


17. Followers and leaders

The wedding rites are completed. Heiger is Lina's lawful husband, and Atgar is Mina's. Karzer has another rite in mind, that will make the new grooms his lawful issue for purposes of inheritance. The rite traditionally involves the use of ash from auspicious ancestors. Those who are participating in this rite will go to a site where some of Karzer's ancestors were cremated.

“ir, with all due respect, you're undermining my authority!” Karzer squinted slightly as if focusing right inside Atgar's head. “You don't have any 'authority', young man,” Karzer replied in his usual silky voice that was now eerily incongruous to the controlled tension in his facial muscles.

Atgar looked surprised, and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial level. “You said I was your number-two man of the house,” he said.

“That was an assessment, not a mandate,” Karzer said coolly.

Atgar blushed deep crimson, just in time for Lina to enter the pumpkin-shaped temporary structure where Atgar and Karzer were sitting on the floor face-to-face.

“We can continue our discussion on route to the cremation site,” continued Karzer.

Lina sensed that a tense conversation had just occurred, and was unnerved to realize that she was probably the cause of it. Atgar looked at her and spoke in an artificially stiff manner. “Contrary to what I told you earlier, you will be allowed to accompany us to the rite. Zantar has agreed to come along to provide more security which we both think will be required for your safety.” Atgar added the “we” part to make sure that Lina knew that the man who overruled him at least agreed with him that Lina's presence was a security hazard.

“Thank you for accommodating me,” replied Lina, “It means a lot to me to be there when Heiger adopts Azer”. Lina hoped that this sounded

sufficiently conciliatory. She liked getting her way but not at the expense of hard feelings.

Atgar felt another wave of hot blood rush into his cheeks. For some reason he had been totally unaware that Heiger's adoption of Azer was on the agenda. This was, of course, a completely reasonable thing to have planned for the occasion. And it made perfect sense that Lina would want to be there when it happened.

"I'm looking forward to it as well. We'll be ready to leave in a few minutes. We're just waiting for more supplies to be packed for you and for Zantar".

"A few minutes" turned into two hours. As clan leader, Karzer was constantly interrupted by kin and friends wanting help or decisions. The plan had originally been that those who were taking part in the next ceremony would leave before the rest of the wedding party, but finally the whole camp was broken down and the entire wedding party made its way back towards the village. Just before they reached the perimeter of the village, the procession was halted, and tearful goodbyes were exchanged between members of the larger group, and members of the smaller group who were going to stay behind. The two groups wouldn't actually split until they were deep in the village, but it seemed more pleasant to say goodbye in the dry sunny fields just outside the town than in its dark and dirty streets.

After goodbyes had already been said, Mina and some other stragglers couldn't resist saying a few more as the smaller party split off down a narrow side-street. It didn't look very promising, but it actually turned out to be the longest street in town. Karzer, Atgar, Heiger, Lina, Azer, and Zantar followed its winding path up a gentle incline to the edge of town that was facing the edge of the valley.

Karzer lead them to a house at the end of the street. Although it was clearly run-down, it was clean and looked respectable. Karzer pulled on a cord that was connected to a chime. Karzer remained calm, patient, and alert as he waited about 8 minutes for the door to finally open.

A grey-haired Lyrian man opened the door muttering something that sounded like an apology, when he looked up, recognized Karzer, and

suddenly shouted "Greetings old friend!". He opened up his arms much wider than necessary, as if to prevent any possibility of escape, and embraced his old friend. His noisy greeting attracted some attention.

"Halder, what's going on? Who is it?" asked an unseen woman. A few seconds later there was a shrill scream from an old woman who suddenly went giddy like a teenager. "Son of Lashkner!" she squealed, and then threw her arms around him. Before she would let go, she made him give her a kiss.

The woman, Yana, looked around at the group Karzer brought with him. Her eyes lit up when she recognized Atgar, and then she squealed in delight again when she spotted Lina. Each of them got a hug and a kiss.

She gave Heiger a long, probing look and then turned to Lina. "Who's this big handsome strapping boy?" she said stroking his arm, with a grin on her face and a tone of voice that suggested she was just looking for confirmation of what she already suspected.

