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Worshippers

Hope of Freelandia



Kent Larson



Worshippers: Hope of Freelandia

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The Freelandia Trilogy:

Book 1 - *Watchers: Guardians of Freelandia*

Book 2 - *Worshipers: Hope of Freelandia*

Book 3- *Warriors: Darkness over Freelandia*

A Note To Parents

This is the second installment of the Freelandia Trilogy. In Book one, we were introduced to Maria, a young blind orphan girl who has a supernatural singing ability. It is a gifting from God, a spiritual gifting the likes of which her world has not yet experienced. It touches not only people's ears, but down deep into their souls.

The first book takes place entirely within the highly secluded country of Freelandia, a land geographically isolated and blessed immensely with prosperity and peace for hundreds of years. Biblical New Testament spiritual gifts are widely exercised and even expected as being part of ordinary Christian life. In the first book, Maria's gift is discovered and she comes to live in the Keep, the capital of Freelandia. Her astounding gifting becomes widely known when she performs with a world renowned singer at a special concert. Within a short time Maria is befriended by quite a number of the most important people in the country. As she is taken in as a very special apprentice within the Academy of Music, life would seem rather idyllic ...except for the ominous Dominion, a country bent on world conquest with Freelandia standing in its way.

We also met Ethan, the son of the Chancellor who also has a most unusual temporal supernatural ability, which is used to thwart an assassination attempt on his father.

Book One ends with Grand Master Gaeten, Ethan's exceptionally skilled mentor and one of Maria's benefactors, heading into Dominion territory to spy out their plans against Freelandia.

In Book Two we follow Gaeten as he uncovers information about the invasion the Dominion is planning. We are also introduced to the School of Engineers, where God's Spirit is actively at work with scientific creativity and inventiveness. Maria, meanwhile, finds that her gifting extends well beyond singing and impacts the entire Academy, and then the entire Keep, the country of Freelandia and even beyond. Ethan and the Freelandian navy are attacked by the Dominion, and God's people learn of a potent spiritual weapon to use against their true enemy.

You are invited to join the adventure. Please bring an open mind to the incredible awesomeness of our God. If you catch a spark of what living with the Holy Spirit's power might be like, if it makes you give glory to our wonderful loving God in any way, then all of the efforts to write it and get it into your hands were well worthwhile.

Kent Larson

Awestruck worshiper of the Most High God

2013

Acknowledgements

Writing a story that grows into a three volume trilogy is no small undertaking. I wish to thank my family for their patience both in releasing my time to write/edit and for their patience as I worked to create each subsequent installment ... just think what reading this story would be like if you had to wait days for each new chapter! I also want to thank the fellowship group from my local church who weekly encouraged me to “keep going”.

As the books took shape, one person in particular had the vision to see them published. A special thanks to Bruce Malone and *Search for the Truth Ministries*. Without a brother coming alongside to lead me through the publication process – I’m not sure these books would ever have become a reality. Thanks also to his wife Robin for the many encouraging words, the expert help of their daughter-in-law Beth for content editing and ideas for streamlining the storyline, and to Rebecca Ross for bringing the story alive with her beautifully detailed illustrations.

Finally, I would like to express thanks and appreciation for the encouragement of too many others to name – fellow believers who took the time to read and comment on the early versions of this story. May God reward your efforts as these books bless many lives.

Dedication

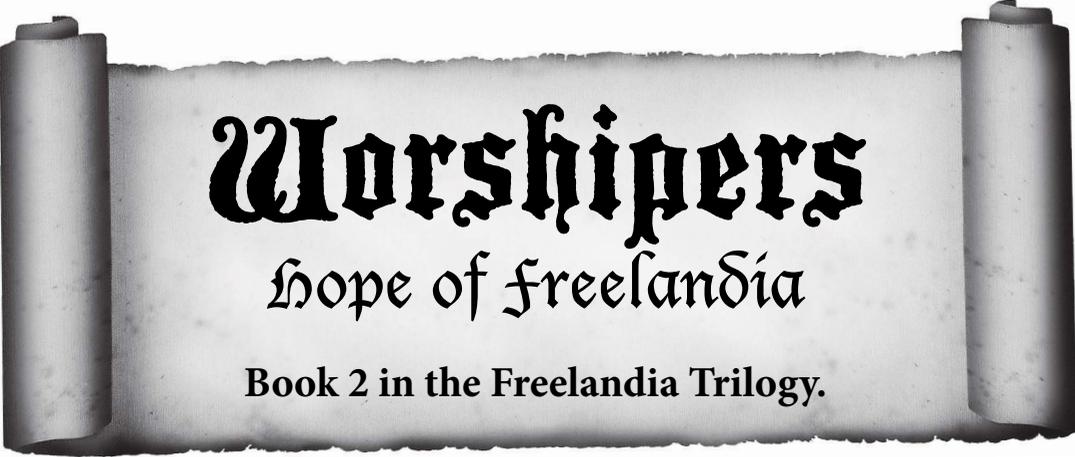
This book has been written to bring the glory of Jesus. To God be the glory for the things He has done! Praise to Emmanuel (the God-who-is-with-us), which can also be understood to mean “God-in-us”. What a concept for every Christian, “God-in-me”!

