
The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

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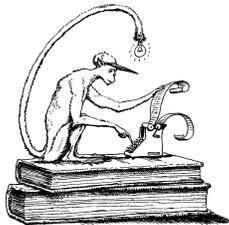
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Tergan

By Till Noever
Chapter 9

"In here." Sander pulled Evadne into an alcove. They had emerged from the low level passage and were heading back toward the kitchen. So far they had been very fortunate indeed.

"The gate will be guarded," she softly. "No matter where we go: they will be waiting for us." She laid a hand on his arm. "You shouldn't have come."

Sander allowed himself a siccant chuckle. "Would you rather I'd left you there?"

"No. Of course not! But . . ."

"Then let's not mention it again, huh? We are here. We need to survive. This must be our focus."

She nodded. "Thank you. Even if we don't . . . Thank you."

"When we're through this," he said, "then I will definitely expect you to thank me. Until then lets hold the thanks in abeyance."

"You are a strange man, Sander of Orgond." She pointed. "What is this . . . weapon? How did you come by it? Did 'they' give it to you?"

"They did."

"Who are they, that they can make such devices?"

He laughed softly. "You are persistent."

"I would like to know—before . . ."

"Stop thinking that we are going to die." He took her shoulders and looked at her. "Listen to me! Repeat this to yourself over and over again: we— are — not — going — to — die."

"I wish I could believe you."

"Believe me. I just have to . . ."

And then he knew what he had to do. His grip on her shoulders tightened. "We shall risk all to gain all. Does that sound like a fair deal?"

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Her eyes studied him with intensity. "Where you go I go," she said softly.

"Good." He released her and peered out of the alcove and along the curved corridor. "What is the last thing they'd expect us to do?"

—

"Seal the castle!" Gervase ordered, his face a rictus of anger. "Find her!" He turned to Silas. "Tell me, spymaster," he said in a dangerous voice, "how a *woman* could get out of one of your cells, kill several guards in the process, and start a fire in the bargain?"

"We think that she had help," Silas admitted.

"You really think so?" Gervase said acidly. "Well, I'm glad to be served by such a perspicacious individual. And I suppose you also have thought about *who* could have accomplished such a feat—which appears unbelievable in itself."

"We think," Silas glanced sideways at Councillor Jago, who stood with an expression of studied indifference, "that it was Councillor Sander."

Gervase stood up from behind Hengiste's former desk and approached the spymaster. He jutted his face close to the other man's. "A Councillor," he said softly. "He walks in there, kills my men, and abducts my prisoner. And how could he have accomplished that if," his voice rose, "he wasn't faced with a total bunch of incompetents?"

Silas stood up under Gervase's gaze. "Your Majesty, we have reason to believe that Sander is more than a mere Councillor."

"And what exactly do you think he is? A magic maybe?"

Gervase's eyes widened, suddenly uncertain. "You . . . don't think that—do you?"

"It is a distinct possibility," Jago said.

Gervase's head whipped around. "He's a Councillor! A provincial nobody, who happens to have inherited a title from his father."

"This, no doubt, is what he wanted us to believe."

Gervase looked from one to the other. "I think you're propounding these ludicrous speculations to account for your blunders. If this is your motive, let me advise you that I fail to be impressed. Even if Sander were as magic, he could not have done what he did." Gervase shook his head. "No. I think the truth is that

more than one person is involved. Persons who wish to topple me even before I ascend to the throne. Persons who are in your midst, but work for my enemies."

"Your Majesty . . ." Silas began.

"Spare me your theories and excuses," Gervase interrupted. "Find Evadne—and when you do, execute her at once!" He turned away. "And now get out of here. I need to think!"

—

From the end of the passage came the smells and sounds of the castle's kitchen. Life, thought Sander, imposed certain basic requirements. One had to eat. This was a fact.

The passage was in significant use. Too much to avoid detection. But, strangely enough, there were no guards. An oversight Sander intended to make the best of.

"We're just going to walk in there?" Evadne whispered. "Are you mad?"

"Not entirely," he grinned. "Come on."

She briefly resisted the tug of his hand, but then yielded. They emerged from the tiny storage room and started walking down the hallway. Sander's right hand held his weapon, concealed by a fold of his garment. A pair of male servants came toward them. They stopped and stared at the apparitions. One of them started to turn. Sander brought forth the weapon and fired two non-lethal bursts. He could not bring himself to kill these innocent men, whose only offense was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The men collapsed.

"They'll live," Sander told Evadne. He considered his victims. One had about his stature.

"Help me!" With her assistance he divested the man of his shirt and trousers. The man wore no underwear. Evadne made a sound and turned away, leaving Sander to complete the procedure. Sander in turn felt vaguely guilty, but told himself that, while embarrassed, the man would be no worse off for the experience. To assuage his conscience he pressed a silver coin into one of the man's hands and closed the fingers around it.

Voices close by!

Sander jumped up and listened.

Women! Fate was being kinder than he'd had any right to expect.

Three young scullery maids emerged from a side branch. One carried a ceramic vessel, the other a basket containing bread, the third an armful of limp celery. All three were dressed in simple clothes: one-piece slip-on dresses of coarse gray or brownish linen, marked with the stains of kitchen activity, and tied with a thin cloth sashes around the waist. All three wore none-too-clean bonnets, tied down with bands around their faces.

The women saw the bodies, one of them nude, and stopped. Their eyes widened, as did their mouths. Then they saw Evadne and Sander. The renewed astonishment somehow inhibited their incipient screams. Sander held his fire.

Instead he placed a finger on his mouth. The women's eyes wandered between him and the men on the floor; then back to Evadne, who still wore her dressing gown, now soiled and tattered.

"Ladies," Sander said softly. "We need your assistance."

They gaped at him.

"Do you know who we are?" he asked them.

One of them nodded mutely. The others remained frozen in attitudes of shock.

"Will you help us?"

The words had an astonishing effect: all three suddenly became animated. They looked at each other with knowing faces.

"We need your help," he reiterated.

One of them curtsied. "Mylady."

"Please," Evadne said softly.

"Of course, Mylady." It was the same one who had spoken before.

"What's your name?" Sander asked her.

"Weona, sir."

"Weona," Sander repeated. "That's a nice name. Now, Weona, the Lady Evadne's life is in peril, and she needs to disguise herself." He smiled confidentially, implying a shared trust.

He nodded at one of the other girls, the one carrying the bread basket. "And you are . . ."

The girl blushed and looked at the floor. "Inga," she whispered.

"Inga," Sander repeated. "Another lovely name."

"And I'm Katrin," the third one interjected with a boldness that seemed to surprise even herself.

"Katrin." Sander smiled. "Your parents are to be

applauded for choosing such apt and lovely names for you all." He redirected his attention to Inga. "We need your help most of all."

"Mine, sir?" Inga, who had dared to look up again, blushed to the roots of her hair and averted her eyes back to the floor.

"Would you let the Lady Evadne borrow your dress?"

The girl looked at him, then Evadne, with wide eyes. Katrin and Weona tittered.

"M-m-y dress . . . sir?" Inga stuttered.

"It may save her life," Sander said seriously.

"B-b-ut . . . of course," she whispered.

"Thank you," Evadne said. The tone of her voice left no doubt that she really meant it.

"We must be quick," Sander said. He looked at Weona. "Do you know of a place where they could . . ."

Weona giggled. "Come," she said and hurried off the way they'd come. Sander grinned at Evadne. She gave him a curious look before she followed the three women. Sander picked up the clothes he'd taken off the man and fell in behind, alert and ready for disturbances. They ran down the narrow vaulted passage and stopped. Weona grabbed an oil lamp from a nearby holder and opened a nearby door. The mixed pungent smells of pantry greeted their noses. Sander ushered them all inside. With some delay caused by general embarrassment and amusement Evadne and Inga exchanged clothes; Inga ending up with Evadne's nightgown, but, at Sander's suggestion, foregoing to wear the dressing-gown over it.

"I'll get you my spare dress," Katrin told Inga, who nodded shyly, too mortified by the whole affair to be capable of words.

Presently the affair was done. Evadne had become a scullery maid. The bonnet did not totally conceal her hair, which she had bundled up under it, but it would do for a casual glance. Sander proceeded to exchange his own garb for that he'd taken off the servant. The girls reacted with amusement and consternation, depending on disposition. Evadne, inured to such minor contingencies, appeared indifferent; though he suspected that she actually contrived to sneak a clandestine glance or two.

When he was done dressing Sander looked around the pantry. He discovered two baskets, suitable for carrying bread or other foodstuffs. He searched further and found several loaves of heavy bread, the kind

that lasted for days if stored in a cool place. On another rack he found blocks of cheese.

Good enough. He placed the bread in one basket, and some of the cheese blocks in another. He gave the women a silver coin each and then, with Evadne carrying the cheese basket and himself the one with the bread, left the pantry; after extracting an assurance from the girls that they would not breathe a word of their encounter to anyone.

As they walked back along the passage Evadne felt compelled to express her doubts. "They will talk! Won't they ever . . ."

"Of course," Sander chuckled. "But it'll be secret talk—and by the time it gets to anybody significant we'll have done what we have to do."

"You are mad."

"Indeed."

They made their way to the servant's access stairs without challenge. The few servants they passed might not have recognized them, but that in itself would not have been overly unusual. The baskets they carried, and the air of purpose and even hurry adhering to their progress, discouraged conversation with those they met. Mere nods were exchanged and the matter went well enough.

They climbed the servants' access stairs to level one, only to find two guards waiting at the landing.

"What have you got?" one of them challenged them. From underneath the basket Sander shot him and his companion with a non-lethal dose.

They gained level two, but Sander kept on going up.

"Where are you going?"

"Come. Trust me!"

Evadne made a grimace but followed.

They arrived at level three and stopped at the door leading to the royal precincts. Sander tried the handle, the needle projector at the ready. The door opened. As expected it was flanked by guards, who lowered their stubby halberds in their direction. Sander stepped forward.

"What's your business? Don't you know . . ."

Two small bursts. Two more unconscious guards.

Evadne glanced at Sander's weapon and shook her head.

"What is it?" he asked her.

"Nothing." She looked right and left. "Where do we go now?"

"Down here." Sander left his basket behind; it had served its purpose. Evadne followed suit. They continued off to their right. Turns and divagations. Avoiding a footfall here, doubling back along a hallway there. A sentry access opened let them out on the third level battlements. Sander peered out but saw no one. Ducking low beneath the parapets they circled the battlement until they came to a set of connecting steps to the battlements below. A hesitation. There was activity in the courtyards below. The parapets provided some cover. They crept down the stairs, continued along the level two parapet.

A pair of guards appeared from around a turret. Before they could open their mouths Sander shot them.

They re-entered the castle through a sentry access at level two. Another pause to listen.

"Down here." Sander pointed.

After several more turns and a tense moment of waiting for a pair of sentries to pass, they finally stood outside Gervase's quarters.

Or maybe 'former quarters'. Possibly. Especially since no guards were posted here. Had Gervase already moved into Hengiste's suite on the level below?

"Come." Sander tried the door, which yielded. They stepped inside.

—

Despite all efforts the search for the elusive Lady Evadne remained without success. The only signs of their progress were guards, rendered unconscious or dead by mysterious means. Though Silas attempted to play that aspect down, the lady's putative helper assumed an air of near super-human menace. Rapidly spreading rumor had it that indeed, they had already left the palace by means unknown, and that the search was an exercise in futility. Among the servantry the story of the events near the kitchen assumed the status of instant legend. Weona, Katrin, and Inga embellished it to suit their romantic needs, and now it rapidly spiraled out of control. Previous rumors, still accepted as definite fact, that the Lady Evadne had a secret lover, were connected with the appearance of her gallant rescuer, who had braved the direst of dangers to save his beloved from the clutches of the evil Silas, whom everybody hated, and the to-be-king Gervase, who, this everybody knew, was a degenerate lunatic.

The rumor inevitably did eventually reach Silas' ears, but by that time he had neither the patience nor the resources to trace it back to its origins. Sander and Evadne had waylaid some servants. What did it matter? By now they would be a long way from where that happened.

Silas' report to Gervase was an unpleasant affair. The king-de-facto was extremely displeased.

"I begin to doubt your capability to handle this situation," he grated.

"We are dealing with unknown quantities, your Majesty. This Sander—and we are now certain that it is he we're talking about . . . Councillor Sander is maybe the most dangerous man I've ever known; if for no other reason but that he has managed to conceal his true nature—whatever that is—for such an inordinately long time. Indeed, we now suspect that it was he who killed several of my operatives—as well as the former king's confidante, Weltig—some time ago when they were sent on a mission to intercept a dangerous Keaenean infiltrator."

"And you allowed this to happen?" Gervase's voice was low and dangerous.

"What I mean to say, your Majesty," Silas said hastily, "is that this man is dangerous and extremely cunning and resourceful. He poisons men at a distance. He moves without being seen. He is cognizant of nobody-knows-how-many secrets of the state. Furthermore, he is the confidante—and possibly even the lover," (at these words Gervase's face darkened) "of the Lady Evadne, whom he freed from the carcery . . ."

Gervase forced himself to calm. He glanced at Jago. "What do you say?"

Jago shrugged. "The facts are as the spymaster delineates them. I agree that Councillor Sander must be found and killed as soon as practicable."

"I want him interrogated first!" Gervase said testily. "I want to know who he is; what he wants; who controls him. Whatever torture we can devise: this man must tell us all!"

"We all would like to hear what he has to say, your Majesty," Silas agreed. "But a man like this may not allow us to choose."

Gervase turned away petulantly. Silas and Jago waited in silence. Gervase faced them again. "Do you have *any* notion of where he is?"

"We believe that they may be hiding on level three.

The trail of unconscious guards appears to suggest this. On the other hand it could be a ruse. Sander may have orchestrated this scenario for our benefit—to get us to focus on searching level three while he and the Lady Evadne prowl in other places at their leisure."

"The palace is sealed tight?" Gervase wanted to know.

"This one thing I'm certain of," Silas assured him. "Nobody enters or leaves without the most positive of identifications."

