

WORLD OF THE WICKED

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World Of The Wicked

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1. A Thief In The Night

“Turn left just before the end of the corridor, then second right.”

Georgio kept the plan of the building in his mind. In the dark he had to feel his way. And silently. One sound and he'd be discovered for what he was. A thief.

He was just fourteen years old but with no money, no food, no home, how else was he going to survive?

He padded along the corridor, past the shadowy forms of paintings and jewelled swords. They'd be worth a fortune. But they'd be missed. The owner would suspect him. He'd be caught. But the gold! There was so much gold. No one would notice if he took some of it.

Suddenly a face loomed in front of him and he almost screamed. Just in time he realised it was his own face, reflected in a mirror.

He'd come too far. He was at the end of the corridor. Retracing his steps, he found the passage.

“It's down here,” he remembered. “Then second right, third room on the left.”

There was a faint click behind him. But Georgio didn't hear it. He didn't see the mirror swivel. He didn't see the tall figure in a cloak step out, into the dark corridor.

Silently, Georgio tiptoed through the house. Just as silently, the figure followed him.

Coming to the third room on the left, Georgio took a deep breath. He knew that anything could happen. The door handle might squeak as it turned. There might even be someone in the room.

Slowly he opened the door. No squeak. He stepped inside. No one in the room.

“Now be quick. Where's the gold?” he thought.

There it was, on a desk, hundreds, perhaps thousands of gold coins, shining even in the unlit room.

Before he could move, another door opened. A girl with a candle stood there staring at him. He stared back at her. She was about his age, with long, dark curly hair and dark, clever eyes.

“Who are you?” asked the girl.

“My name is Georgio.”

“I don't know you,” she said.

“The kind owner of this house let me stay for the night,” he explained, truthfully.

"What are you doing in this room?" she asked.

"I got lost," Georgio lied.

Did the girl believe him?

"What is your name?" he asked.

"My name is Maria."

Maria had never met anyone with red hair before. She studied the goatskin tunic he wore. He was obviously a poor farm boy. Many of them turned up in town without money or even shoes. They came seeking their fortunes. Some of them found work on the ships. Most of them disappeared back into the mountains.

"You must come from somewhere in the mountains. Do you?"

"Yes," answered Georgio.

"Why did you leave your parents?"

"I have no parents. I'm an orphan," he replied.

"Do you expect to make your fortune here?"

"Perhaps."

Maria came to a decision.

"Follow me," she said. "We shouldn't be in this room."

Georgio followed Maria. He remembered the gold but didn't look back. He didn't see the shadowy figure in the corner, watching them leave. As the door closed, the figure went over to the desk and locked away the gold.

2. Girl With A Candle

Maria led Georgio along the corridor to her room.

"You say you are an orphan," she whispered, "but you must have come from somewhere."

"I come from Caro," he replied.

"What is Caro?" she asked as they entered the room.

"Caro is a tiny village, high in the mountains," he explained.

"It sounds beautiful," she said.

Georgio stared around the room. Everything was made of gold or silver, studded with precious stones, hung with exotic silks. He gasped.

"It's beautiful!"

"If Caro is beautiful, why did you leave it?" asked Maria.

Georgio hardly heard her, he was so dazzled by all that he saw.

"Not beautiful," he muttered. "Dangerous. That's how my parents died. There was a rockfall. It destroyed the little house we lived in. It covered our patch of land with boulders and stones. From then on, my only blanket was the starry sky."

Maria was amazed. She tried to picture it.

"Do you mean that you slept in the open air?"

Georgio nodded.

"Every night?"

He nodded again.

But that's wonderful!" she said.

Georgio studied Maria. Was she a fool?

"It isn't wonderful. It's freezing cold. There's nothing to eat. The other villagers gave me scraps but they were almost as poor as me."

"Just how poor are you?" she asked, trying to understand.

Georgio turned out his pockets. They were empty.

"I've never met anyone that poor before. My father is one of the richest men on the islands."

"You are lucky," he said.

"I don't feel lucky," she replied. "I live in this big gloomy house. Servants clean my clothes and make my meals. I can do anything I want, except leave."

"Don't your parents ever take you out?" he asked.

"My father's always busy and I think my mother's dead."

"Don't you know?"

"I've been told that she's dead. So I suppose she is. I've no memory of her. Her name was Perfidia. Pretty, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is pretty. But I don't understand. Everything is so easy and perfect here. Why would you want to leave?"

Maria stared at Georgio. Was he stupid?

"To see the world. Like you."

"I don't want to see the world," said Georgio. "I just want to see a beautiful room like this and have servants bring me food."

Maria shook her head.

"You would get bored."

Georgio had never been bored in his life. Frightened, yes. Never bored.

"I would never get bored," he insisted.

"You would get bored," she repeated, quietly but firmly. "And when you did, you would try to leave. You would discover that you weren't allowed to leave. Then you would start to go mad. Every moment of every day and every night, you would plan your escape into the big, wide, beautiful world."

Georgio burst out laughing. Maria was shocked. He was laughing at her. No one had ever laughed at her before.

"And what would you do in the big wide world?" he asked.

"I would be happy," she replied, smiling for the first time.

It was Georgio's turn to shake his head.

"You would be frightened," he told her.

Maria had never been frightened in her life. Bored, yes. Never frightened.

"I wouldn't be frightened," she insisted.

"You would be frightened," he repeated, quietly but firmly. "So frightened that you would come running home to your father and beg him to let you stay forever in this big, warm house."

An idea popped into Maria's head.

"Perhaps we can help each other," she suggested. "After all, you want to live in a big, warm house and I want to see the world."

Georgio was stunned.

"Surely not," he spluttered. "Surely your father would notice. I mean, I don't look anything like you."

Maria looked at Georgio's bright red hair, his big blue eyes and burst out laughing.

"Of course Father would notice!"

"Then what do you mean?" asked Georgio, blushing.

Maria thought for a moment.

"Supposing I take all my jewels and we escape from this house together. You could show me the big, wide world and I could give you some of the jewels so that you could buy a big, warm house of your own."

Just as Georgio was considering this astonishing idea, a cock crowed and the first purple rays of sunlight shot in through the window. Maria gave a little cry.

"Too late," she whispered. "We can't escape. The servants will be up and Father... You must return to your room."

"Why don't we grab your jewels and make a run for it?" he suggested.

"Impossible," she whispered, opening the door. "The guest room is second left, third right, first room on the left. Hurry!"

But Georgio's mind was full of jewels and Maria. He couldn't give up just like that. He challenged her.

"I don't think you want to escape. It's only a game to you."

Maria's dark eyes flashed him a painful look.

"Perhaps, if you could stay another night, there would be time," she whispered, trying to think quickly. "Ask my Father. But don't let him know we've met. Now go!"

She almost shoved him out. Georgio found himself alone in the corridor. He managed to find the way back to his room without bumping into anyone. Inside, he flung himself on the bed and fell asleep.

3. A Secret

Sophia, the maid, was asleep in her tiny attic room, dreaming of what her life might have been like. When the cock crowed, she awoke with such a start that she banged her head on the ceiling.

Sophia was used to the pain. It happened every morning. Her master, Signor Alberto Laspari, would be waiting for her in the breakfast room. Why did he always have to rise so early? As usual, she ran down the first three steps and fell down the rest.

Signor Laspari raised his eyes from his papers and watched his maid gather herself up and stumble into the room, bowing.

"Is my daughter awake?" he asked.

"Yes signor."

"She is?"

"No signor."

"Then why did you say she was?"

"I don't know Signor. I panicked."

Laspari stared at his stupid maid.

"What are you?" he asked.

"Useless, Signor."

He nodded.

"Worse than useless."

"Worse than useless," she repeated, dutifully.

"So, what should you do?"

"I don't know, Signor. I think I was born useless."

"Not about you, you fool. My daughter's asleep. What should you do?"

Sophia thought about it.

"Wake her, Signor?"

"Exactly."

Waves of relief flooded through Sophia's mind. She was to wake Maria. It was simple.

"Oh and Sophia, inform the lad in the guest room that I would like to see him."

"Inform lad in guest room..." mumbled Sophia to herself, trying to take it in. "Two things. Lad in guest-room and the other thing. What is it?"

“Wake Maria!” thundered Laspari.

Sophia fled.

Laspari continued to study his papers. He was not only a very rich man, he was a very busy man. A very important man. Yet he waited patiently until Georgio entered.

“I hope you slept well.”

“Yes thank you Signor.

All Georgio could think of was the secret he shared with Maria. They would run away together with her jewels. But he needed to stay another night.

“Have some breakfast. You must be hungry,” Laspari suggested.

“Thank you Signor. I am hungry and still tired from travelling down through the mountains, sleeping on bare rocks in the freezing cold. So tired, I could sleep for days. I was wondering Signor, if I might sleep in the room for longer. Perhaps until tomorrow. One more night of sleep will make me strong enough to return to the cold harsh world.”

At that moment, Maria appeared. Remembering to pretend not to know her, Georgio gasped.

“Who is this beautiful young woman? Please introduce me.”

“This is my daughter, Maria,” said Signor Laspari.

“My name is Georgio.”

He stepped forward and bowed.

“Are you one of my father's merchant friends?” asked Maria, pretending she had never met him.

“No,” he replied. “I come from the mountains. Your father kindly gave me shelter for the night.”

“Oh Father, you're so generous,” said Maria, pouring herself some fresh fruit juice.

“I was just asking your father if - since I'm so tired - I might be allowed to sleep here another night. May I, sir?”

The question hung in the air. Maria drank her juice and Signor Laspari used his thumbnail to remove some food caught between two teeth.

Finally Maria said, “I'm sure Father will let you stay. He's always so kind. You will let him stay another night, won't you, Father?”

Signor Laspari studied his daughter's face.

“Why should you want him to stay, Maria?”

“Because...”

She thought about it. What would her father like her to say?

"...He seems kind, honourable, honest."

"Honest? How do you know that he's honest?"

Maria could sense that her father was cross but her words tumbled out as she tried to find the right things to say.

"I don't. But he's dressed in a goatskin and his hair is bright red and he hasn't got anywhere to go!"

"How do you know that?" her father demanded.

"I don't. I don't know."

"How do you know that he isn't a cheat, a sneak, a thief?"

Georgio jumped from his chair.

"I have nothing but the clothes I'm wearing," he insisted. "Look. Nothing in my pockets. I'm an honest orphan from Caro, Signor."

"Are you? Supposing you had crept out of your room last night and headed straight for the room where I keep my gold - which you had seen earlier."

"Are you accusing me?" asked Georgio, suddenly feeling scared.

Signor Laspari took no notice.

"Supposing, just as you were going to steal it, my daughter Maria appeared."

"Father!" exclaimed Maria. "You were watching!"

She turned sadly to Georgio.

"Father has all sorts of passages, mirrors and ways of watching people."

"Be quiet girl!" hissed Signor Laspari.

He fixed his piercing eyes upon Georgio.

"You were out to steal my gold. Admit it, boy!"

"But I never took anything."

"But you meant to!"

"How can you know what a person is thinking?" Georgio protested.

"Never mind how I know! Don't you think I've lived long enough to know how the mind of a thief works? If you have finished your breakfast, I think you should leave."

Georgio hadn't had any breakfast but Signor Laspari rose from his chair and Georgio was obliged to follow.

"I'm innocent" he insisted.

"Don't add lies to your sins Georgio."

Maria heard the front door slam shut. She was furious with her father. But Signor Laspari wasn't interested.

“How dare you take a complete stranger to your room in the middle of the night! And how dare you lie about it!”

He stared hard at her before storming off to make his plans and give his orders.

Maria sat for a while, sipping juice. Then she went upstairs to her room and packed a large bag. She would leave. Secretly. Even if Georgio were a thief, even if she never saw him again, it would be an adventure. Her life would begin!

As Georgio started down the road into town, he turned a corner and saw the port below. There were ships in the harbour, their sails fluttering in the breeze. There were islands beyond, shimmering in the ocean.

Seeing all these riches, Georgio made a promise to himself.

“One day I will be rich. Then I will call upon Maria and invite her to see the world with me. No one, not even Signor Laspari, will be able to stop me!”

4. Perfect Disguise

Maria stared at the mirror and began to cut her curly black hair. She would disguise herself as a boy. Instead of Maria, she would call herself Mario. Mario from the mountains.

None of her clothes looked poor enough. She'd have to complete her disguise later on. Wrapping herself in an old robe, she flung her jewellery into a bag and tiptoed into the corridor.

This was the dangerous part. Her father might step from his study. A servant might appear. She crept down the stairs, across the corridor and into the south banquet hall.

There was sunlight streaming in through the great glass doors at the far end. Maria shuddered. She didn't want to upset her father. But she couldn't bear to be shut up in the vast, lonely house any longer.

The handle of the glass door was warm. A wave of hot air hit her as she stepped into the south garden. Bushes and blossoms seemed to ripple in the heat. She heard a clipping sound. A gardener was pruning the honeysuckle. He hadn't seen her.

Maria ran, leapt and plunged into the bushes that lined the garden wall. The gardener kept on clipping.

"He must be deaf," she thought.

Climbing the wall, she landed with a thud on the dusty roadside. Behind her, the great house stood silent in the sky. The road stretched out ahead.

"Goodbye Maria", she thought. "Hallo Mario."

Further down the road, Georgio was still staring at the ocean. He'd never seen it before.

"All that water," he thought. "I'll never be thirsty again."

His eyes followed the grey line of the road as it twisted along the hillsides.

In the valley below, he noticed a track into town through olive groves. That way would be quicker but he'd have to scramble down. Deciding to do it, he left the road and went skittering down the rocks.

The hillside got steeper. It made him run faster and faster. Leaping over a clump of grass, he saw the ground just ahead of him disappear. If he didn't stop, he was going to fall off the edge of a cliff! But he couldn't stop.

At the last moment, Georgio threw himself at the ground and clung to the withered root of a tree. His legs were dangling over the edge. Silence. Then a ripping sound, as the root slowly gave way.

He was falling. Part of the root was still in his hands but he was sailing through the air. It was such a long way down, he had time to think. He thought of Maria.

Crash! Georgio landed on a patch of prickly bushes. The thorns were sticking into every part of him. Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! His right ankle hurt but he hauled himself up and hobbled off across a field of fallen rocks and wild poppies.

The air was zinging with the sound of cicadas. A goat, tied to a stick in the ground, watched him as he limped by. A hawk hovered above a copse of dwarf trees. He heard an angry voice, saw a fierce-looking man striding towards him and ran for cover.

Georgio didn't stop when he reached the copse. He wound his way down to where the trees were taller. Here, unable to see or be seen, he lay down.

His head brushed against something hairy and warm. A wild pig gave a startled snort and hurtled off through the undergrowth. Georgio stretched out on the blanket of pine needles. His ankle was still throbbing.

No one in the village of Caro had red hair. Georgio had no family, no connections. He was nobody. But in the future he would be somebody. Who would he become? Georgio yawned, turned over and fell asleep.

While Georgio slept, Maria took the twisting road into town. The nearer she got, the more people she saw. Traders sat at the roadside, selling pottery and lace. Fine carriages and donkey carts passed by.

Among the faces, Maria recognised a merchant and his wife. They were friends of her Father. They mustn't see her. She hid behind some goatskin tunics, which were on sale. One was just like the coat Georgio had worn. A perfect disguise.

The old lady was happy to part with it, in exchange for a little silver necklace. Putting on the rough coat, Maria began to believe that she really was a boy. No one would recognise her now.

Travelling on, she came upon a cheering crowd. They were watching a play. Drums rolled, flutes trilled. On stage, a fierce battle was taking place.

Silvio, the bravest of soldiers, was singing a song as he cut down enemies, left, right and centre. He had bright red hair just like Georgio. Maria got wrapped up in this make-believe world and was cheering along with everyone else.

Suddenly a tiny hooded figure leapt onto the stage. He had a face so hairy that you couldn't see his eyes. He drew a dagger, stabbed Silvio three times in the chest and fled into the crowd.

A gasp went up. The other actors stopped acting and rushed over to the dying Silvio. It wasn't part of the play. It was real!

"He's dead!" cried a giant with a baby face, bursting into tears.

Was this a place where you could be murdered just like that?

"It's not going to be enough to act like a boy," thought Maria. "I am going to have to act like a man."

She sold a gold ring to a jeweller and bought a sharp knife.

With her short curly hair, goatskin tunic and knife, Maria looked just like a poor mountain boy.

"I'm not looking for Georgio," she told herself.

But as she walked, her eyes searched endlessly among the faces for him.

Georgio never did find the track into town. It wasn't until he peered around the corner of a shack that he realised he'd arrived.

Women were milling about market stalls. There were oranges, peaches, tomatoes and limes, so much fruit that some had fallen on the ground.

"I'll never be hungry here," he thought.

Picking up a peach, he took a bite. It was rotten. He spat it out.

The bitter peach taste was still in his mouth when he arrived at the ocean. So he cupped his hands and drank the seawater. It was horrible. Full of salt. He needed a drink but had no money.

Some sailors were signing up to serve on board a ship. Seeing that each of them received a bag of coins, Georgio stepped forward.

"How much money will you give me to serve aboard your ship?" he asked.

The Captain threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"For any able seaman, I'll pay fifteen Grubbis a month. But what should I pay for a puny thing, who walks with a limp and has never been to sea? How about nothing!"

The sailors fell about laughing.

Georgio was furious. Lurching forward, he grabbed hold of the Captain's whiskers. The Captain screamed, as his upper lip was almost parted from his face. Then two sailors lifted Georgio high in the air and flung him into the ocean.

He couldn't swim. When he hit the cold water, he panicked. Opening his mouth to call for help, he swallowed water and sank. When his feet touched the bottom, he stood up. The water was only waist-high. For a moment everyone in the harbour laughed. Then they turned away, ignoring him as he waded back to shore.

Maria and Georgio were both sitting on the quayside as twilight came on. But they were at opposite ends and didn't see each other. She was eating a huge sticky cake. His clothes were still damp and he had begun to feel weak with hunger.

5. Miracle Liquid

Georgio needed money. Slowly he dragged himself up and set off through the torch-lit stalls and sideshows. An old man with a bright turquoise coat was selling strange liquid in bottles.

“Just one sip of this amazing drink will fill you full of energy. If you're old, you'll feel young. If you're sick, it'll cure you. It's a miracle! Only ten Grubbis a bottle.”

People were surging forward, thrusting their paper money at him.

Georgio thought he would do anything for a sip of that liquid. At the point of despair, he saw something and knew that his luck had turned. There was a ten-Grubbi note hanging out of the pocket of the man in front of him.

He reached out and grabbed it. The man turned but Georgio ducked out of sight. He scrambled between hundreds of legs to the front of the crowd. Thrusting his note at the old man, he was rewarded with a bottle of “Miracle Liquid”.

The moment he had it in his hands, Georgio had the cork off and was glugging it back. When the liquid hit his throat, his skin turned blue. His eyes turned red. His guts were on fire. He was choking to death. Terrible. Worse than seawater.

He was about to demand his money back, when an idea struck him. People were paying ten Grubbis a bottle for the world's most disgusting drink. And they couldn't get enough of it! Noticing several crates of the liquid, Georgio crept round the back. He'd steal a crate and set up in business for himself. He'd be rich.

Maria was still searching the torch-lit faces when she came upon a man in a turquoise coat selling bottles of green liquid. Suddenly she saw Georgio.

