
The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

No. 11 • February, 2002

Published with Cosmopolis No. 23

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IT MAY SEEM TO ITS READERS that the *CLS* has been something of an on-again-off-again proposition in the past few months. Its sporadic appearance is not due to any lack of submissions, nor to a lack of interest on the part of the publishers; but since those of us responsible for its production are also involved in various aspects of the on-going work of the *VIE*, 'one thing drives out another', as Barliman Butterbur, the innkeeper at Bree, told Frodo Baggins*. Textual Integrity has been popping out texts ready for Composition left and right, and these texts are being set, reviewed, adjusted, and proofed. Work is also progressing on the second *VIE* book outside the primary set, which will include *The Languages of Pao* and *The Dragon Masters*. Things are moving along!

The Literary Supplement will also go on. We feel it to be an integral part of the *VIE* process, a vehicle which promotes involvement and interest in the project, and provides a venue for the work of talented Vance admirers.

As always, the editors welcome new submissions. And send us some letters about the stories!

— Joel Anderson and Paul Rhoads

* An attempt to sound hip and topical by referring to the recent (more or less) and popular moving-picture version of *The Fellowship of the Rings*. For better or worse we won't mention *Harry Potter*.

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The *CLS* is devoted to showcasing literary work in any form, including fragmentary, which bears the influence of Jack Vance. Letters to the editor will also be published on a discretionary basis. Letters and submissions should be addressed to: Paul Rhoads, at prhoads@club-internet.fr

Wings of Iron

Chapter 2



Helveron, Damavand

Altain Mehet Barstan, hereditary Provost General of Damavand for the past two decades, restlessly stabbed a forefinger into a small mound of blue-green powder on the dish that lay before him. The stuff was nickel sulphate, a key component, he understood, of the ceramics that the College of Applied Sciences was developing for him.

It was a substitute, for some few purposes at least, for metal.

He knew that, on most of the worlds beyond, men made all manner of ordinary implements out of metal. As a child, Altain had even seen a picture of a man using a metal eating utensil. He'd been astounded by the showy wastefulness of it. Now, though, he could admit, at least to himself, that he was envious. Unable to bend, even the best ceramics shattered under stress, and to date the other substitutes his chemists had devised were in other ways equally inadequate.

It would have been better, really, if he had never seen that damnable picture. Better if he had never known so many others had metal to waste. But, knowing, he was forever goaded by its scarcity on Valdai. Fifteen hundred years of mining, and still there wasn't so much as one reliably productive source.

It was a puzzle, considered in the abstract. Some geologists attributed it to the fact that so much of the surface of the planet was ocean, while others held that there was simply much less ore on Valdai than elsewhere. Though Altain often followed scientific developments with relish, this was a debate that annoyed him intensely, as the outcome left them confronting the same goading deficiency either way.

Still, for twenty years he had obtained metal enough for really crucial purposes, mainly the manufacture of the most important tools and machines. Yet this was only because he had overlooked absolutely nothing in his pursuit of the elusive stuff. Teams were still scouring the Damavandan island continent for the garbage

dumps of the ancient cities. Sometimes there were rich finds of rust in such places, the remnants of the strange machines that had been imported so long ago, in the hopeful days when Valdai still traded biotech and pharmaceuticals with other worlds. Then too, nearly every geologist in the eastern hemisphere was in his employ, most of them working on an extended geological survey that, perhaps twenty years hence, would be comprehensive.

Through all these efforts, many in Damavand had forgotten the cruelest forms of poverty, and had eventually even come to resent his mining and surveying expenditures, especially since the resource-intensive war of '01, even though they were all that kept want at bay. Over the years it had become increasingly apparent to Altain that the good will of his people was something that couldn't be purchased with success, although it could only too readily be lost with failure. This absurd situation did not leave him embittered, quite. It was really no more than he expected, people, after all, being what they were. But neither did their fickle sentiments encourage him much.

Of late, really, precious little had encouraged him. Just the preceding week he had met with envoys, somber, expressionless men dressed in black whom the new sovereign of Kerken had sent to plead peace accords. Then, only hours after their departure, the minister of confidential affairs reported that there was good reason to believe that this selfsame Kerkenese sovereign was refitting his navy for resumption of the war.

Unfortunately, Altain could only hope this report of treachery was accurate: two years past his intelligence network had been severely pruned in the Black Turnsdai coup. In a single bloody day, in the Kerkenese capital of Atakora, the entire Cerasus family and all of their retainers had been executed. Their disintegrating skulls were still on display, mounted on pikes in a grotesque queue half a kilometer long, a blunt warning to any would-be counter-revolutionaries.

Altain frowned. He had never been able to think of a way to bring the bitter war of '01 with the Kerkenese to a permanent conclusion, and the cost and the destruction of recurrent engagements appalled him more each year. He was weary of it, everything about it, but most of all the perpetual insecurity the war had forced on them, an additional burden superimposed upon the routine insecurity of life on Valdai.

But it was a weariness he could little afford. Though his son had for some years now been groomed to rule, he was still young, and there was no one else sufficiently well-prepared to delegate the continent-bending authority of a Provost to, even for the reprieve of a single day.

Altain absent-mindedly brushed blue-green powder from his fingertip against his trousers. The Kerkenese wouldn't alter their ambitions one jot merely because he wished they would. He had managed to keep a step ahead of his rival and enemy only by seizing the initiative, by staying a little sharper, by thinking a little more clearly. It didn't seem like much to lean on, when everything was at stake.

Now he would have to convene the chancellors' representatives and his own ministers to discuss the latest intelligence, and plan. Yet again.

A knock came at the door of his chambers.
"Come in."

It was his wife, Samaal, with a tray of food.

"I don't suppose it's crossed your mind that you've been up here all day, Altain? More war news, I suppose?"

He smiled, taking in her lithe figure and black, waist-length hair at a glance. "Yes, there's always that, of course. But also, the *Eastern Star* is more than a month overdue in port, you know."

Moving with her distinctive, dancer's grace, Samaal brought the food over and, with a little grimace of distaste, pushed the plate of nickel sulphate to one side.

"And so if she doesn't return, and there's no more nickel for a while, what of it?"

He shrugged. "It slows ceramics manufacture. It's another ship lost that I can ill-afford, and worst of all I can't be certain the damned mine was reprovisioned."

Noting a significant omission in what her husband had said, Samaal sat on a window ledge and meditatively smoothed the blue velvet of her skirt over her knees. "West Oberl was on that ship, wasn't he?"

Altain frowned. Oberl was a gifted young mine engineer from whom he had expected much, and whom he had also liked quite a lot for his earnestness and candor. "Yes."

"What a pity. His family must be worried sick."

"I'm sure they are."

"Privateers, do you think?"

Altain looked into the distance, wondering how much

to tell her. Though he was reluctant to burden her with the knowledge, she was the only human being alive whose discretion he trusted completely.

"It could well be much more serious than that, I'm afraid. The Kytheran principate may be showing signs of being shrewder and more dangerous than the Cerasus principate ever was."

Though she had suspicions of her own in that regard, she asked anyway. "What kind of signs?"

He fell silent a moment, carefully ordering his thoughts. "Suppose the Kytherans have a strategist who clearly understands how we've kept a little ahead for twenty years? Suppose he realizes that we owe better weapons to a greater volume of ore production, and that we owe that production to the geological field work? And now suppose one more thing: that he knows West was heading up the field work and discovered a new source of iron? What would this strategist do?"

Samaal shrugged. "That's quite a lot to suppose, isn't it? That last bit, I mean, about discovering iron. But if there were such a strategist he would likely want to know more about the new source, the potential yields and that sort of thing, so he could estimate what that would imply for our future weapons manufacture."

"Yes, or so he could decide whether it was worth making a grab for it himself. And who could tell him all of that?"

Samaal frowned, sickened at the thought. "West would never tell the Kerks anything."

Altain shook his head sadly. "He might be able to delay, or to tell some half-truths, but he would talk eventually. There are limits to what any man can endure."

"So you think they've kidnaped and broken him?"

He shrugged unhappily. "I think it's possible, yes."

"But there would have to have been a very serious breach of security for the Kerks to know he was aboard the *Eastern Star*."

"Yes."

She looked at him closely, alarmed. "Do you have any reason to think that's happened?"

Altain shook his head. "No, nothing definite, certainly. But also consider this, Sam: suppose the Kytherans know I'm tired of the war, and have decided to make a bid for the nickel and iron. Might they not send a peace delegation in order to buy a delay while they expand their navy?"

"But everyone knows you're tired of the war. There

doesn't have to have been much of a breach of security for them to be aware of that."

Altain pushed back from the table, stood, and leaned against the wall next to her. He brushed a loose strand of hair back from her face and stroked her cheek affectionately. "Right, Sam, right. As I said, I don't have much to go on here, other than the report of a single agent who says the peace initiative is a ruse, and that the Kerks are re-outfitting their navy. That, and the fact that we know they've raised taxes on all metals, which may mean that they've begun hoarding for resumption of the war. Still, I do see a pattern, or at least I may see one."

Samaal considered. "Yes, a lot of the pieces fit. I can see why you're concerned, but we've seen patterns before where there was nothing more alarming at work than our own imaginations. After all, we've had serious storms this winter, and the privateers have gotten so much worse. The *Eastern Star* could be missing for many reasons, after all."

He held her eyes with his and smiled. "Yes, I agree. But there's too much at stake for me to simply dismiss my suspicions. We've got to look into it, yes?"

Samaal said nothing. An investigation would certainly be prudent no matter what had happened to the ship, but her husband's suggestion was so alarming that she resisted accepting it even as a possibility. Catching herself in this act of denial, she forced herself to consider the matter more dispassionately. Though the evidence was very slight, a kidnaping was just possible. And if there was betrayal so close at hand, there was much else—so very much else—the Kerkenese might also know.

"Is Kheel safe, do you think?" she asked suddenly.

Altain looked away, nodding abstractedly. Kheel, the heir and their only child, had been sent overseas for tutoring at Tae Fastness, a vast fortress on Tae Island which had been converted into a school and administrative center. He would be sailing home soon.

"Senet's with him, of course, and I sent orders to Merod at the embassy to arrange an armed escort for the sea passage. He's as safe as I can make him for now, Sam."

Samaal took his hand. In the two years since the Kytheran principate had risen to power there had been many skirmishes, but their strength was still largely untested. If Altain's suspicions were anywhere near the

mark, the new Kerkenese sovereign was indeed a more dangerous man than his predecessor.

Somehow, it wouldn't be surprising. The outlook of Kythera, the most ruthless of the wealthy Kerkenese merchant houses, had always been severely martial. Now, under the rule of Jaun Kythera, even the Kerkenese children were being reared in military discipline, almost from the cradle. Perhaps it was inevitable that one of the Kerkenese houses would eventually produce a leader capable of delivering their long-denied victory, and perhaps it was inevitable that Kythera would be that house.

