

14 Lessons

by dnrock (dnrock@rock.com)

1312, the 11th month, 10th day.

What I didn't know yesterday was that a fisher had brought a dispatch to the castle; it was from a passing Venetian vessel. Now I know how our fathers seem to know so much about what is happening in the world outside, with our port and borders closed. One of the Triangles stopped me in the hall to whisper the news. That is also how they know what goes on in this place. They have their own network of Triangles, still in place from when they were young princes. I wonder what they called themselves and if our grandfathers were aware of them? It makes sense that they would have such a network and that our grandfathers like our fathers sanctioned it. Iason thought this was very exciting. Sometimes I have the impression he still thinks of everything as a game. Well not everything, just most everything. Perhaps it is his natural inclination toward the theater. I think were he not Crown Prince he would be a actor. I must admit he is talented that way, at least compared to me.

I wonder what is in the message but think it best not to ask. When Uncle Iason and Father came into the council chamber they both had the strangest look on their faces. Iason whispered, "that is their mischief look. They are up to something, see how they giggle like us boys." It was obvious, all the knights realized the royal couple were in an extraordinary mood. Not that they are ever anything but pleasant.

The business of the day moved quite quickly, with not that many and all mundane, matters. Father kept looking at the clock. I figured this had to do with the Florentine Envoy's absence. The business of the day was slow and the pages were all talking among ourselves, as were little groups of Knights. Every once in while a knight would laugh so we assumed they were telling jokes. Our humor is very broad based and almost anything or anyone is open to it. Father told me it is a mark of our democratic traditions, much like our satirical theater. Finally Uncle Iason called, "pages come and let us play a game." We are up for this and all scrambled to where he was standing. In his hand he held six pieces of straw. He held it up to us. "I only need one message to be delivered today, the one who draws the short straw has the task." We each drew and Iason pulled the short. "Please take this message to the Envoy. You need not wait for a reply." He handed the folded paper to Iason.

"Should it not be sealed?" Iason inquired. A very reasonable thing to ask and one we are trained to do.

"No, that buffoon is not worth the cost of the wax," Uncle boom, all the knights laughed mightily. "It is not sealed so you are permitted to read it. To everyone."

Iason opened and read to all, "6000 gold florins." The number was written by the system introduced by Leonardo Pisano of Pisa. (TN: these would be the Hindu-Arabic place-valued decimal system.) Our math tutors make us learn our ancient systems, the Roman system and this one. Something well known to our scholars, from about 500, having come to us through the Byzantines. They told us the Romans were so caught up in their own world that this was ignored except for scholars working on fixing proper dates for religions festivals. (Translator's Note: The Eastern Roman Empire is better known as the Empire of the Greeks but to locals as the Roman Empire. It was centered in Constantinople, spelled with a Kappa by Arden but I will use the Latin form. The term Byzantine is from the 1800's. In theory Parga was part of this, but as we see, the theory and practice are not always the same.)

"Perhaps you should also write it in Roman Numbers for him Sire?"

"Perhaps I should but then it would take all the fun out of making him puzzle over it. I wonder if he will know Iota zeta stands for Iason the 7 th. and not Iason of Zakynthos?" Probably not someone chimed in, to much laughter. "Page, try and make a straight face when you hand it to him, a difficult task to be sure."

We remaining five were dismissed to the sports fields for the remainder of the afternoon. I could not concentrate on anything but running. That takes no real concentration. I could do nothing but wonder the content of the messages brought by the fisher.

1312, the 11th month, 15th day.

On each subsequent day a page drew the short straw and carried another short note to the Envoy. I never got that chance. The captured Florentine fleet and our merchant fleet was made ready to sail. It was decided to employ 12 of our merchant vessels to take the soldiers. I could see all the activity in the harbor and took that as a clue to mean the soldiers would go to Florence and the war ships to some other port.

On the 13th day our largest war ship came into port. This ship carried our Admiral Pantaleon. I had never met

him before. Iason had, not as Admiral just as his mother's cousin. Our meeting had been quite brief. He immediately went into meetings with Archimedes and the other ingegneres.

