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The Zael Inheritance

Prologue and Chapter 1

by Tim Stretton

— Page 2 —

Keaen

Chapter 1

by Till Noever

—Page 8 —

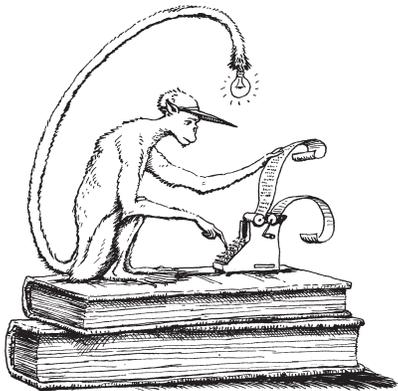
Planet of Retribution

Chapter 5

by Zack Fance

—Page 15 —

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With the advent of modernism and its cult of originality, artistic influence, to say nothing of imitation or copying, has been looked at askance. Thus Renoir, the last of the great classic painters, was driven to protest: "Only cowards are afraid to copy the Masters!" Culture, particularly such a rich and developed one as Western Culture, is not constructed in three minutes. It is the work of centuries, with each new generation of artists clambering up on the shoulders of the last. What would Manet have been without Valasques? another David. What would Valasques have been without Titian? another Sanches Coelo. What would Titian have been without Giorgione? another Carpaccio. And without Bellini, what would Giorgione have been? nothing at all! Does this mean that culture is an artificial, utterly self-referential construct? Quite the opposite. Without Galileo and his crude telescope, would man have walked the moon? Never! The Arts are tools of expression. Expression of what? Of the only thing there is to express; an understanding of human experience and nature. Each artist, like each person, is unique by default. We can not escape being ourselves; it is our doom. The true artistic struggle is not, therefore: "to become oneself", as modernist dogma, eager to destroy tradition, would have it. No; the true struggle is to *escape*, to break the dark, charmed circle of the self, to move up, out, onto the Elysian fields of Truth, for only from there can we view the panorama of Life. To become an artist in the tradition of a great culture there is only one path; following the lead of the Masters. Only thus does an artist "become himself" in the true sense.

The Editors

The Zael Inheritance

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Prologue

Taslana surveyed her new appearance in the mirror with an unusually intent scrutiny. The blue eyes were the same, her nose was still just too short and just too wide and the abrupt white-blonde crop was not completely flattering, she thought; but that was hardly the point. With her dun-coloured shoulder-length hair sheared away she looked at least nineteen; a woman and not an awkward girl. The image might not stand up to close examination, but under the circumstances it would have to do.

She pulled on her full-length insulated overcoat and looked around the room for one last time. She was surprised how easy she was finding it to leave; this had been her room for as long as she could remember, and she might not find things so luxurious where she was going. It was unlikely that her resources would stretch to a private Crimpette, or a Lagensmeyer SmartBed — and her wardrobe would undoubtedly be less extensive. But she had been through that already. With the certainty of one born to affluence, she knew that she could cast these fripperies aside without hesitation. Some things were more important than wealth — and she was going to find them. And the income from the share certificates would come in useful anyway.

Picking up her single case she walked across to the door. From her coat pocket she took out a message cube, time-locked for twelve hours, and set it down in an obvious position on her antique Earth desk. She knew that the message would not stop anyone worrying about her — or stop her father from trying to find her — but it at least salved her conscience.

Without a backward glance she left the room. She knew the reaction would hit her later, but for now she needed to be alert and rational. This time she had the advantage of surprise: if she was caught it could be years before she got another chance.

Making her way through the house she slipped into the courtyard. She had chosen her time with care: most of the staff would be taking their refreshment; her father would still be at the office; and her mother would be at least three hours into an afternoon's inebriation or worse. She didn't know where Tancredin was, but she

could handle him if she had to.

Even the weather was her ally; dark clouds had taken up station seemingly twenty feet above her head, reducing visibility and discouraging loitering outside. She would have been surprised if the Zael's World climate had given her anything different. Convenient for raw materials it might be; but no one ever went there for the sunshine.

She walked smartly across to the aircar compound, her triple-insulated Sneggi boots, retailing at 1,200 marks on Earth, noiseless on the damp cobbles. Her father's aircar was gone, but Tancredin's sporty red Firedaunt Panther was in its bay. She had not intended to use the Panther — it was a conspicuous luxury at the best of times — but she would not be in it for long, and the alternative, the artisans' road-bus, would be still less satisfactory.

She tapped in the entry code on the outer control panel, smiling as she remembered how she had pestered Tancredin to set up her access until he relented from sheer vexation. She vaulted nimbly into the cockpit and set her bag down on the passenger seat. Having no taste for flying the Panther herself she engaged the navcom: "7610 Mecklenburg," she commanded crisply. "Maximum cruise speed."

As the terrain slid by underneath, Taslana reflected on what she was doing. They would come after her, of course. Not that either of them cared whether she was there or not; but her father couldn't countenance the scandal of her running away, and her mother, if she sobered up long enough to realise she was gone, would try to find her first just to spite him. Was it any wonder that she had to escape?

Soon Taslana noted that the moorland terrain of the family's winter estate was giving way to an ugly urban landscape, angular and smoky: Mecklenburg. Looking on the navigation screen she saw the spaceport away to the east, but the aircar carried on into the heart of the city. She set the Panther down in a seedy and deserted goods-yard, where it looked wildly conspicuous. Taslana reasoned that it was safe enough; everyone in the city would know that it was Tancredin's, and of his famous taste for sampling the baser pleasures Mecklenburg could offer. No-one would dare interfere with Tancredin's aircar. It would make her easier to track later, of course; but she would be at the Hub by then.

Slipping off her coat she walked into the sad drab warehouse in front of her. No-one was about, but she

was not fooled.

"Louster!" she called with an illusory confidence. "Show yourself and be quick about it."

"Taslana?" came a voice from the shadows.

"Who else?" she returned scornfully. She had decided that hard-boiled was the best way to play this. Louster was not a man to respect feminine frailty.

The man who emerged from the shadows was thirty-five or so, short and by no means slender; an artisan who could not afford the kind of cosmetic treatments that Taslana's family took for granted. She had to remind herself that Louster's unattractiveness was not his fault.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "I wouldn't have recognised you, blondie."

"That's the idea of disguise," said Taslana with a command of sardonic disdain which rather impressed her. "Have you got the idents?"

Louster rummaged in the pockets of grubby overalls which had either been made in grey-white or evolved that way.

"Like we said: two ident cards. One for Helena Courtenay of Eden; the other blank. Also one encoding device to validate the blank card. And no questions asked."

Taslana nodded. "Thank you," she said with a politeness learned in a very different school. "I have your money: 5,000 marks was the figure we agreed, I think."

Louster tucked the ident cards back into his overalls pocket and wiped his hands on his thighs. With a leer he said:

"That was the cash element. But if you wanted to show your appreciation in a more personal way . . ."

"I don't know what you mean," said Taslana, although she had formed a disconcerting idea. She noticed his face was greasy and studded with blackheads.

"I think you do," he said through his leer. "How old are you? Seventeen? Hasn't that mother of yours been teaching you any of her famous tricks? You can't be that innocent"

Suddenly Taslana forgot all about being hard-boiled. She was very frightened and she seized on the tiny spark of anger rising in her to drive the fear out.

"Scum!" she hissed. "I wouldn't do what you wanted to save my life, let alone for two forged idents."

"Oh no? There's no-one else here. I'm not sure how you're going to stop me. You might as well enjoy it; you may learn something"

Taslana's upbringing had been somewhat unconventional; not many seventeen-year old girls had been

explicitly taught how to deal with such a situation. Stepping smartly towards him she jabbed her index and middle fingers hard into Louster's eyes. As he recoiled, she swung her knee up into his groin and Louster slowly sank to the ground. This was all according to her training; but seeing a heavy wrench on an adjacent work-surface an enhancement occurred to her. She picked the wrench up and crashed it down on Louster's head with all her force. The kneeling Louster slowly toppled forwards.

Taslana satisfied herself that he really was unconscious, and gingerly extracted the idents and the encrypter from his pocket. Only then did she burst into spasmodic sobs. Was this what the world was like? Was this what she'd given up her golden prison for?

Soon Louster began to stir; Taslana had not had the strength or the technique to hit him really hard. She made a heroic effort to bring herself back under control and stood above Louster. She flipped the bundle of fifty one-hundred mark notes out of her pocket and slung them on the floor.

"Are you listening, Louster? I'm going to pay you anyway, although Saviours know you don't deserve it. Soon enough my father's going to come looking for me — and if it occurred to me to buy my forged idents from you, it will occur to him too. It's better for both of us if you aren't on the planet when that happens. Take that five thousand and be offworld within a day. Do you understand?"

Louster nodded dully.

"Good," said Taslana, and hit him in the face with the wrench, just to prove she could do it. It seemed a skill she might need in the outside world.

She climbed back into the red Panther still shaking. Was it all going to be this difficult? But she had the idents: only the spaceport to worry about now. She tucked the Helena Courtenay ident away — Louster could be trusted neither to stay hidden nor to keep quiet — and validated the blank version.

Soon the familiar holographic lettering in the sky came into view:

MECKLENBURG SPACEPORT
WELCOME TO ZAEL'S WORLD - THE HOME OF
TLZ SPACEWAYS

Taslana put the aircar down outside the port, set the homing control and watched as it started its journey back to the estate. With any luck Tancredin would not even have noticed its loss.

She walked into the terminal, catching sight of herself in the plate glass: for a second she had not recognised the image. Her confidence in her disguise thus bolstered, she set her shoulders and walked towards the ticket dispenser. The dispenser did not take cash and she had no choice but to use her own ident chip; it would be absurdly easy to trace her, but although they could track her as far as the Hub, once there she would be invisible.

