish, as Maia was not; his hair was milkweed-pale, and his eyes the color of rain. He looked from Setheris to Maia and said, "Are you the Archduke Maia Drazhar, only child of Varenechibel the Fourth and Chenelo Drazharan?"

"Yes," Maia said, bewildered.

And then bewilderment compounded bewilderment, as the messenger deliberately and with perfect dignity prostrated himself on the threadbare rug. "Your Imperial Serenity," he said.

"Oh, get up, man, and stop babbling!" Setheris said. "We understood that you had messages from the Archduke's father."

"Then you understand what we do not," the messenger said, rising again to his feet, as graceful as a cat. "We bear messages from the Untheileneise Court."

Maia said hastily, merely to prevent the altercation from escalating, "Please, explain."

"Your Serenity," the messenger said. "The airship *Wisdom of Choharo* crashed yesterday, sometime between sunrise and noon. The Emperor Varenechibel the Fourth, the Prince Nemolis, the Archduke Nazhira, and the Archduke Ciris were all on board. They were returning from the wedding of the Prince of Thu-Athamar."

"And the *Wisdom of Choharo* crashed," Maia said slowly, carefully.

"Yes, Serenity," said the messenger. "There were no survivors."

For five pounding heartbeats, the words made no sense. Nothing made sense; nothing had made sense since he had woken with Setheris's grip hurting his shoulder. And then it was suddenly, pitilessly clear. As if from a very long distance away, he heard his own voice saying, "What caused the crash?"

"Does it matter?" Setheris said.

"Serenity," said the messenger with a deliberate nod in Maia's direction. "They do not yet know. But the Lord Chancellor has sent Witnesses, and it is being investigated."

"Thank you," said Maia. He knew neither what he felt nor what he ought to feel, but he knew what he ought to do, the next necessary thing. "You said . . . there are messages?"

"Yes, Serenity." The messenger turned and picked up his dispatch case from where it lay on the side table. There was only one letter within, which the messenger held out. Setheris snatched the letter and broke the seal savagely, as if he still believed the messenger to be lying.

He scanned the paper, his customary frown deepening into a black scowl, then flung it at Maia and stalked from the room. Maia grabbed at it ineffectually as it fluttered to the floor.

The messenger knelt to retrieve it before Maia could and handed it to him without a flicker of expression.

Maia felt his face heating, his ears lowering, but he knew better than to try to explain or apologize for Setheris. He bent his attention to the letter. It was from his father's Lord Chancellor, Uleris Chavar:

To the Archduke Maia Drazhar, heir to the imperial throne of Ethuveraz, greetings in this hour of greatest grief.

Knowing that Your Imperial Serenity will want all honor and respect paid to your late father and brothers, we have ordered arrangements put in train for a full ceremonial funeral in three days' time, that is, on the twenty-third instant. We will notify the five principalities, also Your Imperial Serenity's sister in Ashedro. We have already ordered the courier office to put airships at their disposal, and we have no doubt that they will use all necessary haste to reach the Untheilencise Court in good time for the funeral.

We do not, of course, know what Your Imperial Serenity's plans may be, but we hold ourself ready to implement them.

*With true sorrow and
unswerving loyalty,
Uleris Chavar*

Maia looked up. The messenger was watching him, as impassive as ever; only the angle of his ears betrayed his interest.

"I . . . we must speak with our cousin," he said, the constructions of the formal first person awkward and unaccustomed. "Do you . . . that is, you must be tired. Let us summon a manservant to tend to your needs."

"Your Serenity is very kind," the messenger said, and if he knew that there were only two menservants in the entire household of Edonomee, he gave no sign.

Maia rang the bell, knowing that birdlike Pelchara would be waiting eagerly for a chance to find out what was happening. Haru, who did all the outside work, was probably still asleep; Haru slept like the dead, and the whole household knew it.

Pelchara popped in, his ears up and his eyes bright and inquisitive. "This gentleman," Maia said, mortified to realize that he did not know the messenger's name, "has traveled hard. Please see that he has everything he requires." He faltered before the thought of explaining the news to Pelchara, mumbled, "I will be with my cousin," and hurried out.

He could see light under Setheris's door, and could hear his cousin's brisk, bristling stride. *Let him not have stopped for the metheglin decanter*, Maia thought, a brief, hopeless prayer, and tapped on the door.

"Who is't?" At least he did not *sound* any drunker than he had a quarter hour ago.

"Maia. May I—?"

The door opened with savage abruptness, and Setheris stood in the opening, glaring. "Well? What chews on *thy* tail, boy?"

"Cousin," Maia said, almost whispering, "what must I do?"