About the Author



*The author and his family: wife Sue, sons Ben and Matt,
daughters Sarah and Rachel (son Jonathan is not pictured)*

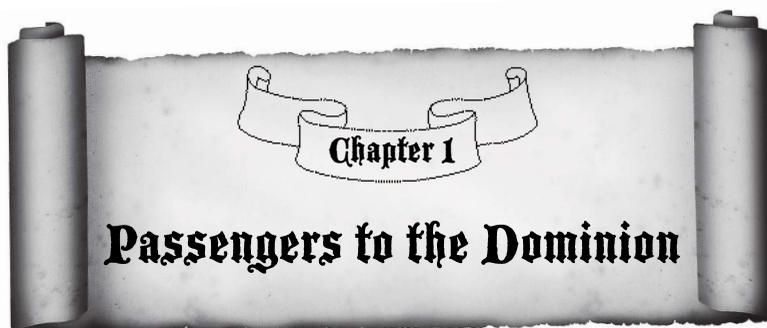
Rent Larson's occupation may not be what you would expect for a writer of Christian fiction with a theme centered on the praise and worship of God. He is a material scientist at a leading chemical company. But he sees no conflict between these, as science proclaims the wonder of our Creator at every level for those who would simply acknowledge Him. The author and his family live in the middle of lower Michigan on nearly five acres - surrounded by a forest filled with animals - at the edge of where the Michigan population tapers off into a rural and rustic setting. On quiet evenings he and his family can step out onto their back porch, gaze at the starry host above, and feel even closer to the God who created it all.

A black and white image of a scroll with a torn edge, unrolled to reveal text. The scroll is held by two cylindrical rollers on the left and right sides. The text is centered on the scroll.

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Hope of Freelandia

Book 2 in the Freelandia Trilogy.



Gaeten carefully felt his way up the stairwell onto the moderately rolling deck of the Dominion merchant vessel that was taking him incognito away from his beloved Freelandia and into the heart of enemy controlled lands to learn about their plans for conquest. Gaeten had no way of knowing if the sailors were just as they seemed, but he assumed that at least some were disguised Dominion soldiers or spies. That did not particularly concern him. He certainly was a spy, and very much more than a simple soldier. And his disguise was nearly foolproof. After all, who would ever suspect an obviously blind, poor old man, one who had complained loudly to the captain the second day of the voyage that some scallywag had pilfered through his battered chest during the night and stolen the few coins he had saved up?

It only took a little exaggeration to stumble out onto the deck, his thin reed cane tapping along as he staggered his way to a side railing. Gaeten ignored the jeers and snickers the sailors made at his slow and awkward steps. Half-way toward his goal a mop handle was silently thrust just ahead of his feet. It was held by the sailor Gaeten had internally nicknamed Garlic Gone Bad, for he always reeked of days-old garlic. GGB, as the blind man thought of him, seemed to dog him around the ship, always trying to cause a trip or other accident. It was getting highly annoying. One of these days, Gaeten planned on showing the miscreant that it was exceptionally reckless to mess with a Grand Master of the elite Freelandian Watchers. Gaeten's lips curled into a dangerous smile. Maybe that time was now, at least in part.

Having sensed the movement, Gaeten had a clear picture in his mind of where the mop handle was. He pretended to stumble and it would have taken a highly acute observer to follow the exact movements of his feet as



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he half-fell forward over the handle to regain his sure footing. While the offending sailor may not have exactly noticed the fancy footwork, he surely did notice the effect. Gaeten had landed one foot down on the end of the handle while the heel of his other foot had hooked backward to propel it sharply upward.

The blind spy was pleasingly rewarded with a loud “Oof” as the mop head caught the unwitting aggressor directly in the face and from the resulting guffaws of the other sailors laughing at the spectacle it caused.

Gaeten smiled more cheerfully and continued on as though nothing untoward had occurred, following his original path to a far more amiable encounter. “The sunshine is rather pleasant today, isn’t it ma’am.”

The middle-aged woman turned and smiled at the much older gentleman. Realizing he could not see it, she quickly responded back. “Yes, and the air is so very fresh out at sea. It surely beats staying down in that smelly hold. But tell me, isn’t it somewhat dangerous out on the deck for ... for someone like you?”

Gaeten smiled warmly. “Yes, but danger is my middle name!” He punctuated that exclamation with a deep feigned cough that would have done a professional actor proud.

“Oh ... oh Mr. Gunter! My dolly Samantha wanted to come out to see the water and waves! Maybe she might even see a flying fish!” The owner of the high pitched sweet voice was the woman’s little daughter, who had found a sure friend in the old blind man. A friend and an unknown protector. Several times during the night Gaeten had loudly snored and rolled about on his bed near these two females just as one of the sailors had been about to rummage through their belongings during the night.

“Well, be careful Samantha does not decide to go for a swim!” Gaeten was leaning on the railing now, filling his lungs with the fresh salty air.

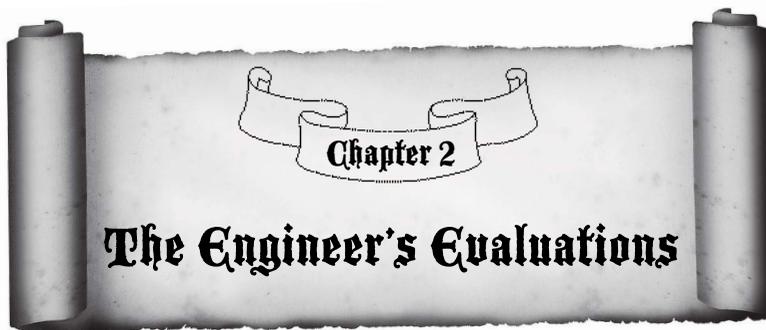
“Oh, she would never do that! She always holds onto me really tight. Just you watch! She likes me to hold her way over the edge so she can pretend to fly in the air over the water. Why just yesterday she ... AHHH!”

The deck pitched as it encountered a larger wave, shoving them all hard against the rail as that side of the ship leaned heavily down toward the water. The shock startled the little girl and she lost her grip on her precious possession.

Passengers to the Dominion

Gaeten's response was pure reflexive action. His awareness of his surroundings was often considerably more advanced than a sighted person, and movement much too fast for anyone to clearly see his hand shoot out to catch the doll mere inches below where it had been dropped. It was not until he had handed it back to its rightful owner that he even considered how his action may have jeopardized his mission.