There was only one ship to the Hub that day, but there were few passengers on the antiseptic concourse. Most Zael's World inhabitants, as she knew, could not afford space travel, even on "the home of TLZ Spaceways." This ship was mainly carrying freight and it looked as if there were only twenty or so passengers, most looking like business executives. With her coat off Taslana was smartly and expensively enough dressed to fit in to that sort of company; but even with her new sophisticated crop she was too young to avoid notice. Unavoidable, she thought.

She was called to attention by the projection onto the concourse of the holographic announcer:

"TLZ LINER *SAXONY* FOR EARTH VIA THE HUB IS PREPARING TO DEPART. WILL PASSENGERS KINDLY MAKE THEIR WAY TO THE EMBARKATION DESK."

This is it, thought Taslana. *Whatever "it" is*. Momentarily she wished she had not been so reckless. What was she running away from? Most folk would envy her. For a second she wavered; then she saw a group of people moving towards the embarkation desk, and instinctively realised her best chance of slipping through unnoticed was in company.

"Are you on the *Saxony*?" she asked one of the men, and quickly struck up one of the nonsensical trivial conversations for which her education had prepared her so well.

She readied her bag for inspection at the desk. With horror she realised that she recognised the young man performing the check. He must have checked her baggage before when she left the planet legitimately. Now the effectiveness of her disguise would be tested.

"Is that all your luggage, madam?" asked the clerk.

Not looking him in the eye, Taslana said: "I travel light." Her attempt to disguise her well-modulated voice led to a slurring more suspicious than her natural tone.

"Are you all right, miss?" he asked solicitously. Taslana noticed that the badge on his chest announced him to be Wenzel Gauss.

Oh, Saviours! he fancies me, she thought with a horror-

struck irony. *So much for inconspicuous. Is this really what it's like for blondes?*

"I'm fine. I just had a good lunch, that's all," she said with a desperate giggle. If she couldn't hide her discomposure, she could at least attribute it to some plausible cause. And Saviours knew, she had enough experience of how women acted when they were drunk . . .

Wenzel Gauss looked into her face more intently than she would have liked. He ran her ident through the scanner and Taslana had a momentary apprehension that Louster's forgery would be detected, but the scanner stayed silent.

Nodding, he said: "Through the gate and on the left. Enjoy the ride." With an almost subliminal pause and a half-smile he said: "The bar is on the starboard side of Deck Two."

Taslana took this impertinence as a tribute to her acting and walked towards the airlift. Once she had gone Wenzel Gauss turned away to his communicator and entered an access code he had never had occasion to use before.

"Sir?" he said. "Gauss on the Embarkation Desk here. I have some information I think The Man might be interested in."

Some thirty minutes later the *Saxony* engaged its atmospheric repulsors and departed the planet. In her small cabin, looking out of her view-screen, Taslana Zael blinked away her sudden and unexpected tears and said goodbye to Zael's World for ever.

Chapter 1

Seven years later

The planet Chrysopolis orbited the star Beta Aquarii, popularly known as Sadal Suud, at a respectful distance befitting the star's supergiant lustre. A generous allowance of Sadal Suud's golden light flooded in through the giant window-wall of Bazlukin's seventh floor apartment one afternoon in late summer. The quality of the light was unusually clean and pure, a fact which accounted for Chrysopolis's reputation across the sector as a spa planet.

"I think we have agreement," said Lamarck, cool and languid in white linen as he sat back in the flexi-chair. "We just need to, ah, verify the details."

Bazlukin, red and sweating despite the excellence of his air-conditioning, grinned nervously. "Details?"

"For us to have a distribution deal," said Lamarck patiently, "there needs to be something for me to distribute. I have a reputation on this planet and I need to be sure that what you're offering me is commensurate with my stature."

Bazlukin was attired in a shapeless green one-piece suit which sat poorly with his colourless complexion and fair curly hair to give him the aspect of an unusually-shaped cauliflower. With an ineffective attempt at nonchalance he indicated his sensopic terminal. "You want to try out the jerkies," he leered, "go ahead. But Guiscard vouches for their quality."

"Guiscard isn't buying the stuff: he's selling it. Don't you think that has a bearing on his attitude?" asked Lamarck sardonically.

Bazlukin reached for one of the jerkie cartridges on the table before him and tossed it lightly to Lamarck. "Take a look," he said.

Lamarck walked over to the sensopic terminal and plugged the cartridge in. The title was projected in three-dimensional letters six inches high in the air in front of the terminal: "Girlie Gymnastic Glee". Lamarck reached for the headset with its audio and tactile transmitters; a glance at the grimy groin-piece was sufficient to induce him to leave it aside.

As he adjusted the headset the first of the eponymous "girlies" appeared, an apparently solid life-size image giving the illusion of a real woman in the room. Her allocation of clothing, ungenerous to begin with, was rapidly squandered as she cast garments aside with a series of lewd gestures and motions. Soon a second girlie appeared in even scantier attire, which was also divested with remarkable alacrity. Lamarck, who had the benefit of the headset, was also treated to an array of pantings and groanings which bore little consonance with the scene being enacted before him.

The girlies' acts ran a predictable gamut of indecency, abetted on occasion by a series of fortuitously discovered objects, until Lamarck called a halt to proceedings.

"Unacceptable," he said crisply. "My patrons are discerning consumers. They will hardly find this turgid fare stimulating. The acts were unimaginative and carried out in a perfunctory manner; the audio backing was of poor quality and out of synchrony with the visuals. In addition, the average Chrysopolitan prefers his women busty and voluptuous, not these scrawny ragamuffins. If I am to establish a distribution network on this planet you will need to supply a rather better product."

Bazlukin shrugged his shoulders. "Guiscard recommended this material. On Gizar it is very popular."

"Best, in that case, that Guiscard supplies it on Gizar. It will not do for Chrysopolis. Now, I see a jerkie entitled "Lizardskin Girls On Heat": let us hope this is of a higher standard. Or shall we sample "Mighty Members of Macrovalarion"?"

The afternoon passed in such a fashion, Bazlukin producing sample jerkies and Lamarck finding fault with the technical quality of the recordings and the verisimilitude of the performances. At last all the cartridges had been viewed.

"So," said Bazlukin. "That is the best merchandise I can get from Guiscard. Take it or leave it."

Lamarck looked around the apartment, furnished in accordance with fashion rather than taste. A tall man, he stood up and Bazlukin's nervousness increased perceptibly. "The trade for this sort of material is still in its infancy on Chrysopolis. In truth folk are unlikely to notice that it is sub-standard. I am prepared to take all your stock just to establish a foothold in the market. Because its quality is so inferior it will be necessary for you to accept a reduction in the price — I believe fifty percent would be appropriate for the trash you are supplying. Remember, I incur a far greater risk than you."

Bazlukin cried aloud in dismay. "That's only ten marks a cartridge! Guiscard charges me fourteen! How can I stay in business at those prices? Where you will get your supplies if I go bankrupt? Be reasonable!"

"If I don't buy from you I deal with Guiscard direct. And I happen to know you pay him only six marks a cartridge. Don't think to cheat me, Bazlukin," said Lamarck with an appreciable increase in menace. "It's convenient rather than economical for me to deal with you rather than Guiscard. You need this deal more than I do."

After a further quarter hour of wheedling Lamarck agreed to take the stock at twelve marks per cartridge. Coupling their personal com-links, Bazlukin transmitted the codes necessary for Lamarck to replicate the jerkies, and Lamarck authorised the transfer of the agreed sum to Bazlukin's account.

Bazlukin nervously got to his feet and gave a sigh of relief, accompanied by a small belch. This was the first time he had dealt with Lamarck, and he had been unsure of what to expect. While the deal was hardly favourable in any financial sense, it did at least provide him with an entry into a new market.

"You're a hard bargainer," he said, licking his pallid dry lips. "I won't be getting rich on your custom."

Lamarck smiled, showing a geniality which had been absent from his negotiations. "Possibly not," he said. "The main reason being that I am a Pangalactic officer."

He reached languidly for the orange badge in his pocket and displayed it. "My name is Prime Apprehensor Geir Lamarck and, Jozef Bazlukin, I arrest you for —"

Bazlukin reached for his own pocket and pulled out a slim pulse-gun. On this cue the door of the apartment slid back to admit a dark-haired young woman who manifested a calm gravity and a primed pulse-gun.

"I wouldn't do that," she said, pointing the pulse-gun at Bazlukin. "I am Apprehensor Voorhies of Pangalactic and having monitored this afternoon's peep show, believe me, I would just love an excuse to use this thing on you. Do you care to oblige me?"

Bazlukin sagged. "What is this? A heist?"

"Are you even more cretinous than you appear?" asked Voorhies wearily. "You are under arrest, as the Prime Apprehensor said before you tried to blast his head off. In addition to importing revolting jerkies — against which the laws of this planet are particularly stringent — you have committed sufficient infractions of import and tax regulations to ensure a lengthy prison term. Additionally your display of a pulse-gun constitutes aggravated resistance of arrest with correspondingly severe penalties . . ."

"Ah, yes," said Lamarck enthusiastically. "I believe we might be able to extend the bill of charges significantly."

"But I'm only a middle-man!" cried Bazlukin in outrage. "Guiscard makes the stuff! I'm a harmless trader!"

"Strangely, I almost agree with you," said Lamarck as he bound Bazlukin's wrists with wrapple. "Guiscard is the real villain: but he's significantly cleverer than you, which is why he's at liberty, and you, my friend, are not. Hell, I only get paid to enforce the law, not to have an opinion on it. And you're a sufficiently sociopathic influence that I'll sleep in my bed with the satisfaction of a job well done tonight."

Voorhies summoned an aircar from the Pangalactic headquarters and soon an orange and blue vehicle had whisked them away to the detention area.