"What must thou *do*?" Setheris snorted laughter. "Thou must be *emperor*, boy. Must rule all the Elflands and banish thy kindred as thou seest fit. Why com'st thou whining to me of what thou must do?"

"Because I don't know."

"Moon-witted hobgoblin," Setheris said, but it was contempt by reflex; his expression was abstracted.

"Yes, cousin," Maia said meekly.

After a moment, Setheris's eyes sharpened again, but this time without the burning anger. "Thou wish'st advice?"

"Yes, cousin."

"Come in," Setheris said, and Maia entered his cousin's bedchamber for the first time.

It was as austere as Setheris himself—no mementoes of the Untheileneise Court, no luxuries. Setheris waved Maia to the only chair and himself sat on the bed. "Thou'rt right, boy. The wolves are waiting to devour thee. Hast thou the letter?"

"Yes, cousin." Maia handed Setheris the letter, now rather crumpled and the worse for wear. Setheris read it, frowning again, but this time his ears were cocked thoughtfully. When he had finished, he folded the letter neatly, his long white fingers smoothing the creases. "He presumes much, does Uleris."

"He does?" And then, realizing: "Dost know him?"

"We were enemies for many years," Setheris said, shrugging it aside. "And I see he has not changed."

“What mean’st thou?”

“Uleris has no reason to love thee, boy.”

“He says he’s loyal.”

“Yes. But loyal to *what*? Not to thee, for thou art merely the last and least favored child of his dead master, who wished thee not on the throne, as well thou know’st. Use thy wits, boy—an thou hast any.”

“What do you mean?”

“Merciful goddesses, grant me patience,” Setheris said ostentatiously to the ceiling. “Consider, boy. Thou art *emperor*. What must thou do first?”

“Cousin, this is not the time for riddles.”

“And it is not a riddle I pose thee.” Setheris shut his mouth and glared at him, and after a moment, Maia realized.

“The coronation.”

“Ha!” Setheris brought his hands together sharply, making Maia jump. “Exactly. So why, I ask thee, does thy coronation not figure largely in Uleris’s plans or, indeed, at all?”

“The funeral—”

“No! Thou think’st as a child, not as an emperor. The dead are dead, and they care not for the honor Uleris prates of, as well *he* knows. It is the living power that must concern thee, as it concerns him.”

“But . . .”

“*Think*, boy,” Setheris said, leaning forward, his cold eyes alight with fervor. “If thou art capable—if thou hast ever thought before in thy life—*think*. Thou com’st to the Untheileneise Court, the funeral is held. What then?”

“I speak to . . . oh.”

“Thou seest.”

“Yes.” Better than Setheris might care to realize, for it was at his cousin’s hands that Maia had learned this particular lesson; by waiting, he put himself in the position of a supplicant to Chavar, and supplicants could always be denied. “Then what must I do?”

Setheris said, “Thou must countermand Uleris. Meaning that thou

must reach the Untheileneise Court before he has time to entrench himself.”

“But how can I?” It took most of a week to reach the court from Edonomee.

“Airship,” Setheris said as if it were obvious.

Maia’s stomach knotted. “I couldn’t.”

“Thou *must*. Or thou shalt be a puppet dancing at the end of Uleris’s strings, and to a tune of his choosing. And thy nineteenth birthday may very well see thee dead.”

Maia bowed his head. “Yes, cousin.”

“The airship that brought Chavar’s lapdog here can take us back. They’ll be waiting for him. Now, go. Make thyself fit to be seen.”

“Yes, cousin,” Maia said, and did not contest Setheris’s assumption that he would be traveling to the court with the new emperor.

The Radiance of Cairado

The airship *Radiance of Cairado* hung ominously beside her mooring mast like an isolated thundercloud against the pre-dawn sky. Maia had not been in an airship since the age of eight, when he had been brought to the Untheileneise Court for his mother's funeral, and his memories of that time were full of darkness. He remembered praying to Ulis to let him die, too.

The crew of the *Radiance* were all very solemn; they knew about the *Wisdom of Choharo*, and he saw grief and fear in their faces.

On impulse, when the captain greeted him with a mumbled "Serenity" at the foot of the mooring mast, Maia stopped and said quietly, "We have nothing but confidence in you and your crew."

The captain was startled into looking up; Maia met his eyes and smiled at him. After a moment, the captain's ears came up, and he bowed again, more deeply. "Serenity," he said in a clear and far stronger voice.

Maia ascended the narrow iron staircase that spiraled around the mooring mast. On the tiny platform at the top, a crewwoman was waiting to steady the emperor into the passenger cabin.

“Serenity,” she said stiffly, and offered her arm.

“We thank you,” Maia said, accepting help he did not need. The crewwoman seemed almost as startled as the captain had been.