"Hmmpf." Gervase was clearly unconvinced. He uttered a peevish curse. "Let me know when you've found them." To Jago, "Send for my personal guard. I am in need of a rest. Tomorrow's the investiture and I don't care to fall asleep while the documentarist recites to me the vow of the Tergan kings." He barked a sharp laugh.

Jago bowed and hastened to comply with his master's wishes.

—

"I will have no compunction killing Gervase."

"All of this could have been avoided if you had decided this some time ago," Evadne said crisply.

"My position has changed. Now we are fighting for our lives."

"And that makes all the difference?"

"It does."

Evadne looked at the rectangle of the window, brightly lit by Janus riding high in the sky.

"I don't understand you."

Sander said nothing.

"And when he comes back here?"

"As I said: we . . . Sshh!"

From somewhere, the fall of locked footsteps.

"Quick!" Sander took Evadne's hand and pulled her after him into the darkness of Gervase's vestuary, where they hid behind a rack of coats. Her breath played in his left ear. "What if he won't cooperate?"

"We shall face contingencies as they arise," he whispered. "Now . . . quiet!"

The sound of a door opening. Gervase's voice; the words indistinct; the inflections unmistakable. The door closing.

"I wonder if he's alone," Evadne breathed into Sander's ear.

"It doesn't matter," Sander whispered. He assured himself that the projector was operative, the safety disengaged.

In the other room vague sounds. The creaking of a bedstead. Someone speaking.

"He's got somebody with him," Evadne whispered. She was so close to his ear that her lips touched him. Despite their situation Sander found his thoughts distracted. Evadne, too, must have sensed something. She drew back a little, but stopped and brought her face close to his.

"Whatever happens," she breathed. "Thank you for everything."

A lingering touch on his cheek. Another hesitation. Her mouth found his. Without conscious volition he returned the kiss: a light touch, none the less exquisite for its brevity.

Sander pulled himself together. "Come."

Cautiously, such as not to make a sound they pushed through the coats and moved to the door. As they did the voices grew more distinct—and now it also became clear that it was not two people but just one: Gervase, muttering to himself and an imaginary visitor.

"You don't *want* me?"

"How could you not? How could you not?"

"No father, she's mine!"

Indistinct muttering. Evadne's hand on Sander's right arm tightened with vise-like strength.

"Evadne, my darling Evadne . . ."

Peering around the half-open door Sander saw Gervase, lying on his back on his ornate bed, staring at the ceiling. His arms were folded over his chest as if holding someone closely.

Gervase jumped up. "Whore!" A sibilant curse. "How dare you bed the Councillor? He's *nothing*. Nothing. Nothing."

Her flopped back on his back again. "For this alone you shall die," he whispered. "My darling Evadne . . . for this you shall suffer . . ."

Behind him Sander heard Evadne's spasmodic breathing.

Enough of this! He opened the door completely and stepped into the room. Evadne's hand let go of his left arm and slid down, to find his hand. She took in a firm grip.

Gervase did not, at first see them. He had rolled over on his bed, facing away from them, curled up in a

fetal position, whimpering lowly. Every now and then he uttered forlorn little sounds of woe and, occasionally, rage.

Sander cleared his throat. Gervase's head turned. He saw them and jumped up. His eyes locked on Evadne's face. His features displayed a sequence of emotions: longing, hatred, lust, detestation, yearning, disgust. His eyes traveled down to Evadne's hand clasping Sander's. His face turned a sick pasty color.

"You *dare!* . . ."

Sander let go of Evadne's hand and took a quick step forward. Gervase lashed out. Sander caught the fist with one hand, applied leverage, twisted Gervase's arm, and pushed him with his face onto the bed, where he held him. He stuck the needle projector into his waistband and used the other hand to hold Gervase in place.

"One sound," he said lowly, "and you die. Do you understand?"

Gervase twisted and jerked. Sander applied more pressure. "Do you understand?"

A muffled "yes".

Sander released the pressure a fraction. Gervase jerked and tried to twist out of the grip. Sander applied pressure again, and Gervase gave a moan of pain.

"For a king you're remarkably stupid," Sander said acidly.

Gervase lay still. Sander eased the pressure with which he held him, but remained alert.

"One last chance," Sander said.

Gervase, with a last desperate effort, twisted his head so that his mouth was free of the smothering mattress.

"Guards!"

Sander cursed and let go of Gervase. The door flew open. Sander reached for his weapon, but he wasn't quick enough. Five guards poured into the room. Another two, at the door raised their crossbows. Evadne screamed.

"Kill them!" Gervase shouted.

The guards fired the crossbows. Sander lunged and interposed himself between the missiles and Evadne. The bolt aimed at him missed; the one for Evadne caught just him under the breastbone. A terrible pain surged through his whole being. He heard Evadne scream again; heard her calling his name; then heard nothing at all.

Sander slumped against her and collapsed on the floor. An ugly stain spread from a wound in his chest. Evadne screamed again. The guards were almost upon her. Evadne looked down and saw the weapon in Sander's waistband. She dropped to his side, jerked it out, and held it as she'd seen him do several times. Her right index finger found the trigger button. She pointed the weapon at the guards and depressed the trigger. There was no sound, but the effect was near-instantaneous and shocking. Evadne swept the weapons mouth over the men—who froze and collapsed. The crossbows, halberds and swords clattered to the floor. Behind her a presence. Evadne whipped around, kept her finger on the trigger. Above her loomed Gervase. He reached for her. Evadne rolled on her back; pointed the weapon at him. Gervase's face, still registering his ultimate triumph, froze in that expression forever. His body, already bereft of life and control, toppled over her.

Evadne let go of the trigger and rolled away. In a dim corner of her mind it registered that her reactions were instinctive, just like Sander had said they would be. The corpse fell on her legs.

For a moment she stared at it, unable to believe that it was finally done. Then, revulsion. That he should even touch her in death!

She struggled free of him. Her eyes traveled to Sander's still form.

Sander . . .

The world blurred.

She bent over him.

From the door a movement! Evadne looked up; saw Silas and Jago. Without thought she raised the weapon and held down the trigger. The men went down without a sound.

Then she heard the clatter of weapons.

"Stay away!" she screamed. The figures of guards appeared. Evadne used the weapon. More men died in eerie silence.

Her left hand sensed a movement.

She looked down, at Sander lying in a pool of blood, twitching feebly.

Moving? How could he move?

His head turned. Frothy blood bubbled from his lips.

Evadne dropped the weapon and turned him over.

His chest was a slick mat of dark blood. The crossbow bolt sticking out of it was an obscene presence.

Evadne bent closer; kissed his bloody face.

"Need . . . rest . . ." She could hardly make out the words.

"Sander?" she whispered. "Please . . ."

"Need . . . rest . . ." he repeated. "Water . . . milk . . . rest . . ."

He gasped. "Pull out . . . bolt . . ." A grimace of pain. "No quack . . ." A bloody hand found hers and squeezed it weakly. "No . . . quack . . . do you hear?"

His eyes rolled up until only the whites showed and he was silent.

"Sander?"

The bolt. He wanted her to pull it out? How could she?

Evadne wanted to retch.

And yet. He'd asked her to do this. How could she not?

At the door there was movement again. Evadne looked up.

"Do you want to die?" she grated.

Her eyes fixed on the bolt in Sander's chest again.

What could she do? What could she do?

She remembered something. The trace of an idea, firming into a sudden insight.

"Keran!" she shouted at the door. "Find Keran and bring him here!"

There was no answer. "Do you hear me?" she shouted. "Your king is dead! Dead, dead, dead! Of the Junco dynasty only I remain alive. And I *order* you! Find me Keran! Find him now!"

"Yes, Mylady." Sounds of hurrying footsteps.

Evadne focused on Sander.

The bolt.

"I hope you are right," she whispered to his deaf ears. She grabbed the bolt with both hands and jerked. Her hands slipped off it with the slick blood. Evadne whimpered and repeated the process. Again, failure.

Think!

She took a deep breath, composed herself.

Think!

She picked up the hem of the scullery maid's dress and wrapped it around the shaft, then grasped it again and heaved. A sickening sound as it came free. Evadne dropped it to the floor beside her and placed her hand on the wound, hoping to stem the tide of blood.

She paused. No blood flowed from the wound. She placed her face close to his; felt the faintest of breaths.

Still he lived! Maybe . . .

"Get me a carry bed!" she shouted. "Do you hear. Get it *now!*"

She turned back to Sander and ran her bloody hands through his bloody hair.

Everything was blood.

Everything was death.

Evadne looked up, at the bodies strewn throughout the room. She remembered Sander's weapon, picked it up and shoved it into her cleavage, where it sat, a small, hard, lethal object of destruction.

Outside, a commotion.

From out of her sight: "Mylady, this is Keran."

"Come in!" she ordered.

Keran, the guard who seemed to be Sander's friend, gingerly stepped into the room. He was quite out of breath. Evadne looked at him as he entered.

Would Sander trust this man?

Could *she*?

Did she have a choice?

He stopped a few paces away from her. His eyes fixed on Sander. There was nothing faked about the grief on his face.

"He might live," she said bleakly, "but I need help."

"Any help I can give, Mylady."

She found her voice quavering, despite all attempts to keep it firm.

"Then get him to my quarters and place him on the bed."

"A doctor . . ."

"No! He wants no quack, and this is the way it will be."

Keran nodded, apparently unsurprised. "He knows best."

Evadne regarded him with surprise.

Keran smiled. "He does, Mylady. Trust me."

Evadne nodded slowly. "I will trust you," she said softly. "I have no one else to turn to."

She raised her voice. "Hear me out there! Bring me the royal documentarist. Tell him I want to make a declaration. Tell him that the last member of the Juncos is assuming the supreme command over Tergan. And tell him that Keran is to be my right hand man and that is to be obeyed as if he were me."

She looked at Keran. "Please, don't disappoint me."

His gaze was compassionate. "I won't. Nor will I disappoint *him*."

—

They had brought him into her quarters and placed him on her bed. Evadne called for hot water, towels and sheets. Then she dismissed them all. The quack was insistent—until she told him that she'd have him executed on the spot unless he ceased pestering her.

Keran was the only one she tolerated in the room. He helped her move Sander's inert body and take off the bloody clothes. He took them away, together with the bloody sheets, which he helped her to replace after she'd washed the blood and grime off Sander's body, his face, his hair. Keran didn't comment on the terrible wound which had disappeared within hours of having been inflicted. He didn't ask and she didn't mention it. It was a given; another unknown and unexpected aspect of the man that was Sander, and who now lay in her bed, under her sheets, breathing shallowly. At irregular intervals he became lively, yet without being truly conscious. Then he muttered things that made no sense. He was able to drink the milk and the water she tried to get into him. It was as if something in him knew what had to be done, even though the other parts of his being were missing. At intervals he soiled the bed, apparently unable to control his bodily functions. Evadne, stoical and without complaint cleaned him up and had Keran help her to change sheets yet again. It was a menial task, and one more befitting a lowly maid. But Evadne did not mind. Sander deserved better than to be seen like this by anyone who was not . . . close.

Close?

Evadne discovered, not without surprise, that this was indeed what she felt: that she *was* 'close'. How it had happened she didn't know, but that it was true was undeniable. The man in the bed was not just Councillor Sander and her self-appointed protector anymore. The last few weeks had done something she wasn't quite able to grasp—or maybe just didn't dare to reveal to herself . . .

Keran came to visit on a regular basis and reported on what he'd done; the decisions he'd had to make. He apologized for not consulting her on most of them, but she waved it aside.

"Do not concern yourself. Only one thing matters."

"This is true."

She looked at him. "Why?"

"Why?"

"Why do you care for him so much?"

Keran smiled. "How could I not, Mylady. He saved my only child from certain death."

"What happened?"

"My son was ill. A terrible fever; the same that struck at so many children that year and jumped from one to the other and spared none. I was a corporal then and often on duty at the gate. Sander always spoke to us when he passed through. At first we thought it was odd, but then we got used to it. Then, one day when my boy was ill, he must have noticed my disquiet, and he asked me what was wrong. Of course, it's not the kind of thing you properly concern a Councillor with. . . . But he insisted, and so I finally told him.

"'You love your son,' he said. I admitted that I did. 'Then we shall save him,' he said. He got me excused from duty there and then. We went to his house where he picked up a small box that he took with him to my house. There my son lay dying, dry and hot with the fever, his eyes seeing monsters and phantoms, his breath like the sound of a rasp on wood. Sander told me to leave the room. 'Trust me,' he said, and I did. My wife didn't. She was afraid to leave my son with this strange man. But I made her come with me—and Sander did what he did. . . . and just three days later my boy was playing with his friends again."

Evadne nodded to herself. "I see," she said softly.

"He knows things none of us know, Mylady," Keran said.

"That he does."

"He also. . . ."

"What?"

Keran hesitated; then shook his head. "Forgive me, Mylady, but it is not my place."

Evadne raised an eyebrow. "I could order you to tell me what you wanted to say."

Keran inclined his head. "That is true, Mylady—and if you did I would tell you. But I trust that you will not." He smiled thinly. "Besides, methinks you will know it soon enough." He bowed again. "And now I have to go. Affairs of state are such a bother sometimes. I hope that when this is over, I will be relieved from this task. I find that I have no life of my own anymore."

Evadne smiled. "But you are so good at it."

He shook his head, bowed again, and made his

departure. Evadne stared at the closed door for a few moments, then returned her attention to Sander.

"Will you ever tell me who you are?"

—

Sander emerged from an abyss of scattered dreams that seemed to go on forever and became so real that sometimes he was sure they were, and that this other life he remembered was just a strange dream, slowly fading into oblivion. But then he surfaced again, and the touch and feel of that dream was more true than any of the other dreams and he knew that here was what for all purposes must be called 'reality'. And in that reality he lay in a bed, under clean sheets, and there was a fragrance in the room he knew so very well, and when he turned his head he saw her crouching beside the bed, her head lying against the side, the soft sound of her breathing coming smoothly and rhythmically.