"Good work, Apprehensor. Another success for Lamarck and Voorhies," said Lamarck with an easy smile once Bazlukin was locked away.

Voorhies looked at him suspiciously. She had come to recognise Lamarck's contrivances during the two years they had worked contract cases together; still, as a

Prime Apprehensor he ranked a grade higher than her and did not normally insist on the distinction. She could have worse partners. Reflexively running her fingers through her short black hair she said, "You are normally only complimentary when you want a favour. Let me guess; you want me to process Bazlukin so that you can go home early?"

Lamarck had the grace to look mildly embarrassed. "I was going to suggest that you attended to the booking-in and I passed on the good news to the Elders. I am playing handball this evening and I don't want to spend all night taking DNA samples and retina scans."

Voorhies shot Lamarck a glance which was intended to be severe, although her dark eyes displayed a degree of affectionate amusement. "Ach, have it your way," she said. "I'm quite happy for you to accept the congratulations of Elder de Groot. But remember you owe me a favour . . ."

"You are better than I am at that procedural side of things, Kate," said Lamarck with a wry smirk. "You know I never have the attention span for that sort of detail."

Voorhies laughed. Her sharp white teeth were too perfect to be natural — an unfortunate impression, given that they were. "That's all part of your deception," she said. "You pretend you can't cope with trivial details so that someone else will deal with them. Get off with you and talk to Charity de Groot."

Lamarck stepped briskly back to his office and activated his com-unit. As his screen showed him the familiar face of Miss de Groot, Elder of the New Church of the New Lord, he reflected that the closure of this case would have several desirable consequences. He surveyed — for what he hoped might be the last time — the pasty and faintly whiskered countenance before him. Why did these earnest religious types seem deliberately to enhance the disagreeableness of inherently unpleasing features? One could certainly not accuse Charity de Groot of the sin of vanity, he thought.

"Good afternoon, Miss de Groot," he said in his 'professional bonhomie' voice.

"Good afternoon, Prime Apprehensor Lamarck," returned the Elder with her customary punctilio. "The Blessings of the New Lord upon you."

Lamarck, by now familiar with conversational openings of this sort, slid into his practised evasiveness. Acknowledging the Second Saviour's benediction with a barely perceptible nod, he moved crisply to the purpose of his call.

"You will be pleased to hear, Miss de Groot, that an arrest has been made in connection with the commission your church laid with Pangalactic."

Miss de Groot's face shifted from its expression of bland benignity to one of righteous earnestness. "That is a blessing indeed, Prime Apprehensor. Have you, then, succeeded in choking off the great swell of obscenity which pours out in a vile torrent of abomination —"

Taking advantage of a brief pause for breath in Miss de Groot's tirade, Lamarck reasserted control of the conversation.

"Leaving aside, as we must, value judgements, and concentrating on sheer legalities, I can report that as a result of an undercover operation by Pangalactic operatives, one Jozef Bazlukin has been arrested on a number of charges relating to the distribution of pornographic sensopics onto Chrysopolis. This, of course, fulfils the basic terms of the contract between Pangalactic Security Services Incorporated and the New Church of the New Lord."

"Are you telling me, Prime Apprehensor, that the lewd material which is so abhorrent in the sight of the Lord is no longer corrupting and depraving the weak fleshly vessels who dwell in His mercy on Chrysopolis?"

Lamarck sighed inwardly. "I would not make such a grandiose claim, Miss de Groot. The only significant importer of such material is under arrest and likely to incur a lengthy prison term. The material itself will continue to exist and the man who is responsible for its production has committed no crime on this world. We have fulfilled our contract; but you must be aware that that contract did not provide for the total extirpation of pornography in the galaxy."

Charity de Groot puckered her face into an expression even less appealing than its predecessors. "You appear to suggest, Prime Apprehensor, that you have failed in your commission to carry out the Lord's work in this matter of depravity and base —"

"Miss de Groot," interjected Lamarck, "we have had this conversation several times. Your church entered into a specific contract with Pangalactic to investigate the import of jerkies onto Chrysopolis and to use the force of the law to retard the trade. That we have done. The fact remains that Rojer Guiscard, the main focus of your dissatisfaction, manufactures the product on a planet where it is legal to do so, and delegates the business of importation to underlings. To conduct a more

thorough-going operation, as you are aware, would be considerably more expensive and your church was not prepared to finance it. I suggest that you accept the outcome of this current operation and consider the options beyond that."

Miss de Groot pursed her lips so tightly that her cheeks appeared to be sucked into the gesture. "I am very disappointed: this is not what I wanted at all! Your insistence on the minutiae of contracts is not pleasing in the sight of the Lord, Prime Apprehensor — and neither is your use of the offensive term 'jerkie' — but it seems I have no choice but to thank you for the work you have carried out on His behalf. But the soldiers of the Lord do not fight for temporal rewards alone. Reflect on the Third Testament, Prime Apprehensor, to your profit not in this world but the next."

Lamarck was conscious that the substantive element of the discussion had come to an end with this predictable lurch into the workings of the divine. His own devotional practices, which were somewhat flexible, allowed him to take a tolerant view of the New Church's conviction that the Second Coming had been and gone; but the subject held little interest for him.

"As ever, Elder, I will weigh your words; in the meantime I will be working to secure the deserved conviction of Jozef Bazlukin. Our preliminary invoice will be submitted shortly. Good afternoon to you."

The sourness of Charity de Groot's expression lessened from lemon to lime. "Our Lords go with you."

Lamarck broke the connection with relief. Miss de Groot had been no more irksome than usual and he had enjoyed her start of dismay when he had referred to the sensopics as 'jerkies' — he had not realised that she was even familiar with the colloquialism. With a grin he dialled another number on his com-unit.

"Noureddin!" he cried. "Can you make handball this evening?"

* * *

Keaen

* * *

Chapter 1

When Armist entered the cavernous Salle of Ancestors he did so with trepidation and the knowledge that time was running out. He knew why his father had summoned him here — and the knowledge was neither pleasant nor comforting.

The high vaulted ceiling loomed above. Massive, age-darkened tika beams arched into a peaked dome, their outlines merging in the gloom with those of the massive slabs of stone they supported; uncontaminated by the light of day; shrouded in darkness since the day the last stone of Wherol Tower had been put into place many centuries ago. In this inner sanctum of Keaenean tradition daylight was an intruder. The images of the former Keaens, arrayed in two parallel rows along the curved walls, would have resented its intrusion. Instead, a dozen oil lanterns hung on the walls. The light from their flames caressed the paintings — some of which seemed to come alive under the touch, and move and twitch, and look this way and that; apparently not content with having had their time of glory and power, but keen to intrude upon the lives of those who had succeeded them.

Armist took another step into the salle. As always it seemed to enfold him like an enormous stone womb; oppressive and claustrophobic. His ancestors, distant though they might be, glared down at him from their lofty positions on the wall with disapproval. As if they knew what was going on in his mind.

Urgency tugged at him. The desire to leave this place — and not just this room, but the castle and all it represented — became almost overpowering. He fought an urge to turn and bolt. Instead he stepped closer to the colossal round table which defined the center of the salle, hoping to find somebody sitting in one of the twelve ornate high-backed chairs which surrounded it. Surely, Tahlia would be here by now. She was never late.

Soft footsteps; a rustle of skirts on the stone floor behind him.

Armist turned toward the sound.

How could he even think of leaving?

His sister smiled at him, and with that smile she transformed the salle into an object of beauty.

She stepped nearer. "I'm so glad to see you!" she whispered breathlessly. "What do you think he wants from us?"

Armist made a significant gesture and took her hands in his, pulling her closer toward the table and the center of the salle. In Castle Keaen private conversations were always held as far away from the walls as possible. Even in the Salle of Ancestors. Armist knew of at least three listening holes, concealed behind the upper row of portraits.

Tahlia followed him, her face anxious and troubled. Armist brought his mouth closer to her ear. "We both know. The Festival is in three weeks. You are eighteen and your time has arrived. I am twenty five — long overdue for the *fael* . . ."

"Armist, I don't want this to happen!"

He squeezed her hands. They were cold. He resisted an urge to enfold her in his arms and comfort her, no matter how much he wanted to do so. Such a gesture was not advisable at this time and in this place, where they could be interrupted at any moment, and where unseen eyes might even now be following their every move. A public demonstration of the deep affection between them would result in severe censure. It might have been acceptable five years ago — and then only just — but not any more. Their attachment would be considered as being tainted with certain, highly disapproved of, undertones.

Which, Armist reminded himself, was uncomfortably close to the truth.

"I wonder what expediency dictates," Tahlia said softly and bitterly. Her hands fell away from his.

"Who's it going to be? Lydd? Ilkred? Tegel? Kiefer?" The sadness and resignation in her voice hurt him to the core. How could they do this to them?

"Damn the Covenant!" he hissed. "Damn it all!"

Despite her disenchantment with her fate, she felt compelled to enunciate the official line. "The Covenant keeps the peace. Without it Keaen would disintegrate."

Armist turned away from her to stare at the ancestral images along the walls. Whatever he was searching for continued to elude him. A semblance of himself or Tahlia maybe; an inclination of the head; a look in the eyes; a quirky expression of the mouth. Something telling him that he was indeed one of that long lineage of Keaens. But he beheld only the baleful stares of strangers, as remote from him as his own father. Maybe even more so. Nothing to elicit a resonance or a sympathy, and to make him feel a part of this grand tradition

of more than seven hundred years.

Armist sighed and turned back to Tahlia. "The price for peace is too high," he snapped. "At least for us!"

Tahlia appeared troubled, but continued — stubbornly and irrationally, he thought — to defend their place in the great scheme of things. "We are instruments of the Covenant. Whether we like it or not."

