
The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

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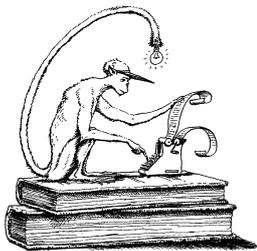
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Editorial

This is the first *Cosmopolis Literary Supplement* put together by the new editor/composer team consisting of Till Noever and Andreas Björklind. We're still trying to find our footing, and so ask our readers to be patient. This is our first try at this, and while we're going to get perfect in due course, such a development may take time and a few more issues.

This *Supplement* brings the final installments of two long-running series, *The Zael Inheritance* and *Tergan*. It also introduces two new authors: Jeremy Cavaterra and Malcolm Bowers, both of who offer short stories with definite Vancean flavors and gleefully twisted perspectives of their own. I hope they have more where those came from, and that they'll let us read them. I'd also love to see others emerge from the woodwork to join their ranks. Send me your stuff: I promise I won't bite.

I this issue we also offer a *Letter to the Editor* by Alain Schremmer, which, I hope, will stimulate—provoke, prod, incite—other folks into following suit. Don't worry about flooding me with your offerings: I'd rather deal with a feast than a famine.

A few words about upcoming issues of the CLS.

For the next issue I'm hoping for more *Wings of Iron* and more short stories. Also, with *Tergan* finished and me really too busy to follow up on my promise of a fresh-from-the-pen novel at this point, I have unearthed an older work, called *Coralia*. Everybody in the science-fiction/fantasy writing business should pen at least one 'space opera', and this one is mine. CLS 13 will have the first installment.

And that's all.

Enjoy.

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The CLS is devoted to showcasing literary work in any form, including fragmentary, which bears the influence of Jack Vance. Letters to the editor will also be published on a discretionary basis. Letters and submissions should be addressed to: Till Noever, at till@clear.net.nz

Natural Selection

by Jeremy Cavaterra

A strange mood had overcome Persephone of late. Often she lay sleepless of nights, chasing the most delightful and fugitive whims down the fertile byways of her imagination. Pulling herself suddenly upright to hug her knees and blink back the tears for the ache of experiences passing her by, she perceived a world outside moving to frenzied restless rhythms while she lay inert in her bed, and presently discovered within herself a capacity for love.

Clipping the announcement form from a recent issue of *Swing Intergalactic* magazine, Persephone composed the following advertisement, using a crisp calligraphic hand:

Single human female, in second bloom of youth, seeks adventuresome companion for life-affirming social intercourse. ME: Snow-complexioned, dainty, graspably plump. Also giving and nurturing, but with a touch of the tomboy. Hobbies include interplanetary banknote collection, amateur entomology, antique automobile miniatures. My tastes straddle the unconventional through the radical and beyond. YOU: Something exotic, even alien. Contact dispatch code and integral photo indispensable. Kindly abstain all but the incontrovertibly unique.

Persephone addressed an envelope, into which she tucked the annuncio together with a stereographic self-likeness. She sealed the envelope, and going about her errands for the day, dropped it into the nearest convenient postal chute.

The advertisement was summarily published in the magazine's summer circular. Persephone waited what she considered a due course, and when no responses appeared forthcoming, she became desperate. A month went by, and she entered a profound depression, and curled into a ball.

Persephone's friends became concerned, then worried. She neither took meals nor accepted visitors, and at length Sterle decided to look into matters.

In time Sterle, exerting her warmest efforts and

employing various amateur techniques, succeeded in restructuring Persephone's fractured psyche to a hotch-potch of its former coherence, and at last Persephone braved to emerge from her womb of withdrawal. The renascence was near-painless and all rejoiced to refresh their acquaintance with the chipper and plucky Persephone of old.

Around such time the responses to her advertisement began to trickle in, one by one. While secretly overjoyed, she evinced only moderate enthusiasm for the process, since during the course of her psychodrama with Sterle she had committed herself to swallowing certain ideological pills. In Sterle's language, Persephone's appeal for "a Prince Charming to come riding out of the pages of a sordid tabloid" was as much "an adolescent's psychic onanism designed to avoid dealing with real people as it was plumb loony as a duck swimming upside-down." Mindful of how her friend's notions on the subject were colored, Persephone kept the sudden influx of correspondence to herself, stowed away in a large empty bonbon tin in the depths of her wardrobe.

Once the initial surge of incoming mail began to taper off, Persephone reviewed her proposals and deemed one above all others worthy of reply, and discarded the rest. The gentleman whom she had decided to accept as her suitor had written:

Single gray-green male, young looking forward and old looking back, tall looking down and short looking up, locust complexion, compound optics, winged but flightless, intricate oral mechanism with 18-inch proboscis, responds to the 'single human female,' with whom he would experiment in contour-comparison seeking points of compatibility. I am affianced to a subsidiary mistress in a strictly auxiliary capacity, but would not averse myself to a fruitful adjunct of a more intimate nature.

Included within the hundred concertina-folds of the letter (which was exquisitely hand-glyphed in pale green upon white web) was a likeness of the extraordinary 'Gene,' whom Persephone found incontrovertibly stunning to the senses. Though the portrait was only a simple IHS†, the remarkable chrome-melon sheen of his complexion was clear to see, and Persephone affirmed her interest at once, matching his

pale olive ink with her own deep catchman's green. A flurry of letters ensued, the one chasing the heels of the other like foot-messengers of antiquity, and these were proceeded by exchanges over telephone, although the device did not lend itself particularly well to Gene's mandibular structure, nor would his antennae conform much better to the incoming end of the receiver. But Persephone strained to appreciate the clicks and whirrs of Gene's speech and in due progress the eager prospective couple agreed upon the date and locale of their first official semi-blind date (Persephone had attempted a witticism, coining the term "myopic date," but abandoned her quip upon meeting with blank incomprehension after several reiterations). Terminating the connection, Persephone noted the occasion in her day-planner: the forthcoming Saturday, by the duck pond in Elysium Fields, on Picnic Green No. Eight (in accordance with what she held to be her lucky number).

Theirs was a storybook encounter that would have moved even the ultra-cynical Sterle, had she been in attendance to witness it. Upon meeting her new courtier, Persephone felt hot frissons flitting along her skin like erogenous feather-wraiths, while her mind chawed the mysteries awaiting her as together they innovated the means to engage in erotic congress. Even so elementary a matter as kissing him was a prospect to which she looked forward as a great adventure. The two conversed (if such a word could be used to describe their interview of a dozen reciprocally asked and answered questions) and made themselves somewhat stiffly casual upon a lawn blanket over Persephone's lovingly prepared tea-basket. Gene politely abstained from the earth-style foodstuffs, explaining that he admitted neither animal nor vegetal matter into his nozzle, but contented himself with a thick pink froth of his own contrivance he had brought along in a thermos flask).

As the afternoon grew long, she was given to understand that he was hundreds, possibly thousands of years old. This speculation aroused her fascination all afresh, since he represented a living relict from some primordial alien world, and one which may or may not still exist. His manner was genteel, even gallant, and she passed their time together staring wistfully at his

proboscis, which lived up to every inch of its advertisement, even in its present retracted condition. What would be the state of affairs when it was fully distended? Persephone's eyes bulged as she allowed herself to be overtaken by a mind-blurring if momentary spell of autotitillation, tinged with a tantalizing trace of fear.

At length the pair repaired to Persephone's studio, which Gene advised might be more to her comfort than his "lair" would prove. Persephone, entering her economical flat in the Sky Spire district and switching on the lights, felt suddenly nervous. "Oh! I've got butterflies in my stomach," she breathed, immediately conscious of the fact that the only thing anywhere near her stomach, apart from her recently consumed lunch, was the foot she had lately swallowed. "Silly me!" she giggled giddily. "Of course you realize I intended no speciesism; my remark was only a figure of speech, an anthropocentric turn of phrase, so to speak, and a poorly chosen one at that. . . Please, by all means, sit down: make yourself at home!"

Gene tried to sit biped-style on the couch, but his leg-joints worked contrariwise and instead he straddled an armchair as elegantly as he was able. "Would you like a cocktail, or, should I say—" and here Persephone's voice dropped a naughty half-octave, "—a nightcap?" Standing at the wet-bar, Persephone glanced sidelong at her guest and wondered what manner of furniture might be found in his home. "Martini? Sundowner? Grasshop—" Persephone clapped a hand over her mouth and her eyes swelled in abashment, the blood rising to her cheeks. "I'm not certain if booze can be classified as either flora or fauna, but I've got plenty of mineral water, which is microbiologically pure. . ."

Sex had never been so kinky. Persephone felt her old self peel free like a singed husk and blow away in a hot rush, and she twirled about the room rapturously nude with arms outspread until she fell dizzily into his outfanned wing-flaps. With an idle hand she caressed his firm glossy metathorax, looking dreamily up into first one hexagonal eye-facet, then the next, losing count of his myriad composite lenses whenever she blinked.

"Tell me, Gene," she purred drowsily, probing one of his spiracles with a languidly adventuresome finger. "Who is your 'subsidiary mistress'? And what is the

'auxiliary purpose' she serves in your life?"

On this point Gene remained emphatically mute, until Persephone at last let the issue drop to the side. "No matter," she said with a sour-grapes pout. Then, attempting to show good sportsmanship, she rhapsodized: "I feel as if I've stepped from a cocoon, a creature reborn!"

"In a manner of speaking, your sentiment is apt," chirped Gene. "You will notice further, more dramatic changes in yourself over the course of the months to come, as you have been catechized with my fecund essence."

Persephone was uncertain what to make of Gene's remarks, and they haunted her throughout the weeks that followed, although she went about her routines as usual. Then, one evening as she lay sunken in a vat of perfumed salts, she twitched and squirmed, attempting to wriggle free a kink in the bathmat beneath her, with no success. Heaving an impatient sigh for the little nuisances which always seemed to disturb life's most halcyon of moments while their fleeting existence attempted in vain to persist, she jerked upright in the tub and twisted about, but to her quandary discovered the mat to be lying flat. Staring down absently into the roseate water she reached behind her back to rub the sore spots just below her shoulder blades, to discover that she had begun to sprout wings.

They were barely discernible as of yet, the merest of purple-green blotches close under the skin. All night they troubled her, and she was obliged to sleep on her stomach, an unaccustomed position only barely more comfortable. By morning these new appendages had broken the skin, and inspecting them in her lavatory's floor-length PPM† she saw a pair of convoluted foliant growths like the erumpent buds of some large exotic plant, on the verge of bursting through some overlying membrane. Persephone called in sick to work and that evening, suddenly and miraculously, the membrane gave and the nascent wings unfurled in the manner of night-blooms. She allowed herself a high melismatic gasp as she turned to the mirror to watch the graceful appendages billow out behind her like the gossamer sails of a fairy ship. Simultaneously she discovered that her vision had improved, acquiring sudden clarity, and that her glasses had become not

merely unnecessary but a hindrance to her improved sight. Furthermore, these implements now fit awkwardly, as it seemed that her face had elongated independently to the back of her skull, so that the bridge of her nose no longer rested level with her ears. To her light-headed wonder, the world had taken on a new and different look, as if she could see in two directions at once, but this sensation was fugitive and Persephone ascribed it to her keyed-up imagination.

Persephone immediately contacted Gene and babbled the news in a single exalted breath. His response was typically oblique: "All is well. Tomorrow I will teach you exercises helpful to develop the muscles needed for manipulating your wings. You no longer require the name 'Persephone.' Henceforth, I will address you as 'the Parturient,' although you may continue to use your old appellative at your workplace and among your acquaintances."

With Gene's assistance Persephone gained control over her virgin wings, though she was saddened to learn that never would they take her into the air. "Your wings are *crêpe du chine* and not *faille*; the one to the other is as lace is to sailcloth. Furthermore, you are too heavy, although this circumstance too will alter, once your thorax begins to taper and porous chitin begins to replace sodden flesh."

Persephone, or 'the Parturient' as her lover now addressed her, quickly grew accustomed to rising an hour before dawn, as the necessity to conceal her latest evolutions had become a tedious procedure. She had begun to affect dashing shoulder-wear: capes and shawls, ponchos and garbadines. With these garments she contrived a mantle of stealth to obscure her wings from general notice. Seated at work, she had supplied the feeble excuse of acute sunburn (though the season was late autumn) for the rather awkward stiff-backed, forward-inclined posture she had made habitual. Once this pretext wore thin, as was sure soon to occur, she would be forced to invent another. The girls at the office, while not overly suspicious, had eyes in their heads, and besides Persephone's striking new fashions there were yet odder things to be noticed. Was their imagination at fault, or did Persephone stand taller than they remembered? Surely no explanation could be found in Persephone's shoes, for she had taken to wearing flat-heeled rain-boots (such footwear being the most comfortable way to conceal what was hap-

† Panoramic Projection Mirror

pening to her feet). Moreover, she seemed to have lost a great deal of weight almost overnight; as if by the wave of a magic wand her once-sturdy aspect had become fragile, and from certain angles, even ethereal. Whispers of first one grave malady, then another, began to circulate among her cohorts, with suggestions ranging from the esoteric to the pandemic.

Persephone grew anxious. The rumors of her work-fellows counted less for her anxiety than personal factors. Despite the similarities growing between them, Persephone continued to meet with reticence from Gene in regard to his mysterious mistress; indeed none of her customary ruses and ploys to elicit information had proved successful, and in this pursuit she found herself no further along than on their first date. "But really," she pleaded. "I'm not jealous! I simply wish to know who she is, so that I can slip boric acid into her face powder when we cross paths in the ladies' room."

But Gene's silence prevailed.

Another week passed, and Persephone's transmutation became more pronounced. It was now necessary—and Gene told her as much—to quit her job. She submitted notice, but accepted a docked paycheck in lieu of working a final two weeks. Once again Persephone became reclusive, taking no callers apart from Gene, and on this occasion her neighbors seemed resigned to accept her queer conduct as chronic. But Persephone could not have cared less; in truth, the changes exhilarated her, while her outlandish lover's opacity had become at times irksome. Often she reflected, her eyes falling softly unfocused as she rubbed patchouli oil into his sleek black-green carapace: if only he were warmer, more accessible, more . . . *human*? Persephone turned her mind to other matters, which was easy, for her thinking had become vague and eerie.

By way of recreation Persephone took to four-wheeling out in the Gleeland Heights mud-flats, an activity suggested by a book entitled *Therapeutic Methods and Techniques of The Ancients*, which on past occasions had helped to organize and channel her aggressions. On one such occasion, however, she ruptured a tire on a discarded holovision tube immersed in the mud, and managed to reach Sterle's Auto Boutique at a crawl.

Sterle barely recognized the angular willowy creature stepping from the big vintage motor vehicle fac-

simile. In fact, she bore little resemblance to the Persephone of Sterle's acquaintance. She stood a head taller and was wasp-waisted where Persephone had been shapeless. Still, she did little to show off her figure, and instead it seemed her intention to bury it under tents and heaps of drapery. She walked stiffly, as if her joints ached, and as she approached, Sterle thought that never had she seen so queasy a complexion. Perhaps the fluorescent garage lights were to blame, reflected Sterle in thoughtful silence, "but that girl looks positively puce to my eyes." Uneasy suspicions danced in her head as she strained to peer behind the shield of Persephone's dark goggles.

"Why hello again, Sterle! I've come to see if you've got anything that will fit around my fourth wheel, and moreover it seems an occasion to refresh our acquaintance . . ."

Sterle, who still felt the sting of her friend's rebuff after having poured sweat and tears into her well-being, ignored Persephone's pleasantries. "Sure I've got tires for you, Persie, but nothing that can't be four-wheeled to shreds like the last spare I sold you."

While Sterle whistled for her boys, Persephone looked about the garage and absent-mindedly scratched the itchy spots which had blistered up to either side of her scalp. She had worn a headband this morning, and hypothesized that she might be allergic to the material, but now, to her alarm, she thought to discern a pair of very distinct bumps or swellings.

"You'll be wanting radials, I assume?" grumbled Sterle, turning back to her two-faced old chum. Before Persephone could reply, her temple gave a pulse and the left side of her head burst apart, dislodging large chunks and clods of dry substance to the concrete floor. Out sprung a green plumate antenna half a yard long, terminating in a furled scroll like the head of a fern. Persephone gave a startled yelp, and saw her own astonishment reflected in the gaping face of Sterle. Her right temple followed suit an instant later; Sterle found herself facing a woman whose scalp had been supplanted by the sensory parts of an extraordinarily large cicada. Several of Sterle's strapping young apprentices came forth in their ubiquitous blue uniforms, and stopped short to stare dumbfounded.

"Aha!" cried Sterle, casting out a vindictive finger at Persephone's hybrid face with the force of a javelin-toss. "*Voilà*, the conniving little two-timing harlot!

Here is how I respond to your having left your fetid scent all over my husband's maxillary palpus!" And the robust Sterle, trembling with fury, plucked a sky-scooter tire from a trestle as if it were a tea-saucer and hurled it across the garage. Persephone crouched low to evade its trajectory, but not low enough, having failed to take into account her new antennae. The rubber traction grazed across their fiddlehead tips, and Persephone screamed, having been made aware of the fact that these delicate new organs were exquisitely sensitive.

Sterle gave a hideous war-cry and a great bound of astonishing agility; Persephone, too awestruck to move, was easily throttled. Sterle reached for her antennae and yanked with all her force. Persephone shrieked in agony and reflexively grabbed hold of Sterle's formidable breasts, which she likewise yanked. The two women cried out together in discordant harmony: a keening soprano wail wavering over a croaking contralto bellow. Sterle relinquished her purchase and Persephone sprang free.

After that she seemed to lose hold on reality, and thought to see and feel herself sailing high through the air, far above Gleeland Heights, the startled disconsolate faces of Sterle and her garage boys dwindling to doll-masks underfoot. Then she was dropping down, her fall feathered by her own diaphanous substance, until her feet once again came to rest upon the ground. She discovered herself standing in the court fronting her own residence tower in the Sky Spire quarter. Her aim had been instinctively exact, neither short nor far of the mark.