The little girl was half-sobbing and half overflowing with thanks to her doll's savior as her mother and Gaeten ushered her back below decks. Just before descending they passed the angry garlicky-smelling sailor nursing a bloody nose who watched them with eyes wide, wondering what he had really just witnessed. His fellow Dominion soldier-sailors ought to be rather interested that the old blind man was not quite the near-invalid he seemed to act like.



So, what brings you into my office at this hour?” Duncan had glanced up from the reports he was reading to see his wife Lydia come gliding in with her usual grace. It was a very welcome distraction.

Lydia smiled. “I just spent some time with Master Warden James. He is recuperating well enough from the wound he received from the Dominion assassin’s arrow, though I think it will be a few weeks until he is ready to put in a full day’s work. He asked me to stop by to help discern who should be delegated to lead several important projects that need immediate attention if we are to be even reasonably well prepared for a not-to-distant Dominion attack. I thought it was a great idea to not only ask for God’s guidance, but then to faithfully utilize giftings He has already given to assist with the selections. There are other discerners he could have picked, but James said it would diminish decision dissention if the Chancellor’s wife were actively involved in each case. God was quite clear on the choices too – the leadings were strong and clear on all of them ... except one.”

Duncan looked surprised. “Oh, what was that project about?”

“James wants someone to immediately begin assessing the projects and ideas of the engineers. It seems the Director of Engineering told him that there have been many new ideas, far too many to seriously work on, and so priority had been given to public sector works and none that might support our military defenses for quite a long time. James got the impression the Director might not be able to link the ideas to the needs of defending Freelandia. Furthermore, James felt that the formal procedure for project approvals was, well, overly institutionalized and lacked the speed and flexibility required when the Dominion threat seems so imminent. James had several of his senior Wardens and Watchers as candidates for doing

the assessment, though he was not confident they could do it to the level required. We both agreed this could be extremely important and even critical to our defense. It did not seem to me that God was directing us toward any of those candidates, though the magnitude of the importance was surely impressed upon me.

So, my dear, I checked with your secretary and cleared out your afternoon schedule tomorrow. You and I will go meet with the senior Engineers to get an overview ourselves of some of their projects and ideas!”

Duncan’s eyes had gone wide and he straightened his back. “Lydia! You can’t just take over my schedule like that! I have meetings with the Council members who were giving rallies out in the district towns, and then I have several planning sessions! Really, this is not like you! Why do you think this meeting with the engineers is more important?”

“Well ...” Lydia’s eyes sparkled in merriment. “It was not my idea at all. As James and I were discussing what to do, I had a clear stirring in my spirit and I heard His voice say ‘Go!’ I saw a vision of us walking into the engineering headquarters. So, my dear, unless God tells you otherwise, I think we have a date!”

Duncan pushed back from his desk and smiled as the momentary tension melted away. “I will pray about it too, though I think it is pretty unlikely He would give me a countervailing direction! And you know, it might even be rather fun – certainly far different than our normal activities. Living with a discerner is never dull! Or perhaps more correctly, living by actively expecting and following the Spirit’s daily and even hourly guidance is never dull! Is James sending one of his senior assistants too?”

“He wasn’t sure. He said the problem was that few Watchers were really good strategists with imaginations – they tend to stick with tried-and-true methods that are often the best for standard warfare. However, James was thinking that the Dominion will NOT come with standard warfare techniques as the Watchers are typically taught. So he needs someone who is both highly practical and yet rather imaginative, who can assess how well a new technology might work even if it is developed for something non-military. They will also need to deal with the requirements for total reliability in situations where what can go wrong usually does. At least, that is how James said it. Oh, and he said he also needed someone who can work with ‘thick-headed stubborn perfectionists who don’t have the

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slightest idea of what is really important.’ I think he was referring to the engineers, but then again Mesha had just walked into the room and I was not entirely sure if the reference was to the engineers or to a certain Master Healer who has been forcing rest on a very unwilling patient!”

Lydia grinned at the thought and then continued. “So I don’t know if we will have accompaniment or not. Either way, I think you and I will be welcomed pretty well by the engineers – you have been quite supportive of their work and have funded many more projects than any of your predecessors.”

“Yes, and we have all been the better for it. A few of those projects have tremendously improved crop yields, and their sanitation and water distribution systems have made the Keep the cleanest, most modern large city in the entire world. Some ideas have seemed truly inspired by God.”

“Well, tomorrow perhaps we will see more of such inspiration.”

“Tomorrow afternoon it is then.”



“You have got to be the orneriest, most obstinate and obstructionist patient I have ever had the displeasure to argue with!” Mesha stood glowering at the seated James a moment longer and then continued. “You are in NO shape to go anywhere, not even for just a few hours! You will wear yourself completely out and then want to come crawling back here for our tender loving care and mercy. I tell you, if you walk or hobble out the front door I don’t know if I will EVER let your stubborn hide grace the doors again!”

James glowered right back. “Is that a promise, your wind-bagginess? If I had known that I would have tried leaving already!”

“Master Warden, you surely try my patience!”

“Master Healer, you should try *being* your own patient! I can’t let Chancellor Duncan and Lydia go off to the School of Engineering just by themselves, and I just can’t find the right person to send in my place. This is a VITAL meeting; it could be one of the most important to the very future of Freelandia! If it kills me, then so be it – I won’t live a second longer than God wants me to anyway. Now you can help me, or you can hinder me, but with you or in spite of you, I AM GOING!”

The Engineer's Evaluations

James looked on with fuming eyes and bunched muscles. It did not impress Mesha one bit, but it was obvious the Warden had totally made up his mind to go, and fighting it further was not going to accomplish anything useful.