With the sight of her it all came back. The guards, the pain. Gervase, who would not yield.

What a fool he'd been! Why hesitate to kill a monster like that? How could he risk her life like this? For what? A stupid principle?

His mouth felt as parched as the Talinic Desert. He tried to lift his arm and found that he could. The restorers had done their good work—and Evadne. . . . well, she must have done her good work, too. Water and milk. Liquid and the constituents the restorers needed to rebuild his torn insides. He must have told her. He had, hadn't he?

He moved his left hand and touched her arm, resting on the bed. She jerked and woke immediately. When she saw that he was awake an expression of disbelieving joy lit up her face. She scrambled up and leaned over him.

"Looks like I'm back," he said, his voice sounding strange.

To his surprise and consternation her eyes filled with tears.

"Hey!" he said, and touched her face, felt the wetness and wiped it aside.

Her mouth worked, as if to form words that just wouldn't come. Sander touched a finger to her lips.

"Don't cry," he said. "Please don't cry."

"I'm not crying."

"Yes, you are!"

A smile stole through the tears. "Don't order me around. Don't you know who you're talking to?"

"Tell me."

She sniffed and sat down on the bed. And she told him—and then he felt like crying himself . . . because, despite his blunder, it had been alright.

It had been alright . . .

He took that with him as he drifted off again.

And then he was awake again and feeling much better. Evadne and Keran were talking to each other in low voices, discussing affairs of state.

"There have to be more interesting things in life than this," he broke in.

Keran was at the bedside with two quick steps. "I'm glad you're back with us," he said, his voice curiously brittle. But he was smiling and Sander told himself that fate's strange, meandering ways had indeed wrought well. How could he have known . . .

Evadne stood beside Keran. "Chancellor," she said briskly, "you said you had business to attend to?"

Sander chuckled. "Chancellor?"

Keran gave a wry shrug. "A title I intend to relinquish at the earliest possible opportunity."

Evadne ignored the exchange and gently guided Keran to the door. Sander noted, with considerable pleasure, that she was so much more . . . at ease . . . than she had ever been. The interaction between her and Keran was remarkable for the absence of any haughtiness or other affectation. Something had indeed gone right.

With Keran disposed-of Evadne locked the door and returned to the bedside, where she sat down.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

Sander levered himself up on his arms, feeling a strength mostly returned, though it would need exercise to bring the muscles back to full tone.

In the process he also noticed that under the sheets he was nude . . .

Sander stared at Evadne.

"What is it?" she asked.

Sander took a deep breath. "It seems that I'm in an . . . immodest . . . condition."

Evadne grinned. "You have been for a number of days."

Sander felt himself blushing. "And who . . ."

Evadne shrugged, slightly blushing herself.

Sander sank back to the pillow. What else had he expected? Unless they were supposed to leave him bleeding and filthy . . .

He glanced at Evadne. "Thank you."

She shook her head. "Don't say that, Sander. But I must thank you—and now that it appears like we've survived and you've accomplished your task, it is also the time for me to thank you—and to do it properly."

She looked at him, a curious, half-expectant, half-frightened expression in her eyes. The she bent down and, before he knew what was about to happen, kissed him—and Sander, being properly restored to health and fully functional, responded in kind.

It was then that Sander learned something most unexpected about himself. Because, as he kissed her, and she kissed him, and he sank deeper and deeper into the kiss and the touch and her warm presence, he suddenly knew himself for the liar he'd been. Of course, he didn't care—and that was maybe even worse. For it had always been Evadne. There had never been another reason, and never would be.

Politics? The paltry games of fools.

His mission? A pointless farce.

The fate of the people of the Valley? Important, of course—but . . . not like this.

For it had always been Evadne. And only now that she was breaking down the barriers of his self-deception did he see that.

She pulled back from him and regarded him with luminous eyes from a face flushed with excitement. She kissed him again—deeply and hungrily. Without taking her mouth from his she wriggled around and worked free the sheets. By some other means she contrived to remove her gown, which fell apart and off the bed. A low moan of pleasure and something else he didn't understand, but he was too much absorbed in her to notice . . . and then she rolled on her back and pulled him on top of her and spread her legs to let him in . . . and she opened her eyes she saw him and everything changed and . . .

. . . her caressing hands turned into claws and she *pushed* him away and screamed and scratched at his face and . . .

"Get away. Get away. Please! Get away . . ."

Her voice dying to a moan. "Please . . . please . . . *don't* . . ."

Sander tore himself out of the spell and rolled off her—but something, maybe *sabér*, told him not to let her go. And so he didn't, though she shouted and whimpered and moaned and bit and scratched. He closed his eyes and let her beat him and wondered if it would ever end.

Finally she exhausted herself and fell silent. He still held her, and then, suddenly, she stopped trying to push him away and instead moved closer. She put her arms around him, and pulled herself even closer until every bit of her was pressed against him—and there she lay shivering and sobbing softly. Sander stroked her hair, ignoring the pain in his gouged face and on his body where she'd dug in her finger nails.

Finally she fell silent, not even crying anymore. But he knew that she was not asleep.

"What did you see?" he said, very gently.

She tensed again. He stroked her back until her muscles relaxed somewhat.

"Tell me."

A low moan. She swallowed hard. "I saw . . . them . . ."

He tightened his arms around her.

"They're gone," he whispered.

"No!—I saw them. When you . . ."

"Sshh . . ."

He held her and they lay quietly—and though Sander was bedded with Evadne, wondrous Evadne, whom he'd lusted after like everybody else had—it was more like lying with a sister, rather than a lover. For that was what she needed; and the touch of their skins, which should have aroused him, only caused in him a strange, though quite wonderful, desire to protect her against all harm the world could contrive.

Evadne pulled back and looked at him. Her glorious eyes widened. She stared at him, aghast at the signs of her struggle.

"What have I done?"

He pulled her to him again. She resisted briefly, but then yielded. "I must . . . attend . . . to you," she whispered against him.

"No," he said. "I must attend to you." He grimaced. "They'll heal. You should know that by now."

She heaved a deep breath. "Who are you, Sander?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"I do."

"If I tell you about me . . . There are many other

things, too. Knowing them will destroy the world you've grown up in."

"I don't much like the world I grew up in."

"It might be frightening."

"It couldn't be worse than what they've done to me."

Probably not.

And so he told her.—Everything. About the lie that was their history; the settlement of the world; centuries of isolation; magices and bizarre cults, which controlled and retarded development; the rediscovery and the establishment of the 'observers'; the training machine in the basement vault of his house in Orgond; the restorers in his blood; the devices left to him to fulfill his appointed duty—which he had betrayed many times over.

When he was done there was a long silence, punctuated only by their breathing and an occasional snuffle from Evadne.

"Sander?"

"Yes?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you . . . do what you did?"

"Why did I betray them?"

Why indeed?

"Because . . . people matter. Because this edifice of lies . . . it is wrong. Because those who appointed my family to serve them are only interested in . . . watching . . . like one might watch a play by a troupe of street performers. Only we are the performers and we don't know it.

"To the people that would like me to do their bidding what the founders did is a curiosity; a behavioral aberration, whose results they would like to study.

"They're even more misguided than the founders. At least *they* were willing to live with the consequences of their actions. They committed themselves and their descendants to this world. However they erred in what they did, they at least cared. Those who watch over me do not have that excuse. They come to visit whenever it suits them and expect our reports to satisfy their curiosity."

"What if they came tomorrow?"

"Then I would be in trouble indeed! But if they do not, I might have the time to change things, so that they find a world not ignorant of the truth anymore—and their precious experiment would then be spoiled.

This is why I want for the ridiculous and artificial enmity between Tergan and Keaen to cease. Armist of Keaen and his father, the magice, must know at least part of the truth. Others may, too. And knowing this, I am certain they want the same things I do. Hengiste and his ilk stand in the way of what needs to be done.”

“And you think I won’t?” she said lowly.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re . . . different.”

“You stake a lot on that belief.”

“Everything.”

Again, a silence.

“Your father: he lives on Greel? What about your mother?”

“She died.”

“Why did she not . . .”

“Live? Like my father and my grandfather, who are still alive and active?” He sighed. “Because the women . . . they do not know. Because the restorers are transferred through blood in a secret ceremony from father to son. Because if the women had them they would transfer them to all their children—and after some generations they would be everywhere. This must not be.”

“Is this how you feel about it?”

“No.”

“I see.”

“I have broken many rules.”

“*That* I believe.”

Another silence.

“Did your father love your mother?”

“I don’t know. How can you allow yourself to love someone whom you have already condemned to death?”

Evadne pulled him closer. “In a way . . . your tragedy is maybe even more profound than mine.”

“Everybody’s tragedy is most profound to themselves.”

“There is that,” she admitted and was silent again—and then, after a while, he realized that she had finally fallen asleep.

He lay there, her head resting on his one arm, which was slowly getting numb, and his other arm around her—holding her close and pondering the future.

What indeed was he to do? For it was true that his father had never loved his mother. Honored her, yes.

Done the best he could under the circumstances. But love? Well, maybe in a manner of speaking. But not *love*. He had admitted as much.

But Sander *had* loved his mother, and when she died after a brief illness—whose cure, his father had felt, was not permissible for fear of revelation—it was a heavy blow indeed; and the boy Sander had learned that to love is to hurt, and that to hurt is not a nice thing at all.

And what about himself now? His father would be aghast at the rules he had broken: his worst mistake being to fall in love. And he knew, as he could know nothing better, that he would never be able *not* to love Evadne; for he had done so since the day he first laid eyes on her.

Should he feel shame? Shame for wanting her as much as her sick cousin? Her uncle? Or just about every other man who came in contact with her?

Shame?

Never.

Not over this.

Loving Evadne was not shameful. Only the sick desire to dominate her—the perversions of the likes of Gervase and Narvin—*those* were reasons for shame.

He felt her breathing evenly against him. His arm was numb now, but he didn’t care. She was in his arms. She was with him. She was alive and safe. And maybe one day . . .

Sander smiled and kissed her forehead. She muttered something sleepy and tucked her head even closer.

Had he fallen asleep? Sander floated into wakefulness, disoriented by circumstances. A warm delicious weight on top of him. Hair tickling his face. Something quivering and soft touching his mouth. An arousal quite beyond his control.

He opened his eyes. In the dim flicker of the single candle still alight he saw her face above his.

She stopped kissing him.

“Never leave me,” she whispered.

“I won’t.”

“Good.” She rolled off him and onto her back—urging him on top of her again.

Sander stiffened.

“Please!” she whispered.

“Evadne . . .”

"Please . . . You must."

He settled over her. Her eyes were open and clear, and she smiled up at him. A finger touched the scratches in his face.

"My poor darling. The things I've done to you . . ."

She brushed a kiss on his lips.

"There's something . . ." she began. She hesitated, searching for words. "Since I've known you . . . since you were in my room that day . . . and when you protected me from Gervase . . . and then at the beach . . . Quite often . . . it was like . . . there was a stranger inside me . . . wanting to control me . . . make me do things . . ."

Her hands slid along his back and came to rest on his hips. She smiled; not without mischief. "Things I'd never wanted to do to a man. Not after what they'd done to me."

Her right hand slipped between his legs and touched him there. "Things like . . . this . . ."

It was difficult to keep a clear head when she was doing that.

"I was afraid of her," Evadne murmured. "That is, until I knew . . ."

Her eyes were dark pools in her face.

"She was no stranger. She was *me*! The one they drove out when they . . . did this to me. But now she wanted to come back.—*I* wanted to come back.—And because of you . . . *I did*."

She smiled. "And now I'm here . . ."

She moved her hips and guided him inside her, making a soft moan as he entered, then relaxing and wrapping her legs around his. She kissed him deeply—eyes wide open and never leaving his face.

"I remember," she whispered, her mouth moving against his. "But I don't see them anymore."

He felt her lips twist into a smile.

"I see . . . you . . ."

Caravella shone in through a window, surrounding Evadne's hair with a halo of fire. With a contented sigh she sank down on top of him. For a while they lay there, breathing heavily in happy exhaustion. Sander thought that nobody, least of all himself, was entitled to be quite as happy and content as he was at this very moment.

Evadne shifted her head. A hair tickled his nose. He felt her cheeks crease against his chest.

"Why are you smiling?"

Little ripples of laughter shook her. A delightful sensation.

"I'm evil," she said and raised her head to look at him.

"If this is the case, you have just completely re-defined the meaning of the word."

"But I am."

"If you insist. Still, the nature of your evil eludes me."

"I am," she smiled, with more than just a trace of mischief, "because I'm going to wear you out. And I don't want to stop."

Sander touched her nose with one finger. "I don't think 'evil' is the correct description. It's just a natural response to a long period of deprivation."

"So I'm deprived—not depraved?"

"Deprived no more, I hope. Not if I have anything to do with it."

She rested her head on his chest again. "You're good for me," she said softly.

"That is my dearest wish."

"If it hadn't been for you . . ."

"It would have happened anyway."

She lifted her head. "No." Very seriously.

Sander ran a hand through her hair. "Then I am glad to have helped you to return."

"Hmm." She narrowed her eyes. "Have I told you that I'm evil?"

"I thought we'd disposed of the subject."

"*I* haven't."

"I am indeed worn out."

She wriggled her hips. Sander felt a stirring.

"Not quite!" she said triumphantly.

—

Keran had had the good grace and wisdom to ensure that they were left alone until they chose to emerge of their own accord. When they finally did he appeared with alacrity. He took in their condition and drew his own conclusions.

"Mylady." A small bow to Evadne.

"Councillor . . ."

Sander chuckled and glanced at Evadne. "There will be changes," he told Keran. "We have decided that the status quo is . . . inadequate. Councillors will go.

Along with a lot of other offices and institutions.”

Keran nodded, unsurprised. “A lot of people will be disturbed at such alterations.”

“They will have to live with disappointment,” Evadne said firmly.

“A daunting task, Mylady” Keran noted.

Evadne looked at Sander. “We are in complete agreement.”

Keran grinned. “I doubt it not.”

