

## The Seeds of Disillusionment

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In her office within the palace, just next door to the king's, Shara leaned forward in her chair and picked up the latest missive from the Grand Duchess. Slender, leather encased fingers broke the seal with a single motion. She unfolded the letter and began to read, dark emerald eyes scanning the parchment with mild curiosity. As her eyes traveled farther down the page, however, they narrowed with dangerous intensity. Slender cinnabar brows began to lower first, then to rise incredulously until by the end of the letter they seemed to be reaching for her hairline. Her lithe form, straight and taut, seemed almost to be vibrating from tension.

"What?!?" It came out as naught but a fierce whisper. Then, her voice rising sharply as she straightened to her feet like a spring uncoiling, nearly knocking her chair over in the process, "*What!?!?*" The letter clenched in her fist, she made long, swift strides across her office to the door. Throwing the door open, she stalked out into the hallway and, without hesitation, turned to the door to Legion's office.

His door too was thrown open, without knocking as she always had before. In the span of an eye blink, she was standing in front of Legion's desk, managing to loom despite her petite frame. The light level in the room darkened noticeably, reacting to her mood. The letter, which explained the workings of the QCoin system in Atheria, she tossed unceremoniously on his desk. Her hands went to her hips; any inclination to interpret the posture in a comical light was wiped out by the heat suffusing her features. Her trademark cinnabar hair was loose and riotous, seeming almost alive as it too seemed to respond to her temper. Hints of shadowstuff swirled in the stormy sea of emerald that was her eyes, eyes that bore into Legion with a disturbing intensity. "What is the meaning of this... this," Legion had never known her to be at a loss for words, a further testament to the white-hot rage building within, "...this *tyranny!?!?*"

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If Legion's expression fazed her in the least, or had any dampening effect on her rage, no sign of it was visible. Indeed, if anything, her expression grew all the more livid. "Aye, tyranny," she replied darkly, her voice tellingy below even its normal soft tone.

An arm snaked out and a finger stabbed down unerringly on the letter he now held, pointing out the passage on startup money and taxation. "So the Crown is distributing money for politically well-connected would-be business owners?"

The finger stabbed down again, for emphasis, in the same place. "A ten percent tax on profits? That is outrageous!"

And again the finger lifted and stabbed down on the parchment once more, this time on the passage about bonuses for participation. "And you propose to confiscate money rightfully earned through hard work merely because the individual wishes to find other employment?!? This is unacceptable Legion." The ever present and possessive 'my liege' had been dropped; a subtle, though not entirely conscious shift, as she addressed him merely by his first name.

She withdrew her arm and straightened, eyeing Legion with a firm set to her jaw. He knew enough of her history to know she would not tolerate tyranny, though perhaps he did not realize that it carried over into even tyranny's more mild forms; he was finding out now.

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*Don't believe him. He cannot be trusted. You've seen it before. Power corrupts even those with the best of intentions.* For once, she did not recoil or try to stifle the tenebrous voice emanating up from her subconscious. The shock of realizing the voice was right stole some of the fire from her anger, taming it into a cold burn. The patronizing tone didn't help; she had never liked being talked down to, not even as a child, and though she was only bordering on her twenty-second year, she was neither naïve, nor uneducated, nor stupid.

When asked to sit, she made a move to the nearest chair on her side of Legion's desk, but remained standing as he took a seat. As she turned to lock her gaze on Legion once more, her hair had actually settled noticeably and the darkness swirling in her eyes appeared more controlled. Rather than

indicating his words were having the desired effect, the growing iciness of her expression hinted at more dire consequences. She crossed her arms under her breasts as she waited for him to finish.

When he had done so, she spoke up in a clipped, purposeful tone. "You did not answer the point about confiscating rightfully earned money from those who later seek other employment." There was no way around that one; it was stated clearly in the letter.

Before he could answer that statement, she continued on. "Do you really expect to mollify me by limiting to a select few, for the time being at least, those you choose to dupe into voluntary servitude? It is not the place of government to be setting up businesses beholden to it. It amounts to little more than a mild form of serfdom. And is it stipulated anywhere in that...*thing*," a contemptuous glance was thrown to the letter, "...that the taxes will be lifted after the 'loan' has been repaid?" A leather-clad hand was waved dismissively. "Never mind, don't answer that."

Some of the hurt she herself felt seeped into her voice, laced with bitterness, like a girl who had just found out that her father was not in fact perfect after all or a woman realizing that the hero she worshipped was but a man. "The blinders are off, Legion." She uncrossed her arms and reached up to rip the rank and insignia off of her shirt, heedless of the gaping tears it left in the fabric. Wordlessly, she tossed them onto his desk, directly atop the letter. Letting her actions speak for her, for she had always been one more prone to action than endless debate, she turned sharply on one booted heel and disappeared into the nearest shadow. In that instant, she was gone from the palace to parts unknown. The magic of her cloak would prevent any attempt to magically divine her whereabouts. Years of training and experience would ensure that she would only be found when she wanted to be.

[Thanks, Legion-mun. :o) It's been fun, and perhaps Legion and Shara will cross paths again. But I just couldn't pass up this chance to move Shara to the next stage in her character development. This stage was planned from the beginning; I had only to find the perfect time and form to make it happen.]