“Alright Master Warden. You win.” Mesha sighed resignedly. He still had one trump card to play, and he wanted the maximum effect. “I should have known better than to pick a fight with the head Watcher in Freelandia. I will help you in whatever way I can. But I will ask for two small favors. I realize you believe this to be an extremely important meeting, but if the strain sets you back very far you know you will have several more weeks here ... under my care.”

James looked smug at his victory, but that faded slightly into suspicion. “What favors?”

“Oh, nothing much, really. Just that I want you to promise to only stay as long as absolutely necessary – and please try to make it only a few hours – for the longer term sake of Freelandia? You really are needed back at your post in full health as soon as possible.”

“Ooookayyy. You mentioned two?”

“Oh, well ... I just think I should send one of my assistants along to help you out – you know, in case your leg starts acting up. You wouldn't want those engineers to see you fall over! And if you get over-tired you wouldn't want to fall asleep in front of them, now would you? That person would be your assistant for the meeting.”

“Well ... yes ... I suppose so.” James was somewhat suspicious – it seemed that Mesha was giving up much too easily.

“Ok then. Since you are graciously granting my two favors, I will fully support your *request* to go to the meeting. I will have your clothes sent immediately. I do want you to eat a good balanced lunch before you go, and I will instruct my nurse to be ready to give you some pain medication if your leg acts up – and maybe some stimulant if you get too drowsy. Remember, that poison is still not totally out of your system. You have been taking naps several times a day and your body needs that to heal properly!”

“I have taken RESTS, not ‘naps!’ And can I have some real food for lunch, not the leafy fruity rabbit food I have had to swallow down since being here?”

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“My, you are testy. Give you an inch and you want a mile! I will see what we can cook up for you – maybe something spicier and with some greater substance?”

“Yes ... YES! A slab of rare meat would be superb, but even some hot chili would taste powerfully good right now.”

“Let me see. I will send an assistant with your clothes and see about your meal. I will stop by again before you leave.” Mesha walked out with somewhat slumped shoulders, but as soon as he closed the door he straightened back up with a steely glint in his eyes. He sent an assistant to get the Warden’s clothes and then another to get a carriage ready. Then he grinned, rubbing his hands together, and called for Head Nurse Abigail. The Master Warden had agreed to an assistant, but Mesha had the right to choose which one.



The School of Engineering was a beehive of activity. Each major project leader was scheduled to give a brief update, and for some reason the Master Warden had said he wanted to have a short show-and-tell of every idea that had been dreamed up and had at least a semi-workable model. That had resulted in a flurry of activity as dozens of apprentice engineers scrambled to build all sorts of contraptions and scale models. The Director of the Engineering School had cleared out their largest meeting room and set up tables and chairs in a “U” shape so that presenters could bring their inventions and ideas into the center where everyone could see and hear. The problem had been who to invite. Certainly every Master Level Engineer had to be present and maybe some of the retired Masters as well. The most senior apprentices should also be invited, and there were a few quite promising mid-level apprentices too. The problem was not in finding worthy attendees.

What was even a bigger problem was the other rule that the Warden had made, and it was still a source of frustration. He had explicitly wanted contrarian viewpoints – he wanted what he had called “healthy debate” and not just “status quo” brainstorming. Master Brentwood, the Director, liked to run a tidy ship, as he was fond of saying. He had in place a well organized methodology for evaluating projects that involved several lay-

The Engineer's Evaluations

ers of formal project reviews so that what finally was funded was sure to deliver. The School had a success rate of over ninety percent on the couple of projects a year it delivered, and quite a few had proven to be highly beneficial to the welfare of Freelandia.

Of course, there were bound to be complainers – usually mid-level engineers who chafed at the slow progress of ideas and inventions that wound their way up through the formal channels. They eventually learned that you just couldn't work on everything, and low risk projects usually got the best funding. 'Slow and steady wins the race' was more than a motto – it was the guiding principle enforced on the School of Engineers from the top down. Therefore, to actually encourage opposing debate rather than the gentlemanly discussion he demanded was not to his liking at all. No sir, not one little bit.

So the Master Warden wanted a token contrarian present? Perhaps if he invited a rather outlandish eccentric the Warden would more easily see his mistake, and likely as not get fed up and dismiss the fellow within the first hour. And the Master Engineer knew just the person. He'd invite that young upstart Robert Macgregor! He was only tolerated at the School because, well, though he did not like to admit it, the man was a genius – but in a confoundingly eccentric way. He could fix nearly anything, often after just looking at it or hearing the details of a problem. He had often discovered flaws in designs that no one else saw or even believed were possible – until working models or even full scale units broke down and proved him correct. Yet he was nearly impossible to work with, and his thick accent supposedly from whatever country it was that he said he was born in did not help either. He seemed to flout the established norms and rules with abandon. He was wildly imaginative and was constantly babbling about some new idea or another – not that any ever made it through formal reviews ... only rarely were any even submitted! And during the few reviews that he was reluctantly invited to, he was always interrupting with some crazy notions or suggestions. His critiques were useful, but few of the senior engineers whom the Director had personally groomed listened to him beyond those, and it was highly unlikely he would ever get past Apprentice Level Six – certainly not during Brentwood's tenure as Director of the Engineering School.

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Yes, Macgregor was just the person to fulfill the Warden's ill-conceived request. Brentwood wondered how many minutes it would take before Macgregor would be kicked right out of the meeting! Perhaps that might finally make this odd-ball engineer come to his senses and conform!



Warden James was sputtering aplenty as he, Chancellor Duncan, Lydia and Head Nurse Abigail pulled up to the School of Engineering Headquarters building. He had to endure the indignity for a Watcher ... for the Master Warden no less ... to arrive in a *carriage*! He would have far preferred to ride a horse, or even to walk – but Mesha has been insistent, and admittedly this was indeed far easier on his leg. But it just was not a proper way for a Watcher to arrive at an important meeting. Harrumph!