“But not today,” Sander told him. “However, some changes have to be immediate. I’ve been told that you have made an inventory of the dungeons’ inmates and released the great majority of them.”

“Those that remain are proven murderers,” Keran said. “We’ve also added a few. Some of Silas’ . . . employees . . . exhibited violent tendencies after the sudden reversal of affairs. Those that weren’t killed were incarcerated. The same applies to a number of the former guards. All of them have now been set to work on improving the very conditions under which they are being held. The element of self-interest is proving to be highly conducive to their cooperation.”

Sander chuckled. “They deserve worse than they’re getting.”

“Indeed.”

“What about the other aspirants to the throne?”

Keran shrugged. “They are plotting, no doubt. The Tanarist branch in particular is promoting their claims with vigor. Firm action may prove necessary.”

Sander and Evadne looked at each other.

“I don’t want to rule Tergan,” she said.

Sander chuckled. “And I didn’t want to be who I am—and Keran doesn’t want to be your chancellor. What a bunch of misfits indeed!” He turned serious. “We must all do what has to be done—at least for a time. Keran, we need you where you are, because we trust you. Evadne, though you may not want it, but the throne will have to be yours for the time being.”

“And what of you?” she inquired.

“What of me?”

“If I’m to rule Tergan then you will have to be my consort. More than that. Though you may not be called ‘king,’ you may have to act like you were. This is *your* lot.”

She laughed at his grim face and hooked her arm under this.

“Come—surely there are worse fates than this.”

Sander laughed and, despite Keran’s presence, kissed her.

“For a while,” he said. He turned to the unwilling chancellor. “Keran, a matter of importance presses upon us. Armist of Keaen faces a revolt, and our former king would have it fostered to advance his own claims. This policy will now be reversed. We will assist Armist and help to put down the Tegel’s revolt. Organize a regiment. They are to set off for Sansker tomorrow. Armist may need their help, and if he does, we shall be there.”

Keran smiled. “Tergan helping Keaen? Change is afoot indeed!”

Evadne laughed. “Wait till you hear the rest!”

Keran raised his hands. “I’m not certain I want to. Not right now at any rate. I’m just a simple man and my head already buzzes from the things I know. To add yet more . . . I’m not certain it would all fit in.”

Evadne laughed and dismissed him. Keran departed with an air of relief.

“You frightened him,” Sander said.

“If what you told me is true,” she replied, “this is nothing compared to what lies in wait for all of us. This . . . ship . . . waiting on the other side of Caravella . . . once it becomes known that it is there . . .”

Sander shook his head. “The knowledge would be futile. The ship cannot be reached without a landing craft.”

“What is that?”

“A smaller ship. Think of it as a boat, intended to ferry people to and from a ship anchored offshore. There must have been not only one but several. But when they were done, the founders probably sunk them into the oceans. Or maybe they buried them somewhere—though of course if they wanted to make sure they’d never be found the ocean would have been a much better place. On the other hand . . .” He hesitated.

“What?”

“If they really wanted to burn all their bridges, why didn’t they destroy the mother ship as well? Why not plunge it into Caravella and have it all over and done with?”

“You mean . . . maybe there *is* such a boat somewhere?” Evadne suggested.

“Who knows?”

The Rakist

by Chuck King

Once upon a time there was a boy named Tommy who hated yardwork. His parents, alas, were woefully insensitive to his position, and regularly afflicted him with mowing, raking, and weeding assignments. Tommy was especially annoyed by the way that he always seemed to be saddled with the drudgery while the exciting jobs, such as hedge trimming and tilling (jobs involving power tools), always seemed to fall to his father. The one time he had been allowed to trim the bushes, his father had made him use the manual shears instead of the electric clippers.

Of all outdoor chores, Tommy found raking the most odious. He considered it tedious and pointless. His parents made him do it anyway.

"Tommy, go rake the front yard," his mother would say.

"Most of the leaves are still on the trees," Tommy would say. "Why don't we wait till they all fall off, and rake them all at once?"

"No, I don't think so. The yard looks terrible. The Cavanaughs keep their yard clear. If we don't rake, the leaves will blow from our yard into the Cavanaughs' yard."

"Who cares? It's not natural to rake leaves," Tommy reasoned. "In nature, they just lie on the ground. They just turn into dirt if we leave them there. It's better for the lawn."

"No, it's not. If we left them there, they would kill the grass. Now, go."

"We should get a riding mower so I could drive it around and suck them all up. It takes way too long to mow the lawn, too."

"Mmm hmm," said his mother; she was no longer listening to him. This is how most of these encounters went.

One day, Tommy's mother told him to go rake the leaves again. "I hate raking leaves," he said. "Why don't we move somewhere with no trees in the yard?"

"You're making this hard on yourself," said his mother. "You tell yourself how much you hate it, and then it seems to take forever because you keep telling yourself how much you hate it. You should try to make

a game out of it. Go out there and try to become the best leaf raker in the world."

"That's easy for you to say," muttered Tommy under his breath.

Tommy went outside and began raking, thinking grim thoughts. He glared at his nemesis, a looming old oak tree. In addition to an infinitude of leaves the tree dropped acorns, which he was periodically required to pick up by hand. They showed an annoying resistance to raking.

"I'm probably already the best leaf raker in the world," said Tommy to himself, "I've raked so many leaves."

Suddenly, a hunched-over man in a tall black hat stepped out from behind a bush. "Marvellous!" he said, his long sausage-like nose quivering. "I've been looking all over for a truly great raker of leaves!" And with that he picked up Tommy, put him in a sack, and took him away.

Eventually the strange man took Tommy out of the sack. The first thing Tommy saw was a huge mansion, with the biggest yard he had ever seen. The yard was full of trees, and *covered* with leaves. When the man put him down, Tommy sank in up to his knees.

"As you can see," said the Groundskeeper (as Tommy later learned he was known), "we are in dire need of great leaf rakers here. But with a rakist of your caliber on the job, I have no doubt that the situation will be under control in no time."

"But there's a zillion leaves here!" cried Tommy. "And I hate raking leaves!"

"Well, that is too bad," said the Groundskeeper in his whistling voice. "Now, come this way. I'll show you to the Leaf Rakers' Barracks, and introduce you to Chief Rakist Snopes."

So, Tommy was assigned a bunk in the Leaf Rakers' Barracks, and became a member of the Leaf Raking Corps. Chief Rakist Snopes turned out to be an extremely languid individual, who appeared to spend most of his time watching TV. In the morning, he would assign Tommy and the other members of the Corps to this or that section of the yard, and every day, as the rakers were setting out, he would say the same thing: "Remember, no lunch until you're finished."

On his first day with the Leaf Raking Corps Tommy approached his task with little enthusiasm. The other

members of the corps didn't seem to be much more excited about it than he was. But as the morning wore on he began to get hungry, and worked with slightly more vigor. He noticed that the prospect of lunch did not appear to excite his fellow Corps members. Finally they finished their assigned section.

The Groundskeeper and Chief Rakist Snopes came out to inspect their work. "This is clearly not acceptable," the Groundskeeper declared. "It will have to be done all over again. Look at all these leaves you have missed!" They had in fact missed a lot of leaves, Tommy saw. "We had prepared such a lovely lunch for you," the Groundskeeper went on sadly: "french fries and shish kabobs, with banana popsicles for dessert. But of course, we cannot reward such shoddy work. No, I'm afraid it will have to be cauliflower again. Snopes!"

"Yes?" said Chief Rakist Snopes.

"Your rakers lack motivation. Even the threat of cauliflower for lunch does not appear to have any effect on them."

"I exhort them every day to work with greater industry," said Snopes in a bored voice, "but my words fall on deaf ears."

So, Tommy and the Corps had to re-rake their section of the yard, and as the Groundskeeper had said, they got nothing but boiled cauliflower for lunch. Tommy was not happy with this state of affairs. Nor was he happy the next day when the same thing happened and, instead of the intended lunch of pepperoni pizza and ice cream, the Corps got only raw turnips.

The following day, as the Corps was setting out, Tommy said to one of his fellow rakers, a boy named George, "Boy, I'd sure like to get the good lunch today."

"We never get the good lunch," said the George. "The Groundskeeper is never happy with the work."

"Well, we didn't do a very good job yesterday," said Tommy.

"That's the best we know how to do," said George.

"Well, I can do better than that," said Tommy. Maybe I really am the best leaf raker in the world, he thought. "I'll show you."

That day, Tommy and George worked together in one corner of the Corps' assigned area, and it was very well raked. When the Groundskeeper showed up, he again decried the poor raking job, but added, "except

for this part here. This is more like what we had in mind. Who raked this corner?"

"Me and George," said Tommy.

"Congratulations on a job well done!" said the Groundskeeper. "You two shall have cheeseburgers and rootbeer floats for lunch. The rest of you must re-rake the rest of this section, and you shall have lima beans."

So Tommy and George got to go back to the barracks, where they had big juicy cheeseburgers (with lots of pickles and catsup) and tall, frosty rootbeer floats for lunch. Then they got to watch TV with Chief Rakist Snopes until the rest of the Corps straggled back and ate their dismal lunch of lima beans. The other rakers were quick to ask Tommy and George how they had managed to rake well enough to get the good lunch. "It's easy," said Tommy. "I'll show you tomorrow."

The next day the other members of the Leaf Raking Corps were taught Tommy's techniques for effective leaf raking, and the whole section was well raked. When the Groundskeeper came to inspect it, he was so happy he danced a little jig. "This is what we had in mind all along," he said. "What has brought about this remarkable improvement?"

"Tommy has shown us bold new ways of raking leaves," said the other rakers.

"Fabulous! Tommy, you really are the greatest leaf raker in the world!" said the Groundskeeper. "Snopes!"

"Yes?" said Chief Rakist Snopes.

"Your inadequacy and incompetence have been revealed," said the Groundskeeper. "You are henceforth reassigned to the Weed Pulling Corps. From now on," he said to the rakers, "Tommy shall be Chief Rakist. However, he will not be allowed to sit and watch TV all day." To Tommy he added, "I suspect that Snopes' predilection for talk shows was responsible for his lax management style."

That day the entire Corps feasted on chili dogs, corn on the cob and red Hawaiian punch.

With Tommy installed as Chief Rakist the Leaf Raking Corps prospered, surpassing the Lawn Mowing Corps and the Hedge Trimming Corps in the weekly achievement points competition. Every day the rakers feasted on more and more delicious lunches, with more and more extravagant desserts. Everyone agreed that

Tommy was the best Chief Rakist the Corps had ever had.

One day, as the rakers were taking a break and jumping into a huge pile of leaves they had assembled, the Groundskeeper appeared and called Tommy aside.

"Tommy," he said, "your Leaf Raking Corps has done a remarkable job in these past months, and today for lunch you shall have spaghetti and meatballs, nachos with cheese and hot fudge sundaes for dessert. I am afraid, however, that I have some bad news. The house has been sold. It will be turned in to a vacation resort, and this yard will go for parking and tennis courts. Consequently, there will be no more need for the services of the Leaf Raking Corps. After today's raking, you will be returned to your previous employment."

So, the Leaf Raking Corps enjoyed one final lunch. The Groundskeeper then returned Tommy to his own front yard. Although he had been Chief Rakist for seven and a half months, the Groundskeeper brought him back to the exact moment he had left.

The yard still needed to be raked. As Tommy looked around now, however, it seemed smaller than he remembered it, and the leaves much less dense than he recalled. What was this small yard with only two trees to an ex-Chief Rakist, who had raked huge piles of leaves out of a veritable forest? Tommy quickly had the yard raked as clean as a whistle.

"Thank you for raking the yard for me," said his mother. "It looks very nice. Now, go wash up. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes."

"What are we having?" asked Tommy.

"Liver and onions," said his mom.

Yecch, thought Tommy.

The next day was windy and when Tommy got home from school his yard was covered with leaves again. His mother asked him to rake the yard. "I know you did it yesterday, but it looks so terrible," she said.

"What are we having for dinner?" Tommy asked.

"Cream of mushroom and tuna casserole," she said.

"I hate that," said Tommy. "Why don't we have pizza and ice cream?"

"Don't be silly," said his mother.

Tommy went out to rake the yard, thinking grim thoughts. As he worked, it became apparent to him that the old rake he was using was just not doing the job. His father drove up while he was working. "Hey,

big fella!" he said. "How's it going?"

"We need a new rake," said Tommy. "This one's a piece of junk. Can we go to the hardware store?"

"Oh, that rake's just fine," said his father. "Just put your back into it. It'll get up the leaves."

"It would be a lot easier if we had a better rake," said Tommy.

"That rake's just fine," repeated his father. The subject had ceased to interest him. "Now hurry up. Dinner will be ready soon."

Tommy continued to think grim thoughts. A lot you know about how good this rake is, thought Tommy, you never use it. The Leaf Raking Corps would have laughed at a rake like this. Still, even with the sub-standard rake, Tommy did an excellent job raking the yard. His mood did not improve when he sat down to his meal of mushroom and tuna casserole.

The next week Tommy sprained an ankle playing soccer and was reduced to hobbling around on crutches. The trees did not wait for him, however, but dropped leaves on the yard with their usual aplomb. Faced with a yard full of leaves and their designated leaf raker out of action, Tommy's parents dispatched his little sister Patty to rake the yard. "She's old enough to start doing a few chores," they said to each other.

Tommy sat by a window and watched Patty struggle with the leaves. Her raking was spotty. She missed patches. She raked into the wind, and leaves blew back over the area she had just raked. He pitied his sister for the dressing-down she would doubtless receive from their parents. But when she came in, declaring the job finished, their parents bubbled over with praise. "Wow, Patty, you raked the whole yard! That's great! You sure are a big girl."

Tommy felt as though he had been slapped. All this time, he thought, they've been pushing me to work harder and longer, and I thought they wanted a good job done. But now bratty Patty goes out and does a crappy job, and they talk about how great it is. I could do a better job with one hand tied behind my back and my eyes closed. They don't care about the yard. They just want me to work and slave!