After a moment Altain squeezed her hand reassuringly, and, as he turned his head to rest it against the wall, she took in his craggy profile, the curve of his shoulder, his still-thick hair, now shot through with white. Though he seemed more fatigued than usual, he still looked to be, and very nearly was, the human definition of resourcefulness. If there was a way, any way at all, for them to prevail, she knew he would find it somehow. Perhaps it was the Kerkenese who should feel fear.

Throwing off her misgivings, Samaal smiled and, leaning nearer, cupped his sex in one hand. "War or no war, you can't resist me forever my love."

He laughed at the immediacy of his response. "Ah well! Apparently not. It seems my defenses are already crumbling."

"Oh, good!"

The soft fullness of her lips a provocation, Altain pulled her off the window ledge and caressed her breasts affectionately, felt her nipples stiffen with pleasure through the light bodice, felt his own response to that.

He smiled sadly. "Believe me, Sam, there's nothing I'd love more than to set the matter aside for a time. But first I'm afraid I really must think this thing all the way through."

"Uh! You've been thinking all day. Why don't you let *him* think for you for a while?" She stroked him again with one slender forefinger.

Altain smiled. "It could be he thinks for me too much already."

She looked at him closely, judging his tone. "I'm sorry. Come and play later? I've thought of something interesting to try."

"Oh really? Something 'interesting,' is it? Then how

could I possibly stay away?"

She walked back to the door, looked back at him over her shoulder through a wave of black hair, then raised her skirt, revealing a long stretch of leg. "Don't forget!" She wriggled suggestively, then dropped the skirt, grinned and left.

The provost snorted softly to himself. His wife did her best to keep him in some semblance of balance, and had cultivated an almost uncanny ability to sense when his mood was black though he tried hard to keep such things from her.

Altain wondered, as he often did, why she had ever chosen him. After two decades of reflection he still wasn't entirely sure. Her answer, whenever he asked, was simply that she loved him, but he little doubted that there were moments when she regretted the decision. She was a modified Ereban-born beauty, who, in the course of a few hours, could voluntarily alter her features, and to some degree even her figure, by inflating or deflating the millions of tiny bladders layered between her skin and muscle. Popular prejudice had it that such women were vain, spoiled and calculating. Altain had never found these traits in Samaal, or, at least, not to any unusual degree, and he attributed the prejudice to envy. Nevertheless, it was certainly true that such women could always choose from a host of determined suitors—and marriage to any one of them wouldn't have entailed the weighty burden of marriage to the state.

He shook his head. The logic of love was a hard thing to trace – the logic of men as applied to the love of women in any case.

Altain stood and paced slowly, trying to clear his head, but without much success; his thoughts were roiled, unsettled, the waters muddied. Finally, he crossed to the window and threw it open. A brisk, icy breeze pushed in at once, lifting the hair off his forehead, and refreshing him somewhat. He closed his eyes. The *Eastern Star* missing and the Kerkenese most likely preparing their navy for a resumption of the war . . .

Damn! Without a doubt, he had to know what had happened to West Oberl and his ship.

Altain opened his eyes and looked out bleakly on the now-renowned Helveron shipyards. Even without looking, he knew well the many rhythms, and the forces of economics underlying those rhythms, that drove everything happening below. The work of shipwrights, all but suspended during the winter, was slowly resum-

ing and would become hectic before many more days passed. Logs, cut from the cultivated forests of the Balustrade Mountains and floated down the Skudra river on rafts, would soon begin to appear, for sale to the shipbuilding trade. Sailmakers would resume their dickering, having repaired storm-wrought damage to old sails and prepared new ones. The hemp merchants would begin to sell off the cordage, used for ship's rigging, that they had laid up the previous summer, and then braided throughout the fall and winter.

Though not a man among them really knew it, every one of them depended upon him to make the right decisions. If instead he failed, their lives would be ripped apart like rotten sails before a stormwind.

Altain turned away from the window. There were plans to make and things to do, and already there was no time left to waste.



In the course of Altain's rule, the Ministry of Confidential Affairs had slowly grown and become interwoven with the everyday fabric of life in Damavand. It was an odd agency, since, in order to minimize breaches of security, its operatives consisted almost entirely of individuals known personally by Altain for many years, most of them family members through blood or marriage. Few Damavandans could have described what sort of work these MCA operatives were responsible for, and even the operatives themselves did not often know why they did what they did.

Rakhib Akurgal, the youngest son of one of Altain's uncles, was proud to be one such operative.

A swarthy, barrel-chested man, with close-cropped hair, famous for his ringing, baritone voice, Rakhib lived with his wife and children in a small, but snug, brick home not far from the Helveron shipyards. Between assignments he sometimes took on work there as a carpenter, helping to design and construct the immense wooden templates from which the great ships were built. He found that hard, physical work steadied his nerves – and that had become increasingly important to him.

In the early days he had been given typically cryptic directives: "Go to Bhotan Tavern at midday," a uniformed MCA officer would tell him, "and watch for a man with two of the fingers of his left hand missing. See who he talks to," or, "Go down to the quay, Rakhib, wait for the

captain of the *Harvest Moon*, and follow him wherever he goes.”

He had done as he was asked, collected his pay, no wiser than when he began, and he had been perfectly content with this ignorance. But recently his assignments had taken him further afield, become more dangerous.

And this time the job looked to be far more dangerous still.

This time the MCA officer had come to his home, alone, at night, without uniform, and the two had walked the empty, crashing seashore by moonlight. Rakhib was told something of what the job was and was given some hint of what was at stake.

And the uncomfortable truth was that so very much was at stake that it startled him. Why had he, among all the operatives, been asked?

The MCA officer had answered reluctantly: they trusted him, he had done good work. Still more reluctantly: many of Altain’s senior operatives had been redeployed. Without really intending to, Rakhib had guessed this, had inferred it from a thousand small things: he knew they would have been sent to Kerken in an effort to rebuild the shattered intelligence network there.

So much for contented ignorance.

For a time he had wavered. An agent could decline an assignment, and he knew that agents sometimes had, albeit at great cost in one way or another. But in the end the right decision seemed clear, if no less uncomfortable. Certainly, he hated the Kerkenese intensely enough to want to play his part. There had been many deaths in his family, and in the families of friends, at the hands of the Kerks, and it would not be long before his own son would be of age to serve in the Damavandan navy.

But there was something else, too: those who had been assigned work in Kerken were no less at risk than he would be. Had he any reason, any right, to be less a man?

So it was that Rakhib found himself awake well before dawn one morning, faced with the prospect of a long voyage into the frigid northern waters in search of some hint as to the fate of a missing ship. He found it hard—almost impossible, in fact—to move from his bed. His bedroom was cool, the bedding warm, and his wife was comfortably snuggled into his back. He lay in the dark for some time, thinking restless thoughts,

feeling the pressure of an uncertain future that was advancing inexorably upon him.

Eventually he forced himself out from under the blankets and into his bathroom, shivering slightly. Just as he finished washing up, Andra awoke and came up behind him.

“Why didn’t you get me up? I’ve barely time to make breakfast!”

“Sorry. It seems I’m a bit busy with myself this morning.”

She gave him a look that combined annoyance with concern. “Why can’t you tell me how long you’ll be gone this time?”

“I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, An. A good while, I suspect.”

Andra frowned. He had always known how long he would be gone before. “This is some sort of special assignment, isn’t it? Why do you do it, Rakhib? I know it’s more dangerous than you say.”

He shrugged unhappily. It was useless to deny it. “I’m not quite sure why, really, but it’s just a bit late to wonder now, don’t you think? You must remember to tell everyone I’ve gone to help set up a new shipyard in Flandam, right?”

She said nothing, but in the lamplight he could see tears rising at the corner of her eyes.

He took her into his arms. “Come on now, An, I’ll take care of myself. I always have. I’ll be back before you know it.”

She sighed into his ear. “I know. I know. I . . . I just wish you weren’t going at all.”

He nodded, and fell silent a time, finally grunting. “The truth is, I do, too.”

They breakfasted, embraced and kissed warmly for a long while, and then, all too soon, it was time to go. Rakhib let himself out into the cool morning air, feeling as he did so that he was leaving behind everything that was meaningful in his life.

From the front window, wondering if she would ever see him again, Andra watched him walk down toward the quay until he disappeared from her view.

But there was one whose business it was not to lose sight of Rakhib. Nor did he.

The Zael Inheritance

Chapter 22

By the time Lamarck and Taslana had finished clarifying the nature of their feelings for each other, it was well past lunchtime. Lamarck had the healthy appetite common to all members of Pangalactic and it had been, even by his standards, an eventful morning.

Room service, unsurprisingly, was not in a position to provide victuals. Some of the staff were in hospital, at least one was dead, and the kitchen had been partly destroyed in the morning's firefight. Clearly other arrangements would be necessary.

Lamarck suggested a trip to Casimondo's for lunch. Taslana was desperate for fresh air and the two of them took an auto-tram down to the waterfront and strolled onto Casimondo's terrace.

"Anything you can tell me about where we're going this evening would be useful," said Lamarck as he sipped with relative abstemiousness at a long tongue-twister.

"There is only one thing I'm keeping back, and that's where we're going, and you will know that when we get there. I'm sorry I can't be any more open."

"Why can't you tell me? I'll know soon enough."

"Firstly, I promised not to. Secondly, in truth I don't know what your response would be if I told you, and I can't take the risk of your not going."

Lamarck chewed his clone steak with deliberation. He had the feeling that the evening's events were not being tackled on an empty stomach.

"You are asking me to take a lot on trust," he said. "Especially since you referred to risk in the context of this evening."

Taslana looked uneasy. "I am assured that there is no direct threat to you if you act reasonably. I don't know how true that is, but if our host meant you harm it could have been achieved with less elaboration than luring you into a trap."

"I suppose that will have to do," said Lamarck, who found the pleasures of the table conducive to a sanguinary humour.

"But if you have any concealed weapons I'd take one," she added.

Lamarck displayed his hands didactically. "These two are the best you can carry," he said, "which isn't to say that I don't have a couple of other tricks."

Casimondo's upper terrace was idyllic in the early afternoon sun. The unfortunate death of Roban Maevert a quarter of a mile away was forgotten. Lamarck felt a curious serenity, of which the brilliant scene before them was only a component. He knew that, one way or another, the Zael case would soon be settled. There was still his suspension to consider, but he realised that he had been en route for collision with Pangalactic for some time: maybe here was an opportunity to reach a resolution.

He looked sideways at Taslana. She was in many senses the architect of his current situation—and still she was not being entirely open with him—but he felt no recrimination. In a strange and not remotely rational way his instincts had always pointed in one direction with her, even when the evidence faced another. He knew that their relationship could have no possible future, and he set out to enjoy what he realised were likely, one way or another, to be their last moments of tranquillity together.