“Georgio!” she cried.

Georgio was about to lift a crate. He heard his name but couldn't see who was calling.

“I'm in disguise,” thought Maria. “He won't recognise me.”

Just then, she noticed two soldiers creeping up behind Georgio.

“Georgio - look out!” she cried.

But she was too late. One of the soldiers struck him on the back of his head and he keeled over.

“Let him go!” she yelled, pushing her way through the crowd. The soldiers had Georgio by his hands and legs. He was unconscious. Maria couldn't think what to do.

"Where are you taking him?" she cried, as they carried Georgio down to the harbour.

"He's going to be a soldier in our battle against the Utmost Isle," snarled one of the soldiers.

Maria ran behind them.

"Take me with you!" she called.

They took no notice.

Silhouettes against a moonlit sea, the soldiers carried Georgio along the quay and up the gangplank of a dark warship.

Maria sat on a stone wall and wept. What could she do? There was no way to follow him. No way to save him. Then a colder thought invaded.

"Where's my bag?"

The bag was nowhere to be found. She ran up and down the street, in and out of the stalls. Gone. How could she ever go home and admit that she had lost all her jewellery?

"Why are you crying?" asked a sweet, high voice.

Maria turned and saw the babyfaced giant from the acting troupe.

"I was crying earlier," squeaked the giant.

"Yes, I remember," Maria replied. "When the actor was killed."

"Silvio. He was my best friend."

The giant began to sob. Maria comforted him.

"What's your name?"

"My name is Zanni. I'm a fool."

"I'm sure you're not."

"I am," he retorted. "I'm good at it. Everyone laughs at me."

"Don't you mind?"

Zanni thought about it.

"I like making people laugh," he said. "What's your name?"

"Mario," said Maria, smiling for the first time.

"Why were you crying?" asked Zanni.

Maria explained how Georgio had been taken away to be a soldier on the Utmost Isle. And how her bag was lost, with all the jewels so she could never go home.

As Maria and Zanni sat on the stone wall, other actors passed by, hauling their scenery onto a small boat, bobbing in the silver water. All of the actors looked as if they'd been crying.

"I think we go to the Utmost Isle sometimes," said Zanni.

"Do you? When?" asked Maria, suddenly imagining a way to find Georgio.

"Soon, I think," replied the giant.

An idea popped into Maria's head.

"Take me with you," she said.

Zanni called out.

"Scapino, are we going to the Utmost Isle?"

As quick as a flash, Scapino, a tall young man with jet-black hair, leapt out of the shadows at Zanni.

"Ssshh!" he hissed.

Maria thought that Scapino's face looked as lonely as the moon.

"I'm sorry Scapino," said Zanni, his high voice trembling. "It's just that Mario wants to come with us. He could play Silvio and be my new friend."

Scapino stared at Maria. Would he realise that she was a girl?

"Can you act?" he asked.

"Of course," replied Maria, trying hard to look like a man.

He studied Maria's soft face, her short, dark, curly hair, her rough tunic with a knife in the belt. Then he gave a short nod, turned and got on with loading the boat.

Zanni beamed at Maria.

"That means yes! Will you be my new friend?"

The delight in the giant's face made her burst into laughter.

"Yes!" she said.

Zanni's face became serious.

"I'll never forget Silvio," he told her.

"Of course not," replied Maria, helping to load the scenery aboard.

A swooshing sound awoke her in the middle of the night. She stared at the stars, amazed, until she remembered where she was. The actors were fast asleep on deck.

Questions surfaced in her mind. Why was Silvio stabbed? Would a hooded man stab her, now that she was Silvio?

Again she heard the swooshing sound. It was the sound of a ship gliding through water. Maria watched as the dark warship sailed out of the harbour.

“Good luck Georgio,” she whispered. “I'll find you, I promise.”

Deep in the hold of the warship, Georgio awoke. There were bodies all around him. The floor was rolling. Everything was shaking. Having never been in a ship before, he thought he was dead among the dead men, cast into hell.

6. King Of The Islands

Signor Laspari did not discover that his beautiful daughter Maria was missing until late in the evening. The study in which he worked had no windows, so he had no idea how late it was. All day his men had arrived, received their orders and disappeared back down the secret tunnel.

When the last messenger was gone, he heaved a sigh of relief and lowered a lever set high in the wall. A mirror swivelled and the wall seemed to open. He stepped through. As the mirror clicked back into place behind him, he smelt hog. Roast hog.

He called for the maid. Sophia appeared.

"Inform my daughter that we will dine."

"Yes Signor," she said and ran off upstairs.

Kitchen staff began entering the dining hall with exotic dishes. Laspari was drinking his second glass of wine when Sophia returned and fell upon her knees.

"Please don't kill me Signor. Please don't kill me."

"Of course I'm not going to kill you. Now what is it?"

"Your daughter is missing," sobbed Sophia.

The very idea filled Laspari with such rage that he leapt to his feet, drew his sword and would have sliced off Sophia's head, were she not already halfway out of the room, screaming like a mad thing.

A search revealed that Maria's jewellery was also missing. Had she gone to meet Georgio? Or had Georgio returned and kidnapped her? Laspari ordered a carriage to be made ready. Five minutes later he was racing towards the palace.

King Carlo wore a huge crown encrusted with precious stones but his face beneath it was old and wizened.

Above his throne, hundreds of candles flickered, one for each of his islands. In the centre, the largest candle represented Fortuna, the King's own Island. Together they made a flickering map of his Kingdom. At the far end, one candle remained unlit.

King Carlo was having a little doze when Signor Laspari ran in, gave a quick bow and started ranting at him.

"My daughter has disappeared, Your Majesty."

"Ah Laspari," cackled the old King. "I'm glad you came by. I have a little favour to ask."

"My daughter has disappeared!" repeated Laspari, shouting this time. "We must order a search."

"A search - of course," agreed King Carlo, who was rather deaf. "What are we searching for?"

"My daughter!" Laspari insisted, trying not to lose his temper. "We must order a search of the town."

"I see."

"Immediately!"

"Now? Tonight?"

"Yes!"

"But it's very late."

"Then wake everyone up!"

King Carlo stared at Laspari for a moment, not quite certain which of them was King. Then he smiled a cunning little smile.

"If I order the search, will you do me the favour I ask?"

"Possibly," replied Laspari, not promising anything.

Maria was all he could think of. He strode over to the window to get some air. His hands clenched the windowsill, knuckles white in the moonlight. His eyes strained to make out the port and the dark ocean beyond. Where was his Maria?

Soon he saw a line of flaming torches winding down towards the town. The King's men were on their way.

Hearing a noise like a goat clearing its throat, Laspari turned and saw King Carlo beside him, shivering. When a courtier placed a cloak upon him, the King almost collapsed under its weight.

"These are beautiful islands, Laspari."

"Indeed."

"It is my greatest wish to see them reunited. Yet we have been at war for more years than I can remember."

"Tragic, Your Majesty."

"We send peace envoys to the Utmost Isle but they never return."

"So I hear."

"You hear? What do you hear?"

"I hear that the Queen of the Utmost Isle grows rich, whilst you grow poor, Your Majesty. I hear that you are losing the war."

The King's old bones rattled with rage.

"We can win! We can win the war!" he screamed. "All we need are the weapons, the ships and the men..."

"Buy weapons, buy ships, hire men!" snapped Laspari irritably, interested only in the line of torches now entering the town.

More and more lights were lit as the soldiers rampaged through the town searching every house. Was Maria still alive? Laspari clutched the windowsill tighter still, hoping against hope.

"But that's just it," screeched the King. "We can't buy or hire anything. We have run out of money."

"Again?" asked Laspari, smiling to himself.

"The war has gone on so long. It's expensive."

"Are you asking me for money again?"

Laspari saw two torches heading back up towards the palace.

"They must have found her!" he thought. "But if they've found her, wouldn't all the soldiers be returning? Perhaps a couple of soldiers have found her and, wanting a reward, started back without telling the others."

Then another thought hit him.

"Is she alive? Surely, if she were dead, or even hurt, they would be carrying her. They are moving too fast to be carrying her. She's alive!"

Laspari's heart filled with hope.

"Ten million grubbis will win us this war, Signor Laspari."

"But you know I don't lend money, not even to you, Your Majesty."

"But Signor Laspari, the diamond mines of the Utmost Isle will make us rich. If you lend me ten million Grubbis now, you can have twenty million back when the war is won!"

Laspari let King Carlo witter on. He'd heard it all before. He knew that King Carlo wanted to defeat the Queen of the Utmost Isle more than anything in the world.

After a while, he interrupted.

"I might be willing to part with ten million grubbis - in exchange for certain islands and trading routes."

The King exploded, as he always did when they got to this point in the negotiations.

"But..." he stammered. "If I sell you any more islands there'll be none left!"

"The islands won't disappear, Your Majesty."

Laspari drew the King's attention to the map of the Islands, flickering above the throne.

"We see things differently, you and I. You see wars and winning them. I see property and trade."

"And profit," added the King, bitterly.

Laspari smiled.

"Exactly. You do understand. You will still be King and soon you will be King of the Utmost Isle as well."

King Carlo stared at the unlit candle on the end.

Laspari heard sounds. Looking out, he watched two soldiers pass through the palace gates. There was someone with them but he couldn't make out if it was Maria. He waited as they climbed the steps, waited until the figure was thrust forward.

It was certainly not Maria. It was not anyone Laspari had ever seen before. Then he noticed it. The bag. It was Maria's bag.

"Where did you get that bag?"

The ragged man held out the bag.

"I found it sir."

Laspari took the bag.

"Stole it you mean, you filthy beggar."

The beggar said nothing. Laspari consulted the King.

"Isn't there a law that says we can execute thieves?"

"I don't know," said King Carlo, worried.

"If you can describe the person you stole it from, we will spare your life," said Laspari to the beggar.

The beggar shuffled uneasily.

"It was a young lad."

"A young lady, you mean."

"No sir, a young lad. He was wearing a goatskin tunic."

An image of Georgio flashed before Laspari's eyes.

He remembered that the mountain lad had been wearing a goatskin tunic. Georgio must have killed Maria and stolen the bag before this beggar stole it from him. Maria must be dead!

Laspari couldn't speak, couldn't think. He was halfway down the steps when he heard King Carlo's voice.

“What's your decision?”

“Have the beggar executed.”

“I mean money - for the battle” the King's voice screeched back.

Laspari remembered. He'd own twenty-three more islands. It gave him no pleasure, now that his daughter was dead.

“Have the documents drawn up,” he said, wandering out, through the palace, into his carriage and away.

7. Servants Of Jupiter

When Maria awoke, she saw the flame torches swarming through town, but couldn't make out what was going on. It was too far away. The sail above her was bulging with air. They had put to sea. From somewhere in the shadows she heard voices.

"That was a close call."

"It was us they were searching for. They'd have killed us all."

"Are the diamonds safe?"

Maria couldn't believe what she was hearing. Who had been searching for them and why? Would they really have been killed? What were these actors doing with diamonds? She lay still and listened.

"Do we wait for the beacons or hoist the flag first?"

"What'll we tell the lad?"

"What does it matter?"

"But he'll see everything."

"It'll mean nothing to him."

"Unless he's a spy."

"Don't be ridiculous. He's some kid from the mountains. Just tell him we're stopping off to rehearse and while we're there, we're going to meet some people."

"Anyone thirsty?"

Maria was thirsty. But she lay still as a bottle was passed round and watched, as the harbour lights became a pinprick in the ocean.

She must have dozed off. The next thing she heard was the sound of crashing waves. Her cheeks stung with the chill that comes just before dawn. Opening her eyes, she saw two beacons of light hovering high above an island.

A small jetty loomed up. A rope was thrown. As Maria stepped ashore, the sun spun out the first rays of morning. It lit up a long white beach, wrinkled by the sea. The air was cool as they walked like ghosts upon the sand. She longed to dive into the ocean but Scapino had other ideas.

"We are here to meet some people," he said. "But before they arrive, we'll start to rehearse you into the part of Silvio. You will learn lines and moves, walks and heroic poses. But above all, you will learn to use a sword."

Maria caught the sword. She already knew how to use one. Her Father had hired a famous fencing master as her teacher. It was her Mother's wish, so her Father had said. Maria had never been told anything about her Mother. Why did everyone keep secrets from her? It made her so angry...

She almost didn't notice Scapino's sword as it swept through the air. With a flick of her wrist, she twisted the weapon from his hand and watched it fall silently into the sand.

"Brilliant!" shouted Zanni.

Scapino glared at him, then at Maria.

"No kid from the mountains is taught to fence like that. Who are you?"

"Just beginner's luck," said Maria, realising she would have to be more careful.

Scapino remained staring at her until an older man with a bushy moustache clapped him on the back.

"We're all a bit edgy. How about a dip in the ocean to freshen us up?"

Maria was desperate for a swim. But she couldn't. They would find out that she wasn't a boy. Seeing a track that lead along the cliffs, she made up her mind to find somewhere to bathe in private.

"I'm going for a walk," she announced.

The actors watched her leave. Scapino turned to Zanni.

"Follow him," he said. "Don't let Mario out of your sight."

By the time Zanni had climbed the cliff, "Mario" was nowhere to be seen. He sat down to catch his breath and found himself looking down into a turquoise rock pool. Someone was swimming. It was Mario. Or was it? Zanni burst out laughing.

Maria heard him. She swam to the side, leapt out and struggled into her tunic. Zanni was still laughing.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"They thought you were a spy but you're a girl."

"Why shouldn't a girl be a spy? And why would anyone want to spy on a bunch of stupid actors?"

Zanni laughed again.

"Come on," he suggested. "They'll tell you themselves."

"No," insisted Maria. "Tell me now."

Zanni sat down beside the rock pool, dangling his huge feet in the water.

"We serve the Queen of the Utmost Isle," he explained, in his sweet, high voice. "Our first task was to seek peace with the King of the Islands. In that we failed. Silvio

was killed. Our second task is to secure ships and weapons for the final battle. That's why we've come to this island."

He no longer looked like the babyfaced giant she'd first seen on stage. There was something serious about him.

"So now you know," he said and started back up the rocks.

A thought occurred to Maria.

Stop" she cried. "These weapons..."

"What about them?"

"You say they're to fight a battle on the Utmost Isle?"

"That's right. It's our only chance."

"But my friend Georgio is going to the Utmost Isle - as a soldier."

"He'll be one of the King's men. Our enemies."

"So these weapons you're getting... They might be used to kill Georgio!"

"It can't be helped," said Zanni, clambering to the top of the cliff.

Maria's eyes sprang with tears.

"Why can't it be helped?" she asked, trying to keep up with the giant.

"Ssh!" Zanni pointed to where a strange meeting was taking place on the beach below.

A semicircle of figures in dark cloaks stood before the actors. Sounds of their chanting echoed across the cliffs. In the centre, a woman - also in a cloak - was leading the chant.

*"We who serve the Only True Master
The Secret Face who watches over our sad little lives
Whilst His Great Plan whispers in the trees
Murmurs through the cow sheds
Howls in the storm, and like a bird in flight
Anoints us with His droppings
From a great height*

*We are the Servants of Jupiter
Down upon your knees and bow"*

Maria watched as the actors got down on their knees and bowed before the Servants of Jupiter. Then the woman spoke again, joined by the others chanting as one.

"Your enemies will become Jupiter's enemies

*We shall fell the tallest timber for your ships
Forge the toughest metals for your blades
Sew the smartest blue uniforms for your men
To fill them with pride and good sense
That your enemies may become dead
And good riddance*

*We are the Servants of Jupiter
All we ask is one small gift"*

One of the actors - it was Scapino - rose and presented the woman with a small casket.

"That contains the diamonds," whispered Zanni.

Maria stared at the casket, trying to understand how stones as beautiful as diamonds could be exchanged for weapons of war.

The cloaked figures were leaving the beach, snaking up a track into the mountains.

"I'm going to follow them."

"No!" hissed Zanni.

But Maria was off - scrambling over rocks - following the Servants of Jupiter - keeping out of sight. She had it in mind to steal the casket. She didn't know how. But without the diamonds, there'd be no weapons. Without weapons, there'd be no war. Georgio would be safe.

8. A Silver Lake

Zanni was halfway to the beach when he remembered Scapino's words.

"Don't let Mario out of your sight."

He turned but she had disappeared. Nothing but red rocks glowing in the heat and the music of insects. Then he saw her on the hillside opposite, scuttling between some twisted trees, high above the line of cloaked figures.

Maria tripped. Her foot dislodged a stone, which tumbled down the hillside. Jupiter's Servants stopped. From where she lay sprawled, Maria could see them staring in her direction. Their cloaks made them look like birds of prey but their eyes were dull.

A gust of wind blew back the woman's hood. She had a great mane of jet-black hair, braided with jewels.

"Why would such a beautiful woman make weapons of war?" thought Maria, keeping as still as she could.

Zanni was only twenty paces away from Maria when the stone fell. He waited until the line of figures continued their march up the mountain. Then he called to her. Maria heard the giant's sweet, high voice and saw him creeping towards her.

"I forgot," he said. "I'm not supposed to let you out of my sight."

"Really? Well if you're coming with me, you might as well help."

"What are you going to do?"

"Steal the diamonds to stop the war and save my friend."

"That's impossible."

"If there was a chance that you could have saved your friend Silvio, would you have tried?"

"Of course," Zanni replied.

"Then I should try to save my friend Georgio, shouldn't I?"

"I suppose so."

"And we're friends, aren't we Zanni?"

"Yes," he said, "but..."

"So you should help me."

"But how?"

"I don't know. Let's follow them and see."

Zanni and Maria followed the line of figures all afternoon as they wound their way up the mountainside. Sometimes they caught sight of the sparkling ocean. Higher still, they could see other islands. As daylight faded, it became harder to climb.

"Who are these people?" Maria asked. "Where are they heading?"

"I don't know," said Zanni. "I think that the woman leading them is called Juno. She's their High Priestess and they're all Servants of Jupiter. Jupiter is supposed to be real. But no one's ever seen him."

"Zanni," whispered Maria, "promise you'll never tell anyone I'm a girl."

"Why?"

"It's just a feeling. But promise anyway."

"I promise. What's your real name - as a girl?"

"Call me Mario. That way you'll never make a mistake."

A moment later the last rays of sunlight flickered out and they were left, stumbling about in darkness.

"Look!" Zanni whispered.

It was a pool of flickering light. They crept closer and saw a vast, lit tunnel cut into the mountain. Jupiter's Servants were marching in. Guards stood at the entrance, their palms raised in salute.

"We can't get past those guards," said Zanni.

"Don't be so quick to give up" snapped Maria. "Let me think."

Fighting her own tiredness and staring at the stars for inspiration, she noticed a pink glow in the sky directly above the mountain.

She didn't even wait to tell Zanni her idea. She was off the track, inching her way up the mountainside towards the summit.

"Have you gone crazy?" asked Zanni, trying to keep up and grazing his knees.

Maria pointed at the peak. Zanni saw the pink glow.

"Perhaps the tunnel leads out somewhere at the top."

Blindly they struggled up, over loose stones and spiky cacti. A light rain began to fall, making everything slippery. Twice the giant had to save Maria from falling.

"Stop" he gasped. "We'll kill ourselves."

"No. It's there. Look!"

Just above them, a bloom of pink light seemed to shoot out of the mountain itself. Hauling themselves up, they looked over the edge. What they saw made them gasp.