From that point on, Tommy refused to rake the yard. No amount of cajoling or threats would get him to pick up a rake. "You think Patty does such a good job," he would snarl, "get her to do it. I had to rake the yard when I was her age."

"Young man, if you don't get out there and start raking, you'll be grounded for a week," his father said.

"I don't care!" Tommy cried.

He later offered to rake the yard if his mother would fix cheeseburgers and rootbeer floats for dinner, but this offer was rejected.

So, most of the time Tommy just sat in his room, remembering his time with the Leaf Raking Corps and occasionally watching as Patty struggled to pick up leaves with the decrepit old rake. From time to time he tried to give Patty tips on more effective leaf raking, but she just told him to shut up, that it was his fault she had to rake the yard at all.

For years afterward, Tommy's parents would sometimes come home and find the yard raked, clean as a whistle. Circumstances pointed to Tommy, but no one could imagine that he was responsible, given his apparent hatred of raking. Still, someone had been there. Someone with the skills of a Chief Rakist.

Wings of Iron

By Kenneth L. Roberts

Chapter 1

Excerpt from the Valdai entry in Hoveden's "Atlas of the Inhabited Worlds":

. . . 35% larger than Earth, but with comparable gravity, attributable to its lower density. Valdai is perhaps the least well known of the "Water Worlds." Most of the population, a polyethnic mix of Terrestrial and Eridanean origins, settled on the continental islands of Kerken and Damavand.

Already far removed from trade routes, early attempts to export bioengineered lifeforms and pharmaceuticals were ultimately abandoned in the face of violent storm systems, deadly native organisms and an extreme scarcity of key resources, especially metals.

Following the Attenesian League Wars, contact with Valdai, which had always been tenuous, lapsed altogether, and the fate of its populace is at present unknown. Because of the unusual severity of the environment and the many obstacles to maintaining advanced technologies, it has been speculated that Valdai is no longer inhabited.

See links at: *Extrasolar Emigration, Legate Consortium, Lost and Abandoned Worlds, Attenesian League Wars, Water Worlds.*



Atakora, Kerken
1506

Crim lived by night, in a mothwing world of blurry shadows and soft, melting pools of gray and blue. Though others would have found it somber and eerie, the nightworld was his sanctuary, his place of comfort and advantage.

Comfort because he was nightsighted, and for him the hours of daylight were excruciating, everything etched in a radiance so blaring that even a glimpse

drove agonizing nails of pain into the back of his skull. Advantage because nothing in the night could hide from him for long, not if he wanted to find it badly enough.

So twilight and darkness were all he knew, and they were all he wanted to know. He had no more desire for a greater intimacy with the harsh excesses of the day than an ordinary child has for the dank intimacies of the night. Indeed, darkness more than sufficed: it fed sumptuously his lust for sensation. Night after night, for as long as he could remember, he had trawled the shadowed streets of Atakora for whatever they might be worth, so that in the course of his few years he had already absorbed nearly every sight and sound the ancient, decaying port city could offer. The ramshackle quays of Scythe Bay, smelling of salt and wet wood; the adjacent alleymaze; the warehouses and whorehouses; the men, women, children and vermin that lived and died in reef-rich profusion everywhere he looked—these were the things that absorbed his meager energies.

All of them.

Competing with everyone, allied to no one, his life was cruelly hard. The desperate business of obtaining the necessities of life posed new challenges every day, challenges that he had to meet without fail. For to fail was to curl into a gray, fetal ragball of exhaustion and discouragement, and to die. Regardless of the advantage his nightsight conferred, he could take nothing for granted.

Nothing, except hunger. Though his soul was well-nourished, his body was not.

There were rare interludes of relative ease, however. One spring night found him sitting at a corner of a crumbling rooftop, a rooftop surmounted by the massive, brooding stone head of some long-forgotten monarch. From here he was able to watch the dogs and ships and sailors below at his leisure. The smooth, sunbaked tiles beneath him were still warm, and so was the sedating caress of the breeze that blew in off the bay. Earlier he had even found half an *ovo* to eat without really working at it—he had seen a merchant captain drop the enormous egg in the sucking mud that always engulfed the streets after a downpour—and his rooftop rainbarrel nearby was half full, too. So for the moment there was nothing of any large importance to do. Idleness, he discovered, was a very strange sensation, but an extremely pleasant one.

As in all of the other Kerkenese cities, few in sprawling, chaotic Atakora had any compassion to spare for the jostling humanity that thronged its narrow, convoluted avenues. From the perspective of the larger events that occurred there, Crim's rare moment of repose counted for just as little as his most desperate exertions. Yet in the very indifference of the city there was room for everything. He saw skinny, rib-tented dogs running in a pack, snuffling the rotting alleyway refuse, chasing wharf peckets and mauling them until nothing remained of the disgusting scavengers but sappy fragments. In the distance ships were rocking hypnotically at their moorings, their masts like tall, wooden metronomes, beating out the lazy heart-rhythm of a world. And sailors, all knees and hips, were occupied with women in the usual way in the starkly revelatory rooms across the alleyway—starkly revelatory to his eyes, at least.

Crim was puzzled by their sweaty exertions: although the sailors were very busy, he couldn't fathom their purpose. At the end of their frenzied efforts they often made strangled sounds of pain and collapsed, spent, to drift off into a deep-winding coma of sleep. He thought he wouldn't like to be a sailor if this strange practice of self-torment was required of a seaman.

But then, perhaps it wasn't. Other sailors were al-

most equally absorbed instead in a game, tossing about small colored rocks. And yet here was a mystery of equal proportions. When the game was over one of the sailors quickly took all the money, and many of the other sailors swore, their faces like furnaces, congested with blood. How could there be any fun in a game that made everyone mad?

Crim had found that, eventually, the streets of Atakora explained everything, but not to the impatient. His attention drifted to a scab, clinging like a chip of bark to his bony knee. It was old, and had separated from his skin at the edges. He amused himself for a while by picking at it, breaking off little pieces at the edge and rolling them between his fingers, enjoying their disintegration. The new, puckered flesh that appeared beneath the scab was as soft and pink-white as a flower petal, and his probing touch provoked a strange sensation that was half pain, half pleasurable ache.

A door suddenly slammed hard in the murky darkness of the alleyway below him. Crim peered cautiously over the edge of the rooftop, and saw the sailor who had taken the money stride hurriedly down the alleyway and on toward the quays, where the masts of the ships swayed so languorously.

A few moments later three other sailors appeared, moving briskly but quietly, their faces tense with purpose. Crim soon realized that they were following the first man. Sensing that violence was imminent, he clambered almost to the ear of the stone head on the peak of his rooftop in order to afford himself an unobstructed view.

It was all over surprisingly quickly, the furious violence of their assault absurdly disproportionate to the time it required.

The three sailors moved stealthily to within a few feet of their intended victim, then rushed him. One sailor held his arms while another disemboweled him. Crim heard a faint, sickening scream of agony, and saw the sailors retrieve their money from a small draw-purse. In utter silence they dragged the half-gutted corpse to the nearest dock and heaved it into the sea. A distant splash, like that of a coin plunging to the depths of a well, reached him.

Crim's heart beat wildly to the utter finality of the sound. His hands shook. His legs felt wobbly and nerveless.



In the short span of his existence he had often seen violence, flaring like summer lightning, suddenly illuminating men's crueler passions. He had also known it much more intimately at the hands of other boys, and even more at the hands of adults. But he had never seen a man's bowels spill loose from his belly, nor had he known how easily a man could die. It was such a frighteningly trivial thing, like breaking a stick over your knee just to hear it snap.

Hot tears suddenly coursed down his cheeks, and he choked back a sob, fearing he would be heard. What should he do?

Was there even anything he *could* do?

The Kytheran Guard seldom came to this part of the city by night, except to patrol for smugglers, and, for that matter, were rarely seen by day except in the company of the tax collectors. He wasn't at all certain they would care to learn what he could tell them. The plunging sense that terrible things could happen and that no one would even care left him feeling cold and empty, cut adrift in the currents of a dangerous and turbulent humanity.

Truly, there was room for everything in the indifference of Atakora.

Crim sat silently on the rooftop for a long time, at first staring into the indigo depths of the sky, then at the dock where the dead man floated, then at the sky again. Uprooted from what little sense of security he possessed, confused ideas flitted through his mind like birds loosed in a small room. Memories of his mother welled up and, as suddenly, disappeared, fading echoes of a bond forever severed. He imagined telling his friends what he had seen, but then sensed that so foolish a confessional might well be enough to invite his own death.

But by degrees, a morbid curiosity gripped him, displacing his anxiety. Who was the dead man, anyway? What did he look like now? Might there not be some money left, and wouldn't someone else steal it? There might even be a dagger he could make his own. It occurred to him that he should go down and search the body before others could, but fear and horror made him shrink from acting.

Perhaps the man wasn't really dead? Perhaps his ghost would seek vengeance?

He had heard many such stories and credited them all, even the wildest. But time came and passed, and

still more time came and passed, and nothing else happened, other than what happened every night in Atakora.

Crim decided to go and look.

He lowered his knotted rope ladder into the darkest of the alleyways and clambered quietly down. Once at the bottom he grasped a much finer length of twine that he had tied to the heavier rope, and threw the latter back up onto the first-story roof. The twine he concealed behind a rain gutter. He listened carefully for dogs, which were always hungry and often vicious; but, hearing nothing, he set out.

Crim moved with feral caution, fearing the return of the three brutal sailors. Yet even so, he soon found himself on the beach adjoining the dock, where he could hear the labored creaking of timber and the slow, recurrent lapping of waves. Had he not been night-sighted, nothing beneath the quays could have been seen. But as it was, everything was painted in soft, felty strokes of gray—and it was there that he saw the man.

The dead sailor was drifting among long, glutinous strands of seaweed, face down, rising and falling in a kind of stately dance amidst the waves.

Nearer. Farther.

Nearer.

Hesitantly, Crim approached. Now he could see that some of the seaweed wasn't really seaweed at all, but rather ropy lengths of viscera, and that there was already something at work, something scavenging energetically, churning the sea.

Crim's nerve completely collapsed. He ran stumbling up a sandy embankment, his mind numb with shock, and made his way back to his rooftop where he laid awake for hours, staring at the stars that wheeled slowly across the sky, like frost clouding a glass pane. As it grew colder, he pulled a strip of dirty sail from beneath the old boards that sheltered it from rain, drew its damp coarseness around himself, and finally slept a fitful sleep.

And that wasn't so very unusual, for fitfully was how sleep passed more often than not on Valdai.

Life was hard everywhere.

In the weeks, and then months, that followed the murder Crim had witnessed, the weather turned ever warmer. Nights sometimes felt clammy as huge cumulus clouds bloomed far out over the Acigol Ocean, grew

dark and gravid and swept Atakora half the day with big, warm raindrops. But most of the time slow, evening breezes still reprieved the city from becoming the steaming oven that it would be by midsummer, when nearly the entire populace would lay awake, too hot to rest, too exhausted to rise.

On this particular night Crim was hungry, so desperately, grindingly hungry that his skinny arms and legs periodically quivered. Two days earlier he had already been ravenous enough to eat some sour, stinking garbage he had found behind an inn. But it had made him so sick that he had gagged up a thin, acid slurry of vomit for hours, and his bowels had churned painfully on and off ever since.

Now he was on the roofs again, watching a dormer — a kitchen window, or at least that was his hope. Wavering yellow lamplight was visible from within, and voices could be heard, so there was nothing to be done yet. But Crim could be patient: just now he had few other resources and too little strength to go anywhere else.

Though he tried hard to listen to what was said inside, he was unable to make out more than an occasional blurry phrase. All he could gather was that there were several men present and at least one old woman. He hoped that some of the men were guests and would soon depart. There wasn't much law in this part of the city, except for the costly protection some merchants and warehousemen purchased from the Kytheran Guard. And there was still less mercy. If he were caught, justice, or what passed for it, would be swift.

Crim eyed the window frame fixedly: a thin blade of dense, amber light was etched against the roof just below the frame, suggesting that it wasn't latched shut.

Hours passed. His universe contracted to that casement, to that so-promising blade of light. In the end, through fevered weakness and exhaustion, he fell asleep.

When he awoke, he discovered that Oren, the smaller of the two moons, had risen bright as molten copper behind thin, windblown clouds that alternately veiled and revealed her. Crim tilted his head back, trying to ease away the stiffness that had clamped cruelly into the muscles of his neck, then rose to his hands and knees and edged up in an agony of caution to the window. Peering within, he could make out very

little apart from a counter top, and so waited until Oren reappeared. In the newly moonlit tableaux within he was just able to see an ice-locker and, possibly, a pantry door. His mouth instantly watered, and he swallowed hard.

The window hinges were fashioned of leather, and looked to be none too supple. This was bad. He knew everything there was to know about hinges and the sounds they could be expected to make. When windows were opened, old leather often creaked its age. Still, it had to be tried. He was already so weak he couldn't even be certain he could let himself down without falling.

He waited until the moon disappeared again behind the cloudwrack, and then quickly yanked the window open. As he anticipated, the stiffened leather squealed in protest. Crim froze, his heart leaping in his chest.

But there was no sound from within, though he listened silently for some time.

Hunger drove him on against fear of discovery. After carefully surveying the area within again, he backed up to the casement and let down first one skinny leg and then the other onto a wooden counter. It seemed the counter legs were only a little less wobbly than his own: there were more squeaks and scraping noises as he shifted his weight down and off of his chest and forearms.

And as his full weight settled on the counter top there was another loud, rattling creak.

His body locked in terror once again.

Surely someone had heard *that*. His better judgment told him to flee, that his actions bordered on insanity, that he could be killed where he stood. Still, as time passed and no one appeared, cautionary thoughts were to no avail. He was now within reach of the ice-locker and only a few short strides away from what he had decided really was a pantry. If someone did come, he would surely hear them, and he could bounce up and out of the window in moments.

He eased himself onto the floor as quietly as possible, then stopped to listen carefully. Though his hearing was nearly as acute as his vision, he detected nothing apart from some very faint, rhythmic snoring.