Airships were not primarily intended for passengers, but along with cargo, they transported couriers and other government servants. Maia had refused to allow Setheris to inconvenience the other passengers—four couriers, two missionaries, and an elderly maza—by commandeering the ship, and he suffered for his charity now under their wide-eyed, breathlessly silent stares. His translation to emperor had failed to work any comparable miracle on his wardrobe—indeed, he only wished it had worked a miracle on his person—so that while he was correctly dressed in formal mourning, each garment bore betraying signs that black had been at least its third dyeing, and the whole had not been worn in over two years, since the death of the emperor’s sister, the Archduchess Ebreneän. The clothes, castoffs of Setheris’s, had been too large then; now, they were barely large enough. Lacking tashin sticks or combs, he had had to make do with braiding his hair back neatly and pinning it off his neck, but the style was more suited to a child than to an adult, much less to an emperor.

He took the seat that Setheris and the Lord Chancellor’s messenger had left between them. If the messenger recognized in the new emperor’s scrambling departure the thwarting of his own master’s plans, he gave no sign of it, entering with helpful thoroughness into Setheris’s travel arrangements. There was nothing to say he was not as devoted to Maia’s service as Setheris was. Maia smiled at the irony.

He and Setheris had disliked each other from the moment they had met, at the funeral of Maia’s mother, the Empress Chenelo. The airship that brought her body to the Untheileneise Court from the manor to which her husband had relegated her also brought her grief-sick eight-year-old son. Varenechibel IV took no interest in his youngest child, and immediately after the funeral service, Maia was handed into the care of Setheris Nelar and both of them relegated to the

former hunting lodge Edonomee, where they had lived in mutual antipathy ever since.

Maia glanced sideways; Setheris was glowering—insofar as he could tell—at a perfectly innocuous piece of woodwork on the opposite side of the cabin. He had never seen Setheris when he was not angry, save for those times when he had drunk himself into a maudlin stupor. Maia’s adolescence had been made a misery by Setheris’s anger, and he would bear until his dying day an ugly scrawl of scars on his left forearm, where a blow of Setheris’s had knocked him into the elaborate and hideous wrought-iron antlers that adorned the fire screen in Edonomee’s main hall.

To do Setheris what justice he deserved, he had been truly horrified, and since that incident, which had enlivened Maia’s otherwise utterly unremarkable fifteenth winter, he had been a good deal more circumspect with his fists. But it did not make him like Maia any better, and it was something Maia knew he himself would never be entirely able to forgive.

The crewwoman stepped into the cabin, securing the door behind her. She cleared her throat—out of nervousness, since there was no need to attract the attention of the deathly silent passengers—and said, “Your Serenity, the captain has taken the helm, and we are preparing to cast off.”

Setheris’s elbow slammed discreetly into Maia’s ribs, and he said, “Thank you.”

The crewwoman bowed, relief written in every line of her body, and went to the front of the cabin, where there was a speaking tube that communicated with the cockpit. Maia had only a moment to wonder if he would be able to tell when the *Radiance of Cairado* cast off from the mast; then there was the slightest of sideways lurches, and the airship was rising into the dawn sky.

The trip to the Untheileneise Court would take two hours, covering a distance that required four days on the ground, and that given fair weather and swift passage across the Istandaärtha, neither of which could be assumed. He could not help wondering, as the airship’s motors cut in, their din ensuring that he would not have to speak to

Setheris again until they reached the court, what the final moments of the *Wisdom of Choharo* had been like. Less than a day ago, she had been in the air, carrying the Emperor of the Elflands. He wondered if there had been a moment when they had known, or if death had come as suddenly as an executioner's sword. He tried to imagine his father screaming or crying or even frightened, and could not do it. His memory of his father, the only time he had ever seen him, was of the Emperor Varenechibel IV, tall and distant, with glacial eyes and a face as white and cold as marble. He remembered the white robes stiff with embroidery, the moonstones on his father's hands, braided into his hair, hanging from his ears. He remembered the black bands, the only token of mourning the emperor deigned to wear for his fourth wife, like smears of ink across the whiteness of his person. He remembered his father's bitter mouth, and his smooth silken voice: *The damned whelp looks just like his mother.* It was as clear and frozen in his mind as the state portrait of the emperor that hung in the receiving room of Edonomee—and now there was no chance for it to change, no hope for it to be replaced.