He sniffed derisively. "So? And what about our own needs and wants? I for one cannot recall having been asked about my own opinion in this matter — and I very much doubt that you have."

She put a hand on his arm. "They didn't have to ask — and we implicitly consented years ago by not doing anything about it. Instead, we accepted the privileges of our rank. It seems wrong to shirk our responsibilities now."

Armist felt the warmth of her hand through the fabric of his sleeve.

"Years ago we were children," he hissed. "Children who knew nothing but what they had been told. How could we possibly make such momentous decisions? All we knew was what they taught us!"

She looked at him with those gray, blue-tinged eyes of hers. The lanterns on the walls reflected as pinpoints of light. Her soft curls accentuated the fine contours of her face, which was troubled and uncertain. Maybe there was even a trace of despair. He knew that, despite her earlier defense of the Covenant, she was as reluctant as himself to yield to the inevitable. He also knew that he had none of her excuses for inaction. She had lived a very sheltered life, confined, for the most part, to the castle. Outings, or other contacts with anything that might introduce 'improper' elements into her life, were decorous affairs, carefully screened and watched over by the self-appointed guardians of propriety such as Lady Teinan. Despite this, Tahlia's rebellious streak had prevented her from submitting completely to the doctrines of the Covenant. Instead, she had sought out Pandrak and Caitlan and their tutelage; and they had given it as willingly to her as to her brother — despite the general disapproval from the conservative elements at court. Fortunately it had never been contentious enough to occasion the Keaen to officially forbid such activity. Instead it was probably a source of amusement to him that the Flower of Keaen should learn the arcana of mathematics or how to wield a rapier. It was a novel notion, to be sure, but it must have appeared harmless enough.

Not so harmless. The teaching had prevented Tahlia from submitting to the official doctrine. Not enough to

incite open rebellion, maybe; but sufficient to allow her to retain a sense of perspective.

Armist, in contrast to his sister, had been exposed to life outside the castle at some length. He had traveled to Cedrea on several occasions, and made many clandestine visits — usually in the company of his friend, Juiles — into Keaen city. Life, as he well knew, had many different faces; and the view from his lofty position as the Young Keaen, was only one of many. Over the years that knowledge had contributed greatly to his own disenchantment; and the doubts which continued to nag at him.

And what had he done about it? He had known that this day was coming and done far too little to prepare for the contingency; much less considered any serious decision regarding the matter. He simply had not known what to do. Still did not know — even now, when the fate of his sister was about to be decided, and time was running out for both of them. Running away beyond the reach of the Keaen and everything he stood for . . . that was all he could think of.

But how could he do that and leave her here? He was responsible for her. There was nobody else.

Indeed, he told himself, Tahlia was the only reason why he had not absconded years ago. Why he suppressed the ever-nagging question about his mother's fate, and succumbed to the rituals of the court, when everything in him screamed for a release.

The sound of approaching footsteps. Muted voices.

The words died in his throat. Tahlia's hand dropped away from his arm. Hastily they stepped away from each other and turned to look toward the entrance.

Hain the Keaen and his seneschal, Sir Fyrzig, entered the salle. Hain paused briefly. His gaze raked over his offspring. As always, Armist felt as if the layers protecting his privacy were being stripped away under that scrutiny. Intellectually he knew that this was not true, but that did not help him much in dealing with the sheer impact of his father's overpowering personality; or with the power of Hain's dark-blue eyes, which by a trick of the dim light of the salle appeared almost black.

Armist performed a precisely measured bow of his head, which, so he hoped, expressed sufficient deference without excessive submissiveness. Tahlia curtsied perfunctorily. Hain's stocky, compact form approached them. Sir Fyrzig's tall, gaunt frame followed with the odd gait of predatory stork stalking a goose.

Hain stopped in front of his children. "I am gratified

to see you here," he said. He considered them with pale blue eyes, set in a face devoid of any trace of warmth.

"You know why I have asked for you." He motioned at the table. "Be seated."

They positioned themselves around the table according to a carefully designed protocol; Hain at one end in the place of honor, with Sir Fyrzig standing off to one side behind his ruler's chair; Armist and Tahlia at the opposite side. Armist pulled out the appropriate chair for his sister and waited until she had seated herself. Then he sat down in the place adjacent to her.

There was a moment's silence as Hain studied them from across the expanse of the bare tabletop. Again Armist felt himself stripped and exposed. He responded by putting on what he considered to be the blandest face possible. Under the table he felt a nudge at his leg where Tahlia's foot was touching him for reassurance. Quite probably she felt even more uncomfortable than he did.

"The Festival draws near," Hain said, his face settling into the facade of the benevolent, but implacable, ruler. The same countenance which, Armist reflected, was also offered for public consideration.

"This is the year of Tahlia's maturation. Now she must submit to her destiny. I have selected one of the eligible barons as her husband-to-be. On Habaday, the magice shall pronounce the Binding — and thus confirm the bonds between the noblemen and the House of Keaen."

He placed his arms on the table, steepled his fingers, and considered Armist for a moment. "Tradition also dictates that at the same time the Young Keaen should undergo the *fael*. You have had to wait an inordinately long time to assume the privileges of your rank. That wait is now over. We will announce your maturity. Your blood will be drawn and burned. You will recite the oath of fealty, and thereby be confirmed as my successor."

Hain's voice took on an admonishing tone.

"And it will be fitting, after that time, that the emphasis of your training will shift toward more germane matters than sword-craft, languages, and the arcane arts taught by our august magice. Affairs of state require your attention. It is time that you partook in them to a greater degree. Sir Fyrzig will do his best to introduce you to matters which you have so far neglected."

Sir Fyrzig, hearing his ruler pronounce those words, nodded with the knowing air of a man who knew that he had much wisdom to impart.

Hain leaned back and studied Armist for a moment. "I appreciate that swordplay may be more to your liking than the apparently mundane matters associated with statecraft. But, as you will find soon enough, there will be much here to fascinate and involve you."

Armist bowed his head, welcoming the opportunity to break eye contact with his father. When he looked up again he noted that Hain's attention had shifted to Tahlia.

"Am I to know who's going to be my husband?" she asked, a trifle tartly.

The tone did not escape Hain. A brief cloud of displeasure passed over his features, before they settled back into their previous configuration. His voice crisped a trifle.

"That is not appropriate. Nobody but myself knows. It will remain that way until the day of the festival, when I tell you whom to choose. This is as it should be, and this is how it will be."

Hain made as if to rise, but then bethought himself. He gave Armist another moment of scrutiny. "I also expect that from now on you consider more carefully the choice of your friends."

With that cryptic remark he rose and his offspring followed suit.

"Much has to be prepared and there is little time to do it in." Hain nodded at Sir Fyrzig. "Ensure that everything necessary is done."

The seneschal bowed. "It shall be done, Sire."

"Good." Hain, with a last brief nod at the two young people, turned and headed for the door. Armist and Tahlia stood, staring after him, until he and the pendulous seneschal had disappeared from sight.

Armist took Tahlia's arm. "Let's go for a walk on the parapets."

She eyed him sideways. They turned down a passage and walked past a heavy oaken door; covered with, and fortified by, an artfully crafted wrought-iron framework. Two sentries, armed with long swords and curved rectangular shields, stood like frozen statues on either side.

Armist cast a dark look in their direction.

He remembered every single time that he had actually been allowed into the sacrosanct precinct of their father's private quarters. A library, a workroom, and a bedroom. The center of power in this land.

To think that one day these quarters would be his — and that he would finally know! That the men would be

guarding his safety. That they would do whatever was necessary to ensure that these quarters remained inaccessible to all but himself and the housemaid who, every day, and under the watchful eyes of two members of the Keaen's elite corps, cleaned the rooms and tidied the Keaen's bed.

Of course, when Armist finally moved in here, it would be different guards standing in this corridor, staring unblinkingly at the masonry of the opposite wall. But, he thought, for all practical purposes it might as well have been the same two men. The mold from which they had been cast produced virtually identical copies, whose superficial differences were far more significant than those that lay below.

Armist shuddered and hastened Tahlia along. He did not want those quarters. Ever.

He resumed breathing freely, and without the feeling that there was a clamp around his chest, only when they gained the freedom of the parapet and the open air.

A gentle breeze blew across from the Limpic Ocean. They stood in silence for a while, leaning on the balustrade; looking out across Keaen's port and the sprawling city beyond. The suburbs merged into farms which spread over most of the Western Flatlands. Beyond that the ocean and, somewhere below the horizon, the Isle of Skele, and Nameless Keep where the magices went to be trained.

Armist glanced at Tahlia, who wistfully pondered the very same landscape. Caravella was slanting down toward the horizon. The sky slowly assumed a ruddy complexion, and bathed the land in the bright glow of some distant fire. Soon the sky would turn green and then pink and blue; before daylight finally surrendered dominion to the dark of night.

"Armist, what are we going to do?" she whispered. "In a few weeks they will separate us forever. I will be sent off to some ghastly place in the provinces to live and share a bed with a man whom I've never met and whom I'll probably hate."

She made a soft, fretful sound. "The thought of any of the barons becoming my husband is really too horrid to contemplate. — Still, contemplate it I must . . ."

She turned and looked at him. Caravella's light caught in her hair and framed her head in a halo of fire. Armist felt himself choking up. Not just because of his total impotence but because of his knowledge that any alternatives he might be able to offer would only bring her more grief than her predestined path.

Still — was that really such a certainty? If only she did not feel so bound by her obligations . . .

What could he possibly say to her to change her mind and make her see things from his perspective?

Maybe later . . .

Besides, there were other problems.

"It's happened again," he said.

She gasped softly. "When?"

"Earlier today. During my session with Caitlan."

Her eyes widened. "Did he notice?"

Armist shook his head. "Nobody ever does . . . except for myself."

