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# The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

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No. 2

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## Tergan

Percursory and Chapter 1

by Till Noever

— Page 2 —

## The Zael Inheritance

Chapter 2

by Tim Stretton

— Page 32 —

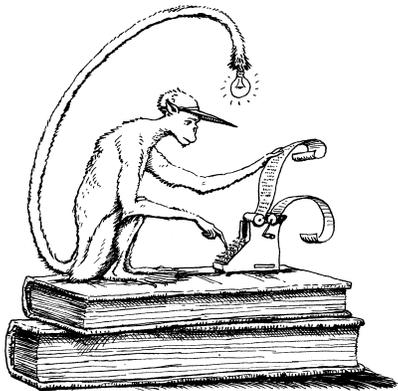
## Planet of Retribution

Chapter 6

by Zack Fance

— Page 43 —

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

## Goodies

Cream chive cheese, olives and wine,  
Watermelon on the vine,  
Stew, hot toast and crab claw meat,  
Beer, Ritz crackers and cold pig's feet.  
Toffee, mocha, peanuts, pie,  
Roast young chicks or octopi,  
Kamchatka chutney, chips, grape pop,  
Chocolate sundae with cherry on top,  
Shrimps and mussels, chowder with clams,  
Lots of butter on hot baked yams.  
Blackberry jam or clear plum jelly.  
All these things to fill your belly.

*George Rhoads (1952)*

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This issue of the *CLS* welcomes back Till Noever with *Tergan*, third in his trilogy, of which the soon to be published *Keaen* is first. The *CLS* will be serializing *Tergan* in future issues. Taslana's adventures continue in Chapter Two of Tim Stretton's *The Zael Inheritance*, and the ever-popular Zack Fance provides us with another chapter from *Planet of Retribution*.

Readers may have noticed similarities between the *CLS* and the sample of the *VIE* format presented in *Cosmopolis* No. 7, and with *Cosmopolis* itself. In terms of layout the *CLS* might be seen as a bridge between previous issues of *Cosmopolis* and the *VIE* book format. The *CLS* and *Cosmopolis* are set up to be printed on commonly available letter-sized paper, while the *VIE* page is twelve by nineteen centimeters, the format of Andreas Irles' beautiful volumes. The page margins in the *VIE* are representative of classic book design, providing a harmonious balance between the facing leaves of a bound volume. What the *VIE* and the *CLS* have in common is the Amiante family of typefaces, used at the same point sizes and leading.

Joel Anderson and Paul Rhoads

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# Tergan

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## PRECURSORY

### I. TETHYS

About halfway between the globular cluster Omega Centauri and the main body of the galaxy floats a solitary Sol-class star: Caravella. In its temperate zone orbits a single planet, left there after a wandering neutron star tore its two companions out of the system and flung them into interstellar space.

Between Caravella and Omega Centauri lies a complicated absorptive nebula. Its aspect from Caravella, highlighted by the cluster from behind, bears an uncanny resemblance to a pair of faces in profile, looking in opposite directions: one leering like an evil witch from an ancient fairy tale; the other benign like a Buddha's.

The colonists named it *Janus*, after a two-faced deity of Terran mythology.

The planet they called Tethys, for reasons obvious at a glance: a water world, dominated by a deep planetary ocean, flecked with a scattering of continents clustered together in one hemisphere, together with a sprinkle of islands, some of which might qualify as continents, but most of which don't.

Aslam, the largest continent: a desert ridged with row upon row of roughly parallel mountain ranges, oriented north-south.

Tapide: a parched desert, with only two small oases, The Valley and Hallaway, where human habitation is practical. Both are separated from the bulk of the continent by arcs of forbiddingly tall ranges, providing natural barriers against the sands swept up by the storms raging across Tapide's interior.

Below Tapide lies Unterthal: once joined to Tapide, until a cataclysmic event split them apart. Unterthal is land of endless steppes and yet more jagged ranges.

Finister — continent or island? — lies to the west of Tapide, opposite the Valley, across the Limpic Ocean, an extension of the mighty strait dividing the now-separated continents.

More islands lie scattered between the two major landmasses: Grelande; Cosinante; the Taelinic Group; a plethora of smaller dots and blotches. The depth of Tethys' ocean tells the story: once all of this was a single

land mass, much of it now sunk beneath the waves.

The planetary ocean gives Tethys a moderate climate. No ice-caps exist. The highest and lowest temperatures are found in the centers of the large continents, whose land masses inject a note of meteorological dissonance and who are the major cause of errant storms and other occasional climatic excesses.

Tethys' nights are dominated by Omega Centauri, half-covered by Janus' looming silhouette. The glow from the cluster is so intense that it can even be discerned, albeit faintly, in broad daylight. The inhabitants of Tethys, most of them ignorant about the true nature of the huge structure in the sky, refer to it as the *Janus Cluster*.

A Tethys day is 27.436 standard hours, reckoned as thirty 'local' hours. A Tethys year lasts for 482.394 days. The axis is inclined at ten degrees to the orbital plane, making for seasons of moderate differentiation.

### II. SETTLEMENT

The most recent wave of colonists — initially they thought they were the first, but the evidence convinced them otherwise — came to Tethys over eight hundred (Tethys) years before the time of this chronicle. They discovered a narrow range of tree and grass species, whose genetic makeup suggested that someone, at some time in the past, had discovered this world, and who before leaving again dispersed a small assortment of seeds across the planet.

Intent or accident?

Who knows?

In the course of an unknown number of millennia the planet had been populated with a narrow range of vegetable species. Grasses: hypher, fask, lemon grass, tussock. Shrubs: kilt, rambling rose, hebe. Most impressive of all were the two dominant kinds of trees. Their antecedents remained unclear. Their genetic material, though recognizably Terran, bore no discernible resemblance to that of any known species. These trees, tika and noquo, were found predominantly in The Valley; most of them concentrated in a broad swath of forest draped over the low hills of the Myrmidic Woods.

The colonists surveyed the planet and concluded that they had found their world. More than twenty thousand sleepers were aroused from their torpor and ferried down to selected areas on Tapide, Aslam, Finister, Cosinante, and Grelande. There they began to implement their grand plan. For three years they built the infrastructure of an imaginary civilization. They constructed cities and roads.

In vats they grew domestic and wild animals, which they either set free or corralled for domestic use. They introduced new species of grass, shrub, tree, mosses, lichens, ferns. They labored hard to build what was in effect an enormous, very realistic and convincing, conceptually consistent, stage-set, against which was to play out their and their descendants' future.

When it was done they subjected themselves to an imprinting process which embedded false memories, to be awakened at the appropriate signal and supplant their real ones. A lottery was held to determine who would play which role in the grand scheme of things. The outcome, they knew, would not please those ending up at the bottom of the social scale, but, apart from a few grumbles, the matter went smoothly.

Everything was as it had been planned. The players readied themselves for their roles; positioned themselves for their new life. A signal was broadcast; the false memories were activated. A new and curious world began: set against a background of the technological ignorance of a medieval Earth; with adjustments here and there to remove those aspects considered undesirable, while retaining others considered essential to ensure the maintenance of an ideal status quo. Maybe it wasn't utopia, but in the opinion of the colonists — and this was what had motivated their enterprise — it was preferable to the prevailing state of interstellar humanity.

The stage setting was varied and occasionally bizarre. Deliberately so. Uniformity had not been the intention: only the discouragement of any urge to move toward higher technological stages.

Mechanisms were put into place to ensure that undesirable developments, should they indeed occur, were foiled. A small group of select colonists, their memories erased like all the others', but supplanted with 'guardian patterns' which retained some inkling of the elements of 'real' history, watched over the developing societies. They fostered desirable elements and ruthlessly suppressed those considered dangerous. The main population centers had each been assigned such a group. Over the centuries only one of these groups survived with its purpose intact: the 'magices' of the Isle of Skele, off the coast of Keaen, who were responsible for keeping events in the Valley on the pre-ordained course. After the demise of their colleagues they sent occasional emissaries to the other centers: agents empowered to keep civilization on the pre-ordained course by any means considered necessary and expedient. But in the

main the magices of Skele focused their energies on The Valley, where a curious, deliberately designed, and highly unstable political situation required their constant attention.

What even the magices did *not* know was that, among the Founders, there had been dissent as to the ultimate future of the colony. Some had suggested to destroy all traces of their true history. Others preferred to hedge their bets? What if something went so gravely wrong that leaving the planet might be the only recourse?

A compromise was reached. The huge mother-ship remained quiescent in a stable orbit equal to Tethys', but on Caravella's other side. A single landing craft was hidden in a cave in the Galatadian Ranges on Finister. Hints were left behind — some in plain view, some in folklore, some concealed behind curious customs — but these would be comprehensible only to those who had at least some hint of what they might signify. One day, so the Founders reasoned, this could lead someone with the appropriate motivation to find the landing craft, learn the truth, and take whatever action was required by the exigencies of the moment.

As the centuries passed unforeseen contingencies perturbed the pre-ordained course of events. Curious mutations appeared in animals and humans alike. These occurred most frequently in those living in and near the Myrmidic Woods. Some of the creatures imported by humans and left to roam freely assumed grotesque forms. A certain species of ape became the 'elec': a kind of shaggy primate predator. The elecs living in the Myrmidic Woods grew to monstrous proportions, but were comparatively benign. Those of the plains became sleek killers, possessed of a frightful intelligence, who stalked their victims at night and were not adverse to attacking waystations or small villages — though they avoided the larger settlements. Other creatures, some of them similarly fearsome, abounded. These derived from a variety of mutated species, now capable of cross-breeding, and so giving rise yet more new species. Many of these were rarely glimpsed and became the stuff of nightmarish legend.