This was no ordinary mountain. It was a volcano. Deep within its crater, lit by a thousand flaming torches, armies of cloaked figures swarmed, fuelling furnaces and fires in which molten rock was being forged into swords, daggers, anchors and cannons.

There were vast, dry docks in which a fleet of warships was being built. Great timber yards where trees were stripped and sawn for battering rams, keels, hulls, decks, masts. Fields of canvas being stitched, ropes twined and coiled...

Glinting in the centre of all this frenzied activity, they saw a silver lake. It seemed to stretch through a rift in the crater out into the ocean beyond. Completed warships lay at anchor.

The sides of the crater were a maze of rope ladders, leading to chambers and tunnels. But on one side a huge, glowering face had been hewn out of the rock.

Suddenly one of its hollow eyes lit up. The high priestess, Juno, appeared in the light.

“Servants of Jupiter!”

Her voice echoed around the walls of the volcano.

*“We stand within Jupiter's right eye
And place here a gift from the Queen
When we receive a gift from the King
Jupiter will rise in human form
He will come among us all
Amazing!”*

*You are the Servants of Jupiter
Down upon your knees and rejoice”*

A great roar went up as Servants everywhere raised their palms in salute. Juno placed the casket upon a smooth stone within Jupiter's right eye.

A gong was struck. Maria watched as Servants began climbing rope ladders, extinguishing torches, disappearing into tunnels. She stared at the casket of diamonds within Jupiter's eye. She scanned the rocks above, trying to work out a way to get to it.

By the time she had settled on a plan, only a few torches remained flickering in the depths of the crater. Most of the Servants were gone. The remaining few were huddled in corners, wrapped in their cloaks, asleep.

Maria heard a snuffling sound beside her. Zanni was also asleep. His big baby-face looked so peaceful in the moonlight.

“Wake up!” she hissed.

At first Maria led, edging her way around the top of the crater. A Servant, waking, would have seen Zanni lower her down to a ledge, where a rope ladder hung beside Jupiter's stony brow. They were skilful acrobats. She was nimble. He was strong. Together, they slithered, clung, balanced, twisted their way down into Jupiter's eye.

Maria and Zanni stared at the casket on the smooth stone. They were almost afraid to touch it. Would alarm bells ring, guards rush in? Nervously, Maria took the casket and wedged it securely into her tunic. No bells rang. No one rushed in. On the other hand, how were they going to get out?

It was Zanni who moved first. He managed to straddle from the edge of the eye to the ladder and told Maria to climb over him. Halfway across she lost her grip, clung to his neck and almost dragged him off with her. Slowly, his muscles shaking, he pulled himself back until Maria's foot made contact with the ladder.

Only when she was safely on the ledge, did Zanni haul himself across. Then he lifted her up. Balancing on his head, she got her arms over the edge of the crater.

Maria was about to turn around and help Zanni, when she saw the material. Dark material. Cloaks and, above the cloaks, dull eyes peering from beneath hoods. Servants of Jupiter surrounded her. Zanni's head popped up. He saw them too and almost fell backwards over the edge in shock.

Someone stepped into the circle of Servants. It was Scapino.

“We seem to have sent a traitor to catch a spy,” he said, staring hard at Zanni.

“But you told me not to let Mario out of my sight.”

“I didn't tell you to steal the casket. Come!”

Maria and Zanni were taken down a goat path to where a pile of boulders concealed the entrance to a tunnel. Once inside the volcano, they were led through a honeycomb of chambers and passageways to a vast cavern.

Juno herself stared down upon them. Everyone bowed. Even Zanni got down on his knees. But not Maria.

“I have a friend called Georgio,” she said, standing her ground. “I stole the casket to stop the war and save his life. I have failed. Georgio may die. But I don't understand how someone as beautiful as you could want to make things that kill people.”

Juno smiled an icy smile.

“Silence him” she purred.

Maria saw the Servant beside her raise his arm, felt herself falling from the blow, then darkness flooded in.

9. The Silent Boy

The human cargo was three men deep. Seawater swooshed about the bodies, as the warship rolled from side to side. Arms were broken. Heads cracked against heads. There was nothing to eat or drink. Some drank the water and started raving. Others died and the smell filled the air.

Georgio used a dead body as a raft. Wedging it between a column and the side, he was able to sleep. Time was endless. He had conversations with people whom he never saw again. A lad from his own island of Fortuna. A hairy man from Silenus. They'd all been knocked on the head. None of the lads knew where they were.

They didn't know that on the deck above them, officers ate hearty meals, drank wine and wandered about, surveying a sea full of exotic islands. Of course the officers had their own problems. They were supposed to be at war. But where were the warships and weapons to win it?

Officer Barbori did not eat hearty meals, nor touch a drop of wine. He was in a rage. This was no way to wage war. They should be charging, thrusting, maiming, decapitating and winning. Barbori was a fighting man. He didn't care which side he was on. He would just as soon go down and murder all the men in the hold.

Most of the officers kept their distance from Barbori. The only exception was Mira, a shy man from a wealthy family. He would try to comfort Barbori.

"The new weapons will arrive soon," he'd say. "There will be time to train the troops for battle."

Barbori would grunt and walk away. Sometimes Mira was more thoughtful.

"Why do you always want to be fighting?" he once asked.

Barbori's eyes became so wild, that Mira thought Barbori would hit him.

When the ship docked, the hold was opened. Officers watched as the men fell, pushed and stampeded out.

Once ashore they went hurtling about like madmen. Some splashed in the ocean. Some ran looking for food. Others crawled out and died in the sun.

A few of the officers smiled. Mira looked away, as the old ship carried them out into the bay, safe from the lunatics.

There was nothing you'd call food on the island. Georgio tried chewing on leaves. Walking inland, he found another beach. The island was tiny.

Taking another route, he heard cries and came upon men crowded around a tiny waterfall. They were fighting each other to get a drink. As thirsty as Georgio was, he would wait.

A small skinny boy with big eyes beckoned him. Georgio clambered up the smooth rock above the waterfall. The boy showed him a pool of sweet, clear water.

Georgio drank until he was full. Then he sat back, breathless.

"Thanks," said Georgio.

The boy smiled but said nothing.

"What's your name?" asked Georgio.

The boy opened his mouth but no sound came out.

"Can't you speak?" asked Georgio, puzzled.

The boy shook his head.

"But you can understand."

The boy nodded, smiling again.

"How will I know your name?"

The boy put his lips together and pushed air through. Georgio did the same and out popped a "p" sound. The boy nodded. Then he made a yawning shape. When Georgio copied him, an "ah" sound came out. In this way the boy told Georgio his name. It was Pablo.

Pablo pointed to the top of Georgio's head. What did he mean? It was Georgio's hair. Pablo had never seen anyone with red hair before. Georgio had never met anyone who couldn't speak.

Pablo led him to a wild olive tree that no one else had found. They ate hundreds of dark, juicy olives and talked. That is, Georgio asked questions to which Pablo nodded, shook his head, grinned or frowned.

He was an orphan just like Georgio. Pablo's father had gone away to war and never returned. His mother, unable to look after all the children, had let Pablo go. He learned later that his mother had died. He didn't know what had become of his brothers and sisters.

Pablo only survived due to the kindness of one of the King's officers, who took him in as a servant. The officer was good to him at first. But when his wife died, he changed. One day the officer stabbed Pablo in the neck for no reason.

"Is that why you can't speak?"

Pablo nodded.

When they had eaten all they could manage, they fell asleep beneath the stars, happy in each other's company

That was as good as it was going to get. Within days, all the fruit on the island had been eaten. Soon there were no more frogs or lizards. Birds that hadn't been stoned, had flown away.

The waterfall turned yellow and tasted sour. Hungry men fought over flies and cicadas. When one man found a beehive, he was killed - not by the bees but by other men, mad for the honey

Each day, more men were dumped on the island, until there were thousands. They swarmed like ants over an anthill. Officers on deck discussed the problem.

"At least let me train them" screamed Barbori.

The other officers tried to quieten him down.

"We have no weapons" Mira reasoned. "Anyway they're starving. You can't train starving men."

"Who says I can't?" demanded Barbori, his hand on his sword.

No one dared reply.

Pablo and Georgio watched, along with the others, as two officers rowed ashore.

"This is insane!" warned Officer Mira, frightened.

"Just have your sword ready" replied Barbori, his teeth tingling with excitement.

Suddenly Pablo gave a start and disappeared up a tree. Georgio climbed up after him.

"What is it?" he asked.

Pablo pointed at Barbori.

"What is it? Do you know him?"

Pablo nodded furiously, pointing at his own neck.

"Is that the man who stabbed your throat?"

Pablo gave a single nod and hid among the leaves.

Georgio watched as Barbori, his sword flashing, forced the starving men to line up in columns. He made them march up and down, run around the island. He ordered them to set upon each other in mock battle.

If a man fell, he was forced back on his feet, unless he was dead. Several times men advanced angrily upon Barbori. But each time, Barbori would brandish his sword and they would do as they were told.

Georgio didn't know how it happened. He must have slipped. One minute he was hidden in the tree. The next minute he was flat on his back in the dust. Barbori was standing over him.

"I suppose you thought that you didn't need to train, did you boy? I suppose you thought you'd just watch. Did you?"

"No sir," Georgio stammered.

Leaves rustled overhead. Barbori looked up and saw Pablo, staring down through the branches.

"You!" screeched Barbori, recognising his former servant and noticing, with pleasure, the scar across Pablo's throat.

"Get down here!"

Pablo clambered down and stood, shaking before him.

"Gather round men!" ordered Barbori, his eyes gleaming. "You are about to learn the first rule of war. Kill! Or be killed! Now..."

He turned to the quivering Pablo.

"...Come at me boy. Attack me."

Pablo didn't know what to do. If he obeyed and attacked, Barbori's blade would cut him down. If he didn't obey, Barbori would attack him. The men gathered round as Pablo and Barbori circled each other.

"Stop this!" cried Officer Mira, pushing his way through.

Pablo used this momentary diversion to throw himself at Barbori's ankles. Barbori toppled. The men roared with laughter to see the officer on the ground.

But Barbori was on his feet. He lunged at Pablo, who ducked and dived, to escape the whistling blade. The more wildly Barbori swung at him, the more agile Pablo seemed to become. The men's ribs ached from laughing at the silent boy making a fool of his superior.

"Stop this!" cried Officer Mira, to no effect.

"Grab him!" screamed Barbori at two of the men. "Grab him you grinning oafs or, by my sword, you'll both be grinning from ear to ear."

Barbori forced the men to catch Pablo and drag him over.

"Hold him still."

Everyone held their breath. No one believed that Barbori would dare to kill Pablo and yet everyone feared that he would.

At that moment, Georgio seemed to fly through the air. It all happened so fast. Georgio's hands gripped Barbori's throat. Barbori twisted. His sword plunged into Georgio. Georgio fell, blood gushing from his shoulder.

Eyes turned to Barbori. They were no longer frightened of him or his sword. They'd kill him for sure.

"Come on," said Mira quietly, guiding Barbori away from the men.

Swords at the ready, the two officers backed down the beach and onto the rowboat. The men watched them leave. There'd be no more training sessions.

Once out of reach, Barbori yelled.

"You'll all be dead in battle soon. Think about it."

Pablo carried Georgio to the water's edge and washed his wounded shoulder with salt water. Others helped carry him back into the shade. Leaves were gathered to keep him warm as he slept.

Somehow what had happened brought the men together. In caring for Georgio, they began to care for each other. Graves were dug for the dead. Shelters were found for the sick. Pablo, who knew how to fish, taught others. Although there was never enough food and people still died, they made the best of it.

Georgio slept through all of this. But he was dreaming. Maria was holding a candle out, leading him through the darkness to safety.

10. Warships And Weapons

On Jupiter's Isle

Having been captured by the high priestess Juno, Maria and Zanni were locked in a cage. It was suspended above the crater. The slightest breeze made the cage sway. There was no escape.

Below them, Scapino was leading his new fleet out of the lake in the crater, onto the rolling ocean and away to the Utmost Isle.

“At last my island will be able to defend itself,” sighed Zanni.

Maria could only think of the harm those weapons would do to Georgio. She prayed to the mother she had never known.

“Look after him. Protect him from harm.”

She imagined that the cage was a cradle and she was a child again. If only her father knew where she was. He would save her.

On The Isle Of Fortuna

Signor Laspari believed that his daughter was dead. To keep himself busy, he was concentrating on business.

“Just sign here, Your Majesty.”

The moment the contract was signed, Laspari whisked it away. Bowing, he left the King's chamber.

Old King Carlo couldn't bear to have sold his last islands to Laspari. How did Laspari come to have so much gold in the first place? King Carlo suspected that - in some way he couldn't work out - Laspari was tricking him. Still, the casket of gold was real. Enough gold for one last battle.

He lifted a little bell and tinkled it. A courtier appeared.

“I'll see the Servants of Jupiter now.”

Moments later, the doors of the throne room burst open and three cloaked figures bowed before him.

“I understand that you will provide us with weapons and warships in exchange for this casket of gold,” said the King.

The Servants of Jupiter remained bowing.

"I want to be sure that we will have the number of ships we are paying for. How many ships will we have? How many cannons?"

The Servants made no reply.

"You can stop bowing now."

The Servants rose.

"Well? Can you tell me?" asked the King anxiously.

The Servants walked over to the casket of gold, lifted it and marched out.

"I suppose it'll be alright," thought King Carlo. "Anyway, no point worrying. It'll be alright, I'm sure. With our new fleet, we will win the final battle. The Islands will be united once more."

The old King chuckled to himself.

"The Utmost Isle won't have a new fleet. It will have leaky boats and rusty weapons."

But King Carlo was wrong.

On The Utmost Isle

They did have a new fleet. It was anchored in the great harbour. Under a starry sky, Scapino made his way up through the valley behind the harbour, to report to his Queen.

Queen Olivia was an old woman. Time had turned her flame-coloured hair as white as snow. She had once been very beautiful, more beautiful even than her sister Dora. Now both sisters were old.

Peering down from the fortress wall, their soft white hair blowing in the night breeze, they watched the young man make his way up the valley towards them.

"At least he's safe," said Dora, comforting her sister.

Ever since they'd seen the new fleet sail in, Queen Olivia had known that attempts at peace had failed. There was to be one final battle. Olivia hoped she would live to see it.

As the young man got nearer, she saw that it was Scapino. Scapino was Dora's son. Olivia told her spirit to remain calm. When Scapino reached them, he bowed.

"What news?" asked Olivia.

Scapino dreaded having to tell Queen Olivia his news. He looked at his mother Dora for support. She smiled but said nothing. Scapino took a deep breath and began.

"We successfully exchanged the casket of diamonds for warships and weaponry."

"How many ships? How many weapons?"

"Let me see..."

Pulling a scroll from his pocket, Scapino read from the list.

"We have five hundred cannons, two thousand spears..."

Queen Olivia interrupted.

"So the peace mission failed."

"I'm afraid so."

There was a long silence. A question hung in the air. Olivia forced herself to ask it.

"And Silvio?"

Scapino gritted his teeth.

"I am sorry to have to tell you that your son..."

But Olivia's eyes had already clouded over. She knew. She knew that her son was dead. With his fiery hair and his deep blue eyes, he'd been the light of her life.

"Silvio," she whispered and hid her face in her sister's arms.

"We were on the peace mission to King Carlo of Fortuna. We were disguised as actors. A tiny hooded man jumped on stage and stabbed..."

Dora silenced her son with a quick, painful look. Then she drew Queen Olivia inside to rest.

Alone, Scapino stared out beyond the valley to the fleet in the harbour. He thought about Silvio. It gave him no pleasure to be taking over from his cousin.

Later his mother came out.

"Who was Silvio's father?" asked Scapino.

Dora shook her head.

"This is not the time to ask."

She changed the subject.

"You'll have to take over as Commander. What are our chances?"

Scapino looked at his mother.

"It takes more than weapons to win a war. I need a purpose. If I'm to lead us in battle, you must tell me the truth."

Dora gave a deep sigh.

"I'll tell you. But not here. Follow me."

11. Another Secret

On The Utmost Isle

Scapino followed his mother, Dora, across the courtyard of the fortress, where Olivia's doctor had a few words with Dora. Then on to his mother's chambers, where two ancient ladies were playing chess. They stopped as Dora and Scapino entered.

"We've heard the news," said one.

"We're so sorry," said the other.

Dora sat down in the corner. The ladies continued their game.

"They won't hear us. Now - what is it you want to know?"

Scapino paced the floor.

"When I was born, the war had already begun. I only just remember my own father. I always thought that Silvio's father had died in battle like mine. But there have been rumours."

"What are these rumours?" asked Dora, giving nothing away.

Scapino stared hard at his mother.

"Look, what I want to know is - is this war about justice or is it a family affair?"

"Justice!" roared Dora.

"Hurrah!" cried one of the ancient ladies, taking a pawn.

"Justice," repeated Dora, in a hushed tone. "King Carlo was taxing the Utmost Isle to pay for his banquets, his adventures, his girlfriends. He was young then. When our crops failed and the people of the Utmost Isle were starving, he sent no food. Nothing. We had no choice. We were fighting for our lives."

"Did the King know that people here were starving?"

"I have no idea. He wouldn't speak to us."

"Why?"

"Because..." Dora stopped. There was no way out. "Because he was so angry with Olivia for leaving him."

Scapino sat down.

"Olivia was his Queen?"

Dora said nothing.

It was true then. He'd never believed it.

"And Silvio?"

"Silvio was King Carlo's son."

Scapino tried to take it in.

"Did Silvio know?"

"He did."

"So the peace mission was to his own father? He was about to meet his father when he was killed?"

In his mind, Scapino caught a glimpse of the hooded man who had leapt on stage and stabbed Silvio. Had the King known? Had he ordered it?

Scapino rose. He smiled at his mother. She looked tired.

"It was a family affair then," he murmured.

When he had gone, one of the ladies turned to Dora.

"Perhaps we should have told him earlier."

Don't worry Dora," cooed the other. "He's a strong lad. He won't let us down."

The doctor had given Queen Olivia a sleeping potion. But even in her sleep she sobbed. Standing alone on the battlements, Scapino could hear her.

If he was to lead his men into battle, he had to believe that his uncle, King Carlo, was a monster. He had starved the Utmost Isle to pay for wild parties. He had even ordered his own son to be killed. Had he? Was the hooded man in the pay of the King?

Scapino would find out. He would win the battle. After years of war, the King would have no money to pay for new weapons and warships.

But Scapino was wrong.

On Jupiter's Isle

King Carlo did have a new fleet. It was being built by the same people who had built Scapino's fleet. The Servants of Jupiter.

The Servants worked day and night. Watching from the cage, Maria noticed how tired and angry they were, at having to work so hard. Whenever they complained or fell asleep, Priests would come round with whips and make them work harder.

"Look up there," said Zanni, pointing.

A young dark-skinned woman stood at an opening in the crater just above them. Smiling down, she drew something from her cloak and dropped it. Grapes. They landed in the cage beside Zanni.

A gong sounded. Both eyes in the glowering rock-face of Jupiter lit up. Juno placed the King's casket of gold upon a smooth stone within Jupiter's left eye.

"Servants of Jupiter!"

Her voice echoed through the crater.