Again, cautiously, Persephone tested her new pedal equipment. Her kneecaps gave all the way backwards, like the hollow jointed reeds of the Gleeland marsh, and she could feel the springboard tension cocking justly into place along her quilled thigh muscles. She dipped far down so that her segmented abdomen almost brushed the pavement, then—*boing!*—she let loose the tension-lock, an enthralling muscular release like a watchspring dislodged from its housing. As before, the ground dwindled beneath her, the air whisked through her antennae, and in her fishbowl vision the grid of the city bellied into a toyland miniature below. Recalling an old earthen phrase, *'What goes up must come down,'* she rejoiced in the exhilaration of free-fall. Such a descent would have nauseated the

old Persephone, who would have felt her guts rising into her lungs, but the new Persephone's innards were better suited to such extremes of momentum, being rather more tightly knit within her. For a fact, she was not even sure if she properly had guts anymore. This time, her aim was less lucky—she was due for an untidy collision with the county waste disposal site. Her micropterous appendages gave a lazy flutter, enough to veer her course a crucial yard or two, and she rebounded off the lid of a dumpster and back to Sky-Spires. In an exuberant *pas-de-zéphyr* she sailed through the window of her studio, which she had grown accustomed to leaving open, the better to air out the rather heady perfume left by her nightly nuptials with Gene.

Odd . . . The pheromone taint still lingered in the room from the previous evening, or such was Persephone's assumption, but upon switching on the light she gave another squeak of startlement to find that Gene had anticipated her. Perhaps her own sensitivities had become attuned to his alien features, but he appeared visibly cross.

"You have been careless," he told her darkly. "It was never intended that you and the Nutrice should recognize each other. Matters now become both delicate and complex . . ."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Persephone, now becoming crabbed herself, although her voice had started to click and squeak and take on a timbre not unlike the sounds produced by Gene when he replicated human speech.

"So it was Sterle all along, eh?" she snorted. "I should have guessed so. I glimpse an elegant simplicity to the coincidence, even if it was sheer chance—"

"Come!" snapped Gene, rising abruptly upright on his palps. His complicated oral process flared into a star-shaped corona of chitinous prongs, laying bare the sharp under-fangs, so that Persephone recoiled warily. "It now becomes necessary that you join me in my nest. You will never return to this apartment."

"What? Never? Oh, don't be silly . . . Come now, Gene, you're overwrought." She stepped forward to lay a soothing hand against his epicuticle; clearly his little tantrum was nothing more than a lover's teasing, the captious fit of a pampered darling. "Honestly, beloved, if this is your way of inviting me to elope

with—”

“Come!” hissed Gene, catching Persephone about the wrist. The quality of the touch was unfamiliar and disturbing.

“Gene, you’re hurting me! All right, I’m coming—no need to be surly about it! Honestly, now. Just let me gather a few things . . .”

“You need nothing,” he said. “We depart at once.”



Gene lived in a labyrinth of gauze. The Parturient, as she now thought of herself, drifted listlessly from one pellucid chamber to the next, like a weak draught through cobwebs. The past had gone its irrevocable way. Her old life had become a wan and distant dream, of less substance than a shadow. Reality had dwindled to narrow confines, as defined by the mesh walls of Gene’s underground warren. Here he hoped to create a colony, so she understood, of others “like themselves.” All had been arranged, and she must now play out her part according to these arrangements. So much he had told her as fact.

The Parturient had seen little of her lover since he had brought her underground. Escape was an empty concept, devoid of meaning. Time, likewise, was immeasurable in incremental terms and hence had lost all pertinence. No longer was she sure to distinguish such abstractions as up from down; all her certain knowledge encompassed were the hollows and tunnels of pale tissue, the frail but resilient silks that had barred her way when at first she had sought to break free. The things Gene had told her were also encompassed within this knowledge.

“You are to be my queen,” he had announced before leaving her alone. “You are imbued with the stuff of myself; when the metamorphosis is complete, you will yield a number of egg-sacs. With your ovipositor and when such time is nigh you will deliver them into the belly of the Nutrice, who is to be enchrysalized. The ova will hatch of their own, and if you feel a lack analogous to hunger you may eat those which remain. Their substance is nourishing. From the fertile eggs will emerge grubs; they will flourish upon the stuff of the Nutrice, and from larva will emerge pupa, and from pupa adult. By this stage the Nutrice will have been entirely consumed.”

A tiny fragment of Persephone that remained to the Parturient was surprised that her tongue, notwithstanding these disclosures, had not refused its office. The remainder of herself—the greater part of it—felt nothing whatsoever; one of the late phases of her transformation into a creature like Gene had been a merciful balm of inertia and apathy upon the emotive regions of her brain. Her response had been a dull nod, and a question: “What will you do with me then? Am I to be abandoned, to forage and scuttle as a freak above ground in harsh sunlight?”

Gene had replied in the negative. “It is to be your life’s work. The yield produces hundreds of offspring, but of which none is female. The queens of my species—*our* species—must be recruited and metamorphosed, while the life-mothers—the Nutrices—are a more specialized rarity, conforming to narrower criteria, and hence must be chosen with care. But this is more information than you should require for a period. Until you see me again, think only upon what I have told you. Or, if you prefer, think of nothing. Your nutritive needs are simple: with only oxygen you will thrive many hundreds of years on the serum I have given to suffuse your green blood.”

Gene backed away toward the trap of his subterranean abode. A hallucination? A remnant spark from the frayed fibers of her dismantled old psyche? She thought to perceive the semblance of an almost human grin quiver his mandibles.

“And now, if you will excuse me, I must be about my affairs. There are other nests to tend, other warrens to populate . . .”



Tergan

by Till Noever

Chapter 11

Tergan

"Why must you?" Evadne insisted.

"Who else will go? Whom else can you trust to do what needs to be done?"

"Then I will come, too!"

"No!"

"No?" she arched an eyebrow. Sander detected certain danger signs and hastened to buttress his position. "If you do," he said, "the Lantesers and the Polheems will try to take advantage of your absence. When you return there may be no throne for you to come back to."

Evadne looked around, but they were alone in the council chamber. The elongated table stood empty, the high-backed chairs carefully arranged and undisturbed.

She leaned closer to Sander. "I don't really want the throne," she whispered. "You can have it." She inclined her head, her eyes dancing. "Want to be king? I snap my fingers — like this! — and you have all the power in the land. Then you can decree what everybody should do and we shall all live happily for all time."

Despite himself, Sander laughed. "Politics under Evadne will be a totally novel experience."

She was not diverted. "Make up your mind, Sander of Orgond. If I become the ruler of Tergan — which I am merely to please you, and because you keep telling me that I have to do it, for a while at least — then I shall decree that my consort and ardent lover Sander will have to enjoy my company all the way to Sansker and beyond — if only to ensure that his bed is not warmed by the wrong bodies."

"You are stubborn!"

"And you told me that you *liked* me stubborn!"

"I did, but . . ."

"Sander!" she said warningly.

He threw up his arms in surrender. "Have it your

way!"

Evadne laughed triumphantly and threw her arms around his neck. "I knew you would see reason."

"Reason"? What rea . . .?" He discontinued the sentence because it was impossible to talk with her mouth against his like that.

"Keran will take care of things," she said when they separated.

"Keran is overworked already. To run the state . . ."

"He has already learned the art of delegation."

"Certain parties will not care *what* Keran does. They will try to devise ways to assume power in your absence."

"Do we know who they are?"

"I have a fair idea."

"Then tell Keran. He will do what is necessary to keep them in line." He opened his mouth but she placed a finger on his lips. "No — listen! I know I am right. And it is because Keran has assured me that, because of you and who and what you are and have done — and maybe also a little because of what I did — almost the entire guard for once is not only *loyal*, but *loyal*." She chuckled at his perplexed face. "While you were . . . indisposed . . . Keran had occasion to speak at some length. It appears that our . . . exploits . . . have stimulated a novel kind of reaction among the lower ranks of the guard. You are seen as a romantic hero of sorts, fighting nobly for your beloved princess." She smiled. "Of course, that's entirely correct."

There was another break in the conversation as Evadne did her best to demonstrate to Sander that she meant exactly what she had said.

"Anyway," she continued, "my order to empty the dungeons of all those who did not deserve to be in there only reinforced their conviction that here was a strange but promising development that might just bring a welcome change. And these are the people Keran relies upon. They were his comrades when he stood guard at the gate. They know him and he knows them. You can be certain that Tergan will be in good hands even though we are both away." She placed a hand on his mouth. "Sshh. — I will accompany you, and that's that."

Sander knew when he had lost an argument. "That means the investiture will have to wait."

"It is just a ceremony," she said. "Pomp and circum-

stance. I am bored with them. Maybe we should cancel it altogether. It will save me having to stand endless hours suffering through the dress-maidens measuring me and using me as a dress-stand.”

Sander grinned to himself. Indeed, high Tergan politics under Evadne would be . . . different. A complement to the changes at the Keaenean court.

Suddenly he felt almost giddy with anticipation. Maybe it was all going to work out after all. A vision came almost with the intensity of *sabér* — only to flee as quickly as it came, but leaving him breathless with its scope, and its exhilarating — and somewhat frightening — touch.

He picked up Evadne in his arms and swung her around a full circle. And again. Her eyes sparkled and laughed at him. He put her down.

“You can come,” he told her.

“Can I? Why, thank you, dear sir.”

“Don’t mention it.” He kissed her. “Let’s get this organized. The regiment must be halfway to Pruid Fair by now. If we leave tomorrow morning we might just catch up with them by the time they get to Teela.” He smirked at her. “Prepare for sore haunches.”

The afternoon flew by with meetings and other activities. Keran was not enthused about Sander’s plans, and even less about Evadne’s intention of accompanying him.

“One king has just been murdered on the very road you intend to travel,” he said darkly. “Does it not suggest that this idea lacks merit?”

Evadne waved the objection aside and pointed a thumb at Sander. “My uncle did not have the benefit of his help. Had he been a wiser man he might have, and might thus still walk among us.”

“A touching faith,” Keran said with irony, “but I doubt it will deter those who wish you ill.”

Evadne grinned. “Which is why we will ensure that nobody knows that we’re gone until we actually *are*.”

Keran’s eyes widened. “You intend to go without a guard?” He glanced at Sander. “You do not support this . . .”

“Foolishness?” Sander suggested, but his grin belied his words. “Indeed I do. We leave with the first light of dawn. Just the two of us. We will overnight in Pruid Fair. On the morning of the next day send a pigeon — no, two! just to make sure! — to the com-

mander of the Teela garrison, telling him to expect two visitors, a man and a woman, who will reveal their identity to him upon arrival, and use the password . . . ‘Margarite’. Tell him to communicate the matter to Captain Ormond, who leads the regiment. They are to wait until we arrive.”

Keran face twisted into grimace of exasperation. “I wish I could change your mind, but I can see that it is not possible. I will do as you say.” He bowed in Evadne’s direction. “And I will do my best to keep the Castle and the throne safe from would-be usurpers while you are away.”

Evadne turned to Sander and smiled triumphantly. “See? — I didn’t even have to mention it.”

“I think it didn’t take much to figure it out!” Sander said dryly and smirked at Keran. “It seems to me, my friend, that you are paying a heavy price for the life of your son.”

Keran chuckled ruefully. “You warned me, Sander. I didn’t believe you then. Now I know better. Be assured that I’ll be more careful next time before accepting your services.”

All three laughed together, and there the matter rested.

They got to bed very late.

“Who is ‘Margarite’?” Evadne asked Sander.

“She was my mother.”

Evadne’s face expressed remorse. “I’m sorry. I thought . . .”

Sander smiled. “My sexual conquests have been few and far between — and after I met you . . .”

Evadne kissed him. “You are an inveterate flatterer, Sander of Orgond.”

“It is the truth.”

“And to think that for a long time I didn’t even know you existed . . .”

“We’ll make up for it.”

“Definitely.”

For a while talk gave way to mostly inarticulate utterances. After their happy exercise they rested languidly.

“I am serious about your haunches,” Sander told Evadne, running his hands over said parts of her anatomy. “You’re going to be on horseback for the next three to four days. You will know about muscles you never dreamt existed, and ‘agony’ will take on a com-

pletely new meaning.”

“Pah! Already I have been through the torture of your training. Nothing could beat the agonies I suffered then.”

Sander’s voice rippled with laughter. “You will talk differently by the time we get to Teela.”

“They say massage helps with such aches.”

“Do they?”

“Yes, and I expect you to attend to me in my time of need.” She settled herself on top of him. Her hair fell into his face. “As you have done again and again,” she whispered. Quite without volition Sander felt himself responding again, and presently they forgot all about the morning.



Chapter 12

Keaen

The first of the mangonels had been completed. A range of differently sized stones were heaped around it. The structure was rotated to aim at the river and the first ranging shots were fired. The heaviest of the rocks made it just to the river bank, while the smaller ones almost reached the opposite side.

When Caitlan was satisfied that the device had been ranged properly he ordered another few shots, just for demonstration purposes, and then had the mangonel reoriented so that it faced Caelar.

“Five of these should serve our purpose,” he told Armist, who had been watching the practice.

“A lot of construction which might come to naught,” Armist noted. “If all goes to plan these could just be so much firewood.”

“Better than have them used for their original purpose,” Caitlan replied, to which Armist wholeheartedly agreed.

“I wonder if there’s more we can do to accelerate the process of ‘persuasion,’” he added. “The sooner this is brought to a conclusion the better.”

“What are you thinking of?”

“I have no idea. You are the expert in such matters.” He paused and looked at his big friend. “Have I told

you how glad I am that you’re here?”

Caitlan grinned. “Once or twice.”

Ailin and Mirne approached. “How is the ‘machine?’” Zygie asked Caitlan.

He shrugged. “It would pound Caelar to dust if we so wished. Which we do not.” He viewed the women thoughtfully. “Where’s Fliz?” he asked Ailin.

“In the village with Nerys, negotiating the price of victuals. Since you insisted on compensation for the villagers we thought a skilled negotiator might be useful. The villagers, though basically benevolent, still suffer from occasional attacks of cupidity. Fliz, having some . . . acquaintance . . . with such sentiments, is proving to be invaluable in arriving at a price that will not completely drain the treasury.”

Caitlan laughed, but he still had a pensive air about him. “I think I will go and talk to Fliz,” he said.

They all looked after him as he left. “That man of yours,” Zygie told Ailin, “does he ever stop meddling?”

Ailin laughed her bubbly laugh. “Never.”

Caitlan returned not long after, in the company of Fliz and Nerys.

“We have devised a plan,” he declared.

Nerys, whose face displayed an expression of muted disapproval, muttered something under her breath. Ailin cast her a curious glance. Fliz hooked his arm under his lover’s and pulled her to him. She yielded with ill grace; but, Ailin noted, yield she did.

“We have Caelar surrounded,” Caitlan said. “The defenders have it in their minds that this is where the threat lies. We are planning to add a second line of attack — from the inside. Thus we introduce an unexpected element, which will be incomprehensible, generate considerable confusion, and thus serve to aid with demoralizing the defenders.”

“I don’t like it,” Nerys declared. “Fliz . . . it’s just *him*. Alone. What if something goes wrong? What if they . . . We all know what happened to . . . those men . . .”

Caitlan opened his mouth to say something but Fliz shook his head and took Nerys aside, out of earshot, where he spoke to her in a low voice.

“Please understand! This why we’re here. This I have to do. Our adopted home, Nerys . . . This is something we can give — in return for the succor extended to us.”

She was not consoled. “What good is this place to

me if I lose *you*?"

"You won't."

"You don't know that."

Fliz smiled. "Yes, I do."

"Really?"

"Really."

"You're not just saying that to make me feel better?"

"It's the truth."

"What if you're wrong?"

"Nerys!"

She sighed. "I'm just so . . . scared."

Fliz embraced her. "Don't be."

They returned to where the others stood. Caitlan glanced at Fliz and received a small assuring nod in return.

"This is what we are going to do," he said.

When he was done, there were a few moments' silence.

"I should be doing this," Armist said.

"No," Caitlan replied sharply. "Your . . . talent . . . it is too unreliable. You have admitted as much yourself. Besides, your presence here is a necessity."

"Nobody would ever know I'm gone," Armist pointed out. "Seconds would pass for you, while it might be hours for me."

"You have never maintained it for that long," Caitlan asserted. "On the other hand, I have seen the results of Fliz's activities." He grinned at the thief. "Pandrak himself would be impressed!" He narrowed his eyes. "An interesting issue, which we might resolve one day: would Pandrak see Fliz — or Fliz see Pandrak? What if two people of similar talent were pitched against each other?"

Ailin laughed and hooked her arm under Caitlan's. "Stop it! You're giving us all a headache."



The 'Gait of Stealth'? So, someone else had given the phenomenon a name. People were actually *trained* in its use! Of course, some of them were better at it than others — and by now, if Caitlan were to be believed, there might be only two with the talent: Armist's father and himself.

Fliz flattened himself against the wall of Caelar, only a step to the side of the access door next to the main gate. As yet it was closed. Soon, or so he hoped,

it would be opened to allow a courier to enter the town to deliver a message from Armist to the Baron Tegel. Fliz intended to sneak in with the courier. A tight fit it would be — if it were possible at all. If anybody felt his touch, his unnoticeability would be compromised.

The time was late afternoon. The courier would approach once Caravella had dipped below the horizon. The less light there was the better.

Fliz relaxed into the familiar sense of being and yet not being present. It wasn't easy. The task ahead of him made his entry into Cantinflas's vault seem like child's play. There he'd only had to reach the front door to be away from immediate danger. Here he was surrounded by the walls of a fortified city. He might not be able to leave for some time — and Nerys would be frantic with worry! But of course, since it was a town, there were houses, and hiding places galore. And even if he had to wait it out inside the walls of Caelar, he was not going to starve or die of thirst. He was, after all, the best thief Thalonica had ever known.