All the mutated animal species are nocturnal and shun the light of day. None can abide the close proximity of copper. As a result copper is the Valley's most valuable metal. Most houses — especially those in the country and on the periphery of even large settlements — have copper strips nailed along their walls and around their windows and doors. Elecs and other creatures of the night will not venture through openings thus protected.

Humans mutated with less effect on their appearance and disposition. Indeed, the mutations were oddly systematic, producing, in the male, 'magices'—a name applied because of their association with the magices on Skele—and in females those known as 'circes'. A curious affinity exists between the creatures of the night and mutant humans: an awareness of a profound kinship. As a consequence not even the fiercest elec would harm a magice or a circe. They can roam freely where ordinary humans dare not go for fear for their lives.

### III. KEAEN

The larger of the two kingdoms in the Valley, Keaen occupies the southern part, separated from the smaller Tergan by the Myrmidic Woods and the mighty Tor river. The capital of Keaen carries the same name; the ruler bears the title 'The Keaen'. A complicated ancient document, The Covenant, regulated the interaction between the ruler and the common folk. Keaen is an association of provinces, each governed by a Baron, whose fealty lies with the House of Keaen. In return they receive favors, which in the past included the assignation of the Keaen's daughter, the Flower of Keaen, as a spouse to one of the Barons.

The Keaen would always have only one daughter and one son. The Covenant decreed that he had to bed 'vessels' from the common folk and among the issue select one boy and one girl to become his designated 'children'.

Apart from this populist gesture the system of government was autocratic and had little to commend for the ordinary folk. The ruler invariably forgot his 'common' roots and became what his predecessors had been: haughty, self-centered tyrants. Thus was the status quo maintained.

The last of the rulers following this pattern was Hain the Keaen. But Hain was deposed and now an unknown future beckons.

### IV. TERGAN

The kingdom to the north of Keaen eschews populist pretensions in favor of intrigue, murder, treachery, back-stabbing, incest.

Incest: in Keaen the ultimate taboo; in Tergan not even an issue. Indeed, if anything distinguishes Tergan from Keaen, it is the attitude toward incest. Otherwise the two nations are so much alike as to be one. People move freely across the border. The languages are identical.

Many families extended across the border.

Hostility between the nations was carefully fostered by the magices of Skele. Their goal: to strike the right balance between an enmity that would keep everybody, especially those in power, suitably distracted—and a similarity that would prevent the enmity to escalate into outright conflict—for such conflict invariably motivates a quest for technological advantage. This had to be prevented at all costs.

The currently ruling dynasty in Tergan are the Juncos, led by Roi Hengiste. They are a decrepit family, inbred through too many generations—with the notable exception of the Princess Evadne, whose mother was the daughter of a Keaenean baron. The dynasty is in the process of tearing itself apart in a paroxysm of intrigues and assassinations.

### V. MAGICES AND CIRCES

For centuries the magices of Skele kept their secrets to themselves. But their numbers diminished and their purpose became distorted by time. In order to bolster their power all new magices were now recruited from the sparse pool of mutant male youths. The mutants' use of the Founders' technological relics occasionally produced some surprising and unforeseen results.

Circes, female mutants, have the talent of healing even the gravest injuries and the most terrible of diseases. They are barren, live for indefinite periods without signs of aging, and are capable of self-healing under all but the gravest of conditions. They can bestow the gift of longevity upon a lover—assuming they find the 'One': an extreme improbability. The 'One' is assigned by fate, not design. As such he may simply not exist.

While male mutants habitually end up under the umbrella of Skele's magices, circes are left to their own devices, detested and outcast. They live under disguises, always wary, always transient. Some, driven by urges too powerful to ignore, take temporary husbands, only to be forced to leave them again as exposure threatens. The husbands seldom know who their wives really are until they're gone—usually when it becomes obvious that they can bear no offspring. As a result of popular paranoia, ordinary barren women are often falsely suspected of being circes.

### VI. ARMIST AND TAHLIA OF KEAEN

Armist and Tahlia are the putative children of Hain

the Keaen, fathered with 'vessels' from the pool of 'ordinary' Keaeneans, according to the precepts of the Covenant. In truth Hain was barren. In both instances the 'vessels' had taken lovers shortly before Hain bedded them. The Keaen made use of this contingency to cover up his infertility, of which he was well aware. Armist and Tahlia were taken from their respective mothers when only weeks old, and brought to Castle Keaen to be raised as Hain's chosen offspring: Armist to be Hain's successor; Tahlia to be given to one of the barons allied to the House of Keaen.

Armist and Tahlia, intensely enamored of each other, absconded from their fate and finally became lovers, defying the taboos of their society. Armist was captured by Tergans while Tahlia was forced to return to Keaen, where she suffered a sham-wedding to the Baron Tegel, whom she later killed when he tried to rape her.

Armist and Tahlia escaped their respective gaolers and were eventually reunited. When they found out that they were not siblings they became lovers openly. They led the Pacer's revolt against Hain, who was deposed and eventually died at Tahlia's hands. Armist and Tahlia now rule Keaen. The Covenant has become defunct.

Armist is a mutant, who suffers sporadic fugues during which time around him appears to stand still, while he functions normally, able to manipulate the frozen world around him. He has used this talent on several critical occasions, but has yet to come to terms with it.

#### VII. PANDRAK

Father of Armist. Once magice-at-court for Hain the Keaen. He was born Kervran, and fathered Armist with Mayia of Cedrea, just before the magices of Skele took him away to be trained. Pandrak never forgave his masters for taking him and thus causing, albeit indirectly, Mayia's death through the agency of Hain the Keaen — whom she defied when he bedded her and again when they came to take the baby Armist away. Pandrak betrayed the magices and the Covenant for the sake of his son and his revenge, and so helped to bring about Hain's downfall. After the death of the other magices at the hands of Caitlan of Tinagel, Pandrak is now the last survivor.

#### VIII. ZYGIE

A circe, living in Sacrael, operating a tavern: *The Daenean Stag*. A friend of Ailin of Teela. When Ailin

went with Caitlan on their quest to Finister, she left directions for Pandrak on how to find Zygie — in case he might see the need for a circe's help.

#### VIII. LAETIS

Leader of a clandestine Keaenean opposition group, the *Pacers*. Helped Armist to topple his Hain the Keaen. Now Armist's chief of security.

#### IX. CAITLAN OF TINAGEL AND AILIN OF TEELA

Caitlan is the former weaponsmaster at the court of Hain the Keaen. He came to the position by saving Hain's life as a young man, when Weltig, a former Tergan assassin and now a confidante of the Tergan king, tried to kill Hain. Caitlan taught Armist and Tahlia martial skills and attempted to help them after they fled Castle Keaen.

While trying to find Armist and Tahlia, Caitlan met Ailin, a circe, then living in Cedrea, who became his lover and found to her incredulous joy that Caitlan was her 'One'. After the coup in Keaen she went with Caitlan on a quest for a mysterious object — which turned out to be the one remaining landing craft — across the continent of Finister. The magices accompanying them on their ship as prisoners were responsible for Ailin's apparent drowning in the Limpic Ocean. Overcome with grief Caitlan threw the magices into the sea after her. Later he found that she had been rescued. They went on to locate the space boat, in the company of Fliz and Nerys. A magice sent to find the same object tried to kill them, but failed, with fatal consequences to himself.

#### X. FLIZ AND NERYS

Fliz: a Thalonican thief with a talent ordinarily expected from a mutant magice: the *Walk of Stealth*, an ability to move about without being perceived by anybody.

Nerys: the daughter of a rich Gaskarian merchant, bartered off to a Thalonican *Wearer*. She escaped her guards and met up with Fliz who helped to avoid being recaptured. They later joined up with Caitlan and Ailin on their quest across Finister.

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## Chapter 1

## TERGAN

*To kill or not to kill.*

If only, thought Sander, he had a choice in the matter. He didn't. Decisions had been made a long time ago. Now he had to live with their consequences.

The assassin sent to dispose of the Lady Evadne circled the room with the stealth and attentiveness of a stalking elec. He approached the tapestry. Sander, standing in the nook which it concealed, could see his outline through the weave. He hoped that the man would not look down. The tassles did not quite reach the floor, and though Sander had shrunk into the nook as far as he could, a glance at the floor . . .

The assassin paused in his progress. Sander stopped breathing. The assassin resumed stalking. Sander exhaled softly.

*To kill. . .*

The action had to be decisive, final. The assassin must not live to report that Councillor Sander had taken the side of the Lady Evadne; that he was willing to do whatever it took to ensure her survival. This intelligence would instantly render all Sander's efforts futile - and make him into the target of assassination attempts as well. Such were the ways in the courts of Tergan.

Sander grimaced. He detested having his hand forced. But events in Keaen had precipitated corresponding upheavals in Tergan. Everything was in a state of flux: a situation both dangerous and full of potential. All pivotal period in history were like this. Always had been and always would.

Prevarication came to an end. Sander activated the weapon in his right hand and raised it into a firing position. His left hand reached out and slowly pulled aside the curtain.

From the rod suspending the tapestry was came the faintest of creaks. The assassin whipped around. Sander aimed the weapon. The assassin stared at the apparition, distracted for a fatal moment. His right arm jerked up. Too late. Sander performed a minute correction of his aim and pulled the trigger. A soft hiss. A half-second spurt of tiny, almost invisible, needles impacted on the assassin, penetrated his clothing and his skin, buried themselves in his flesh, and released their poison.