We were woken up early on the 15th and told to prepare for a long day as pages. When I looked out our window at the harbor, I could see two ships entering, one behind the other. One from Florence and a much larger and grander one from Venice. The Venetian vessel was being pulled along side the main quay and I assumed would off load cargo. I saw a military escort of King's Guards leaving the Castle and a smaller escort of Argoanuts following behind them. Both had dress uniforms on. I wondered what the Argoanuts were about, so did Iason. Ikaros pushed us out the door for our morning meal with the other pages. Sometimes he is like our mothers.

Uncle Tertius was in the court yard directing traffic, as it were. He was sending people in all directions making sure they all knew what their timing and duties were. Everyone, and I mean everyone, was dressed in their finest parade uniforms. We boys were madly speculating on what was about to happen. One of the knights that was inspecting everyone, to be sure we were all dressed exactly right, told us when he was a page, when our grandfathers were still alive, a show like this was put on for some visiting nobles from Pula.

The main hall was decorated in the finest way. Every seat and available space to stand was assigned to someone, along the balcony I could see hundreds of palace faces, including many of the Argoanuts and Palace Boys and Girls. Many ladies were also in attendance but not Princess Elpis. The baby was due any time now and the midwives had confined her to bed.

We were not long in the main hall when the pages and scribes were summoned into the council chamber. All the council knights, and our fathers milled around the room. We were told to sit and be quiet. Presently Ikaros came into the room with Iason's and my finest tunics and our gold loral wreath crowns. He took away our page's tunics but left our page's hats. We had no idea why this was, except we knew we would be called upon to do some ceremonial thing or at least were being prepared to do so.

The guards opened the door and announced the Florentine Ambassador to Venice, the Venetian Ambassador to the Court of King Iason the 7th, the personal representative of the Doge of Venice and several others. Introductions were quickly made and everyone settled down to business. The Florentine Ambassador just out and paid the 5000 florins, agreed to the peace and friendship treaty and chartered 12 ships to take his army home. The Venetian Ambassador and Doge's representative offered 7,500 gold florins for the captured Florentine ships, a peace and friendship treaty with us and an invitation for our ambassador to take up residence in Venice. The scribes were set to making the contracts and everyone shook hands and congratulated each other. Iason and I were brought forward to meet them. Karyakos explained the little ceremony that would happen as soon as everyone was in place. This brought broad smiles to the faces of the visitors and to us as well.

The Florentine Ambassador told us that the Envoy would be arrested as soon as he stepped on the Florentine flag vessel; much cleaning had taken place in Florence, since this "stupid adventure" had proven to be other than originally represented to his government. The word came and everyone took their positions in the great hall.

We pages sat behind the King in our usual place. The council knights and the King and Consort sat on their thrones. First the Florentine Ambassador to Venice was announced and he came in bowed to the royal couple and presented his official documents of accreditation along with a letter from the Doge assuring us the Ambassador did in fact speak on behalf of Florence. All the while the Envoy was seated with others along one side of the wall. I could not see his face, Father's throne blocked my view. The page at the other end of our row whispered, "he is as white as a ghost is reported to be." Next the Venetian Ambassador to our court was announced along with the Doge's personal representative. Their papers were presented and accepted. King Iason welcomed all three. Karyakos was about to speak when the doors opened and in ran our three little brothers, followed by two nurses in a loosing foot race for the King. Nikias was yelling for daddy to come quick mommy needs him. He was joined by the other two.

Father immediately asked the nurse, "how is it?" She just shook her head from side to side and Iason began to cry. I grabbed onto him and began crying myself. Karyakos stood and told the King, "Go the your wife in her time of need brother, go." By now the nurses had caught up to the boys and Uncle Iason with Nikias in his arms ran from the hall with the nurses and the twins right behind him. I could not see clearly, the tears were in my eyes as I held my beloved, who was crying uncontrollably. He rose to go as well, but Karyakos pointed for us to sit. We sat. He knew, what we realized later, two older sons were the last thing needed in her apartments, as she lay dying. She needed her husband and not the king or any of his court, us included.

