

Coffee Is Served In The Green Lake Room

Brother Generale lept up from his table, and ran down to the base of the Green Lake. Standing wide legged, arms open, he shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Heresy!" The sound of his voice ricocheted off the waters of the Green Lake, the infinite curves of the stalactites and stalagmites giving his voice a silky, ominous texture.

"You have interrupted the Queen," Abbot Gaudentius replied in a steely tone.

"Yes, I have. But, I will change my statement. This story of the blessed Dona Rina is not a heresy, it is a blasphemy!" Brother Generale shot back.

"You will cease and desist with this interruption," Lieutenant Alphonso replied sternly. "Or you and all the other Flagellantes will be forcibly ejected from this chamber."

The Brother laughed nasally, sounding for all the world like a crow. "As if a disgraced Guardsmen--only a Lieutenant at that--could order such a thing."

A new, powerful voice boomed out across the room. "I am a retired Captain of the Queen's Guard, in good standing. If you do not apologize to the Queen immediately, I will not only have you and your followers forcibly evicted, I will consider your behaviour an insult to the Bacas, and deal with you myself, in the manner of a gentleman."

Don Antonio, Dona Carmencita and Dona Baca all turned their gaze of wondrous surprise to the lean taciturn figure. "You will have me at your side, Don Baca," Don Antonio said. "Enough of this overweening cultist."

"I expect an apology from you, Brother Generale," the Queen said in her clear alto. Her voice seemed to glide smoothly along the walls and aisles, and back to her, like an obedient canine.

"My queen..." the Flagellante stammered "I was just trying to preserve the purity of our faith in Dona Rina..."

"On your knees," the Queen commanded. "Also, apologize quietly. I'm tired of your voice already."

The tables, aisles and halls burbled with murmuring voices. There was not a man or woman in the assembly who did not have an opinion about what the Queen had read, or the reaction that had burst forth from the Flagellante leader.

To the amazement of Don Antonio, the Flagellente fell to his knees, and produced from his belt a small leather strap which he applied to each shoulder while he muttered to himself. The Queen, the Abbot, and Lieutenant Alphonso conferred among themselves on the podium. Finally the Abbot raised his arms for silence, and silence he got.

"It would appear that we all could make good use of this emotional display. Before the Queen begins to read again---there are only a few pages left in this section of document--each designated group may have a maximum of two minutes to speak on the veracity of the document. The order will be: Apache Traders, first; Flagellantes second; Spanish nobles third; Western Bandits, fourth. Please choose a spokesperson. We are serving coffee, sangria and crustillos in fifteen minutes, and I do believe you will want the coffee hot and the pastries tender."

"Most sensible thing I've heard in this room so far," Don Antonio noted.

Don Antonio and Dona Carmencita enjoyed the ensuing hubbub. Various members of the groups leapt from their seats with the vigor of young people, though quite a few in the assembly were in their mature years. Within a few minutes, a blocky, middle-aged Apache Trader, the now-repentant Brother Generale, and a lanky young Western Bandit with a droopy moustache lined up at the end of the green pool farthest from the podium, and nearest to the exit. Don Baca and Lieutenant Alphonso conversed using Guard Hand, with Don Baca shaking his head at being chosen speaker. He signed 'you-must-speak' to Lieutenant Alphonso. Dona Baca leaned her head against her husband, slightly spoiling the cant of her mantilla in her glowing pride.

"I wished I had learned Guard Hand better when I had the chance," Don Antonio sighed. "It would really come in handy in all this racket."

Two of young monk ushers stood at the base of the dais, and thumped their brass-ended staves into the limestone floor, booming like two small cannons. Abbot Gaudentius came to the very edge of the dais, in front of the podium and spoke. "We will hear from the Apache Trader of White Mountain. All will attend."

The Apache Trader spoke in a smooth soft voice, and all the monk ushers made sure that those seated at table were quiet. "We of White Mountain know very well this story. We have had a long working relationship with the daughters of Berylia the Wise, and we very much wish to hear the end of this particular story. We would ask everyone to remember that this tale concerns three young excitable girls faced with unimaginable challenges, and we would ask that everyone reserve judgment about the character of the three." He then turned right, and moved back to the Apache Trader section of the tables.

Brother Generale could not lift his head to face the Queen and so he spoke to the lake, increasing the echoes of his voice. "We Flagellantes believe this tale to be false. It is unthinkable, no, it is impossible for the Blessed Dona Rina to have been friends with the Devil Herself, Dona Dina. Any child in New Spain knows her true name--Dianire Redourine--but I hope to God that I never hear the name spoken outside this chamber."

Lieutenant Alphonso spoke next. His armor glittered with the light from the lamps of the Green Lake Room, making him appear a gallant knight of old. "I never thought that I would agree on anything with a Flagellante. Not only is Dona Dina real, but that I saw her with my own eyes, and whatever she was in the past, she is a monster now. I am more worried about why she let me live than why she slaughtered the settlers."

Finally, the lanky Western Bandit loped up to the edge of the water.

"Begging, your pardon ma'am, but we Western Bandits fought alongside Dianire Redourine, and she was a true and trusted ally, forgive me for saying so. Yup, she's real, and as wacky as this story sounds, it's probably all true."