The assassin stood still. Sander waited impassively. The

dosage of poison carried by ten needles or more was invariably fatal. The assassin had received maybe twice that.

*Thus I am compounding my crime*, Sander thought. The technical term was 'active interference'.

If *they* knew . . .

Sander shook off the thought. It was too late for second-guessing. His only hope was that to have it all done before his sins were finally discovered.

The assassin collapsed into an untidy heap. Sander stepped out from behind the curtain, went across, hunkered down to search the body. Two wrist-knives, their projector's springs cocked. A belt holding throwing knives hidden under a loose jacket. A long thin dirk, its blade mottled with poison. Another, broad-bladed, dirk with a wicked double serrated edge. A strangling cord. Three five-pointed throwing stars. All that to kill a woman?

Sander smiled grimly. He considered man's face, slack in death, open eyes staring vacantly. *Number two*, he thought. *I wonder how many more they're going to send?* Though the pockets of those wanting to get rid of Evadne were deep, high-class assassins like this one didn't come cheap. Vexation at their failure would surely cause many a sleepless night and mutual recriminations. How could it be that such competent killers were disposed of with such efficiency? What agency might be responsible? Ample cause to nourish distrust and suspicion.

Sander pondered the disposition of the corpse. He would leave the room the same way he'd come in: through the window. When they found him in the morning they'd wonder yet again. Death would be attributed to the long fall. The needles were too small - almost invisibly thin. They left no marks.

Sander gripped the corpse under its arms and started to drag it toward the open window. He rested the upper torso onto the sill and bent down to take the legs, ready to heave it out.

A sound at the door.

Sander dropped the legs and spun around. The door opened a fraction. Sander saw the green of Evadne's flowing skirt. Her face was turned away as she spoke to someone outside. A tinkle of laughter, sounding faintly artificial. Probably dismissing Gizel, who would have followed her like an eager puppy all the way from the ceremony to her quarters. A dangerous puppy, Sander reminded himself. Gizel's pathetic desire to bed Evadne masked the other parts of his personality: the scheming, treacherous, opportunist backstabber and

climber. Maybe even one of those who'd paid for the assassins. That sounded like a contradiction, but in Tergan it need not be.

Evadne's efforts appeared to have been successful. Footsteps faded away. She turned around, stepped into the room — and froze.

"What? . . ."

Sander raised a warning finger to his lips. A brief flash of anger flitted across her face. Sander, despite his predicament, felt a brief surge of amusement. Evadne wasn't used to being ordered around by a Councillor. The situation was so novel that she'd probably take a moment to adapt. For a breath or two they stared at each other.

Evadne opened her mouth. Sander pointed at the corpse and shook his head. Her mouth snapped shut. Sander signaled her to close the door. A minute hesitation, then she complied. She leaned her back against the closed door.

"What are you doing in my quarters? What is this man doing here? Is he dead? *Did you* kill him? Why?"

Sander sighed. His carefully laid plans were about to be disrupted by contingency.

"I would like you to look at this man."

She raised a questioning eyebrow, detached herself from the door, and stepped closer. Sander watched her approach, his face carefully impassive. The damage had been done. Now she needed to be told at least some of the truth. As she came closer he thought - again - that she was not only Tergan's best hope for peace with Keaen, but that she also happened to be beautiful. A finely chiseled face, untainted by the blemishes and distortions created by inbreeding. She had a presence that surrounded her like an aura. Hardened by the necessities of survival in the unforgiving environment of the Tergan court, repeated rape by her cousin Gervase and his father — yet she remained unbroken; and something told Sanders that the rape had not been forgotten, and that one day there would be a reckoning.

Evadne stopped beside Sander. He opened the man's garments and pulled back his sleeves to reveal the hidden armory. Evadne's eyes widened; her face tightened.

"He came here to kill me," she said tonelessly.

"He was the second," Sander told her.

Her head snapped around; her dark-brown eyes, now hard as flint, bored into his.

"What?"

Sander shrugged. "And, like the other, he failed."

Her features softened a trifle, but did not lose their vigilant mien.

*Good*, he thought. *Don't take anybody at face value. Not even those who claim to have saved your life.*

"You?" she said softly.

He motioned at the corpse. "May I continue what I started?"

Evadne nodded, distracted. Sander took hold of the legs and heaved the body over the window sill. He looked out and saw it spread out on the battlement below.

"I'll have to go down there," he said to Evadne, "and drag it out of the way. When they find it . . . it would be better if it wasn't under your window."

"Quite."

"So . . . if you'll pardon me . . ."

Again she gave him a stare that tried to probe right into his soul.

"I wish to speak with you when you're done with . . . this."

"Of course."

"Then you may go."

"Thank you, Mylady."

He could feel her eyes on his back as he walked to the door. He opened it a slit and peered out; saw nobody and slipped into the corridor. Around a few corners, down a passage, through a guard's access tunnel, and onto the battlement outside.

Nobody here either. Sander stepped into Caravella's bright light and sauntered over to where the corpse lay askew. He looked around, saw nobody, bent down and dragged it about twenty steps further along the battlement. He peered over the parapet. Below lay a passage connecting two internal courtyards. A couple of grooms leading horses passed by below. He waited until they were out of sight and pushed the corpse through an embrasure; watched as it impacted with a sickly thud on the pavement below. He stood for another moment, looking around to make sure that his act had remained unobserved. From her window he saw Evadne's face looking down. Sander returned to the small access door and re-entered the castle.

Evadne was awaiting him. In the short time he'd been out of the room she had changed from her ceremonial dress into a simple gown of pale-blue gauze, with a thin, red sash around her waist. The outfit accentuated the contours of her figure: lithe, well-toned, with breasts provocative enough to make her into a prime object of

desire for every male around the castle and beyond. Sander noted that she wore nothing underneath the gown. The effect was . . . revealing.

Haste or design? Knowing Evadne, Sander suspected the latter. She wanted him off-guard when she questioned him. Nothing more than that. Councillors were too far down the hierarchy to be attractive to those in the lofty realm where the Lady Evadne lived. But Councillors were men, and if Evadne had learned anything it was that men were easily distracted by the appropriate stimuli. And there she stood, hoping to befuddle him; not knowing that this was *his* game.

"I suppose I should thank you," she said thoughtfully. She sat down on a chaise-longue. The act was calculated for maximum effect and would, by itself, hopelessly confused an unfocused male.

Sander bowed politely. The best thing was to tell her as much of the truth as he possibly could.

"You were protecting me," she declared.

"That Mylady, is my mission"

"Who instructed you to do this?"

"That I cannot reveal," he said - quite truthfully. To admit that he acted entirely under his own initiative . . . it would not have been productive. Not . . . yet.

"Could you at least give me an indication?" Evadne's facial expression suggested, ever so subtly, that the act of providing such an 'indication' might be of such a nature as to incur her ever-lasting gratitude and whatever that might imply.

"The intent is benign," he assured her.

"Truly?" She didn't believe a word of it.

"Truly. "How could it be otherwise?"

"I have been used before," she said, making it sound like an exchange of confidence. "I will be used again. What else could motivate anybody in this place?"

*No need to win me over. — I'm already on your side. . .*

"Whoever . . . instructed me . . . has . . . plans for you."

A brief flicker of surprise, immediately suppressed. Her eyes turned flinty.

"Plans," she repeated.

"There those," he said carefully, "who would like to see you on Tergan's throne."

She stiffened and sat up. "What? - Why?" she snapped.

"Because they don't want to war with Keaen. Because they think that *you* don't want to either."

"Why would they think that?"

"They have not seen fit to communicate this to me."

"I see." She considered him from narrowed eyes. The seductive mien had disappeared. "And why did they choose *you*?"

Sander shrugged. "They trust me to carry out their wishes."

She nodded. "And you seem to be good at it." She gazed at him for another moment, and he thought that, for an instant, her eyes had softened, before shrouding themselves again.

"How did that man die?" she asked.

She was far too observant!

"He allowed me to get too close."

"A professional assassin . . ." she mused. "And you . . . what did you do? I saw no injury. Did you break his neck? Because he let you get too close?" She eyed him shrewdly. "Then who are *you*?"

"I used to be someone else than I'm now," he said obliquely.

She took a deep breath. Her chest heaved suggestively. It was, Sander realized, done without intent. But when she exhaled again, *then* she knew what she was doing. The guarded, calculating look returned to her eyes. Watching for his reaction. Trying to catch him out. Waiting for a lingering look on her breasts maybe; or a flash of desire behind his carefully controlled countenance. Still trying to find a way to weaken his resistance and make him reveal more than he should.

*Keep trying, he thought. It's not that I don't enjoy watching it.*

"I'm not supposed to know about all this, am I?"

"No," he admitted.

"And now that I do?"

He grimaced. "*They* don't know that you do." A rueful smile. "I'm not going to tell."

"It would not reflect well on *you*," she guessed. That was a motivation she understood. Never admit your mistakes — unless it is beneficial to do so.

He shrugged, admitting it. Let her think that she had found a weak spot.

"What now?" Evadne wondered.

"I shall continue to fulfill my assigned duty."

"Until what happens?"

"Until they give up trying to kill you." He looked at her meaningfully. "Which may or may not be soon."

"Or they may not give up."

"Then, sooner or later, they will make a mistake and reveal themselves. Once their anonymity is shattered, they themselves become open to certain . . . counter-measures."