The four of them entered the building – and James turned red when Abigail held the door open for him as he limped up – and were escorted to the meeting room. Master Brentwood ushered them to the front table with James and Duncan sitting in the center, flanked by Lydia and Abigail. Abigail made a fuss, and a young apprentice scrambled to find a short stool so James could keep his wounded leg somewhat elevated.

Most of the engineers were already in the room, with a few others wandering in to take their places. James noted that they were definitely dressed up compared to when he had visited before. He guessed that formal reviews required more formal attire. Precisely at the starting time for the meeting, Master Brentwood stood.

“Ahem! Please engineers, each of you take your seats promptly! This is not grade school! Several of you are tardy – that is NOT the way to start such an important meeting as this!” He glared sternly at the late comers. “Each Master Engineer will present on the projects they are in charge of, followed by the lesser ranks present in the room. The others will wait in the antechamber to this meeting room and will be called in one by one when it is their turn. Now, be assured, we have a tight schedule and so we will all be punctual to our allotted time – you all know how I feel about that and I will personally enforce the rule.” Brentwood noticed that the furthest chair on the end was empty – the seat he had reserved for Mr. Macgregor.

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“Good,” he thought, “*I did my part and the loud-mouth did not even show up! Perhaps this day will turn out better than expected!*”

James looked at Duncan and rolled his eyes. He had really wanted an open format brainstorming session with freely flowing ideas, but perhaps this method would work out ok, since they had quite a few projects and pre-project status ideas to review. Yet he knew that sometimes the best ideas were born of synergistic discussion built upon others. It seemed like Brentwood was rather rigid in how he ran meetings ... and by extension likely how he ran the entire School. James wondered just how beneficial this was going to be after all. At least it was better than being under Master Healer Mesha's baleful glare!

Brentwood frowned at those whispering in hushed voices before he spoke. “Engineers, we have the high honor of not only having the Master Warden here – and you must realize he is still recovering from the abhorrent poisoning at the hands of the Dominion – but we also have the very distinguished honor of having Chancellor Duncan and his gracious wife Lydia here as well. You should all be aware of the significant investment the Chancellor has made into our School over the last many years.” Brentwood turned and belatedly looked over at Nurse Abigail, not sure who she was or why she was here.

Lydia stood and relieved his hesitation. “And this is Abigail, Head Nurse at the Ministry of Healing and personal assistant to Grand Master Mesha. She is here in an official capacity to care for the Master Warden.”

James glared at Lydia with a stony frown. It was not like he wanted any attention to his medical condition!

Brentwood continued, “We want to give these good people a review of our work. I understand there may be considerably more funding available for projects that might assist in the defense of Freelandia. Now of course, that has not been much of a focus here for quite some time, and so the Master Warden wanted to take a fresh look at what we are doing to see if perhaps anything might have utility for that immediate purpose. I'm not so sure anything will strike his fancy, but we just may find that some of our projects can help the infrastructure, which can free up people for more specific defensive activities.

In any case, I think we can begin ... Master Hargrove, perhaps you can start?”

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At that moment a commotion sounded in the next room, with shouting voices that spilled over into the meeting hall. The door between the rooms burst open and in walked a tall, lanky fellow with a thin reddish moustache and shortly trimmed beard. He was scowling and his head was turned to glare at someone in the other room. He was two steps into the meeting hall and was flinging the door shut with some force when he finally turned and noticed the room full of seated figures staring at him in shock – except for the stiffly standing Master Brentwood whose eyes were icy needles boring down toward the disruptive engineer.

The tardy engineer grinned sheepishly. “Ach ... now I be surely sorry for me wee interruption gentlepeople. One or two of our apprentices needed a bit o’ correction on their designs and didn’t quite see me point, so I had to ... persuade them more force-ably like!”

Master Brentwood was obviously not amused as his face turned a shade of angry red. “MR. MACGREGOR! You are unconscionably late! We have already started! You should have excused yourself and waited to enter at the scheduled break!”

“A thousand pardons I’m inclined to give ye. But it doesn’t seem like ye be getting along too far in yer meeting yet. Least-wise it seems you be still do’in all the talkin’. But most importantly, sir, have the prayers been spoken yet? I sorely didn’t want to miss bein’ part of the blessing. Without God’s blessing we’re all just a wee bunch o’ codgers dreaming up ideas in our own power. But now, under the power of the Most High and with our ‘arts and minds stirred uppity-like by His Spirit, well sir, that be another story entirely!”

Master Brentwood sputtered. “I hardly think we need your preaching, Mr. Macgregor. Now please take your seat immediately so we can get on with the first project review!”

Duncan was grinning, already taking a liking to this late comer. “Ah, excuse me ...”

Brentwood turned and assumed a more contrite attitude. “Yes, Chancellor?”

Duncan’s grin turned serious. “I also think it is imperative we seek God’s guidance on this meeting! The war that is coming is God’s to win and ours to lose. I do not want to do anything on the basis of just my own power or judgment concerning the protection of Freelandia!”

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Master Brentwood sputtered, “Oh ... well, of course! I was just wanting to get the meeting started promptly ... I know how important your time is!”

“Yes, I’m sure ... though I did not see it listed on your quite detailed agenda. Regardless, do you mind if I pray for us first?” Duncan’s question left little room for any other answer but one.

“Well of course not, Chancellor! Please ... please invoke the blessing.” Brentwood had taken on a placating tone but he was obviously uncomfortable, and not used to being overruled in his meetings.