Caravella disappeared from sight with a cascade of greens, purples, and reds. From Armist's camp came a courier displaying a white flag suspended from a short stick. The courier did not know that Fliz was there. He was under orders to deliver Armist's message to Kistof in person; possibly to take a message back. That way Fliz would get two opportunities to try his luck.

The courier approached the gate and called out. From the other side voices answered. The courier declared his intentions and was made to wait until superior officers had been consulted inside. Finally a grating sound indicated that the bars holding the gate closed were withdrawn. Fliz relaxed himself into not being 'there', detached himself from the wall, and walked around the courier, so that he could see inside the gate.

An array of soldiers sporting halberds faced him. A sergeant emerged into the open and spoke to the courier, who remained unyielding in his insistence that the message be hand-delivered to Kistof himself, or not at all, in which case would the baron prepare himself to have his city pounded into the ground on which it stood.

The sergeant returned inside to consult with his superiors. The door remained open. Soldiers in Caelar uniforms arrayed themselves around the

courier. Others stood with their attention directed at the encircling camp, watchful for possible subterfuge.

Only two soldiers remained visible inside. Fliz decided that this was the time. Carefully avoiding the soldiers he approached the door. They saw him and yet they didn't: this was his art, honed to near-perfection over years of larceny.

Fliz entered the door, approached the two guards inside, who stood in attitudes of relaxation, confident that their comrades outside had the situation under complete control.

Fliz slipped past the guards, to face a closed gate of iron bars guarded by another two soldiers. He flattened himself against the wall to await developments. Presently four guards appeared, flanking the courier, who looked subdued. The guards opened the gate. Two guards stepped through, then the courier, then the other two guards. The tiniest window of opportunity. Fliz took a quick step. Another. One guard pushed the gate closed. Fliz, his thoughts a dual stream, one directing the movements of his body, the other relaxing him into perceptual non-existence, slipped through. His sleeve caught in the gate. The guard, sensing the minute resistance against his hand, frowned briefly and pushed harder. Fliz slid out of the way. The gate clanged shut. The guard drove home the latch and lowered a pair of heavy iron bars, which were hinged to the wall beside the gate and whose other end locked into metal flanges set into the opposite wall. The guard, having completed his task, returned to his station. Fliz went off to explore the interior of Caelar. Caitlan had briefed him on the layout, which made it easy to find his way to his first goal: the Tegel mansion.

Fliz's first impression of Caelar was one of oppressiveness. The streets were deserted except for patrols of soldiers. Everybody else, including the families of the few soldiers who had wives and children, had been evicted from the city in preparation for the siege. They were just so many hungry mouths, and Kistof had been certain of Armist's unwillingness to make use of the civilian populace as hostages. Everybody inside the city walls was a fighter, and everyone was armed to the teeth. Fliz, despite his cloak of effective invisibility and the dagger at his belt, felt naked and exposed. He forced himself into a relaxed state and proceeded along the alleys winding in concentric rec-

tangles around the central plaza where stood the Tegels' residence: a squat three-story block of stone, resembling a tiny castle with its high narrow window slits and the single, albeit expansive, entrance. At opposite ends of the castle-mansion stood tall towers crowned by steep conical tiled roofs. In the top windows Fliz discerned observers watching the activities of the army surrounding the city.

It did not take Fliz long to reach the center. The city was small, designed as a fortress. It would not have been this glum when the gate was open and the villagers moved about freely. A collection of now-unused stalls evidenced the existence of a now-defunct market.

Fliz stopped when he reached the central square. He considered the mansion. Beside the main entrance a detail of four guards stood at lax attention. What could they fear inside such a secure zone? How could they possibly know that even as they laughed uproariously at a crude joke by one of their company, they saw — and yet did not perceive — Fliz as he walked straight past them, waited until none of them looked, pushed the door open carefully, listened for a sound of betrayal that didn't come, slipped inside, and slowly closed the door again.

He found himself inside a gloomy hall. On two sides staircases led to the upper levels. The floor was covered with an ornate pattern of polished wooden planks. Lamp holders ringed the walls holding small burning oil-lamps. Apart from that the hall was empty. No statues broke the expanse of the floor, no paintings or wall hangings the stark stone facade of the walls.

A footfall. Through an arched doorway at the far end of the hall came a man dressed in a livery of sorts. In his hand he carried a tablet with an earthenware decanter and two goblets. He hurried up the left staircase, his shadow cast on the wall by a light somewhere out of Fliz's sight.

Fliz waited until he was gone, then considered his instructions. The mansion was to be set aflame. But the fire must not be set on the ground floor, thus cutting off the escape route of those who had no need to suffer the consequences of the Tegels' folly.

A noble intention, Fliz thought, though an overly sentimental one. That he himself had suggested it changed nothing. It was more considerate than any-

thing the Tegels would extend to their own enemies. Still, when all was done, he would have to live with his conscience, and the death of an innocent servant or maid was not what he wanted.

Fliz slid up the stairway to arrive at the second level. Laetis had briefed him on the arrangement of the living quarters. On this level he would find two reception and banquet halls; studies and meeting rooms; a library; a small armory where Kistof kept his private collection of instruments of death and such curios as attracted his attention. Kistof, Laetis had informed Fliz, possessed the only example of what Laetis had called a 'persuasion hook': an instrument of Kistof's own devising, and of which apparently he was quite proud. Fliz had not cared to enquire into the exact nature of the device. The name sufficed to invoke a faint shudder.

Still Fliz had encountered nobody but the one servant. Why was this house so void of people? The kitchens were below, somewhere beyond the door whence the servant had come. Soon it would be time for supper and surely there would be a summons of some sort. He would then have ample time to do what he'd come for.

Fliz bethought himself and presently ascended the next flight of stairs to the third floor where lay the quarters of Kistof, Tiffer, their aunt Gerdania, and her one and only — slightly imbecilic — son, Jolis. There were other, lesser, members of the Tegels' family, but they were not resident in the mansion, and had to contend with smaller houses near the northern wall.

Fliz paused on the landing of the third floor. He listened. From his current position a murky hallway led across to the opposite staircase. At right angles to it another hallway, lit by a row of lamps in holders, extended the depth of the house. It ended at a narrow window, through which blew a slight draft that made the oil-lamps flicker. From his position Fliz saw four doors, two at the right and two at the left side of the hallway. From down that way somewhere emerged sounds of human voices.

Fliz held his breath. One voice was female, of that he was certain. It also had a clear ring of distress. Another voice, its characteristics not clear enough to ascertain the sex of its owner. Maybe a bit like . . .

Fliz peered down the passage to his left, saw nobody, and stepped boldly forward into the hallway

ahead. The voices emerged from behind the first door on his left. The torment of one was unequivocal. With Fliz closer now, it became less the sound of a woman than of a child. The other voice Fliz now identified as that of a man. It carried an almost effeminate menace — even without the words, which sent shivers down Fliz's spine.

Fliz cringed. He could not possibly stand here like this; witnessing, if only by sound, what passed beyond the door without . . .

He tried the handle, which yielded. His invisibility fell off him as he stepped into room and faced the scene: a naked man, grotesquely priapic, crouching over the body of a girl at the very first edge of puberty; her hands and feet tied to the posts so that she lay spread-eagled at her violator's disposal. As Fliz stepped into the room she let out another cry as the man performed an obscene invasion of her.

Fliz closed the door. At the sound the man stopped moving, crouching there, panting. His head turned. He stared at Fliz with utter incomprehension. His mouth worked, but no words came out.

Fliz looked at the girl; saw the terror and the agony. Their gazes crossed. A silent plea: abject, pathetic, ineffably sad.

The man still crouched. Now he moved; struggled to get up.

Kistof?

Too young.

Tiffer then.

Again the girl's gaze fixed on Fliz. Something flared up inside him. The rage of decades, too much of it still dammed up; memories of events at a campfire on Finister; his dead sisters and mother; Gerwan, Nerys's brother: prepared to murder his own sister; the Wearer's degradation of his family; maltreated whores from the Pink Palace, crying as Oweena tended to their wounds . . .



Tiffer saw it, but he could not know *what* he saw. Only that it was death.

He looked around desperately for anything that might stave off his fate. His eyes fell on the fireplace. With one smooth motion he rolled off the bed, scrambled across the floor, and lunged for the fireplace,

where he grabbed an iron poker, which he brandished at . . .

Tiffer looked around him with wild eyes.

He saw . . .

The bed: the girl spread out, tied to the posts; bleeding where he'd toyed with her; squirming, her eyes gazing around in terror.

The room: empty.

Tiffer grasped the poker in two hands and held it before him.

"Where are you?" he shouted, his bowels watery, his breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

"Right here," a voice said behind him.

Tiffer froze. Then he whipped around. The poker whistled through the air — and found nothing.

Tiffer's momentum carried him on. He emitted a hoarse cry of anguish as somebody shoved him from behind. He stumbled, tried to stop himself from falling, and in the process dropped the poker. It clanged to the wooden floor and slipped out of his reach.

Tiffer scrambled to get up but a brutal kick in his side sent him sprawling, gasping for breath with the pain.

Someone took his legs. Tiffer, desperate beyond measure, attempted to twist around, and do anything . . . anything . . . to save himself — only to find himself yelling out as his assailant jerked and twisted his legs, forcing him around again. His face hit the floor. A sharp pain lanced through his nose. He screamed again.

He was dragged across the floor . . .

He turned his face to one side; noticed that he was being dragged alongside the bed. He saw a piece of rope tied around a bedpost.

The window!

The window?

No!

A last desperate struggle. Another kick that took the wind out of him. His legs were lifted, the calves touched cold stone. He struggled feebly; flailed at his enemy; was rewarded with a numbing glance at the base of his neck. Another heave. Agony in his crotch as he was hoisted over the ledge. He screamed again. His legs dangled in empty space, flailing around feebly.

Before Tiffer, his attacker's face . . .

Close to his . . .

Hesitating . . .

Who was he?

Who was he?

"I was supposed to let you live," the man grated. "But I think the world is better off without you."

Thought ceased, to be displaced by terror.

The man heaved again. Tiffer's bare torso scraped over the rough rocky windowsill. His hands grasped for a hold and found the man's garment.

The man's face twisted and worked, displaying emotions beyond Tiffer's comprehension. He took Tiffer's hands and worked loose his fingers one by one. He gave him a final shove. The weight of Tiffer's body did the rest.

And then he was falling, with his limbs flailing and a drawn out scream coming out with his last breath. And as he looked up into the sky it seemed that he was falling upwards; as the wall of the house rushed past him, and then . . .



The scream cut off. Fliz gathered himself. His anonymity had been shattered by events. He stepped to the bed, extracted the knife from his belt, and cut the girl's bonds.

"Quick," he hissed.

A sound at the door. Fliz whipped around. In the doorway stood a man: the same servant Fliz had seen earlier. He stared at the scene with incomprehension and shock. Fliz jumped off the bed, ran to the door and, before the man could turn away, grabbed him by the arm.

"Quick," he commanded. "Take her away!"

The man gaped at the girl, who still sat on the bed, nude, bloody, in a state of shock.

Fliz shoved the man into the room, hauled the girl off the bed, tore off the sheet and wrapped it around her.

He addressed the servant: "Take her out of here. Run for your lives — for this house will be destroyed."

The man evinced comprehension. He nodded numbly, put an arm around the girl's shoulders, and dragged her out through the door.

Fliz stepped to the wall. He grabbed a lamp from a holder and threw it on the bed. The oil ran out, soaked into the fabric of the mattress, and presently caught

alight with an impressive 'whoosh'. Fliz turned and ran. He crossed the hallway, pushed his way into a room on the opposite side. It was pitch black in here. Fliz returned to the hallway, grabbed another oil-lamp from the wall and threw it into the room. In the light of the licking flame he saw that here, too was a bed, a table, a fireplace. What had these walls been forced to witness?

Fliz turned away, only to hear footfalls along the adjacent hallways. He paused, focused, and slipped into invisibility. Thus protected he stood as a man ran past him. This, judging from the dress, was the Baron Kistof. He ran down the stairs, shouting for assistance. Fliz hurried down the hallway connecting the landings and came to an open door. He peered inside. The room was brightly lit by lamps on the wall and one on one corner of a large desk.

The Baron's study? Parchments littered the desk. Fliz stepped closer and saw that they were drawings: plans of Caelar and the surrounding countryside. He discerned marks that might have indicated the arrangement of Armist's camp and the siege engines.

Fliz took the oil lamp that stood at one side of the table and tipped it sideways. The oil ran out and over the drawings. Fliz dropped the lamp. The oil caught alight. Fliz ran.

At the landing he paused. From below, voices shouting orders. Confusion was in evidence. Fliz hurried down the flight of stairs and stopped at the next landing. The floors here, like everywhere, were wooden. Wood burned. Fliz removed two oil-lamps from a nearby wall and smashed them on the floor. The flames spread rapidly.

Men came running up the stairs now, carrying buckets; pathetic attempts to prevent what was now inevitable. Fliz ducked out of their way, and when they were past he proceeded downstairs. The front hall was awash with people now, hindering each other in their confusion. Amidst them the baron was shouting orders and trying to remain in control.

Fliz pushed his way through the men, heedless of being visible and making no effort to conceal himself. Now they didn't see him because their attention was completely focused on other matters.

Fliz reached a wall, sidled over to a lamp holder, detached the lamp and, before anybody had registered what was happening, hurled it across the heads of

people against another wall. It smashed; the oil ran down the wall to the ornate wooden floor, caught light on the still-burning wick lying there, and spread amidst the screams of the bystanders. They started a stampede for the exit; but by that time Fliz was already outside and heading for his next target.

Behind him the inside of Kistof's mansion burned with a bright, inextinguishable fire.



"There." Caitlan pointed. They all looked.

"He did it," Armist said softly. "He really did."

From the center of Caelar rose a column of thick, black smoke. Armist glanced at Nerys. "I am glad he's on our side," he told her, and saw that, despite her worry and apprehension she was glowing with pride for her lover.

Caitlan laughed. "I've thought that a few times myself in the past," he agreed.

"I hope he's safe," Nerys murmured, almost too low to hear.

Ailin hugged her. "He told you he was going to be. Believe him."

"It's hard."

"I know. — Believe him anyway."

Laetis approached the group. He kept a fastidious distance from the circes and especially from Zygie, and addressed Armist and Caitlan as if the women simply weren't there. "It seems that your plan worked."

"Let us wait to see if Fliz gets to the stores," Caitlan said. "This will complete the devastation."

"I have disturbing news," Laetis told them. "A Tergan regiment is about to reach Teela. It must be assumed that they are on their way to Sansker."

"Don't let it concern you," Armist said. "You have said yourself that they are half our number, even if they do combine with the Teela and Sansker garrisons. And then they have to cross the Tor . . ."

". . . for which they have barges at Sansker!" Laetis declared. "Twenty of them; for this very purpose only. We must send a company to stop them crossing! If we don't they could be here in less than three days. Kistof *will* hold against us out because he *will* know this. We cannot stop the pigeons — because we cannot see them in the night." He waved at the town, where now

a second column of smoke poured into the sky. "All of this, it will be for naught — and together Kistof and the Tergans *will* be a match for us."

"Your concerns are understandable" Caitlan told Laetis, "but we will not send our troops upstream."

Laetis pointed at Zygie. "Because *she* says so?" he asked, his voice cracking with the intensity of his emotion. "Because *she* tells you lies about this Evadne and her Councillor? Is Keaen to fall to Tergan because of the word of one woman — and a circe at that?"

"Keaen will not fall," Armist snapped. "And troops will not go upstream. If we wanted to stop them we'd have to send more men than I can possibly spare."

"And what if they do cross the Tor? What then? Once they are on this side Tergan has achieved what it has dreamed of for centuries."

Armist glanced at Zygie. Laetis was right, of course: everything did indeed hinge on her word, her assessment of Sander and his protégée, Evadne. And if Zygie was wrong . . .

"Can't you see the truth?" Laetis spat, his face contorted with rage. "How can you be so blind? How can you trust the word of this . . . freak? Just because he," referring to Caitlan, "is besotted with . . ."

Words would not do to convey what he needed to express. He turned and stormed away.

Armist looked at Zygie. "I trust you," he told her, "but I do hope that you're right."

"Do you trust Caitlan?" she asked him.

"You trust Sander that much?"

"I do."

"Then this matter is closed," Armist declared.

"If Tergan crossed the Tor," Zygie said, "then either Sander and Evadne are dead, or they have sent their army to assist us."

"That's a novel notion," Armist said siccantly. "What do you think?" he asked Caitlan.

"I think we should focus on Kistof. Even if Tergan helps us — which, I must admit, is too vast a concept to grasp easily — it would be better if we were seen to deal with Kistof without their assistance."

Armist nodded. "Just so."



Armist, to demonstrate his solidarity with his men, had chosen to have his tent located in the middle of

his army. Caitlan and Ailin shared another tent with Fliz, Nerys, and Zygie. The arrangement, though agreeable to all, nevertheless left Zygie as the odd one out. The other two couples . . . being around them reminded her of Pandrak — Kervran! — and it shocked her to the core to realize just how much she missed him. Not just in bed — though there it was like a dismal void — but in every aspect of her being. Suddenly the nagging incompleteness that had been her life sprang into clear focus — and she realized, not without trepidation, that maybe she had been wrong. Maybe this whole feeling was yet more evidence that whatever existed between her and the magice might just possibly . . .

Her mind shied back from the enormity of the thought. Ailin, maybe. But herself?

Dreams of a little girl. And she was not a little girl anymore. A hundred and twelve years on she should be wise enough to know!

And yet . . .

Unable to sleep, Zygie unwrapped herself from her blankets and quietly got up, careful not to disturb Nerys, who slept nearby, tossing and turning and making soft utterances, and muttering Flitz's name. Beyond Nerys, Ailin and Caitlan may or may not have been asleep. They lay still, the weaponsmaster's big frame hiding Ailin, who probably was snuggled comfortably against him on the other side. Lucky girl!

Zygie took her coat and shoes outside the tent, where she sat down and put them on.

She looked around. The camp had fallen quiet. A few sentries patrolled between the tents; apart from that everything was still.