Her face lifted. "So," she gave him a wintry smile, "I'm

being used to bait a trap?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“You *know* this? You? A Councillor? What do you know of your masters’ true intentions?”

He smiled. “They are not my masters.”

*Careful now! Watch what you say . . .*

“I am in their . . . employ,” he amplified. “That doesn’t mean they own me — nor that I am ignorant of their goals.” He bowed perfunctorily. “And now, with your permission, I’d better leave.”

*Before I say too much.*

She favored him with a dyspeptic smile. “You have my permission.”

“Before I go though . . . if I may make a suggestion?”

“Suggest away. You’re a Councillor after all.”

Sander grinned. “As if that mattered,” he said, giving her a wry look. “Anyway, I have *two* suggestions. Firstly, it is essential that my role in this matter remains a secret. Only in that way can I remain . . . effective. Secondly, I believe that — in order to provide you with some extra security — you would benefit from some . . . martial instruction.”

“I carry a weapon.”

“I am aware of that,” he admitted, suppressing a smile at her astonished face. She’d been certain that nobody knew about the little dagger strapped in a sheath to her left leg. “But this may not be sufficient. The carrying of a weapon and its effective use are two very different things.”

“Unfortunately instruction in such matters would make my enemies aware of my . . . alertness to their plans,” she pointed out.

“True,” he admitted, apparently regretfully. “Anyway, it was just a thought.”

“Unless, of course,” she continued, as if speaking to herself, “I did this . . . secretly.”

He hesitated, as if the notion not occurred to him. “That, too, is correct. Still, there is another problem I had not considered. Almost all of those qualified to provide such instruction are . . . how can I put it delicately . . . ”

“Suspect?” she suggested.

“Precisely.”

She shifted on the chaise-longe. “As a member of the royal family I’m entitled to a personal Councillor from the pool,” she mused idly. “I have never done so, because,” she shrugged, “what possible use could a

Councillor be for me?”

She eyed him speculatively. “On the other hand, it has just occurred to me . . . ” She paused. “You’re not attached to anybody.”

He thought it appropriate to at least feign reluctance. “Mylady, I’m not sure . . . ”

“Why not?” she inquired.

“I’m just a Councillor.”

“Yes, I can see that,” she retorted sarcastically.

“I’m not really qualified . . . ”

“You killed two assassins,” she said crisply. “That’s enough qualification for me.” She made a dismissive gesture. “The decision has been made. Consider yourself *my* Councillor — and personal instructor, and protector — as of now.”

Sander made a point of looking uncomfortable. Evadne’s face broke into a smile.

“Come! Surely, there are worse things,” she said.

“It’s not that . . . ”

“Then what is it?”

“There are considerations of propriety.”

Evadne laughed. It was the first time he’d seen her laugh; and it lit up the room like a thousand candles. The experience was . . . unexpected.

She caught her breath. “Tamar has **D**elfis,” she said.

“Indeed,” he retorted dryly. The sexual antics between Evadne’s aunt and her Councillor had long been the subject of extensive scandalmongering around the castle.

Evadne sat up, all laughter draining from her face. “You will do this?” This time it was a plea.

He nodded. “I will!”

Evadne released a small pent-up breath. “Good. I shall attend to the organizational issues associated with having you assigned to me. It’ll probably take a few days, as I’ll have to contrive some reasons to make it look better.” A wry twitch of the mouth. “To give it . . . propriety . . . ”

“Very good,” he agreed. He inclined his head. “With your permission . . . ”

“You have it,” she said graciously.

He left the room, careful to keep his face indifferent. The situation had developed much better than he’d dared to hope for when she surprised him.

—

When the door snapped close Evadne remained in an attitude of deep thought.

*What exactly happened just now?*

The fact that she was asking the question was bothersome. The whole interview, this whole situation — it had left her in complete confusion.

Confusion? About what?

About — well, everything. Her sexual stratagems had been totally ineffectual. Apart from a slight gleam of interest toward the end, her revealing attire had had no effect on Sander.

Sander.

A major source of confusion. He probably thought that, until she'd found him in her quarters trying to dispose of a corpse, she hadn't even been aware of his existence. He *would* have thought that, because he was astute enough to know the conventions governing the court and its interactions, and because he didn't appear like a man who was easily deluded by his own self-importance.

Which was refreshing.

Bothersome, too.

The other Councillors, twenty-four in all — this being the unchanging size of the 'pool' since time immemorial — *were* mostly self-deluding, pompous fools, inflated by an excessive sense of their own importance. They were, however, at best moderately influential, and at worst completely irrelevant. They were also a bunch of conniving cretins, whose gowns of office barely concealed their middle-aged overweight bodies that you wouldn't want to touch with a prodding stick, let alone anything else.

Except for Sander, of course. Not only was he the youngest of the lot, but *his* gown hid what Evadne had always suspected to be a very flexible and probably not unattractive body. Now it appeared that it was also quite lethal. Which, she ruefully admitted, added to the attraction. And then — finding him in her quarters in such compromising circumstances, and what he'd revealed during their subsequent conversation — that made him even more interesting.

Interesting, yes. But troublesome, too. Because something was not right. It wasn't just his lack of a suitable response to her charms either. Though that was vexing enough.

Maybe he preferred boys. It was possible. A lot of Tergan men did; though why Evadne never really understood.

Maybe Sander indeed preferred boys.

But then Evadne remembered a tiny moment when the disinterested mask had slipped. No! No boys. Just a mind

kept in careful check; unwilling to allow himself to be dominated by the urges of his nether regions — or his heart, for that matter. Focused on the task at hand.

Which was . . .

What?

Evadne got up and stretched. She rubbed her stiff neck with both hands.

What was Sander's task?

Superficially: to protect her. But nothing was ever what it appeared. Somewhere there were other plans, intentions, levels of meaning and purpose. And she would find out what they were. Which was why she'd used his suggestion that she acquire more martial skills to her own advantage. Having him as personal Councillor — and instructor — should prove very interesting indeed. In the long run he *would* weaken to her charms. She *would* find out just what exactly motivated him.

Evadne froze in the midst of her self-ministrations when a thought struck her. Step one on her new quest. Find out more about Sander of Orgond? How did he get to be a Councillor so young? His father or an uncle must have held the same position: this was the tradition.

Uneasy about something she could not define, Evadne paced back and forth, then stopped in front of a mirror of Nacra crystal in the far corner of her room, beside the massive wardrobe. She dropped her hands to her side and stood still; watched the woman in the pale-blue gown looking back at her; tried to see her as someone *else* than herself.

*Who likes you?*

Why was the other woman asking her that? She, of all people, knew that Evadne didn't even much like *herself* . . .

A knock on the door. Evadne jerked.

"Who is it?"

"Arguitte, Mylady."

Her abigail, returning from errands.

Evadne sighed. "Come in."

Arguitte came into the room, and curtsied. "Mylady."

Evadne considered her abigail. She suspected Arguitte to be one of Silas' many spies. If she was, however, she had always been careful not to provide Evadne with any evidence to support such a hypothesis. In any case, it did not matter. Anybody at court was a spy for somebody. It was inconceivable that things could be different. Intrigue permeated the castle's corridors like a vile stench that clung to everything and everybody and would never go away — but to which everybody had

gotten so used that its presence was almost unnoticeable.

"Did you get the lotion?"

Arguite nodded and stepped forward. She undid the string from the purse in her hand and extracted a small, capped glass jar, which she handed to Evadne. "This," she said, "and more." A hand went into the purse and came out with another jar. "The apothecary gave me this unguent and suggested that Mylady try its amazing properties."

"Charging you an exorbitant price, no doubt," Evadne said dryly.

Arguite shook her head. "He charged me nothing."

"Did he not?" Evadne uncapped the jar and sniffed on the white, slightly oily-looking, substance inside. A faint scent of wertberries, mixed in with just a notion of jasmine.

"What does it do?" she asked Arguite.

"It tones the skin and makes it more supple and radiant."

Evadne reflected that it was time change apothecaries — but maybe not time to tell her abigail. Or maybe, and this was a real possibility, it was time to change abigail as well.

She took the other jar off Arguite and nodded. "I might try these — tonight."

Arguite smiled. "Would Mylady like me to help her select a dress for the reception tonight?"

Evadne shook her head. "Not yet. I'll call you when I'm ready. You may leave now."

Arguite hesitated for a minute instant. "Of course, Mylady. I'll be in my cubicle." She curtsied again and left.

When the door had closed behind her, Evadne stood for a while, contemplating the jars in her hand. She went over to her dressing table and placed them to one side, away from her other cosmetics. She would not use them until someone whose competence and intentions she could trust had tested and declared them to be safe. If they had been willing to send assassins to dispose of her, it was a small step from there to engaging an apothecary to prepare lethal ointments, which a vain young woman might carelessly smear onto her skin, and thereby seal her own death warrant.

Evadne paused. Someone she could trust? The notion was almost an absurdity. There was no such somebody: only those she distrusted less than others. Unless . . .

The image of Sander standing over the body of the assassin came unbidden. Whatever Sander's schemes,

whoever his masters, the simple fact was that he had saved her life. It was also a fact that she had believed him when he'd said that it was the second such emissary of death. He had no reason to lie about it.

Braggadocio?

No. He wasn't the type; nor did he have a credible motive. He would have studied her carefully and know what impressed her and what didn't.

