

# NOBLE IMPOSTER

**BOOK TWO IN THE CANTRAL CHRONICLES**



# NOBLE IMPOSTER

Book One - Precisely Terminated

Book Two - Noble Imposter

Book Three - Viral Execution

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# **Noble Imposter**

Volume 2 in the Cantral Chronicles

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Published by Scrub Jay Journeys

P. O. Box 512

Middleton, TN 38052

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Print Edition: ISBN: 978-1-946253-08-8

Mobi Edition: ISBN: 978-1-946253-09-5

Second Edition - First Printing November 2020

Printed in the USA

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020920093

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# CHAPTER ONE

Simon sat at his desk chair as he peered at Monica over a handful of papers. “When you first meet a couple at a formal gathering, what do you do?”

Sitting in a straight-backed chair and facing Simon, Monica licked her lips. “Curtsy to the lady first, then to the gentleman. I wait for the host to introduce us and for the lady to speak to me before I say anything.”

“Correct.” His brow bending, Simon began shooting out questions with barely a pause in between. “What is your maternal grandmother’s name?”

“Eunice.”

“Your paternal great-grandfather?”

“Maxwell.”

“Your great-uncle, father to your mother’s sister?”

“Dante.”

“What is your favorite fruit?”

“Blackberries.”

“How many years have passed since Cantral outlawed personal communications using wireless technology?”

“One hundred and seven. That’s when the messenger system began.”

Simon scowled. “I didn’t ask you about the messenger system.”

“I know but—”

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“No buts. Maintain etiquette. The Nobles think it’s impertinent to answer questions that haven’t been asked. Amelia knows this, so you need to know it.”

Monica nodded. “Okay. Sorry.”

He showed her one of the sheets of paper. “You have ten seconds to study this map.”

She squinted at the diagram of rooms and hallways on the hand-drawn map. The labels were scrawled in Simon’s usual scribbles.

He snatched the page back. “What room is next to the library?”

“A study room.”

“Which directions would you go to get from the study to the main entrance?”

“Northwest from the study. Turn north into the hall until I get to the main hall. Turn east and keep going until I reach the main entrance.”

“Correct.” His scowl eased. “Amelia, what is the programming language you invented for your own use?”

“Um ...” Monica searched her brain. The computer questions were always the hardest. Studying for them was so confusing. Nothing made much sense. “Anagram?”

Simon threw the papers on the floor, scattering them. “Too slow!”

“But Simon, I—”

“I said no buts!” He shot to his feet and kicked a page. “You can’t be Amelia if you don’t immediately know the answer to such a simple question! Your knowledge of computers, especially their microchips, will be the key to gaining the Nobles’ trust. Without that, you’ll never find where the Cantral computers are! It’s what your entire mission is all about!”

Monica sighed. “I know. I know. I’ll keep trying.” She looked down at her forearm where a wristband should be. What time was it? She hadn’t had a band since she lost her last one, and Simon had disposed of his and Alfred’s bands as well.

“We’re not done yet, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

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Monica jerked to attention. “I wasn’t. I was wondering when you would give me the dictionary like you promised.”

“So you say.” Simon waved a bony finger at her. “You’re going to regret not studying harder when someone asks your new identity about the inner workings of a computer or where to sit at a banquet.” He rummaged in a desk drawer and withdrew a thin booklet. “But here it is.”

She snatched the book from his hand. “Thank you.”

“I really shouldn’t give it to you,” he muttered. “You don’t seem at all repentant for your lack of study.”

“Thanks for being so understanding.” Flipping through the pages of words in Old Cillineese, she smiled. “Once Amelia is pardoned by the Council, I’ll be able to go where I want. And don’t worry; we still have plenty of time before I have to take Amelia’s place.”

“No, we really don’t.” Simon sat at his desk and shuffled his papers before sliding them into a yellow folder. “I received news a few hours ago that Amelia has taken a turn for the worse. They’re not sure she will live through the night.”

The dictionary slipped from Monica’s hands, but she caught it, keeping it from hitting the ground. “But I thought you said they predicted she would have at least another week.”

“Apparently they were wrong.” Simon handed her the folder, staring at her over the top of his steel-rimmed glasses. “Would I lie to you?”

She took the folder, tucked the booklet inside, and met his gaze. “Probably.”

“I take offense.” Simon removed his glasses and started cleaning them with the hem of his wrinkled black shirt. “This role is extremely important. You can’t just act like Amelia. You must *be* Amelia.”

“Yes, I know.” Monica placed the folder on the desk. He wasn’t really angry. He never got angry with her anymore. Their

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brush with death two weeks ago had calmed him down more than he would ever admit.