Zygie stood up and stretched. From the Tor wafted a breeze carrying the musty smell of river, mud, and rotting weeds. Zygie took a deep breath and, greeting a pair of passing sentries, headed down toward the river. She needed to be away from people. Alone with her thoughts. Thoughts mostly of Pandrak. Mooning over a man less than half her age — like a twenty-year old! If it weren't so . . . nice . . . to think about him, it would have been pathetic. As it was, it was simply pleasant; and a touch melancholy, because he wasn't here.

Down by the Tor a wall of willows stretched from the docks, past the camp and the village, to thin out and then stop several miles down river. Much of this

was inundated now, but would emerge again when the Tor sank to its normal levels. Zygie walked as far as the trees and stopped between them, right up at the edge of the swirling waters. Through the canopy shone Janus, casting indistinct shadows of branches waving to and fro in the breeze. Zygie stood there, staring into the water, and it was as if the shadows were flat live things that swam on the surface of the lazy eddies and wakes.

Behind her a sound. Leaves scraping along garments. Zygie, her contemplation shattered, started to turn. A long, thin, but powerful arm wrapped itself around her throat. A cold-sharp object touched the side of her neck, just behind the jawbone.

"Hello, Laila," said a familiar voice. "I think that I will make an end to this."

Zygie twisted. The tip of the knife dug into her skin and drew blood.

"Be still, circe," Laetis hissed. "Enjoy the last breaths of your cursed existence."

"What do you want?" she croaked.

He loosed his hold around her throat by a trifle.

"What do I want?" he echoed. "To finish it, of course. Rid the world of at least one of you. Maybe save Keaven at the same time."

"You do not know . . ."

He jerked his arm tighter again. "Oh yes, I do," he said, his voice oddly calm and almost passionless. "I know that you, Caitlan's accursed lover, and all of your kind must not be allowed to live — for if you do you will destroy the rest us."

"How can we?" she whispered, twisting her head so that she could get some air, yet trying to avoid the sharp tip of the knife. "We cannot have children! How could we possibly ever be anything but what we are . . .?"

"Isn't that enough? You live, while the rest of us have to die. Isn't that the greatest crime of them all? Already *you* have lived for longer than you have any right to. I merely complete what nature has neglected to attend to."

"We have not chosen to be what we are."

From Laetis issued a mordant chuckle. "Who has? Still, you have chosen to live your disgusting lives. How many men have *you* confused, rejected, deceived, betrayed?" The tip of the knife dug deeper. "Tell me, circe, could you stop a man from dying, even if he were

old? Could you make him young again? Heal the ills of his body? Give him back his vigor and potency? And if you can, then why do you not do so? Why does your kind let their men get old and die? Is that not the same as murder? And do not murderers such as you deserve to die just like any others?"

He paused. Zygie felt the tip of the knife draw a lazy arc along her jawline. The sensation of warm blood seeping from the wound. It would stop in a breath or two. The wound would heal in a few minutes.

"If I sever your head," Laetis's voice said close by her ear. "that will end it, yes? I push your body into the water and hurl the head far out, into the current, where it gets swept away and never joins the body again . . . Surely, that will do it, don't you think?"

She said nothing. There was nothing to say.

Another pause. "Tell me," he said hoarsely, "could you make a man live forever?"

And what if she said "Yes"? Would it make a difference? If it saved her life, what did it matter that it was a lie? Half a lie, actually. For, while she could heal, she could only bestow immortality — or whatever it was her kind possessed — to her chosen One.

If there was such a one . . .

A terrible wave of regret swept over her.

To die here, alone.

Never to tell him.

Never to be able to let him know . . .

"Could you?"

How much time had she wasted by *not* telling him . . .

The knife edge drew a shallow cut along her neck.

"I could," she said. "But never you."

I'm so sorry, my love.

Laetis exhaled sharply. "Then die, freak."

Involuntarily, Zygie stiffened. She felt him gathering his resolve. Then he relaxed. The decision had been made. She was dead.

Then, the wish of something moving through the air. She felt him stiffen and turn his head. A sharp crack. The arm around her throat relaxed. The other twitched convulsively. The knife jerked, penetrated deep into her neck, was jerked out again. A gush of blood spewed forth. Laetis slipped to the ground.

"Are you alright!?"

A woman's voice.

Nerys?

Zygie tried to say something, but couldn't. She fell to her knees and clasped her left hand against the tide of blood coming from her neck.

"Don't," she croaked as Nerys bent down to help her.
Concentrate!

She pushed harder against the skin; felt her consciousness slipping away.

Live!

How could she ever see him again unless she lived?

Strange shapes swirled before her eyes. She didn't know that she fell forward onto the ground and lay there, still and unmoving.

Where?

What?

A diffuse form emerged from a chaos of vortices, shadows, and blotches of red, blue, and white.

The form became more distinct; resolved into Ailin's face.

Ailin?

Behind her, the faces of others.

Nerys.

Nerys — who had saved her life . . .

Armist.

Caitlan.

Ailin smiled, but her eyes were red. "Welcome back," she said softly.

Later, when Armist and Caitlan had returned to attend to martial matters, and it was just Nerys and Ailin, Zygie just lay there as they made her drink water and fed her ravenous hunger.

"I couldn't sleep," Nerys told her. "I heard you get up. I got up after you left. I saw you go down to the river. I thought I might like some company, so I went down there, too. By the time I found you . . . he . . . was there, too. I heard him talk." Nerys grinned from ear to ear. "Fliz isn't the only one who can get around without being noticed. When I was little — and maybe not so little! — I used to sneak out of my father's house and go wandering around the city."

Ailin hugged Nerys. "I'm so glad you did," she laughed.

"So you clubbed him," Zygie said weakly. She reached for Nerys's hand and held it. "Thank you."

Nerys shrugged. "I had to do *something*." She shook her head. "This man . . . he's really sick in the head."

"Sick?" Ailin said darkly. "That hardly does it justice."



"What are we going to do with Laetis?" Armist wondered.

"Let's talk to Mirne and Screef," Caitlan suggested.

Mirne and Screef were found and presently appeared in Armist's tent. As yet the news of the night's events had not spread through the camp, but it was only a question of the time until it would become known.

Caitlan related the issue. Mirne and Screef were stunned.

"What do you suggest we do?" Armist asked them. "Laetis in many ways *is* the Pacers. Indeed, that's the only reason why I have allowed him to continue in his office for so long. Clearly, this is no longer possible."

"Where is he now?" Screef asked. "I think we should like to speak to him."

"We're holding him in the village; in one of the houses."

"I'll take you there," Caitlan said.

Armist nodded and the three filed out of his tent. Armist stared after them. So much for political expediency and the requirements of statecraft. A friend had almost been killed as a result of it.

And yet Armist knew that he'd had little choice in the matter. The Pacers had helped him to overthrow Hain. There was a price to pay, and he had known it. At the time it had been abstract, easily put off somewhere into a dim future that might or might not eventuate. But now it was here, and with it the consequences.

How to deal with this? Laetis could not be allowed the freedom of Keaven again. He was clearly demented; obsession and paranoia carefully concealed under a competent and controlled exterior.

Armist made a fretful sound. How he wished that he was not who he was!

And yet . . . who else could he trust to do what had to be done?



Fliz, bored with almost two days of inactivity and slinking around, stealing food and drink and availing himself of what meager facilities remained in Caelar after his sabotage, decided that he had to do *something*. As a result he repaired himself to a place where he found out what he wanted to know: the location of Kistof's new headquarters. He found it easily enough, in a building Kistof had taken over from one of his lesser relations. Made wiser by bitter experience, Kistof had placed an excessively strong security detail around it. The place was surrounded by a ring of sentries, all in pairs, each pair in sight in sight of at least two others.

It would have been sufficient to hold off an ordinary man, but for Fliz it was child's play. The baron would have been shocked and dismayed to learn that the meeting at which he and his commanders discussed the details of their latest plan to win this battle — which focused on the assassination of Armist of Keaen — had been observed by at least one highly undesirable entity, of whose existence they were not even aware.

They also discussed the advancing Tergan regiment, which was in its final stages of crossing the Tor, and would then be on its way to the site of the siege. Kistof expressed his irritation at the lack of messages from the leaders of the Tergan detachment. His commanders agreed. The Tergan silence could mean anything — though one of them suggested that it was deliberate and designed to ensure that Armist also remained ignorant. Besides, what else could they possibly want to achieve but to help Caelar?

Was Armist's assassination still necessary then? One commander raised the issue, only to have Kistof put him down with a cutting remark. Armist's death would facilitate the defeat of his army.

Plans were refined and finalized. The men sent to do the deed would dress in Keaenean uniforms, attempt to infiltrate the camp and reach Armist; then kill him as expeditiously as possible. How they would get out of the ensuing melee was unspecified. But all of them were resourceful, and the rewards for success would be great.

Fliz listened this far. He made a decision. He departed the meeting and the building and made best speed to the western wall. He looked up. Along the battlements patrolled sentries, keeping a watchful eye on the surrounding countryside.

Urgency tugged on him.

He needed a rope!

Fliz merged into the city again. He located a general store, which was locked; the owner nowhere in evidence. Fliz located a window around the rear of the building and let himself in. He found a coil of sturdy rope, far too long and heavy for him to carry. He cut off a length he considered sufficient and left the store. Back at the wall he found the entrance to the access stairs guarded. Fliz decided that he had no time to apply patience or finesse. He picked up a fist-sized rock, sidled up to the guard, who never knew what hit him when Fliz rapped the rock over his head. Fliz hastened up the steps and emerged onto the battlements.

Now, to find an anchor for the rope and to get out of here!

A pair of sentries marched past. Fliz, invisible as a wraith, shrunk against the parapet, allowing them to pass.

Was there enough time before they returned?

Futile hesitation . . .

Fliz looped the rope around a merlon, knotted it and threw the rope over the wall. He looked down. It reached almost to the ground. Good!

The sentries reached the end of their range and started to turn back. Fliz, doing his best to remain invisible, which was difficult under the circumstances, stepped through the embrasure, grasped the rope with both hands and swung out over the precipice.

He heard the footfalls of the returning sentries. If they saw the rope . . .

Heedless of the searing pains in his palms he let himself slide down. The rope burned and tore to shreds the skin of his palms, but by the time the sentries spied the rope and there was a cry above him, he had reached the end and allowed himself to fall the last few feet. He stumbled, got up and, fighting the pain and forcing himself to focus, ambled away in his concealing gait.

The sentries, staring down, saw only the dangling rope, but nobody who might have been using it.



Nerys was fussing over him and his injured hands, but already the pain was gone. Under Ailin's ministra-

tions the wounds had healed and presently only a few pink stripes reminded him of his hasty escape.

"The Tergans will be here tomorrow," Caitlan said. He was stooped over a map, looking thoughtful.

"Tomorrow then, we'll know for certain," Armist agreed.

"They have to stop at the other side of Caelar," Caitlan said. "There's no way to get lots of men around the spur in a short time. So, we do have an advantage of sorts."

"Who leads them?" Zygie asked Fliz.

"The Tegels seemed to have no idea."

"They don't know much, do they?" she said dryly. She turned to Armist. "You will send a delegation to meet them?"

"It appears appropriate. Diplomacy is preferable to war — and I'd rather ask questions first and unsheath weapons only when the answers aren't satisfactory."

"You are going?"

Armist nodded.

"I would like to be there with you," Zygie said.

"Why?"

"I think I should."

Armist shrugged. "Consider yourself a part of the Keaenean delegation."

Nerys took Fliz's arm. "Enough of this," she declared firmly. "Fliz needs a rest and I'm going to make sure he gets it. Now!"

"Rest' she calls it!" Ailin's voice rippled with suppressed merriment.

Nerys pulled a face at her and turned to Fliz. "Are you coming?"

"I am your humble servant."

"That would be nice," Nerys said pertly as she dragged him out of the tent.

"Better nobody go into that tent for a while," Zygie said, biting back her laughter.



The Keaenean delegation to greet the Tergans consisted of Armist, Zygie, and two of his top commanders, together with two mounted heralds carrying the Keaenean banners, and a troop of six cavalry. They passed along the narrow passage between the edge of the spur and the river. The waters of the Tor

had receded just far enough to allow such passage without risk.

As they came around the spur they saw before them the Tergan force. Maybe three hundred, Armist guessed, riding in disciplined formation. At their head rode a small group of people, consisting of two men in the uniforms of captains, another man in civilian riding garments — and beside him a woman, wearing similarly fashioned garb, and riding in the manner of a man.

"I knew it," Zygie said beside Armist. He turned to look at her and saw that she was grinning broadly.

One of the advance group raised a hand. The command propagated through the mass of soldiers, which came to a halt. The lead group of four approached the Keaenean delegation.

As they came closer Armist had time to study the two civilians. The man: medium build; possibly in his thirties; an unruly mop of cut-short ash-blond hair; a pair of striking dark-blue eyes in a deceptively ordinary face. The woman: a petite brunette, of striking beauty and intensity, with a pair of dark-brown eyes that alternated between softness, an odd somberness, and grim determination.

The man saw Zygie, and his face broke into a broad smile. Neglecting polite protocol, he kicked his horse into motion and pulled up beside her.

"I should have known you'd be in the thick of this!" he laughed.

"You should talk!" Zygie countered.

He moved his horse closer to hers and put an arm around her in a brief embrace. The other woman — it had to be Evadne! — tensed, then relaxed. The man let go of Zygie and guided his horse to stand close to Armist's.

"Armist of Keaen," he said and held out his hand. "I am glad to make your acquaintance. I am Sander of Orgond." He flicked a glance at Zygie. "She might have mentioned my name."

Armist grinned. "Once or twice." He shook the proffered hand. Sander wheeled his horse and indicated his companions. "Permit me to introduce . . ."



As Caravella was about to dip below the horizon, a messenger delivered this message to the gate of Caelar.

*From Armist of Keaen
To Kistof, Baron Tegel*

Let it herewith be known that you have until day-break to surrender Caelar and yourself into my hands. If you choose not to do so, your town will be destroyed and your life will be forfeit. Surrender and it will be spared.

Your family may choose to remain in my realms. You however must consent to be exiled to a place of your choice, but not in the Valley, for the remainder of your natural life.

This I declare, with the support of the Barons of Kint, Port Ster, and Cedrea, and the Queen Evadne of Tergan and her consort, Sander of Orgond.

The beleaguering army settled down to await developments. The mangonels were readied and aimed. On the northern side of the spur the Tergan army prepared to take the unprecedented step of assisting the House of Keaen to subdue an internal rebellion.

As Caravella rose over the Eastern Ranges the gate of Caelar opened. From it emerged a small procession, carrying a white banner. Between two uniformed men stumbled Kistof, Baron Tegel. His hands were tied to his back and he was not of a happy disposition.

The Caelar delegation confronted the assembled Keaeneans, who had come to meet them. A soldier in a captain's uniform stepped forward and bowed to Armist.

"Sire — he would have had everybody die for the sake of his pride. He is yours to do with as you please — as is the city of Caelar."

Armist stepped forward and held out his hand. The captain looked at him from wide eyes. "Sire . . ."

"Take it," Armist told him.

The captain grasped the proffered hand.

"The siege is ended," Armist said. "Let life return to normal."

He nodded at Kistof, who stood, glaring at him with an expression of loathing.

"What do you say? Do you consent to exile?"

Kistof spat at him.

Armist shrugged. "Just so." He motioned to a guard detail. "Take him somewhere discreet and execute him. Make sure the body is never found."

His head held high, Kistof was led away to meet his fate.

Armist turned to the captain. "Until further notice Kint will administer Caelar."

The captain bowed. "Sire . . ."

Armist opened his mouth to correct the man, but shut it again. Caitlan, who stood off to one side noticed the gesture and grinned. Armist scowled at him. Caitlan shrugged, biting back his smirk.

The Keaenean delegation returned to the camp. Later that day there was another meeting with Evadne and Sander.

"Why don't you come with us?" Armist asked them. "You can return home along the more usual route."

Sander and Evadne exchanged a glance.

"We have," Armist added, "a lot of things to discuss."

"And," added Caitlan, "we also have something to show you. But for that you *must* come with us."

"Show?" Evadne said. "What?"

Caitlan looked at Sander, and between them flowed a silent understanding.

"Evadne knows what I know," Sander said.

"Good," Caitlan said. "Then we have a lot to talk about indeed!"



Epilogue

Keaen

And so the world is about to return to normality.

Or maybe not quite. But there was at least a semblance of it. Autumn was almost upon them; already the events of the early summer had become distant and somewhat vague. Keaen was united again. The Pacers had a new leadership and appeared willing to accept the altered circumstances. At the Tergan court intrigues still simmered, but were kept from boiling into action/coming to the boil by reforms that proved disconcerting to many. Everybody was far too occupied trying to figure out what was going to happen next, to have time to work on devious and not-so-devious schemes to assassinate each other. Besides, Sacrael had become a bad place for assassins. Keran, still the reluctant chancellor, had initiated a process which made life for members of that profession very unpleasant and complicated. As a result many had vacated the city and sought their fortunes elsewhere; most of them, Keran had assured Sander, in places other than the Valley. Fridswid had been sighted back at his home in Pruid Fair, but Sander had ordered that he should be left alone. If he dared to return to Sacrael though, he would regret it.

But right now these matters seemed distant and somehow of lesser significance. For Armist had invited them all to Keaen to discuss the future of their world. A staggering concept, but there it was. For the future was indeed at stake, and the ten people who knew the truth had to decide what to do next.

Sander's eyes roved over the company of those he considered friends. Confidantes. People who shared a knowledge of the secret. Armist of Keaen and Tahlia, her belly swollen with the baby awaiting to be born. Caitlan and Ailin. The Thalonican thief, Fliz, and Nerys, his Gaskarian lover. Pandrak and Zygie, both of whom still appeared faintly surprised at what they'd found in each other.

And Evadne.

Above all, Evadne . . .