Evadne walked over to the window and looked out over Sacrael, wondered what it would be like *not* to be who she was, but one of those teeming tens of thousands of people who knew little or nothing of the intricacies of intrigue and treachery at the Junco court. She grimaced ruefully.

She would never know.

Her gaze traveled down to the castle grounds. Down by the fence the guards lockstepped in their interminable rut. Along the main accessway two men stood talking; one of them wore the prim, black-and-purple uniform of the Castle Guard; the other . . .

Evadne squinted against Caravella's bright glare.

Sander!

Now he patted the guard on one shoulder. A gesture like that of an old friend or maybe a confidante.

Evadne smiled cynically. Sander seemed to go out of his way to become familiar with the lowest ranks of servantry and guards. An eccentricity which, on the surface, seemed quirky and pointless, but which just might turn out to be more devious than anything the other Councillors chose to devise.

—

Sander left Evadne's quarters and headed for the lower levels and the exit. Apart from a few guards, stationed at certain strategic junctions, the passages were empty. Evadne's rooms were situated on the fourth level in the western quarter of the roughly circular, tapering structure that was Sacrael Castle. Beneath her, in somewhat more expansive rooms, resided her aunt. Human traffic on levels four and three was mostly confined to servants and a few guards. On the second level it was a different matter. Here lived and worked Roi Hengiste. Here also were the quarters of Hengiste's de-facto successor, Gervase.

Sander descended to the second level, but kept to those passages assigned for use by servants. Right now he had no taste for meeting Hengiste, Gervase, or any of their Councillors.

The servants who passed Sander greeted him with nods of easy familiarity. Nobody wondered why a Councillor should use such low-level thoroughfares. Sander was different. Everybody knew that. Less powerful, of course, than Toffel or Jago; maybe a bit odd as well. But they'd gotten used to him.

As he stepped out of the narrow stairway from the second to the first floor he almost bumped into Arguitte, a somewhat corpulent young woman, with a round face ringed by drooping curls of muddy-red hair. Arguitte was Evadne's abigail. She was also in the employ of Silas, Hengiste's spymaster.

Arguitte curtsied. She kept her eyes averted. For some obscure reason she appeared intimidated by Sander, no matter how much he'd tried to put her at ease.

"What have you been up to?" he asked her lightly.

"Running Mylady's errands and getting Mylady salves and tinctures," she replied, her eyes unable to meet his. With anybody else Sander would have instantly understood this as a indicator of a guilty conscience. With Arguitte he expected it — and so he silenced the tiny nagging voice inside him, that told him that something was not totally as it should be.

Was it *sabér*? It was difficult to tell. The symptoms of *sabér* bore a close resemblance to anything from anxiety attacks to unfounded — and possibly quite mistaken — intuitive processes. After decades of carrying this gift around with him — sometimes thinking of it as a talent, though often enough it appeared more like a curse — he still could not tell the difference. Besides, *sabér* was a fickle companion. Often enough it had deserted him when he really needed it. At other times he had confused it with any number of other inklings. Like he might be doing this time . . .

So — something was not totally as it should be. Nothing at the Tergan court ever was. They were the most twisted freaks imaginable. A veritable parade of psychopaths; Machiavellian schemers; self-delusional, inbred half-wits. With the exception of Evadne — who was half-Keanean; the result of a union that caused a not inconsiderable stir around the palace when it became public. Only the political acumen of Prince Bartle, Evadne's father had prevented him and his wife — Myria of Kint province — from becoming ostracized. Of course, they'd both been discreetly assassinated some years later.

"Well," Sander said to Arguitte, "you'd better run then."

She curtsied again. "Thank you, sir. Mylady doesn't

like to be kept waiting." She hurried past him and disappeared into the stairwell.

Sander stared after her and shook his head. Evadne could be difficult. A lifetime's exposure to Junco habits of living, thinking, and acting had left its marks.

Sander left the castle through the main entrance. He walked, as he always did. An idiosyncrasy, which continued to attract snide remarks on his eccentricity, but which he maintained, because it gave him the opportunity to get to know the faces of the guards — and, more importantly, for them to get to know his. Thus familiarity was created, maintained, and fostered. Sander made it a point of stopping and talking to them. Initially, they had looked at him in askance, perplexity, even suspicion. Councillors did not behave in such a manner; and deviations from the norm needed to be treated with utmost circumspection. However, after years of patiently maintaining the same habits, they had begun to feel at ease with him and felt free to share news and gossip. They even forebore to ask him for his papers of admission, something they were obliged to do with everybody below a certain level of significance. Even Councillors were not exempt, some of them having had their access permits withdrawn by capricious royalty, usually for limited periods and as a method of punishment for real or imagined transgressions. However, with Sander most of the guards didn't even bother to look at the pass he waved at them. He could have used a blank piece of parchment to the same effect.

But Sander seldom just passed through, and today, too, despite being in a hurry, he made it a point of pausing to chat. He inquired about the health of the son of the sergeant commanding this watch. Sander expressed his delight when he found out that the boy had not had a recurrence of the ailment which had almost killed him some months ago. He had lived only because Sander — following not so much *sabér* but a compulsion born out of compassion, occasioned by the obvious distress of the guard, now not a guard, but just a desperate father — had intervened to heal the boy; providing a flimsy and entirely fictitious explanation of how he had been able to do so.

It had been a dangerous move, and Sander had often asked himself what could have prompted him to have been so reckless and risk exposure. Still, the boy lived, and that was a reward in itself. The guard — a certain Keran — was pathetically grateful and assured Sander yet again that he was forever in his debt.

Sander clapped him on the back. "Think nothing of it.

Your son's well. That's what matters."

"A debt is a debt," Keran insisted.

Sander grinned. "I'll collect it one day."

He excused himself and left, nodding at a patrol lock-stepping along the endless iron picket fence as he exited left the castle grounds. Before him stretched Sacrael, Tergan's sprawling capital, enveloping the castle like a protective barrier. Sander stopped at a stray notion and looked back at the tapering shape of Sacrael Castle. He located the window to Evadne's suite. A pale shape filled the dark rectangle. Sanders wondered what she was looking at. At him? Sander turned away. The notion was curiously unsettling.

He refocused his attention to other matters. Like Fridswid. Sander sighed. He would have to deal with Fridswid, who was becoming somewhat of a nuisance. His factotum's putative absence to visit relations in Pruid Fair had, in truth, been an extended de-briefing visit to Roi Hengiste's spymaster Silas. The fact that Silas should have seen fit to summon Sander's servant to such a visit indicated an unhealthy increase of interest in his person.

Sander paused. Something — was it *sabér*? anxiety? other, other unknowable impulses? — urged him to return to the castle. Other considerations advised against such a course of action. Evadne was an extremely observant woman. It had taken more than just luck and Sander's protective umbrella to survive the massacres at the court, which had decimated the ranks of her cousins over the last few years. He would require an excellent reason for his return, so soon after he had excused himself. He had none.

Sander turned away, continuing on toward the city. He entered the alleyways of Sacrael, choosing a route deliberately different from any he'd taken in the last days of weeks. Routines were dangerous. He had enemies aplenty. Every Councillor had them; even Sander, who tried to keep himself out of the fray as much as possible. When Evadne declared him to be her personal Councillor his carefully cultivated insignificance would evaporate. The incentives to dispose of him would inflate to grotesque proportions; as would be his value to those who preferred the more venal approach. So far, attempts to bribe him had been few and far between, perpetrated mostly by outsiders who did not appreciate his unimportance. That would change soon.

Sander cast furtive glances at the buildings around him. The dark rectangles of the windows stared back at him, concealing whatever might wait in their cover. He

could be waylaid just like anybody else, and a hit by a crossbow bolt in the wrong place — like the head — was capable of killing him just the same as it would any ordinary man.

He immersed himself into the afternoon crowds thronging Upanish Square, and headed for the eastern exit. His residence, a comparatively modest two-storey edifice in an elite part of town, lay just a few minute's walk beyond. He has just crossed the square, when he felt like something had jolted him.

*Sabér!* No doubt this time!

Sander froze. Someone behind him bumped into him and cursed.

"Get out of my way!"

Sander made a polite gesture and stepped aside. The man behind him — a sailor of unidentifiable origin, surrounded by a halo of the rancid stink of one who hadn't washed for days or weeks — was not mollified. He was also intoxicated and, not being Terganese, failed to recognize the color and cut of Sander's garments.

He gave Sander a one-armed shove. Sander reeled back. A hollow pit had formed where his stomach used to be. A sure sign of *sabér*. Sander fixed the sailor with a stare. The man was several inches taller than himself, making the efficacy of the gesture dubious.

The sailor took a step forward. Sander held up a hand. "Wait."

The sailor stopped in mid-stride, a perplexed frown on his coarse face.

Sander took stock of the situation. The sailor was not going to be placated. Sander, however, could not afford to be distracted. The choice, once more, had been pre-empted.

He took a quick step toward the sailor, feigned with his left, and, as the man reacted instinctively, brought up his right and drove the knuckles into a nerve node just underneath the man's left ear. The sailor stood for a moment, transfixed in paralysis, his face frozen into a sneer. Then his legs gave way and he collapsed on the ground.

Ignoring the stares of the people around him, Sander stepped back into the crowd and pushed his way through as he hurried back toward the castle.

—

Without bothering to summon Arguitte, Evadne tried on several dresses for the evening's event. Having discarded the gown she'd put on for Sander's benefit, she

held them this way and that, inspecting herself in the mirror of polished crystal; actually stepping into some and doing them up as much as she could, then turning around to examine their appearance from all angles.