Hardly daring to breathe, Crim crossed to the ice-locker, eased it open, and greedily snatched the thick glass bottle half full of cold milk that stood within. Puncturing the protective paper cap with one thumb,

he immediately gulped the cool contents down, hardly believing his luck. As he further scrutinized the contents of the locker, part of a smoked joint of meat riveted his attention. He had just picked it up when a brisk gust of wind clapped the window sharply against its casement. The rhythmic snoring suddenly ceased, to be replaced by fretful muttering. Someone was waking up!

Terror at first immobilized him, then dropped into the pit of his stomach with the weight of a stone. Regaining mastery of himself with a desperate effort, Crim leaped to the counter, but one of its legs gave way abruptly under the load, and it collapsed with a bang.

He spilled onto the floor, regained his feet, and jumped high enough to get his hands on the lowest part of the sill. But, to his dismay, he found he quite simply lacked the strength to pull himself up.

The boy looked around frantically, spotted a chair.

But it was already too late. There was someone in the room with him!

Crim held very, very still, aware that he probably couldn't be seen, but sick with fear nonetheless. Peering slowly back over his shoulder he could just make out a short, broad silhouette, could hear the slightly raspy breathing of congested lungs, could smell alcohol.

Neither of them moved. As wires of anxiety tightened around his soul, time went liquid, poured through him hot and surreal, a feverdream of hyperacuity punctuated by the frenzied clenching of his heart.

Crim's grip weakened and he fell to the floor just as the moon emerged from the clouds. An old woman's voice cried out lustily: "Dakin! Dakin, be quick! We've a thief! Dakin!" She groped her way along one wall to a whiskery black broom that she quickly brandished.

"Dakin! Damn you! Up now! Get up!"

She advanced on Crim crabwise.

He crawled into the pitchy shadows.

A disgruntled mumbling could be heard from somewhere in the other rooms of the place. "What's it? What's it now, Wilsie?"

"Are you deaf, man? It's a thief! Be quick now!"

Crim saw that his only chance was to slip behind the woman and through the doorway by which she had entered. He had made it most of the way there when he heard the sound of a match being struck. A dim, flickering light appeared behind the woman and cast

her wavering, inky shadow monstrously before her across the wooden floor. Spotting Crim, she cawed with anger or triumph and buffeted him sideways with the broom. Crim grunted with pain as his head thudded into the wall, but he was still able to scramble through the doorway on hands and knees.

Just as he was getting to his feet, the woman side-swiped him again and he fell against the wall. Before he could recover, an enormous hand clamped around his upper arm.

"What's this here?" a masculine voice suddenly boomed, nearly in his ear. "Well, would you look at this, Wilsie? A skinny little raggermuffin. Well, well."

A third voice spilled from the rooms within. "What's all the yammerin', Dakin? Can you not let a man sleep?"

Crim looked up to see an astonishingly obese man with a sprouting black beard glaring down at him.

"We got ourselves a little thief here, Hanlil. Just get yerself up out of bed now and come have a good look."

"Eh? A thief, is it?"

"I'm no thief!" Crim protested, angry despite his fear and hunger.

The woman made a coarse sound. "Not a thief! What's that in yer pants, then? It an' yer thing, that's certain!"

Crim looked at his pants. There was a sizable lump in one pocket.

The bearded man shook him hard, really angry for the first time. "What *is* that? Get it out, boy!"

Chagrined, Crim reached in and pulled out the joint of smoked meat, now covered with sand and lint.

The woman guffawed. "Want me to put it back in the locker, Dakin?"

The owner of the third voice appeared, a thin, balding man with a squashed lump of a nose. "Ah, Neva's balls, what's all the carkin' noise about? Just some starvin' street pecket. Look at him. Nothin' but eyes and bones. Throw him out and go back to bed."

Dakin started to hustle Crim off, but the woman held his other arm.

"Hold up here. Hold up here, you! There *is* somethin' funny 'bout his eyes. Hold up the lamp there, Dakin."

Crim tried to look away, but the woman shot out a gnarled claw and clutched his chin.

"Look at that! Just look now! See? He's moderfied! A carkin' *moderfied* roamin' the streets like some common bit a trash!"

Dakin frowned "She's right, Hanlil, just you have a look here. His pupils are shrunk down to pinpoints even in lamplight."

The thin man leaned closer, his face a moonscape of pockmarks and creases. "Hmm. Be damned if you aren't right for once, Wilsie." His eyes narrowed, crimping into an intense stare. "What's yer name, boy?"

Crim twisted his jaw free of the woman's painful grip. "Crim."

"Crim what?"

"I don't know. Just Crim."

Dakin shook his head in puzzlement, a movement that quaked his second chin. "Why he doesn't know his name? There's a story here, sure as death." He considered for a long moment, taking in Crim's tattered clothing, dirty face, and skeletal limbs. "Starvin' for sure. Still, an' no face from the streets. Got his start from somethin' better, that's certain. Could be a bastard maybe, fathered on a whore. *Maybe.*"

Hanlil pulled his disfigured nose, shook his head in disagreement. "From the streets, no, you're right Dake. But his mother's no whore. Listen to that court accent. He doesn't talk like any street scum. Where're yer parents, boy?"

Crim's face pinched. His father was just someone his mother had talked about. His mother . . . all Crim could remember clearly was her dying. And what did those words mean . . . bastard . . . whore?

Dakin shook him roughly. "You heard 'im, speak up now, where're yer *people?*"

"I don't know . . . they're dead—she's gone. Let me go, you're hurting my arm!" Suddenly, weak and terrified, Crim wanted to cry, but he stopped himself with desperate effort. You just didn't cry in front of others. Not ever, because they would call you names and then laugh at you, and beat you until the flavor of your own blood filled your mouth. His face slowly loosened, became expressionless as a board.

Dakin did lighten his grip then, just a little, and for the first time a flicker of something like pity passed across his bloated features as he weighed the likelihood of Crim's words. He looked across at Hanlil. "So you think he's from court? Maybe he lost his people on Black Turnsdays? All the retainers was hung . . ." He shrugged.

The thin man nodded slightly. "Could be. Could be.

As good as any, Dake." The three of them stood gawking at Crim as though he was some deep sea creature pulled up from the depths for the first time. He endured their convergent scrutiny silently. Finally Dakin said "What do you make of his eyes, Han?"

"Mmmm. Dark-adapted, I think. The Cerasus principate used 'em as spies and saboteurs sometimes. Nightcreepers, they were called in the old days, when there were more around. Never saw much of 'em, myself, or wanted to neither. They don't like daylight much, that's certain. See the corners of his eyes there? They've a black membrane that slides over the eyeball in brighter light. Gives 'em a queer sort of look altogether when you do see 'em by day. They seem like blind then, maybe, or . . . maybe just somewhere else the rest of us don't go—and wouldn't want to, neither." He addressed Crim. "Can you see in the dark, boy—Crim?"

Crim hesitated, then nodded.

Dakin grunted, much impressed with Hanlil's grasp of affairs.

"Hanny?" Wilsie nodded her head excitedly in the direction of the bedrooms.

"What's it, Wilsie?"

"Somethin's come to me."

Dakin shook his head. "Upp! She's *thinkin'*. We're in trouble now!"

"Go bugger yerself, Dakin! Careful you don't lose 'im, now. Come on, Han."

Dakin grinned hugely at Wilsie's annoyance, revealing the rotten stumps of teeth, and gaps where other teeth should have been.

Hanlil followed her into a small, disheveled bedroom and waited for her to light a sputtering candle.

"So?"

"We could *use* 'im, Hanny," she half-whispered wheedlingly.

"Use him! Wilsie, what gives you these brain cramps? If the Guard catches us with a Cerasus principate brat, it's our heads on a pike!"

"No, listen, Hanny, listen to me now. If ever they catch us it's our heads on a pike anyways. This boy, he can see in the dark. We'll put 'im up high, up high somewhere, see, and you can figure some way he can signal to us."

Hanlil folded his arms, frowned his face into a stubborn moue. "It's another mouth to feed, Wilsie, that's

what it really is, and what if he talks?"

"He an' gonta do no talkin', Hanny. We caught 'im breakin' in. Everybody knows that's yer hands, or worse. And, listen to yerself. He's Cerasus princerpate. Who's he gonta talk to? And eat? How much he gonta eat? He's only so big around as a straw. If he sheds the Guard once even, he's paid for 'imself twice over."

The logic of this slowly forced itself upon Hanlil, but he was reluctant to admit it, particularly since, as the leader of the little group, he felt he should have thought of it himself.

"Mmm. Hmm. Well, there's *some*thin'. Lock him in the storeroom for tonight. I'll talk it by tomorrow with Dakin."

Wilsie nodded emphatically. "I'll do it. Yer a smart one, Hanlil, I always say."

"Yalah, you always say, but I didn't make no promise."

"Well, you talk it by, you talk it by. You'll know what's best. You always do, Hanny. Yer a smart one."

Following a few confusing words of explanation and a descent down a narrow stairwell, Crim found himself in a tiny room on the floor below that was packed with an odd miscellany of equipment and a great pile of roughly-woven bags smelling strongly of earth and starch. He thought they must be full of cassava root—he had seen such stores once or twice before, hoarded against the times of scarcity.

After the door was closed on him, the room was submerged in darkness and rather pleasantly cool. Crim sank to the floor and rested his head against a lumpy sack of cassava. What would become of him now? It was an urgent question, but he was already exhausted, his belly was more full than it had been in a long time, and soon he fell into a deep, world-erasing sleep.

Crim awoke with a start, unable at first to remember where he was or how he had gotten there, but after a few moments the smell of the cassava recalled him to the events of the previous evening, and once again he began to wonder what would become of him.

Who were those three again?

Hanlil . . . Wilsie, and . . . oh, Dakin.

Crim decided he didn't like any of them, Wilsie least of all. If it hadn't been for her mouth, Dakin might've let him go. But not her. She'd gone in the other room

with that Hanlil, the man with the pocks and ugly nose, and then they'd said something about him staying and shoved him in here.

As Crim thought about the three, he suddenly remembered something Dakin had said, something about Black Turneday. And Hanlil had then said something about the Cerasus principate. Crim puzzled over their remarks until he became aware of two much more definite things: that he was hungry again, and that his bladder was full to the point of urgency. He was about to relieve himself in one corner when the door flew open and Wilsie appeared, her hair a wild, grey bramble, dressed in a drab brown garment as shapeless as she was. She squawked when she saw what he was about.

"Upp! We'll have none of that in there! Put that thing back in yer pants and come out here instant!"

Crim pulled up his trousers and reluctantly did as he was bid.

"Now then, I've some breakfas' for you. You eat—no, first you go do yer business in the pot, and then we'll have a nice little talk."

She took him to one of the small bedrooms—Crim noticed that the two men were nowhere in sight—and there he found the promised chamberpot. He came out when he was done, more than a little eager for the promised food, but Wilsie was mad again.

"D'you think *I'm* goin' to empty it, slackwit? Get the pot, boy—Crim—and throw it out that window!" She jerked her thumb to indicate which window she meant.

Now it was his turn to be mad. What a lot of fuss over nothing! Adults always seemed to want to have everything their way, and it seemed to Crim that they were forever getting upset over the littlest things. But his anger was stilled at the recollection of her promise of food. Maybe it was best just to go along with her.

He finally shrugged, then retrieved and emptied the pot, wondering if he should bolt out the door once he had eaten, but the thought was driven from his mind as Wilsie presented the promised food. This proved to be a little thin porridge with a bit of milk, but it was the best food he had had in weeks, and as much as his shrunken stomach could hold. When he finished, he polished his bowl carefully with his tongue, Wilsie looking at him with ill-concealed distaste the whole while, and then asked for more. The old woman shook her head.

"You'll never hold it . . . and it'll end on my kitchen floor, or I'm pregnant by a dog . . . I seen it a hunner' times. But if you listen good, maybe you'll get more later. *Maybe*.

"Now, first thing is, you're Cerasus princerpate." She squinted doubtfully at him through a net of crow's feet, as though she didn't believe her own statement.

Crim stared at her blankly for a moment. "What's that? Cerasus principate?"

"Well, that's . . . bice, don'tcha know *nothin'*? *Cerasus princerpate*, they're the rich people, they tell everyone what to . . . no, well, they *did* tell everyone, but then, then the Kytheran princerpate wanted it, and all their people was for them. So they killed . . . well, you know, they made a reverlution, so now *they* tell everyone what to do. See? And the Guard is theirs."

Crim puzzled over this baffling explanation, growing angry and stiff with frustration as it suggested so much and yet said so little. He finally frowned. "You mean . . ."

What could the tangle of words possibly mean?

Wilsie shook her head and tried again impatiently. "See, here it is, right on a plate. Now, the Cerasus princerpate, that's your people. And the Kytheran princerpate, that's the enemies of your people, and they killed your people, and they're the ones in charge now. See it?"

This was finally language Crim could understand, and it supplied a sickening perspective he had never had before. His father, then, had not simply died. He had been murdered.

For a moment the boy remembered the quayside murder he had seen earlier and his mind spun, first with shock and then with sudden, wheeling fury. His losses, his hunger, his misery now had an origin, and the origin a name: Kytheran principate.

Kytheran principate!

This, this he would never forget.

The Zael Inheritance

By Tim Stretton

Chapter 20

Lamarck awoke and for a moment he could not tell where he was. He heard a soft breathing next to him and he began to remember. Could this really have happened? Rolling his head sideways he saw Laura's on the pillow next to him. Evidently it could.

He looked at her sleeping face, her eyes under wraps behind the lids. With their vivacity shielded, her face seemed curiously vulnerable, and Lamarck felt a wave of protectiveness, a tenderness so overwhelming it was almost painful. It was with something of a shock that he realised that he had never felt like this about anyone. Why, when it happened, had it been with a 20-billion mark larceness? Whatever he felt was a luxury that he did not have the capital to finance. It was time to think of practical measures.