It was good to have friends. Good, not to be alone with the burden of knowledge. Good, not to have to decide alone. Sharing a burden was not necessarily an

abdication of responsibility. In some instances it was a way to make it more bearable — and to pool the insights of many in order to arrive at a decision that had the benefit of more than one point of view.

This decision had not yet been made and might not be for some time to come. But Sander had seen the landing craft in the Myrmidic Woods, and the world for him, too, would never be the same again. The mother-ship waited on the other side of Caravella. Or did it? Maybe his former masters had chosen to take it away! Maybe they had even destroyed it. The only way to find out was to go there.

Decisions.

Sander looked around him:

At his friends . . .

. . . and he hoped that they all knew what he knew: that friends are good; that people mattered more than grand schemes and plans and devices and designs.

At the unyielding, seemingly eternal walls around him . . .

. . . and he thought that the design of Castle Keaen was grim compared to the more elegant plan of Castle Sacrael — though, if the truth be admitted to, they both could have done with more grace. The founders obviously had been of a somewhat severe disposition, and this was reflected in the construction of their cities and castles. Still, the *living* people made a place what it really was, and if one held with this axiom, then Castle Keaen was cheerful and bright. For people were laughing and chatting and smiling at each other — and this was the way it should be.

A touch at his arm.

Evadne.

"Thinking deep thoughts?"

He smiled. Sometimes he caught himself still not quite believing it: that she was with him, that they were like . . . this.

"Deep? Hardly. I'm just . . . content."

She slipped her arm under his. "Let's go for a walk on the battlements. Tahlia says that the view across the passage and Fingael bay is quite beautiful."

"Why not?"

Sander caught Armist's eye and motioned with his head. Armist smiled and nodded, then returned his attention to Fliz. Sander paused for a moment and contemplated the small circle of friends. Pandrak

laughing at something Nerys had just told him. Tahlia and Ailin talking in a corner, probably about Tahlia's growing baby. Zygie conversing with Caitlan, who listened with a little crooked smile.

People at ease. People who liked each other. What more could anybody want?

Sander put his arm around Evadne's shoulders and they left the room. The vaulted corridor was empty. A few torches stuck in holders along the walls cast a chaotic flicker of light and shadow across the walls and the floor. A door on their left. They opened it and stepped out onto the battlements. Sander inhaled deeply. The view was spectacular indeed. From the other side of Keaven Passage the glimmer of the lights of Fingael. Off to the east Janus rising. Above a sprinkling of stars. Across the western sky the expanse of the Great Void. An immensity extending from one infinity to another; and somewhere, near this star or that, maybe a world teeming with people — some of whom might at this very instant be looking up into their skies and seeing the same universe, though from a completely different perspective.

"I can almost *hear* you think," Evadne said.

Sander chuckled. "Guilty on all charges."

"What's on your mind?"

"What's out there. — *Who's* out there."

"Will we ever know?"

"Do you want to?"

"I think so."

"Well — one day, when our tasks here *are* done . . ."

"And we'll be . . ." A minute hesitation.

He turned and took her in his arms. "Old? — No."

"Sander . . ."

"I said I don't agree with the precepts. I meant it."

"But . . ."

"I don't want to live without you," he said simply.

She kissed him. "You *do* know how to say the right things."

"I meant it."

"I know."

"So — then?"

"What . . . what exactly do you . . . we . . . have to do?"

Sander chuckled. "Nothing much. A small cut; in your arm maybe. Another in mine. A touching of the wounds. The restorers migrate from one bloodstream to another."

"That is all?"

"That is all. Those who migrate populate the new host. The deed is done." He touched her face. "Do you want this?"

Evadne took a deep breath. "I do."

"Tonight?"

"Tonight?"

"Tonight."

"Yes. — Tonight."

They embraced and kissed. Then they stood there for another while, arms around each other, and looked out across Keaven Passage.

"What about our friends?" Evadne wondered. "Tahlia, Nerys, Fliz . . ."

What indeed? First Evadne — and now Tahlia and Nerys as well? And then their children and so on. And if he included them, then why not others? What gave him the right to select arbitrarily from his fellow human beings? Even if he just considered his friends? There was Keran. Was he not just as worthy of this boon? And Keran would ask him to include his son and his wife, both of whom he adored. And, while Keran would probably keep the secret, was his wife likely to?

The propagation of the restorers was a process that, once set in motion, would continue with ponderous inevitability along a course over which he, Sander, would have no further control. The only way to halt it was to contain it here and now. Exclude everybody but Evadne and himself . . .

And he knew that he could not do this — no matter what the consequences. Besides, this thing was already loose in the world. He had it. His father and grandfather had it. Evadne would have it before the morning. And his friends were his friends. How could he *not* give it to them? Armist, Pandrak, and the circes did not need it. But Tahlia did — and how could he deprive Armist of his love? Their bond was as strong as that between Evadne and himself . . .

His father would be horrified — and his former masters, those whose authority Sander had renounced, would be extremely displeased. But they were far away and might not even exist anymore. Or they might have forgotten all about this world. Or maybe . . .

Futile speculation. Excuses for delaying decisions. Decisions that were his, and his alone.

"Trust your friends," Evadne said softly.

He looked at her, surprised. How did she know?

"Sometimes," she said, surprising him again, "your face tells your thoughts as plainly as if you had spoken them aloud."

"Am I that easy to read?"

She smiled. "To me, yes." Her upturned face was a pale oval in the light of the stars. He decided that he wanted to kiss her, and he did. And though the stars wheeled above them it was as if time stood still.

"Let's go back inside," he said then, "and I will tell them."

"I knew you would."

"Did you now?"

"I did. — Just like I knew that I loved you — long before I even conceived of the possibility that I could ever love anybody."

Together they looked up into the sky.

"I wonder what's out there?" she said, leaning against him and making him feel so content that it almost hurt.

"We'll find out."

The End



A New Beginning

by Malcolm Bowers

Disquisitions had been accepted, practical and theoretical enchantments accomplished, and full membership of the Guild granted. The three young mages from the Ermizard Institute of Esoteric Exegesis were celebrating at the Golden Wyvern, still arrayed in their ceremonial best. The inn was too expensive to be a regular student haunt, but this was a special night. The time for scrimping and constant study was past; the future was a wide, slow river to a shining sea, and no rocks or rapids would mar the way.

Tanfl the barman kept an eye on the three. *You had to watch student mages or they'd turn the serving maids' hair purple and blue or levitate a pot of beer and upend it over someone's head. This lot seemed pleasant enough, though, and the red-haired youth had the look of a noble. Maybe their magic could help find that lazy, worthless pot-boy. No, there's always a price, maybe high.*

Aspand made a gesture for silence. He was resplendent in robes of fasciated celadon and charcoal, a pectoral and armllets of lacquered pink copper, and a dramatic cerise cloak. His skin was tawny, his eyes grey, his curly black hair short. "We should temper our joy, for not all today are as fortunate as ourselves." His face grew glum. "There was an accident earlier at the Institute: an over-diligent alchemist fell into the vat of acid he was stirring. . ." He sighed, looked down, looked up again. "He was absorbed in his work."

That his companions laughed rather than groaned at this chestnut signified that drink and good cheer had been plentiful. Even Hamamelis, normally somewhat astringent, had relaxed beside him. Her honey-blond hair was piled in a white bandeau, her robe, the fresh blue-green of glacial ice, a shade paler than her eyes, was held in with a white cincture. She turned her gaze to Pyric, who leant back opposite his friends, legs crossed, casually clasping his raised knee. Even so indolently posed he seemed to hold court; the russet hair that framed his high-boned face strengthened his leonine air. He wore a deep green cloak atop contrasting tunic and treads of tan heavily patterned with cinnamon-coloured thread, belt and high boots of bur-

gundy.

"You did not seem to be 'absorbed' by Nenisaire's speech, Pyric."

"Absorbed, no. Corroded, yes. The boredom ate away at me slowly but no less painfully than did the acid at Aspand's imaginary alchemist."

"I'm amazed that old Nenisaire remembered it all. You know how he is normally," said Aspand. He accurately imitated the high-pitched, cracked voice of their former tutor. "What is the order of the alphabet again?"

"That is unkind; I'm sure he has never said anything of the sort," said Hamamelis, smiling nonetheless. "I thought his words this afternoon, if profuse, were wise."

"My dear girl, I must disagree." Pyric's dark eyes flashed, he sat forward. "Discipline and diligence, practise and repetition, these are the drudgeries of an apprentice. We are done with them. Admonitions to caution are fitting for the aged and infirm, not for those of us with hot blood flowing in our veins. We have vigour, daring. We can stride lustily where they must take small, halting steps."

Hamamelis persisted. "Should we not heed the lessons of experience? It is prudent to be prepared for the world's dangers."

"Bah, experience has ground the old down till they are as smooth as cobblestones, and fear to be likewise trodden underfoot. They think the world dims along with their eyesight. I say the world is bright, vibrant, alive: the day sings! The fears that flit like bats about the brow of age are but the shadows of mortality. They need not concern us."

"You sweep aside the warnings of Nenisaire with fine eloquence," said Aspand. "Surely his advice on magic is less easily dismissed? Magical ritual must be performed precisely: any dissonance, hesitancy, or lapse of focus, and it fails. Mages must work with structures. Repeated patterns give magic structure; a single strand is like gossamer, but many strands perfectly aligned give great strength. Surely, therefore, repetition is necessary to the art, and we must practise to achieve precision, just as a swordsman practises his thrusts and parries."

"An admirable summary, my friend: I would that Nenisaire had been as brief." Pyric grinned, and cut and ate a slice of apple. Some might say he was

impetuous, but he was polite enough not to eat while speaking. He impaled the remainder of the fruit on his knife, waving it about for emphasis as he continued.

"It is true that the eight cardinal and sixty-four contingent gestures of power, for ensample, require frequent reiteration to gain fluidity of technique. But rote exercise does not apply to the mind as it does to the body. Creativity is the true core of magic, chaos within order, like the blade within this apple. Tutors at Ermizard and elsewhere say 'we do it thus, ergo it is right' but I say they lack imagination, and merely follow precedent. Hence a treacle-slow progress condemns us to decline to their state of hoary decrepitude before we attain our real potential. I covet the trappings and rewards of power now, while I can enjoy them! What use are they when the fires of youth have dwindled to the ashes of age? Fresh-poured wine is sweet, the dregs are sour."

"We must learn from someone, or spend a lifetime reinventing the spell. If there were a more painless way, would it not be in use? Why would mages grow old in study if they could attain mastery more nimbly?" said Hamamelis.

"Ah, there's the nub of it. Let me elucidate by analogy. Those foresters and warlords who employ elephants secure them at night with a rope fastened to a peg in the ground. The beasts can easily uproot trees, yet are held securely. Why is this? When young, they are secured with chains stapled to tree trunks. The calves try and try again to pull away but cannot: they are weak. Once they give up, the chains are replaced with ropes. They continue to believe they cannot break free, and so never attempt it, even when they grow and their strength waxes. Habit forges mental chains for mages that are subtler, but as binding. Our venerable tutors cannot see past the restrictions of their training, and so cannot advance quickly. To follow in their path is to be doomed to that same dragging, elephantine pace."

"Archimages have been known to be both brilliant and eccentric. Morozam springs to mind. Surely some must have had the same thoughts as yourself, and would have, if it were possible, codified swifter, less limiting systems of tuition."

Morozam was one of the more illustrious Archimages, just long enough dead for his history to

start crystallising into legend. His avarice for life had been startling: he had lasted nearly two centuries.

"Indeed," said Pyric, "in my researches I have descried cryptic hints that this may be so, more in what is not indited than in what is. Curious lacunae and odd obliquities in certain manuscripts lead me to believe that such a system exists, but is hidden."

"If there were such an easy path to power, why has it not been shared?"

"Altruism is not universal." said Pyric dryly. "At the loftier heights, a mage's greatest fear is of other mages. He is as jealous as a phoenix of his position. If it appears such eminence can only be achieved with protracted toil, it becomes grander in the eyes of his colleagues and the world, the better to command awe — and justify the accrual of wealth. Let us not forget our lavish tuition fees."

He threw his arms wide in emphasis: the apple flew off his knife and behind a stack of wood by the massive stone fireplace. The dozing pot-boy was struck squarely on the ear in his hidden nook, and ran squealing to the kitchen. There was scattered laughter from around the inn. Pyric was immediately contrite, too late.

The miscreant's sudden rout impressed Tanfl the barman. *There you are, mages know what you want without asking, and can see through things too. Best not overcharge them.*

"I observe you are on target in at least one respect." said Aspad even more dryly. "But, since habit and self-interest explain much human activity, your theory may be tenable."

"I purpose to prove it. We now have full access to the library. I shall make generous use of the privilege to pursue my researches. After I unlock the wisdom I know exists, I shall revel in the proof of being Ermizard's youngest Archimage!"

"Hah! Likely you'll wade for years through deep sloughs of wearying theses and obscure monographs. I conjecture that many are kept locked away more to preserve the Guild from embarrassment than to shield unready minds from dangerous knowledge."

The conversation thereafter bounced from topic to topic like the severed head of a goblin bouncing from boulder to boulder down a rocky slope. In time, the three parted with promises of undying friendship and frequent future evenings of carousal far too extrava-

gant to have much chance of being kept.

Lower only than the Sidereal Conspectorium at the rocky hub of the Institute, the Ermizard library tower spiralled up like a colossal seashell of pale lilac. Its stepped rooms, segments of the spiral, were linked by short stairways, so that one who desired exercise, or lacked the rank to use the central shaft, could traverse the rooms clockwise to the very top. To do so was to wind back through centuries, for the older the volume, the higher the level at which it was stored.

Pyric's search, he thought, might have daunted a lesser soul. As it was, he was tired after so many days, finding it hard to force himself to peruse yet another title. He was sure that what he sought was somewhere on these shelves, but where? The library's scores of rooms each contained hundreds or thousands of volumes. Beyond the lower segments holding standard reference works — *The Pandect of Panprobability*, *Endobarl's Hermeneutics*, *The Bigbian Enchiridion* — order seemed gradually to lose the battle with chaos. The older and more recondite books were stacked haphazardly, so each must be checked. The preservative magic of the building prevented damp and pests, but by a lamentable oversight not dust, so a thin carpet of grey further obscured already faded titles. Pyric sighed (and coughed as the sigh raised a puff of dust). He rested a moment, his tired mind empty.

Pyric felt a tug at the edge of his awareness. He looked up, but no one had come into the room and he could hear nothing. At this height, the segments were usually deserted. No, it was not a physical thing, but some inner sense. He tried to concentrate on it. Nothing. He pondered a moment then tried not concentrating at all. Something faint might be found indirectly, just as a faint star can be seen only when one looks to its side, not straight at it.

Yes, he could feel something, sense a direction. Haltingly at first, losing and finding it again, he followed the trace up a few more turns of the spiral and finally stopped. Strangled gleams of light filtered through the narrow quartz windows in the wedge-shaped room. His hand reached out as if guided to a volume that lay behind a congested row of books on one of the lowest shelves. The tome felt curiously right when he held it, as if it had been waiting just for him.

The book was an old dissertation. Under a filmy fur of dust, its cheap leather binding was cracked. Inside, a crabbed script suited the tedium of the contents. The style was laboured, the topic obscure. If this immensely dull and turgid thesis had been accepted, it had been because the student's mentor could not bear to read through it; Pyric almost slumped asleep after a page. He forced himself to continue.

He became aware that touch belied its appearance; the book felt smooth. If he didn't concentrate on the text, he could almost see something out of the corner of his eye. He let his mind go blank. His vision slipped out of focus and the page swam before him. The ink of the letters seemed to run and twist, then the colours and form of the book altered completely. He could now see past what must have been illusion: the book was magnificent, the script rich and flowing, gold letters written on sheets of vellum dyed purple with murex. Such a volume, a *codex aureus*, was only created for works of the first importance! The magical disguise confirmed its worth. Joy welled up, a near-physical pressure in his chest.

Sheer exhilaration made it impossible for Pyric to read the tome at once. He placed it on the oaken reading table, strode up and down a while, sat, tried to calm himself. Fate or some kindly god must have guided him . . . yet in truth a deity would more likely send doubtful dreams or omens than act directly, and his piety had not been such as to attract divine favour. It must be like calling to like — not quite a ghost, rather the lingering resonance of a kindred spirit finding at last a receptive and untrammelled mind.

The book lacked title, author, or inscription, and was prefaced with an ambiguous rune. He started to read. The exordium was immediately engaging. It accorded entirely with his own views, setting forth the problems with the rigidly stratified study of enchantment and the correspondingly sloth-like amelioration that attended its pursuit. It outlined ideas that he had considered himself, others he had adumbrated but not amplified, still others that were fresh, visionary concepts. It proposed to reveal a rapid, intuitional method of gaining expertise. Pyric felt triumph and vindication (abated only by the faint disappointment that he had not proposed all the ideas and expressed them as cogently himself). He had been right all along! This was, moreover, not a clue to the hidden work he

sought, but the work itself, obviously the creation of a master. It was perfect, almost too good to be true.

The composition was in the style of, and he soon realised must be by, Morozam himself. It was said he had been working on a last, great enchantment in his final days. His notes had not been found, and accepted wisdom was that he had failed, destroyed them, and died in despair. Rumours still ran rife as to Morozam's utmost endeavour: a glowing mist that could transport whole armies at speed, a literal cornucopia, little blue pills that could restore manly gusto. Now, though, Pyric knew. It was not a new enchantment, it was a new enlightenment. Morozam's spirit must have guided him to it, to pass on to a sympathetic soul the legacy he had failed to pass on in life. For his insight, Pyric would be the first in the full flush of youth to be rewarded with effortless empery.

Pyric proceeded to the body of the work, a giddy mixture of philosophy, example, and revelation. The discourse was enlivened by learned allusions, consolidated by practical applications of its disclosures. He saw that a mage must surrender some part of himself to the art for magic to flow through him. Overmuch study rigidified the mind, hardened it against acceptance of the pure light of truth. Far from study calling out native power, only by exclusion of what was imposed could one transcend the mundane and directly touch upon underlying reality. As each new insight illuminated his mind, it was as if he'd known it to be true all along but had latterly lost sight of it. Some text he read without complete and immediate comprehension, yet it seemed understanding followed on. This was not a normal treatise to be scrutinised and challenged; more a thing to be experienced, wherein one gained intuitional knowledge, not facts for recital!