Evadne made a vexed noise. None of them truly pleased her, but there was no time to commission another. Besides, she had no idea *what* she would like to be wearing right now. Something to impress and befuddle; put them off-guard, so that she might derive the best advantage from whatever interactions would ensue.

Evadne shook her head. Futility. Wasted time. Another evening wasted away in pointless posturing.

If only there were somebody to *be* befuddled . . .

The notion occasioned a involuntary grimace of distaste. The thought of the only two candidates likely to respond to her sexual allures invoked instant revulsion.

Gizel: A repellent fop, with the conscience of an elec and all the attraction of a slime-fish.

Gervase: The very name occasioning a wave of intense, hot hatred. The memory of the rapes was as alive and vivid as if they had taken place yesterday. And to be forced to dissemble every day; to bury the loathing under a carefully crafted mask; to have to *speak* to this monster . . .

A rap on the door. Evadne jerked; almost dropped the dress she was holding up.

"What?" she snapped.

"I wish to speak with you."

Evadne swayed. She felt like being ill. Was that all it took: a thought?

What was she to do? She looked around. The room was a mess. Garments lay strewn across the bed. She was wearing next to nothing. The thought of his eyes feasting on her made her want to retch. The notion of him being *alone* with him was . . .

Sending him away: the most desirable course of action. Implausible though. He would wait. We would see her. He had the right to do so, and the arrogance to insist on it. He was the first in line to the scepter: the eldest son of the eldest brother to Hengiste. With the demise of Hengiste's own children and Gervase's older brother, he was the implicit successor.

She could not just send him away. Or push him out of the window. That was the stuff of dreams — but equally unrealistic. Gervase was strong and agile. Always had been.

*His hated face above her, now contorted in agony. Blood dripping from his mutilated nose into her face. The vile taste of him in her*

*mouth as she spat the severed tip of his nose back into his face. His contorted visage. A scream of pain and rage. Narvin, Gervase's father, looming above them, reaching down to . . .*

The whole thing had been covered up as an unfortunate accident during weapons training; but everybody around the castle had a fair idea of what really happened. The girl Evadne became somebody to be wary of. Which suited her well.

Her gaze fell on the bell-cord.

"Wait!" she said aloud. She pulled the cord. Hard.

She went back to the bed, swept up the garments and threw them into the wardrobe; picked out a simple, gray, one-piece dress and pulled it over herself. A quick look in the mirror crystal. Far too revealing! Her breasts — he would leer at them incessantly. Maybe he would even choose to become ardent; forget his clipped nose, and, after all these years, try again. Maybe this time . . .

She remembered Sander's suggestion of martial arts training. Suddenly, the wisdom of it was so obvious that she couldn't understand why she hadn't done it of her own accord.

She rummaged through the wardrobe and came out with her riding outfit: a two-piece garment, consisting of a sturdy, gray, short-sleeved vest that buttoned up at the front, and effectively hid what was underneath; and a pair of moderately tight-fitting ankle-length linen trousers — very unfeminine and generally disapproved-of by just about everybody.

Evadne slipped out of the gray dress, put on a white blouse, the riding vest, and the trousers.

Another, impatient, rap.

"Just wait!" she snapped. "Or come back later."

There was no reply, but the doorknob moved.

Evadne smirked to herself. She had driven home the inside latch. Years of habit, born of justified suspicion and distrust.

Evadne completed the dressing procedure by putting on her riding boots. She closed the wardrobe door, glanced at herself in the mirror crystal, took a deep breath, went to the door, and opened it.

"What do you want?" she snapped.

Gervase raked her up and down with one glance and pushed past her into her room. He turned around to face her.

"Going anywhere?"

"What does it look like?"

He said nothing, but looked around the room, as if suspecting somebody else to be lurking near. Finding

nobody he turned back to her. Evadne composed her face to conceal the emotions that roiled inside her. The sight of his nose, the tip an irregular jagged flap of skin, brought memories and savage satisfaction. Above it, a pair of black eyes, set too closely together under thin eyebrows. A willful forehead, bordered by thick, straight, dark-blond hair, cut in a sharp horizontal line.

She was going to ask him again what he wanted, but stopped herself. Repeating the question would place her in an undesirable position.

She turned away from him and moved over to her dressing table. His gaze was like a clammy physical presence in her back.

"I have a proposition," he said.

She did not turn around. "About what?" she asked.

"About resolving . . . certain matters. Presenting a united front."

"What *are* you talking about?"

She finally turned around to face him. He took a step toward her. She forced herself not to flinch or try to back away.

"The succession," he said.

Despite herself she was intrigued. "Why would *you* have a problem with that?" she said acidly. "You're the first in line."

"One of three," he reminded her.

*Three indeed. When once there were fifteen . . .*

. . . most of them murdered by their own relatives — with the notable exception of Hoegen, who had fallen to the sword of Armist of Keaen.

"So?"

"I want to avoid further needless conflict. The dynasty is thinning to the point of there being no one to carry it on."

"I still don't know what you want," she said curtly.

"Marry you," he said.

The words at first did not sink in. Didn't make sense. Refused to come together into a coherent utterance.

When they finally did, she found herself speechless.

"It would help to continue the dynasty," Gervase said, "and it would . . . discourage . . . Gizel from persisting with his attempts to . . . change things."

Translation: try to murder those in his way; especially Gervase.

"Take a leap off a cliff," she snapped. "Make it a tall one!" She pointed at the door. "Get out of here. — Now!" At this point she didn't care about status, tradition, or the consequences of her actions.

Gervase stood still.

Evadne shrugged. "You're not? Then *I* am."

She took a step toward the door. Gervase moved to block her way and slammed the door close, leaning his back against it. Evadne stopped abruptly, a step or two away from him.

Gervase grinned. The tip of his mutilated nose pulled slightly downward.

"I think you will change your mind."

"Never."

"Then you will die."

"We'll see about that."

She backed off a couple of steps. Gervase smirked crookedly.

"Waiting for your abigail? I've sent her on an errand. You're waiting in vain." A look of anticipation flitted across his features. "It's been a long time, Evie."

That's what he used to call her when she was little. When . . .

Gervase pushed himself away from the door.

"Think of it," he said. "It could be like it was. For the rest of your life."

"No."

He took another step.

A rap on the door.

Evadne's heart jumped with relief.

"Come in!" It didn't matter *who* it was.

The door-handle moved.

"Stay out!" Gervase commanded.

The door opened. Gervase took a quick step toward it and reached out to slam it close. From the other side, somebody pushed hard. The door slammed into Gervase's face. He reeled backwards, holding his hands to his newly battered nose, his assailant still hidden from him by the bulk of the door.

But Evadne saw Sander. Already she had collected her wits. She shook her head and made a quick gesture, indicating for him to back away. If Gervase saw him, the consequences would be severe.

Sander nodded and stepped back into the corridor and out of sight. Evadne heaved a sigh of relief at his alacrity. She wondered if he'd known just *who* had been at the other side of that door.

Gervase straightened, a hand still over his face. Blood dripped onto the floor. Evadne kept a carefully neutral face.

Gervase stumbled toward the door and peered into the corridor. Evadne held her breath.

Gervase whipped around. "Who was it?" he hissed.

The blood seeped over his lower jaw.

Evadne shrugged. "I have no idea."

He advanced on her.

"You lie!"

He took his hands away from his face. His nose was slightly twisted to one side, a dark discoloration spreading from the point where the cartilage had broken. He advanced another step toward her, reaching out with a blood-stained hand. Evadne stepped back nimbly.

A movement at the door. Sander. In his hand he held a small instrument which he pointed at Gervase. There was a tiny sound. Sander lowered the instrument and stood, watching alertly. Gervase paused as if to listen, began to turn. His eyes unfocused and glazed over. He took another halting step and stumbled against a chair, only to collapse in a limp mound on the floor.

Evadne looked up at Sander. The audacity of the Councillor's action took her breath away. This, after all, was Gervase.

"He'll come to in a little while or so," Sander said casually. He pushed himself off the doorjamb, came into the room, pulled the door close behind him, and engaged the latch. Curiously enough — or maybe it wasn't so curious at all? — she felt no alarm at his action; despite a notion that Sander was potentially infinitely more dangerous than Gervase could ever be.

"What did you do?"

"I administered a harmless poison, Mylady," he assured her as he stepped close and knelt by Gervase's body. He turned it over, so he could see the face, pulled up the eyelids, and performed an inspection of sorts. Apparently satisfied at the result he rose.

When he looked at her, Evadne suddenly became aware of a disconcerting fact: that Sander was much, much more than he appeared to be. Behind the assumed air of measured subservience lurked . . . what?

Power. The knowledge of power. A willingness to use it.

She started to say something, but stopped herself. Maybe this was not the time to push too hard. Maybe the illusion had to be maintained. For a while at least.

Sander straightened. "Mylady," he said softly. "Are you . . . well?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes, thank you."

He glanced at Gervase. "I think it would be good if . . ."

"Nobody will know," she assured him.

He appeared relieved. "Thank you, Mylady," he said

softly.

"Think nothing of it," she replied, attempting a lofty, though benevolent, air.

Sander nodded at the body. "He will be displeased at his . . . situation."

Evadne was unsurprised at Sander's evident concern.

"True," she admitted.

"He . . ." Sander hesitated.

"We were arguing," she said.

Sander gave her a glance which told her that he knew pretty much what had *really* happened.

"He will be wonder how he got to be in this position?"

"I'll contrive a plausible story," she said.