Heiger expected Lina would say something, but instead she turned to him with a loving look, pulled his head closer to her lips, gave him a kiss, and looked back at Yana. The two women grinned broadly as the question was answered.

"And this one is my Pa," Heiger said as he gestured to his father. Zantar was surprised, delighted, and a little embarrassed to get a friendly embrace from a stranger.

Yana looked around absent-mindedly as if she had just misplaced her knitting needles. "I thought I saw a little boy. Now where did he go?"

"That was Azer, Yana," answered Lina. "Halder grabbed him and took him in the house while your back was turned. He looked like he had something to show him."

"Oh, I bet I know what it is! He wants to show him some of his toys. Listen, let me take care of the rest of you. Come in, come in!"

She motioned for them to follow her, which they did, getting just a glimpse of her own run-down quarters, into a down-ramp which lead them to some rooms on a lower level. Eventually they found themselves in a room open to a wide veranda that looked out over a surprisingly pleasant view of the nearby hills, across a short remaining stretch of the valley. The foreground was green with some of the last remaining fields of

crops growing in the vicinity of town; it suggested a different time, when the valley was thriving and productive. A narrow but well maintained pathway led from the veranda through the fields, where it disappeared among fences, sheds, and other infrastructure.

A single imposing-looking building, of obviously ancient origins, sat alone perched on a prominent hill whose top had been broadly leveled to accommodate it. The building had 4 sections, one on top the other, each of them tapering to a flat terrace on which the next section was built. Each section was decorated in a bas-relief design defined in broad, angular, blocky strokes that ended in sharp points. At the very top were 4 pairs of columns perched on each of the 4 edges of the highest terrace. The columns were curved away from each other at their bases, then curving back together and straightening out into parallel lines for most of their length, ending in sharp points. It appeared that their curved bases formed a gate through which one passed to walk onto the highest terrace.

“Papa Karzer, is that a temple up there?” asked Heiger.

“Indeed it is, Son”, answered Karzer.

“Now you folks make yourselves comfortable while I go bring some lunch in,” said Yana. “Then I’ll need to take care of other guests, but Halder and I will be back at supper-time.”

“Then you’ll be joining us?” asked Karzer hopefully.

“Of course we will! But I hope you won’t mind that we’ll be a little late. We’ll feed the other guests first so that we’ll be free for the rest of the evening.”

“Splendid!” exclaimed Karzer.

Yana took her leave.

“We’re going to rest here until a few hours before dawn. Then we’ll make our way to a campsite where we’ll spend the next night.”

Zantar looked around eagerly, and then spotted his heart’s desire: two image visors. Lina’s face fell dramatically as she watched Zantar hand one of them to Heiger and then settle comfortably onto one of the lounge chairs. Lina squeezed in next to him and put her arms around his neck.

“Papa Zantar, don’t you want to enjoy this beautiful afternoon with the rest of us? We want to sit and talk...”

“Aw shucks, daughter-by-marriage, I any image-vising in for weeks now haven’t been able to get, and a game on there might be!”

Lina was about to pursue dissuading him, when she saw her father standing behind the chair and shaking his head. She took that to be a direct order not to pursue the matter.

Zantar put the image-visor on, fiddled with the tuner in his hands, and was lost to the rest of the group as images were projected directly onto his retina and sounds in his ears in 3D. From then on, the only sounds that came from him were meaningless grunts and mumbling, until, briefly, when he apparently found something interesting and muttered to Heiger to put the other headset on and tune in to channel 1E.

Heiger reached for the other set, but Lina got up, gave him an almost sad look, and grabbed his hands. Despite the considerable differential in physical strength in his favor, he let her push his hands back down to the table where he let go of the image-visor.

Heiger instinctively looked over to Karzer for direction. “I won’t let Lina boss her father-by-marriage around”, Karzer said, “but as her husband, you, on the other hand, are obliged to at least listen to what she has to say.”

“Darling, wouldn’t you rather spend time with me than...that thing?” she asked wistfully. Heiger didn’t know what to say, so he looked over at Karzer for help. Karzer closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Heiger, plugging into an image-visor isn’t really an experience you can share with your father, is it? Look,” Karzer said, gesturing towards Zantar, “he’s in his own little world. He can’t even hear us.”