*"Now King and Queen have each presented Gifts
Their Armies can do Battle to the Death
With Weapons made by you - you must feel proud!
For Jupiter will Rise and Crowds will Cheer
Peace will Reign and Folk will live in Fear!"*

Maria looked at Zanni. He was eating.

"Do you realise what all these new ships and weapons are for?"

The giant's mouth was full of grapes.

"No," he spluttered.

"They're to be used against Scapino's fleet."

Zanni stopped eating.

Maria went on.

"I don't understand what she means about Jupiter rising but I'm sure that she's evil."

"Who?" he asked, wiping his sticky mouth.

"Juno," she hissed.

"Juno provides warships for both sides. Her weapons will send thousands to their deaths. And for what? Gold? Diamonds?"

Beneath them King Carlo's new fleet sailed out onto the rolling ocean.

On The Island Of Soldiers

Georgio's shoulder was still painful when the King's fleet came sailing in. Pablo stayed close to his friend as the men were gathered up, issued with swords, knives, jackets, boots and carried off to battle.

12. Eye Of The Storm

Georgio and Pablo stood on deck. Two among two hundred men, all in their new blue uniforms.

"There seems to have been some rather serious misconduct, I'm afraid," said Officer Mira. "I want to make it clear that these weapons are for killing the enemy - not each other."

"Animals!" screamed Officer Barbori, pacing madly.

"I don't want to see any of you stepping out of line again," Mira continued.

Barbori saw his former servant, Pablo, and his eyes shone with rage.

"You wouldn't step out of line, would you? Just once?"

Pablo opened his mouth but no sound came out.

"Answer me!" hissed Barbori, drawing a dagger from his belt.

"Sir, he can't speak sir," said Georgio.

Barbori pressed the tip of his dagger into Pablo's chest.

"Answer me or I'll cut out your lungs."

Mira intervened.

"Can you speak boy?"

Pablo shook his head.

Mira stared hard at his fellow officer.

"Then he can't answer you, can he."

Barbori strained like a dog on a leash. All he had to do was to press a little harder and his blade would pass through skin and twist deep into Pablo. Shaking, Barbori replaced the dagger in his belt.

"See you in battle," he whispered.

Mira continued his address to the men.

"Now it's time to say a few wise words about war. We shall soon be arriving at the Utmost Isle and I know that most of you haven't been taught how to use your weapons. Lack of time, I'm afraid. Never mind. All you need to know is this: A hero wins, even if he dies. A coward loses, even if he survives."

Mira paused, to soak in the admiration of his men.

"A hero kills for King and Country" he declared, feeling strangely emotional. "I mean, where would we be without our country?"

"In the sea," thought Georgio.

He wished he were floating in the water under the warm afternoon sun. They were passing an island. Giorgio saw a shack with a little garden, a goat and a donkey. There were clusters of pink and red blossoms around the door. An old couple, arm in arm, smiled at them, waving.

For the first time, Giorgio thought that perhaps he didn't need to become the richest man in the world. Just to have a little house, an acre of land and Maria by his side. Tears welled up in his eyes as he pictured it. On the other hand, to have a vast fortune and a million servants was probably better. But anything rather than die in a war.

"...And that's why we'll win!" concluded Officer Mira, smiling.

"Company dismissed."

Barbori couldn't believe it.

"Dismissed?" he screamed at Mira. "It was my turn. My turn to speak. You didn't let me have my turn!"

Mira pointed to a dark line on the horizon.

"If that's what I think it is, we have to move fast."

Barbori stared. He had to admit it could be a storm.

"You think you're so clever, Mira," he said.

"Not clever" said Mira, pretending he wasn't. "Not clever but I think the men respect me. Don't they?"

A soft roll of thunder echoed across the warm sea.

Below deck the soldiers were getting drunk. A kind of terror possessed them. Giorgio was thinking.

"You know that nonsense about being a hero?" he said.

Pablo nodded.

"I think that someone who dies just because they're told to, is a fool, a coward. A hero would escape."

Pablo couldn't agree more. Why die if you could live?

"Then I think we should be heroes together. We should be heroes and run away the very first moment we can."

Someone passed Giorgio a bottle of wine.

"Let's drink and be heroes!" he cried.

Pablo shook his head, took the bottle from his friend and passed it on. They'd need clear minds if they were to escape. Better to sleep.

But Georgio couldn't sleep. He watched as the men got drunk. They fell about, telling jokes that made no sense and bumping into the walls. One man picked up his sword by the tip of its blade and waggled it about, laughing. When he realised that he'd cut his hand to shreds, he burst into tears and passed out.

The Utmost Isle was bathed in fine sunlight. The air was still. Time seemed to have stopped. Dora helped her frail sister to step outside, onto the battlements of their fortress.

Queen Olivia was lost in grief for her son. In her mind, Silvio was still alive. She saw pictures of him as a boy growing up. She remembered the day he was born.

"King Carlo and Queen Olivia are proud to announce the birth of their son and heir to the throne."

She remembered the cheering crowds, the warm baby in her arms.

Dora was worried about her sister.

"Olivia, don't despair. There's a battle to be won. You are still our leader. Listen, I must tell you Scapino's plan."

Somewhere, in her grief, Olivia remembered her duty. She forced herself to listen.

"What do you see floating in the harbour?" asked Dora.

"Is it the new fleet?"

"No," replied Dora, pleased. "But it looks like the new fleet, doesn't it? Actually it's what remains of the old fleet. Our new fleet is hidden over there."

Dora pointed beyond the long sands, where shards of needle-like rocks shot up from the sea.

"When the King's fleet discover our old fleet at anchor, they will enter the harbour and attack. Then our new fleet will sail out from behind the Needles to cut off their escape. Our army will swarm down the valley and we will have won. That is the plan."

Dora looked across and saw her son on the high ridge between the valley and the sea. He was preparing for battle. She was proud of him. Olivia forced herself to look at her sister's child.

"He's a good lad," she said.

Scapino went through his plan of attack. He would lure the King's fleet in, then cut off their escape. His archers were ready on the cliff tops. His foot soldiers were hidden in the caves. What more could he do?

He tried to imagine life after the battle. What would it bring? His mind went blank. As if there were no future at all.

"Then it's now," he thought.

He noticed a dark line dividing the sea from the sky.

"Is it a storm? Or is it the enemy fleet?"

Scapino waited, as twilight came on.

As twilight came on, the King's officers were assembled on the quarterdeck of their flagship, awaiting orders.

"We are nearing the Utmost Isle."

"A storm is brewing."

"We need a plan of attack."

"The plan. Yes, the plan," said Rudolpho.

Rudolpho was Commander-In-Chief and nearly as old as King Carlo himself.

"The plan is to remain calm and not do anything rash. Where has everyone gone?"

"We're here sir."

"Then why can't I see you?"

No one dared say, "Because you're as blind as a bat".

"It is getting dark," suggested Mira.

Just as dark clouds were about to wipe out the last rays of sunlight, they saw land ahead of them.

"The Utmost Isle!" they gasped.

"What are your orders sir?"

"We're nearing the harbour sir."

"What shall we do sir?"

Suddenly a great ragged claw of lightening lit up the bay. They saw a fleet in the harbour.

"Is anyone there?" called out Rudolpho.

"There's a fleet in the harbour, sir."

"A fleet in the what?"

"We have surprise on our side. Let's attack and be done with it!" screamed Barbori.

"I've come to my decision," croaked Commander Rudolpho. "We shall moor beside the long sands, safe from the storm and get a decent night's sleep."

The very thought made him feel snoozy.

The King's officers were aghast.

“I say attack!” hissed Barbori. “By the time our Commander awakes, the war will be won.”

The officers looked hard at each other, then nodded and returned to their boats.

“Is anyone there?” repeated Rudolpho.

This time nobody was.

“A fleet in the harbour...” he pondered. “It's an obvious trick. We'll have to attack from the rear.”

13. The Last Battle

Apart from Rudolpho's flagship, all the King's fleet sailed into the harbour. There was the enemy fleet, waiting silently. The King's archers lit their arrows, aimed and fired.

High upon the ridge, Scapino watched the blazing arrows fly through the air and saw the remains of his old fleet burn. What did it matter? He had the King's fleet within his harbour.

Now to cut off their escape. He sent a messenger along the cliffs to instruct his new ships to sail out from the Needles.

But here the weather took a hand. Amid thunder and lightening, a wind whipped across the sea. It toppled many of Scapino's archers from the cliffs and tossed all his new ships against the Needles, where they were wrecked.

Whistling through the harbour, the wind sent the King's fleet crashing into the burning ships. Thousands of soldiers jumped overboard as flames leapt, masts fell and the blazing ships whirled about the bay.

Georgio couldn't swim. He clung on to Pablo for dear life. The wind twisted and turned. It sent burning timber up like shooting stars into the night and down, hissing into the water all around them.

Georgio and Pablo saw the huge wave. It lifted them up, clashed with another wave, turned and swept them towards the face of a high cliff. Mid-air, it left them to fall on the rocks below.

Pablo and Georgio looked at each other. Another wave crashed down on them. Hanging onto rocks for dear life, they worked their way towards the steps where the harbour wall began. They came upon hundreds of other bedraggled soldiers.

"At the end of the valley there's a fortress," Barbori was saying. "When I give the word, we'll charge up the valley and take control. Halfway up, there are caves which archers may use from which to fire arrows. But if I find any lazy cowards hiding there, I will kill them. Are you ready?"

Pablo and Georgio thought it best to steer clear of Barbori. They hid amongst the men, as their officers led them around the blazing harbour and through the deserted town. More and more of the King's men joined them.

By the time they started up the valley it was dawn. But nobody noticed. Heavy black clouds hung overhead.

High on the ridge, Scapino saw the King's men climbing up through the valley. He signalled his remaining archers to fire flaming arrows. From deep in their caves, the Queen's army charged down the valley.

The two armies met, clashed and as they clashed, storm clouds ripped open. Rain tipped down, driving a river through the valley. The river sent men, their swords, spears, daggers and cudgels, slipping and colliding into each other.

Officer Mira was a bit surprised to notice that both armies were wearing the same blue uniforms. He couldn't tell which side was which. It was chaos. People were just fighting each other. There was no sense to it. He found a cave and went in.

Out of the rain and all alone, he remembered that he had a peach in his pocket. Luckily it hadn't been squashed. He bit in. It was juicy. He'd always liked peaches.

He heard a sound and saw his friend, Barbori staring at him.

"What are you doing?" asked Officer Barbori.

"Eating a peach old chum. Do you want a bite?"

"You lazy coward!" shrieked Officer Barbori.

Barbori drew his sword and cut off Mira's head. Then he took the peach and went off to kill more cowards.

One moment Georgio was with Pablo. The next moment Pablo was gone. Georgio looked at the cliff.

"The only way to escape is up," he thought. "I should wait for Pablo. But where is he?"

The air was as thick as mud. Around him a battle was being waged like a slow dream in the blinding rain.

Officer Barbori turned just in time to see the smiling face of Pablo and the slight tension in Pablo's brow as his sword thrust up, straight through Barbori's heart.

Georgio heard the swish of a blade. He'd no idea whose blade it was. He whirled his sword around in the darkness, heard a cry, a splash below.

Somebody else fell against him. Again Georgio's sword struck bone. Were these his enemies or the King's men? It made no difference.

When Pablo's face reappeared through the driving rain, they scrambled up the cliff, killing anyone who stood in their way.

Just one ship had survived the storm. Anchoring off the long sands, Rudolpho had himself carried ashore. His men carried him up endless goat paths. At the top of the ridge they saw Scapino and his archers.

"Stand me up men!" ordered the ancient Rudolpho. "One last glorious battle for me. Put my sword in my hand. Point me in the right direction. Now, quiet as we can. We'll attack from the rear."

Dora looked out from the fortress battlements. She could see nothing. Beside her, Olivia felt only the rain pouring down. Tears for Silvio.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the storm vanished. Clouds rolled away and the sun beamed down. The sisters stared in silent horror at the debris floating in the harbour and beyond in the glittering sea. They saw the thousands of uniformed bodies strewn in the valley, like strange blue bushes in the deep red earth.

"Why are all the men wearing the same blue uniforms?" asked Olivia.

But Dora didn't hear her. She saw her son Scapino, out on the ridge. She watched his attackers appear from behind.

Rudolpho's men gave the archers no time to draw their bows. They stabbed them in the back. But they left Scapino for their Commander.

Blind in the sunlight, Rudolpho stood wagging his sword.

"Is anyone there?" he called.

Scapino turned, lashed out and knocked the brave old warrior down. He was about to finish him off, when Georgio leapt into view. Finding someone in his path, Georgio thrust his blade straight through Scapino's stomach.

Dora watched her son fall. The image of his death burned into her eyes. Her heart stopped beating. When Olivia opened her mouth, a scream flew out. It echoed across the cliff tops like seagulls screeching.

Then stone cold silence reigned in the still, warm air.

14. Utopia

All night winds tossed and twirled the cage. Zanni and Maria clung to the sides, as the storm whipped them and rain lashed in.

Just as suddenly as it had appeared, the storm vanished. Zanni watched the sky turn from black to deepest blue. The cage was barely swaying now.

He stared at Maria tenderly. Her dark curls had grown. She no longer looked like a boy. He was glad she was getting some sleep.

Somebody whispered. Zanni looked up and saw the young woman who'd thrown them the grapes. He could just make out her jet-black skin and her wonderful smile.

Again she drew something from her cloak and dropped it. More grapes. Thank goodness. No one else had fed them. They'd have died if not for her.

"What is your name?" whispered Zanni.

"Utopia," she whispered and disappeared.

"Utopia. That's a strange name," he thought, popping a grape in his mouth.

Sounds of marching footsteps rumbled through the volcano. Columns of Servants marched out from the tunnels. Each column was led by a Priest or Priestess. They gathered in the crater in front of Jupiter's great stone face.

The great gong rang out. It was like the roar of a wild animal.

Maria awoke.

"Where am I?" she thought.

She had been dreaming of Georgio. When she opened her eyes she saw the High Priestess.

Juno's voice echoed around the sides of the volcano.

"Servants of Jupiter

The armies of King Carlo and Queen Olivia

Have met in battle."

Maria's heart beat fast. Georgio had been in the battle.

"Both armies were destroyed

There were no survivors."

Maria screamed. She couldn't help it. No survivors. Georgio was dead. Zanni was unable to comfort her.

Zanni also had loved ones who must have died in the battle. A family of giants - his father, brothers, cousins, nephews - all gone. Why was it that he, the fool of the family, the clown, was still alive? Silent tears trickled down his big, baby cheeks.

Hearing Maria's scream, the High Priestess looked up. Her face twisted into a thin smile of satisfaction.

"Success is ours!" she cried.

She waited for her Servants to roar their approval. But they were quiet. Not a murmur was heard. Perhaps they were too tired after all their work. Perhaps they were thinking of loved ones they'd lost.

"Today I will set sail on a mission to bring everlasting peace to our islands!" Juno proclaimed.

Still nobody cheered.

"While I am gone, you will build a new fleet."

"No!" shouted a Servant.

"We're tired!" yelled another.

"No more weapons and ships!" insisted a third.

Juno's face flushed with hot rage for a moment, as if she couldn't believe what she heard. Then she continued.

"This new fleet will be Jupiter's fleet, manned by yourselves, an army of peace."

But again voices rang out.

"I'll not join an army and die in a battle!" cried one man.

That instant an arrow whistled through the air and lodged deep within the man's chest.

The Servants gasped as he fell to the ground.

"The same fate awaits anyone else who opposes me."

They watched Juno step aboard her ship. They watched as her ship sailed out of the crater.

The moment her ship was out of sight, Priests ordered the Servants back to work. Again the nightmare sounds of hammers on iron, of furnaces rumbling, wood being sawn.

Maria could stand it no more.

"Wake up!" she called.

Some Servants heard her and stared.

"Don't build your High Priestess a fleet. She is wicked. Why else would she provide ships and weapons to both sides?"

More Servants stopped work and peered up at the cage.

"If Juno cared about peace, how could she send thousands to their deaths? No. It's the gold and the diamonds she wants. She doesn't care about peace. She doesn't care about you. She'll send you all to your deaths for more diamonds and gold!"

The cage began to sway. Priests were hauling it up. They dragged Maria and Zanni out.

"Which one of you spoke?" demanded a Priest.

Maria spat in his face. He struck her. But she didn't care what happened to her anymore. If Georgio was dead, she'd find him in the land beyond death. Not here, in the world of the wicked.

The Priests were about to drag her off, when a sweet high voice piped up.

"It was me."

The Priests of Jupiter stared at the giant.

"It was me. I spoke," Zanni repeated. "My family are dead, my island defeated. Let Mario live. It was me. Take me."

Before Maria could utter a word, they'd taken the giant. Maria was thrown back into the dangling cage, where she wept for Zanni and Georgio all the long, hot day.

The sun went down and the moon came out, crystal clear as if nothing were wrong. A voice whispered down.

"I am hauling you up."

It was Utopia.

When they came face to face, Utopia spoke.

"The Servants are gathered. I hope you will speak to them. Come, follow me."

"Speak to them?" asked Maria, following. "What should I say?"

"Say what you said before. Tell them the truth, that Juno is wicked. They're religious people, they need to believe. Promise you'll lead them away to freedom."

"I can't promise that," said Maria, stopping. "I can't save them."

"They can build boats. We can all escape," suggested Utopia.

She looked at Maria. Her long black curly hair and dark serious eyes shone, in the torchlight of the passage.

"Oh!" gasped Utopia in surprise. "You are a woman. I thought you were a man."

Maria whipped the sash from Utopia's cloak. She wound it about her head to hide her hair.

"I am a man," she declared. "Now tell me, is Zanni alive?"

Utopia nodded.

"And you say we can make boats and escape?"

"Yes. Will you speak to them?"

The Servants were assembled within the dark crater.

"We can build boats and escape!" cried Maria.

"Don't listen to him!" yelled one of the Servants. "He is a traitor. We are the Servants of Jupiter."

"We are the Servants of Jupiter!" they repeated as one.

Who is Jupiter?" Maria asked them.

"He is our God!" a Servant informed her. "He is thunder and lightening."

"Yes!" agreed another. "He will vanquish all armies, and bring peace to our islands."

"Do you really believe that? she asked. "Or have you been fooled? All you ever do is work."

"That's true enough," someone growled.

"Who are you?" a solitary voice called out.

"My name is Mario. Listen - you have been tricked. You've made weapons and warships, which have killed thousands of people. Now she wants you to become an army and die in battle."

"But if we rebel, the Priests will punish us."

"There are more of us than them. Don't be frightened. Be brave."

The Servants stared at Mario in his goatskin tunic and the scarf about his head. They wanted to trust him. They thought of their loved ones, killed by weapons made here in the crater.

"Will you choose freedom?" Maria asked.

"Yes!" they bellowed.

At that moment an arrow whistled through the air. Maria felt it plunge into her arm. Pain shot through her body and she fell backwards. A second arrow hit Utopia. Two Priests appeared. The Servants cowered.

Priests dragged Maria and Utopia down a tunnel and flung them in a cell beside Zanni. When he saw the two wounded girls, he burst into tears.

"Don't cry," said Utopia.

With a single movement she ripped the arrow from her own arm. The giant's jaw dropped in surprise. He watched as she cradled Maria's head in her lap. Again with a

single movement, Utopia removed the arrow from Maria's arm. Almost immediately the skin seemed to close over the wound.

“How did you do that?” asked Zanni.