Pyric looked up after a time. He had read some quarter of the tome. It was now late in the day, and he had arranged to meet his friends. He rose to his feet, yawned, shook his head to clear it. As he left, he secreted the book in its former place. He had no fear it would be disturbed by others, since the protective illusion lingered. In the early afternoon, he had glanced back at a previously read page to see it dull again, detailing, of all things, some forgotten incident from his own childhood. No doubt the illusion must draw from the mind of the reader to effect its deception.

Pyric walked briskly, but in the time it took to reach the agreed rendezvous, like iron out of a blacksmith's fire, the red glow of evening had cooled to the black of night. The Cauldron was comfortable and cheery, less splendid than the Golden Wyvern perhaps, but justly famed for its sweet nutty ale and tasty fare. It was also a good deal cheaper, and the wealth of the three mages had so far failed at catch up with their new rank. Pyric found Aspand and Hamamelis at a wall table, and beckoned for ale. Tonight, like many of the tavern's patrons, the three wore faded student robes of purple and blue.

"Ah, at last, we thought you were lost to us." said Hamamelis.

"Not quite."

"Well, now your presence graces this vasty hall," said Aspand, his gesture taking in the low, black-beamed ceiling, close-crowded tables, and warm bustle of the tavern, "what say you to gingered broth and crusty bread, a capon with galantine, crayfish and lemon tartlets, followed by a wedge of ruayn cheese and a flask of muscatel?"

"Delicious . . . and what will you two have?" grinned Pyric.

The meal was indeed delicious, and fell short of perfection only in the lack of room to sprawl out afterwards. Pyric reflected that an evening with friends like this felt more real, more worthwhile, than much in life. Even the day's miraculous disclosures right now seemed nebulous in comparison, like the glittering faerie castles that appear in the air before travellers and then vanish to confound them.

Hamamelis spoke, her blue-green eyes mocking. "You seem in good spirits tonight, Pyric. Have you uncovered further signs in your hunt for hidden mysteries?"

"I come close; I scent the prey; its very taste is in my mouth." Of a sudden, Pyric felt strangely reluctant to reveal too much to his habitual confidants. He could not understand why for a moment. Perhaps he wanted to make sure it was real — yes, that was it, tomorrow he would be certain. "I will know soon. But what of your own pursuits? Have you decided on future paths?"

Aspand spoke first. "For me, frankly, the deeper mysteries of the multiverse lack allure; I had thought

to commence with the zetetics of zymurgy.”

“I see you have a true philosopher’s soul. I am sure you will quaff deeply from the cups, horns, beakers, jacks, and goblets of wisdom.”

“My own aim is in all ways more sober.” said Hamamelis, pushing back her hair, worn loose this night, with a slim pale hand. “I plan first to expand my repertoire of enchantments. With full membership of the Guild, spell scrolls become merely an expensive luxury rather than a hopeless extravagance.”

Pyric considered her briefly. He might have found her attractive, but preferred more complaisant girls. Of course she could be his if he chose, but she better suited Aspand, who, like grass, seemed to do better for being cut down now and then.

“For my part,” said Pyric, “I may well play no active role at Ermizard, whatever the upshot of my research. I chafe at its constraints and niceties; they stifle enterprise. Scruples mix no more with ambition than scorpion venom with griffin blood.”

“You surely do not mean you would consider . . . other avenues to power.” said Hamamelis, with a slight grimace of distaste.

“I would not go so far. After all, necromancers don’t drink . . . wine.”

“Ho ho! You are a man after my own heart!” said Aspand, beaming. “Landlord! Another round of wine here!”

When they left the tavern, the moon had long risen. Since the others lodged to the south, Pyric set off for his northerly dwelling alone. A slight frost had crispened the air and sharpened the stars. Moonlight glistened on the rime, tessellated the night-still terraces of the city into chessboard squares of deep black and pale silver-blue.

As Pyric walked home, the effects of drink cushioning him from the chill and making dreamlike the streets, he fell into reverie, considering what it would be like to have the sway of an Archimage. Soon now, nobles could want *his* favour. He might live like an Oriental potentate, in a modest palace of green-white marble, hung with fine tapestries and sweet-smelling censers, with screens carved of rare wood, damask cushions and couches, and silken girls bringing sherbet . . .

At intervals in the black-shadowed, blue-and-silver streets, lanterns seeped warm amber light like pools

of melted butter. Near one a fellow leaned against a wall, meal-coloured cloak clasped tight, wide-brimmed hat pulled down. As Pyric passed, he got an impression of a swarthy, vulpine face, a shabby attempt at swagger. A pander, doubtless, waiting for his harlot to reappear. Pyric ignored him and turned into the alley that cut through to Glassmakers’ Row.

Pyric sensed movement in the shadows ahead, and with sudden prescience knew exactly what would occur. When the wretch followed him into the alleyway and noisily cleared his throat, he didn’t turn around, but began a swift spell. He was unsurprised when dark shapes loomed from the shadowed walls before him: two club-wielding ruffians. He spoke a word of power, willed a measure of force, made a sinuous gesture leaving his left hand outspread. A surge of energy thrilled through him: twisting razor-edged ribbons of glowing blackness, darker than the night, streaked out from his fingertips, coiled around the pair and cut them down.

“Now just hand over your coin and no one needs to . . .” The robber’s tones of measured menace dried up. The mark, a tipsy student by his look, should have wheeled about in fear, caught off-balance, to be clubbed down from behind and stripped of valuables. Something was wrong. He couldn’t see what; he heard thuds, the clatter of clubs on cobbles. The mark then turned, but smooth and sure, capable-looking. Taken aback, the robber reflexively threw his drawn dagger.

Pyric saw the amber gleam from the spinning blade; he sidestepped, cat-quick; the throw went wide. He spoke another arcane vocable, focused power, extended his hand. Scores of scintillae whirred like angry emberflies in a globe over his palm, lighting the alleyway orange-white, casting a vague shadow behind. He blew on them sharply: they flashed forth with a vicious hiss. The face of the target was briefly illumed, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, as the swarm of fire-shards struck and flung him back, nearly cut in half.

All was still again. Pyric relaxed from the state of heightened clarity that had possessed him, aware that scant seconds had passed. He walked forward to look at the corpse in the splash of lantern-light at the mouth of the alley. It lay broken and twisted, face still shocked in death. A scorched smell hung in the air.

Pyric hadn’t thought he could project so much

power without draining himself utterly; he realised with wonder that he had barely tapped his potential. He retraced his steps, drew out a small light-globe from his scrip: it flickered with cold green fire. The would-be assailants in the alleyway lay still. He should have hurt them enough to slow them down and scare them off. One was dead, his face ashen. The second, a hulking brute, was paralysed and breathing stertorously. Even as Pyric brought the light-globe closer, he saw the eyes film over in dull incomprehension as that one, too, died.

He was a little disquieted. Not so much by the deaths of a few robbers (although he felt somehow that it ought to have affected him more), but by the force he'd used without significant exertion. It was as if he had kicked at a boulder and smashed it to flinders.

Still, qualms were for querulous old age. As he continued home, he marvelled at his competence given the night's drinking. Every move had been perfect — truly well-oiled indeed! The skill and power the book had promised had proven real after all: more potent, and more quickly granted, than he had dared dream.

Autumn trees wept red and gold around the courtyard; the leaves blown across the cobbles hissed like palimpsests being scraped clean, swirled about him, heaped at his feet — he was pinned down, and the drift piled up and up until he was buried.

Pyric awoke gasping for air. The nightmare had been distressingly real; the scuffing sound seemed to echo briefly in his skull. His breathing slowed and evened. He was a little shaken, but after all, it was only a bad dream. No doubt a touch of indigestion after that extra tartlet.

It was a new morning, crisp and clear, bright with promise. Pyric made his way up the library's spiral tower to the room where the tome lay. He retrieved the book and sat down at the oak table to read, the illusion again dissolving before him like frost in sunlight. By the end of the day he would have all that he sought, and more.

As he read further through the tome, as he absorbed new lessons, new epiphanies burst upon his brain, secrets that the truly talented could absorb without tedium. Ever and anon, just as he had located and truly seen the book by forsaking rigid scrutiny, he

found that if he simply ceded to the text, understanding came naturally, although he could not have repeated the words he had read exactly. He was enthralled, conscious that he was gaining in power and wisdom simply by reading. It seemed, with each leaf turned, as if he peeled away a page-thin layer of ignorance and callowness from within, becoming one step nearer full enlightenment and free employment of power. It became less difficult, almost as if he were recalling rather than learning, refreshing concepts rather than instilling them. He could feel assurance settling about him like an aura; surety being inked into his brain as if by a master scribe.

Through a narrow quartz window, sunset sent a shaft of gilded crimson across the table and open book. It brought to mind the dream that had disturbed him. He should reflect carefully on that in due course; perhaps it was a warning of some kind. But there was no time now: only a page remained of the tome! One page to complete mastery! Pyric read on, the golden letters shining like fire before his eyes.

Morozam looked up from the book that had been the instrument of his last, greatest enchantment, and smiled. He flexed the muscles of his new body: young, fit, and comely, it would do very well indeed. The brain too was crisply responsive. The outer shell of memories had been preserved, to help with his new role, but the rest was clear. It was as he had hoped: his mind's fire was recaptured along with the limbs' vigour. Excellent! All his old skill with new energy and swiftness. It was like riding an eager thoroughbred after ambling along on a tired jade. The years of preparation, the decades of waiting in disembodied limbo bound within the book, had been worthwhile. Everything had worked perfectly: the subtle clues and psychic lure keyed to a brilliant but reckless victim; the intricately nested spells to erode his will and beguile him with specious visions drawn from his own desires; the gradual transfer of minds under the veil of delusion.

Morozam hummed a jaunty air. After a meteoric rise to his former rank, he would have another century or two to enjoy himself. His new works of genius and subsequent fame would be under the name of Pyric, but he was content.

He closed the book that now held the soul of Pyric

and carelessly placed it in a dusty stack of dreary tomes. No longer distinctive, it blended in as if absorbed. He mused that Pyric had got what he wanted, in a way: a mind that would not age, a young body brimming with mastery and experience, and all without years of drudgery. Not that he could enjoy it, or even appreciate the irony. There was always a price for power.



The Zael Inheritance

by Tim Stretton

Chapter 25

"Before we start," Smith said, "are you sure you want to do this? It must be completely voluntary, or your conditioning will re-assert itself."

Lamarck looked across at Taslana, who was sitting uncomfortably in an armchair designed for a more appreciative occupant. She stared back blankly. Lamarck drew whatever conclusions he needed to.

"Do it," he said. "Is there really a choice?"

"Oh yes," said Allaiiao Gazmend. "You always have a choice. You can stand up; but we'd all be worse off – and you most of all."

Lamarck nodded abstractedly.

"Well, Dr Smith – if I must use that absurd alias – the floor is yours," he said. "Begin at your convenience."

'Dr Smith' spoke in a slow deep voice.

"I am going to put you into a mild trance. I will ask you some questions and you will want to answer them fully and helpfully. I am raising my hand: when I let it fall you will be co-operative."

Smith raised his left hand; with his right he made a series of barely perceptible movements. Slowly – so slowly the movement could scarcely be tracked – the left hand fell.

"Can you hear me?" he asked.

"Yes," said Lamarck, his voice subtly different in inflection.

"Go back in your mind," said Smith, "to August the 27th 1504, Galactic Standard Calendar. It is 14:00 hours. Where are you?"

There was a pause, a feeling of suppressed urgency and moment, plans about to come to fruition and mysteries find their resolution.

"I am on the bridge of the TLZ liner *Flanders*. The *Flanders* has just landed on the planet Byzantium."

A sigh from Allaiiao Gazmend.

"Good," said Smith. "What name are you using, and who is with you?"

"I am Second Officer Cowan Hood . . . Captain Imminghausen is with me."

"Think ahead in your mind: do you go into the Captain's ready-room?"

"Yes. It is 14:32 by the chronometer. The Captain has left the bridge, and a few minutes later he asks me to join him."

"Tell us what happens from that point."



I go in to see the Captain.

"Sit down," he says. He seems unsettled, although someone who was not familiar with his ways would not notice it. He indicates the com-screen.

"I have just been speaking with The Man," he says. "The Man is worried, and unhappy."

I am beginning to have similar feelings myself. I say nothing.

"He tells me that a Pangalactic snoop has been uncovered on the *Ferdinand Magellan*," he continues.

Now I really am worried.

"The *Ferdinand Magellan*? Don't they carry – secondary cargoes?" I ask, simply to buy time. I know the *Ferdinand Magellan* has been trafficking jerkies and arms – and I know they had a snoop on board.

Imminghausen nods.

"The snoop was unlucky. He claimed to have worked out of Argyris Station; then a crewman came aboard who had spent twenty years in and out of the Station. He knew nothing of this man Schnaber: his quarters were searched and various pieces of equipment were discovered. They interrogated him; enthusiastically and none too competently. Now they won't have the chance to ask any more questions."

I have never understood that 'breaking out in a cold sweat' was not just a metaphor before: now I am learning the literal truth of the phrase. Imminghausen, the cynical old cat, is playing with me.

"The Man is somewhat paranoid. He thinks there may be other snoops," he continues.

I shrug. "Not impossible," I say with what I think is commendable composure.

"Anyway, it means that he thinks he is under scrutiny. He couldn't give a damn about any of us, of course – but he's worried that the money may not be safe."

He holds up a small transaction strip.

"This is the income from our secondary cargo, and

from many previous secondary cargoes,” he says. “The Man wants it put in a secure and untraceable account. Before we take off, go over to the Bank of Byzantium and open a Triple Bar Nucleotide Strip Account.”

I can barely hold back a laugh. Not only does Imminghausen not suspect me; he is sending me off to hide the money; or is he just playing with me some more? I stall.

“What do I have to do?”

“It’s simple. A normal credit account requires positive physical identification to allow access; normally one or both of a DNA and retina match. I have a sample of The Man’s DNA here, which would allow you to open an ordinary account. Obviously with the sort of money we have here it is too insecure to use.

“The second security feature is the nucleotide strip. The Bank extracts a random DNA sequence from the account holder’s sample and makes a ‘ticket’ containing this sequence. To access the account now I need not only the original DNA, but the ticket as well. Without the ticket the sample is useless since I don’t know what part of the DNA sequence has been built into it.

“This is a useful feature: it means Pangalactic can’t simply arrive at the Bank of Byzantium with The Man under arrest and access the account with his DNA – because The Man will still have the ticket hidden away.

“If one is as cautious as The Man, even that isn’t enough. DNA samples are freely available, and the key might come into someone else’s possession. So the Triple Bar Account employs a third security device, the oldest in the book: a password. Even that isn’t infallible, but to access the account now I need all three tools: the DNA sample, the nucleotide key, and the password.”

“I understand,” I say, and indeed I do. The Man is effectively distanced from the account but, once I hand over the nucleotide key and reveal the password, only he can get at the money. It’s a clever way of protecting his money and avoiding awkward questions about its source.

It seems that I am – for now – free from suspicion. The situation cannot last, even though Imminghausen trusts me. The Man, notoriously thorough, is certain to order all sorts of checks – and it might not be too difficult to find some circumstantial evidence which would lead to more searching questions. Once there

are even faint suspicions about my loyalty, my role as a snoop is blown: at best I will be taken off the ‘secondary cargo’ runs; at worst they will torture me to death. I am hoping that my handlers know what’s happened to Pincarion – they are bound to halt the operation once they do.

I leave the ship and make my way through Byzantium City. Although it seems odd to me that I’m opening a Triple Bar Account for a third party, no-one in the bank is surprised. They have enough irregular transactions to know that sometimes it’s best not to ask; and The Man’s money is as good as anyone’s – and gregarious with it.

I hand over the DNA sample and make up a password, studiously neutral; the clerk hands back after a couple of minutes the account number and the nucleotide key. The transaction complete, I toy with the idea of going to the local Pangalactic office and calling off the operation; but I know we don’t have enough direct evidence to convict The Man. We need to tie him to the money – and for that the account needs to be active. If I’d wanted an easy life I should never have become a snoop . . .

When I get back to the ship Imminghausen is waiting for me. He is a phlegmatic character and he doesn’t even bother to ask me for the nucleotide key, let alone the password.

“Have you completed your errand, Mr Hood?” he asks me in the ironic tone he customarily uses in front of an audience.

“Yes, sir,” I say.

“Very well,” he replies. “Prepare to engage take-off engines,” he commands the pilot. With casual authority – after all, he is the captain, on his own bridge – he walks over to my station and holds out his hand. I indifferently give him the nucleotide key; but on a crowded bridge I think it best to keep back the password.

Soon we are in orbit around Byzantium. The Captain, simultaneously watchful and bored, commands me:

“Ready the Drive, Mr Hood: we enter Otherspace in two minutes.”

I tap in the commands necessary to bring the Drive on-line. As I await the command to engage the Drive, Beckling, the Communications Officer, calls out:

“Priority transmission from the planet, sir:

Pangalactic frequency.”

Imminghausen is a strong man: he does not sag, though he must know it is all over. He is one of the old school.

“Transmit, Mr Beckling,” he says.

“Captain Imminghausen, this is Puissant Apprehensor Palaeologus of Pangalactic Security Services Incorporated. Please consider your craft under immediate interdict. Do not attempt to engage your Drive. I have a battery trained on your ship and I will destroy you if necessary.”

I suspect this is a bluff, and Imminghausen’s sneer suggests he does too; but he has nowhere to run, and appreciates the futility of adding to his catalogue of crimes, which is already ample.

“It is my business to comply with the law, and I will do so: however, I hope you will explain the reason for this disruption to my schedule.”

Palaeologus, a career bureaucrat by his looks, reaches for a sheet which appears to contain the bill of offences.