“Now.” Simon slid his glasses back into place. “Sit.” He pointed at the armchair that had been pulled close to the other side of the desk.

She slid into the leather chair. “So that’s what has you in this mood? The early identity takeover?” She put her hands on the desk, showing her scarred left palm and thinly bandaged right hand. “It won’t be a problem. My hands are mostly healed now, and I can walk out in the open and everything.”

“Not quite ‘and everything.’ ” Simon shook his head. “Your knowledge of computer circuitry is completely lacking, and your tutors will be baffled at your newfound stupidity. It doesn’t help that we can’t find Amelia’s computer or notes. It’s probable they were taken with her to Cantral, but her nurse told me she can’t find them anywhere. They might have been lost on the way. You will want to think of some excuses for the Council.”

“Okay.” Monica fingered the folder Simon had laid on the desk. “At least I have these study sheets you made for me, and Amelia won’t be doing any computer work for a while, even after she suddenly gets better.”

“The only reason the Council of Eight cut that plea-bargain deal with Gerald is because of Amelia’s knowledge. If you don’t perform, they might nullify it, and then you would be in a real fix.”

The library door swung open. Simon pushed back from the desk. “What took you so long?”

Monica twisted in her chair. A short boy with a pointed nose, carrying three plates, walked around the desk to Simon’s side. He handed one plate to the old librarian, gave another to Monica, and kept the third for himself.

“Thank you, Alfred.” Monica placed the plate on the desk’s edge.

“You’re welcome.” He sat on the floor nearby and began eating a brown mash, scooping up bites with his fingers.



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Simon sniffed the goo on his plate. “What *is* this, Alfred? Garden mud?”

“Something called potatoes. They’re really not bad.”

“Well there’s no time for it.” Simon shoved his plate away. “We must get Monica on her way to Cantral before Amelia dies.”

“She has to go now?” Alfred looked up from his food. “You said—”

“I’ve explained it once to Monica already; I won’t explain it again.” Simon reached into his shirt pocket and withdrew a brown paper package. He unfolded the top and sprinkled some white powder onto Monica’s food. “Eat quickly. Alfred and I have a few last-minute things to do before you depart.”

She pulled her plate away. “What did you put on it?”

“The Nobles add this spice to their food to keep slaves from eating it.” Simon pulled her plate from her hands and dumped more of the powder onto her meal. “It creates terrible stomach cramps in someone who hasn’t eaten it all his life.”

Monica stared at her ruined dinner. “I know about the spice. Alyssa ...” She touched the necklace that hung around her neck, half of a medallion, torn during her journey to the Cillineese computers. “Alyssa told me about it.” She sat back in her seat. “You said we had to leave. If I have cramps, I can’t travel very well.”

“These will be the worst of the cramps. You can get over them while Alfred and I run an errand or two.” Simon marched to the door. “We’ll be back in a few minutes. Eat.”

Alfred sighed and wiped his fingers on his black pants before jumping to his feet and following Simon out of the room.

Monica sighed and pulled her plate close. Taking her spoon in one hand, she grimaced. Eating such foreign food was difficult in the first place, but making herself swallow something she knew would put her in agony would be almost impossible.

She regripped the spoon and brought a bite of potatoes to her lips. Simon was right. She had to get used to the spice, and it

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would be better if she didn't have to explain stomach ailments to a doctor. They would have enough questions already because of her scarred, bandaged hands.

She downed the bite in one swallow. As the potatoes hit her stomach, the food turned sour, and her belly ached. She forced another bite before plunking her spoon down.

Her stomach in knots, she slid off her chair and held her hands close. Stabs of pain shot through her, as if the food she had eaten were trying to claw through her abdomen.

She rolled onto her back and squeezed her eyes shut. Obviously the spice worked more quickly than expected. If only she could concentrate on something other than the cramps. Maybe her fellow slaves. After all, she was doing this for them. If she didn't get used to the Nobles' food, she could never fit in with Amelia's identity, and everything would be lost. Cillineese might be free for a while, but Cantral would overtake it once again. A few cramps were nothing compared to the freedom of millions. If Cantral fell, so would the Council of Eight's grasp on the rest of the world. There would be no more terminated cities.

Slowly, the invisible grip on her stomach loosened, allowing her to sit up. Her arms and legs shook, and sweat poured down her limbs. After wiping a stray strand of hair from her eyes, she crawled to her feet and crept to one of the leather chairs near the desk. Sinking into the cushions, she sighed. Her arms and legs still shook, but the quakes lessened with every passing minute. She curled up in the center of the chair and rested her head on the arm. Her breathing evened out, and she fell asleep.