He watched the breeze playing with her hair, exposing a tender flash of ear, and the short straight line of her nose. She seemed like just another girl, albeit a beautiful one; but she was Taslana Zael, and he knew he could never accustom himself to that.

Noticing his scrutiny, Taslana came out of her absorption and looked at him, turning her siren's eyes quizzically toward him. She reached across and touched his hand.

"Geir," she said. "I'm sorry we have to do this; I'm sorry we can't just forget that I ever was Taslana and that someone is trying to kill me. I've disappeared once and I could do it again . . ."

Lamarck met her steady gaze. He was not sure whether this was a serious offer. He suspected that she was prepared for him to take it that way. Part of him wanted to snatch her up and make for the spaceport immediately; so what if he never knew the answer to the mystery? Was knowledge worth the price he would have to pay for it? The temptation to run away with her was almost overwhelming; but somehow he knew it wouldn't solve anything. And he knew also that if he'd thought it would have, he'd have done it.

"Come on," he said, "we need to pay a visit to Genix

before this evening. I have to see someone.”

They donned their sunshades and left the terrace and strolled along the waterfront to where the auto-trams were more abundant. Neither said anything and neither needed to. Lamarck felt an unusual equanimity: there was something about Taslana Zael, a stillness, a calmness, a gravity, which he found profoundly soothing.

“Why are we going to Genix?” Taslana asked as they boarded the auto-tram.

“Are you the only one allowed to be mysterious?” grinned Lamarck. “I want to confirm your bio-test results with Dr Haecht.”

“Unnecessary, but if it makes you feel more comfortable with this evening. . .” Taslana replied indifferently.

Lamarck noted a difference about the Genix facility as soon as they arrived. Security was unobtrusive but significant. It occurred to him that he might not be admitted—after all, he no longer had any official status.

He adjusted his sunshades in the strong afternoon sun and walked towards the building. “Leave the talking to me,” he said to Taslana as they walked up towards the front entrance.

Lamarck nodded to the Pangalactic security detail and would have sauntered past.

“Ident chip please, Prime Apprehensor,” said the guard, moving to block his path.

Lamarck slipped his sunshades off and gave the man a look of surprise.

“Since you know who I am,” he drawled, “it would seem superfluous to require my ident chip.”

The guard made an embarrassed face. “I’m sorry, sir, it’s the orders of my chief.”

“Since when did your chief have jurisdiction over Contracts work, Kjell?” said Lamarck. “Are you so literal-minded that you think orders to safeguard the building extend to barring glaxes investigating the case? Don’t expect a career in Investigations.”

“I’m sorry, sir, I don’t want to hamper your inquiries. But I’ll need to see your pass, Miss,” he continued to Taslana.

Lamarck, who had just replaced his sunshades, whipped them off again in astonishment.

“Are you setting out to provoke me, Kjell?” he demanded. “If she is with me she is clearly relevant to the reasons why I’m here. I was too generous when I called

you literal-minded: you are an idiot, pure and simple. Now, I am in a hurry: let us through immediately, or let me call your chief to resolve matters.”

“That won’t be necessary, Prime Apprehensor,” said Kjell, now completely beaten. “Go through and report to the reception.”

“Thank you, Kjell—and try to learn something from today, eh?” said Lamarck, sliding his sunshades back into position.

Lamarck and Taslana walked languidly into the Genix building; the first stage of the plan had been achieved. With a smile at the reception clerk, Lamarck said, “Please can you notify Dr Haecht that Prime Apprehensor Lamarck and Miss—Glyde are here to see her.”

“Certainly, sir: if you’ll wait one moment.”

Lamarck leant against the counter with an appearance of coolness which was at least in part contrived; Taslana looked calmly into the middle distance. As far as Lamarck could tell, her composure was entirely genuine.

Soon Nina Haecht had come down from her laboratory to meet her visitors.

“Geir!” said Nina with curious glee. “I am glad to see you.”

“I should hope so,” said Lamarck neutrally. These days he never quite knew what mood he was going to find Nina in: she had never used to be so volatile, he reflected.

“And your—colleague?” she continued with heavy emphasis.

“In a sense,” replied Lamarck. “Miss Laura Glyde, Dr Nina Haecht.”

Nina favoured Taslana with a smile which only narrowly avoided being a smirk; Taslana gave a cool nod. These were two women who were unlikely to become friends, thought Lamarck.

Nina said, “Shall we adjourn to the interview room? I am eager to get out of my lab.”

Lamarck nodded. “We’re your guests, Nina.”

“I take it,” said Nina, “that I can speak freely on all subjects in front of Miss Glyde?”

“All” is a wide word,” said Lamarck. “But whatever you have to say on the results of your bio-tests need not be suppressed on her account.”

Nina gave Lamarck a glance which suggested she knew exactly the scope of the word *all*. Taslana, bored

and detached behind her sunshades, showed no signs of having noticed.

Lamarck and Taslana sat down in the interview room while Nina went to the projection screen at the front of the suite. Lamarck wondered whether this theatricality was strictly necessary—a simple yes or no would suffice—but he had no desire to antagonise Nina.

“As you know,” Nina began, “Genix’s commission was to ascertain whether a DNA sample brought in by Pangalactic matched a given, ‘base’, DNA set. This is a standard procedure and this office carries it out several times a week. In this case the situation was complicated by the use of a masking agent on the sample. Neither Dr - “

Nina paused for a moment, her composure shaken.

“Take your time, Nina,” said Lamarck. “If you want to skip to the end, that’s fine.”

Nina shook her head and continued. “Neither Dr Mamoulia nor I had seen or heard of the use of masking agents in DNA samples. Dr Mamoulia was attempting to research the theoretical and practical possibilities with other Genix colleagues at the time of her death. She had established that there was no research in the area being undertaken.

“After Dr Mamoulia’s death,” she continued with an effort after a pause, “I was given full security protection from Pangalactic and instructed to crack the masking agent by any means available. In truth this was never going to be that difficult: the reason it had thrown us was because the procedure was novel, not that it was unbreakable. It was always simply a matter of time. Yesterday I fabricated a compound which removed the effect of the mask while leaving the original DNA virtually unaltered. I ran the process overnight, and then a slightly refined version this morning.

“Now,” she continued, “if you will look at the screen, I can illustrate the test results. This is the base DNA.” She indicated a multicoloured bar chart on the large screen.

“And this,” she continued, calling up another chart adjacent to it, “is the sample Geir brought in, with the effects of the masking agent removed. Even to the naked eye you can see the extraordinary similarity. I have had to enhance the sample because removing the masking agent slightly corrupts it. Nonetheless, observe the similarities here, here and here. You are looking at identical strands of DNA.”

There was a sigh. Lamarck realised it was his. Nina was an accomplished presenter.

“There was, however, a peculiarity. It is not visible on this slide, but if we zoom to this section here . . .” she continued.

“Can you see this mark here on the sample? It is not present in the base DNA. Geir, can you see that?”

Lamarck nodded.

“Miss Glyde—do you see that mark?”

“Yes,” she said, “although I don’t understand its significance.”

“Initially, neither did I. I had to run it through the computer, and then I found it. It’s a hallmark.”

“A what?” asked Lamarck.

“An artificial addition to a natural DNA sequence. It’s not in fact that uncommon. Whenever Genix perform any kind of genetic alteration procedure they add a unique modifier to the altered DNA. The modifier is entered on the central Genix database together with notes on the nature of the procedure performed.”

Lamarck looked across at Taslana: she was pale and oddly stiff. Whatever had been done to her, she had not known about it.

“So there can be no misunderstanding,” said Lamarck crisply, “can we clarify this? The sample DNA is the same as the base DNA, but at some stage in its life it has been subject to some kind of Genix modification process?”

“Exactly,” said Nina with a half smile. “I accessed the database records for the modification; which had an astonishingly high level of security clearance. Only three people in the whole of Genix were authorised to release the information to me. I spoke to one of them.”

“And?” asked Taslana very quietly.

“It is an interesting and rather sad story,” said Nina, who didn’t look sad herself. “The owner of the DNA sample is a clone of the base DNA’s owner.”

“What!” cried Lamarck. “A clone? How? Why? Cloning is illegal . . . what—“

“I think that’s more questions than I can deal with in one go,” said Nina, brushing her blonde fringe back from her eyes.

“The base DNA belongs to Taslana Zael, as you know. Perhaps you should have told me, but I can see why you didn’t. According to the file, the young Taslana died: she was about six months old, and the file isn’t very specific about how it happened. There was an accident,

anyway, and maybe there were suspicious circumstances. Whatever, the parents had difficulty in coming to terms with the death of their young daughter, as you would expect. Ordinary folk have to deal with that in their own way. Things are different if you are the Zael: they just had the kid cloned," Nina finished harshly.

Lamarck could not separate the emotions running through his head. He wanted to spare Taslana, rigid as the dead next to him, any more suffering; but he wanted to find out the answer to the puzzle; and then finally and most powerfully he was simply stunned.

Nina was the only one in command of events, and she continued dispassionately.

"Cloning, as you say, is illegal. You cannot just turn up at Genix facility and order up a couple of clones. What you can do, on any planet in the galaxy, is go to your planetary Ethics Commission and apply for the Hegemonic Constitution to be set aside in a specific case."

"But they wouldn't do it . . ." jerked out Lamarck almost involuntarily.

"Oh no?" said Nina. "On Zael's World, where the Zael family owns the planet and has the government in its pocket? If Dasien Zael goes to the Ethics Commission on Zael's World and says, I'd like to clone my daughter, and by the way, would you like to keep your job, are they going to quote the Hegemonic Constitution at him? I don't think so.

"There is an additional irony: I don't know if you will find it amusing or not when you think of how many people it has killed. Under the Hegemonic Constitution, a clone is a separate legal entity to the owner of the base DNA. That means that "clone Taslana" is legally a different person to "real Taslana". As a result she will not be allowed to inherit the Zael estate. The only two people referred to in the will are Tancredin and Taslana Zael—and they are both dead. You are the glax; but I think the estate will revert to the planetary treasury."

Lamarck was stunned into silence. Taslana had not so much as flinched. He tried to think of something to say.

"I didn't realise you were such an expert on the Zael case, Nina."

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Geir," she said. "As far as the Zael's are concerned, I've followed the news intently and I've done some research this afternoon.

"I'll do my invoice tomorrow. In summary: the owner

of the sample was grown in a vat from the owner of the base DNA. Person or persons unknown then masked the sample DNA holder for reason or reasons unknown; but that is your problem."

Taslana looked blankly at Lamarck.

"Shall we go?" she asked with an attempt at composure which was more terrible than hysterics. "I think we've learned all we need."

She stood up, swayed slightly and sank back towards her seat. Lamarck leapt up and caught her as she fell back. She clung desperately to him.