Duncan arched one eyebrow. “I don’t think I can “invoke” anything. I can, however, talk to our Creator.” Duncan stood, eyeing the group. Several looked relieved, and Macgregor was beaming. Others were rolling their eyes and looked uncomfortable. Duncan noted those who seemed in agreement with seeking God’s guidance. “Dear Father, thank You for Your inspiration. We seek Your guidance and wisdom today on how You might have us use the ideas You have already given, and ask for open minds to see anything new You may direct us toward. Please guide our thoughts and hearts to hear You, and let the words of our mouths and thoughts of our minds be quick to encourage and uplift our brethren, and to give You the glory and all the credit as the source of all knowledge. Amen.”

“AMEN sir, and well said!” It seemed that Mr. Macgregor was rather ... outspoken.

“Ah, yes. Thank you Chancellor for those ... uh ... stirring motivational words. Moving right along, Master Hargrove?”

James, listening to the exchange, felt his initial impression of Master Brentwood was perhaps overly considerate. He really did not seem to be the best choice to select and lead the efforts here to rapidly accelerate projects for the coming war effort.

Master Hargrove stood and beamed at the head table. He had a small-scale mock building with various tiny pipes attached. “The project I have been assigned to work on involves a rain water collection system for large buildings. One problem with tall buildings is providing water on the upper floors. My apprentices and I have designed a rooftop rain water collection system that can supply water to upper floors, or – and this is the true inspiration – it can be funneled and piped down to the ground floor and injected through small nozzles into the building’s water supply. This can

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boost the pressure of that water thirty percent or more – to supply more water to the higher floor levels and provide higher water pressure for potential firefighting needs.”

James tried hard not to roll his eyes or yawn. This project may be useful but did not appear to have much military potential.

Hargrove continued. “We have been working on this for over a year now, and are almost ready for a full scale trial on one of the newer tall buildings. Let me demonstrate on this model.” He grinned even wider. “We spent several months perfecting this exact scale model. It will show the water pressure with and without the system in place by the water exiting a fountain that will fill the pond in the model. You can see the difference in pressure by the relative height the fountain water will reach.”

Master Hargrove pulled out a narrow necked watering can and proceeded with the demonstration, filling his 15 minute slot with further details.

James groaned under his breath, just loud enough for those nearest him to hear. Nurse Abigail leaned forward with a worried look on her face, but the withering stare from James silenced her unspoken concern. Lydia suppressed a giggle with a hand over her mouth. Duncan, ever the diplomatic one, nodded appreciatively. “Thank you, Master Hargrove. Firefighting is indeed an especially important issue in a war situation, and the firefighters will likely need all the help they can get. What’s next?”

Master Hargrove bowed low and busied himself with cleaning up – the fountain had over shot the miniature pond and made a puddle on the floor, but he had brought some towels along just for such a possibility.

The next several Masters described their projects, and while all had promise of improving the standards of living of Freelandian citizens, none showed particular benefit for the war efforts. The visitors were getting bored and James was now unsuccessful at stifling a large yawn. He wondered if this visit had been such a good idea after all.

Master Brentwood on the other hand was quite pleased. There had been no interruptions from Macgregor. “Next up is Master Oldive, who has a very clever use for one of our recently discovered new metal alloys of silarium.” Master Brentwood sat down, look rather self-satisfied. So far each project review had gone without a hitch – the spilled water did not really count against that – and Chancellor Duncan in particular appeared

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rather impressed by each. He was sure the School of Engineering was going to show itself very worthy of greater funding and prestige.

Master Oldive was a pot-bellied shorter fellow with a balding head and a bright sparkle in his intelligent eyes. He had been one whose true piety Duncan had noticed. "Let me begin by saying that I have had the privilege to be assigned to one of the first projects incorporating the new metal alloy. As many of you have heard, silarium has many rather unique properties we are just beginning to explore – and as far as we know, Freelandia is the only current source for this metal. This first application is rather ordinary and simple, but the project was chartered to try out the new alloy in something plain and practical so we could get some history and familiarity working with it. So, while I really don't see a fit to the very urgent need of defending Freelandia, please bear with my simple demonstration."

He pulled out a small scale door on a frame and placed it on the table in front of him before continuing. "While others are exploring a variety of additional uses for silarium, we have focused on springs. You may or may not be familiar with these little metal spirals, but they can store up energy when compressed and then quickly release it. The approved project we have been working on is for automatic door closers." He pushed the small door open wide with minimal effort, and then let it go. The door promptly swung back to place, banging shut with some force on the frame in which it was suspended. "Of course, we would put some padding on the frame to keep it from banging like that, or let it swing clear in the other direction – the little springs here will dampen the oscillations nicely and the door will come to a stop in the shut position in just a moment."

"Thank you, Master Oldive. Do you have any suggestions for how this might work outside of, say, an office or shop?" Master Brentwood was obviously proud of this newest invention.

"Well, thank you for asking, Master Brentwood. I do believe it may be helpful on our ships for topside doors which would close immediately and automatically behind anyone exiting to the deck – it would minimize potential water entry, for instance."

"Splendid idea! I am sure Warden James will want to check up on that immediately! Now, next up is ..."

"Wait up there a moment, if ye don't mind." Senior Apprentice Macgregor spoke up for the first time since being seated. "May I take a closer

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look at yer device there, Oldsy?” The last was said with a good natured chuckle and wink.

“Certainly Bobby, feel free to take it apart and tinker with it if you like. I don’t think you’ve played with this one yet.”

“GENTLEMEN, PLEASE!” Master Brentwood had jumped to his feet. “Please refrain from such casual bantering at this formal project review!”

Master Oldive had brought his door and frame over and placed it in front of Macgregor, then hastily retreated to his chair across the room. “Oh, I am sorry Master Brentwood! Please forgive me; I thought open discussion was to be fostered at this meeting.” He nodded at the guests and took his seat.

James let out a barely disguised snort. So far nothing appeared to have any real utility. His leg was beginning to throb, despite what he had told Mesha – though he was not going to allow the oh-so-sticky-sweet Nurse Abigail to know about his discomfort. Who knows what that old battleaxe might try to foist upon him! Yet if something of interest did not turn up soon he may just as well leave – at least he had a good excuse he could use for needing to depart early!