He knew that it was a feint. He saw it coming and discerned the intention behind it. Yet his body's reactions betrayed him. Caitlan's blade, which only a moment ago had appeared committed to hitting his shoulder, now descended in a tight arc whose end point coincided with Armist's wrist. Armist cringed because he could see the inevitable outcome. Whatever he did, it would be too late. There simply was no time to avert calamity. His body ignored the intellect's judgements. Instinctive reflexes, which only a moment ago had forsaken him, now worked to counter the move. Armist's rapier came around in a clockwise arc. Its tip touched the heavy blade as it swooped down. Metal touched metal with a sharp grating sound.

In a contest between two such unequal weapons the wielder of the lighter one had to learn how to use the attacker's inertia to deflect, rather than counter. Still, in this case the momentum of the weaponsmaster's blade, supported by the strength of the individual behind it, would force his own aside. The best he could hope for was that it would land on his guard instead of his hand or wrist. Armist tensed until he felt that his muscles must surely snap — and braced himself for the impact.

And then . . .

The descending blade halted in mid-air. Caitlan froze. Armist stood transfixed. His rapier dropped away. The point came to rest on the floor.

Now?

It had never happened in a situation like this! Never when he actually *needed* it.

A scene which was getting to be almost too familiar — after several similar incidents during the last few weeks . . .

The world around him had congealed. And yet he could move — and breathe! — and those objects he was

in contact with, like the rapier, appeared unaffected; at least while he was in physical contact with. Armist opened his hand and let go of the rapier's pommel. As expected, instead of dropping to the floor, it remained suspended in mid-air. He grasped it again and it returned to being a perfectly normal rapier.

For a time he had thought that these fugues were fabrications of his imagination and that he must surely be going mad. One day, however, despite his terror, when the fugue came upon him he performed some tentative experiments. Move a chair. Empty a cup. Use a knife to cut a notch into a table. When everything had returned to normal — as abruptly as it had started — he found, to his surprise, that he had indeed done all those things. He performed another experiment and suspended a cup in mid-air above a table; then stood back, closed one eye, and watched it very carefully against the background. It moved. With agonizing slowness — but it moved. Which meant that time had not frozen altogether, but was merely passing very slowly indeed.

So, he wasn't crazy! And that had scared him even more. If this was 'real' the implications were terrifying. He desperately needed guidance, but found that Tahlia, his only confidante, was just as scared and helpless as himself.

Who else was left? Should he tell the magice? Was he willing to live with the consequences of being identified as one with 'talent'? Caution said 'no' — despite the fact that he considered the magice a friend. The discovery of a talent within himself might lead to even more strictures on his freedom. And then — may his greatest fear: that the magices of the Isle would find out. There was no doubt in his mind that they would be very interested indeed in a man who could make time stand still.

Armist studied the frozen Caitlan. It wouldn't take much to displace the sword just enough so that, when everything reverted back to normal, it would give him an advantage, and maybe even allow a suitable riposte. If he twisted the wrist slightly, to change the angle of the weapon . . .

Sadly, regretfully, he shook his head. It would not do. Not with Caitlan. The weaponsmaster would wonder. Maybe ask questions that must not be asked.

Armist heaved an inaudible sigh. He raised his blade and placed it back against Caitlan's — though in a slightly more advantageous position, angling the rapier a little more favorably in order to give himself more leverage. He inspected his new position and found it as satisfactory an arrangement as he could hope to achieve. Then he relaxed and prepared himself to wait until the fugue passed . . .

. . . which happened almost immediately.

The sword continued on its trajectory, was deflected by the rapier — which occasioned an astonished widening of the eyes behind the grid of the weaponsmaster's mask — but still had enough momentum to smash on to Armist's guard with brutal force. It slid off, traveled on to his wrist, and impacted with sufficient force to numb him and make the rapier drop from his momentarily paralyzed hand.

Caitlan raised his weapon, stood back, and saluted the loser. "Well done! You're still dead, but well done. That last parry was a very good example of how to turn a mistake into a fighting chance for success."

Armist, massaging his sore right wrist, grinned lopsidedly. "I don't know quite what happened there." Which was, he reflected, not too far off the truth.

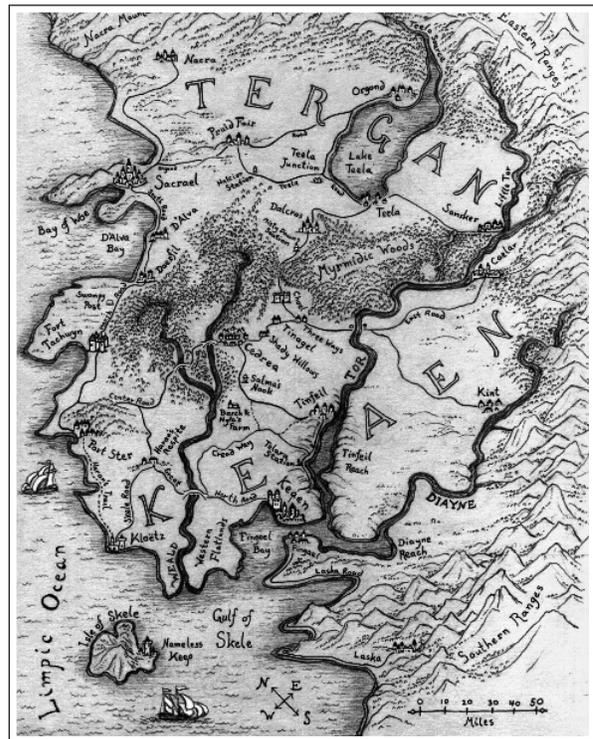
Caitlan shrugged negligently. "In combat something more fundamental than our perception is at work. The combatants seldom truly perceive what actually happens. They either know or they don't."

"In this case it seems you didn't," Armist noted dryly.

Caitlan laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "Even I'm not perfect."

He placed his weapon on a nearby ledge, took off his mask, and undid the protective shielding around his own hand and wrist. Armist followed suit.

"Enough for today," Caitlan said. "You might wish see Pandrak about some of his special ointment. It's said to



do wonders for painful joints and muscles." He grinned at Armist.

Armist gingerly moved his right wrist. He grimaced with the pain. Caitlan looked at him. "Don't feel inadequate. Duels involving unequal weapons are the most difficult. However, you cannot rely on your enemy obligingly choosing his weapon to suit your needs."

Again he clapped Armist on the shoulder. "You're good at this, Armist of Keaen. You'll defeat the vast majority of your opponents. But they don't matter. It only takes one better than you to do you in."

Armist felt a brief surge of guilt when he thought of how he hadn't really earned Caitlan's last compliment. Without the strange time-freeze to assist him he would have been in much more pain.

To cover his unease he smiled at his tutor and glanced at the ornate time-piece on the far wall of the training-hall. "I have to go. My father wants to see me."

Caitlan nodded. "When the Keaen summons, one does not dally." He made a negligent gesture and picked up the sword and an oil-soaked cloth. "We'll continue this tomorrow at the same time."

"That's the third time in any many weeks. Please be careful!"

Armist nodded. "I intend to, but . . ." His voice trailed off.

"But what?"

He took her hands. "It cannot go on like this. Whatever is happening to me is a magic thing, and a magic may not become Keaen.

"Not that I want to anyway . . ."

"It's all working in your favor then," Tahlia noted. "Tell Pandrak — who will investigate this matter in his usual methodical manner. If you're right he'll inform father. After that you'll be automatically relieved from all duty to the kingdom."

She shrugged sadly. "Unlike me, you'll have a legitimate reason to extricate yourself from this whole affair."

Armist shook his head. "It's not that simple."

She frowned. "Why not?"

"No 'talent' Pandrak's ever mentioned bears any resemblance to what I'm experiencing. So — what does that make me? A freak? A new kind of magic? Or what?" He shook his head. "Pandrak informing the Keaen isn't what really concerns me. What I fear is that he'll be obliged to tell the people of the Isle . . ."

"Who might be able to help you!"

Armist shook his head. "They'll just take me away from here — and from you."

Tahlia glanced at him uncertainly. "Not if you don't want to."

"Those with talent have no choice in such matters."

Tahlia sighed. "Oh Armist, I love you so much." She hugged him. "What am I going to do?" Her voice was muffled by his clothes. They stood in silence for a while, thinking their private thoughts.

They separated; reluctantly. Armist looked out over the flatlands. "I don't want to undergo the *fael*," he said darkly. "I don't want to swear an oath of fealty, which I have no intention of keeping. And I don't want to be given official blessing to impregnate any female I want — all in the name of the Covenant. Indeed, there's nothing in this whole charade I want."

Tahlia touched his face. "You've got to want *something*."

He took her arm and led her further along the parapet. They proceeded to walk slowly around the curvature of Tynwand Tower.

"I want to be where I can make sure that you're safe. But I do not want to be Keaen. I want nothing to do with this place — and I wouldn't be here anymore . . . if it wasn't for . . ."

She squeezed his arm.

"I need to find out what's happening to me," Armist continued. "What it's going to mean for me. What it tells me about who I am. — And there's the matter of my mother, of course."

"I was wondering about that," she said softly. "But it's been so long . . ."

Armist shrugged. "I must know. Why did she have to die so young? Who was responsible? I know — I just *know* — that what happened to her . . . that was wrong. She didn't kill herself. She wouldn't have!"

Even Tahlia's touch failed to comfort him.

"I never knew her," he said bleakly. "She's not even a memory. Just an . . . inkling . . . of things lost. I wonder what she smelled like. What it was like to be nursed by her — before they took me away. Her touch. The sound of her voice . . ."

They continued their circuit of the tower and stopped again.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

Armist shrugged morosely as he stared out towards the north where, beyond the rolling hills on the horizon, lay Cedrea, the place of his birth. "I can't leave. I want to, but I can't."