"Geir! Geir!" she wept, and the rest was lost amidst the sobs which could no longer be contained.

Lamarck held her close and stroked her hair. He wasn't conscious of what he was murmuring and it was unlikely that Taslana was paying too much attention anyway.

Nina shut off the com screen with the DNA charts on it. Her expression could not quite be called a smile; but neither was it one appropriate to the emotions being enacted before her.

"I'll be in my lab if you need me," she said to the oblivious Lamarck. As she left the room the smile she had so long repressed could be denied no longer.

Lamarck had no thoughts to spare for Nina, which was probably as well. Taslana leant sobbing against him, incapable of speech or independent perpendicularity. It was hardly surprising, he thought: what it must be like to find out that you were a clone? He remembered Voorhies's aversion to cloned meat; to many of the population, much of it as rational as Kate, a clone was a thing of horror. Yet the girl in his arms, the girl he loved, was a clone: as Nina had put it, "grown in a vat". And she was no longer the Zael heiress; for her the Zael inheritance was her DNA and no more; and even that was a copy. He held her tighter. For the first time he felt that she really needed him.

Chapter 23

Slowly awareness of the wider situation dawned on him.

"We have to go," he said. "We can't let ourselves be found here."

Taslana looked up at him and nodded. "I suppose you're right. Although it hardly seems to matter. It's all in ruins . . ."

"We still have things to do," said Lamarck, aware that someone had to take control. "Now there are more questions than ever to answer."

Taslana said nothing. Lamarck passed over her sunshades. "Put these on," he said. "You can cry all you like in the auto-tram: but for now we have to skip."

Taslana stared dully at the sunshades. Lamarck slipped them on her and took her arm. Mechanically they left the Genix building. As they walked past the security detail Taslana stumbled. Kjell said:

"Everything satisfactory, sir?"

"Within certain limits, Mr Kjell," said Lamarck as they walked past.

Lamarck hailed an auto-tram and they climbed aboard. "Circle the city," he commanded the vehicle.

"Now," he said, "you really are going to have to tell me everything. Whatever you were planning obviously didn't involve this."

Taslana leaned listlessly against him.

"Taslana? Talk to me?"

"Don't call me that!" she hissed. "I'm not Taslana. You were right all along. I'm not anybody. . . *Grown in a vat* . . ."

"You're more Taslana than anyone else is. You have the same DNA, you -"

"I'm not the same person. Taslana Zael's mother was Carlotta Zael—my mother was a plastic tank. Geir, I'm not anybody," she said, her voice dissolving into sobs.

Lamarck knew this was a situation that required careful handling. Taslana had information that he needed—for both their sakes—if he was to maximise his chances of resolving matters. Throughout their relationship Taslana had been strong and purposeful; stronger, indeed, than he had been. How was he going to deal with this new, rudderless, Taslana? He loved her as much as ever—more, in some ways—but in this state she was a liability; one who could get him killed. He didn't love anyone that much.

He let her cry quietly for a few minutes. Eventually he said gently:

"We are running out of time. You have to tell me the full story: now."

She shook her head. "I can't tell you everything: you'd hate me," she said with a gulp.

"I have a feeling if you don't tell me it will get me killed: I'm prepared to take the risk of it affecting our rapport," said Lamarck.

Taslana looked away.

"You were right all along," she said almost without inflection. "The whole episode was designed as a scam to ensnare you. I was supposed to—to do anything necessary to drive a wedge between you and Pangalactic."

"But why? And what about the DNA mask?"

"The mask was meant to delay the confirmation of my identity," she said tonelessly. "If you'd been able to confirm that my DNA matched Taslana's inside of a day, I wouldn't have had time to pull you away from Pangalactic."

"But why, Taslana, why? What did you stand to gain?"

"Stop the tram," she said. "If we're going to have this conversation I want it to be outdoors."

Lamarck killed the auto-tram's motion with a gesture. They were in the northern part of the city, where immaculately landscaped parks rolled across shallow hills. In the late afternoon sun the temperature was pleasantly warm, and many couples seemingly like themselves strolled in the relaxing surroundings. Even if Rolando had glaxes looking for them, they would be inconspicuous enough here, reasoned the glax in Lamarck.

After several minutes of silence they came to a copse bathed in dappled sunlight which was to Taslana's liking.

"What do you want to know?" she asked unsteadily as she sat down on the dry grass.

"Why and who?" said Lamarck crisply, putting aside all thoughts of how beautiful she looked. Even in this predicament, she knew instinctively how to light herself.

Taslana sighed. "Allaiao Gazmend."

Lamarck nodded. "Go on."

"I know you wondered about how I originally disappeared from Zael's World. Well, my original effort was in fact quite amateurish. Somehow Allaiao Gazmend tracked me down—I think one of his spies recognised me when I left; I had been gone about six months when he found me. I thought he was going to take me home; instead he helped me convert the my shares into an untraceable annuity and said he was going to leave me alone. He did say that he had earned a favour, though, and that he would call it in one day."

Taslana seemed more like her old self as she told the story. Her resilience was coming back.

"It makes sense," said Lamarck. "What would he have gained by taking you back? By keeping you out of sight he had a trump card for unforeseen contingencies."

"I didn't realise that at the time; I just thought he was being chivalrous for some quixotic motive. I didn't know then what he was like."

"In some ways Allaiiao Gazmend is a reassuring figure," said Lamarck. "In an age of moral ambiguities he is that rare thing, a completely amoral man. That is as unusual as a completely good one. Gazmend has no scruples at all. Once you realise that, he is easy to deal with."

"I had not heard from him for years. I was making my own life on my own terms when, about a year ago, he arrived on Earth, where I was then living. He said that he needed me to claim my inheritance since he was in danger of being displaced by the TLZ board.

"I refused; whatever favour he had done for me I was not going to let him compel me back. Then he started talking about my mother in the asylum on Stellapolis. Without him making any direct threat I became aware that he could and would harm her if I didn't go along with him. You have seen the asylum; it is hardly secure. And Allaiiao Gazmend had power of attorney for her; there was no way of getting her moved somewhere safer. So I agreed to go along with him."

Lamarck nodded slowly. "That is consistent with Allaiiao Gazmend's character. There is nothing implausible in it. Pangalactic have long wanted the chance to bring Gazmend before a court. Now we arrive at the stage of factual verification," he continued with a slight addition of steel. "What identity did you use when you left Zael's World? What subsequent changes did you make? I don't want any evasions like we had last time."

Taslana looked coolly back at him. Dully she set out the arcane ways that Allaiiao Gazmend has ensured she remained obscured from view. Lamarck found the account convincing. It fitted all the facts he knew.

"You still haven't told me everything yet: the DNA screen, why you tried to alienate me from Pangalactic . . ." he said. Now, at least, he felt he could believe in her veracity.

Taslana looked at Lamarck steadily with her deep blue eyes. "Do I have to tell you this? We are going to see Allaiiao Gazmend tonight and I was working for him. Isn't that enough?"

Lamarck resisted the appeal. "No. Something tells me we're getting to the interesting part . . ."

Taslana organised her thoughts for a moment. "I thought that Allaiiao Gazmend would simply ask me to present myself and give a DNA sample. Then he outlined his wider plan. He would arrange for a screening agent to be added to my DNA which, although not altering the basic structure, would make it time-consuming to verify my identity.

"He said that among the glaxes running the investigation would be a Prime Apprehensor Lamarck. It was very important, he said, that I should make you act outside the Pangalactic rules so that you were compelled to trust me. He said he would arrange it so that my story was implausible; the closer you got to me the further away you would be from your colleagues.

"I must say," she continued, "that in this Apprehensor Voorhies proved invaluable. Her resistance to me was so pervasive that you were almost bound to take an opposite position."

Lamarck interrupted. "The reason your story was so implausible was that we illegally tapped your comlink calls, including the one where you reported back to your handler and admitted all kinds of larcenous intents."

"Of course," nodded Taslana. "Allaiiao Gazmend knew that Pangalactic tapped calls, and that you would be certain to check mine. It was inevitable that you would disbelieve me, and misunderstand the reason for the DNA screen. Given that, you were always likely to try the kind of approach that you did. All I had to do was make you see that I was trustworthy."

Taslana looked away as she finished.

"I'm sorry," she said. "From the start I felt I didn't want to do it to you, especially when you seemed so genuine with me. But I had to; he would have killed my mother, and he'd assured me that you wouldn't come to harm."

Lamarck was silent. Had he really been netted so easily? The fact that Taslana had acted unwillingly, or that she had developed real feelings for him, was irrelevant. And the story still didn't answer all the questions.

"Why? Why would Allaiiao Gazmend want to put me outside of the Pangalactic pale?"

"So that you'd come with me this evening. He wants to talk to you."

Lamarck laughed with very little mirth. "He is going to some trouble to start a conversation: my comlink code is in the city directory. He need only have dialled."

"I gather you have some information he wanted—he didn't say what it was."

Lamarck rubbed his chin. "It is beginning to make sense. I have never met Allaiiao Gazmend; but we have had dealings in an indirect kind of way in the past."

"Is there anything else you need to know? Do you believe me?"

"How," asked Lamarck, "did Allaiiao Gazmend know that I was going to be working the case? Suppose it had been, say Voorhies and Nouredin? The entire effort would have been wasted."

Taslana shrugged. "Allaiiao Gazmend has many sources of information. He said that he had contacts inside Genix to provide him with the DNA mask; I assume the same goes for Pangalactic."

"There are differences," said Lamarck sharply. "Pangalactic is a law enforcement agency and Allaiiao Gazmend is a great criminal: there is hardly a coincidence of interests."

"And there are no corrupt officers within Pangalactic?" retorted Taslana with a return to something like her old hauteur. "They are not all like you," she said more gently.

Lamarck said nothing. Taslana's story was far more plausible than the one she had peddled as "Laura Glyde." It made sense of all that had gone before, with only minor inconsistencies and lacunae. Whatever Allaiiao Gazmend wanted from him, he was unlikely to have confided to an agent working for him only under duress. Taslana's ignorance on this subject was likely to be genuine.

Lamarck digested Taslana's explanations and other questions began to occur to him. "Your story is consistent as far as it goes. But what about the man who followed you? And the attack at the Anastasia?"

Taslana shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. I only dealt with Allaiiao Gazmend and to the best of my knowledge this is all his doing. He needed me kept alive; no-one profited by my death. I just don't know."

After a pause she said, "Geir, I shouldn't ask this, but please, if you can't forgive me, say you understand, at least."

The sunlight played on her hair as Lamarck took her hand. "You should have told me all this at the beginning. There was a time, at the Anastasia, when you were on the point of trusting me; it would have been better if you had," he said without rancour.

"I couldn't take the risk. You were being so sympathetic, but I didn't know how much was you and how much was Pangalactic."