Utopia smiled.

15. A Hero's Welcome

"Is anyone there?" Commander Rudolpho called.

One of his soldiers knelt beside him.

"Scapino is dead sir."

"Who is he?" asked Rudolpho, unable to raise himself.

"The enemy Commander sir."

"Oh yes. Did I kill him?"

"You were about to kill him sir, when this young devil appeared and cut him through."

The soldiers grabbed Georgio. Pablo tried to stop them but was thrown to the ground. Georgio was presented to Rudolpho.

"Shall we punish him sir?"

Rudolpho tried to think. What had happened? Had he been about to kill Scapino? He wanted to believe it. His head swam. His hand felt down to the throbbing pain in his stomach. It was wet and sticky. Blood.

He remembered the truth. Scapino had knocked him to the ground, had been about to kill him.

"I'm dead anyway," he thought.

"This young man is a hero," he croaked. "He killed the enemy Commander. Come closer boy. What is your name?"

"Georgio, sir."

"Well, Georgio, it's up to you now. You must take my place. Return to Fortuna. Tell my old friend King Carlo that we won a glorious victory. Tell him that you killed the enemy Commander. The King will reward you."

Rudolpho coughed. The soldiers were horrified to see blood appear from his mouth.

"Georgio will lead you," he spluttered. "Promise me that you will obey him."

No one spoke.

"Promise," he repeated, coughing up more blood.

"We promise," they murmured.

Rudolpho heard them, closed his eyes and died.

Georgio didn't know what to do. He looked to Pablo for help. Pablo pointed to the King's flagship, moored off the long sands.

"What are your orders, sir?" asked one of the men.

If Georgio were to lead, he would have to know the facts.

"Are there any survivors?" he asked.

They all looked down at the valley, strewn with dead bodies.

"None but ourselves," came the reply.

Georgio looked down at Rudolpho's body.

"Should we bury him?"

"At sea."

"To the ship then!" ordered Commander Georgio. "Forward, march!"

It was evening by the time they had carried Rudolpho down the goat paths to the long sands. Swimming out to the ship in the moonlight, they assembled, dripping wet, on the deck.

"Set sail for Fortuna!" Georgio commanded, hoping the men would know how.

But nobody moved.

"Tonight, sir?" asked one.

Feeling unsure, Georgio checked.

"Is it possible?"

"Yes sir," said a tall drooping man with a beard.

"What's your name?"

"Sir, I am known as Wiffio."

The other men giggled. It was the first time anyone had giggled for days and it changed the mood.

"Wiffio?"

"Yes sir. On account of my smell sir."

This time the men fell about, holding their noses and laughing.

One by one, Commander Georgio was introduced to his men. There was Enzo, a little man with massive muscles and covered in tattoos. He stood to attention so fiercely that he poked himself in the eye.

The next man, Tony, had a big fleshy nose and big, dopey eyes.

"Hallo," he grinned, quite forgetting to salute.

Spotty Scarlotti was found to be asleep on his feet. When Enzo nudged him, Spotty Scarlotti fell over and started snoring.

Alonzo and Alonzo were identical twins. Their parents had decided that, since they looked the same, they'd better have the same name, to avoid confusion.

"How am I going to tell you apart?" asked Commander Georgio.

"Tell who apart?" they asked.

Commander Georgio yawned.

"Well, Wiffio. You say it's possible to sail tonight?"

"Yes sir."

"Even though we're tired, I think it would be the safest thing to do."

"Yes sir."

Georgio and Pablo were shown to the Commander's quarters, where they made good use of his liquor.

"Can you believe our luck?" said Georgio.

Pablo shook his head. He was very weary.

"We were cowards, escaping the battle and now we are heroes. Crowds will cheer. The King will reward us. Do you know what I'm going to do first?"

But Pablo was asleep.

Georgio lay back. He knew what he'd do. He'd visit the home of Signor Laspari. As a hero, he'd be able to ask Signor Laspari for Maria's hand in marriage...

When Georgio awoke, Wiffio was standing over him.

"Sir, we are about to enter the harbour of Fortuna."

Georgio sprang to his feet. There was a terrible smell in the room. It came from Wiffio. The men were right.

"I've put your uniform there by the bed. Shall I help you on with it, sir?"

"No, thank you Wiffio. I'll see you on deck."

Georgio and Pablo stood on deck and watched, as crowds flocked to see the great ship dock. A carpet was laid. The King's carriage appeared.

Frail old King Carlo stepped into view and everyone cheered. Georgio led his men down the gangplank and bowed.

"Where is Rudolpho?" demanded the King.

"Dead, Your Highness. He appointed me Commander in his place."

"What do you have to report, er, whatever your name is..?"

"Georgio, Your Highness."

"Georgio? Is that all? What does it mean?" snapped the King.

"It's my name, Your Highness."

King Carlo nodded, without understanding.

"That's all very well, but where is Rudolpho?"

Somebody tugged at Georgio's ear. He turned. It was Pablo. Georgio understood the signal. The King was deaf. He stepped close to the King.

"Rudolpho is dead!" he bellowed at the top of his voice. "I am his replacement, Georgio."

"No need to shout, Georgio," said the King. "What is your news?"

Georgio didn't know what to say. Should he say that the battle was a disaster? That the fleet had burned and the army swallowed in rain and blood? Should he say that everyone was killed? That all was lost?

"Your Highness!" Georgio shouted. "We have won a great victory."

A cheer went up. The King looked pleased. Georgio relaxed.

"It's all going according to plan," he thought. "The King will invite me to his palace, reward me and I will marry Maria."

The King did invite Georgio to the palace. When they got there however, the King asked how many prisoners Georgio had taken.

"I have no prisoners, Your Highness."

"No prisoners? But how can you prove that you've won when you have no prisoners? Where is their leader?"

"I killed Scapino," said Georgio.

"Not Scapino, whoever he is. Their leader!" shouted Carlo, with more power than Georgio would have expected from such a little old man.

A courtier took Georgio aside.

"His Majesty means his wife, the former Queen Olivia. Have you got her? Is she alive?"

"I don't know," whispered Georgio. "I've never heard of her."

The courtier tutted and turned to the King. "Commander Georgio has failed to capture their leader, Your Highness."

"Then he must go back and get her!" shouted King Carlo.

"Now?" asked Georgio, shocked.

"Not now, you carrot-head! I don't want anyone to know that our enemy is still at large. It must be a secret mission. You will leave at midnight. Do not return until you have captured the Leader of the Utmost Isles. Is that understood?"

As King Carlo's voice rose to a quavering climax, a thought popped into Georgio's head.

“If I bring you the leader, will you reward me with riches so that I can marry the one I love?”

King Carlo peered down from his throne and cackled.

“The one you love?” he sneered.

He thought of his wife Olivia, of the war that had drained his coffers. There wasn't an ounce of gold left. So much for love. But if the boy wanted riches, why not promise them?

“You shall have riches beyond your wildest dreams,” he replied and cackled so much that he fell off his throne.

16. Living Nightmare

Commander Georgio bowed out of the King's chamber. He was going to be rich. He could hear his men enjoying themselves in the banquet hall but didn't join them.

Leaving the palace, he set off for Signor Laspari's mansion. Cheering townsfolk lined the streets and pretty girls danced about him.

Georgio remembered the first time he had set eyes on Maria. He had been a poor mountain lad. Signor Laspari had kicked him out for trying to steal gold. Yet here he was, strutting along in his Commander's uniform, cheered by adoring crowds and soon to be rich beyond his wildest dreams.

Watching from the banquet hall balcony, Wiffio was concerned to see his Commander walk unprotected through the streets. He called to Pablo, who was guzzling cakes. They decided to follow their leader.

Approaching the Laspari mansion, Georgio expected to see Maria. She'd be at a window. She'd answer the door.

But it was the maid, Sophia, who ushered him in and went to inform the Signor.

Laspari smiled to himself when Sophia announced that the King's Commander was waiting. He'd been expecting a royal request for more money. Instead he saw Georgio. One glance was enough.

Here was the mountain lad who had murdered his daughter Maria. The thief had described his goatskin tunic and no uniform now could disguise her killer. Signor Laspari drew his sword and lunged at the King's Commander.

Georgio was lucky to avoid the blade. He leapt onto a chair and from there to a table. His sword was stuck in its sheath. Laspari leapt after him. Georgio dodged this way and that, trying to free his sword.

To avoid being pinned in a corner, he dived between Laspari's legs, under the table and out of the room. Laspari flew after him, calling to servants to capture the murderer.

Georgio fled down the endless corridors. Why was this madman attacking him? He came to a room where light from the street poured in through a window. To escape, he'd have to crash through it. Just then his sword came free at last.

He turned to see Laspari's blade lash out. He met it with his own. Swords locked, Georgio stared at Laspari.

"Why do you want to kill me?" he asked.

"I will kill you," said Laspari, his eyes burning with rage, "because you killed my daughter Maria."

Maria was dead? Georgio's weapon fell to the floor. Dead? A vision of her, in the light of a candle, came into his head. She blew out the candle and disappeared.

Laspari saw his chance. He would plunge his sword through Georgio's heart.

Suddenly the glass in the window shattered. Two soldiers jumped through. Pablo and Wiffio grabbed their Commander. They drew him back onto the street, where a curious crowd gathered.

Laspari could do nothing about it. He called for his carriage. He'd see the King. Georgio would hang!

Pablo and Wiffio led their leader away from the crowd. Hiding behind some trees, they watched Laspari's carriage set out for the palace.

"Laspari's a powerful enemy to have," said Wiffio. "Better get Georgio onto the ship."

They tore down the hillside, skidding and sliding, as twilight lengthened the shadows around them. Georgio was living a nightmare. Maria was dead. Where was his future, now that she was gone?

At the palace, Laspari wasted no time. He swept past the courtiers, and through to the King. King Carlo was sleeping. SnORES like little farts echoed around the chamber.

"Your Majesty!" Laspari shouted. "I demand that you arrest your new Commander."

King Carlo awoke.

"Ah Laspari," he croaked. "I'm glad you came by. I have a little favour to ask."

"Never mind that. I demand that you arrest your new Commander and have him put to death for murdering my daughter!"

"Oh really?"

"Immediately."

"But he's about to embark on a mission for me."

"He's a murderer!"

Carlo looked at the clock. A quarter to twelve. He smiled his cunning little smile.

"If I order his arrest, will you do me the favour I ask?"

"Possibly," replied Laspari, who knew what was coming. "But first, arrest him."

"No," croaked the King. "Not this time. I have here a document. It says that if you lend me five million Grubbis now, I'll repay you in ten years time."

Signor Laspari shook his head.

"In ten years time Your Majesty may be dead."

"How dare you?" screeched the King, who still thought he would live forever. "I need gold to rebuild the Islands. You cannot refuse your King."

"I too have a document," Laspari said, drawing it out. "I will return all your Islands and up to ten million Grubbis in gold. In exchange I will become the heir to your throne when you die."

"I may never die," said the King. "Have you thought of that?"

Laspari smiled. "Then you will reign forever," he assured him.

The King liked the idea of living forever.

"You'd return all the Islands you say?"

"Yes."

"And ten million Grubbis?"

"Yes."

Signor Laspari watched nervously as King Carlo signed his name on the document and put his seal on it.

"Now," said Laspari, taking the document. "Order the Commander's arrest."

"Too late," replied the King, his eyes twinkling. "His ship sails at midnight. Look at the clock."

It was midnight. As the clock whirred and chimed, Laspari returned to his carriage. He'd have Georgio. And stupid King Carlo. It was only a matter of time.

As the clock whirred and chimed, the King's ship sailed silently out of the harbour. Georgio was in despair. Without the promise of love, his heart hardened.

"You have to take what you want," he thought. "There are no rules. Anything can happen, good or bad. A coward can pretend to be a hero. A beautiful girl can die. A King can promise to reward you and be lying through his teeth. If you want riches, you have to take them for yourself."

He sat on the bow, staring into darkness. From that moment on, Georgio's only love would be gold.

17. Mirrors And Jewels

Jewels and mirrors. Mirrors and jewels. Juno sat and admired herself. She felt wonderful, powerful. Her green eyes, bright as emeralds, gleamed back from the mirrors. Her dark hair, studded with topaz, reflected its lovely yellow light upon her dazzling face.

Fiery red rubies, sapphires as mysterious as the deep blue sky... How she loved them. But her favourite was the diamond, hardest and sharpest stone of all. Juno stared in the mirror. She shone like a diamond. She was the world and the world was hers.

Had she always been so perfect? Had she and Jupiter always been so sure that their plan would work?

"People are stupid," she thought. "They slave, day and night, for me. What fools they are to waste their lives. Cowards. They pretend that they are good when they are weak. Compared to them, I am a Goddess."

She stared at the amber ring on her finger, at the tiny insect trapped within the honey yellow stone. Perfect.

A priest had entered and was bowing. He looked like a little black spider.

"We are nearing the Utmost Isle," he informed her.

Juno felt a rush of excitement and climbed up on deck to watch.

It was a misty day but she could see the burnt driftwood floating in the harbour, all that remained of two great fleets. She could hear women wailing in the valley beyond. Then she saw them, small as ants, scurrying about the hillsides, burying the men.

Queen Olivia looked down from her high fortress at the end of the valley. Her eyes followed Juno and the Servants, as they climbed the valley towards her. She too heard the women wailing as they buried their dead.

But Olivia's mind was elsewhere. She was remembering Scapino's death. She had seen the murderer. For a moment she had thought it was Silvio. Her son, Silvio, also had beautiful red hair.

As Scapino fell, his killer had turned. She had seen the murderer's face. It haunted her. She'd know him anywhere.

It was quite unlike the face that came towards her.

"Who are you?" asked Olivia.

"Juno," came the reply.

"Have you come from King Carlo?"

Juno stared at Olivia. She recognised her, although she hadn't seen her for many years. How old Olivia looked. Her skin was mottled like marble. Her eyes were like cloudy white opals. How easy this was going to be.

"I have come to end the war," she said. "I bring peace."

Olivia wanted peace. She stared at Juno. Had she seen this woman before, a long time ago? Juno's face was beautiful. Yet the feeling it gave off was ugly.

"What do you want from me?" asked Olivia.

"Sign this document."

Juno clicked her fingers and her priest presented it.

The Servants Of Jupiter crowded about frail Olivia. They frightened her.

"What does it say?" asked Olivia, feeling helpless.

"It makes me leader of the Utmost Isle, instead of you. That is the price of peace."

"Why should I sign?"

"You have no choice."

"Will there be peace throughout the Islands?" asked the Queen, without a trace of hope in her voice.

"Sign! Sign! Sign!" chanted the Servants.

Juno smiled, as she watched the old lady sign her life away.

The women of Bellona watched their Queen being led through the valley in chains. Down in the harbour they heard the High Priestess call to her Servants.

"Servants Of Jupiter. You will stay here on the Utmost Isle. It is famous for diamonds. I want the mines working, day and night. If there aren't enough men, use women and children. Put them in chains and force them to dig for the beautiful stones."

"Slavery," whispered Olivia, as she was led up the gangplank.

"That is the price of peace," said Juno, following her prisoner onto the deck.

As they sailed out of the harbour, Juno's last sight was of people in chains, winding through hills, like human bracelets. Then the white mist closed in and they were at sea.

Juno's ship was now largely unprotected. Apart from the crew, there were only two Priests and a few archers. They were unlikely to come across another boat, let alone an enemy craft. Even so, she instructed them to remain on guard.

There was another ship at sea that afternoon and not far away. The King's flagship had set sail for Bellona to take prisoners, when the mist came up. Georgio felt so lost without Maria, that the white cloud surrounding him seemed almost comforting.

It was Pablo who saw the ghost of a ship appear through the haze.

"Is it real?" asked Georgio, his mind in a fog.

"Real enough," replied Wiffio. "Look."

A stream of fire flew down on them from the other ship. Pablo pulled Georgio to safety, as flaming arrows set the deck alight.

"We'll all burn," gasped Wiffio. "Orders to abandon ship, sir."

The danger brought Georgio to his senses.

"Ram the other ship!" he shouted, making a dash for the bridge.

Whilst the crew turned the sails about, he locked the wheel onto a collision course.

"Climb!" he cried, shinning up the mast.

Men swarmed up the rigging as flames leapt from the deck. Wiffio clung to a beam. Pablo dangled from a rope. It was only a matter of time before the mast and sails caught light.

"If we don't make contact with the other vessel soon, we'll be fried alive," he thought.

"When I give the word, board and attack!" he yelled.

Peering through smoke he saw little lines of flame racing up ropes. He felt his body quiver, heard a splintering sound and knew that the mast was about to give way.

At that moment, there was a great, spine-wrenching crack as Georgio's burning vessel hit Juno's ship. He had no time to give orders. The mast split. Georgio lost his grip and went flying through the air.

18. Yet Another Secret

Having commanded her archers to fire, having watched the enemy ship burn, Juno thought she had won. Her only fear was that there might be other ships, possibly a whole fleet.

When the great burning hulk headed straight towards them, she thought it was an illusion. The fire was simply getting bigger, shining brighter through the mist. By the time she realised her mistake, it was bearing down on her.

As the blazing ship rammed them, Juno fell forward. Looking up, she saw bodies flying through the air, falling or swinging down on ropes, brandishing swords, killing her Servants.

Georgio picked himself up. He was on the deck of the enemy ship. A hooded figure leapt at him. Another gripped his throat from behind. Georgio grabbed the man in front of him and rolled back, squashing the man's throat.

He drew his sword and whirled about. At a glance he saw his men engaged in battle. Wiffio was piercing through cloaks as they came at him - cutting, stabbing and probably even stinking them to death.

Noticing an archer aiming at Pablo, Georgio hurled his sword up and watched the archer fall screaming into the sea.

"Who next?" thought Georgio.

His men seemed to be getting the better of these hooded devils.

Then he saw a cloaked figure skirting the action, slinking away. He ran off in pursuit. Catching up, he lunged forward. The figure turned to face him.

It was a woman. Beautiful jewels in her dark wavy hair and around her neck. Bright green cruelty in her eyes.

"Lay down your sword!" she hissed.

He almost obeyed her.

"Who are you?" he asked, his sword at her throat.

A smell of bad eggs filled the air. The woman coughed. It was Wiffio.

"Have you dealt with the fire caused by our ship?" Georgio asked, hoping it would send Wiffio scurrying off.

"Everything is under control sir."

Georgio stared at the woman. Who was she? There was something familiar about her. Did he know her? As he watched, her eyes seemed to roll in their sockets.

"What is that terrible smell?" she asked. It's making me sick".

Georgio smiled to himself. Wiffio looked a bit embarrassed.

"We've dealt with the fire, sir. The deck's a bit charred I'm afraid. Our own ship went down sir. Sad sight sir."

"Yes Wiffio. Wiffio?"

"Yes sir?"

"Do you, by any chance, know this person?"

"No sir. Looks like a woman sir."

"Very likely," said Georgio. "In any case, you seem to have a strange power over her."

"What sir?"

"Smell, Wiffio. The power of smell. I'd like you to stand close to her."

"Close sir?"

"Very close."

Wiffio edged forward.

"Stop it," begged the woman, overcome by fumes.

"Closer!" ordered Georgio.

Wiffio tucked his armpit directly under her nose.

"Stop!" she screamed. "What do you want?"

"First of all, tell me your name."

"I am Juno," she said. "I am Jupiter's High Priestess."