Sander nodded, plainly unconvinced. Evadne found the response irritating. No matter what he had done for her, how dared he to even *think* of doubting that she would do exactly as she said?

"Another remedy suggests itself," Sander said quietly.

For a moment she thought that he was going to suggest killing Gervase right here and then.

Sander must have read her mind. His lips twitched in a quickly suppressed smile.

"If he could be made to forget what happened . . ."

She looked up in surprise. Sander made a small gesture. "I have access to . . . substances . . . which will have that effect."

Another apothecary. Which reminded her . . .

She went over to her dressing table and picked up the jars Arguitte had brought back earlier.

"If you know so much about poisons," she said to Sander, "do you think you could find out of *these* contain anything unsalutary?"

He took them. "I can try." He pointed at Gervase. "What would you have me do with him?"

"No memory at all?"

Sander nodded. "He will not recall anything that's happened since he went to sleep last night."

"You have ready access to this . . . substance?"

"I carry it with me."

Really? The man was a bottomless repository of surprises.

Sander shrugged at her questioning look. "One must be prepared for eventualities."

"He'll wonder what he's doing in my quarters."

"We could carry him into the corridor. Maybe deposit him at the next junction."

"It would be risky."

"Life is a risk. Your cousin took a risk when he came here without an escort."

"He didn't think so."

"Evidently not."

Evadne came to a decision. "How do you administer the poison?"

Sander smiled. "That, with all due respect, is a secret of the trade, so to speak. If Mylady would look away while I attend to the matter."

Impertinence!

Evadne hesitated — then shrugged with feigned disinterest, turned away and, as Sander knelt beside Gervase, moved toward the window. There was a scraping sound as Sander got up again.

"I may need your help," came his voice.

She turned around.

"It is done," he said to her surprised face.

What else was he going to come up with?

She stepped closer. "You will be my Councillor?" she half-stated, half-asked.

"If Mylady wishes it."

"I do."

"Then, of course, I will obey."

"Good," she said crisply. "And I accept your offer of tuition in the martial arts. We will begin tomorrow at first light."

He nodded, but kept his face studiously unmoved. Despite this, she sensed an underlying amusement. More impertinence!

Sander pointed at Gervase: "Let us be quick about this."

Evadne refrained from a snappy comment on his assumption of command.

Sander went to the door, unlatched and opened it, peered out into the corridor. He disappeared briefly, only to return almost immediately. He lifted Gervase under both arms and waited. Evadne froze. Was he expecting her to assist in this?

Apparently he was. She drew in a sharp breath and, overcoming her reluctance bent down to pick up Gervase's feet. A quick glance at Sander's face. Emotionless but for a slight twitch around the mouth. Evadne suppressed a vexed mutter. If he even *thought* of laughing at her . . . Which, she admitted ruefully, he probably did.

They paused to listen for footsteps. They encountered only silence and the sounds of their own breathing. Together they carried the limp man into the corridor. Again Evadne had a fleeting notion of the ludicrous nature of the whole enterprise. How completely undignified and simply unthinkable that she should be

doing *this*. And yet she was . . .

Twenty steps they arrived at a juncture of corridors, where they propped the body against the wall. They hurried back to Evadne's quarters. When the door closed behind them they stood for a few moments, looking at each other. Evadne noted with detachment that Sander made no effort to even appear subservient.

"He wanted to espouse me," she said; and wondered why she was telling him this.

"Really?"

"He meant to . . ." She stopped herself, unsure of why she was even contemplating . . .

Sander nodded. "If Mylady will excuse me," he said. "Important matters have been left unattended."

Relief. Evadne considered Sander for long, thoughtful moment. What was going on behind that high forehead of his?

"Tomorrow morning," she reminded him.

"Of course."

— —

Sander arrived at his residence to find Fridswid in attendance, installing fresh candles into the holders around the house. With Fridswid away they had burned down over the previous two nights. Sander paused before the man could notice him approaching and observed his activities. Again he wondered if it was wise to admit to his knowledge of Fridswid's clandestine agenda. The conclusion of his thoughts was the same as it had been several times before: Fridswid had to go — if for no other reason but to send Silas a signal that he, Sander, would not tolerate such intrusions on his privacy. Now that he was about to make his association with Evadne official, the time was probably as good as any.

He made a noise. Fridswid turned around; his gaunt, pale face crinkled into an obsequious configuration.

Sander motioned for Fridswid to follow him and continued on into his study. He operated a secret latch below the rim of his wooden writing desk — a latch, he was certain, wasn't 'secret' to Fridswid at all. There had been many occasions when Sanders' cunningly placed telltales had revealed that his desk had been searched. Sander pulled open the now-unlocked drawer and withdrew a purse, from which he extracted a hexagonal *caret*, a medium sized unit of Tergan currency. He turned to Fridswid, who stood in an attitude of discreet disinterest, his face averted from the desk.

"It has come to my attention," Sander told him, "that your interests and mine do not coincide."

Fridswid looked up, his face set in a quizzical expression.

"Sir?"

"This situation is not longer tolerable," Sander amplified. "You have served two masters for too long." He handed Fridswid the coin. "As of now you are no longer in my service. Consider yourself fortunate indeed in that I don't deal with you in a harsher manner."

There was a pause as the meaning of his words registered.

"But — sir . . ." Fridswid's gaunt face carried an expression of frightened perplexity. For an instant Sander's resolution wavered. Fridswid, having failed in his assigned task with Sander, could expect to have his employer deal with him in a suitably unpleasant manner.

Maybe there was another way?

There wasn't. This man was a spy, whose interests went contrary to his own. Always had.

Sander held out his hand. "The key."

Mutely, Fridswid reached into a pocket and took it out, held out his hand, handed it to Sander.

Sander motioned at the door. "Now you may leave."

The factotum's lips worked but no sound came out. His slightly protruding eyes were wide with shock.

Sander took a step forward. Fridswid jerked back. Sander caught a fleeting glimpse of . . . what? Fridswid teetered on a brink. For an instant he was leaning forward, as if to . . . attack? His hands clenched and unclenched spasmodically. Sander felt the frisson of an unexpected disturbance.

Without a word, his face an appalling rictus of despair and hatred, Fridswid turned on his heel and fled the room. The sounds of his footsteps faded. The front door battered against the jamb. Sander stood still, composing himself. This had been . . . unexpected. Who would have thought that Fridswid, who had always projected himself as a composed individual, could harbor such unexpected passions. Naked malevolence: that's what he'd seen.

Sander shook his head. He hoped he hadn't made a mistake. It was difficult to decide exactly what had to be done at a time like this. Things were in disequilibrium and flux. It didn't take *saber* to know this. The air in Sacrael was crackling with the tension of an impending thunderstorm, just before the first lightning lashed across the sky. Gervase wanted to espouse Evadne. Others — maybe even Gervase himself? — were trying

to kill her. In Keaen the Tegels of Caelar were about to secede from the Union of the Covenant. Young Armist had his hands full just keeping his nation together. The ramifications of the instability were felt as far as Sacrael. Hengiste smelled an opportunity to expand Tergan influence and his own glory. Others wanted a share of that glory, too. In Sacrael Castle blood would be shed, the various factions swept away by events they mistakenly believed were under their control.

Sander squared his shoulders.

What next?

He considered his options. Above all, he needed a reliable servant: someone not in Silas' employ, who would look after Sander's house, and fill Fridswid's place. For a Councillor needed a personal servant. This was a given. Though Sander felt no personal need for an attendant, it was required. The adjuncts of status must be worn, if only for appearances.

Where to obtain a reliable man — one who was not already in the employ of Hengiste's spymaster?

Sander went to the front door and looked up and down Juno Close: one of the better living areas in Sacrael. An irregular row of self-contained houses, many of them two or even three-storied, constructed mostly from brick or mortared stone work; Some of them surrounded by small gardens. The street was fully cobbled, with a channel to carry off waste water along each side. A two-wheeled conveyance, drawn by a single horse, the driver perched on a high jackboard that swayed to and fro, rattled over the irregular stones. As it passed Sander he saw the single passenger: Delfis, Councillor — and paramour — to Tamar, Evadne's aunt.

Delfis saw Sander and gave him a negligent wave. Sander nodded in response and watched as the conveyance pulled up outside Delfis' house, just a stone's throw away. Delfis' factotum came rushing out and helped his corpulent master climb down to the road.

Fridswid's absence would be noted very soon. Yes, Sander thought, he definitely needed a servant. And he had an idea where he might find someone to help him with the task.

— —

When Gervase came to he was being carried on a pallet into his quarters. The contrivance was carried by a pair of guards. His Councillor, Jago, walked beside him.

Gervase made a vain attempt to collect his thoughts

and fight the dizziness and disorientation. What was he doing here? Why . . .

The last thing he remembered . . . the nipples on Kalinda's big breasts looming above his face as she rocked forth and back, uttering small sounds of, possibly faked, abandon . . .

How did he get from there to . . . this?

He reached out and grabbed hold of the sleeve of Jago's tunic. The Councillor turned around. The relief on his face was palpable and real.

"Mylord . . ."

"What's . . . happened?" Gervase muttered weakly. His nose was a focus of stabbing pain. He had to breathe through his mouth.

Jago made a curt gesture. The guards stopped.

"Can you get up, Mylord?"

"Of course I can," Gervase snapped. He tried to get himself into a sitting position; found that it was more difficult than he had anticipated.

"Help me," he commanded Jago.

The Councillor hastened to obey.

"My nose," Gervase tried to touch it. The pain was excruciating. "What happened to my nose?"