"It would be terribly dangerous," she said. "Father

would be livid. Such a thing is unthinkable! It would humiliate him. He would search for you everywhere, and if he found you . . . ” She swallowed. “He’d show you no mercy. Not only would you be disinherited, but you’d be punished as a traitor.”

“No worse than what’s about to happen to us here.”

“At least we’ll be alive.”

“What kind of life would that be?” he retorted. “You: in the bed of someone you dislike. You and I: separated forever. Our lives: etiquette; tradition; propriety. I’ll be groomed for ‘statecraft’, instead of learning about important things.”

“Our father thinks statecraft is important.”

“Of course he does. I don’t. And neither do you. A baron’s play-thing. Bearing him ten children, attending to him as a dutiful spouse, presiding over his household, and spending your time socializing with the other noble ladies.”

Tahlia shook her head. “It’s the last thing I want . . . ”

Armist nodded. “You’ve spent far too much time with Pandrak and Caitlan — and not enough with Lady Fosgiel or Lady Teinan. Too much learning and not enough sowing of seams — as Sir Fyrzig once commented.”

He grinned. “You’ve exasperated a lot of people at court.”

“That’s a real tragedy,” she said dryly.

“Nice and proper girls don’t learn how to wield weapons and throw knives.”

“Caitlan always liked me.”

“He does.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know. And we’ve got very little time left to figure it out.”

* * *

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The Planet of Retribution

(Volume II in the
Deranged Astrophysicist series)

Chapter V

* * *

From *Humanity*, tome 7, by Kleptacit, Count Clodissa:

Revenge is by definition too late. The hated deed is done and cannot be undone. All too often, when redress fails, the offended party, abandoning the precepts of his society (unless revenge is therein conventional) begins a campaign against the offender, becoming a narrow-minded, implacable, intractable person — in short, a pest. This person will, as often as not, feeling that he has failed to receive justice, vent his anger upon someone or something dear to the hated one: his wife, his brother, his dog, even his vehicle or garment. Thus he may initiate a series of vengeful acts which can escalate into a feud or even a national obsession. In such a way did the (accidental?) overturning of a Flarbian's rain barrel by a neighboring Saskoli set off a war between Sasko and Flarbia in 3002. Even today this war, in which an estimated 71,000,000 died, continues to flare up among the 79 survivors. The conflict was of course exacerbated by religious differences, which, as we all know, are the primary cause of human conflict in the universe. Even religions which pride themselves on accepting and embodying teachings from all other religions are not immune. In 2998 the Pan-Absorbitionist church incorporated certain parts of the Ophiutian Punditate credo into their own scriptures. The Ophiutian Punditationists were so inflamed at this presumption that they issued a revindication of death against all Pan-Absorbitionists, who in turn litigated against the Punditationists for ten years, seeking a restraining order, but failed to receive it. During this time no Pan-Absorbitionist so much as suggested that the offending passages be removed.

Pearson turned his ship east towards the coast and followed the shore northward at an altitude of 80 feet hoping to avoid the radar of Fedor Karkassus. His abrupt abandonment of Fleuridian weighed on his mind; should he pursue a liaison with a woman whose father he intended to kill?

Presently the shoreline broke, opening into a vast archipelago of islands separated by twisting water-courses. Pearson gained altitude and cruised slowly

back and forth over the confused expanse of ochre, dark green and bright silvery blue, eventually finding what he sought: the large island with its characteristic patch of light brown, site of the dusty village of Murelia. He brought the ship down on the landing area, a large circle marked on the ground with lime, and stepped forth.

A horde of small, brownish, nearly naked people surged towards the ship. Among them, he was relieved to see, was Breke's tall pale form.

"Kirk!" called Breke. "You are back at last, and safe!" The Murelians jumped up and down cheering and smiling. Breke approached Person and said in a lower voice, "These worthy Murelians have been most hospitable . . . but their sexual exigencies have brought me to a condition of enervation. Let us leave as soon as possible."

Departure, however, was delayed. The Murelian elder insisted on roasting a large water creature in Pearson's honor. After the feast, woozy from the effects of Murelian beer and his garments soaked in grease, Pearson went to the ship and returned with a bar of gold. He presented it gravely to the elder. Then, as Murelian custom demanded, Pearson and Breke exchanged hugs and kisses with each Murelian, a process which required 2 hours. The Murelians then gave a final farewell cheer. Pearson and Breke entered the ship and activated the repulsors. Spent air pumped out the vents; the ship lifted itself into the evening sky, and dust engulfed both village and villagers.

From the salon Pearson and Breke looked out at the sun, which bulged on the horizon like a salmon colored fruit sagging in a murky sauce of pale brown and lavender. As the ship drifted slowly westward the two friends discussed the course of their business.*

Pearson recounted his adventures in Slagtown.

"Why did you not allow the girl to accompany you?" Breke asked; "she would have made an admirable hostage."

* Pearson and Breke were prospecting on one of Beldune's three moons, Crispinsk, at the moment when Fedor Karkassus destroyed the planet. Beldune had been their home. Their families were there, their friends, their neighborhood, in short, all they held dear.

Breke had looked up from his digging to see Beldune silently collapsing upon itself. He nudged Pearson and pointed. Transfixed with amazement they watched their world, once a blue sphere in the black Crispinsk sky, crack, twist and disappear in a smear of red dust.

But it was no natural disaster, as they had at first assumed. The two friends later learned that Fedor Karkassus, in association with a group known as the Deranged Astrophysicists, was responsible for the act. Thereupon Pearson and Breke resolved to put all else aside until Karkassus, and his unspeakable weapon, were obliterated.

"Two considerations: She saved my life, and making such use of her could only further excite Fedor Karkassus."

Breke lowered his eyelids: "Your scruples do you credit. Meanwhile our leverage is not enhanced... However: so be it! I have news that will interest you. There will be a week of zebul racing in Scratch Flats, beginning in four days — at the so called 'Mreistershriegh' festival." He made a gesture of disapprobation: "The names they use on this world are truly odd and repulsive!"

He reached to a shelf and took up a small book they both knew well. "Fedor Karkassus is proud of his famous string of racing zebuls. But", here Breke paused, eyeing Pearson gaily, "it seems he has also decided to become a jockey."

"Oh ho the hypocrite! Well, so much the worse for him. It is a situation we can certainly turn to our advantage."

"Exactly!" continued Breke. "The Murelians are inordinately fond of gambling; in fact they are offering 7 to 3 on Karkassus. And why? Because, so they say, he is a sure thing for the steeplechase."

"Indeed? even weighing in at 300 pounds?"

"Ah, so one would think. But Triumpho makes the difference."

"And who, or what, is 'Triumpho'?"

"Triumpho is Karkassus' prize zebul, a veritable monster. The Murelians tell me that Karkassus loves him better than his own children. He uses a secret language to communicate with him."

"So", laughed Pearson, "he plans to make a public demonstration of his hippic, or as I suppose we should say here on Golfo: 'zippic', prowess! Is this the behavior of a true gentleman?"

"Obviously not!" gloated Breke, who had already opened the little book to page 44. He read: "'Principal 19: The gentleman owns and trains his champions, but never does he stoops to mounting. Such comporture would be vulgar and undignified public display, beneath a gentleman's dignity... ' Karkassus has fallen short of the mark! the braggart." Breke tossed the little book down on the table and both men considered it with distaste.

Breke stepped to the locator and set a course for the Scaulm plateau, keeping the ship at low altitude and moving at sedate speeds so as not to excite the curiosity of possible radar surveillance. As the ship drifted through the night Pearson and Breke carefully evolved a plan.

Excerpt from: *Mauld's Tourist Guide to the Planet Golfo:*

Scratch Flats is the only settlement of significance on the great Scaulm plateau, which extends nearly 1000 miles to the north and west of the large port of Tribuche on the Semillion sea. The plateau is covered in windy savanna, with the occasional sink-hole marking the terrain at far intervals. The climate is temperate, and the plateau is too high to be infested by grass dancers and grues. Though the plateau is mostly arid, zebuls and certain other hardy ruminants thrive.

Scratch Flats exists thanks to a water supply provided by an artesian well, whose waters are free to all. The town is dedicated to the zebul: its capture, buying, selling, training, and breeding for saddle or draft. Visitors come to Scratch Flats principally for the races, the most prestigious of which occur at the so called 'Mreistershriegh' festival, but ten others occur though out the 437 day Golfo year, each with its specific character. (See index 9 for schedules of racing events at Scratch Flats.)

The town abounds with colorful zebulchers, the men who ride and herd or otherwise work with zebuls. These are rough, easy-going men, as are their women. They are friendly and hospitable, but hard-drinking and often truculent. The visitor will be surprised above all by their obstinate provincialism; for the denizen of Scratch Flats, the great Scaulm plateau is the only habitable section of the universe. The demeanor of the tourist when visiting the local bars and cafes should therefor be polite and restrained and, above all, modest. Zebulchers, being ill-paid and uneducated, are sensitive to slights and resent those who put on airs or attempt to demonstrate their superiority.

In cases of disturbance or crime the municipal authorities, once roused, dispense "justice" with an all encompassing rigor. At Scratch Flats all problems have a single solution: the rope. To help keep municipal taxes low, expenses entailed by courts, judges and so on are simply avoided. Instead; any and all suspects are gathered up and hung, without delay or fuss. It is an unusual system, but it works in Scratch Flats where the crime rate is famously low; the tourist may come, and go, in security and confidence.

Accommodations are many and diverse, from deluxe to primitive. But the degree of luxury of any establishment can only be judged by an inspection of the interior. The architectural precepts imposed on builders in Scratch Flats demand exterior homogeneity; therefore Muggans' hostelry, an establishment rating one star at most, presents the same exterior of adobe and thatch as the five star Grand Scaulm Interstellar. (See the following page for a list of hotels and prices.)