This meant nothing to Georgio.

"And who is Jupiter?" he asked.

"He is a god," she replied.

Pablo's head appeared. He wanted Georgio to come below. Georgio turned to Wiffio.

"Disarm the prisoner and bring her below."

Entering the cabin, Georgio saw a sad old woman with silver hair and a face like furrowed snow. There were chains shackled to her arms and legs.

The moment Olivia saw Georgio, she recognised the man who had killed Scapino.

"Murderer!" she cried and leapt at him.

Wiffio and Pablo prised her from their Commander. All the energy drained out of her. She slumped to the floor.

Georgio turned to Juno.

"Who is this old woman?"

"Her name is Olivia."

The name rang like a bell through Georgio.

"Olivia? King Carlo's Olivia?"

"Wiffio," he said, "this is the prisoner we've come for."

"Yes sir. What does it mean sir?"

"It means, Wiffio, that you can leave us. I mean - set sail for home!"

Wiffio sprang up the steps. They heard him cry "Set sail for home!" and the cheer that went up from the King's men.

Georgio felt so happy that he smiled at Juno. He thought he noticed a flicker of fear pass across her face.

"We know who the old woman is, so that leaves you. You are obviously our enemy. Why else would you attack us? I feel certain that King Carlo will be pleased to receive you."

Juno remembered that Georgio had stared at her jewels when he first saw her. Was he greedy? It was her only chance.

"May I speak with you alone?" she asked.

He considered the request.

"Are there any survivors Pablo?"

Pablo nodded. There were two. They were old.

"Take the former Queen Olivia to join our other ancient guests."

The moment they were alone, Juno drew her hand from her cloak. Sure enough, Georgio stared at the rings on her fingers.

"I'm very rich," she informed him. "Beyond your wildest dreams" she added.

"Are you?" he asked, not quite clear where this was leading.

"Have you ever thought that you might be rich one day?"

He had. Since he'd lost Maria, he had thought of little else.

Juno saw his greed and hatched a plan.

"Take me to Jupiter's Isle," she said. "I will make you rich."

Georgio shook his head.

"I've to return home with Queen Olivia."

Juno shrugged.

"You can have the Queen. I can give you other prisoners too. And I can make you rich, which is more than King Carlo can do."

"What do you mean?"

"The King hasn't got a Grubbi to his name. Didn't you know?"

Juno watched Georgio's eyes. Obviously he didn't.

"Let me make you rich," she purred. "No one will be the wiser. You'll have your prisoners. I'll have my freedom."

"My men will know..." he stammered, wishing he could accept her offer.

"Just take me to my island. You can come ashore alone."

"You must think I'm a fool," he said. "The moment I go ashore, you'll have me murdered."

"Then send my Priests. Release me only after they have returned with the prisoners for your King and the riches for you."

"When you say riches, what do you mean?"

"A casket full of jewels. Are we agreed?"

"A casket of jewels? But what will it buy?"

"There are hundreds of islands. One will be yours. You will live in a palace overlooking the sea, with gardens and fountains, with maidens and courtiers to tend to your wishes. You won't have to work. You can do what you want for the rest of your life."

It sounded like music to Georgio's ears. He sat there blinking. No more sleeping rough. No more following orders. No more war. No more pain. All this for just one casket of jewels? Paradise

Juno saw that he was ready.

"Are we agreed?"

"I don't want my men to know about the jewels."

"Of course not," she replied.

19. Jewels And Mirrors

At dusk, the ship slid out of the mist and silently anchored off Jupiter's Isle. In the twinkling blue light, a rowboat was lowered from the deck. Two ancient priests and Pablo descended.

Georgio watched the little boat bobbing away

"Are you sure about this sir?" asked Wiffio

"If anything happens to Pablo," said Georgio, "if they don't return with our prisoners come sunrise, Juno will die."

"Yes sir. But this Juno sir. Can we trust her?"

"She is a Priestess, not an enemy. After all, she did capture the Queen. She also assures me that the prisoners we will receive are traitors to the King," said Georgio, twisting the truth to suit himself.

They watched as the little boat disappeared through a cleft in the rock and entered the volcano.

In a prison cell deep within the volcano, a giant stretched out on the floor. Zanni was alive but starving. Maria's wound had healed but she hadn't eaten for days. Utopia kept their hopes alive. She told them that the future was wonderful.

"We will not die in this prison," she assured them. "I can see it all."

The prison door opened. Two ancient Priests stood there and a boy with a scar on his throat. Utopia, Zanni and Maria were led along corridors, down through the crater and onto a rowboat. They had no idea where they were being taken.

As the boat passed out of the crater, Maria saw Juno's ship ahead. When they drew alongside, a rope ladder was thrown over. Once on deck, they were lined up for inspection.

The Commander appeared. It was Georgio. Maria just stood there, staring at him. She couldn't believe it. He was alive. Utopia had been right. The future would be wonderful. This was the happiest day of her life. How she loved him.

Of course Georgio didn't recognise her. She was wearing a goatskin tunic. Her hair was tied up in a scarf. She could hardly wait to tell him who she was. But he was speaking. She mustn't interrupt. What was he saying...?

Georgio was nervous. What if Juno tricked him at the last minute? What if he didn't get the jewels? He surveyed the prisoners.

"You are traitors to the King!" he barked.

"We're not traitors," replied Maria.

Before she could say who she was, Commander Georgio stepped forward and cuffed her across the face.

"Be quiet!" he ordered.

She didn't cry. But she went cold. Her eyes followed the Commander. It was Georgio. Yes. But he was cruel. He was taking them prisoner and letting wicked Juno go free. Maria hated him now.

She watched, as Juno and her two ancient Priests floated off in the little boat. She said nothing as she, Zanni and Utopia were kicked and pushed, down into the ship's hold.

There was another prisoner in the hold. An old woman in chains was crying quietly to herself. Zanni, who was from the Utmost Isle, knew who she was.

"She's Queen Olivia," he whispered.

As Utopia began to comfort the Queen, Maria wondered if she had made a mistake. Perhaps Juno had tricked Georgio. If only she could talk to him. He'd recognise her. She'd tell him that Juno was building a fleet. He would change his mind. The King had to be warned!

Olivia stopped crying. She looked up at Utopia.

"What a beautiful soul you have my dear," said the Queen.

Hearing a sound, Utopia turned and saw the boy with the scar on his throat. He was holding something - oranges, grapes.

Pablo watched while the prisoners ate. He saw how hungry they were. The dark-skinned girl kept staring at him.

"What is that scar?" she asked.

He covered his neck.

"Can't you speak?"

Pablo shook his head.

"Would you let me look at it? Perhaps if I touch it..."

Pablo took a step back. It was a trick.

Maria saw her chance.

"I must talk privately with your Commander," she said. Will you take me to see him?"

Pablo shook his head.

"But I have important information which he will want to hear."

Pablo felt less certain. What harm could it do? There was no escape for this dirty lad in his filthy goatskin. But then again, what information could he have?

"Is your Commander's name Georgio?" Maria asked.

Pablo nodded.

"Then you must let see him," she said.

Pablo led Maria up from the hold. At the end of a passage, he knocked on a door. There was no reply. He knocked again. Finally he pushed. The door swung open. There sat Commander Georgio, staring at hundreds of sparkling jewels.

Georgio leapt to his feet.

"How dare you come in here?" he shouted, slamming down the lid of the casket.

He rushed to the doorway and hovered, hiding his precious casket from view.

"What is it Pablo?" he asked, trying to remain calm.

Pablo encouraged the lad in the goatskin to speak.

Maria opened her mouth but no sound came out. She recognised the casket. Hadn't she and Zanni followed it up the side of the volcano? Hadn't she tried to steal it, to stop the war, to save Georgio's life? What a fool she had been.

"Look at his eyes," she thought. "They are greedy with diamonds. Just like Juno. He doesn't care about anyone except himself. My father was right. He is a thief."

She despised him.

Georgio saw the accusing look in his prisoner's eye. Why was he looking at him like that? What did he know?

"Get this prisoner back to the hold!" he hissed. "He's a traitor!"

Maria had seen and heard enough. She turned and walked away.

Jewels and mirrors. Mirrors and jewels. Commander Georgio sat, in what had once been Juno's cabin, staring at his treasure. He felt strangely powerful.

There were emeralds and bloodstones. There were rubies, bright as flame. Smooth amber, golden topaz, sweet as sunrise. Sapphires as mysterious as the deep blue sky. He loved them all. And they loved him.

His favourite was the diamond, the clearest, coldest stone. He caught sight of his own face, glinting from the mirror. It shone like a diamond. The world was his.

20. A Right Royal Reward

Commander Georgio stood on deck, handsome in his uniform. His blue eyes twinkled. His red hair shone like flame.

The last time he'd arrived in Fortuna, King Carlo had received him amid cheering crowds. This time would be even better. This time he had Queen Olivia as his prisoner.

What did it matter if Signor Laspari wanted him dead? Georgio was a hero. What did it matter if King Carlo failed to reward him? Georgio was already rich. He had the jewels. They would buy him freedom and a good life.

If the King did reward him, he'd have a very good life. He might even be as rich as Signor Laspari. But how to get it? He felt sure that once he had presented the prisoners, King Carlo would find an excuse. If only Georgio could claim his reward first.

Seagulls circled as the ship sailed into the Bay of Fortuna. Georgio heard the roar of the crowd. He saw King Carlo and his courtiers arrive.

The man standing beside the King was Signor Laspari. As the ship docked, their eyes met. Georgio smiled and strode triumphantly down the gangplank. He stopped in front of King Carlo and bowed.

"The last time I had the honour to address Your Majesty, it was with news of our great victory!" he bellowed.

The crowds cheered.

"Our Islands are now at peace!" he exclaimed.

Again they cheered.

"Get on with it..." cackled the King, irritably.

"When sending me on my present mission, Your Majesty was kind enough to promise me a reward."

"Ooooooh!" went the masses.

"Reward? What reward?" croaked the old King.

"I must report that this mission has been even more successful."

The crowd went wild.

"Therefore I humbly beg that my reward be made now, publicly."

"Here? Now? Nonsense. Show me the prisoners, if you have them," insisted the King. "Then I will consider your reward."

But Georgio was in no mood to be hurried. The crowd was on his side.

"I have indeed captured very valuable prisoners, without a thought for my own safety. Vicious rebels all of them. But one, the greatest enemy of all: The Leader of the Utmost Isle!"

The crowd gasped.

Laspari heard the King whisper "Olivia".

"But first, I feel sure that the good folk of Fortuna would like to see a poor lad from the mountains rewarded by his King."

"Yes!" cried the people of Fortuna.

"Gib him de mummy!" yelled an old woman with no teeth.

Others took up her cry.

"Give him the money! Give him the money!"

Georgio stared round at the chanting crowd. How they loved him.

What was the poor old King to do? He couldn't ignore the crowd. They might do something rash, like rise up against him. But he had no reward to give.

"Lend me your purse Laspari," he whispered.

Laspari wasn't about to watch his purse being presented to the peasant who had murdered his daughter.

But the good folk of Fortuna continued to chant.

"Give him the money! Give him the money!"

Old King Carlo lost his nerve and leapt at Laspari, babbling.

"I am your King and I demand your money!"

Laspari refused, so the King kicked him in the shin.

Laspari went mad. He drew his sword and was about to slice the King's head off, when the crowd went "Hissss!"

Laspari looked around at their stupid, lumpy faces. He sensed that killing the King might make him unpopular. Reluctantly, he replaced his sword. Even more reluctantly, he produced a purse full of gold.

Georgio stepped forward.

Everyone in the crowd fell quiet. All except a little boy called Dino, who was running around with a bucket, drenching people with water and laughing.

The King cleared his throat and, in his most kingly voice, proclaimed:

"I hereby present you with this right royal reward!"

Georgio raised the purse of gold, high above his head. The rabble roared its approval. What with the jewels from Juno, things were turning out rather well.

Laspari's eyes sparkled with white-hot hatred. In his mind, he drew his sword and wiped the oafish grin from Georgio's face for good.

King Carlo was also lost in a world of his own. He hadn't seen his Queen, Olivia for many years. She would be old now. Would he recognise her? He wasn't sure he could control his emotions. Did he still love her? Did she love him?

"Get on with it!" he rasped. "Present the prisoners!"

On deck but hidden from view, Olivia was in torment too. There was no one else left in her life. Their son Silvio, was dead. So were her sister Dora and Dora's son, Scapino.

Olivia could never forgive Carlo. Yet her eyes flooded with tears at the thought of seeing him once more. The other prisoners consoled her.

"Be strong," whispered Utopia.

"What is that smell?" asked Olivia. "Has someone farted?"

But it was Wiffio.

"Prisoners. Forward, march!" he ordered.

Olivia tried to hold her head up high.

When the crowd saw the prisoners stumbling down the gangplank in chains, they stopped cheering. Were these pathetic specimens the "vicious traitors" Georgio had promised them? A weak-looking lad with a scarf on his head? A girl? A giant with the face of a baby?

Then someone noticed the frail, white-haired lady.

"It's Olivia!"

"It's the Queen herself!"

Those old enough to remember, told the young. Others just gasped.

"She's alive."

There was a stunned silence. It seemed like a miracle.

21. More Secrets

Carlo and Olivia stood just two paces apart, staring at each other. He had a crown upon his head. She was in chains.

"Your Majesty..." she began, her voice like a warbling dove. "I stand before you, a shadow of the person I once was - with no desire to live - without hope - without pride, empty. Yet I find that seeing you again affects me more than I can say."

For a moment she stared at her husband. Then she hid her face. Tears formed in people's eyes. What would the King say? Several noticed that he was finding it difficult to begin.

"I too feel the burden of the years since last we met," he admitted, finally. "This has been a terrible war for our Islands."

"Not once did I give up the search for peace," said Olivia, trembling with pain.

"How are we to believe that?" Carlo asked. "We sent so many messengers to the Utmost Isle. Not one of them ever returned."

Olivia was shocked. Was it true? Had the King sent messengers?

"None ever arrived," she said.

"Does the prisoner doubt my word?"

Olivia hung her head.

"Is Your Majesty aware that our own son came here to Fortuna, seeking peace and was killed?"

The news went through Carlo like a knife. His son, Silvio, killed? Was she blaming him? He hid his grief in anger.

"Was it not you, who stole our gold and set up against us on the Utmost Isle?" he demanded.

"They needed supplies. They were hungry. It is no secret that you were draining the Kingdom's coffers with your wild parties and your women friends."

The crowd gasped.

Carlo shook with rage. He stepped closer, yelling in her face.

"You dare accuse me? Did I not have to have your second son sent away because he was not my own?"

Several people fainted.

"He was your own! You behaved badly, so you believed that I behaved badly. It was your excuse."

"And was it a Queen's duty to take five young soldiers at a time into her bed chamber?"

"Lies!" cried Olivia, slapping Carlo across the face.

"How dare you hit the King!" he shrieked and leapt at her throat.

She tried to force his head back. He tried to force her down.

They fell over, kicking and biting, pulling each other's hair and shouting "You've ruined my life!"

The crowd gaped in horror at the sight of their ancient royal couple, writhing about on the ground. It was unseemly. Yet no one dared pull them apart.

Just then, little Dino appeared, poured a bucket of cold water over them and ran off laughing. No one moved. No one spoke. It was too awful.

Slowly King Carlo - dripping wet - got to his feet. Olivia remained in the mud, sobbing to herself. The King replaced the crown on his head.

"Take the prisoners away!" he ordered.

"Your Majesty!" someone called out.

"What is it?" he asked.

It was one of the prisoners who stepped forward and spoke.

"I wish to confess. I am not a spy. I am not a traitor. I am not your enemy."

The King stared at this weak-looking boy in his filthy goatskin tunic.

"And I am not a fool!" he said. "Take them away!"

"I am not even a man!" cried Maria, removing the scarf from her head and revealing her long, curly hair.

"Oooh!" went the crowd.

"My name is Maria," she announced. "Signor Laspari is my father."

Laspari stared at the prisoner. It was his daughter.

"Maria!" he cried, as his arms flung out and wrapped themselves around his precious girl. Father and daughter wept. The crowd wept with them. It was getting to be an emotional kind of day.

Georgio, who had been sitting to one side, counting his gold, jumped to his feet in astonishment.

"She's alive!"

Maria had been his prisoner. Why hadn't she told him? Then he remembered. She had tried. He had been counting his jewels.

It didn't matter. He was now a rich and successful man. He would marry her. Signor Laspari could not object.

"Your Majesty," said Georgio, rising. "On my previous return, Signor Laspari wrongly accused me of murdering his daughter."

Carlo turned to Laspari.

"This is true, is it not?"

"It is true," Laspari confirmed.

"Signor, I bear no grudge," Georgio assured him. "I brought Maria home to safety, to clear my own name and to ask for her hand in marriage."

A marriage proposal? Would wonders never cease? The good folk of Fortuna swooned, cheered and went quite doolally. No one, however, reckoned on Maria's reply.

"You?" she cried, turning on Georgio in fury. "You, who let the enemy go free in exchange for jewels? Who had us chained and beaten, whilst you played with diamonds and pearls? You are a traitor to our Islands. I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth!"

Everyone stared at Georgio. Was he a traitor? His face went the colour of his hair.

Maria continued.

"If Your Majesty will have his cabin searched, you will find the casket of jewels which he took as a bribe."

"What have you to say for yourself Commander?" enquired the King.

Georgio opened his mouth to speak but no sound came out.

When the casket was produced, Georgio tried to pretend that it had been a gift from his mother but Maria cut him short.

"It was given to Commander Georgio by the wicked Juno, in exchange for her freedom."

Laspari whispered in King Carlo's ear.

"He's obviously guilty. Send them all to the dungeons."

The King blinked. He was tired and caked in mud.

"When?"

"Immediately," replied Laspari.

Within seconds, the crowd saw Georgio and all his men arrested. They were marched to the dungeons with the other prisoners. Signor Laspari bundled Maria into his carriage and drove away. King Carlo rattled off in the royal coach to the royal palace for a royal bath.

There was nothing left for the good folk of Fortuna to watch.

22. The Dungeons

The crowd milled about for a while, discussing the royal punchup, the Lasparis' reunion and the traitor's marriage proposal. For a while they exchanged heated opinions. Finally they got hungry and wandered off to have supper.

In Laspari's carriage, Maria was very upset.

"Zanni and Utopia are innocent," she told her Father. "Queen Olivia is in a bad way. She certainly shouldn't be in prison."

Signor Laspari agreed to tell the King. He also promised to mention the wicked Juno, whom Maria insisted was about to attack with her fleet. Nothing he said, seemed to stem his daughter's feverish anxiety.

Maria was exhausted. The moment they arrived home, she ran upstairs to her room, lay down upon her lovely warm bed and fell into a deep sleep.

Things weren't quite so cosy in the dungeons. They didn't have supper, like the townsfolk did. They didn't have nice comfy beds like Maria. Instead of beds, there were rocks. Instead of supper, there was slimy black water, which dripped from the roof.

Georgio sat alone on a wet rock in the corner, unaware of the black water dripping on his uniform. He could hear Wiffio and his men discussing what they would have done, had they been in charge.

"I wouldn't have let that Priestess woman go," said Enzo.

"Nor I," said Tony. "Not even if she bribed me with all the stars in the sky."

"You'll be lucky!" declared Spotty Scarlotti.