Father wiped the tears from his eyes and stood, moved down the steps to the floor. "The Midwives were called to Princess Elpis' chambers earlier today. Obviously the situation with this 6th child is not a good one. The King, begs your understanding for his absence." He turned to the pages. "First page go and stand by to bring any

news. Tell also the King to stay with his family, he is not needed here, he is needed there.”

He glared at us briefly, I knew we had to pull ourselves together and do our duty, as he was doing his.

“Friends, I know some of you have wondered why we have this strange, two part or shared office. You now have your questions answered.” He returned to his seat. “You have all assembled here today for a multi purpose celebration and excursive in our unique style of demokratia government. For our visitors I should explain. In this kingdom, unlike most other places in the world, almost all of us are blood related. We are one large clan, fewer then 300 of us can not trace our roots to the founding families. Those 300 are relatively new to our land and in a generation or two will be part of us as well. Any one can go to any part of this land and find a sister, brother, cousin, aunt or uncle.

We must press onward and should not let our personal difficulties interfere with the joy and celebration of the family as whole. To that end we have officially received three distinguished visitors and recognized their office. We thank you for your presence in our land and for accepting the hospitality of our family.

Earlier today. No, I get ahead of myself. Envoy your official status has been revoked by your government. Please remain with us in this room and celebrate with us, the good news I am about to announce.

Earlier today we concluded several pieces of important business. First we have settled our difference with Florence and all hostilities are ended between us. In addition, we have concluded a Peace and Friendship treaty between us. The purpose of this treaty is to assure both Florence and ourselves that we respect each other’s independence and resolve to mediate any points of friction between us, to avoid further conflict. Florence has made a strong gesture of good will toward us by granting the sum of 5000 florins to. This money will be used to help endow the King Iason the 7th Free University and Academia. We will welcome scholars and students, from all lands, intent on the advancement of knowledge. How do the citizens of Parga think about this?” They all began to clap, whistle and shout approval.

Second: The Venetian Ambassador has purchased the captured Florentine navel vessels, now anchored in our harbor. The Captains of these vessels are here with us. I have been assured that you and your crews will be fairly compensated for your work. You should sail on the evening tide for Venice. The Doge’s personal representative will meet with you this afternoon. We found you and your men to be worthy sailors and shipwrights and we look forward to the day when you again call on our port, to receive the welcome and hospitality we so much enjoy give to friends and respected colleges. Fair winds and good weather on your journey.

Third: the Florentine ambassador has chartered some of our merchant fleet to transport the land army guests back to Florence. You too will sail on the evening tide. I know your stay here has not been the most pleasant of circumstances but it has been a most pleasant experience to work with brave men of honor. We look forward to greeting you as visitors in the future.

We have one more small piece of business to conclude.” Father turned to Iason and myself and pointed at his head. It took us a second to figure that out. Take off the page hats and put on our laurel wreaths. “General would you come forward to represent all of your military men. Prince Iason and Prince Arden would you come forward and return the General’s sword to him, we have no further need of it.”

Iason and I moved to the floor before the thrones and the General came forward. Uncle Tertius carried the sword in a very fancy scabbard. This was not the actual sword that had been surrendered. This was a very fancy ceremonial sword. I could see Iason was to have a very good time doing this. He loved being on stage and performing before an audience. The General knelt down and we both placed our hands on the sword. Iason looked at me with his deep blue eyes, fix on mine. He had a half smile on his face. I nodded in agreement. What I had just agreed to I had only a vague idea about but I would go along with my lover no matter what.

“Before I return this symbol of honor to the General, Prince Arden and I have one other ceremonial use for it. On the 20th day of the 10th month in the year 1312 King Iason the 7th proclaimed the creation of Crown Prince Iason’s Argoanuts. Those Argoanuts, as their first of many contributions to our state, have commissioned a memorial statue, the Ganymede of Parga. That memorial will not be dedicated or unveiled for some weeks.” All the while the poor General is on one knee looking up at us. “Prince Arden was selected by the Argoanuts to be the model. Take your pose brother.” I know I was smiling as I took my pose. He poked me gently and I put my hands back on the scabbard. Iason drew the sword and holding it in his hands placed the flat of the blade on each of the General’s shoulders. “General you are the first Knight of the Ceremonial Order, Protectors of the Ganymede of Parga.”