You will find gourmet food at three restaurants, The Explorer, La Chamonile, and Clarissa's Cornucopia. The menu of all the others can be summed up as follows: roast, fried, boiled, or raw zebul with, or without, beans.

Scratch Flats has a spaceport and monitored parking for air cars. Approach to the plateau overland is difficult and slow. However,

the reasonably safe and very picturesque voyage can be made by power wagon or zebul caravan, without regular schedule.

There could be no question of landing their notorious ship at Scratch Flats itself. At daybreak they maneuvered down into a forest nestled at the foot of the Scaulm plateau, some miles from the Tribuche-Scaulm road, and sidled it under the canopy of a broad boledad. Pearson and Breke spent the rest of the day further concealing the ship behind a screen of branches and foliage, and making their preparations. The next morning, loaded with gear, they set off toward the road. The forest consisted principally of boledad and wissila. The thick, purple-black foliage of the gnarled boledads clattered in the wind like the roiling of pebbles in the surf. The tall wissila held aloft feathery leaves to form a luminous pale green ceiling. They avoided the boledads for fear of grues, whose habit was to drop on passers-by from the limbs of these trees.

At the end of an avenue of wissila Pearson and Breke glimpsed a stream which on closer approach proved to be a rapidly scuttling hord of hard shelled creatures, the size of cats, in a column ten feet wide. Breke moved forward to wade the stream but Pearson pulled him back. Pearson poked into the current with a stout stick which one of the creatures snipped neatly with its pincer. They waited for the army to pass but as it showed no sign of thinning, after ten minutes they constructed a trestle of tree limbs, laid it over the stream, and so continued.

At midday Breke shot two cuprats which they skinned and roasted on skewers. By mid-afternoon they escaped the forest and found the road, which ascended to the plateau in a series of perilous kinks and cutbacks. An hour later they were overtaken by a caravan of power wagons. Pearson hailed the driver, who waved but did not stop. Trotting alongside, Pearson called: "Will you give us a ride? We can pay." The driver shook his head.

"I don't know you and have no time to examine your credentials. Besides, we're full." Pearson and Breke waited for the caravan to pass, then swung up onto the last wagon, where they clung to the fretwork. Here they perched in discomfort for several miles until a face glared down at them from the roof and ordered them off.

By evening they reached the top of the plateau and turned to behold miles of forest stretching away to a strip of silver in the far distance: the Semillion Sea.

As they set up camp the sun descended over the plateau in a diffusion of tangerine merging into maroon, which in turn blended into the ochers of the plateau creating a disorienting effect. They ate a supper of nuts and dried fruit, set out telltales, and slept.

They walked all the next day and at mid-afternoon of the day after; Scratch flats came into view. From a distance it seemed a row of low hills, so well did its coloring blend with the terrain.

As they approached, the town became more distinct. It was surrounded by a low grey fence but the track across the plateau led them directly to a large portal; two massive adobe pillars bridged by a tile roof. Between the pillars hung a banner, decorated with garlands of dried flowers: *WELCOME TO MREISTERSHREIÇ AT SCRATCH FLATS!* And below, in smaller letters: *ÇILLEASH AND ÇALOR PROVIDE ALL YOUR ÇARBAÇE NEEDS!* Posted on the pillars were further advertisements, such as: *VISIT THE MUNICIPAL ARCADE — 37 MERCHANTISERS AT YOUR SERVICE,* or: *BANOONA'S BAR AND DANCE HALL — SQUARES, ROUNDS & TRIANGLES — ELEGANT MUSIC,* and others of similar sort.

"'Garbage' needs?" wondered Pearson aloud.

"Apparently the inhabitants of Scratch Flats have need of it", sneered Breke. "Another example of the wierd words and habits to be encountered on this miserable planet; home to the odious Fedor Karkassus!"

They passed through the portal and traversed an outlying district. Wide sandy streets delimited large areas sub-divided into a maze of parched gardens. Each garden partially hid a rude shack or more substantial dwelling, and was delimited by a fence of grey brush. The town proper, with its adobe structures, began abruptly. The very first building was identified by a crude and imposing sign painted on the wall:

*Çilleash and Çalor
Çarbage and Equipmental Emporium*

"Hm . . ." mused Pearson, "I believe I am beginning to understand. 'Garbage' might be a word like 'forage' or 'portage', and would seem to refer to 'garb'!"

Breke snorted. "Then why not construct the term on the same basis as 'equiptmental'? Then it would be 'Garbal' . . . still bad, but better than 'garbage'!"

"Such is the local habit."

"A confused and bad one." Pronounced Breke.

"You show little tolerance for what may turn out to be a very interesting society." Pearson said. "In addition,

since we should remain as inconspicuous as possible, we have as much need of 'garbage' as our fellow men of Scratch Flats."

Breke looked up at the sign: "Gilleash and Galor's emporium is at least conveniently located to serve our 'garbage needs'— unless you care to try the municipal arcade, where the 'garbage' is, perhaps, of higher quality?" He opened the door of the Emporium for Pearson with exaggerated ceremony.

Inside they found primitive splendor. Lush Carpets of zebul hair in vivid orange or pink, with patterns of blue or sour green dots, were spread on the waxed tile floor. Paintings, similar in design to the carpets, bore price tags which caused Breke to whistle between his teeth.

A stout woman approached. She sported a high coif and was draped in an orange khaftan. Using the slow sibilance of the local dialect she addressed them: "Help you boys?"

"Yes", replied Pearson. "We are zebul merchants from Tribuche. As you can see our hobby is camping so we have journeyed to Scratch Flats on foot, using all our special camping equipment. Now that we have arrived we want ordinary clothes."

"No joke? Me, I would never set foot off the plateau!" Pearson smiled politely. The woman took this as a sign of friendly good-will and smiled broadly in return. "I will sell you clothing!" she announced. "Follow me." She led them to racks which she indicated with a wide gesture. "Choose!"

Pearson and Breke hesitated before the variety of garments on display. The woman watched them critically. "Well?" she demanded at last, "do you intend to wander the town in your outlandish 'camping equipment', or will you purchase suitable garb?"

"Suitable garb, by all means!" declared Breke. "But there are too many styles; we do not want to make an error and select last month's fashions."

The woman winked: "At Scratch Flats we are cosmopolitan; fashions last considerably longer than a month! But I can see that, like most men, you have no real sense of panache, or even any independent judgment. It is part of your charm."

Pearson nervously fingered several items. "I wonder if I should chose these high boots with copper spangles . . . would they accord with this vest of woven hair embroidered in green thong?" In the end the woman helped Breke choose ankle boots, faun trousers held with a sash of coarse native tapestry, a loose homespun

blouse in off-white twill, and a bleached zebul hide vest fringed and embroidered with beads in the local manner. She accoutered Pearson in black balloon trousers, a snakeskin cummerbund, and a black vest with vertical stripes of emerald green. Then she stood back, looked them up and down, and pronounced the result both 'fashionable' and 'discrete'.

"These are the qualities that make for a true style!" she explained. "All discriminating citizens of Scratch Flats Trust Glor Halor for their garbage and haberdashery needs! Now; shall we look at some hattage?"

"Hattage, by all means!" assented Pearson, glancing slyly at Breke.

Madam Halor fitted them with small brimmed, low crowned slouch fedoras of grey felt. After she had given final approval to their appearance, and the bill had been settled, she jovially agreed to keep their packs until they had found lodging. Strolling the streets they noted the costumes of the crowds of zebulchers come to Scratch Flats for Mreistershreigh, and decided that theirs were no more outlandish than the norm.

After examining the interiors of several inns and hotels, they chose *The Island of Contentment*, where several men dressed similarly to themselves occupied the common room. It was a small, clean establishment. Lanterns in the shape of pumpkins, apparently made of hide, hung from the low ceiling. The ochre walls were decorated with gaudy posters of zebuls and zebulchers. A hollow-eyed whiskerado wearing a green frock coat stood behind a counter. Pearson approached and inquired after rooms.

The man snorted. "Rooms? We have been booked full for weeks. Mreistershreigh begins tomorrow! Where have you bohusters been?"

"Insolence is uncalled for," Pearson replied evenly. "A simple 'yes', or 'no', is sufficient."

The man stared at him as if he had not understood the remark. "Despite your dilatory arrival, I am able to answer your needs. I'm sure you have heard of Jem Calafrage, the dimpy glanger, and beveler of zworpage . . . no? odd. He was injured today in the trials — fell on his head and was trampled by the zebuls, poor gritch. He'll be in the nursing shed for some days. I can offer you his room until he has recovered — if you can pay. It's our best room, vermin free"

"How much?"

"Forty five terquins — apiece."

“Done.”

The second floor room was small but clean, with a view of the busy street below. Calafra’s belongings were removed and a serving woman dragged in a second pallets with bedding. The pallet consisted of sacks stuffed with aromatic grass. They looked uncomfortable but proved acceptable. The blue walls were adorned with spurious antique artifacts, wired securely in place — a wooden shovel, a stone ax, a leather helmet with beadwork ornamentation. In the corner stood a macabre construction; a wardrobe of dried leather stretched over sticks and bones.

They descended to the common room. Breke asked the wiskerado if a person of the establishment was available to fetch their packs. Meanwhile Pearson inspected a tourist guide. A boy was sent out from the kitchen and came to stand mute before Breke, exuding lack of alertness.

“What is your name?” Breke asked.

“Dablick sir.”

“Dablick; the mission I am about to send you upon is an important one. Do you understand?”

Dablick nodded his head.

“It is also well paid.”

Dablick looked up with a jerk.

“You will be paid five terquins now, and another five after you have successfully accomplished your mission.”

Dablick’s watery eyes enlarged, but he remained silent.

“You will go to the Gilleash and Galor Garbage and Equipmental Emporium — do you know where that is?”