"Old Rudolpho wouldn't have set her free," insisted Alonzo.

"No," agreed Alonzo. "He'd have interviewed her. In private."

The Alonzos collapsed in giggles.

"No, but it's right though," said Wiffio, wisely. "He should have questioned her. First thing you do is question your prisoners. Got to find out what's what. Stands to reason."

"I'd have found out about that fleet in the volcano and gone in and surrounded it," insisted Spotty Scarlotti.

"Are you bonkers?" snapped Enzo. "How could you have surrounded a whole fleet when you only had the one ship?"

"I'd have taken them by surprise," replied Spotty, smugly.

"Don't be daft," said Wiffio. "It's obvious. We should have sailed back here, dumped the prisoners and set off with the King's fleet!"

Georgio couldn't help it.

"The King doesn't have a fleet!" he yelled.

They ignored him.

"Did you hear someone say something?" asked Enzo.

"Not I," replied Tony.

"I heard nothing," added Spotty Scarlotti. "Unless it was that greedy pig who's going to get us all hanged!"

"Hanged?" whimpered the Alonsos, throwing their arms around each other and bursting into tears.

Georgio thought about what he had done wrong. He had let the priestess go. He had taken the jewels. The others would have done the same, whatever they said now. Even silent Pablo ignored him.

"Hypocrites!" thought Georgio.

Pablo was staring at Utopia as she stroked the old Queen's hair.

"That Priestess. Who is she?" asked Olivia, confused.

"Hush now," murmured Utopia, her eyes full of kindness.

"I wish I could remember..." sighed Olivia.

"Relax, calm your thoughts," whispered Utopia. "Only your body is here. Your soul is free."

"Free?" yelled Georgio. "What does that mean? Nothing's free!"

Zanni came over to Georgio, knocking his head on the jagged ceiling as he did so.

"What do you want, you great stupid oaf?" asked Georgio.

"When we first arrived at the volcano island, I found out that Maria wasn't a girl," said the giant.

"So what?" replied Georgio, turning away.

"Well, I said it would be okay with the others but as soon as she found out what the casket was for, she was off, up the mountain."

"What casket? What are you talking about?"

"The casket of jewels to pay for the fleet."

"What's that got to do with anything?" sneered Georgio.

"Well, she knew you'd got carted off to fight the Utmost Isle."

"Yes? So?"

"So she said we had to steal the jewels to stop the war but we got caught."

"Stupid of you to listen to her then. What's your point?"

"Well, she did it for you, because she cared about you - so you wouldn't get killed."

Georgio got the point.

"I cared about her!" he screamed.

"You don't care about anyone," said Enzo.

"Except yourself," added Spotty Scarlotti.

"Not like Pablo," said Tony, grinning. "He hasn't taken his eyes off Utopia since we got down here."

The men laughed.

Utopia looked up and saw Pablo staring at her.

"Would you help me comfort Olivia?" she asked.

Pablo nodded and came over. They held the old Queen between them, stroking her hair until her eyes closed.

Utopia looked at the scar on his neck.

"Does it hurt?"

Pablo shook his head.

"Is it numb? How does it feel?"

He stared at her, trembling with emotion.

She placed her fingers gently upon the scar.

"Can you feel that?"

Their eyes met.

"I love you," said Pablo.

No one could quite believe that Pablo had spoken. Georgio studied Utopia. Had she really healed Pablo's voice? Was it possible? - That someone could do that? - That someone could do such a good thing? It made Georgio want to do something good, to redeem himself.

Suddenly Olivia sat bolt upright.

"I remember!" she cried. "She's Perfidia. Wicked. Wicked..."

Her cries brought the prison guards. They unlocked the cell and swarmed in.

"Be quiet!" ordered a guard.

Olivia kept moaning.

“Wicked. Wicked.”

A guard raised his arm to strike her but Zanni stood in his way. When guards beat him down, Wiffio and his men jumped on them.

Meanwhile Georgio crept, unseen, out of the cell. There were tunnels full of prison cells. He didn't know which tunnel to take. He heard footsteps and voices. Which direction were they coming from? Just in time he saw a ledge, high in the rocky roof and scrambled up.

More guards arrived. He listened as they quelled the prisoners. Georgio had escaped from the cell but he had no idea how to get out of the dungeons.

23. The Best Kept Secret

Seeing that Maria was asleep, Signor Alberto Laspari pulled a cord by the fireplace. It rang a bell in the kitchens. He heard Sophia scampering up the corridor. She skidded into the room, out of breath and so off balance that when she bowed, she fell over.

"Signor Laspari."

Getting up, she saw the peaceful Maria asleep in the bed.

"Sofia. In this wardrobe is a costume for Maria. When she awakes, I want you to dress her. Are you listening to me?"

"Isn't it wonderful to have her back?" cooed Sophia.

"Good god girl, concentrate. I want you to dress Maria in these clothes."

As he opened the wardrobe, Sophia caught sight of the most beautiful dress she'd ever seen. It glittered with tiny gemstones.

"Ooooooh it's lovely."

Immediately she pulled the covers off Maria and began pulling off Maria's nightdress.

"What on earth are you doing?"

"I am dressing her, Signor. Like you said."

"When she wakes up, you fool. Not while she's asleep!"

Sophia got that frightened feeling.

"Yes Signor," she said.

She tried to replace Maria's quilt but, by mistake, threw it on the floor.

"Listen carefully Sophia. Stay here. Dress Maria when she awakes and don't let her leave the room."

"Before or after I dress her, Signor?" asked Maria, a little confused.

"What?" Laspari could feel the hairs rising on the back of his head. He was getting angry.

"It's simple. Dress her when she wakes. Don't let her leave the room."

"I understand, Signor," she replied, replacing the quilt.

"You're sure?"

"Yes Signor," she said, bowing out.

The moment she'd left the room, she felt better.

"Where in blazes are you off to?"

Sophia scampered back in.

"To the kitchens Signor."

"Sit!" he ordered. "Stay here."

Signor Laspari flung her down on a chair, strode out of the room and slammed the door.

Now he was late. At the end of the corridor, he pulled a lever set high in the wall. A mirror swivelled. The wall seemed to open. Laspari stepped into his secret study. He threw on a great dark cloak. It was sewn with silver sun, moon and stars and trimmed with golden patterns of fire.

He lit a flaming torch and started down the secret tunnel. Down winding steps, down passageways hewn in the rock he hurried, past the huge vaults filled with his precious jewels and gold. Would he be late? He was almost running.

He came to a stone wall that blocked his path. Catching his breath, he lowered a lever. The wall slid away and a sea breeze cooled Laspari's hot face. Ahead lay the moonlit bay. There was no one about.

He studied the outlines of ships in the harbour. His ship should already have docked. Was that sail large enough? Was that his ship? Peering into the shadows, he could just make out a figure descending the gangplank.

"So many years ago. This very spot. This very moment. We predicted it..." he remembered. "We planned everything. How clever we were, how brilliant! And how many years have passed, since I last saw her face..."

The figure stopped in front of him.

"Alberto?"

"Perfidia."

Laspari stared at his wife. She had hardly changed. They kissed. Could life really taste this sweet?

"I take it your fleet is about to enter the harbour?" he asked.

"Your fleet, oh great Jupiter" Perfidia replied.

Laspari smiled.

"My fleet, I forgot. I'm a God now."

"To your Priests and Servants, you are a God. They've never seen you. Only your image, carved in the rock of the volcano."

"They'll see me tomorrow."

"Yes. You will be Jupiter, God of all the Islands."

"And you Perfidia will be my Goddess Juno."

Laspari ushered his wife past the vaults of jewels and gold, to his secret study.

"Was there a boy in a goatskin tunic, with a scarf around his head, who caused you trouble in the volcano?" he asked.

"Yes," said Perfidia. "I caught him stealing our jewels. He kept trying to escape with his huge stupid friend. He stirred up trouble among the Servants. His name was Mario. I had him beaten. Why do you ask?"

"Just interested."

Laspari smiled to himself.

"Are you hungry?"

He led her into the long dining room.

"It's just as I remember it," she gasped.

"What will you have?" he asked, striding across to a table bursting with food.

Seeing the cold meats, salads, pastries, pies and fresh fruit, a thought occurred to Perfidia.

"You wouldn't try to poison me, would you, my dear husband?"

Laspari was stunned. How could she doubt him? He was about to answer, when a girl in a glittering dress appeared in the doorway.

Maria stared at the couple in the room. Was she dreaming? The man in the sparkling cloak was her father. The woman was the wicked Juno. What was happening?

Just then Sophia skidded past her into the room and fell on the floor.

"Sorry Signor, I just nipped to the loo and when I got back she was gone."

"That's enough Sophia. Now go away."

"What? Oh good. Thank you Signor, thank you," she said, bumping into Maria as she bowed out.

Laspari turned to his wife.

"This was your Mario," he informed her.

Perfidia stared at Maria and smiled.

"Oh really?"

Laspari turned to his daughter.

"Maria, meet your mother."

24. A God And Two Goddesses

Maria stared in disbelief. Juno? Juno couldn't be her mother. Her mother was dead. And besides, Juno's eyes were evil. Her mother couldn't be evil. But the face - it fitted with memories from her childhood. And Juno's dark, wavy hair - it was just like her own.

"Is it true?" she asked her father. "Is she really my mother?"

"It's true" he said.

Maria was horrified.

Perfidia saw the look on her daughter's face and laughed.

"I'd have treated you differently, had I known you were Maria. But then you'd have treated me differently, if you'd known that I was your mother. Never mind," she said, opening her arms to embrace her daughter. "All's well that ends well."

Tears of rage sprang from Maria's eyes. She lashed out, kicking and punching her mother.

"If you're my mother, why did you leave me? Why was I told that you were dead?"

"We did it for you," her father explained, pulling her away.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Perfidia. "You have got a nasty temper on you."

"You would have suffered far less pain if you hadn't run off after that thief Georgio," Laspari suggested, sitting Maria in a chair. "He was no good. You admit that now, don't you?"

"Yes," Maria admitted.

Maria knew that she had to forget Georgio. She wished she could forget everything she knew.

"Never mind," said her father. "I've got some rather good news."

"Your father is to be King of the Islands," revealed Perfidia proudly.

"God," he corrected her, slapping some cold meat onto his plate.

"What do I care about that?" mumbled Maria, feeling terribly sad.

"Well you should care!" hissed her mother, choosing the same cold meat as Laspari. "Your father will be a God and I will be his Goddess. It means that you are very lucky."

Maria thought about it.

"If there was any justice, you'd both be in prison," she said.

"That may be," growled Perfidia. "But there isn't any justice is there? Or haven't you worked that out yet?"

"Let's take our food onto the balcony to watch," her father suggested.

When Laspari looked for his plate, he realised that Perfidia had taken it. Did she still believe he was trying to poison her? Perhaps it wasn't a bad idea. Perhaps she was going to poison him. He'd have to be careful.

He put his arm around his daughter and led her onto the balcony. It was a clear starry night.

"Look down there."

He pointed to the dark town below them.

"That's where the little people live."

Maria looked.

"Is that what you want Maria?" asked her mother, stepping up beside her. "Do you want to be a little person?"

"I don't know," replied Maria. "I thought I was."

Her father smiled.

"Some of them spend their whole lives being good. But what good does it do them? They're little people, fools."

"They even believe that Gods look down and protect them," added Perfidia, laughing at the very idea.

Maria didn't laugh. She stood between her parents, staring out to sea. She didn't know what to think.

"You have to live in the real world Maria," said her father, sharply. "In the real world, cats kill birds and birds kill worms. Some live, some die. There's no justice. Do you understand?"

Maria understood nothing.

"Justice is just a idea in people's minds," explained Perfidia. "It was invented by clever people to control the stupid ones."

"Absolutely!" agreed Laspari. "There are only winners and losers. You are lucky Maria. You are a winner."

"I don't feel like a winner," said Maria.

"She's soft!" snarled Perfidia. "She doesn't deserve to be a Goddess. We're the ones who've done all the hard work."

"A Goddess?" asked Maria, suddenly feeling very weak. "I'm supposed to be a Goddess?"

"Good girl!" said her father. "You're getting the picture. I knew you'd come round."

"Becoming a Goddess is every girl's dream," said her mother.

Maria looked down at her glittering dress. Part of her wanted to throw it off, change into the goatskin tunic and run away. But she couldn't. She didn't have the strength to run away again and the dress was very beautiful.

"There's food, if you're hungry," her father suggested.

She did feel hungry. She'd never felt so hungry before.

Maria stepped inside and piled a plate high with food. As she filled a glass with wine, she saw herself in a mirror, wearing the dress full of sparkling jewels.

"Is that me?" she thought.

The possibility frightened her. She gulped back the wine and poured some more. After four glasses of wine, she stumbled back out with her food.

"Warabout the King?" she asked, slurring her words. "Duzzy know 'bout all this?"

"The King is old," her father reminded her. "I am his heir."

"He's a very sick man," said her mother. "He may even die tonight."

Maria sat down and began to eat. Her parents were talking. They were waiting for something. What was it? The wine had made her feel dizzy.

"Do you see anything?" Laspari asked his wife.

"Nothing yet," she replied.

They peered into the darkness.

A loud clattering sound made them jump. Perfidia turned to see Maria's plate rolling across the floor, food flying everywhere. Maria was slumped in the chair. She had passed out. Had she been poisoned?

Laspari saw his wife's accusing look.

"She just had too much to drink," he assured her.

Perfidia wasn't so sure. She noticed that her husband wore a large ring similar to one she wore. Perhaps his ring had poison in it too. She would have to watch out.

"There it is!" whispered Laspari.

"Time to go to work," said Perfidia.

When Maria opened her eyes, her parents were gone. She was alone. Walking to the front of the balcony, she stared down at the town. Something caught her eye - the shadows of sails in the moonlight. That's what her parents had been waiting for. It was Jupiter's fleet. Her father's fleet.

It amazed Maria to think that her parents had planned all this. They had used the war to get rich and take power. It was wicked. But the world was wicked. Did that make her wicked too?

She watched the fleet sail into the harbour.

“What's going to happen?” she thought. “Will the Servants attack? Will they kill people? I'll be alright. My father is Jupiter. My mother is Juno. No one is going to harm me. I will have whatever I want. And why not? In the world of the wicked, why shouldn't I be a Goddess?”

25. We'll All Be Dead In The Morning

It was a clear starry night as Jupiter's Fleet sailed into the harbour at Fortuna. Ship after ship docked at the quayside. Servants of Jupiter disembarked. There were thousands of them.

They scuttled through town like hoards of black beetles. Several units were dispatched to the town square, where they began building a huge platform. Other units patrolled the streets.

Hundreds swarmed into the Palace. The sound of arrows sliced the air as they took the King's men by surprise.

King Carlo was fast asleep when two Priests entered. They crept up - one each side of his bed - and whispered in his ears.

"Prepare to meet Death."

The old King's heart almost stopped. His eyes opened. Seeing the hooded men, he thought he must be dead already.

The Priests dressed him and placed his crown upon his head.

"Prepare to meet Death," they chanted and led him away.

Georgio was still clinging to the ledge in the roof of the dungeons. Pablo, Utopia, Zanni, Wiffio and his men were still huddled around Queen Olivia in the cell. He had to save them. But how? There were nine guards beneath him. What could he do against nine men?

The longer he clung to the ledge, the weaker he got. For the first time in his life Georgio felt despair.

"Give me strength," he prayed. "Give me one last chance to do something good."

Suddenly he heard the whipping sound of arrows in flight and watched the guards fall to the ground. Within seconds, cloaked figures swarmed through, stabbing any guard not yet dead. Then they were gone. Off to kill more guards elsewhere.

Georgio seized his chance. He dropped to the floor and pulled a chain of keys from around a dead guard's neck. He was about to free his friends when he heard footsteps.

"Throw them to me" hissed Wiffio.

But there was no time. Georgio scrambled back up to the ledge, just as two hooded Priests marched in with a prisoner.

Georgio couldn't believe his eyes. The prisoner was King Carlo. He watched the Priests fling the old King into the cell opposite and lock the door.

"Prepare to meet Death," they chanted.

Georgio decided then and there: He would save King Carlo. He waited for the Priests to go. But they didn't go. They stayed, guarding the King.

Staring blankly into the cell across the way, King Carlo saw a face he recognised. His wife, his Queen, Olivia. She had pulled herself up by the prison bars and was staring at him.

"Olivia."

"Carlo."

Georgio explored the ledge with his fingertips. He managed to work a small stone loose. Lowering his arm, he threw it as far as he could along the corridor. Hearing the clatter, one of the Priests went to check.

Georgio swung down and, with both feet, delivered such a powerful blow to the remaining Priest that he collapsed unconscious on the floor. The other Priest turned and rushed headlong at Georgio.

At the last moment, Georgio stepped aside, caught the Priest a swift crack on the head and sent him crashing down on top of his partner. Both out cold.

Georgio wasted no time. Even so, it took three attempts to find the right key.

"This way, Your Majesty," said Georgio, pointing to the corridor.

But King Carlo was staring at his Queen.

"Give me the keys!" commanded the King.

Obediently, Georgio handed them over.

Placing the chain around his neck, Carlo selected a key and opened Olivia's cell. He cradled the Queen in his arms.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I'm sorry too," she replied.

Carlo admitted "I was to blame".

"We were both to blame," she sighed.

Carlo insisted, "The fault was mine!"

The Queen said, "No. It was my fault as well."

"I'm the King, god dammit! Don't argue with me."

"As you wish," said Olivia and died.

King Carlo felt dreadful. He'd only been trying to say he was sorry. Why did she always have to argue? Now she was dead. He lifted up his head and let out such sobs of grief, it seemed his old body might break.

A booming sound of marching men echoed along the corridor. Georgio put his hand over the King's mouth to stifle his sobs.

"Quick!" he hissed. "Swap their clothes!"

In seconds Pablo, Utopia and Zanni had dressed the King as the Queen and the Queen as the King. They did it so quickly that, without thinking, Zanni put the key chain around Olivia's neck.

A shrill voice rang out.

"I am Death."

The prisoners looked and there, at the head of a column of Servants, stood a hooded dwarf with a face so hairy that no one could see his eyes.

Zanni recognised him instantly. It was Silvio's murderer - the tiny hooded figure who had leapt on stage and stabbed Olivia's son.

"Where is the King?" demanded Death.

The prisoners parted, revealing Olivia's body dressed in the King's clothes. Death leapt through the darkness and peered at the corpse.

"Dead already?" he screamed.

He was clearly not pleased.

As the Servants filed in and removed the body, Georgio caught sight of the keys. He watched, as Death slammed the prison door shut and disappeared.

"Just out of interest," he asked, "who put the keys around Olivia's neck?"

Slowly Zanni raised his huge hand.

"It was me."

No one could quite believe it. There was no escape. They'd had the keys. But the keys were gone.

"What on earth made you do it?" cried Wiffio.

"I didn't think," whimpered Zanni. "I've always been stupid. It used to make people laugh."

Zanni did one of his funny walks but nobody laughed.

Suddenly the broken-hearted old King looked down and realised that he was dressed in his wife's clothes. He let out a piercing scream and started trying to pull them off.

“Oh what's the point?” moaned Wiffio. “What's the point of having saved the King's life if he's still locked up? Will somebody tell me? What's the point? We'll all be dead in the morning.”

“Do shut up,” mumbled Spotty Scarlotti.

Georgio sat alone thinking painful thoughts.