Heiger looked down for a moment, then looked up again at Karzer. “But there might be a game on,” he said, hopefully.

Karzer’s eyes brightened with delight, and a smile spread over his lips. “You want a game? Excellent. Then a game you shall have. One moment please.” Karzer left the room. He seemed to be very much at home in the inn.

“You don’t need that silly thing, Love. You’re your own best company,” said Lina, stroking his hair, “and besides, I do not want to share you!”

Heiger exhaled, releasing the tension that he had held onto while hoping to win this battle, and then relaxed and smiled weakly. Karzer returned after a few minutes carrying several playing boards and some playing pieces for a game of “Intrigue”.

It was a typical ritual battle game, but one of the more complex types, simulating something more like a cold war than an all-out hot war. One board was for Karzer’s country, one for Heiger’s, and the rest were for an arbitrary number of other “countries”. In addition to soldiers and members of the royal court, there were also pieces representing spies and covert operatives, whose operations could involve, for example, taking over another player’s piece as if it had been bribed or personally threatened, which could be used to attack its own side. Each player played his own game, but alliances were permitted.

Heiger’s eyes got big when he recognized the game. “Um, that’s not the game I had in mind,” he said, “but I’d be willing to play you a game of snarts!”

“We both already know that you can beat me at snarts, son-by-marriage,” said Karzer, “but what about Intrigue? Let’s find out.”

“We both already know that you can beat me at Intrigue, father-by-marriage”, answered Heiger. “Let’s try arm-wrestling instead.”

Yana came in with lunch. She reminded them that she’d be back later to have supper with them, as if they had forgotten, and then excused herself.

Karzer continued setting up the boards without looking at Heiger. “Atgar, Heiger doesn’t want to play with me. Can you encourage him?”

Atgar approached with a sheepish grin. “Well, Heiger, he can beat me too. But what say we both play him together? Come’on, let’s see if we can get the old man’s goat!”. A tell-tale grin seemed to indicate that Heiger was warming up to the idea.

Karzer didn’t even bother to glare at Atgar for the disrespectful remark. He simply continued setting up the board and calmly remarked that Atgar was getting cocky and needed to recruit more help.

The two younger men turned to Lina. "You could help," said Atgar. Lina's eyes got big.

"Beloved daughter, aren't you the one who often talks about stepping up to a challenge?" asked Karzer distractedly, without looking up.

"I'm sorry, but I don't think I'll be any help!" she pleaded to Atgar and Heiger, but they coaxed her into giving it a shot anyway. She laughed nervously as she gave in.

"Azer!" she called. Amazingly he heard her from another room and arrived a few minutes later carrying a toy trolley.

"Yes, Mama?"

"Grampa wants to play Intrigue. We need your help to give him a worthy challenge."

Azer didn't mind playing his grampa in private, when there was a lot of encouragement and coaching going on, but was not looking forward to public humiliation. Azer looked doubtful and sighed, but obeyed his mother.

"Atgar, you're our leader. Why don't you work out strategy with Azer, and then help us make our moves," suggested Heiger. Everyone agreed that this seemed like a prudent approach. While each player had to make his or her own moves, there were no rules against collaboration of any kind.

Lina's country was the first to fall. She had concentrated too much on her own plans, and had not adequately prepared for an attack. Azer, who clearly felt his responsibility as tactician, gasped as his grandfather took control of her board. He had tried to warn her, but his instructions were too vague as a result of his failing to grasp his mother's command of the game. She laughed and tried to hide a blush on her cheeks with her hands, but recovered quickly. Now that she had no more stake in the game, she relaxed and began watching the game as a spectator with more enthusiasm than she had played.

Heiger was surprised that his own country hadn't gone down first. In fact, it seemed to be prospering, which should have been his first clue that something was terribly wrong, since neither luck nor skill were on his side. After he attempted to send help over to Atgar's country, it

started to dawn on him why he had been seemingly spared when one of his advisors assassinated Atgar's prime minister.

"Heiger, your government is full of traitors!" yelled Atgar excitedly in the heat of the moment, "Half your ministers, I think, and probably even your king!" Heiger was horrified at first. He thought Atgar must have been cross with him, but when he looked over at him, he was grinning broadly. He grinned sheepishly back.

Azer tried to help Heiger purge his rogue pieces as they began assaulting his own borders, but instead, Heiger's government collapsed in a civil war.

Azer and Karzer were the last in the game. Azer ended up playing defensively as Karzer attacked again and again, until finally Azer's pieces were paralyzed according to the rules of their own playing abilities. Unable to maneuver them, Azer watched in slow-motion horror as his grandfather easily picked them off one by one.

"The game is over! I can not rescue my poor trapped pieces!" gasped Azer in a voice that sounded comically serious. Heiger wrapped an arm around him and pulled him to his side.

"You did great, buddy! You were the last one standing!"

"But I lost!" he said, disappointed despite having realized his prospects going into it.

Atgar reached around, clutched Azer's shoulder, and told him "It's better to fight than to lose by default."

Lina stood behind Azer, bent over, and gave him a kiss. That seemed to cheer him up better than either pep talks or philosophizing. At least, he smiled.

"Papa Karzer, I know that you're really smart, but I'm amazed that you beat all of us working together against you!" Heiger admitted.

Karzer did not look as elated as Heiger would have expected. His smile was a little too tenuous.

"No need to be amazed. I suppose that there's a lesson in this. Suppose that instead of just the 4 of you, I had played against all of the Ministers in the Democratic Kingdom. How do you suppose the outcome would have been in that case?"

Heiger grinned broadly. "You would have lost. Are you trying to tell me it's all relative?"

Heiger felt a slight blush as he noticed Atgar's embarrassed grin and a sly exchange of winks. He looked at Karzer expecting a severe look, but instead Karzer simply closed his eyes, pushed his lower lip against the upper, and shook his head.

Atgar spoke up. "Probably not, Heiger. Papa could probably beat all of them together."

"Allow me to explain," said Karzer very matter-of-factly, without any evidence of having taken offense. "Suppose that you had two people of average intelligence—that is, each of them 100% norm. Now say that they work together on a problem. Do you really think that together they are the equivalent of 200% norm?"

Heiger imagined himself and his cousin working together on a mathematical reckoning project. "No, Sir," he answered.

"Correct. Intelligence doesn't add up that way."

"Intelligence is mostly a matter of noticing patterns and knowing what to do when you recognize a known pattern. That's why intelligence tests consist largely of groups of patterns and instructions to figure out which object or symbol comes next, or belongs, or doesn't belong."

"The reason these tests are useful is because in real life things tend to happen in patterns. The movement of the suns relative to the Homeworld is complex but it follows a pattern, and if we recognize the pattern, we know when to plant our crops and when to harvest them. We know to store spare crops because we notice that although the pattern is irregular, we can always expect famines."

"Civilization consists of the recognition of patterns which triggers patterns of behavior that produce consistent, repeatable results."

"Any two random people are unlikely to recognize twice as many patterns as any one of them, because most of the patterns that one of them knows are the same as the ones known by the other person. There is too much overlap. There is not twice as much knowledge or for that matter, intelligence. It would be like trying to read two different reckoning books covering roughly similar topics and trying to learn twice as much."

“Azer held up the longest because he learns the patterns of life by far faster than any of us, including me. But with age and experience on my side, I know more patterns than all the rest of you. That is why I won.”

Heiger looked as if he were deep in thought, then he looked up at his father-by-marriage as if he wanted to say something.

“Yes, son?”

“Well, I understand what you’re saying, but I do know some things my cousin doesn’t know, and he knows some things I don’t know. So while together we would not be twice as smart, we’d be a little smarter than either one of us”.

“True, son, but this poses an interesting problem. Suppose that just you and I are playing Intrigue, and you’re the only one solving the problem of your side of the game. While you might on rare occasion turn indecisive, most of the time you have no trouble making up your mind. And on the rare occasions that you do, your dilemma does not turn violent. You’ll come to a decision, and the internal conflict won’t upset you much.”

“Now consider the case of a group of people trying to decide an issue. Perhaps collectively they know a little more than any one of them, but not much more. When there is a conflict, how do they resolve it? It’s not an automatic brain function as it is with an individual.”

Heiger nodded knowingly. “I think I see where you’re going with this.” Karzer gave him an approving nod to continue as he took a sip from his mug. “You mean that this is why we need Democracy.”

Karzer grimaced. Then he closed his eyes and shook his head. “No, that is not the point. You’re seeing what you believe, instead of believing what you see. Since when did Democracy ever resolve any conflicts?”

“Well, I guess it doesn’t, but it would prevent them if people would accept the results.”

“My dear boy, when is anyone satisfied with decisions contrary to his own desires, just because a greater number of people made the decision? While some may accept results contrary to their own desires, I suspect that most people won’t. Some people would even resort to violence or deception. Isn’t that what you see? Democracies are not even immune from civil wars. You know that from history.”

“Well, if Democracy is not the point, then what is the point?”

“If you mean what are the practical ramifications of the impracticality of making collective decisions, the answer is that you’d do well to avoid them as much as possible.”

“I don’t understand,” Heiger said, sounding genuinely bemused.

“Don’t make decisions for each other when you can make decisions for yourselves. The whole point of private property is to divide up control over resources so as to avoid fighting over them.”

“Instead of asking ‘what shall our nation have for supper tonight?’, let each family make their own decision. Instead of asking ‘what crops shall we raise on our land?’, let each farmer make that decision. Everyone makes his own choices for himself, and you have a decision-making process that leaves everyone happier.”

Now Heiger was grinning. “Ah, so instead of fighting over how resources are to be used, we fight over who owns them.” He thought he had the old man.

Karzer didn’t seem nonplussed. “True, but irrelevant. Private property implies respect for the rules of ownership. The rules won’t help if you don’t apply them. It is much like laws against stealing don’t prevent the existence of thieves. Civilization is based on taking advantage of repeated patterns. Laws are patterns of civilized behavior. Civilization is useful even if some people ignore the rules.”

“There have been many legal systems tried for the assignment of property rights. The most peaceful solution is foremost to allocate property rights to those who produce wealth, and secondarily, to maintain property rights if there is no better prior claim. If there is no involuntary transfer of resources, then no violence needs to be used. The problem remains that the process has to bootstrap somewhere in prehistory, before civilization, starting with original ownership of land and natural raw materials. That was already decided by violence, and there are still unresolved multiple claims on many items. At least we can prevent unnecessary bloodshed going forward by obeying laws of ownership and lawful transfer.”

Karzer had nothing more to say. He had already said plenty, and his listeners had nothing to say for their own part. Heiger appeared to be deep in thought.

Lina announced that Azer needed a nap. She disappeared with him into a small sleeping nook off the main room and wouldn't reappear until supper. Atgar began getting ready for tomorrow's journey and ceremony. Zantar was occupied all afternoon with the interesting shows he kept discovering on the image visor.

Karzer went out on the veranda and settled comfortably in a wicker sofa. He was surprised when someone he always thought did not feel particularly comfortable being alone with him plopped down right next to him.

"Good afternoon, Son".

"Good afternoon, Papa".

"What's on your mind?"

Karzer expected a request or a solicitation for advice. Instead, Heiger just gave him a very funny look for a few moments, before he finally answered.

"Sir, do you really feel that way about Democracy?"

This subject had been known as a potential flashpoint for contention—the equivalent of desecration of the temple in ancient times. Democracy was one of the four sacred principals of the kingdom; everyone had learned this since infancy. Heiger was a well-built man, Karzer thought as he admired his biceps and pectorials. But he trusted him not to become belligerent as long as he were not blatantly and grievously provoked.

"I feel the same way about Democracy as you do," Karzer answered matter-of-factly.

"Oh. Then why did you sound so skeptical about it?"

"For the same reason that you assigned Atgar to be your lead and Azer to develop your strategy."

"Huh?"

"Why did you do that?"

"Because they're better players than Lina and I."

“Why didn’t you decide your moves among yourselves by taking votes?”

“Because my vote would not have been worth much. Lina’s not a very good player either.”

“Your actions speak for you”.

Heiger was about to argue, when Karzer held up a hand and said “That is my answer.” He settled comfortably into the cushion of the sofa, relaxed his muscles, closed his eyes, and added, “Now quietly ponder it until supper.”