

# REUNIONS



*The* lacquered doors of the throne room parted with a breath of lavender-scented air. Erymanthus Petrukus, called Haemon, a commander in the Order of the Knights of Parthenian, faced a tapestried royal chamber divided by a brace of untenanted benches draped in cloth of gold. Here and there pleated purple drapery clutched by molded leaves of brass suggested a succession of balconies, but the balconies for now were shuttered by antique alabaster panes guarded by soldiers in the ceremonial armor of Loxian Guard swordsmen.

At the foot of a broad four-tier throne poised twin marble tables. These were immense, massive. Positioned left of the raised marble dais, the first table seated the elderly aristocrats of the Imperial Council, their secular scribes, and various attendants. On the right hand of the royal seat perched the portly priest-clerk—the Emperor’s record-keeper—and two men of regal stature wearing costly gray silk. The gray-robed nobles were

Vitusian prelates. They came from the city of Calydon on behalf of the High Priest of Vitus.

Although the Knights of Parthenian had time out of mind carried the honor of Royal Protectorate, Haemon Petrukus saw no member of his prestigious order about the throne room. It was the first time Haemon spied the Emperor absent his elite knights. With an imperceptible shift of his head, Haemon confirmed it. The myopic veterans of the Loxian Guard, the local militia, had displaced the Royal Bodyguard.

Unheard of, unthinkable.

Yet there was Mikolas Cercyon Mezentius, Prince of Laetonia and Lord of the Parthenian Knights, attired in courtly black, without weapon and cape, two steps below the throne—unattended. No, not unattended. His profile was all Haemon saw, but Mikolas communicated danger in other ways. They had been brothers in war. At a sharp angle below the gaunt, seated figure of the Emperor, gold-haired, blue-eyed Mikolas stood still. A step below Mikolas hovered two of the silver-armored Loxian swordsmen. Although the armored Loxians kept a fitting distance, Lord Mikolas was their charge, in custody.

All this Haemon digested in the moments before the portly clerk bounded to his feet.

“We call into the glorious presence of His Most Excellent Magnificence, Aegyptus Machaon Mezentius, Emperor of Laetonia, the bodyguard commander of Prince Valten Leonardas Mezentius. Advance, knight-commander, and be known.”

The formality was unexpected, yet not. Last night, Haemon had returned to the Laetonian royal seat of Asthrinasipal. Observing the customary practice of report, he had made directly for the palace. But he had reported nothing. He had been closed inside an apartment in the Golden Tower, fed, and brought a fresh uniform. He had thought, then, he was being prepared for formal inquiry and wondered how the Emperor would receive him.