Dablick nodded, more vigorously this time.

“Good. You will give this note to the woman in an orange khaftan. Her name is Madam Glor Halor. She will give you two back packs, which you are to bring immediately back to me, here. Speak to no one but Glor Halor. If anyone questions you, you must avoid that person. Run away at full speed if necessary. Understood?”

“Yes sir, but what if they catch me?”

“Catch such a swift runner as yourself? inconceivable! However, if you are detained; lie. Say you have been told to deliver the packs to this inn. Do you understand the logic of this procedure?”

Dablick nodded, but his chin hung loose giving his face a vague expression.

“Now; fold the note and put it in your pocket. Show it to no one but Glor Halor. If anyone else demands to see it, you must put it in your mouth and swallow it.

Agreed?”

Dablick gulped: “I agree.”

Breke proffered five terquins; the boy seized them and ran out the door.

“You confused and frightened poor Dablick with your weird jokes,” remarked Pearson.

“He will return all the sooner.”

The two men went to the bar to await Dablick’s return. The whiskerado came out from behind the counter, took off his frock coat, tied on a white apron, went behind the bar, approached Pearson and Breke, and peered at them inquisitively.

“Make mine goolug”, said Breke.

“Likewise, but omit the slime,” said Pearson. The barman shot him a glance of bewildered surprise, but offered no comment. Pearson and Breke settled themselves at a table. The whiskerado delivered the drinks.

Pearson spoke: “A meal will soon be in order. I have learned from the guidebook that there are three gourmet restaurants in Scratch Flats. Of these *The Explorer* is the nearest. Let us test its quality.”

“Would a zebul merchant eat gourmet food?”

“If the zebul merchant had the wherewithal, why not?”

“The point is well taken. Even so, we must remain inconspicuous; Karkassus has a far reach; Scratch Flats is not Kloot, or even Slagtown, but he might have spies, especially since he intends to participate in the races.” Breke took a long sip of goolug. Pearson did likewise but instantly regretted it. Scratch Flats goolug, unlike the admittedly unpleasant brew he had been served in Slagtown, was undrinkable. He pushed the mug away wondering how Breke could consume it with such insouciance.

The two men waited nervously for the return of Dablick. The packs contained several items which, if discovered, would be of interest to the local authorities. But the boy soon appeared burdened with the two packs. He approached the table.

“Did all go well then Dablick?” asked Pearson.

“Yes sir. The lady gave me a candy!” Breke handed him another five terquins and Dablick hurried back into the kitchen — from where there instantly arose sounds of blows and muffled screams.

“It seems Dablick has transgressed.” chuckled Breke. “In his absence he may have allowed the zebul sauce to burn, or perhaps he neglected to polish the shoes.”

“Your attitude toward Dablick lacks all indulgence,” remarked Pearson.

"I have my own troubles," replied Breke, "and I don't see why you should concern yourself unduly with the fate of this minor non-entity . . ."

Pearson offered no rejoinder and Breke tipped the rest of his goolug down his throat. They arose, stowed the packs in their room and locked the door. Amplifying this precaution with tell-tales and preventers they departed for *The Explorer*.

Night had fallen and the town was aglow with light from oil lanterns: amber globes mounted on squat adobe pedestals. The wide streets were animated with groups of zebulchers singing, calling out, swaggering. Zebul hacks came and went, transporting the local women to their evening engagements with their men, mounted on zebuls, following behind. Shadows of these figures were projected onto the naked adobe walls by the amber lights: a spectacle of odd patterns and shapes. Above, the aurora borealis shone in flickering waves of pale green, a nightly phenomenon on Golfo.

The Explorer was set back from the street. A sign on a post read:

The Explorer
Scratch Flats' Finest Dining

The interior revealed rough and discolored plaster walls, hide and bone furniture, and a floor covered with dried and shredded vegetation. Pearson and Breke chose seats by the wall and were given menus. After inspecting it for some moments Breke spoke, in a tone of amazed disgust: "Listen to this! 'Item 34: Sink hole bottom feeder, boiled in powder-berry jam, served with sprekle, bronklettes, and side dish of warm mint-flavored zebul milk'. Ouch! the so-called 'gourmet cuisine' of Scratch Flats is clearly uncontaminated by interstellar influences."

Person surveyed his menu. "Perhaps item 58 would be more to your taste: 'Prime morsels of reddest zeet dewlap, broiled with pepper leaves and served with scravies au gratin, cured in squeeze'. What do you think; is it fish or fowl? And what do they mean by 'squeeze'?"

In the end they ordered broiled zebul steaks with baked turnips and a salad of ramp and chard. Appetizing fare was soon brought to their table and Pearson tucked his napkin under his chin. He was about to sample his food when suddenly he huddled toward the wall.

"Are you well?" inquired Breke.

"Not altogether," Pearson whispered. "Look: the dark haired girl in apron and toque; it's Fleuridian Karkassus!" Breke turned and looked at the girl. "Not really amazing", he muttered after a moment. "She has accompanied her father to Scratch Flats and now patronizes one of the better dining establishments of the town . . . no, I am mistaken! She is waiting on tables!"

"Exactly. What can it mean? Can her father be present as well? But I don't dare look up for fear the girl will recognize me."

Breke pretended to admire the scope and decor of the room. "I don't see anyone who might be Karkassus." He narrowed his eyes. "Still, he might be in disguise. But just in case; we had better kill everyone present."

In spite of himself Pearson raised an eyebrow, but he kept his voice even: "Of late your concepts have become both extremist and impractical." He raised his hand to his face as if rubbing his cheek and peeked between his fingers at Fleuridian. "At the very least I do not care to destroy the girl." She was busy taking an order.

Breke inspected her as well. "Bah! the spawn of such a man . . . I pity her mother. Well then, if we are not to do as I suggest, what do you propose?"

"Besides being a human soul, and a rather attractive young person," Pearson persisted, "Fleuridian is a source of information and should not be destroyed. Given my recent use of her however, I am reluctant to show myself. If she is vindictive, with her father so close at hand . . . in short; best that I leave. You might care to make her acquaintance; she is basically a decent girl if a bit wild. I will return to the inn."

Head averted Pearson left the restaurant. In a dark mood he wandered the streets, regretting his uneaten meal, his friend's attitudes, and several other things all related to the person of Fleuridian Karkassus. He wandered aimlessly for a time and eventually found himself at a blue door on which was painted, in broad white-wash strokes:

Harbish House — Good food
Hammerman's Goolug
Foreign Devil Mead
Zebul Chowder our Specialty
All Welcome

Entering, he discovered a dim interior illuminated by an occasional candle in a bottle. Along one side of the room stretched a bar solidly lined with zebulchers. A

twanging, melancholy music emerged from a loudspeaker in the middle of the low ceiling. Pearson seated himself on a bench and scanned the menu. A slattern in a soiled apron and scuffs approached.

“What’ll it be sir?”

“The specialty if you please, and a pint of your Foreign Devil mead.” The woman slouched away and returned immediately with Pearson’s order. As he ate he pondered his troubles.

Since the time they were nineteen years old, when Fedor Karkassus had destroyed Beldune, he and Breke had postponed their lives and dedicated themselves to retribution; so it had gone for twelve years. But in the last few months Breke had become impatient and even reckless to the point of fanaticism. Meanwhile Pearson felt his own dedication waning; he grew more and more cautious and reluctant, even indifferent at times. But their work required both cool heads and steady hearts. Prospects of success would thus seem to be waning — a discouraging consideration.

Besides themselves few others, if any, were interested in bringing Fedor Karkassus to justice. Though the proof of his guilt existed, the whole galaxy preferred to believe that the destruction of Beldune was a mysterious natural catastrophe. Understandable of course; the alternative was too terrible to contemplate. But a source of frustration none-the-less. Pearson and Breke further suspected Karkassus of being part of a mysterious cabal, the so called Deranged Astrophysicists.*

These, they had reason to believe, were the creators of Karkkasus’ weapon of planetary destruction. Were they planning to set themselves up as tyrants of the universe? No such attempt had yet been made, openly at least, and most people treated the Deranged Astrophysicists as the paranoid nightmare of conspiracy theorists. What motive, so it was argued, had brought Fedor Karkassus halfway across the galaxy to destroy an innocuous planet? And yet; this is what he had done! In appearances Fedor Karkassus was merely the tyrant of northern Kloot, a territory on the backward planet Golfo. He possessed a private army and exercised absolute authority, but what of that? Across the galaxy thousands of others did likewise.

Aside from the members of the Women’s Benevolent Society of Beldune Town who had been on a tour of Earth, and Marko Breakneck,† not a soul had survived

the disaster. The ladies, as far as Pearson knew, had remained on Earth, and Marko was still on Crispinsk.*

The only other possible survivor was the then president of Beldune, Yesilla Magnatz, who was supposed to have been away on diplomatic travels — but they had found no trace of her. Their immediate plan seemed quixotic, if not crude and impractical. Yet it was the closest they had yet come to their goal — since the recent debacle at Kloot.†

Beyond all this was a more complex question: his own motives. The quest of retribution had for so long seemed the logical, even the only possible course. Yet whether Fedor Karkassus were brought to justice or not, the bitter fact of Pearson’s own loss remained. Breke had no patience for this concept and its subtle and ambiguous ramifications, and only manifested ever greater degrees of reckless abandon. Pearson was increasingly obliged to reason with and restrain him.

Then there was the question of Fleuridian . . .

Pearson paid his score, returned to the inn, went to his room and fell into troubled dreams.

* see volume I: Planet of Destruction

† Marko Breakneck, the aged miner who had helped Pearson and Breke on Crispinsk; see volume I.

* Crispinsk was now in stabilized orbit around the sun Umichrom II, which once had warmed pleasant Beldune.

† See chapter 2