While this was happening the Argoanuts who were in the gallery pushed forward to the rail for a better look. I

could see about 25 or 30 of them. Iason slipped the sword back into the scabbard and we handed it to the General. The look on his face was puzzling at first I was not sure if he was to cry or shout with joy. He did neither. The General rose and bowed to us.

"I am honored to accept this symbol of friendship between Florence and Parga. I am even more deeply honored to being named the First Knight of the Order Protectors of the Ganymede of Parga." I think he was about to say more but I could see his emotions welling up when the First Page slipped up behind us and knelt by Prince Karyakos' side.

"Thank you General and Princes. I must interrupt the proceedings. Princes, your mother requests your immediate attendance to her side. Your duty here is fully and well discharged. Go now to a higher duty and attend your mother." We ran out of the hall having completed one duty we must now take up another. It is easy to bring joy and happiness to others. It is a perk of office that both of us enjoy as much as anything, except our privet time together. Absolutely nothing exceeds that. Now the hard part of duty calls. We have no experience with this, no knowledge to share between ourselves or with others. We knew in our hearts Princess Elpis must be close or we would not have been summoned. A boy's mother, even a surrogate mother, loves him unconditionally and he in turn, loves her unconditionally. That much we both understood.

Our philosophy tutor later told us, in closing the public part of the audience, "Prince Karyakos went on to relate one of his lessons, as my professor's student, he said in part:

In the *Theaetetus* — after some many pages of showing, that while true knowledge exists, defining it remains a logical impossibility — the unperturbed Socrates, having obtained from young Theaetetus agreement on this conclusion, states his own position or role:

'Then supposing you should ever henceforth try to conceive afresh, Theaetetus, if you succeed, your embryo thoughts will be the better as a consequence of today's scrutiny, and if you remain barren, you will be gentler and more agreeable to your companions, having the good sense not to fancy you know what you do not know. For that, and no more, is all my art can effect; nor have I any of that knowledge possessed by all the great and admirable men of our own day or of the past. But this midwife's art is a gift from the gods; my mother had it for women, and I for young men of a generous spirit and for all in whom beauty dwells.

Now I must go to the portico of the King- Archon to meet the indictment which Meletus has drawn up against me. But tomorrow morning, Theodorus, let us meet here again. The finding of this dialogue — that every attempt to arrive at a firm definition of knowledge had proved a failure — was not then and is not now a popular conclusion. Public men above all do not want uncertainty even hinted at, since it shakes the foundation of all that they say and do.' (TN: Sounds like little has changed in 3000 years.)

Indeed, Socrates, as he casually remarks, is to be tried for his life by the public men of Athens for persisting in such subversive offenses. Corruption of youth, I believe is the best way to state it. Anyone who declares ignorance to be a universal condition is a mortal threat to those who live by their pretensions to knowledge, certainty and absolute truth. A condition most often found in religious leaders, noblemen and tyrants. A lesson King Iason, myself and our princes must continually be reminded of. It is not wrong to believe in a fiction or dilution but morally wrong to force or strongly encourage others to share it or to cause action upon it without first acknowledging its lack of, or suspect voracity.

If we turn away from the rhetoric of such disputes, the sophists and demigods; to take an honest look at our own lives and opinions, and then at the affairs of the world, we soon admit that Socrates was profoundly correct. He has *this* much knowledge, whatever it's worth. People fool themselves and others about what they know, all the time. A further recognition would be that while Socrates openly admitted to sharing in the common ignorance, he was not in the least upset by this condition. The Athenian world was having a hard time, but for Socrates life presented no great problems. Our world is having a hard time of it too. It takes all of our leadership and skills to manage our own lives and I can not say the problems are small. They are only as great as we perceive them to be, however.