Lamarck sighed ruefully. "We've both made mistakes in this. All we can do now is go through with it."

Taslana stood up. "Yes," she said. "It has all turned out as Allaiiao Gazmend wanted."

"So far," said Lamarck. "But the decisive engagement is still to come."

They walked back towards the auto-trams in silence. The day had exhausted just about every potential conversational gambit. Lamarck slipped his arm around Taslana's waist and he could feel the tension of her muscles. Self-contained as she was, there was little doubt that she was reaching the end of her resistance. He hoped she could hold together for whatever the evening had in store.

Chapter 24

It was early evening when an auto-tram discharged Lamarck and Taslana in front of Pieter van Padegem Spaceport, the less used of Mezzanotte's two ports. The spaceport was quiet; in an age where space travel remained expensive, flights were comparatively infrequent and most traffic went through the imaginatively named Main Spaceport. No further flights were planned that evening at Pieter van Padegem, and apart from scattered port personnel, the terminal was all but deserted.

The port, in common with most across the galaxy, was owned by the municipal authorities and leased to TLZ Spaceways. Since the overwhelming majority of space flight was commercial, and TLZ had a monopoly in this area, it was convenient for the facility to be run by the spaceway.

Lamarck led the way into the lonely lounge. Garish adverts played on the giant com-screens to an oblivious audience of service personnel and orange-uniformed customs proctors. "TLZ Spaceways: Can You Afford Not To?" asked one screen against a backdrop of a mighty spaceliner hanging above a representation of old Earth. Lamarck smiled sourly to himself: the ad seemed to encapsulate his own dilemma.

At the back of the hall was a security door marked: PRIVATE: TLZ SPACEWAYS PERSONNEL ONLY. Lamarck looked sideways at Taslana.

"I take it this is our destination?" he drawled. If he was tense or apprehensive he wasn't going to show it.

Taslana was pale as she nodded. "Once we go through, that is it. Geir, if anything happens I want you to know. . ."

"Nothing will happen," said Lamarck. "I've been in worse spots than this."

As he spoke he inwardly crossed his fingers: in truth he had been in equally difficult situations once or at most twice; but certainly never exactly *worse*.

Taslana smiled weakly. Lamarck gently touched her arm. "Get us in," he said simply.

She pushed the "communicate" button on the security panel and spoke in a low voice which Lamarck did not attempt to overhear. He shrugged his shoulders to make sure that his jacket was hanging correctly; it was too late now for any more deliberate preparations. Allaiio Gazmend's scheme had been effective in ensuring that he presented himself bereft of all the normal safeguards a glax took into such situations.

After a short wait the door opened and a man curtly waved them inside the TLZ sanctum. Lamarck recognised him, as well he should: the man had shot half his shoulder away in the street. He had at the very least Dr Mamoulian's murder on what passed for his conscience; it was likely that he had also killed the Smederevods. The fact that he had revealed himself to Lamarck suggested that one or the other of them was not intended to survive the evening.

"I don't believe we've been introduced," said Lamarck.

"Introductions aren't so important where we're going," said the man. "I know you and I know her; that's enough for now."

He carried himself with an assurance and self-confidence which was not arrogance. This was a man who was a master of a specialised trade and knew it.

"Hand over any weapons," he said.

"Weapons?" responded Lamarck with a raised eyebrow. This was all part of the game.

The thickset man—Hax, as he'd represented himself to the Smederevods—almost casually hit Lamarck in the stomach, who collapsed gasping to the polished floor.

"I'm not getting overtime for this, glax," said Hax. "Don't make me any unhappier."

Lamarck twitched his pulse-gun out of its holster onto the floor. Hax dragged it towards him with his

foot and stooped to pick it up. Putting the gun aside he dragged Lamarck to his feet.

"Now: any more toys?" he continued as Lamarck brought his breathing back under control.

"Don't take my word for it," said Lamarck with an effort. Hax gave the glax a rapid but thorough examination, coming away with Lamarck's remaining minisuns and various other seemingly innocuous items of concealed lethality. Hax understood weapons, Lamarck had to acknowledge.

"That way," said Hax with little inflection, indicating the corridor in front of them. Taslana was pale and silent; although she had been prepared for the worst, the casual assault on Lamarck had unsettled her.

Soon they were before another door. Hax stepped forward and pressed the access plate. The door opened to admit Lamarck and Taslana. The room was very different to most in the spaceport, furnished in the Old Earth style favoured by plutocrats the galaxy over. Two men sat in plush chairs.

One of the men, silver and smooth, in middle age as far as could be determined behind his Genix anti-ageing treatments, rose at their entry. "Ah, Taslana," he said in a rich smooth voice. "With a guest—you have done well. I am pleased."

Taslana said nothing. Behind them the door slid quietly shut. The silver man turned to Lamarck. He exuded a silky assurance which emphasised rather than concealed a flexible ruthlessness.

"Prime Apprehensor: it is a satisfaction to meet you at last. I will not pretend to modesty: as you aware, I am Allaiio Gazmend. Please be seated."

Lamarck saw nothing to be lost and did as he was bidden. He would show Allaiio Gazmend that he was not to be outdone in urbanity.

"I have long desired to make your acquaintance, Puissance," he said. "Although not, in truth, under exactly these circumstances."

Allaiio Gazmend, returning to his armchair, permitted himself an ironic smile. His mouth seemed well-shaped for the expression. "Sometimes we must deal with circumstances as we find them, Prime Apprehensor, a lesson I am sure you learnt early in your distinguished career."

"Indeed," responded Lamarck. "I am at this stage not fully conversant with the full scope of these circumstances."

"Why have I invited you here?" said Allaiiao Gazmend. "The answer could scarcely be simpler. You have some information which is worthless to you and valuable to me. My intent is to arrange things in such a way that an equilibrium is reached."

"I am puzzled as to the mechanics of this," said Lamarck. "As you know, Pangalactic officers who undertake undercover work—and I will not insult you by denying that I have done so—undergo a psychological conditioning which renders them impervious to torture. You cannot extort from me any information I do not wish to divulge."

Allaiiao Gazmend smiled negligently. "And therein lies the beauty of my plan. I do not require of you any information you will not be willing to part with."

"Allow me a degree of scepticism," said Lamarck. "You tell me what you want to know, and I'll tell you the kind of *accommodation* we can reach."

"Now you go too quickly," said Allaiiao Gazmend smoothly. "I am glad you do not deny your undercover background. We can go a little further: you were an undercover operative in an investigation against the activities of TLZ Spaceways in general and Allaiiao Gazmend in particular. That is not a question: it is fact."

Lamarck was reflective for a moment. "Yes," he said.

"Good: you take a realistic attitude to events. I am more conversant than you might think with that aspect of your career. There is information in your possession with which I intend to make myself familiar. Although it is impolite for me to suggest that you might evade, or even dissemble, it will be best for all concerned if you consent to undergo a simple hypnotic procedure."

Lamarck nodded. "My psychological conditioning also includes a block on my being hypnotised without my consent. The only way you can undo the block is if I let you in. If you aren't prepared to take my word you are no nearer the solution."

"No?" asked Allaiiao Gazmend with a smile. "Suppose, disagreeable as the thought is, that someone were to threaten to hurt Miss Zael?"

On this cue Hax passionlessly struck Taslana across the face. The blow seemed harder than was necessary for demonstration purposes and Lamarck flinched even more perceptibly than Taslana. Through gritted teeth he said:

"You can't hurt her too much: you need her alive to

inherit and not too ill-disposed towards you."

Allaiiao Gazmend rubbed his smooth chin. "That is so. I deduce however, both from your response to a threat to her, and the fact that you are here at all, that you have tender feelings towards the young Taslana; and indeed, who would not? Her distress is, in a very direct sense, your distress. Suppose then, that I activated the sanction I have used to influence Taslana thus far?"

Both Lamarck and Taslana were silent. Allaiiao Gazmend continued.

"How about that, Taslana? If Prime Apprehensor Lamarck does not co-operate, the unpleasant circumstance which we discussed earlier may come to pass. Would you not like to ask him to be amiable? We can all see that he hangs on your words."

Taslana's composure, loosened by Hax's blow, disintegrated completely. Her eyes, already reddened by the emotional strain of the afternoon, were liquid and swollen. Allaiiao Gazmend understood the principles of driving home an advantage.

"Well, Taslana?" he asked with brutal softness. "The Prime Apprehensor is waiting for your instructions. We are all waiting, my dear."

Lamarck jerked erect in his seat. "You win," he said. "I consent to your hypnotic procedure: just leave Taslana alone."

Taslana looked at Lamarck through her tears; Lamarck looked away. Whether or not he was doing the right thing—and he could have made the case that his consent was justified on tactical grounds—he knew that he was doing it for the wrong reasons.

Allaiiao Gazmend nodded. "Very good, very good. Prime Apprehensor, may I introduce Dr Smith: he is an expert in the field of psychological conditioning, and he will be performing the procedure."

Allaiiao Gazmend indicated the man sitting in the corner, who had previously been silent. "Smith", as Lamarck was intended to regard him, rose and spoke.

"Prime Apprehensor—if you would like to step this way," he said to Lamarck, indicating the heavy Earth oak table at the far end of the immaculately furnished room.

Tergan

Chapter 10



Keaen

Several days of torrential rains had turned the normally majestic but placid Tor into a ferocious raging torrent which had inundated part of the East Road on both sides. The Diayne was similarly affected as the clouds poured themselves out into the foothills of the ranges. Kint's orchards suffered major damage. Their prized plums would be scarce in the next season.

The rains delayed Armist's planned action against Kistof. Even pigeons were reluctant to fly in the rains and the aerial channels of communication were accordingly disrupted. But horseback messengers had managed to get through to Cedrea, and Tyfal had promised that his contribution to Armist's force would be ready once the rains abated. Kiefer also had advised Armist that his men stood at the ready to leave for Cedrea as soon as the roads were passable.

From Kint there had been no word, and the fate of the two messengers, sent together to provide mutual support, was uncertain. They had been deposited on the eastern side of Tinfeil Reach, and presumably made best speed to Kint; but this was not a certainty and Armist was impatient to get a reply from Lydd. The only consolation was that everybody else's timetables would be equally disrupted, and so the scales were evened out.

Abruptly the rains ceased. Caravella shone from a cloudless sky. Armist set off from Keaen at the head of his own troops, a regiment of about five hundred strong, composed of almost three hundred foot soldiers and a cavalry of eighty. The remainder served to supply and support the small army: cooks, carpenters, blacksmiths, wagoner, grooms. They faced almost a hundred miles of trek along the Reach Road and then, past Tinfeil, through open country along the Reach. Such a mass of heavily armed people were sufficient to even scare elephants away. The army would march until it had reached Tinfeil, even if they arrived in the middle of the night;

then rest for one day, before setting off again in the early morning to arrive at the East Road ferry, the only realistic means of crossing the Tor, over a day later.