It seemed disingenuous to deny that he had genuine feelings for her, and the preceding few hours had been enchanting on their own terms; but extracting himself from the situation while retaining his job seemed to require a delicacy of touch he did not possess. If nothing else, he had learned that she really did keep her instanc gun up her skirt; but it seemed a small return for such an extravagant indiscretion.

He wondered, too, whether he had been suckered. He was no judge of women's behaviour and he did not feel confident of accurately assessing Laura's true feelings. His impression that they were genuine could easily enough be the product of his own desires and her manipulateness. Her conduct when she awoke would make it easier to form a definitive judgement on this, but if her aim had been to wean him ever further from his allegiance, then she had been almost totally successful. Whether he wanted it that way or not, his only route back to Pangalactic was through Laura. The sooner he accepted that and acted accordingly, the better.

Laura stirred next to him; Lamarck glanced at his watch and saw that it was past seven; he was rarely abed this late. She unmasked her deep blue eyes and smiled. Lamarck smiled back but found an appropriate

conversational gambit beyond him.

Leaning over and kissing him lightly she said, "Well . . ."

Lamarck deployed his most sardonic smile. "Well, indeed. This is hardly the course I imagined the investigation taking."

"Possibly not," she said. "But spontaneity is sometimes a good thing."

"I find it unlikely that Jaden Rolando will reason along those lines."

"Forget Pangalactic," Laura said softly. "Whether consciously or not you've chosen to believe me. That puts you and Pangalactic on opposite sides."

Lamarck sat up. "You think I believe you?"

"Oh yes. Last night would never have happened if you hadn't." And she kissed him again.

Lamarck untangled himself. "I have always thought—and maybe I shouldn't say this—that you were more honest than not. That doesn't mean I think you're Taslana Zael; but neither do I think you're responsible for the murders surrounding the case. I'd take a pretty big bet that you know where Taslana Zael is, though."

"I thought you already had," said Laura. "Now, I'm starving: time for breakfast." She touched the comlink to alert room service to her requirements.

Laura slipped into a dressing gown while Lamarck immersed himself in the cleansarium. He welcomed the opportunity; the cleansarium was the scene of much of his best thinking. He realised that Laura had been at least partly right: on at least one level he believed, not only in her fundamental honesty, but that she might even be Taslana. Given the irrefutable evidence against the proposition, that was absurd; but it did no harm to hint to Laura that it was so. He would never testify to it in court, and if she tried to blackmail him, well, it wouldn't work. He would admit all before it got to that stage. But somehow he didn't believe Laura was going to blackmail him.

Breakfast was a confection of rolls and cereals. Lamarck always functioned best after refuelling, and he began to look on matters from a more favourable angle. Laura seemed happier, more natural and relaxed, than he had known her. There had been a tension, a guardedness, about her previously which seemed wholly absent from her today. Indeed, she was sportive, jaunty and affectionate. Lamarck thought the best that he could do was to go with the tide of events. If Laura had

an outcome she was aiming for, let her go in that direction; the success of his strategy depended on being able to see through hers, and so far it remained largely opaque.

While Laura busied herself in the cleansarium after breakfast, Lamarck called the office and made a vague excuse that he would not be in that day. He was glad Voorhies was not around to take his call; he was confident that his unease would not be apparent to anyone else in the office.

"What next?" asked Laura when both were dressed and ready for the day.

"Ideally," said Lamarck, "you tell me some vital information, possibly critical enough to conclude the case on the spot. Then we spend the rest of the day enjoying each other's company in Mezzanotte City before stepping over to the Tower of Commerce and resolving any matters that have arisen from your revelations."

"Let's not go too fast," said Laura, lounging on the sofa. "Although our relationship has entered a new phase of harmony, there is still scope for dissension over the Zael Inheritance. Soon—maybe very soon—I might need to ask you to do something for me: but not now. Please don't press me any more yet."

Lamarck could hardly insist without undoing much of the concord they had established. He realised—and it was with something of an unfavourable shock—that he trusted her after all. He was glad that Voorhies was not around.

He took Laura's hand. "If that's how you want it, that's how it has to be. That isn't the same as saying I like it."

Laura seemed half pleased and half pensive. "Thank you," she said simply.

The conversation was interrupted by the insistent shrill of a klaxon. Outside the window came a distinctive electric blue tint of a force-field. Over the public address system came a message:

"THIS IS A SECURITY ALERT! THIS IS A SECURITY ALERT! THERE IS NO CAUSE FOR ALARM: HOWEVER, FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY YOU ARE REQUESTED TO REMAIN IN YOUR OWN ROOMS UNTIL THE ALERT IS OVER. I REPEAT, THERE IS NO CAUSE FOR ALARM!"

"I don't like this!" snapped Lamarck, pulling his pulse-gun from its concealed holster. "The force-field is up outside and we're trapped!"

"Is it to do with us?" asked Laura.

Lamarck shrugged. "Maybe. There is something strange about the external force-field being on: it's designed to protect the hotel's occupants from air or space-borne attack. It also very effectively pens us inside the hotel."

Lamarck disregarded the instructions and made for the door; it had been automatically locked. He blew half the door away with his pulse-gun. Then he hit the panic button on his personal comlink. Drones would be with them in minutes.

"I've got to get to the control centre and disable the force-field, otherwise the drones can't get in. Hide under the bed until I come back: it's undignified but as safe as anywhere."

Laura ran to her dressing table and scooped up the instanarc gun Lamarck had discovered the previous night, evidently the pair of the one which had inadvertently killed Maevert. "I feel safer on the move with this," she cried, "and you know I can shoot straight!"

"Follow me, then!" yelled Lamarck, taking off down the corridor. He knew that the airlift would be out of action so he heltered down the slippery stairs.

Coming round a tight bend he saw a dark-suited man bearing down on them. The man raised a weapon—it looked like a pulse-gun—and pointed it to the side of Lamarck in Laura's direction. Lamarck was an accurate shot and a rapid one: pulse-gun, arm and half a torso vanished before their owner could get off a shot.

The wounded man thrashed feebly on the floor. Lamarck would have liked him alive; but this was no time for taking risks. He angled his pulse-gun at the prone figure.

"Wait!" called Laura, and coolly discharged a bolt from her instanarc gun into the horizontal form. Lamarck gave her an approving nod and continued his progress down the stairs.

Reaching the landing above the foyer he raised his arm to indicate that Laura should hang back. Dropping to a crouch he carefully examined the scene below him for danger. Several bodies lay on the floor, all in Anastasia staff uniforms. Whether they had been shot by the man Lamarck had hit was uncertain; but there had to be other members of the team about.

Lamarck signalled to Laura to make sure that their rear was covered. This was no time to be taken by surprise.

A pulse bolt spattered into the banister beside them. Judging by the comparatively minor damage the bolt had done Lamarck deduced that it was at the limit of its range. That meant its origin was over towards the far side of the lobby. Lamarck pulled a square about three inches on a side out of his jacket. From this he pressed through a small disc about the size of a coin. Pushing a switch on this, he skimmed it across the lobby floor over to where he estimated the shot had come from. A detonation sounded loud in the confined space; a weapon skittered across the hard polished floor and a body slumped forward. Not for the first time Lamarck owed his life to the mini-stun grenade.

Was there be a second gunman in the foyer? Probably not, but Lamarck tossed another mini-stun away from the concussion field of the first to be sure. All seemed well. Beckoning to Laura to follow him, Lamarck descended the stairs in that scuttling gait known as the “manic crab”, intended to merge maximum speed of locomotion with minimum surface area.

Gaining the safety of the lobby Lamarck shoved Laura behind the main reception desk. Here her back was covered and she had a clear field of fire at anything in front or to the sides of her.

“Drop anything—anything except me—that moves,” commanded Lamarck. “I am going to deal with the force-field.”

As part of the numerous security operations Lamarck had conducted at the Anastasia, he had become very familiar with the layout and security systems of the hotel. He knew that the force-field control was located in the underground “bunker” next to the laundry. While not impregnable, it was easily defensible with only a small number of men. It was not a citadel which could be reduced with mini-stuns.

Lamarck vaulted down the stairs until he was in the corridor leading to the bunker. It was seemingly devoid of defence. Lamarck doubted that the attackers would have wasted too much of their strength down here when their objective was far away on the second floor. If their victims survived long enough to counter-attack things would already be looking bleak. It was surely not the attackers’ intention to hold the Anastasia in a prolonged battle.

Nonetheless Lamarck proceeded cautiously, pressing himself flat against the wall. Whoever was in the bunker would not be able to see his approach, since the bunker had not been designed with visibility in mind. It had been built to defend the people inside the hotel against the people outside.

Lamarck gained the door of the bunker. Outside was the access control panel. Lamarck smiled to himself. Whoever had planned this operation had clearly not realised that there would a glax present, or that he would know the command over-ride code. Lamarck entered the seven-digit number and waited. From inside a man dashed out into the corridor.

“Easy, friend,” said Lamarck calmly, his pulse-gun negligently pointed at the man’s torso. “Any more of you in there?”

In reply the man snarled and brought his pulse-gun up. Warily Lamarck stepped aside and blasted him down a fatal quarter-second before the gun could fix on the glax. Lamarck shook his head ruefully: the assassin’s ludicrous bravado had prevented a potentially useful witness falling into Pangalactic’s hands.

Lamarck casually lobbed a mini-stun into the bunker, pressing himself flat against the corridor wall to avoid the blast: it would be ironic to be knocked out by his own grenade. Entering the room he saw that the explosive had been wasted; the dead man had been the bunker’s only defender.

After switching the force-field off and securing the bunker once more, Lamarck returned to the foyer.

“Laura! Are you there?” he called.

“Oh, Geir!” she cried, running out from behind the desk and throwing herself into his arms. Lamarck embraced her as passionately as is possible with a pulse-gun in one hand and a bubble-card of mini-stuns in the other.

Laura made a series of comments rendered incoherent by her mouth being buried in Lamarck’s neck. Lamarck dropped the mini-stuns and stroked her hair. The colloquy was abruptly halted as a phalanx of armed glaxes bright in orange and blue armour entered the hall, with Apprehensor Voorhies at their head.

“Don’t even bother trying to explain this,” she said, flicking her faceplate up. “Just don’t even open your mouth.”

From behind her Rolando stepped into the lobby, his eyes a-glitter. “You’re fired, Lamarck. This time you

really have gone too far.”

Lamarck tucked the pulse-gun back away in its holster.

“You can’t do that,” he said. “You have to suspend me and hold a tribunal. Until then I’m still a glax.”

“A nice distinction,” said Rolando. “Very well: as of this moment you are suspended from duty pending an investigation of your grossly irregular conduct. The instant I return to the Tower your Pangalactic ident will be cancelled. Please hand over your weapon.”

Lamarck shrugged. “I don’t have to do that either. This is a privately and legally held pulse-gun. You can drop round to my apartment to collect the markedly inferior Pangalactic issue one if you like.”

Rolando was ominously calm. “Score all the captious minor victories you like, Lamarck. You will never carry a Pangalactic ident again.”

He turned on his heel and left the lobby, pausing as he did so only to say to Narosyn:

“Take the statements and report to me as soon as you’ve finished, Prime Apprehensor.”

Narosyn, no great admirer of Lamarck but taking no pleasure in this turn of events, merely nodded.

Lamarck spoke levelly to Narosyn: “Give us a moment, will you, Prime Apprehensor? We will be in Miss Glyde’s room.”

With that Lamarck took Laura’s arm as she moved unsteadily towards the stairs. Voorhies stood off to one side and Lamarck gave her a genial grin; Voorhies simply looked blank and shook her head. As Lamarck and Laura walked past she said, too softly for either to hear:

“What have you done? What have you done?”

Chapter 21

Lamarck and Laura were alone in her suite. The business of statement-giving was over and Lamarck, now suspended, was to all intents and purposes a private citizen. Narosyn had spoken to Lamarck in a suite adjoining Laura Glyde’s room: Voorhies had been present but cultivated an ostentatious distance from the proceedings. She had neither participated in the interview nor looked in Lamarck’s direction. Lamarck had given his statement with the cool terseness expected of a glax, and Narosyn had put his questions with a similar detachment.

Laura sat, subdued, on the sofa. Whether she was in shock from the morning’s violence or chastened at the outcome for Lamarck was outside his knowledge. Lamarck stood impassively by the window; even by his standards this constituted being in a scrape, and it would take unusual ingenuity to extricate himself.

His only hope, he realised, was to pursue the very course he had laid out initially. Only Laura Glyde offered any way into the case; and unless he could solve the case his chances of avoiding dismissal were minimal. Ironically, Rolando and Voorhies’s efforts to keep him away from Laura had driven him towards her; she was now his sole escape route—albeit a risky one.

Absorbed in his calculations, he had not noticed Laura quietly walking towards him. She slipped her arms around his waist as he watched the gaggle of orange and blue Pangalactic aircars fill up with glaxes and the two surviving assassins.

“Are you all right?” Laura asked.

Lamarck smiled with an effort. “I should be asking you that; you’re the one who’s survived an assassination attempt this morning—or so I assume; my problems are just debates between friends over procedure.”

Laura, standing behind Lamarck, laid her head on his shoulder. “I’m sorry that I’ve caused this . . .”

Lamarck reluctantly disengaged himself. “You have more pressing concerns,” he said with a less forced smile. “You had better tell me who wants you dead, and why. We were lucky this time; but it was a feeble effort, badly planned and badly executed. If I’m going to save us next time, you must tell me the truth.”

Laura sighed. Her deep blue eyes were dull. “You

will not believe me. You have not so far.”

“Try me,” said Lamarck. “If you really are sorry that I am going to lose my job over you, then you owe me some candour. Let’s start with who Laura Glyde really is.”

Laura sat down and looked away. After a distinct pause she shifted her gaze back towards Lamarck. “Laura Glyde was born Taslana Zael on Zael’s World twenty-five years ago,” she said steadily.

Seizing her wrist roughly, Lamarck snarled: “Don’t hack me about, girl. The time for that lie is past; if you don’t give it up you’re dead and I’m finished.”