He did exactly what he wanted to do with his time, and enjoyed it. He treated his death sentence almost as a joke, saying in effect to his judges, 'You never touched me! You have only done ill to yourselves.' Of us here today none are the stature of Socrates. Of our sons and the other young men and women, time alone will be the judge."

The number one page had only just returned to the apartments as we arrived. Inside we found the ladies, nurses and children all huddled and crying. The midwives were busy cleaning up and we could see the evidence of much blood. Princess Elpis looked every bit of what she must have been through. We did not know any details but it had obviously been a difficult birth. Uncle Iason looked as though he too had been through it. Iason and I

later decided he had. Not the physical pain or difficulties but the emotional difficulties of seeing one you love suffering and being powerless.

I took Iason's hand and we approached the bed. It is a very large bed in the classic Greek style. It had a wooden frame, with a high board at the head and bands of hide laced across, upon which skins were placed. The bedstead was veneered with expensive woods, ivory inlaid or veneered with tortoise-shell and with silver feet. The pillows and coverings were beautiful made of fine fabrics in many colors and it had a thick matrice over the leather lacing filled I assumed with feathers.

As we approached her eyes were closed and I assumed she was asleep. When we came very close she opened her eyes and half smiled, lifting her hand which we both took. We could see she was flushed and feverish, her hand was almost hot to the touch. "You are so young my princes, Iason and Arden. This should not be thrust upon you, but it is. The children are in your care, as their older brothers, love them as I would. Take special notice of your new brother, call him Lysandros. Arden, fetch Father Georgios please. I kissed her hand and told her I loved her, and ran to find the page. When I returned she said again she love us and made us promise to love each other as our fathers love each other.

Shortly after Father Georgios, Karyakos, Tertius and Lady Lucia and the other pages arrived. Uncle Iason was forced to yield the child from his arms to the wet-nurse. Tertius gently took over the situation. He sent pages off, one was with the announcement of the new Prince and his name Lysandros. Names are not often given to new babies until they reach an age of several days to a week. This one was different. He is a large baby, I am told, strong and very demanding. A second wet-nurse was sent for as he would only sleep for perhaps an hour and then demand food. Uncle Iason seemed almost powerless and unable to do anything. Karyakos comforted him and when not at his side was at Princess Elpis'. Tertius instructed the girls and Helladios to go with Lucia and stay in her apartments with their cousins. He and Lucia have two girls younger than me. I understood several other births did not survive. Iason and I took our brothers to our apartment for the next little while. I sent a page to inform Ikaros, he would see that our guests were reassigned to other sleeping places for the next while, except Odo. Being only two years older than them I thought he could be of help.

Nikias was taking all this very badly. He could just not understand why daddy was not able to make mommy better. Why he and the twins couldn't lay in bed with her like when they were sick and so on. He did not seem to understand what the nurses were telling him or maybe he did not want to. Anyway, I told him Iason and I promised mother that we would take care of our brothers as she had asked. That seemed to at least mollify him.

Tertius told us to take the young ones and go ourselves to see our friends depart the harbor. Iason seemed to pull himself together and managed to send a message to the Argoanuts. We would all go together and sing songs as the army of Florence boarded the ships to go home.

I took charge of the brothers and Iason took charge to the theater. I guess it was best that way, it gave both of us something to think about. The Argoanuts were a somber group when we assembled them. They had obviously taken her into their hearts as she had them. They obviously were feeling our pain and loss too. Brothers understand brothers, we all understood duty too. In our hearts we all knew our mother did not want us to mourn her but to celebrate Lysandros.

Several of the biggest boys stepped up and took the three eight year olds on their shoulders as we marched to the city plaza. I must say that we were an impressive group too. All 124 of them turned out and with the six of us in the lead and the three little princes riding on their human steeds we turned a druggie into a celebration of boy joy.