Armist knew that he was pushing his troops hard, but he was not going to waste any more time.

Alternatives had been considered but found wanting. The proposition to sail up the Reach and the Tor had been discarded for two reasons. One was that there simply weren't enough ships available to transport such an army over water. Armist could, of course, confiscate merchant vessels, but decided that this would be an act which might backfire at a later time. The other reason was that the Tor ran strong, and shipping against such a current, which might prevail for days, was likely to be slow, if any progress were made at all.

There had finally been notice from Kint, indicating that Lydd was mobilizing and might arrive to join up with Armist's troops in due time. Armist sent a pigeon back, requesting Lydd to synchronize his arrival with Armist's. Before a reply was forthcoming, the regiment from Keaen departed the city.

Tahlia saw Armist off. She had wanted to come, of course, but it took fairly little to persuade her not to.

"Be careful," she admonished him, her face a study of concern and anguish. "There is no need to be a hero and face Kistof at the head of your army."

He assured her that he had no intention of dying or even getting injured, and reminded her that he was not entirely without 'protection'. His skills in manipulating his talent—which allowed him to freeze the world around him, while for him nothing appeared to have changed—had grown and would no doubt get him out of the worst of situations.

Tahlia was only half-convinced, but she had no argument when he told her that carrying a child was potentially more perilous than what he was about to undertake.

Armist also insisted that Pandrak stay back at Keaen. His father had not been happy about the suggestion, but found his son unyielding. Pandrak was even more loath to stay at Keaen because Zygie *was* going. Armist knew this, and yet he accepted her offer. She was willing to heal those who might otherwise be maimed or die, on both sides. Who was he to refuse such an offer?

Laetis, on the other hand, was coming with the army. Armist requested it and Laetis had found no reason to demur; though when he found out that Zygie was

coming, Armist detected an unvoiced protestation, and a flash of anger that was hidden almost as quickly as it had flared up. Armist also asked Mirne and Screef to come, which they did without questioning his reasons.

The army departed, churning up the muddy Reach Road. Curious eyes were turned to the women, but soon the need to deal with the forced march overshadowed all such idle thoughts.

They made a brief stop at Telara Station, then onward toward Tinfeil, which they reached, as expected, in the early hours of the morning of the next day. The men were exhausted. A night in elec territory and the associated apprehension and stress had not helped either. They were accommodated in Tinfeil and spent a day nursing their blisters and sore muscles.

They departed in the early hours of the next morning, just as the first light of dawn peered over the ranges, and headed across unroaded countryside along the Tor toward the East Road. The first part of the way proceeded along the slow decline of the western edge of the Tor; high enough to avoid getting bogged down. But when they came to level ground it was a different matter. They turned away from the Tor in order to avoid the flatlands south of the East Road, which the rain had turned into bogs, and the Tor, breaching its banks, had partially flooded.

Progress was slow; often the broad wheels of the wagons sunk deeply into the ground, and the wagons had to be lightened and freed with the assistance of many men. Seeing that Armist was not flagging, the men chose to emulate him and toiled all the harder. They stopped on a slight elevation, which provided drier ground. The quacks attended to sores, cuts, bruises, and spread healing ointments over cramped muscles. Two men had severely sprained ankles and were transferred to wagons. Armist's lieutenants assured him that two out of that many represented a *very* light casualty rate for such a march. Zygie offered her assistance, but Armist told her that he'd prefer it if as yet she did not reveal her identity. This appeared advisable, if only as a precaution against unnecessary distraction in the ranks. The hurts caused by the march were minor and could be dealt with in the customary fashion.

"We don't want the quacks to feel completely superfluous," Armist told Zygie, who laughed at the comment.

Night approached and descended. The soldiers were

fed and rested. Armist told his commanders to spread the rumor that elecs really didn't like boggy countryside and that therefore everybody was probably much safer than they were the night on the Reach Road. Still it would be wise to keep a lookout for strays who might feel differently.

"How do you know this?" Zygie asked Armist.

"Don't tell me it's true!"

"It is. Who told you?"

"Nobody. I made it up."

Zygie found this immensely amusing and laughed merrily. Mirne and Screef approached. Mirne enquired about the jocosity. Zygie related the circumstances.

Mirne fixed Armist with a stern frown. "You lied?"

Armist shrugged. "The men have enough to worry about. It seemed a harmless enough story—especially since it turns out to be true."

For some reason unfathomable to Armist, Mirne appeared unimpressed by this fortuity and did not waver in her disapproval. Screef, however, did not take the matter as seriously. Indeed, Armist thought to detect a faint amusement in the Pacer's eyes.

The soldiers regrouped, the wagons were readied, the army continued on its way under the diffuse glow of Janus.

Presently the ground rose again and became less boggy. Progress accelerated and by first daylight they finally came upon the East Road, only to find that Tyfal's regiment happened to be passing along the same stretch of road. With them was the smaller contingent from Port Ster, seventy mounted soldiers, who had ridden to Cedrea the previous day to join Tyfal's force.

Tyfal and Kiefer were at the head, both looking exhausted but determined. Armist was as surprised to see them here as he was pleased by the fortunate timing, but refrained from asking questions. Their presence, he surmised, expressed, more than anything else, their resolve to stand by him. He gave warm thanks for their support as the regiments lined up and proceeded at best speed in the direction of the Tor.

They arrived at the Tor ferry by mid-morning, to find the river swollen and the ferry housings on either side halfway submerged. The two tall poles by each housing still stood straight, being deeply sunk into the ground and supported by a framework of three guy ropes. They were made from the straight trunks of tall pines, and served to hold the slack end of the ferry cables high

above the water so that ships might pass underneath. The ferry, a large wooden pontoon barge that could carry the weight of fifty men, was moored on the other side of the Tor, held by extra ropes tied to trees that stood away from the river. Armist was relieved to see that it had not been washed away. There was no other way to cross the river.

Then, however, his relief turned to concern. For he recognized the dark-gray-and-yellow uniforms of Kistof's men on the other side. It seemed that the baron had done his best to ensure that Armist was stranded on the wrong side of the river—and the Kint forces were nowhere in sight.



Caitlan pulled up the horses.

"Look," he said, pointing. "More soldiers, marching across from . . ."

He looked at Ailin. "Keaen," he said tonelessly. "And Cedrea. All of them marching overnight. Someone is waging a campaign. Against . . . Caelar?"

They spurred on their horses.

Presently they crested a small elevation and found before them, camped all around, at least eight hundred men, their path barred by the monstrosly swollen river Tor. They approached the camp, only to be challenged by a guard detail of six soldiers. But the guard leader's words died in his throat when he recognized the weaponsmaster.

Caitlan laughed at the expression on the man's face.

"Close your mouth, Tanil. You've swallowed enough air already." Caitlan scanned the mass of troops. "Who leads this army?" he asked.

"Armist of Keaen," the sergeant called Tanil replied. "In the company of the Barons Tyfal and Kiefer."

"Marching against Caelar?"

"That we are."

"Take us to Armist," Caitlan ordered. Tanil obeyed with alacrity.

Minutes later Caitlan enfolded a disbelieving Armist in a bear hug—with Ailin and Zygie meeting in an equally joyous embrace, while Fliz and Nerys looked on with bemused expressions.

"I don't know where Lydd is," Armist said. "Without him we cannot hope to get to the ferry."

"With him it might be impossible," Caitlan noted, taking stock of the situation. They stood at the Tor's bank, eyeing the activity on the opposite side.

Armist turned to Caitlan. "What do you mean?"

"Kistof knows that he cannot defend the ferry against a superior force. Look how few men he has over there. Twenty? When they see Lydd coming, what do you think they're going to do?"

"They'll . . ." Then Armist blanched, understanding. "They'll cut the ropes," he said.

"Exactly."

"Then why haven't they done it already?"

"Why destroy something you might need to use—unless you absolutely have to?"

Armist cursed softly. "I have been a fool. This possibility never occurred to me."

Caitlan clapped him on the shoulder. "You are a good man, Armist, but a soldier you are not. So, now that we know the stakes, let us make plans to reverse the situation."

"How?"

Caitlan looked up and down the Tor, taking in the currents in the fast-flowing water. He turned to Armist. "You had better make sure that Lydd does not show his face too soon."

"He has been ordered to march at best speed to meet us here!"

"Then send a messenger and tell him to wait and not to approach within sight of the ferry."

He pointed. "See that boat?" It was small, capable of holding four, maybe five men. "Get some men, carry it downstream until they're out of sight. Have them cross the Tor and find Lydd. That's the best we can do."

"And meanwhile, what are we doing to make of this situation?"

Caitlan looked upstream. "I may have an idea."

Ailin was not enthused about Caitlan's plan.

"Are you tired of life?" she wanted to know.

They stood separate from everybody, wanting privacy for what they had to say to each other.

Caitlan touched her face. "My love, we die together, or not at all. This is what Fliz saw, and I believe him."

Ailin's face evidenced the conflicts raging within her. "I believe him, too. Still, I'm frightened. For you. For me. For us. The river . . . look at it. It is like a monster, its swirls look for the unwary, to take them in forever.

Maybe even you! You are not immortal. We can still die—and if you . . .”

“We’ve survived the Limpic Ocean,” he reminded her. “The Tor does not want me. And Armist needs me.”

They embraced and she clung to him tightly, as if that were going to make a difference.

“I will be back,” he said. “This I promise.”

She looked into his face. “You’d better, Caitlan of Tinagel,” she said crisply.

Caitlan chuckled. “That’s more like it.”

He kissed her, and they walked back to where Armist stood with ten soldiers, all of them now out of uniform, and dressed in light tunics. To their belts were affixed various kinds of weapons: slings, knives, strangling cords. Tools of a grim trade. They looked at Caitlan expectantly. He considered them for a few moments. On them, and on him, depended the fate of Armist’s campaign. They were the toughest the army had to offer. They knew it and so did Caitlan. He had selected them personally, remembering them from their training, knowing their skills, strengths, weaknesses. All of them would do what had to be done.

And some of them might die.

They knew it, and they even knew that they would have to face the Myrmidic Woods before the day was over; before they even faced the enemy.

“Ready?” he asked them.

All signaled their assent according to their dispositions.

“Then we go.” Caitlan briefly clasped Armist’s hand. “The ferry will be ours by the morrow.”

Caitlan cast one last look, then he and his men departed—on foot, heading for the Myrmidic Woods. They fell into a slow trot as soon as they were outside the perimeter, and presently the camp fell from sight behind an elevation.

About five miles along their way they paused to take breath. The Woods were close by, individual trees clearly discernible. After a brief rest they continued, forced to enter the Woods to avoid the river. Progress now was slow, but by the time the afternoon came to a close they had arrived at what Caitlan considered a suitable position. The Tor made a sharp bend here and the direction of the currents here made this the best place for a swimmer to cross to the other side.

