

Kalpa Imperial

The Greatest Empire That Never Was

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PORTRAIT OF THE EMPEROR

The storyteller said: Now that the good winds are blowing, now that we're done with days of anxiety and nights of terror, now that there are no more denunciations, persecutions, secret executions, and whim and madness have departed from the heart of the Empire, and we and our children aren't playthings of blind power; now that a just man sits on the Golden Throne and people look peacefully out of their doors to see if the weather's fine and plan their vacations and kids go to school and actors put their hearts into their lines and girls fall in love and old men die in their beds and poets sing and jewelers weigh gold behind their little windows and gardeners rake the parks and young people argue and innkeepers water the wine and teachers teach what they know and we storytellers tell old stories and archivists archive and fishermen fish and all of us can decide according to our talents and lack of talents what to do with our lives—now anybody can enter the emperor's palace, out of need or curiosity; anybody can visit that great house which was for so many years forbidden, prohibited, defended by armed guards, locked, and as dark as the souls of the Warrior Emperors of the Dynasty of the Ellydróvides. Now any of us can walk those wide, tapestried corridors, sit down in the courtyards to listen to the fountains

run, go into the kitchens and cadge a doughnut from a fat, grinning cook's helper, pick a flower in the gardens, admire ourself in the mirror galleries, watch maids go by with baskets full of clean laundry, tickle the foot of a marble statue with an irreverent finger, say good-morning to the crown prince's tutors, smile at the princesses playing ball on the lawn; and then go on to the door of the throne room and simply wait our turn to come right up to the emperor and say to him, for instance, "Sir, I love plays, but my town doesn't have a theater. Do you think you might tell them to build one?"

Ekkemantes I will probably smile, since he too loves plays, and fall to talking enthusiastically about the poetic tragedy by Orab'Maagg recently presented in the capital, until one of his counselors reminds him with a discreet cough that he can't spend an hour chattering with every one of his subjects because it would leave him no time to rule the Empire. And probably the good emperor, who seems born to smiles and good nature, though he wielded weapons like the black-winged angel of war when it was a matter of eradicating from the Empire the greed and cruelty of a damnable race, will reply to the counselor that chattering for an hour with each of his subjects is one way of ruling the Empire, and not the worst way, but that the lord counselor is right, and in order not to lose any more valuable time, he'll dictate a decree to the lord counselor and sign it himself, ordering that a theater be constructed in the town of Sariaband. And very likely the counselor will stare and say: "My lord! Building a theater, even a theater for a very small town, is an expensive business!"

"Oh, that's all right," the emperor may say, "let's not obsess about money. A theater's never expensive, because what goes on inside it teaches people to think and understand themselves. There's some jewel in the palace, some fortune down in the

basement, to cover the cost. And if nothing turns up, we'll ask all the actors in the Empire to send the profits from one day, one evening, one show, to help build a theater in Sariaband, where some of them will act some day or where some day they'll see their son act, or their daughter, or a student who they've been trying to teach the hundred and eleven methods of expressing sorrow on the stage. And when the actors agree, we'll build a theater of the pink marble from the quarries of the province of Sariabb, and we'll ask the sculptors of the Imperial Academy to carve statues of Comedy and Tragedy to flank the doorways."

And the play-lover will go off happy, whistling, his hands in his pockets, his heart light, and maybe before he reaches the doors of the great throne room he'll hear the emperor shouting after him, promising to come in person to the opening of the theater, and the lord counselor clicking his tongue in disapproval of such a transgression of protocol.

Well, well, I've let words run away with me, something a storyteller should take care to avoid; but I've known fear, and sometimes I need to reassure myself that there's nothing to fear any more, and the only way I have to do that is by the sound of my own words. Now, back to what I was getting at when I began, we all now have the right to use as if it were our own house, which it is—in that palace, in the south wing, in a salon that looks out on a very pretty hexagonal garden, there's a shapeless heap of dusty, dirty old stones. Everywhere else in the building you'll see carpets, furniture, mirrors, paintings, musical instruments, cushions and porcelains, flowers, books, plants in vases and in pots. There, nothing of the kind. The room's empty, bare, and the marble flags don't even cover the whole floor, but leave an area of beaten earth in the middle, where the stones are piled up. There's nothing secret or forbidden about it, but many of you, looking for the way out, or a quiet place to sit down and

rest and eat the sandwich you brought in your backpack, will have opened the door of that room and asked yourself what on earth that heap of grey rocks was doing in such a well-kept, clean, cheerful palace. Well, well, my friends, I'm going to tell you why there are storytellers in the world: not for frivolities, though we may sometimes seem frivolous, but to answer those questions we all ask, and not as the teller, but as the hearer.

Long is the history of the Empire, very long, so long that a whole life dedicated to study and research isn't enough to know it wholly. There are names, events, years, centuries that remain dark, that are recorded in some folio of some archive waiting for some memory to rescue them or some storyteller bring them back to life, in a tent like this, for people like you, who'll go back home thinking about what you heard and look at your children with pride and a little sadness. As well as being long, the history of the Empire is complex: it's not a simple tale in which one thing happens after another and the causes explain the effects and the effects are in proportion to the causes. Nothing of the kind. The history of the Empire is strewn with surprises, contradictions, abysses, deaths, resurrections. And I tell you now that those stones lying in an unused room of the emperor's palace are, precisely, death. And resurrection.

For the Empire has died many times, many deaths, slow or sudden, painful or easy, silly or tragic—died and re-arisen from its death. One of those deaths, thousands of years ago, was deeper and darker than the others. It wasn't silly, nor tragic, but mindless, senseless, heart-breaking: men killing one another for the most futile and dangerous of the passions, power, so they could attain the Golden Throne, sit on it, and stay sitting on it as long as possible. An ambitious general killed an inept emperor. The emperor's widow, who had always lived in his shadow and whose name is forgotten, avenged her husband and

at the same time cleared her own way to the throne by killing the general with his regicidal sword before he could take over the palace. Then she cultivated the resentment of the leaderless soldiers, something she was good at since she was quite familiar with resentment herself; she incited them against the officials and had every general of the Imperial Army killed so that none of them might conceive the same idea as her husband's assassin. The dead emperor's brothers armed themselves and ran to the palace to defend the helpless widow, so they said—in fact, to try to seize the throne from her. There was an uprising in the eastern provinces, where a bankrupt nobleman who claimed descent from an ancient dynasty asserted his right to rule the Empire. Somebody strangled the empress in her bed and stabbed her children to death, though it was said that one girl escaped the slaughter. From the bogs and forests of the south came hordes of the dispossessed, sacking the cities, improving on the confusion left in the wake of the armies. In the north a charlatan said heavenly voices had ordered him to proclaim himself emperor and kill all who opposed him, and unfortunately many believed him. Within months war was everywhere, a war in which men ended up not knowing and not wanting to know who they were fighting against, in which it wasn't a matter of kill or die but kill and die. Plague made its appearance. Within a year the population of the Empire was reduced to less than half. The rest of them went on fighting, killing, burning, and destroying. In the capital, some officers of what had been the proudest army of all time found a girl they said was the emperor's daughter, sole survivor of the night of the assassins. Perhaps she was, perhaps she wasn't. The girl took the throne, not among parades and fanfares but among flames and screams; once there she tried to impose order, first in the palace, then in the streets and houses of the city, and looked as if she might succeed. But the men