"Mylord . . ."

"Get me a quack!" Gervase rasped.

Jago snapped an order at the guards carrying the pallet. They hastened to obey and left, taking the pallet with them.

Gervase stood on shaky legs. He looked around the room. The rays of late-afternoon Caravella slanted in through the windows.

Afternoon?

He turned to Jago. "What happened?" His voice sounded dull; his damaged nose, clogged with congealed blood, created strange resonances in his head.

Jago made a gesture indicating his puzzlement. "Two guards found you at a juncture on level four. They summoned me. I came and found you propped against the wall, as if resting."

"Level four? What was I doing on level four?" Gervase wondered. "And why it is almost evening? Have I been unconscious most of the day?"

Jago looked at his master with open perplexity. "Mylord, we spoke this morning. In this very office."

"What?"

"As to your presence on level four: you were going to visit the Lady Evadne — with the express intent of suggesting marriage."

"I was?" Gervase's disturbance increased. He remem-

bered nothing of this.

Jago nodded. "Yes, Mylord. We discussed the matter at some length. You agreed with my assessment that such a union would produce a suitable realignment of the current power structure."

Gervase moved to the rightmost window with ginger steps; still not quite trusting his sense of balance. He stood, looking out at the city beyond, bathed in Caravella's yellow light.

"You are certain of this?"

"Absolutely, Mylord. You declared your intent to attend to this matter immediately."

Gervase turned around. "I have no such recollection." He raised his right hand and felt his head. If he had been clubbed there should be a trace. He found nothing. The only other possibility . . .

"Poison," he whispered.

"Mylord?"

"It is the only explanation."

"It would seem that way," the Councillor agreed.

"She must be involved."

Jago wagged his head. "The Lady Evadne is resourceful, but I doubt that she could have accomplished such a thing by herself."

"Who would dare to ally himself with her? What could he hope to gain?"

Jago inclined his head. "Mylord — I shall find out."

"You'd better," Gervase agreed grimly. He frowned. "If Evadne is indeed in league with elements who would do such a thing . . ." He felt himself immersed in a rush of sudden anger.

How dare she?

Despite the agony in his face, images returned to titillate and arouse him. Years ago: a much younger Evadne, still a child and yet almost a woman, her blouse torn open to expose pert breasts, her skirt slipped up high, his father holding her ankles, forcing her legs apart so that his son might satiate himself on her. The blazing fury in her eyes — even then. Already she had been beautiful, only to grow more so with the years. The promise of youth had been fulfilled. If he wanted anything more than the throne it was to have her underneath him just like that — helpless, fighting with an unexpected strength . . . yet no match for him as tried to take her, and his father laughed and told him that he was doing well . . .

Then, as usual with these daydreams, the inevitable letdown: the utter impossibility of what happened next; the searing pain as she bit down on his nose; his own

screams; the unfulfilled promise of the burning in his loins; his father pushing him aside, smacking his fist across her face until she bled, heedless of his injured son shouting imprecations at her and spreading her legs again to finish what his son had been unable to accomplish . . .

. . . completing his humiliation . . .

As he was humiliated yet again. The reception for the Duke of Brys was tonight! Nothing short of severe illness of death could excuse him from attendance. Hengiste would have his hide if he did. And he had to show up like . . . *this!*

His thoughts returned to Evadne. Always Evadne — whose face pursued him into his dreams. This time there would be no Narvin. This time she would be his, subjugated without aid. This time he would do what he hadn't been able to get himself to do for all those years. Either that or she had to die. But it seemed that she lead a charmed life indeed.

Gervase found that he couldn't breathe. He gasped for air; forced himself to calm down. The thought of . . .

What had happened earlier this afternoon? Who was the ingrate who'd dared to help her violate him thus? Allowing her to see him humiliated, incapacitated, dragged out of her quarters — because that's where it must have happened — and dumped in a corridor like . . . garbage. Did she have a lover? She couldn't have. He would have known.

He whipped around to face Jago.

"I want him!" he hissed.

"There may be more than one, Mylord."

"I don't care," Gervase grated.

Jago bowed. "Of course, Mylord," he said deferentially. "I will attend to it immediately."

Gervase nodded curtly. "Go."

Jago departed in haste, leaving Gervase to himself and his fury, and dreams of Evadne's ultimate subjugation.

—

"Keep your hands off me!" Zygie snapped. She swatted the groping fingers out of the way and moved back from the bar. The man, a middle-aged hostler, still reeking from the day's work in the stable, his watery eyes unfocused from the effects of too much alcohol, slumped across the bar, his arms outstretched in a coarse intoxicated supplication. The men sharing the bar with him backed away to a safe distance; leering now; sniggering and not bothering to hide it either. Here was something

that just might disrupt the monotony of the evening and add just a touch of voyeuristic excitement.

Zygie gave a vexed hiss. Tonight of all nights this . . . slug . . . had to decide to become amorous. She looked along the bar and caught the eye of Taide. The blonde girl gave a shrug. Coald was a massive man and, devoted employee though she was, she wasn't going to tangle with him — even if Zygie *was* the employer. Such things were the responsibility of Galahad, who, by some perverse quirk of fate, had decided to be sick today. Zygie had contemplated engaging a temporary stand-in, but then decided to risk doing without for the night. She should have known better.

Despite her vexation she didn't blame Taide for her reluctance to come to her aid. The sight of Coald's massive torso draped across the counter, his thick, unwashed fingers now grasping convulsively at thin air, would intimidate just about anyone. He wasn't a violent man, but his sheer bulk gave anyone pause.

Zygie decided to leave Coald where he was. Let him get bored with the whole affair; whereupon he would probably depart, as he did most nights well before dark-fall. She wagged an admonishing finger at him.

"Bad boy. You know the rules."

"Wha-a-t . . . rools . . ."

Zygie grimaced. "You don't touch the girls," she said testily. "You know that, don't you?"

"Don't - touch - the - girls . . ." he repeated slowly. His mouth creased into a smile exposing his rotting teeth. A choked sound; probably laughter. He burped eruptively. Zygie back away further as a bolus of halitotic fetor engulfed her.

"You . . ." Coald levered himself into an upright position and pointed a finger at her. "You . . ." he declared, "no girl." Another chortle shook his massive frame. Entranced with his own wit he guffawed mightily.

*If you only knew*, Zygie thought wryly. A 'girl' she definitely was not.

A creak, loud enough to be heard above the din in the bar. Zygie's attention was diverted toward the side-entrance to the bar. She'd really have to get someone to lubricate those hinges.

Three people entered the taproom. A man in the soiled garments of a blacksmith; a whore, who appeared to be in his company; and, behind them . . . Sander.

Sander. Well, it had been some time.

She saw him look at her and grinned crookedly. He cast a brief glance around him, as he always did. Sizing

up; classifying; figuring out who was who. He was wearing a plain gray chemise over a pair of loose pantaloon; Nothing to indicate his exalted status. He always came like this; understated, bland, almost unnoticeable.

Sander completed his inspection. Apparently satisfied, he headed for the bar. He gave Coald a fleeting look and tried to steer past the hostler. Zygie thought she saw his lips twitch in ill-concealed amusement.

Coald, unsteady on his legs, at that moment chose to lose his balance and tumble right into Sander's path. Sander tried to dodge, but he was surrounded by bodies, and there was nowhere to dodge to. Coald bumped into Sander. He looked down at the Councillor, who was over a head shorter.

"Watch where you go," Coald grumbled.

Sander raised his hands in a gesture of benevolence. "Excuse me."

Coald nodded and, in his slow, drunken way, started to turn back to the bar. Sander tried to slip past him.

Coald stopped his motion, as if struck by a sudden thought. He turned around. A hand shot out and clamped down on Sander's arm.

*Uh-oh*, Zygie thought.

Coald bent down until his face was a hand's breadth from Sander's.

"No," he declared.

Zygie wondered if Sander was holding his breath. For his own sake she hoped he did.

Sander's eyes briefly rested on Coald's blunt visage, then flicked across to her briefly. She made a small apologetic gesture.

Coald saw the look. His head snapped around, his bulbous eyes fixed on her. Sander took advantage of the occasion to take a breath. Coald turned back to Sander. The fist clamped around Sander's arm and jerked the smaller man around.

"Who do you think you are?" Coald roared.

Zygie saw the look in Sander's face. She'd seen it before.

*Poor Coald.* Despite the big man's peccadilloes she felt sorry for him.

A movement at one of the street windows attracted her attention. A face pressed against it from the outside. A brief inspection of the room. The face withdrew. Zygie shook off a feeling of unease. Just a harmless passerby. What else could it be?

Events in the taproom claimed her attention again. Coald was about to be taught an interesting lesson.

Sander twisted; reached out with his free arm; made another movement, too deft and quick for the eye to follow. Suddenly the roles were reversed. Sander held one of Coald's hands between his own in a complicated grip, twisting fingers and wrist. He jerked. Coald roared with the pain and doubled over, his arm now sticking out at an odd angle from his side.

"Let - me - go!" he shouted, his face an agonized grimace. His free arm flailed about in a vain attempt to reach Sander, who stood, holding onto Coald's other hand. The circle of watchers widened as people pushed back to get out of the way. Sander made a small movement. Coald doubled over and ceased all attempts to defend himself.

Sander said something; too low for Zygie to hear. Coald, breathing jerkily, nodded mutely. Sander hesitated for an instant, then let go and took a step backward, alert and prepared.

His vigilance proved to be unnecessary. