

## Misdirection

I remember back when I was just a little girl of five or six years. Daddy and I had been sitting in one of the palace gardens in Edotoma playing a game of *go*. Daddy had said that he enjoyed playing *go*. He said that it was fun. At the time I hadn't been very good at the game and didn't particularly share his feelings. Trying to understand, I asked him why *go* was fun - just in case I was missing something. He said that like any truly good game, *go* allowed for an infinite variety of misdirection. I didn't understand why this would make the game good or fun and told him so. Daddy smiled and told me that for a game to be truly good, it needed misdirection. Any really good game must at least in part mimic life itself. A game without misdirection could not accurately mimic life. When you became good at misdirecting others, the game became fun. And then he laughed and I laughed with him. Not because I knew any better or even what he was really talking about. I laughed simply because he did and I wanted to join in on the fun.

Of course Daddy had been deadly serious the whole time and had been teaching me an invaluable lesson. And he had been having fun doing so.

It took a while for me to understand. But now that I do understand, every so often I partake of Daddy's idea of fun and games. It's one of my ways of being serious.

Granelda was one of those pampered, snotty women who had grown old and bitter and now despised the young for their youth and vitality. She strolled through the garden party occasionally making a biting remark that hurt someone's feelings very badly. I did not care for Granelda. Any shred of pity I might have felt for her had been beaten away by the cruel words from her lips and the coldness in her heart.

But I needed her here.

Located partway between Regillus and the aquatic world of Tas Vibbon, if a person followed the Regillian highway, one would come across a nice world I liked to visit. A place called Podeva. This world was filled with waterways and bridges, with small cities located here and there. While their architecture was rustic in design, the people were more modern in their thinking towards one another. Granelda stood out here like a dinosaur at the opera.

The bitter, old woman came from Dusurra. That world was only slightly smaller than Podeva which meant it was a rather large world. And it had recently been admitted into the Regillus Trade Consortium purely because it was rich in gold, caviar, and the bluest sapphires to be found. Dusurra was located quite some distance away from here; on the other side of Mulvius Mons in fact. Granelda, was the Czar of Dusurra's mother. The Podevan people were polite to her because they knew she was important and because they had very little practice at being anything other than pleasant. Today Max wasn't acting the part of my assistant. Today, she had graciously agreed to host this little soiree.

This afternoon Max had dressed in a lovely blue gown and wore a necklace of Dusurran sapphires. For the occasion her hair was now platinum blonde and almost waist length (Dyle Alchemical Hair Lengthener and Number 2 Blonde sipping potion). She was

stunning and everyone knew it, including Max. She went strolling through the crowd more or less in Granelda's wake. As my friend mingled, she soothed hurt feelings and gave quiet compliments that had them soon forgetting about Granelda's vicious tongue. Yes, Max was making many friends today.

I had been away on business for the last three weeks. Max had organized this little gathering and it seemed to be quite the success. It would appear that she ran parties just as well as she ran board meetings.

For myself, I was being a rather self-indulgent guest. I wasn't terribly interested in showing off my new dog, Prince, but people asked about him every so often despite my current interests, so I was forced out of politeness sake to show off just a little. Prince was a large bull mastiff. He was distinctively colored - something between a cross between a Prussian blue and black. This afternoon found him adorned with a nice leather and diamond collar.

Max gave a subtle signal to one of the servants and a substitute hostess came out and gracefully stepped into the destruction that was Granelda's wake. For herself, Max walked over to a young girl of maybe eighteen and her father. The girl's name was Emmeline. Her father, Gaspar, was the Prelate of Podeva. The closest thing to a ruler the Podevan people had. Max spoke with them briefly and then escorted them over to my table where we were all introduced. I was charmed and most pleased to meet them. I had done a bit of research and I already knew that these were nice people. Once everyone was seated and comfortable, Max excused herself in order to return to her hosting duties.

So the three of us chatted. It was a pleasant little talk about trade and charity and the coming winter. Emmeline and I spoke a little fashion but I changed the subject shortly so as not to bore Gaspar.

Prince sat and drooled.

As was inevitable, Granelda eventually worked her way around to my table. Gaspar stood and held out a seat for her which she ignored. The obnoxious woman introduced herself and sat down in Gaspar's chair. I quirked an eyebrow at him which seemed to ease his discomfort a bit at such blatantly bad manners. Prince whined and I rather absently put a hand on his furry head to comfort and quiet him.

"Don't see why anyone would bring a dog to a party," Granelda declared. "This isn't a hunt," she looked me in the eyes by way of challenge. I must admit to some amusement at this.

In return, I smiled sunnily, "Hunting is where you find it Madam Czarina. Some is done with dogs," here I gave Prince another pat on the head, "and some is done by other means. For myself, I find the other means more challenging."

"You talk a lot but say nothing. I am thinking you are a Regillian. Are these your servants?" she asked, indicating Emmeline and Gaspar with a wave of her hand.

Gaspar looked surprised but not offended. Emmeline looked like she wished to be elsewhere, "I am indeed a Regillian. In fact, I am part of the royal family. These most pleasant people," both smiled at my words, "are from Podeva. Gaspar is the Prelate here. Emmeline is his most charming daughter." And she was charming. Emmeline had not only a youthful beauty, but also a natural grace about her. In some ways she reminded me of Aunt Flosia.

"Humph," Granelda snorted at the prelate. "So you are responsible for this place. Your people are soft Gaspar. There is too much niceness and not enough strength about

these people." Not being used to such confrontational dialogue, he didn't seem to know what to say to this, "And as for you," she continued, turning back to me, "You seem too soft to be one of the royal Regillians I hear so much of." The czarina had not had that much experience in traveling across worlds as Dusurra had only recently been added to the Regillus Trade Consortium. Once they'd become a member, a well marked trade route through the maze of worlds had been created specifically for Dusurra but before that, travel to and from the world had been limited to a long, interworld sea passage and a singularly dangerous overland route.

I smiled again. Sometimes they just made it too easy. "When I was six years old, I watched my uncle as he was carried away into exile in chains. I did not cry and I did not curse him. He was caught doing what he should not have and he failed. The consequences were his to bear. So if you are talking about my spirit being weak, you are mistaken. When I was seventeen, I climbed the cliffs of Mulvius Mons... just to see if I could do it. I could. So if you are talking about pure physicality, you are mistaken." I wasn't going to admit to her that part of my motivation for that was that my cousin Foster had done it years before and I'd wanted to match his accomplishment. That was none of her business. "When I was thirty, I faced the demon, Fleshripper, and sent it crying back to hell. So if you are talking about my soul being weak you are also mistaken. In summary madam - I believe you are mistaken."

"Hogwash!" she stated firmly. "Stories to tell the young and the gullible," she continued, indicating the two others sitting at the table. Prince whined again and again I comforted him with a distract pat on the head.

"Do you know why Dusurra is a member of the Regillus Trade Consortium?" I asked.

"Of course I do!" she announced proudly, "Our mines are deep and our whales are fruitful."

I nodded. "That is exactly correct. Do you know why Podeva is a member of the Regillus Trade Consortium?"

She gave a derisive snort, "Things grow here."

"Things grow here," I agreed. "And the people here are hard workers who ensure that those crops grow and grow well." Gaspar sat up a little straighter.

"Bah! Anyone can plant trees. It takes strength of back and character to mine gold and sapphires. It takes courage and skill to bring in whales. Farming is nothing."

"It is not 'nothing!'" Emmeline declared angrily. I was very pleased to see some spirit from this girl. "Our people work hard. It takes skill, knowledge, planning, and hard labor to produce food from the ground and the trees." I could see Gaspar getting ready to chastise the girl for her outburst. I didn't want cold water thrown on this particular fire so I intervened.

"You are of course absolutely correct, Emmeline," I said, giving her and her father a bright smile. Her father seemed to forget whatever he had been going to say which was exactly as I'd intended. "Sapphires, gold, and whales can be found anywhere. Hard workers, who are also good people, are a much rarer find."

"Bah!" Granelda declared again, "What do you fair-haired, brainless milksops know? Workers are a copper a score. Minerals. Metals. Those are rare commodities. These bring true wealth." Despite the fact that she was very rich, I doubted Granelda would ever truly know what real wealth was.

All my planning had indicated that this was likely to happen but I still wasn't quite prepared for it when it came. I became angry.

"Do you know why Regillus is the center of the Regillus Trade Consortium?" I asked quietly. Prince whined yet again and I absently petted him a bit more.

"That is a disgusting beast," she stated with a look at the dog beside me. Returning her gaze to me, she said, "You are the center of the trade routes because one of your ancestors had the forethought to begin building roads. That is why the roads lead to Regillus."

Ignorance is obviously not bliss or she would have been a much happier person.

"No," I contradicted. "That is not it at all. Regillus is the center of the Regillus Trade Consortium because that is what the King of Regillus and the head of House of Diamond desires it to be. Regillus is the center of the Regillus Trade Consortium because the royal blood of Regillus has built the roads and trails leading off into the worlds beyond it. Regillus is the center of the Consortium because we have taken over those who opposed us and aided those who supported us. Regillus is the center because Regillus is the center of order for all the worlds at this end of the Great Maze."

She paused a moment before snorting.

I smiled again but this time I wasn't sure if it made it up to my eyes.

"I see you don't believe me. Allow me to give you a very small demonstration. You understand the basis of trade correct? Supply and demand?"

"Of course. *I* am not some simple backwater hick," she stated, seeming to indicate that others here were.

"Good. Then you understand that the value of any given product... say sapphires for instance... is dependent upon there being fewer of the item than there are people wanting them?"

"Indeed, everyone knows this."

"Good," I nodded and patted Prince's head again. When I pulled my hand back I allowed a large blue sapphire to fall out of my hand onto the table. I cocked an eyebrow at Granelda, "Nice, wouldn't you say?"