“You are charged with felonious traffic in proscribed substances, importation of baneful weaponry without due permit and payment of imposts . . . ’



At this point Allaiiao Gazmend began to grow restive.

“Enough!” he said. “Smith, I think the recital has gone far enough.”

“You may desist,” said Smith softly to Lamarck.

“Am I the only one who knows how to conduct an interrogation?” asked Allaiiao Gazmend. “I want a one-word answer: just ask the question.”

Smith paused and turned back to Lamarck.

“When you opened the Triple Bar Account: what was the password?”

Taslana laughed aloud with hysterical intensity: surely the truth could not be so simple, and so absurd.

“BEAST,” said Lamarck tonelessly.

Hax, standing by the only exit in the well-appointed room, came to life. He took out a pulse-gun which seemed to know a short-cut into his hand.

Inclining his head towards Lamarck he asked, “Now?”

Allaiiao Gazmend shook his head.

“Bring him round,” he said to Smith, and with a gesture Lamarck was restored to his normal state.

Rather to his surprise he found he remembered all that had happened; he had imagined that he would be unable to recall events occurring behind his conditioning screen.

With a sardonic smirk he said to Allaiiao Gazmend:

“Was that what this was really all about? You wanted the password to your own account?”

Allaiiao Gazmend resisted any provocation Lamarck may have intended. “Pangalactic pulled you out too quickly after we discovered your confederate on the *Ferdinand Magellan*; you were the only one who knew the password. How much time – and how many lives – might have been saved had your colleagues waited for you to communicate with Captain Imminghausen.”

“No doubt the former is of more concern to you than the latter,” said Lamarck. “You have been expending lives at a prodigious rate to date. I assume there are several more remaining to be taken . . . Indeed I am a little surprised to have lived this long.”

Ever since he had entered the room, Lamarck had been trying to establish how he and Taslana were going to get out again; but there was only a single exit, and the competent Hax guarded it with relaxed intentness.

“You need not be so pessimistic, Prime Apprehensor,” said Allaiiao Gazmend, relaxing back in his chair. “There are ways of arranging today’s events to all our satisfactions. A man with my interests is always eager to make new friends: one never knows when they might come in useful.”

“You are making me an offer?” said Lamarck. “That seems scarcely plausible.”

“Who better, Prime Apprehensor? My experiences have taught me that one can never have too much money nor too many friends among the glaxes.”

Lamarck smiled a sad smile. “If that’s the best you can do to try and keep me alive, I’d better say my farewells to Miss Zael. You have no need to kill her; your hold over her is as strong as ever and you still need her patronage.”

As he spoke he hoped that Allaiiao Gazmend did not know of Taslana’s clone genesis; her life was valueless if he knew she would never inherit.

“Prime Apprehensor, you are a man of honour and I respect that even though I myself have no use for it. But what I am offering is most attractive. You are not,

I imagine, eager to die for its own sake; if I give you a practical alternative I am sure you will take it. Consider it like this: you go back to your job, at which you excel. Continue to promote justice, if that is your normal habit. And occasionally, just occasionally, I may ask for some information, say a small routine run through the Pangalactic databank. It will not make you a less moral man than most of the Pangalactic board; of that you can be assured.”

Lamarck thought for a moment. The key to concluding this case was to get out of the room alive; his hard-won knowledge would be no use if it died with him.

“I know I can trust you,” said Allaiiao Gazmend. “I control Taslana Zael, and so I control you. I am sure you would not want her distressed, let alone hurt. I am an observant man; I see the way you look at her; it is enough.”

“You overlook one key point,” said Lamarck deliberately, slowly rising from his chair. “As of this morning I am under suspension. It is unlikely that I will ever represent Pangalactic again; and I can’t imagine that you will be so eager to befriend the proprietor of Lamarck’s Detective Agency.”

Allaiiao Gazmend nodded indulgently. “Have no fears, Prime Apprehensor. Allaiiao Gazmend is a powerful friend, and rewards those who serve him. By tomorrow lunchtime your suspension will be seen as an unfortunate mistake; no doubt by the evening you will have sewn up more cases.”

Lamarck spun to face Allaiiao Gazmend with some vigour. “You can get me my job back?”

“I can, Prime Apprehensor. You have been wrong to oppose me all this time. I make a much better friend than enemy; and I would welcome the chance to employ your expertises.”

Leaning back against the oak table, Lamarck nodded ruefully.

Taslana, who had seemingly been in a trance, cried out suddenly, “Geir! Don’t believe him! He will betray you!”

A dark look visited Allaiiao Gazmend’s face. It became terribly obvious that the urbanity he cultivated was just a mask for a soul of violence and horror. “You would be wise, girl, to keep out of this. You live because I let you—”

From the corner of his eye Lamarck noticed that

Hax’s attention was drawn towards the developing altercation. Instantly he rolled backwards over the table and landed, on his feet, directly in front of the tough. Hax went for his gun; and he was both practised and fast; but Lamarck was faster. His knee came up into Hax’s groin long before Hax reached his holster. Gasping, Hax sank to the ground. Lamarck had seen the effect of this manoeuvre before, and as Hax’s head went forward and down Lamarck met it with a tremendous kick. Hax’s head snapped back on its neck; he was either unconscious or dead in an instant; Lamarck didn’t much care which.

Snatching up Hax’s weapon, Lamarck span back to the main body of the room, where Allaiiao Gazmend was drawing a pulse-gun of his own. Lamarck loosed off a bolt at the wall behind Smith; although the psychologist posed little threat, Lamarck preferred the thought of him cowering in uncontrollable terror behind what small cover the furniture provided.

Allaiiao Gazmend did not panic at the turn of events. Stepping briskly across to Taslana, he dragged her erect with one arm around her neck. Inwardly Lamarck cursed; Allaiiao Gazmend with a gun and a hostage was going to prove a dangerous customer.

Lamarck ducked down behind the table; he did not want to provide Gazmend with a clean shot. Gazmend’s body, meanwhile, was protected by Taslana; it was a stand-off.

“You disappoint me, Lamarck,” said Gazmend in a tight voice. “We could have worked together, to both our advantages.”

“You’ll never get away with this, Gazmend,” shouted Lamarck, in an attempt to prolong the conversation and defer the shooting.

“Ha!” cried Gazmend. “Watch me. You are going to let us walk out of here; if you attempt to intervene I will kill Taslana.”

To punctuate his point Gazmend struck Taslana across the cheek with the butt of his weapon, drawing blood instantly. Taslana bit his hand viciously, and Gazmend gave a cry of rage and a further blow.

“Taslana!” called Lamarck. “Do what he says. He has no reason to kill you. Gazmend, you’re free to leave.”

Allaiiao Gazmend manoeuvred across the room, taking care to keep Taslana’s body between himself and Lamarck.

"Aren't you going to take Dr Smith with you?" called Lamarck, who felt that a useless passenger might encumber still further Gazmend's escape bid.

"Ah yes! Come out, Doctor!"

Smith showed himself.

"Unfortunately," said Allaiao Gazmend, "our departure vehicle has but two seats. Under current circumstances Miss Zael is rather more valuable."

So saying, he shot Smith down with a single pulse, and Lamarck, a ruthless enough character himself, was nonetheless shocked. Gazmend took the opportunity to take a shot at Lamarck while fleeing from the room with Taslana still in his chilling embrace.

Lamarck dived for cover. Allaiao Gazmend was clearly making for a two-seater aircar, or possibly a small spacecraft. This was, after all, a TLZ spaceport and Gazmend would know the ways to get to the ships.



Chapter 26

He edged carefully out of the room. He was not confident that Gazmend would not be waiting to finish him off, but the corridor was empty. He sprinted desperately for a comlink; it was essential that the port was sealed off immediately.

Pounding helter-skelter round a corner, he collided abruptly with Voorhies.

"Kate!" he cried. "What are you doing here?"

"I ran the com-tap on the number Laura Glyde called this morning; it was Allaiao Gazmend's personal message line and I started to get suspicious. I called the spaceport and reception remembered having seen you and Laura. I knew that it must be a trap so I came down."

"Alone?" snapped Lamarck. "We need Enforcements, and plenty of them."

"I told Rolando what I'd found. He said Enforcements would only escalate the situation so he came along with me. We've split up to search the buildings."

Lamarck's eyes narrowed. "I wonder . . ." he began, before realising that this was scarcely the time for speculation. "Come with me!" he said. "Gazmend has

Taslana hostage and they must be on their way to the hangars."

"Hostage?" panted Voorhies as they ran. "I thought they were in cahoots?"

"It's not that simple," gasped Lamarck.

Soon they were before the entrance to the hangars. The entrance was protected by a security code, but Allaiao Gazmend clearly had the appropriate clearance, and as a glax Lamarck would have too. He touched his palm to the security screen.

"CLEARANCE NOT RECOGNISED," said the terminal's mechanical voice.

With a grin, Voorhies touched her own hand to the portal. "Remember, you're suspended: I revoked all your clearances this afternoon," she said dryly.

The hangar door slid aside. "Kate, call Enforcements: I don't care what Rolando said – get them down here, and quickly."

Lamarck slid into the hangar while Voorhies attempted to contact the Tower on her personal com. Gazmend had several minutes start on them, but had been encumbered with a hostage and may have felt it prudent to take a more roundabout route.

Slowly Lamarck's senses became accustomed to the silence and gloom of the hangar. Since the roof had not been retracted it seemed unlikely that Gazmend had yet taken off in an aircar. Were they in the room? Or still on their way?

Lamarck called up a schematic of the hangar on the comscreen. Quickly he scanned the craft booked into the hanger; several hundred or so. The number of two seater aircars was small. Running down the list he saw that one, a top of the range Firedaunt Imperial, was registered to TLZ and was recorded as having Otherspace capability: this had to be Allaiao Gazmend's craft.

He ran over to Voorhies and whispered his conclusions.

"It's over there," he indicated. "You go round that way: I'll approach from the other side."

Voorhies nodded and set off. Lamarck made his own way to the ship. As he approached, he heard a sound of footsteps: certainly more than one person. He smiled. There was no way that Allaiao Gazmend could climb the narrow ladder to the cockpit and remain in immediate proximity to Taslana.

He sank back into the shadows of the dimly-lit

hangar, choosing a vantage point which afforded him a full view of the Firedaunt. Soon Allaiao Gazmend and Taslana came into view. Lamarck considered dropping Gazmend where he stood; but the sight of a pulse-gun rammed cruelly into Taslana's back convinced him to wait for a clearer opportunity.

As they stood before the aircar Gazmend pulled out the remote control and summoned the ladder to the cockpit, some ten feet from the ground. A normal aircar was small enough that the pilot could vault into the cockpit directly from the ground; but this craft had Otherspace Drive components which made it into a much larger vehicle.

Gazmend looked around. He was a cautious man; but he had no reason to believe that glaxes were in the room. If he let his guard down long enough to allow Taslana even momentarily out of his orbit, Lamarck had him.

Lamarck held his breath, more as a psychological ploy than because there was any real chance of Gazmend hearing him. Gazmend was deciding which of them should scale the ladder first; clearly he did not trust Taslana not to slam down the cockpit cover as soon as she was inside.

Eventually Gazmend decided that this risk was too great to take, and began to move crabwise up the ladder, rungs gripped with one hand and pointing the gun at Taslana with the other. This was Lamarck's moment: he was sure he could shoot Gazmend before he could fix on Taslana.

He stepped from the shadows. "Give it up, Gazmend!" he called out crisply. "Drop the gun or I'll kill you." His tone indicated that either outcome would be acceptable to him.

Allaiao Gazmend was no coward and no weakling. In one movement he leaped from the ladder and fired off a shot at Lamarck. Even as he jumped aside Lamarck fired back but Gazmend was in mid-air and the bolt spattered harmlessly against the Firedaunt's fuselage.

Lamarck scrambled to his feet; but Gazmend had achieved his objective; he had gained enough time to get Taslana back under his control. Once again Lamarck could not fire at him without endangering Taslana.

Lamarck scuttled back into the shadows with a curse. What a time to develop scruples; he should have dropped Gazmend without a warning.

"You don't give up, Lamarck," shouted Gazmend. "But you should have killed me when you had the chance," he taunted.

Lamarck said nothing. His voice would give his position in the shadows away and Allaiao Gazmend would certainly kill him now if he got the chance.

"Wherever you are, Lamarck, listen to this: we are going up the ladder together. I will kill Taslana if I have to; her support is valuable to me, but I no longer need it quite so much, now that you have given me the password to my account. The best option – for all three of us – is for me to fly out of here. Be rational, Lamarck: there are times when you just have to walk away."

Lamarck had crawled away behind an aircar which prevented Gazmend getting a clear shot at him. He decided to play for time; surely Enforcements would be here soon enough.

"I agree with your reasoning, up to a point," he shouted back. "How's this for a deal? I throw my gun out into the light where you can see it: I can no longer threaten you, so you can let Taslana go."

Gazmend was clearly tempted by the offer. It avoided the need for him to make the awkward manoeuvre up the ladder with Taslana while under Lamarck's gunsight; and, of course, it gave him the chance to kill the unarmed Lamarck unless he hid himself very well. If he could get out of the atmosphere and engage the Drive before the glaxes could pinpoint him, he was safe.

"Very well," he called back. "Throw me the gun."

"I don't think so," shouted Lamarck. "Release the girl first and I give you my word not to shoot."

"We do this my way, or not at all," yelled Gazmend.

Lamarck smiled in his shadowy vantage. This was exactly the sort of debate he wanted. Since he had no intention of yielding up his own weapon and he knew that Gazmend would not release Taslana without it – if at all — he could extend the negotiations indefinitely.

"Be reasonable, Gazmend," he called. "My only reason for negotiating is to make sure Taslana is safe. Until I know that there's no chance of a deal."

"There is another way," said Gazmend, becoming impatient. He had pinpointed Lamarck's position in the dark and fired off a remarkably precise pulse: it would certainly have hit Lamarck had the aircar not shielded him.

There was a second flash and a great cry. Allaiiao Gazmend's right hand was a bloody mess and the pulse gun which it had held was nothing. Gazmend fell heavily to the ground. Voorhies stepped from her own place of concealment.

"Kate!" cried Lamarck, stepping forward. "How long have you been hiding?"

"I arrived just after you missed him on the ladder. I could see what was happening but I couldn't get a shot at him."

"Keep your gun pointed at him," said Lamarck. "He's not getting away again."

He sprang over to Taslana, who was bleeding gently from her cut cheek. "Are you hurt?" he asked, taking her in his arms.

She shook her head. "Really, I'm alright," she said dully. Then she went limp against him and burst into tears.

Suddenly there was another sound of footsteps. Lamarck made sure that he had one hand free for his pulse-gun while he continued to comfort Taslana. But the new arrival was Puissant Apprehensor Rolando.

"Apprehensor Voorhies. Lamarck," he said. "Is everything under control?"

"Yes, sir," said Voorhies. "Geir knows the full story but it seems the whole episode was a conspiracy orchestrated by Allaiiao Gazmend, who is now in our custody."

Rolando nodded reflectively. "It would seem you have done very well, Apprehensor."

"And Geir, sir. It was a team effort."

"Lamarck is under suspension, Apprehensor. His earlier actions are not rendered more acceptable because you have made an arrest."

"I know that, but . . ."

"Kate," said Lamarck. "Don't worry about this. You have apprehended perhaps the greatest criminal in the galaxy. All the rest can wait."

"You're right," she said. "Let's get Gazmend booked in."

Lamarck turned away from Rolando and walked a little apart with Taslana, who looked unsteady on her feet. Voorhies was conferring with Rolando. She stepped towards Allaiiao Gazmend, taking out a length of wrapple. As she turned Rolando made a sudden rapid movement.

Realisation hit Lamarck. "Kate! Get down!" he

screamed.

Voorhies ducked automatically; but it was too late. The pulse from Rolando's gun caught her torso and she flopped loosely to the ground with a dreadful cry.

Lamarck had not let go of his pulse-gun for the past half hour. Now he was quick enough to ensure that Rolando did not get a second shot. He slung Taslana aside, and as Rolando spun to face him Lamarck fired. Rolando fell back, surely dead. Lamarck took no chances. Standing above him he fired another four shots into the prone figure.

"You dog!" he cursed. "Gazmend's man all along."

He tossed his gun across to Taslana. Pointing at Allaiiao Gazmend, he said harshly. "Shoot him if he moves. Maybe shoot him if he doesn't."

He moved over to Voorhies. He picked up her pulse-gun where it lay on the floor. Sitting down next to her, he cradled her head against his chest. There was a lot of blood.

"Kate — I'm sorry. I'd begun to suspect him and I shouldn't have taken my eyes off him."

Voorhies coughed and blood came out. She didn't look in pain but that was probably shock. She was hurt, and badly. Lamarck reached out her personal com and dialled for emergency medical assistance. He knew if she stayed alive until the medics arrived she would survive.

"Stay awake," he whispered. "Don't let them win."

Voorhies smiled weakly and bled some more. She was frighteningly pale and Lamarck knew there was nothing he could do to keep her alive. Even as he watched she slipped out of consciousness. Allaiiao Gazmend grinned unpleasantly at the scene before him. He prepared to say something and Taslana shot at the floor in front of him.

"Open your mouth and I kill you," she said in a voice Lamarck did not recognise. "Don't think I won't."

"Prove it!" shouted Gazmend, leaping to his feet and sprinting for the exit. Lamarck, cradling the softly moaning Voorhies in his arms, didn't bother to move. Enforcements were on the way and he knew there was nowhere for Allaiiao Gazmend to run.

Taslana unhurriedly stood up. The hangar was long and Allaiiao Gazmend could not run flat out in the dim light. Taslana took deliberate aim; there was a pulse and Allaiiao Gazmend was blasted to the ground. Lamarck didn't think he was alive.

Calmly Taslana sat down again. She looked at Lamarck; there was no challenge in her gaze, just curiosity.

"Give me the gun," said Lamarck, and she wordlessly slid it across the floor to him. Reaching out with his free hand he picked it up and tucked it into his holster. Then he tossed Voorhies's gun to Taslana.

