

*May this missive reach the 'V' responsible for the Imperial song that graced so many ears during the festivities that recently accompanied the coronation of Empress Lisabetta von Holberg.*

*Up until this past year I had thought that, with my advancing years, I had seen most of everything that might happen. Wars, deaths, coronations, celebrations, Herald's of the Realms, betrayal, magic, love and all else that makes up this world. I have crossed swords with a Suranni noble, met a basilisk's gaze (the experience I have the least desire to ever repeat), and seen a Herald of Night be absolutely beguiled with lurid lies. However, I would like you to know that your song showed me that the world has a few tricks left up its sleeve.*

*I was in the town of Coombefort in southern Astolat for much of the coronation celebrations, and I do have to tell you that the inhabitants of Coombefort were amongst the toughest of crowds in my long years as a troubadour. Now, you might think that such a time of festivity should have rendered any gathered group of stout Imperial citizens into a celebratory party just by being in proximity to one another, but the most curious and unfortunate accident had afflicted the town just prior to my arrival - and to the main portion of the celebrations. Almost the entire stock of bibulous goods, all the wine, had been spoiled by a quite disgusting infestation of a mould that had gnawed deeply at the barrels and tainted the juice within and so, you see, Coombefort faced the coronation without anything to drink!*

*And so, you see, I faced the difficult task of bringing joy, virtuous thought and festive spirit to a gathering of dour sorts whose patience for celebration had already run dry. My Dawnish fellows of the town were at the end of their tethers, breaking into argument or even outright fighting with one another at the drop of a hat. The Highborn in town had faces so stony you could carve a substantial and quite defensible fortification from them. The Urizen traders were frantically trying some sort of ritual to send precious goods to an Eternal of Autumn in the desperate hope it would send them some wine back. Well, I stepped up into that breach of good cheer and did my best with word and song, up on some rickety stage they'd set up and surrounded with trestles before they'd discovered what had happened to their wine stocks, but despite all I did, I could barely crack a smile from amongst them. There was so much surliness and sore-headedness in the air that it was almost thick enough to catch the vegetables they threw at me - but at least I knew I'd not go hungry with such 'gifts' showered my way, even if I too was beginning to suffer from a rather dry throat.*

*Well, it was at that moment that some League lady came to my rescue. Not a single song in my repertoire had made a dent in the crowd's poor composure, but she skittered up to the stage, sly as a weasel, and shoved a crumpled piece of paper into my hand. Try this, she said. It's been all the rage in Temeschwar, she said. Well, I'll tell you honestly, Temeschwar isn't exactly known itself as a font of happiness and delight, and the last time I saw art from the northern city, it was a granite carving of a large, frowning man staring angrily down at a number of smaller, angry men who were being driven out into a disturbingly unpleasant rendition of an icy wasteland. I hope you won't take offence when I say that I wasn't exactly filled with high expectations.*

*But I unrolled that paper, saw the song, and gave it everything I had. And do you know, do you know, I could swear that I could see the flakes of stone cracking off their grim faces. I finished it through once and thought, buggar it, I'll do the same again - they weren't smiling yet, not quite, but there was a light in their eyes. And after that second rendition, why, I thought I saw the corner of one Highborn's mouth twitch ever so slightly upwards, and one of the local yeofolk actually stopped punching her friend and even looked at the stage for the first time.*

*Well, that was something at least. But I admit it - I sighed then, let my shoulders drop, went to pick up my harp and walk off that stage. If even this 'V's song couldn't break their sullenness, I figured I'd be best off looking for the next town over - ideally one with some wine still in their casks. And then it happened, as the last note of the harp finally died. I heard a creak and was fearful for a moment - I thought that rickety stage had finally had enough, and was to crash down in on itself and take me with it. But then, round the corner, came a ruddy great Navarri wagon, creaking and clattering, oxen straining and sweating - for it was loaded to the sky with barrels, beautiful barrels, so full of fine fluid as to not even have space to slosh around.*

*Well, the crowd went wild. All cheering Lisabetta's name, throwing their hats in the air, rushing to meet the striding just rolling into Coombefort with their wagonloads of Miaren-grown salvation. The Navarri were almost pelted with coins, the casks were cracked open, and Navarri wine flowed freely. And at some point, some buggar looked up at me, not yet off the stage, and yelled, it was that song that did it! The song brought us wine! And then it was all cheering for the Empress again, and they stopped throwing vegetables and threw a few coins up, and demanded I sing it again and again until frankly my fingers were bleeding and my throat was raw. But let me tell you, finally they were smiling and cheering and enjoying the night as they should have been right from the start.*

*So there you have it. Never thought I'd ever come across a song that had the power to magically summon up cartloads of wine. Now I've tried it a few times since and it doesn't seem to have worked again, which is a damn shame, but that first time it did, it was enough to finally crack a tough crowd like few have ever seen - a coronation party with nothing to drink.*

*Now, I've written a good few songs in my time, and even had a few get picked up and passed from throat to throat across more nations than one can count to on one hand; and I've read and listened to the work of some true masters and mistresses in my time too. I know, though, that I'm getting old - fingers on my harping hands freeze up a little more with each passing year, the pain in my lungs stings worse now than it did last month, and truth be told, I could barely make out the letters on that scrap of paper that League-lady passed my way. But I'll tell you this, from an old troubadour who probably won't last out this year the way things are going - at least I know this new reign has at least one good songsmith right there in its foundations.*

*I hope you're proud of your work. You should be.*

*Pierre Harper of Astolat*