Though truly, he thought, leaning back slightly to lessen the likelihood that he would catch Setheris's eye, *even were it to have been replaced, it would only have been with something worse. Be grateful he cared no more for thee than "damned whelp."*

His memories of his brothers were nothing more than wisps of cloud. He had not even been sure which ones they were in the masses of black-clothed courtiers around his mother's tomb. It had been the lady charged with his care during the funeral—a minor noble's wife whose name he could not now remember—who had pointed them out. *There your brother Nemolis and his wife, there your brother Nazhira, there your brother Ciris.* They had all been adults to his child's eyes, as white and forbidding as his father. None of them had ever made overtures, not at the funeral and not since—whether because they shared the emperor's disdain or feared his wrath—and Maia had hesitated to make overtures of his own, lest he should anger them. And now it was too late for that, as well.

He would have liked to rest his head against the back of the seat

and shut his eyes, but he did not need Setheris to tell him that an emperor could not behave so in public, and those seven passengers and the nervous crewwoman constituted “public.” Despite what had seemed the overwhelming probability that both of them would be confined to Edonomee for the rest of their lives, Setheris had been relentless in maintaining and enforcing court etiquette. Maia had never minded—Chenelo had taught him carefully—but now it occurred to him that he ought to be grateful.

He glanced again at Setheris’s granite frown. It was strange in this sleepless dawn to be looking at Setheris and seeing simply another man instead of the tyrant of Edonomee, as he had figured in Maia’s mind for the past ten years. Middle-aged, bitter, cunning but perhaps not wise—Maia had never learned what it was that Setheris had done to earn Varenechibel’s enmity, but he knew it could not have been anything trivial. Outside Edonomee, Setheris seemed smaller, less dreadful, and it occurred to Maia that if Setheris ever struck him again, it would mean a death sentence. The idea was dizzying, and Maia found his hands clutching the arms of the seat, as if the *Radiance* herself were whirling about, instead of merely his own mind. He forced himself to relax his grip before anyone else noticed; it would be unkind in the extreme to make anyone think him fearful.

Through the windows on the opposite side of the cabin, he could see great mountains of cloud, stained with pinks and reds by the approaching dawn. He remembered a Barizheise hymn to Osreian his mother had taught him and said it to himself, looking at the clouds and hoping that the goddesses’ mercy would extend, not merely to his father and half brothers, but to everyone who had died with the *Wisdom of Choharo*.

He was brought back to his immediate surroundings by the approach of the crewwoman, who came within arm’s length and then went down on one knee. “Your Serenity.”

“Yes?” said Maia, aware of both Setheris and the Lord Chancellor’s messenger coming to full alertness beside him.

“The captain wonders, Serenity, if you would care to come forward to watch the sunrise from the cockpit. It is a very beautiful sight.”

“Thank you,” Maia said before Setheris could get his mouth open. “We would like that very much.”

He compressed the corners of his mouth against a smile as he stood up, watching Setheris turn an unflattering shade of red with impotent fury. And following that thought—and a host of others that had been teasing about the edges of his mind since Setheris’s lecture on dealing with Uleris Chavar—he turned and said to the messenger, “Would you accompany us, please?”

“Serenity,” the messenger said, rising with alacrity, and they left Setheris fuming, unable to invite himself along now that an express invitation had been issued to another than himself. Maia reminded himself that glee was unbecoming an emperor, and thought soberly as the crewwoman opened the narrow door at the front of the cabin, *I must not acquire a taste for this pleasure*. It was heady, but he knew it was also poison.

The door led into a narrow passageway, scarcely broader than the width of Maia’s shoulders, and debouched through another door into the cockpit, where captain and first mate shared a wide panorama of clouds and sky.

“Serenity,” they said in chorus, though they spared but a glance away from their instruments and the unfurling brightness in the east. The first mate, he saw, was of goblin blood, his skin only a shade lighter than Maia’s own.

“Gentlemen, we thank you,” Maia said, having to pitch his voice even louder to be heard over the roar of the engines, and allowed the crewwoman to shepherd him into a corner where he could see but would not obstruct anything important. The Lord Chancellor’s messenger was likewise shepherded into the opposite corner, and the crewwoman closed the door and braced her back against it.

They stood in silence for fifteen minutes, enrapt and breathless before the glory of Anmura rising from Osreian’s embrace. Then the first mate turned, bowing his head, and said, “Serenity, we will be arriving at the Untheileneise Court in approximately an hour.”

Interpreting this to mean that they needed their cockpit back, Maia said, “We are most grateful, gentlemen. We will remember this always

as the beginning of our reign.” Much better this than that confused and frightened awakening in darkness, his own glassy, sharp-edged panic, Setheris’s drunken viciousness.

“Serenity,” they chorused again, and he could see that he had pleased them.

The crewwoman opened the door and Maia returned to the passenger cabin, to spend the remaining time considering ways and alternatives of greeting his father’s Lord Chancellor.