The next Master stood and began to discuss his newest plowing invention which he intoned would reduce field work by at least fifteen percent.

Duncan’s mind wandered and he was having a hard time concentrating on the speaker. His gaze shifted over to Apprentice Macgregor, who was totally ignoring the speaker and busily dismantling part of the door and spring contraption. He had some strange device in his hands that looked like a pair of pliers with a screw driver arm extending below it. Macgregor was pulling on the spring, turning it this way and that and testing its action. Then he paused a moment, obviously thinking. Something must have come to him, because he suddenly began to reassemble the parts, but not apparently in the same way it had been given to him. Macgregor then looked about surreptitiously and leaned backwards to grab some device sitting on the floor near him – likely a demonstration project of some other engineer nearby.

Duncan covered his mouth to hide a chuckle. Macgregor was removing a few parts of that other model while its owner, seated next to him, was intently listening to the next project review. The outspoken engineer was reassembling the parts on the rearranged spring contraption, presumably

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creating something entirely new. He made a few adjustments, and then pulled back on the smaller piece of wood now attached to the springs. He appeared satisfied with whatever he was doing on that part, and began carving out the end of the wood with what appeared to be a small blade he swiveled out from the other hollow handle of the pliers. Duncan wondered just what other tools might be equally well hidden in that most unusual pair of pliers.

A model of the new plow was being demonstrated in a pan of dirt, but it was not going exactly right as soil was being spun about and showering onto the nearest onlookers. The errant dirt was being brushed off with annoyance by the soiled audience while the speaker continued his monolog without even noticing.

After a small pile of shavings had been produced from his carving efforts, Macgregor looked about on the table this way and that. He reached over to grab a small plum from a plate of fruit which sat nearby. He pulled on the main plank attached to the springs, holding it back with some obvious effort, while his opposite elbow struggled to hold down the former door frame tightly to the table surface. With considerable dexterity he placed the plum in the now hollowed out area of the short plank.

Duncan was fascinated and he gently elbowed Lydia and directed her attention over to whatever it was Macgregor was doing, and then did the same to James on his other side. The plow presentation finally ended, and Master Brentwood thanked the speaker and then addressed the room. "Now, engineers and guests, perhaps we should take a short break to stretch our legs and take refreshments? Just for a few minutes though, we have many other equally interesting and important presenters to show us their work." Just as he finished, Macgregor let go of the end of the plank holding the captive plum.

The board slapped forward with considerable force, hurling the plum into the air. It sailed clear to the furthest corner of the room, where it smacked into the wall with great force, splattering the fruit in a large reddish purple spot on the white-washed walls.

There was dead silence in the room for several moments. Master Brentwood had first gone pale, and then his face rapidly reddened in anger as his eyes widened. He was winding up for a thorough and considerable rebuke when Macgregor spoke out first. "Did ye see that! Holy Father above!





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Those springy-thingies have POWER! Think a wee bit what they might do in large size? Now I wonder 'bout that ... what kind of range might a catapult have with a few o' these springy thingies super-sized? Hmmm – hey Oldsy, how big have ye made these springy thingies into?”

Master Brentwood's face was bright red and his eye bulged as his surging anger reached new heights and was now ready to explode in full gale-wind fury. “MACGREGOR! I – HAVE – HAD – ENOUGH – OF – YOUR – OUTBURSTS! You will take both yourself and that abominable contraption out of here this instant and ...”

James was sitting up straight in his chair, staring alternatively at the plum-splattered wall behind him and back at the miniature device which had launched it. He very deliberately interrupted in a loud commanding voice: “And you will begin an immediate investigation into its possibilities as a long range catapult system! If I had not seen that with my own eyes I would have said you were crazy!” James laughed. “Maybe you are, but if so, it is a kind of crazy I like! You have my full support and as much funding as you need – make it happen, and fast!”

Brentwood's eyes were bulging out of his skull and he was no longer saying anything coherent, just sub-vocal sputterings.

Lydia reached over and touched the arms of Duncan and James, an intense look on her face as she spoke. “He is the one, James. Macgregor is the one who needs to lead the engineering war efforts. That is the direction I am getting.”

James looked rather wryly over at Duncan. This was not going to go over all that well with the bureaucracy that Brentwood had clearly established in engineering stone. Well, it needed a shake-up, from what he could see. Duncan nodded in agreement with his wife. James could see that Master Brentwood was angry beyond words, his whole body trembling. Nurse Abigail hurried over to try to get him to sit, but even as she arrived Brentwood suddenly grabbed at his chest and collapsed to the floor.

Abigail was a head nurse and when she took charge she could put a senior Watcher to shame. She snapped out orders even as her nimble fingers untied Brentwood's tie and loosened his shirt. “You!” Her stare caught one of the nearby engineers in an icy grasp. “Get a blanket, now!” She turned to Lydia, who had rushed over. “He may be having a heart attack. We should move him to a bed or couch.” Abigail caught another two engineers

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with her glare. "You two – is there a couch or bed nearby we can move Master Brentwood to?" As they fumbled out an affirmative answer she continued. "Then help carry him – gently – to it. And have someone else bring a glass of cool water."

The two engineers lifted the barely conscious Brentwood and carried him off with Nurse Abigail at his side, while another engineer trailed after them with a glass of water and the blanket the first man had just fetched.

James took control – he was particularly good at that in emergencies, and anyway, his nanny-nurse was now otherwise occupied and he intended to make the most of the opportunity. He stood to his feet and in a command voice ordered everyone else to be seated. James watched the procession leaving with the prone body of Brentwood, concern darkening his features. He cleared his throat noisily to get the attention of everyone remaining before he spoke. "Gentle people! Let us pray for Master Brentwood's healing and recovery." As James took a breath before continuing Engineer Macgregor leapt to his feet, a sorrowful look washing over his face.