Caitlan scanned the river’s eddies and visible surface currents. “If you can’t make it,” he told them, “do not

needlessly sacrifice your lives. Head for the closest bank and take it from there. Remember that you’re more worth alive than dead. For those who do make it, we head for the clump of willows just upstream from the ferry. From there we proceed together.”

He took a deep breath. “Good luck to us all.”

They discussed the structure of the river’s flow and came to a consensus about how to brave it. Then they undressed until they were left with only their belts and weapons and small triangles of cloth tied around their loins and between their legs. They anointed themselves with oil from a bottle which Caitlan had brought. Then, one by one, they slipped into the water—as Caravella dipped into the western sky and the Tor slipped into the shade, thus hiding their heads and splashes as they struck out toward the opposite shore.

The waters were icy cold, as they always were, becoming lethal in the spring when the snow melted from the ranges. What they were doing now would be suicide then.

Caitlan surrendered himself to the river, striking out vigorously to keep warm, while still trying to conserve his strength. The muddy eddies caught him and whirled him about, making him their plaything, and mostly ignoring his puny efforts to control his movements. But when their buffeting relented, as it sometimes did, he used it to push himself in another direction, toward another current or swirl that looked more conducive to taking him to the opposite bank.

It was a game of intention and luck, of plans gone awry and chances taken sometimes paying off, and more often not. Night fell on his silent struggle. The Tor carried him along, past the ferry and maybe a mile downriver, before his feet felt solid ground and he scrambled out of the waters.

The temptation to lie down was great. His muscles were knots of agony, and the breeze chilled him to the bone. Oh, for a chance to rest!

But he had to get to the meeting place and that was upstream of the ferry. He would have to circle around the Caelar soldiers, giving them a wide berth.

A few deep breaths; a last look back at the majestically rushing river, now a band of gray, patterned by erratic loops and blotches reflected in the dim light of the stars and rising Janus; then he gathered his energies and loped up the slight incline and away from the Tor to avoid the soldiers.

By the time his jog-trot had brought him to the meeting place, Janus was riding clear of the ranges and his feet were blistered and sore. Maybe, Caitlan told himself, some light footwear would have been appropriate after all.

Nobody had arrived yet, so he sat himself down in a spot protected from the wind and rested his weary limbs.

Presently there was a sound that didn't belong. Caitlan rose and hid between two sprawling willows. As he did, he noticed that both his aches and pains and his tiredness had virtually disappeared.

Ailin's gift! How could he forget! Maybe one day he would get used to what he had now become; the manner in which his body repaired itself.

From the darkness emerged a furtive figure. Caitlan called out. The man replied. Now they were two. Caitlan ordered the man to rest while they awaited the others. Three more arrived not long after. Then, nothing. They waited until Janus had swung toward its highest point. Then Caitlan called them together.

"I had hoped for more," he said, "but it looks like the five of us will have to do the work for all. Given our numbers I suggest that we focus on securing the ferry cable anchor. This must be our highest priority." He indicated himself and two others, who went by the name of Fildek and Tanar. "The three of us will attend to this task. The rest of you . . . I expect you to wreak havoc and terror among Kistof's men."

As he uttered these orders Caitlan felt conflicting emotions. Indeed, the very existence of the conflict reminded him yet again that his days in the soldiering business were numbered. If it had not been an absolute necessity . . .

"If you can keep from killing them," he said, "do. But none must be allowed to escape. Kistof has to remain ignorant of their failure for as long as possible."

They set out to do their grim work.

The ferry master lived on the eastern bank of the Tor in a one-story house set on a hillock, the site having been chosen with the prevailing conditions in mind. Nearby stood a small barn, surrounded by tiny holding pens for horses and other livestock. The Caelar soldiers had ensconced themselves in the residence and evicted the ferry master and his family, forcing them to take up residence with their animals in the barn.

As Caitlan, Fildek, and Tanar crept toward the ferry anchor, the other two sidled up to the house. Two Caelareans stood guard at the door, torpid and inattentive. Presently they died with their throats cut. The two assailants pulled the bodies out of sight and divested them of their clothing, which they put on themselves. They returned to the house and assumed the position of the deceased guards.

One of them rapped on the door. "Hurry!"

Bumping noises from inside. The metallic clangor of steel. Through the door burst the first man: a captain, judging by the uniform; maybe the commander of this outfit. Still groggy from sleep he died before he even knew that the two men before him were not who they appeared.

More men emerged from the house. The Keanean commandos worked deftly, with lethal efficiency. No one was left alive.

At the anchor, Caitlan and his companions slid along covering walls, trying to stay out of Janus' light. At the anchor stood a guard detail of eleven men in attitudes of moderate to slack watchfulness. Against a wall leaned an axe: the instrument with which they intended to cut the ropes if necessary.

The anchor itself, half submerged in the swirling waters of the Tor, was a triangle of posts, deeply embedded in the ground, joined for mutual stability with cross members. In the center of the triangle stood the tall post serving as a cable guide. Three guy ropes connected the anchor posts to another one, fashioned from a young tika tree, and buried further up the shore. The ferry itself was held by four thick ropes wrapped around the anchor: the one used to pull the ferry from the western to the eastern bank and two extra ones of new rope to provide the extra restraint needed to prevent the Tor from carrying it away. The ferry master knew his river and had taken the appropriate precautions.

Caitlan signaled to his men. The other two disappeared into the darkness as they moved to double back around to the other side of the guards. Caitlan grimaced when he realized that the situation left no room for finesse. The guards would die. This was the way of war.

He readied his first slingshot and fitted a stone, the size of a child's fist, into it. The same with the second. He started swinging them slowly, so as not to arouse

suspicion by the noise they made as they swished through the air. Two slings at once required very effective coordination and mental focus.

Then, a gurgling sound. One of the guards went down.

Another.

Caitlan sped up the slings, aimed, and let go of his first missile. Even as it flew he released the second. Both found a mark and the guards went down. Another guard, possessed of sufficient presence of mind to grasp what was happening, picked up the axe and lunged toward the anchor. He stepped into the water and started wading toward the three posts. Caitlan started running. He reached the water's edge. The guard heard him and looked around. He brought up the axe, aiming at Caitlan, not the ropes. Caitlan took another step and launched himself at the man. The axe was on the highest point of its arc. Caitlan twisted in midair. One hand grabbed for the axe handle, found it, jerked it out of the man's hand as they both went down. Caitlan let go of the axe, which disappeared under the water. The man struggled for the knife at his belt. Caitlan's hand clamped down on a wrist and twisted. The man screamed as the wrist snapped like a twig. Caitlan let him go and pushed him aside. The man rose and stumbled away splashing through the water, nursing his injury. Caitlan looked after him, pondering his own order that no one should be allowed to escape. For a moment the fleeing man's life hung in a precarious balance. But what could he do? He was wounded and would be more concerned with his own welfare than the Tegel's problems. Caitlan grimaced, admitted to himself that he was becoming unsuitable for the soldering trade, turned to the others—only to find that the fight was over. Caitlan waded out of the water and approached the scene. Fildek stood in an attitude of watchful waiting. Around him the bodies of the guards—and of Tanar, who had taken a halberd through his gut. Caitlan bent down to see if he was still alive. Maybe, if he could get Ailin quickly enough . . .

But it was too late. Even a circe could not bring Tanar back.

Caitlan stood up. "Well done," he said.

Fildek nodded his acknowledgment. "I will go and check on the others."

"Do that."

Fildek melted into the shadows. Caitlan looked at the corpses around him. He felt no remorse for what had

had to be done. Just a lingering sadness at the waste of it all. Fathers, brothers, sons. Here they lay, deprived of their lives—when they should have been with their families, looking toward the future.

Caitlan looked across the Tor; thought he saw figures on the other side by the water's edge. He waded over to the anchor, reached up and jerked on the rope leading up the tall post. Three times he jerked; then waited, but not letting it go. Presently he felt a response. The rope jerked thrice. He jerked another four times, thus confirming that it was him who was giving the signal. From the other side of the Tor he heard a chorus of faint shouts.

Caitlan waded back onto dry land and slid away to make sure that his remaining men had completed what they had come here for.

"It cannot be done!" the ferry master insisted.

"It can be done," Caitlan told him curtly, "and you will do it."

"The river still flows too strong!"

"Then we will ferry smaller loads," Caitlan snapped. "Men died to make this possible. Now get to it! You have four men to help you, so let us not waste any time."

It took most of the morning to prepare the ferry for its first trip back to the western bank. The ropes strained and creaked but they held. The safety lines were not needed.

Armist decided to dispense with the complicated niceties of river protocol. The rope guides remained unused for this enterprise. If a ship came down the Tor right now—which few captains in their right mind would attempt—it would have to find a way to pull to the shore and wait until the crossing was completed.

On both shores, teams of sturdy horses were harnessed and commenced the process of pulling the ferry across. On the western bank Ailin greeted Caitlan with a fierce embrace. Caitlan enquired about the other members of his team. None had reported or been seen. More people dead. Kistof would have a lot to answer for.

The labor began of ferrying hundreds of men, dozens of horses, and several large wagons across the river. Lydd of Kint and his contingent arrived in the late afternoon and provided a welcome help. Despite this, by nightfall the crossing was not yet completed, and it took until dawn before it was done. Miraculously, not a single person, animal, or wagon was lost.

Armist gathered with the barons and Caitlan to plan for the next step.

"We march to Caelar? Just like that?"

Caitlan nodded. "There will be no opposition. The defense will concentrate at the town itself."

To Laetis came a messenger. Hengiste had set off for Sansker three days ago. Rumor had it that he was preparing to confer with the Baron Tegel.

Caitlan shook his head. "Kistof is not going anywhere. He knows that without him the city will surrender. Only his presence will keep them fighting."

Armist looked at Laetis. "This is your assessment as well?"

Laetis nodded. He was, Armist saw with relief, focused on his task and on what he did best; instead of wasting his time on futile considerations of unrequited lust and lingering resentment.

"Kistof stays in Caelar," Laetis affirmed. "He stays there and he will die there."

Then, as if he had said too much, he turned away and departed.

The army, now almost a thousand strong, set into motion.

Sometime during the afternoon another messenger arrived.

"Hengiste has been assassinated," Laetis reported. "Gervase now sits on the throne."

"Does this change anything?" Armist wondered.

Nobody appeared certain about the consequences of the change of the Tergan scepter.

Then came another message. Laetis relayed it to Armist.

"Gervase is dead; slain by Evadne, with the help of a minor functionary, Councillor Sander—who was slain during the event."

Despite Laetis' protest Armist sent for Zygie.

"What do you make of this?" he asked her.

Zygie's face fell when she heard about Sander's death. "Sander dead? I do not believe it," she said.