"Leave the talking to me," he said. Taslana looked back expressionlessly and nodded.

Lamarck stroked Voorhies's hair. She was completely unconscious now and her porcelain features were all but transparent. He pulled her jacket across the pulse-wound and it almost seemed as if she was asleep.

"I'm sorry, Kate, I'm sorry," he whispered as he held her against him.

Enforcements, accompanied by the ubiquitous Narosyn, arrived just about simultaneously with the Genix medical team. They found Lamarck still holding the unconscious Voorhies and a few feet away Taslana sitting tucked up, her arms folded round her knees.

The medics soon loaded Voorhies aboard their aircar; Lamarck asked to accompany her but the vehicle's capacity made this impossible. Instead Narosyn strolled over and indicated the two corpses in front of them. Lamarck gave a summary account of the evening's events, including an identification of the unrecognisable form of Puissant Apprehensor Rolando. After a break for expressions of disbelief Narosyn continued his enquiry.

"I take it the other chill is Allaiao Gazmend — shot in the back, it seems?"

Taslana looked up dully.

"How far do you want to push this one, Maroc?" asked Lamarck.

"To the point where we get the truth," responded Narosyn.

Lamarck gave a half-smile. "Truth? How do you know when you've got there?"

"Don't jerk me about, Lamarck. Tell me how Gazmend died."

"He ran off. I shot him. End of story."

"This was after Rolando shot Voorhies? You were holding her like when we found you?"

"Yes."

"You were cradling Kate with your right arm. That means you shot him left-handed while supporting a

dead weight, and, from the look of the angles, round a corner."

Lamarck shrugged. "I'm a good shot."

Narosyn looked sharply at Taslana, who appeared to be paying only the most cursory attention.

"Is that how it was?" he asked her.

"If Geir says so."

"No. Do *you* say so?"

"If Geir says it, I say it."

Lamarck interjected. "What do you want here, Narosyn? Two men are dead who damn well deserved it. What does it matter how it happened? I shot both of them and they were both clean kills. It is the best way for everyone."

Narosyn shook his head. "We don't come from the same Pangalactic; I don't even know if we come from the same universe. We both know that the girl shot Gazmend, and in the back at that. And I can't prove a thing."

"Yes you can," said Lamarck. "You can prove that I shot him: whether I did or not."

"I'll interview you again tomorrow," he said. "I'll wait until then until I write up tonight's notes."

He walked quickly off to his aircar and leaped aboard with surprising nimbleness. As it took off Lamarck slowly walked towards the corner where Taslana was sitting quietly, waiting for the strip of synthoskin on her cheek to dry.

He reached out his hand and pulled her gently to her feet. "We'd better get you home," he said.

She smiled once again her familiar crooked smile. Her customary composure was beginning to return, despite her dishevelment. Lamarck's was conscious of his white shirt, soaked red where Kate had leaned against him, and sticky where it had begun to dry against his flesh.

For the only time since he'd known Taslana he didn't know what to say to her. It was the first occasion when neither of them were playing games; all they had to guide them were their own feelings.

"You didn't need to lie," she said eventually. "I shot him in cold blood and I would have admitted it."

"I know," said Lamarck. "And you might even have been convicted. What good would that have done? Whatever culpability you have had in all this, you've suffered enough for it. Sometimes justice really is more important than the law."

"I'm sorry," she said, taking his hand, "about Apprehensor Voorhies. If I'd been honest from the start it would never have happened."

"I understand why you weren't," he replied mechanically. "Risking getting shot is part of the job; and in this case it was another glax who shot her. The Genix boys say she'll live."

Taslana nodded. "I suppose so. I don't know what to think about anything anymore. All I want is to get away from here and . . ."

Lamarck felt a quiver run through him. Somehow he had not counted on her going anywhere, especially after . . .

"Taslana . . . this may not be the ideal moment . . . but what about us? You said earlier . . ."

Taslana gave a wan smile. "After everything that I've done to you? I'm not an heiress any more: I'm not even a Zael. I'm certainly not the same person I was this morning. I don't know what I am but I don't think you want to be around it."

"Oh, Taslana! None of that matters. I love you . . ."

Taslana leant her cheek against Lamarck's shoulder, rupturing the synthoskin film and bleeding again.

"Geir! You don't know what you're saying. I . . . I want to say that I love you — everything tells me that I do — but I just don't know what I'm feeling. So much has happened, and so quickly. I am just drained. Please don't make me say something now which I might not be able to stand by later. I have lied too much, and especially to you: I only want to tell the truth from now on."

Lamarck stroked her hair sadly. The real Taslana — which in every material sense she was — was too complex and subtle for him, as the facsimile had been. She looked up at him. Her eyes were heartbreakingly tender.

"I'm sorry if you want more than I can give you," she said. "It really is better this way. I need to go away and work out how I feel about so many things: not just you; the cloning, who I really am, what Allaiiao Gazmend made me do, my mother, the life I had before I came here. No-one can do that for me, and I don't think anyone can help me."

Lamarck nodded. "You've got a lot to think about," he said with a reflective smile. "But don't think you're alone. I meant what I said. Whenever you want to come back, I'll be here."

She kissed him gently on the lips. "Thank you. But don't wait too long."

She turned and walked away towards the hangar exit, her heels clicking on the hard shiny surface. Lamarck was silent in thought until he was startled by the suffusing light of the dawn flooding in through the retracted hangar roof.



Chapter 27

Around a week later Lamarck arrived at the Genix Hospital and was admitted to a luxurious area deep inside the building.

"Can I go in?" he asked the trim nurse with dark hair and flashing eyes who was on duty.

"As long as you don't upset her. She is much better but the treatment is very sapping."

Lamarck nodded his thanks and went into the private room. Voorhies was propped up in a comfortable bed, looking pale and drawn, but no worse than that. It was not enough wholly to assuage the guilt he felt.

"Kate," he said with a slight but genuine smile. "They wouldn't let me see you before: how are you?"

Voorhies reached out her hand with a grin. "I'm tired but they tell me I'll be fine. Organ regeneration is a simple procedure these days."

"It's good to see you again, Kate. I really thought you were going to die at the spaceport — and we would never have made up our quarrel."

"That's all in the past now, Geir," she said. "We were both wrong-headed. Tell me what's been happening at the Tower — what they show on the news is worse than useless."

"You know that Rolando is dead, of course — I'm too good a shot for it to be otherwise," he said. "Gazmend is dead too — he made a break for it and I couldn't take the risk of him getting away."

"So I heard on the news," said Voorhies. "Is that how it really happened?"

"Up to a point," said Lamarck easily. "As far as the rest goes, attention has been deflected from the whole Rolando business — Pangalactic is adept enough at news management."

"Do you know anything more about why he — why

he shot me?" asked Kate. "I haven't really been awake enough to think about it."

"We had an unexpectedly lucky break. Hax, the assassin I left for dead at the spaceport, survived. He has done some kind of deal with the Judiciar and has become quite co-operative. He was very close to the centre of Gazmend's operation. Incredible as it sounds, Rolando was in collusion with Allaiao Gazmend all along. When I was being interrogated by Allaiao Gazmend he offered me a retainer in case he might want a favour every now and again. He was only half serious, I think — but he hinted that he had glaxes on his payroll as it was. Just before he shot you it dawned on me that he could have been talking about Rolando: that put me on the alert. Not alert enough to stop you getting shot, but enough to stop him getting away with it. And of course he wouldn't let you bring Enforcements to the spaceport with you — that struck me as suspicious at the time."

"But, Geir, this can't be — Rolando was a career glax, and a good one. Is Hax reliable? He has enough reason to make up a story like that."

"There is more: most of all, he shot you: that seems a clear enough declaration."

"Yes," said Voorhies, now showing more animation, "but you haven't made the link on motivation. We know that Rolando was in some ways not what we thought him — but that doesn't necessarily make him Allaiao Gazmend's puppet."

"There was also something Taslana told me . . ."

"Carry on," said Voorhies.

"As you know from the senso-news, Taslana was Allaiao Gazmend's plant to inveigle me. For that scheme to work, he had to be certain that I would be assigned the case. Who could have ensured that for him? The Puissant Apprehensor, Rolando."

"But why?"

"Hax is quite convincing on this. Rolando was, as we both know, bitter about the way Pangalactic stuck him away to rot on Chrysoopolis: he always felt he had been scapegoated. It seems that Gazmend gave him a couple of years to stew and then he reappeared with a chance to exact the most ironic of revenges on Pangalactic: to work for Gazmend under their noses . . ."

Voorhies nodded, mostly convinced. "What I really don't understand, though, is why Allaiao Gazmend wanted to inveigle you at all."

Lamarck laughed. "It's absurd and ironic in equal parts. I suppose there's no harm in saying now that I was part of the undercover operation against TLZ's arms and drug-running a few years back. It was all Allaiao Gazmend's work and he was raking off a fortune. He was paranoid and suspicious about Pangalactic, as well he might have been. He decided to move the proceeds of his dealings into a Triple Bar Nucleotide Strip Account, because if we couldn't locate his money we had no case against him. By a bizarre coincidence it fell to me in my undercover capacity to open the account. That same day the undercover operation had been blown and Pangalactic arrested just about everyone and called the operation off to protect its undercover agents. I never got to communicate the password on the account to the ship's captain and so Allaiao Gazmend can never have received it. He had transferred the proceeds of many years' illegality into one account — and now he could not get at it."

"Although Allaiao Gazmend became Puissant of TLZ, he never, unlike the Zaels who had previously held the position, owned any TLZ shares. He was just another employee and he could have been out on his ear at any time. His wealth, and his lifestyle, were tied up with getting into the nucleotide account. He came up with a double scheme to safeguard his position: force Taslana Zael to pick up her inheritance and keep him as Puissant, and ensnare me into to giving him the password to his account. It nearly worked: he didn't know that Taslana was a clone, and if you hadn't showed up at the last minute he would have got away."

Voorhies laughed with almost hysterical vigour, before stopping short with a wince. "What an absurd story. I suppose it isn't funny — too many people have died for that."

"Hax also volunteered information on another aspect of the case, which may not have struck you as suspicious yet. If Taslana was working for Gazmend, who had her tailed and tried to kill her that morning at the Anastasia?"

"My brain is not up to detective puzzles," said Voorhies. "Just tell me."

"It was Gazmend himself! His paranoia was legendary, and it seems he wasn't sure how good an actress Taslana was — an unfounded doubt, as it turned out. He arranged to have her clumsily and obviously followed to give an extra authenticity to her per-

formance. That worked out better than he could have imagined when Taslana killed Maevart — an episode which really started to drive the wedge between you and me. The ploy was so successful that he tried a mock assassination at the Anastasia, gambling, I suppose, that I would be alert enough to head off what was a pretty amateurish attempt. The thugs were under orders not to do any real harm. The one who survived told a story along those lines once he learned that Hax had sold him out. I feel rather guilty about the degree of force I used to deal with them now.”

Voorhies spared no sympathy for the brutalised miscreants. “What about Laura, or Taslana, or whoever she is? I knew about the cloning — Nina told me just after she told you. She must be in big trouble — and broke.”

“I don’t think so,” said Lamarck. “She was acting under duress throughout, and her actual culpability is fairly minor. She admitted illegal possession of an instanarc and we cautioned her. Narosyn has decided not to press the manslaughter charge and I’m sure he’s right. She may have been part of Allaiiao Gazmend’s trap, but she is not what you thought she was.”

“We usually argue where Laura Glyde is concerned,” said Voorhies. “Has she accepted that she has no claim on the inheritance?”

“Oh, yes,” said Lamarck. “The Zael’s World laws on cloning are explicit enough, and in truth I don’t think she ever really wanted the money anyway. She is affluent enough as she is. She is more upset about the idea that she is a clone; it seems to make her feel in some way that she is not real.”

“You seem to harbour remarkably little rancour against her,” said Voorhies. “She lied to you all along; it could have killed you and it could have ended your career.”

Lamarck shrugged. “She was not in control of her actions; plenty of people have dealt with blackmail worse. No, the one I have resentment against is Nina. When she found out that Taslana was a clone she did everything she could to hurt both of us.”

“And you know why,” said Voorhies with more animation. “You never treated her very well.”

“That’s no reason to do what she did to Taslana. I will never forgive her, Kate.”

“Perhaps we should set the subject aside for now,” said Voorhies with new-found emollience. “Although I

confess to an understandable curiosity as to your current relationship with Taslana,” she finished with a smile Lamarck had not seen for an eternity of weeks.

He laughed somewhat uncomfortably. “I may not be the best person to ask. She has been understandably pre-occupied recently, and I am by no means certain of her plans.”

“You never want my advice, Geir, but that’s no reason not to give it to you. Laura Glyde is trouble wherever she goes; you are better off away from her.”

Lamarck grimaced reflectively. “Like you said, we never agreed about her. There’s no reason we should start now.”

The nurse entered the room and began to chivvy Lamarck out of the way. “That’s enough for today, Prime Apprehensor. She isn’t supposed to have visitors at all, but she kept asking to see you. I hope you’ve cheered her up.”

Lamarck permitted himself a wry summary. “I have told her that her former captain was a heinous felon, that I am not on speaking terms with her best friend, and that her partner is still enamoured of a brassy impudent adventuress whom she despises. To what extent this falls within the definition of ‘cheered up’ I leave to your judgement.”

“Ignore him,” said Voorhies. “I feel much better for seeing him. I will soon be up and about and we’ll be righting the wrongs of the galaxy again.”

Lamarck arranged to return soon. He walked out into the late afternoon sun.

Outside it was cool and sunny. There had been a shower while he was in the hospital and the pavement was damp underfoot. The rain had left a fine grit on the surface and Lamarck enjoyed the sound and feel of it crunching under the sole of his shoe. Seeing Kate so near to recovery had raised his spirits. The Zael case would never be one that he would remember with pride; but at least it would be one that he would remember. Taslana had made sure of that.

Skipping smartly out of the way of an advancing auto-tram he spun on his heel and set off for the Tower of Commerce: he was a glax again and there was work to be done.



Epilogue

Several months later Lamarck's enquiries took him to the park in the north of the city where he and Taslana had gone that afternoon they had learnt she was a clone.

Motivated by a subterranean impulse he made his way to the sunny glade where she had confessed her part in Allaiao Gazmend's plot. He sat on an old-fashioned wooden seat and pulled from his pocket the holographic locket of Taslana which he still carried with him.

He had thought that he had been successful in blotting Taslana out since she had left Chrysopolis. As he looked at the locket he realised that he had been deluding himself; as he had done so often where she was concerned. He had performed his duties with a perfunctory efficiency — even earning the commenda-

tion of Rolando's replacement — but his spirit was elsewhere.

Where was Taslana now? She had made it clear that she did not want him to know. She had chosen, for now at least, to deal with things alone; and with her history, she was certainly well qualified to make the choice. She hadn't known whether she would be coming back; so Lamarck could hardly know himself.

He realised that it still mattered to him whether or not she came back. She had told him not to wait too long, and he was alert to the undertone of that warning; but some things were worth waiting for. He switched off the locket, stood up, and walked slowly back towards the auto-trams in the late autumn sun.

The End



Letters

Dear Editor:

While, I suppose like every reader of Vance, I have thought about writing fiction, not necessarily in his style, but at least in as effective a style, I must sadly report that I have never been able to write anything that even I could read without shuddering or falling asleep.

I must disclose here that I am a pretty good polemicist, even if I say so myself, and that I have written a few textbooks in mathematic — although not commercially published. So, it is not a matter of my being shy, or of not being able to write, or having a writer's block — I know how to handle these — or of not being able to write à la manière de Vance — though, as far as that is concerned, I definitely am not; but, simply that, for the life of me, I cannot think of a plot, good or bad, let alone develop one. This in spite of the fact that each one of my mathematical writings is entirely based on the development of a single 'story line', e.g. how to turn discrete plots into continuous graphs, in a (lengthy) text on differential calculus.

Now I don't propose that you turn CLS into a correspondence school or, to be less anachronistic, a distance learning center, but I would certainly like to read analyses of Vance plots by writers who write, or have written, à la manière de Vance. I am thinking of Tim Stretton and yourself and Michael Shea; but also, possibly of L. Warren Douglas and Ray Aldridge. In general, I would be very much interested in analyses taking apart any of Vance's books from the point of view of plot. I am aware that this is supposed to be his weak side. So what I really mean, perhaps, is dissections of how Vance's books work and succeed in spite of whatever is or isn't an absence of plot. For instance, I would have liked to see David Langford develop his *Growing Up, Striking Back: Revenge in the Work of Jack Vance* in that direction and, similarly, Dan Simmons his *Jack Vance: Dragon Master*.

Alain Schremmer

P. S. Re "'Flames' will be ignored." Are you truly

going to ignore Paul Rhoads? Flames can be good and authors' tender egos, including mine, need less adulation than being hardened.

Editor's reply:

Thank you, Alain, for becoming the first ever 'Letters to the Editor' writer in the CLS. I'll see what can be done about getting people to contribute the kinds of articles you're talking about.

About 'flames': I have no intention of ignoring Paul! There is a difference between opinions vigorously expressed (something Paul never fails to do), and deliberate 'flaming', which has much more to do with *ad hominem* attacks. It's perfectly acceptable to target opinions, ideas, beliefs, concepts, ideologies, and to single these out for criticism and questioning: vigorously and without mercy, if this is called for. But it is an entirely different matter to impugn the people holding the beliefs that are being targeted, or to question their integrity, personal quality, motive, mental capacity, or antecedents, merely because they hold them. Such behavior will *not* be tolerated in the pages of the CLS while I have anything to do with it.

The same applies to authors. Some may require 'hardening' — though not by being personally insulted, but by constructive criticism and commentary on their work. The latter would be very much appreciated and will actually help these authors — crushed though they may be because some of it might not be *quite* what they would have liked to have heard! But, alas, this is all part and parcel of author-hood — and those who can't handle it are advised to follow 'safer' pursuits.

Till Noever