As we marched into the plaza we sang Iason the 5th original marching song. That got everyone's attention. We were soon joined by a group of palace boys, the sanctuary men and some I didn't recognize. The Florentine solders all saluted us as they marched by and many broke ranks and came to meet us or to greet their former servants. The loading took time, soon the plaza and quays and streets were filled with men. It did not take long for the Swiss, Germans and Florentine's to start singing in their languages, back to us. Some of the units even put on displays of marching precision for us and each other.

When the General and the Venetian and Florentine ambassadors came into the plaza all the army fell silent. The General came up to us and announced to his solders that he had received, on their behalf, the highest honor any man could be given. He was now the first Knight of the Ceremonial Order, Protectors of the Ganymede of Parga. That statue will stand here on this pedestal.

Iason got that look and before I could do anything he started chanting Ganymede, Ganymede. All the Argoanuts follow and just kept chanting until I stepped up. Iason then said, "naked brother, like it will be when finished". I hesitated and the General said, "please Prince Arden." I could not refuse either request so did as asked, I shed

my tunic and kilt. Iason replaced my loral wreath and I took my pose. Suddenly from behind me a deep baritone voice spoke the first line of the ode and the Argoanuts answered by singing it. I got the feeling they had been preparing and I was their unwitting accomplices. He spoke the second and they sang the second and so on until the entire ode had been completed. I must say my arms were getting just a little tired by the end. Like before this was a thrilling experience but unlike before the audience was silent, totally silent. One of the solders spoke the first line, with a heavy Germanic accent and all responded in song. Strangely when they sang in Greek their accents were almost unnoticeable. The baritone moved around where I could see him and spoke the second and again all responded this time with the Argoanuts joining. That was truly magical. The Baritone turned out to be one of the older boys from the North house. I did not hold my arms up for the second but joined in the song as well. This method of singing is not unlike how we teach the words and tunes to others. In this setting it was very powerful and given the number of voices powerfully felt. (TN: I believe this type of singing style has a proper name and I'm sure a long history, but I know it not. I guess Arden didn't either.)

My little brothers were beside themselves with this. While sitting on the shoulders of their personal Argoanuts transport the twins outstretched their arms imitating me. I know they wanted to get down and dance. Dance for us is almost as important as the music itself but this would not be safe. Three small boys among so many men. We will dance back at the castle. We find any reason to dance. We dance at weddings and festivals, at births and just any occasion except funerals. Funerals are all to common in life.

On our return to the castle we met Father Georgios who was returning to his church. He told us Princess Elpis was resting now. He said she had what the physicians called birth fever. Some women survive and some don't. He thought it was in god's hands and then added "the physicians had waters brought from the Temple of Apollo and she seemed to be responding to them and the potent they had prescribed". Then he said the most remarkable thing for a man of his calling, "When you boys began to sing we could hear it in the castle and when she was told what the source of his mighty sound was her fever broke and she seemed much more at ease. I would like to believe it was my prayers, her midwife and physician the potent and waters. I think it was your singing that was the most powerful." Our hearts were eased somewhat, but not at ease.

1312, the 11th month, 20th day

Since the young princes have been staying with us at night, I have had little time to sit and reflect or record. This afternoon we took them riding for several hours and on our return Ikaros bathed them and saw they were fed in our rooms. They are now sleeping and Iason and I have at last some time alone together. They think it quite humorous that we are more interested in each other than in playing games with them. We must ask Uncle Tertius about this as he must know what they think. Nikias is their leader in all but sex where they all seem equal in participation. Odo is a frequent visitor to our bed and a willing participant in our mouth games. The three boys love him as much as us, since he is more willing than we are to play games with them.

Princess Elpis is recovering and is now able to spend some time with the children during the day. I now wonder how my mother managed when I was born, there is only 5 years and two sisters between my brother Abernath and myself. I am sure my father and my grandmothers helped her. Lysandros must be fed by the wet-nurses as our mother's milk has dried up. I noticed the two wet-nurses are young Palace Girls, one I have seen in Ikaros' company on occasions.

Author's note: If you enjoy Arden you may also like another of my stories, The Value of Love in the Gay Male-Adult Youth section of Nifty.