"That hardly matters," declared Laetis, whom Armist had been unable to remove in time to confer with the circe alone. "He was killed by Gervase's men. These are the facts."

Zygie flicked a quick glance at Armist. He thought he understood, grateful that she did not push the issue.

"Ailin's expecting me," Zygie said and departed.

Armist contemplated Laetis. It would not do to appear

too indulgent of Laetis' whims. "She deserves more respect," he told the Pacer.

"She is a *circe!*" Laetis hissed.

"That does not make her intrinsically unreliable," Armist said equably.

"I know what I know," Laetis insisted, his posture stiff, the head raised just slightly, making him appear even taller than he already was.

"You never expressed a similar reservation with regard to Ailin," Armist noted.

"I did not know what she was," Laetis replied sharply. "Do you not see it? Even Caitlan has changed."

Armist refrained from continuing this line of discussion, especially since Caitlan had come up behind Laetis, very quietly, and now just stood there, listening attentively.

"What says your intelligence out of Caelar?" Armist asked Laetis, not giving any hint of Caitlan's presence. "Is there any information that might help us?"

Laetis eyed Armist suspiciously, then realized what he was doing and got his expression under control. "Caelar is closed to us. The baron's men are paranoid in the extreme. A spy who came in from Caelar this morning says that the town is virtually closed off. Supplies have been brought into the town. They are preparing for a siege, of that there is no doubt."

"Yet they know that they cannot possibly hold out for long," Armist pointed out.

"Unless they are expecting reinforcements from Tergan."

"Which will not be forthcoming."

"According to the circe," Laetis said acridly. "The only source suggesting that a Tergan ruler—man or woman!—will do anything *but* take advantage of the current divisions in Keaen."

Laetis spoke with increasing agitation. "Do you not understand this? Tergan is small and has no hope of ever besting Keaen in a regular confrontation. But, with a major component of our forces not only out of action but arrayed against us, drawing our full attention as it does now . . . how can they help but desire to take full advantage? And it doesn't require Hengiste—who admittedly has been almost rabid in his desires. The charming Evadne would do just the same, and now that her alleged mentor—'mentor'? pah!—now that he is dead, she will most definitely proceed as any other Tergan ruler would."

Armist looked up. "What do you think, Caitlan?"

Laetis whipped around. "How long . . .?"

Caitlan allowed himself a thin-lipped smile. "Just arrived—in time to partake of your analysis of the Tergan situation."

"You disagree?" Laetis asked sharply.

Caitlan shrugged. Armist knew his friend well enough to realize that the indifference was a fake. "I do not have your resources for information gathering. I would not presume to form a judgment based on insufficient information. It tends to lead one into quandaries that can be anything from merely embarrassing to lethal."

"Just so," Laetis snapped. He looked at Armist. "If you will excuse me."

Armist nodded. "I want to be kept informed of anything that might be of significance."

"Of course." Laetis bowed perfunctorily and, with a quick glance at Caitlan, departed the scene.

"He is a troubled man," Caitlan said, when Laetis was out of earshot.

"That he is," Armist agreed. "Do you know where Zygie is? I had a sense that she wanted to tell me something, but not in front of Laetis."

Caitlan sighed. "Can you blame her? Come. She's dying to talk to you, and, believe me, if Sander is what she says he is, then he probably *is* alive."

Caelar was situated on a broad jutting spur that was the westernmost protrusion of the foothills of the Eastern Ranges. The spur ended at the bank of the Tor. Over the eons the river had worn down the tip to leave a steep embankment about a hundred feet high, at the edge of which sat Caelar. On the southern side of the spur lay Caelar's docks; an array of low planked piers, where the flat-bottomed merchant vessels from Tinfeil and Keaen docked. Right now the docks were still mostly submerged and vessels were nowhere in sight.

To the south the spur exhibited a strip of gentle slope, forming a natural access ramp. Caelar itself was surrounded by a wall of rock and mortar sixty feet tall and over ten feet wide. Access was through a single gate of young tika boles, which had been workable when first put together in this way, but had hardened over the years to become virtually impermeable to any means of assault, including rams, steel tools, or fire. Beside the larger gate was a small door, also fashioned from tika

wood, and just large enough to allow the passage of two men walking abreast.

On the northern side the spur was steep and easy to defend. There was, therefore, only one angle from which an assault was practical—if it was to be considered at all. It was a contingency Armist wanted to avoid if at all possible. He also had no taste for dragging the general populace into the fight.

The Army, marching at a stiff pace with only one break for rest and nourishment, arrived in sight of Caelar at nightfall. They progressed until they arrived among the scattered village arcing around Caelar's southern side. The villagers received the martial visitors with a mix of apprehension, indifference, and, surprisingly, a apparent measure of relief.

The soldiers established a camp between the village and the Tor; in an untilled area, where the ground was rocky and infertile, but also relatively dry, since it lay a few feet higher than the surrounding terrain.

Armist, Caitlan, and Laetis rode to inspect the layout and to make plans for the morrow.

"We must appear to lay siege," Caitlan told him. "Even if we do not intend to follow it through. The very sight of engines of siege being constructed and moved into position has an interesting effect of the morale of the defenders. Indeed, let us do it without haste, so that they have time to watch us doing it. Time to think and to become afraid. Ominous and determined preparation has been known to be more effective than posturing or threats. In the event, no communications with Caelar should take place."

"Should we not negotiate?" Armist wondered.

Caitlan laughed. "We may consider this once our positions are established and the engines have lobbed a few trial rounds into the Tor, where the rocks make impressive splashes and everybody can see what we're up to."

"You sound as if you didn't think we'd ever use them."

"I hope not," Caitlan replied. "The waving of big impressive swords has often prevented conflicts that might have gone ahead if everybody had just brandished the knives from the kitchen table. "

"Kistof will not yield," Laetis muttered darkly.

"He may be stupid enough not to," Caitlan noted, "but remember that without his commanders he is nothing. It is them we have to convince that to resist is suicidal folly. I am banking on the instinct of the soldiers.

Given the Tegels' record I don't think we have to expect fanatical loyalty."

Laetis clearly remained unconvinced, but did not pursue the matter. Armist thought he knew what was going on in Laetis' mind. He wondered how far the Pacer's plans to assassinate Kistof had proceeded. Again he was embroiled in a deep conflict with himself; for he had done nothing about stopping the process.

They returned to the camp. Laetis went about his business while Armist took Caitlan aside and explained his dilemma. Caitlan grinned, but then turned serious.

"I do not approve of assassinations," he said, "but I think you are right. The only alternative to what you did—namely nothing—was betrayal, either of Mirne and Screef or of Laetis, who may have his flaws, but is your ally. We must needs hope that his plans come to naught and that this confrontation can be brought to an honorable conclusion."

On the morning of the next day the soldiers became builders of siege engines. They went into the foothills and came back with the trunks and thick branches of felled trees. These were stripped of bark and smoothed. The carpenters, with the aid of the soldiers detailed to the work, began the work of fashioning mangonels, which Caitlan considered the simplest and most reliable of siege engines. The carpenters agreed. Construction proceeded with vigor and enthusiasm. The soldiers likewise soon warmed to the novelty of it all. There were only two such machines in existence, and they had never been used in earnest. Now it seemed as if this was about to change.

Night fell on the camp. The villagers, now on a more familiar footing with the soldiers, mingled with the army. If there was any lingering loyalty to the House of Tegel, it was not on display. The commanders feared a break in discipline, but Caitlan brought them together and told them that the advantage of having the populace on their side outweighed small lapses in military etiquette. As long as the soldiers knew the limits of the permissible. The commanders disseminated strict prohibitions on sexual liaisons for the duration of the campaign. One sure way to create mistrust was to ravish the daughters of the villagers. The penalties for transgressions of these rules were severe.

With nightfall came bad news. Mirne stormed into Armist's tent, where he was consulting with Caitlan and some commanders. Screef followed, though he entered more calmly.

"How *could* you?" Mirne shouted at Armist. "I *trusted* you!"

She stood before him with blazing eyes, her face distorted with bitter anger.

Armist, nonplused by the attack, stared at her for a few moments. Caitlan made a quick motion with his head. The commanders left the tent in haste.

"What have I done?" Armist asked Mirne.

"You betrayed me! You betrayed us all! Those who trusted you! What kind of a man are you?"

She raised a fist as if to hit him. Caitlan's hand caught her wrist.

"Easy," he grumbled.

Mirne stood stiffly, her eyes hot and wet.

Armist shook his head. Caitlan let go of Mirne's wrist.

"What happened?" Armist asked.

"As if you didn't know!"

Armist looked at Screef. "What happened?"

"Trefawn is dead," Screef told them. "He and two others were executed by Tegel's guard earlier today."

Armist looked at Mirne. "You think I *betrayed* them?" he asked her. "To the Tegels?" He shook his head. "How can you think this of me?"

Mirne glared at him. "Laetis says they were betrayed! Only Trefawn, Laetis, Screef, and I knew! And I told *you*!"

"And how does Laetis know that they were betrayed?" Caitlan interjected.

"He didn't tell me. But he has no reason to lie!" Mirne grated.

"Maybe he has," Screef said behind her.

Mirne whipped around. "What do you say?"

Screef stepped forward and took her hand. "I said it before, Mirne, and I say it again," he told her. "Armist would not do this." He gave Armist and Caitlan a penetrating stare. Satisfied with what he saw, he returned his attention to Mirne and touched her face with a gesture of odd tenderness. "I think nobody betrayed anybody. It just went wrong. Trefawn failed. These things happen. Laetis either wants to believe that they were betrayed—so he can blame somebody else than himself—or he would like *us* to believe it. Because if

we do, and if—as he might well suspect—we informed Armist of his plans, then what better way to sow discord between us and punish you for going behind his back?”

Mirne stared at Screef for the space of a breath or two, refusing to believe what she'd heard. Her face fell in defeat—and shame. She stood still, looking at the ground. Screef gently massaged her neck.

Armist touched Mirne on the shoulder. “Do not blame yourself,” he said kindly.

Mirne looked up. “I'm . . .”

“Let us forget this,” Armist said firmly. “We are friends, are we not?”

“I did not behave like one.”

“Perfection eludes us all.”

“You are not . . . angry?”

“Why should I be?” Armist took his lower lip between his teeth. “I am getting tired of Laetis' plots and schemes.” To Mirne and Screef he said. “Maybe we should Laetis think that he has achieved at least one of his goals. I suggest you leave and do it in such a manner that everybody seeing you do it is convinced that we've had a falling out. That should allow him to focus on the things that matter. And if he doesn't he'll not like my response.”

Mirne looked dubious. Screef took her arm. “Come,” he said gently. “Armist is right.”

“I am sorry,” Mirne said to Armist, “I should have known.”

Armist shrugged. “Let's see what we can do to beat Laetis at his own game.”