She warily picked it up and looked it over, "The color is good as is the opacity. The cut is good as well. This came from one of our mines."

"No it didn't," I contradicted her, grinning broadly. "It came from the power of House Diamond."

"Bah. I know our product when I see it. You lie."

Prince prostrated himself on the ground and put his paws over his eyes.

I turned back to Granelda who didn't seem the least bit concerned. Gaspar did but I don't think he was concerned for himself. I think he was actually worried about Granelda's safety. I smiled again. I held my hand out over the table palm down. After a moment another sapphire dropped from my hand and landed on the table. Then another and another.

"Bah, parlor tricks. I have a jester who can do the same trick only better."

I just smiled more brightly and allowed the trickle of sapphires to become a flood. Soon they were spilling out across the table. Soon after that, they were flowing over the table edge. "Supply and demand. It is only a small portion of the power of Regillus. In a single afternoon worth of idly producing these, I can devalue sapphires throughout all of Podeva. In a week I can devalue sapphires throughout the entirety of the Regillus Trade Consortium. With slightly more effort... but not much... I can find gold mines on every

member world of the Trade Consortium kingdom."

"No," she whispered with the look of a woman who did not want to believe the horror she was seeing or hearing. "There must be some trick. This cannot be real," she said, looking at one of the sapphires while trying to find a flaw somewhere within it.

"There is not trick and I assure you these are very real. You are part of a larger world now Granelda. You represent the Monarchy of Dusurra. Had it been any other Regillian sitting across from you, both you and Dusurra would be in great danger because of your rudeness. Most of my uncles enjoy leading armies and fleets whenever the mood strikes. I have no doubt that they would consider sacking your lands a nice weekend excursion. Dusurra is a rich place. I doubt that it would take very much to provoke them into taking it over for themselves.

"Or to convince them to do so."

Prince threw up and Granelda didn't look much better.

"Oh dear. Emmelline? Could I ask a favor? Perhaps you could take Prince down to the stream over there and let him get a drink? I suspect that if you were to talk to him for a while it might help settle his stomach a bit."

"Certainly, Lady Clarissa," she agreed with a little curtsy and a pleased smile. She had gotten to see Granelda's comeuppance so balance had been restored to her day. She lead Prince through the crowd and down towards the brook.

"Granelda," I said with a toned down smile, "I am going to do you a favor. I am going to forget this conversation ever took place. Oh Maxine?" I called. Max walked over quickly as she had been waiting for my call anyway.

"Yes, Lady Dyle?" she asked, looking completely innocent of her role in the day's events.

"Would you do me the great favor of having your people pass out these sapphires? They are a gift from the people of Regillus to our dear friends and allies here in Podeva."

She bowed and said it would be done. Granelda looked lost. I smiled and went for a walk with Gaspar.

I'm not sure what Prince had been eating but it smelled atrocious.

Misdirection. Standing in the cathedral of the Blessed Angel, I couldn't help but think it was just the greatest toy ever. One might surmise that the entire party at Max's was to get Granelda out of circulation and get someone intelligent and somewhat less blunt than a sledge hammer out on the diplomatic circuit for Dusurra.

One would be wrong. That was just a pleasant side effect.

That *was* what Prince Vallanos had thought though. Seeing his grandmother in action was the only reason he had agreed to be changed into the form of a dog for a while. I had warned him that she would lead Dusurra into disaster. I had then shown him the aftermath of one of Uncle Lloyd's battles against a world on a newfound path through the great Silvani woods. That trip had proved to be a most convincing demonstration. After that, I had shown him Aunt Flosia decorating her house for a light festival by bringing in crates of diamonds from some world fragment she occasionally visited in order to glue them about the walls and draperies of the house. Earlier today, I'd left him to contemplate matters briefly at one of my homes and while I was away I had one of the servant's spike his food

to make him nauseous. He'd reluctantly agreed to allow me to change him into the form of a large dog. Then I took him to a little garden party at Max's. Yes, Prince Vallanos was a firm believer now. This generation would hopefully now be safe from the destruction that Granelda's vituperativeness could very easily have brought forth.

But I wasn't interested in just saving one generation.

While Vallanos was the heir to Dusurra, he had no true idea about compassion. He didn't truly understand generosity. There had been no one in his life to show him these traits.

Until now.

Vallanos had rather predictably been smitten with Emmelline. Emmelline hadn't been quite as smitten immediately, but she had come around to loving him. Vallanos had a certain charm that his family in general lacked and aside from being incredibly rich and not too rough on the eyes - he was also incredibly persistent. Of course, it helped that Max had left a number of writings with Vallanos concerning romance and the wooing of women in general.

Now under the sign of the Blessed Angel, Vallanos was about to marry Emmelline. And Emmelline was in turn about to show the people of Dusurra what a soul was even as Vallanos bolstered Podeva with that famous Dusurran strength.

Oh, yes. Misdirection is a great way to have fun while getting serious results.