"Beggin' yer pardon, Master Warden sir – as I am the likely trigger for poor old Brentwood's sudden affliction, might I be allowed to unite us in prayer on 'is behalf?"

James gave a critical look at the lanky young man, wondering just what kind of prayer this engineer might give for the man who appeared to be his nemesis, and how sincere it might really be. Perhaps this would be a quick check on the true mettle of this man. James looked Macgregor squarely in the eyes and nodded his head in acquiescence.

The engineer looked about the room slowly before he spoke. "Christian brothers and sisters, this is serious business. Let us come before our good Lord with united hearts and minds to intercede on behalf of our friend Master Brentwood." Robert closed his eyes and raised his arms and hands heavenward. "Dear Father above, we ask for your healing mercy to fall upon poor Master Brentwood. Please send Your Spirit to touch his body, to restore him back to full health. And even more, please open his mind and touch his soul to see his need for You. And help everyone here to know that this could be their last day here on earth and that some sitting here need to get right with You before it is too late." Macgregor sighed heavily and continued with obvious sincerity in his voice. "Thank You Father for

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hearing even me, forgive me for being such a thorn in Brentwood's side at times, and help me to learn to better support those whom you put over me. Amen."

A murmur of consensual 'amens' swept around the room. Robert remained standing with a concerned expression. "Friends, if anyone feels a need to be a'talking 'bout this later, please find me out. I'd be sure to stop whatever it was I might be do'in to talks with you. Please do take heed to what I said to our Good Father. There is no more important a thing you canna do but get right with God." He turned to look at James in the front of the room and nodded his head as he sat back down.

James nodded back. If he had been doubtful before, he was now sure this was indeed the right man. "Master and apprentice engineers, we do hope and pray that Master Brentwood will be healed. But we cannot wait. We need a Chief Engineer to lead a new Engineering Directorate for our war preparations. The person will report directly to me and make all decisions of funding and projects for the duration of the Dominion crisis. That person needs to be outside the normal chain of command, someone who can think and act very independently, and be able to make things happen quickly without regard to the established rules or bureaucracy. Both from what I have seen today and from what we have just discerned from God, that person is Mr. Macgregor!"

James did not wait for any response and now addressed the startled young engineer directly. "Will you accept that position, sir?"

Macgregor flinched, and then looked down. "I'm sure there be many more qualified engineers here, Master Warden. I am not even a Master yet! Surely there be others, like Oldsy there, who would make a better leader. I seem to be best at makin' our leaders here upsety-like."

Master Oldive stood. "No Bobby, I agree with the Master Warden that you are the one we need." He turned to Master James. "I think that is the right choice, Warden. Bobby is one of the most eccentric and opinionated people I have ever known, and he makes rather hasty decisions – but he is nearly always right! He is one of our smartest engineers with more raw talent than anyone I know, but he has been held back because of his 'unrestrained' and unconventional ways. He can and will make things happen like no one else in this room. And he has the respect – in his own quirky way – of everyone here and especially from the other apprentices. He is

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constantly helping them with their ideas and inventions, even when they have not had official recognition to continue the work. And most of all, he listens. Bobby listens both to his fellow engineers and especially to the ultimate Master Engineer, God.”

Others around the table were nodding, mostly those Duncan had noted earlier just before prayer. He stood. “I agree, and believe God is leading us in this direction. Well, Apprentice Macgregor, will you help us?”

Robert gulped. This was certainly not expected! “I need to pray ‘bout it first off – if it truly be what me God wants o’ me, then woe is me if I be gettin’ in His way! Can ye give me a wee bit of time, say by noon on the morrow?”

James smiled. “Certainly. Please come to my room at the Ministry of Healing and we will go out for lunch – my ... er ... Chancellor Duncan’s treat! Meanwhile, I think we should cancel the rest of the meeting for today – with the change in leadership I believe we can let this go for another week – but we really, really are counting on you engineers to help us defeat the Dominion! And of course we all need to lift Master Brentwood up in our prayers. Thank you all.”

The engineers filed out, with Master Oldive and Robert carrying the cata-contraption and deep in discussion. James had perked up and now was in a rather good mood. “Duncan, Lydia, let’s head on back. I think we have done a good day’s work here, and I expect tomorrow we will have a new Chief Engineer to shake this place up and report on what falls loose that we can use militarily. I think that calls for dinner out ... what do you say?”

Lydia grinned at James and said oh-so-innocently, “But James, I really don’t think Head Nurse Abigail would approve! I am certain she has strict orders to escort you directly back to the Ministry of Healing and Mesha’s care! You surely would not want to miss whatever thin soup or cream of mush they might be serving!”

“Oh, I don’t know what her instructions might have been,” James said rather magnanimously, “but anyway, she is going to be busy for awhile with poor old Brentwood – I am sure someone here can see that she has a nice carriage ride back when she is ready. Meanwhile, I don’t think there is anything left for us to do here, so we might as well not just hang around – we should probably head on back. And if we just so happen to stop at a

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restaurant on the way ... you know Duncan how you sometimes get hungry a might early some afternoons ... then what could be possibly wrong than for three dear old friends to share a nice sit down meal together?"

Duncan laughed. "That's putting it on 'a wee bit' thick, my friend! I doubt you'd be missed for a few more hours ... but if we are out too late Mesha will probably have the Keep Watchers scouring the whole city for you!"

James scowled, but it quickly changed to a grin. "I don't see any reason Mesha needs to hear about it. Our meeting ended early, Nurse Abigail is otherwise occupied, and our schedules are suddenly opened. Besides, I am powerfully hungry for some REAL food!"