With a movement of silken brutality he hauled her erect by the wrist and twisted her arm uncomfortably. “I am not one of those glaxes who beats the truth out of suspects; don’t make me start now.”

“Let go!” spat Laura. “You won’t hit me and we both know it.”

Lamarck slung her back towards the bed. “You have been holding something—maybe everything—back from the start. More than once you’ve nearly trusted me: if not now, when?”

Laura moved herself into a sitting position on the bed. “You are hardly acting in a manner likely to draw my confidences,” she said with a scornful expression. “I liked you better wheedling than bullying.”

Lamarck controlled himself with an effort. “If I am ‘bullying’ you, it’s because more rational approaches have failed. Can’t you see? We need each other. You might not like that; at the moment I can’t say I do either; but it’s the truth, and the sooner you realise it, the sooner we can resolve affairs to both our satisfactions.”

“Please, Geir,” she said quietly, “be patient with me a little longer. I understand that you are frustrated and I understand why. I don’t know what’s happening or why someone tried to kill me.”

“Listen to me, Laura,” said Lamarck as he sat down next to her, now restored to composure, “I am going back to wheedling, as you put it. No-one else is going to help you; Voorhies will let you stew: the more scared you are, the better for her. Somebody went to some trouble to try and kill you today; I’d bet that they’ll try again. Two of the assailants are in custody; I’m your best hope of staying alive until Narosyn works out who they are.”

Laura looked steadily at him for fully half a minute.

Finally she nodded. “I don’t know who is trying to do this, but there are things I haven’t told you, and there are things I don’t know myself. I do know how to get the answers, though.”

“Go on,” said Lamarck.

“You have to understand from the outset: I can’t tell you everything, although you will learn everything in the end; and there is a degree of risk to you if you do what I ask.”

With one finger under her jaw Lamarck turned her face to look directly at him. “You are asking me to buy a blind bet. You tell me to act on your instructions while keeping information back; and you tell me that finding out could get me killed. That doesn’t seem much of a deal.”

“It’s the best you will do,” she said. “If you want the truth about me—and the truth really isn’t so bad—and the truth about the Zael Inheritance, then it’s as simple as this: come with me to a location of my choosing whenever you like.”

Lamarck realised with complete certainty that this was what Laura had wanted from the outset, why she had slowly driven a wedge between him and Pangalactic.

“You’ve lied to me all along. Why should I believe any of this?” he asked, comparatively calmly.

“I haven’t lied as much as you think,” she said, “and if I was lying now I could have made the deal much more attractive: as you say, I’m offering you a blind bet and hoping you’ll trust me. Does that look like duplicity to you?”

Lamarck felt a curious fatalism; he had more faith in Laura than the evidence warranted, and he had the sense that he was meant to go wherever she wanted him to. It was not a decision he could justify in terms of Pangalactic procedure; but Rolando had made him an ordinary Chrysopolitan citizen, and that extra latitude he would use.

“I’ll do it. Where and when?”

“I need to make a call,” she said. “Then we will go, today if you like.”

“Go ahead. Make the call.”

“Not here,” she said. “I said there were some things I couldn’t tell you yet, and who I’m calling is one of them.”

Lamarck frowned. “Is it always going to be like this?”

“Geir, you’ve trusted me this far. Accept that this is necessary.”

Lamarck, who had had an idea, assented with the appearance of meekness. Laura, remarkably buoyant for one who had faced down pulse-bolts that morning, slipped gracefully from the room to make her call in the lobby.

As soon as she had gone, Lamarck pulled out his personal com and accessed Voorhies's code. It was Narosyn who answered.

"Prime Apprehensor! I take it you wanted to speak to Apprehensor Voorhies?"

Lamarck nodded.

"You can't, for two reasons: firstly, she has given instructions that she won't take your calls under any circumstances; secondly, Allaiiao Gazmend has arrived to demand a reckoning on the Zael case, and Rolando and Voorhies even at this moment try to convince him all is about to be solved. From his expression as he entered it appeared that Gazmend would take some convincing."

"If I can't speak to Voorhies, pass on a message at least, will you?"

"You are suspended," said Narosyn. "You can only compromise Kate—and me for that matter—by carrying on conversations while you are under investigation."

"I understand that," said Lamarck, "but this is about the Zael case, not about me. Get her to run a tap on all Laura Glyde's calls from the Anastasia this morning. I think it could crack the case."

Narosyn shook his head. "In candour, Geir, I don't know whose side you are on, and I'm sure Kate doesn't either. You've been sucked into I don't know what; we're not having the same happening to Kate."

"Pass the message on. Let Kate decide that."

Narosyn broke the connection. He was not, Lamarck knew, malicious or unjust. He would not withhold the message from perversity; but he could well do so from a misplaced sense of propriety.

Another idea came to Lamarck. Whatever he had committed himself to with Laura, he was best off going into it with as much information as he could gather. So reasoning, he entered Dr Nina Haecht's code.

Nina answered after a short delay.

"Geir," she said on recognising him, without any great warmth.

"Nina. How are your tests going?"

Nina raised her eyebrow. "You vanish to Corinth

without so much as a goodbye when Dr Mamoulian was murdered: you don't bother to get in touch when you come back—and now you just call me up to ask about test results."

Lamarck grimaced. "The last time I saw you I had a kebab for a shoulder. Social niceties were perhaps not my optimum concern. Nonetheless, I'm sorry: I really have been busy on cases."

There was enough sincerity in Lamarck's tone partially to mollify Nina. "Forget it," she said. "I am working under round the clock security. It's nice to talk to any human face—even yours. . . ."

"Pangalactic security is the best, Nina. If they want to keep you alive, you'll stay that way. Are you making any progress on the DNA screen?"

"I was going to call Kate this afternoon. I've cracked the process and now it's just a matter of waiting for all the tests to finish. I've already got answers to most of them."

"And?"

Lamarck was conscious that this was a key moment in the Zael case: for the first time he would be able to prove that Laura Glyde was not Taslana Zael. At last he would have some bargaining power with her.

"From what I can see so far, there is a strong correlation between the base sample and the one you brought in."

"Strong correlation? Strong correlation? What does that mean? They are the same person?" gabbled Lamarck, his urbanity fractured.

Nina interjected. "I am a scientist. I cannot say with certainty until the final tests have finished. Beyond a doubt—or at least beyond a one in several billion chance—the two samples are from very similar gene pools—close blood relatives. I am fairly certain—one chance in several thousand against—that yes, they are the same person. I will know for definite this afternoon. But if you want to know for your own investigative purposes, then you are looking at two samples from the same person. Just don't go to the Judiciary with it yet."

Lamarck was stunned. "These are two samples from the same person?"

Nina laughed, showing her small white teeth. "I just said so. How much clearer can I make it? I reserve final judgement until the last tests have run, but that's a formality."

Lamarck shook his head. "Could there be a—mistake?"

"Error is present in all human activities, Geir," said Nina. "Its scope has been minimised in this case. There is no mistake. Come down this afternoon and I'll show you the full results."

"I'll see you then. I may need to bring someone else along too," replied Lamarck with a weak smile, and broke the connection.

He sat down heavily in one of Laura—or should that be Taslana's?—chairs. How could this be? If she really was Taslana Zael—and Nina's analysis seemed to prove it—then why would she have masked her DNA? It explained her icy composure whenever the question of her identity was raised, and why she had stuck to the story even when she was badly frightened and simple pragmatism should have told her to abandon it. It did not explain the tapped com call to "Mr X" where they had discussed ways of ensnaring Lamarck and ensuring that he would give her the "benefit of the doubt". What doubt? She must always have known that the tests would endorse her claim. What profit was there to her in suborning him?

The test results seemed to raise as many questions as they answered. One thing was certain: the working hypothesis he had evolved with Voorhies was clearly false. The DNA screen had not been intended to delay the collapse of Laura's claim: it could only have been designed to postpone its *verification*. It stood everything on its head.

Lamarck had based his actions, both before and after his suspension, on the premise that Laura Glyde was not Taslana Zael. Should he now backtrack on his commitment to go along with her plan? He had even less idea what her ultimate objectives were than he had had an hour ago. In at least one sense, though, it made *more* sense to follow Laura's—Taslana's—lead since he had even more to learn.

What would Voorhies do when she learned the test results, probably this afternoon? In some ways she was going to be even more thrown than Lamarck himself. He, at least, had felt that there was a fundamental honesty to Laura, even though the way it had expressed itself was a surprise to him. Voorhies, on the other hand, with her manichean world view, had seen her as nothing but a scheming adventuress. Her enquiries would be simultaneously derailed and concluded. There

would be little choice but to pay out: Rolando would surely insist on that, to close the case and earn his performance bonus. Voorhies would be unhappy with the loose ends, but it would not be her choice to continue: the case would be over. The only hope of further progress would be Narosyn's snoop cases: the murders of Dr Mamoulian and the Smederevods, the assassination attempt at the Anastasia.

Lamarck realised that it had all come too late to save him. Even if Pangalactic paid out to Laura, he was still under investigation and, as he had to admit, had acted with unacceptable irregularity. The fact that he had been closer to the truth than anyone else would not help him: he had not got close enough, nor soon enough.

And what of Taslana, as he was now going to have to get used to calling her? He realised that he had been in love with her almost from the beginning, even though he had believed she was one species of adventuress. That, he thought bitterly, was all over now. Whatever she felt for him—and he could hardly be sure of the vector of those feelings—she was now a 20 billion mark heiress. The Zael wealth had been a curse on all who came in contact with it: the further away from it he was, the better he'd like it. It seemed unlikely that she would want to be encumbered with a raggle-taggle disgraced former glax, and still less that he could tolerate living on her patronage.

At this moment Lamarck heard the door: "Taslana" had returned. Smoothly she slipped into the room. Lamarck saw her as if for the first time. The casual elegance, the graceful economy of movement, were all what one would expect of a woman of Taslana Zael's background. She looked like the product of 20 billion marks.

"Come with me this evening," she said gravely. "Tonight you will learn what there is to learn."

Lamarck had been undecided as to whether to confront Taslana with his discovery: now he realised it would be too difficult to dissemble. It was his only remaining card, and it was time to play it.

"I have already done some learning," he said dryly.

Raising her eyebrows quizzically Taslana said: "Life is a learning experience. Do you mean anything more specific than that?"

"I made some com calls of my own," said Lamarck. "I have had an informal preview of your bio-test results."

"Ah," said Taslana with a barely suppressed smile.

"They reveal you, subject to confirmation, to be Taslana Zael," he finished in a level tone.

"Since I am, they would," she said airily. "Is this the substance of your 'learning'? I have been telling you exactly that throughout our acquaintance. Now, about this evening—"

Lamarck raised his hand. "This evening can wait—possibly indefinitely. Why did you act in a way to make us think you were an impostor?"

"Did I?" she responded. "I said all along that although I might not have told you the whole truth, everything that I did tell you was true. You and Voorhies—especially Voorhies—seemed disposed not to believe me whatever I said. You were the more open-minded: why are you so surprised now?"

"Because—" Lamarck began, before realising that he could scarcely mention the illegal com tap, and that Laura could easily enough deny knowledge of the DNA screen.

"Exactly," she said, misinterpreting his pause. "You had no reason beyond your prejudice. You couldn't believe that anyone walking in off the street pretending to be Taslana Zael really could be."

"That's an oversimplification," said Lamarck. "It makes me wonder about why we're going wherever we are this evening, though. I will no longer find out the truth about you, since the bio-test and your account now tally."

Taslana looked alarmed. "It's not just about who I am, which I knew all along anyway: it's also about who wants to kill me. I don't know, but we may find out tonight."

"Your position is no longer so strong," said Lamarck. "I have solved the Zael case: all I need now is to turn up at the Tower and get on with my job."

"That's a poor bluff. You no longer have a job," said Taslana. "I hardly think calling your pal at Genix constitutes solving the case. You are still in big trouble with Pangalactic: the only thing that's changed is that I'm worth 20 billion marks. You'd still better come along with me this evening."

Lamarck sat down heavily. Taslana was right and, more to the point, she knew it. He gave a rueful grin.

"There's more to this and you know it, Laura—Taslana—Miss Zael, oh, whatever I should call you . . ."

Taslana sat down beside him. "You don't have to call me 'Miss Zael': I think that's an unnecessary level of

formality for someone you've had sex with . . ."

Lamarck laughed with something approaching genuine mirth. "Maybe, but you have to accept that it changes the quality of our relationship. You are, as you say, a 20 billion mark heiress, and that has to change the way we relate to each other."

"Does it?" she asked softly. "Are you saying you liked me better when you thought I was lying than now I'm telling the truth?"

The tone was ironical, but Lamarck felt a poignancy behind it. "Yes" was the truthful, if irrational, answer, but it seemed impolite to say so.

"I don't know," he said. "At least I thought I knew where I was with you then."

"I'm still the same person. It's because no-one could see who I was through the money that I ran away," she said. "I never wanted the money. It never made me happy and it never made anyone else happy."

So why have you come back for it? thought Lamarck. He ruffled her hair. "Whatever, it'll be yours soon enough. You have to deal with the consequences of that."

"With you?" she asked, so casually that the anxiousness cried out.

Lamarck sighed. "I doubt it," he said gently. "You could deal with 20 billion marks: you were brought up to it. I couldn't. I don't have the equilibrium to deal with all that money, nor the person who possesses it."

"But, Geir," she said, "I am no different to what I was before. And I love you . . ." she concluded almost silently.

"Laura . . ."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything," she said brassily, standing up and smoothing her short skirt. "I don't know what I was thinking. And my name is Taslana."

She made irresolutely for the door wrecked by Lamarck's pulse gun that morning. Lamarck was not of a demonstrative disposition; but before he realised what he was doing he had seized her shoulders and swung her round to face him, kissing her with possessed intensity. Taslana responded with equal vigour.

"Oh, Taslana, this is crazy: but I love you," said a part of him he was only dimly aware existed. He forgot the Zael case and he forgot his suspension; he even forgot that he had just renounced her.