“What can I do? How can I save the King? How can I do anything, stuck in this prison?... What about Pablo, Utopia, Zanni, Wiffio and his men? They've done nothing wrong. It was me... I should never have let the High Priestess go free. I knew she was bad. It was greed. I wanted the jewels... No wonder Maria hates me. She's right. I hate myself...”

Pablo noticed Georgio's distress and turned to his beloved Utopia.

“I think Georgio needs some of your special healing powers,” he said.

Utopia stood up and walked over to Georgio.

“Don't panic,” she whispered, settling down beside him.

But Georgio couldn't accept her kindness. He pushed her away and slunk off into the shadows in shame.

“How can I put things right?” he raged. “How?”

26. World Of The Wicked

When the good folk of Fortuna awoke that morning, they were shocked at what they saw. Servants of Jupiter, with black cloaks and glinting daggers, lined the streets.

Curious children, who tried to touch or talk to the Servants, were quickly pulled back by their parents. Some families hid in their homes. Others formed little groups on street corners, whispering.

Did anyone know who the cloaked figures were? Were they friends or enemies? Word spread that something was happening in the town square. People began to make their way there, to see for themselves.

Pouring into the square, they saw a huge platform with three dark thrones studded with jewels. Ten paces from the thrones stood a line of scaffolds with ropes and nooses. The whole area was surrounded by Servants.

As the sun rose in the sky, a gong sounded. The crowds stopped chattering. Slowly, the cloaked figures began to chant.

*"We are the Servants of Jupiter
Behold this day, a miracle"*

Maria heard the chanting. It gave her a thrill. Servants fussed about her, fixing her hair, makeup, dresses and jewellery. She could feel herself becoming a goddess. She had the clothes, the face, the thoughts of a goddess. She was a goddess and it felt good. Her lips moved along with the chanting outside.

*"We are the Servants of Jupiter
Behold this day, a miracle"*

Deep in the dungeons, Death, looking tinier and hairier than ever, watched as the prisoners were shackled together in chains. He felt great. So many executions, all in one day. Their wailing and moaning was music to his ears.

"Never mind," he growled. "You'll all be dead soon."

Even so, none of the men wanted to be chained beside Wiffio. Zanni's baby face was a picture of fear. Pablo couldn't stop talking.

"Don't worry," he told his beloved Utopia. "Don't worry."

But she wasn't worried.

Death stared at the dark beauty. What was it about Utopia that made him hate her the most? She smiled at him.

“You are unhappy,” she said. “Let me heal you.”

Her hand reached out. Death shrank back, hissing.

Georgio's thoughts raced. As long as King Carlo remained in disguise, there was still a chance. Thankfully the old King was quiet now. He no longer tried to tear off his dead wife's clothes. This was his punishment. Tears rolled down his cheeks and onto her dress.

“Lead on!” snarled Death.

The chain of prisoners were led from the dungeons and out into the blinding light. They were dragged from the palace to the town square and up onto the scaffolds. Georgio stared down at the sea of faces and chanting Servants.

*“We who serve the Only True Master
The Secret Face who watches over our sad little lives
Whilst His Great Plan whispers in the trees
Murmurs through the cow sheds
Howls in the storm, and like a bird in flight
Anoints us with His droppings
From a great height*

*We are the Servants of Jupiter
Down upon your knees and rejoice”*

All the Servants bowed low. Some of the townsfolk followed suit. The shattering sound of a great gong sent more to their knees. A thousand crows were released to the sky. They wheeled about, screeching, until every last person bowed down.

Then the Servants proclaimed:

*“Behold this day, a miracle
God of Gods - Jupiter!”*

The townsfolk peered up at the platform. They saw a figure in a great dark cloak, sewn with silver sun, moon and stars, trimmed with golden patterns of fire. They couldn't help cheering.

“Jupiter!”

It was a miracle!

Then something even more surprising happened. The God spoke.

His voice rumbled like distant thunder.

“Good people of Fortuna. I have lived among you for many years.”

What did he mean? They'd never seen him before.

"I went by the name of Signor Alberto Laspari."

Laspari was a God? They'd never have guessed.

"Behold the Goddess Juno. You knew her as my wife Perfidia."

They stared at the Goddess, who shimmered like a diamond.

"Perfidia?" croaked an elderly woman. "I thought she was dead!"

"Be quiet you fool," murmured others. "Goddesses don't die."

"For many years Juno and I have been separated. Why?"

Nobody knew.

"We separated as part of a plan to bring peace to your quaint little islands. Now we will rule over you, as if we were mortal. We shall be your King and Queen."

"It's a miracle!" chanted the Servants of Jupiter.

"It's a miracle!" repeated the crowd in amazement.

"It's a trick!" yelled the old man who sold Miracle Liquid.

"Behold our daughter, who brought a traitor to justice."

Maria stepped forward, her dress glittering with tiny gemstones. She heard the cheer go up. She saw the hats thrown in the air. She felt calm. It was as if she'd always been a Goddess.

A voice from the crowd called out.

"Where is the King?"

"Read the will!" bellowed Jupiter.

A Priest stepped forward, unrolled a large document and read out:

"I, King Carlo, name Alberto Laspari as my heir to the throne."

Jupiter waited for the Priest to withdraw. Then he turned to the crowd.

"It is my sad duty to inform you that your King died peacefully in the night."

The old King was dead? No one uttered a word. They were stunned.

Georgio seized his chance.

"The King is alive!" he cried. "Look!"

He pulled back Olivia's cape and revealed the silent, sobbing face of King Carlo.

27. Death

"It's the King."

"He's a prisoner."

"Release him."

The crowd surged forward.

"Servants of Jupiter defend us!" roared the suddenly nervous God.

Those at the front of the crowd saw the Servants draw their swords, but couldn't stop in time. Pushed from behind, they plunged straight into the Servants' blades. Screams filled the air. The crowd fell back. There were bodies on the ground.

"Silence!" thundered Jupiter, regaining control. "Behold Death."

The tiny hairy figure of Death leapt onto the platform.

"String up the impostor!" ordered Jupiter.

Within seconds, Death had unchained the sad old King and placed his neck in a noose.

"Maria!" shouted a desperate voice.

Maria looked. It was Georgio.

"Maria forgive me. I betrayed you. I betrayed my country. But don't let the King die because of me."

Maria refused to listen. Goddesses could do that.

"Silence the prisoner!" boomed Jupiter the God.

Death flew at Georgio, striking him a heavy blow across the face. Maria flinched.

Wiping away the blood, Georgio went on.

"I've tried to make up for it. I saved the King from being murdered last night."

This news sent shock-waves through the crowd.

Someone cried out.

"Laspari's no God, he's a murderer."

It was the people's turn to chant.

"Murderer! Murderer!..."

Death placed the tip of his sword at Georgio's throat.

"Command me oh God to slice this traitor's head from his body."

Maria stared at her father.

Laspari opened his mouth but no sound came out. If he gave the command, he'd be seen as a murderer. If he let Georgio continue, Maria might be swayed. He mustn't let that happen. But even as he tried to think, the wretched boy kept calling.

"They are your parents but they are wicked. See how your Father had these good people killed. Think of what the future holds."

Maria worked hard to keep the smile of a Goddess upon her face. She felt as if her head would explode.

"Let Georgio die," she told herself. "Let them all die but let me be a Goddess and have nice things."

Laspari found his voice.

"String up the traitor with the impostor!" he cried.

Even as Death unchained him, Georgio kept pleading.

"Maria, you are not cruel. Speak the truth. Save the King."

"Stop!"

Maria hadn't even realised she'd spoken. But everyone was staring at her.

"Stop."

It was as if her voice was speaking for her.

"It's true. My parents tricked King Carlo. They tricked Queen Olivia. They tricked all of us..."

"Be quiet, Maria!" snapped her father.

But Maria couldn't stop.

"They provided both sides with weapons. Thousands have died to make them rich..."

"Shut up, you hell-child!" hissed her mother.

"My parents are not Gods, they are devils and I'm a devil too..."

Tears poured down Maria's cheeks.

"She's hysterical!" shrieked Laspari. "Silence her!"

A Priest put his hand over Maria's mouth to shut her up. She bit his finger and twisted away, calling out.

"Servants of Jupiter! You remember me."

She spun a scarf around her head.

"I was Mario."

The Servants stared. They remembered the lad in the goatskin tunic with the scarf around his head. Was this beautiful Goddess the same person?

"We were going to escape from the volcano together," Maria reminded them.
"Do you remember?"

There was a moment of silence. Then the Servants chanted as one.

"Yes. We remember."

It was uncanny.

"Stop her!" barked Laspari.

But not one of the Servants moved to obey.

"Instead I was tortured on the orders of my own Mother."

The crowd gasped. Torture your own daughter? It was unthinkable.

"Kill her! I order it!" screeched Perfidia.

But nobody moved and nobody spoke.

"Look at the poor King," said Maria. "Won't someone help him down?"

Two Servants stepped up to remove the noose from King Carlo's neck.

But Death sprang forward. He would not be cheated. He grabbed at the rope to strangle the King. Georgio leapt on him. They fell to the floor. Death managed to get his hands around Georgio's throat.

Georgio twisted and writhed but the tiny man's hands were amazingly strong. They wouldn't let go. They squeezed tighter and tighter. He couldn't breathe...

"Somebody help him!" Maria pleaded.

But everyone was afraid of Death. She would have to save Georgio herself.

Before she could move, she felt an arm about her waist. A dagger appeared at her throat. Her Mother's voice whispered into her ear.

"Don't move a muscle Maria, my sweet. I would just love to kill you."

28. Funny-Looking Chickens

Alberto Laspari saw no one was looking and stepped back into the shadows. If he got rid of this robe, he could disappear in the crowd, slip back to his mansion, to his gold and his jewels.

Descending the platform, he happened to spy the old man who sold Miracle Liquid. Signor Laspari crept up beside him, slid a dagger in his chest and as the man fell, removed his turquoise coat.

"Over here!" called Zanni.

Georgio heard the giant's pretty voice and, with his last ounce of strength, rolled over. Zanni lifted his great foot and trod on Death's head. Slowly, Death released his grasp on Georgio's throat until he could breathe again.

Coming to his senses, Georgio caught sight of someone in the crowd. The man who sold that horrible liquid. Georgio recognised the coat, but looking at the face... It was Laspari. Georgio jumped into the crowd.

Death revived. He wriggled free of Zanni's foot and was about to leap after Georgio, when he felt a hand upon his shoulder. He turned and saw Utopia. She was draining him of evil, but evil was all he had.

Death felt his energy fizzle away. The last thing he saw was the face of Utopia smiling at him. The last thing he heard was his own death cry.

The scream was so loud, that everyone put their hands to their ears. For a second, Perfidia relaxed her grip on her daughter. Maria grabbed her mother's arm and wrenched herself free. The dagger clattered to the floor between them. Perfidia laughed and drew her sword. Maria couldn't reach the dagger in time. She was defenceless.

Suddenly the sky seemed to rain swords, from Servants and other well-wishers. As Maria knelt to pick up a sword, Perfidia lunged. Maria sidestepped.

"Well mother, you had me trained by the world's finest swordsman. Now you will see what I've learned."

"He wasn't so good!" cried Perfidia, parrying. "I was the best!"

"Perhaps. But I am young and you have lost your touch."

They circled each other. Mother and daughter, radiant Goddesses, mirror images. Somewhere in the crowd, Georgio caught a glimpse of the turquoise coat.

"There he is! Grab him!"

Pushing his way through, Laspari saw people who recognised him. The gaps between faces seemed to close like a tightening noose. He sensed that Georgio was right behind him. He'd have to turn and fight. He would wipe the oafish grin from Georgio's face for good.

Laspari drew what he thought was his sword. It wasn't his sword. It was a bottle of Miracle Liquid. People burst out laughing. Georgio placed the tip of his sword at Laspari's chest.

"Somebody tie him up!"

Everyone seemed to find something with which to tie Laspari. Men tied his legs with leather straps and twine. Women bound his arms with colourful shawls. Servants of Jupiter donated their belts. Two little children decked him with strips of green and yellow cotton. One old lady ran round and round, wrapping him up in bright red wool. Everyone joined in, until Laspari looked less like a God and more like a huge, funny-looking chicken.

On the platform, Maria and her mother matched each other, blow for blow. Perfidia was having to concentrate hard. Her daughter knew all the tricks and she was strong. As their swords crashed together, Perfidia found it hard to not to drop her sword.

Just then she saw an enormous chicken and, for a moment, lost her concentration. Maria lunged at Perfidia, knocking her to the floor and wounding her shoulder. The crowd saw the blood, saw Maria's sword at Perfidia's throat. Was it possible? Could a daughter kill her mother?

"Tie her up!" cried Maria.

In seconds the Goddess Juno had turned into a chicken, just like her husband. The two chickens were put side by side. Everyone in the town square fell about laughing and doing chicken impressions.

Maria and Georgio ran to the scaffold. They cut the old King down and carried him to the great throne. There they revived him with a glass of Miracle Liquid.

It worked wonders. When King Carlo got to his feet, the whole town cheered.

"Good people of Fortuna, it is time for justice," he warbled.

"That's not the King's voice," remarked a voice from the crowd.

"No," said another. "It's Olivia's voice."

People gasped.

"It's a bloomin' miracle," they whispered amongst themselves.

King Carlo had heard the change in his voice. He had heard Olivia speak. He didn't know how, but he knew that, from now on, she would speak for both of them.

"Now," warbled the King, turning to face Laspari and Perfidia. "What have you two chickens got to say for yourselves?"

"I'm innocent!" cried Signor Alberto Laspari. "I was happy just being rich. It was Perfidia who wanted power."

"It's my fault is it? You worm!" shrieked Perfidia.

She appealed to King Carlo.

"Alberto planned everything. He made me do it. I just wanted to stay at home and look after my lovely young daughter."

Everyone booed. No one believed her.

"Lock those two chickens in the dungeons!" King Carlo commanded.

Everyone clucked and flapped their elbows as Laspari and Perfida were led away.

No one clucked louder than Laspari's maid, Sophia. She had always been afraid of the Signor. Now he was gone. She felt as if her life could begin.

29. Song Of The Islands

King Carlo silenced his subjects with a wave of his hand.

“Laspari and Perfidia fuelled this war. But we, your King and Queen, were also to blame. The real heroes are Maria and Georgio. As a reward we will grant each of them one wish. What is your wish?”

Georgio spoke first.

“Your Highness, my wish is to be allowed to ask for Maria's hand in marriage.”

The crowd looked from Georgio to Maria.

“That is also my wish,” said Maria.

Everywhere eyes twinkled, mouths grinned. As the happy couple kissed, husbands embraced wives and children cuddled up to their parents. It might have seemed a bit sickening if you weren't part of it. But everyone was part of it. Utopia kissed Pablo and Zanni kissed Spotty Scarlotti.

Queen Olivia's voice whispered inside King Carlo's head.

“See how Maria and Georgio kiss. Whatever went wrong, we couldn't spoil this. The world must move on. It's time to prepare...”

King Carlo raised his hands. The crowd hushed.

“When we are gone,” he announced, “Georgio will be King and Maria will be Queen.”

Townfolk and Servants roared their approval. Georgio and Maria looked to each other for strength.

“Now,” said the King, “I think it's time for me to perform a wedding!”

One wedding became three weddings. Utopia and Pablo also wanted to get married. So did Sophia. She wanted to marry Wiffio, even though they'd only met a few minutes ago, when everyone was kissing. She'd found his smell so overwhelming that she couldn't help falling in love.

Twilight came on and torches were lit in the town square.

“Step forward Sophia and Wiffio,” commanded the King.

Sophia and Wiffio stepped forward.

“Step forward Utopia and Pablo.”

Utopia and Pablo stepped forward.

“Step forward Maria and Georgio.”

A roar went up as Maria and Georgio stepped forward.

The whole town stood in silence throughout the simple ceremony. It seemed to unite them all. The older ones recalled the wedding of Olivia and Carlo many years ago.

Carlo himself felt his life pass before him. He felt closer to Olivia than ever before. It was almost unbearable. He was relieved when he came to the closing words.

“I now pronounce you husbands and wives.”

Wiffio and Sophia kissed. Utopia and Pablo kissed. Maria and Georgio kissed.

“It is customary now to have a party,” said the King. “But with your permission, I will retire. It's been rather an eventful day.”

King Carlo congratulated the couples and left, giving Georgio a curious look.

“Did you see the way he looked at me?” asked Georgio.

But nobody heard him.

Georgio watched, as stalls opened up, selling food and drink. Others began a roaring trade, selling colourful clothes to the former Servants of Jupiter.

A band struck up. People started dancing. Sophia and Wiffio walked into the centre and stood beneath the stars, with their arms about each other. They danced without moving.

Zanni did a crazy jig. All the children laughed and tried to copy him. Utopia performed a whirling acrobatic dance with the two Alonzos. Pablo sang his heart out.

Georgio watched it all, as if in a dream. He had no reason to believe that life might be wonderful and yet it seemed possible.

Maria walked passed him, carrying a tray of food.

“I'm going to visit my parents,” she said, kissing him. “I'll be back soon.”

She threaded her way through the crowd, passing Enzo, Tony and Spotty Scarlotti, their glasses raised, singing endless rousing choruses of “Song Of The Islands”. She could still hear them as she made her way up to the palace.

There was nobody in the palace. Everyone was at the party. The only sounds she heard were her own footsteps as she descended the stone stairs to the dungeons. Stepping over the bodies of dead guards, Maria glanced into the first cell she came to and gasped.

There lay her parents. Were they asleep? Something was wrong. She dropped the tray of food and ran over.

“Mother!” she cried. “Father!”

Neither of them moved.

Feverishly she searched for keys. Finding some around a dead guard's neck, she tried each key until one of them turned the lock. She rushed into the cell. Her father was stone cold. So was her mother. For minutes her hands moved between them, until her mind had to accept the truth.

They were dead. Her parents were dead. There was no sign of a wound on either of them and yet they were dead. The sound of her sobbing rang through the palace.

Maria had no idea how much time passed before Georgio's arms were around her. Seeing that Laspari and Perfidia were dead, he held Maria close.

"How did it happen?" she whispered.

Georgio pointed to a large ring on Laspari's finger. The jewel hung open on a tiny hinge, revealing a secret compartment in which there was still some fine green dust.

"Poison," said Georgio. "Look."

Maria saw that her mother wore a similar ring. It too was open.

She shuddered.

"But what happened?"

"It's hard to say. Either they poisoned themselves or they poisoned each other."

She stared at Georgio, trying to understand. He shook his head.

"We may never know."

"What's that noise?" asked Maria, suddenly alert.

Something was happening on the floor above. Maria and Georgio leapt up the stairs. At the top they collided with courtiers who cried out.

"The King is dead!"

Georgio and Maria raced along the corridor. Entering the great throne room, they stopped short. King Carlo, still dressed in Queen Olivia's clothes, was sitting on his throne, dead but smiling. Around him, the map of his Islands flickered. Every last candle was lit.

As word spread that King Carlo had died, everyone flocked to the palace gates. Georgio and Maria felt fragile, more like two orphans than King and Queen. Hearing the cries outside, they stepped onto the balcony.

When the crowd saw their new King and Queen, a great cheer rang out from the crowd. It echoed across the Islands and flew up into the starry skies. If there were any Gods or Goddesses up there, they must surely have heard.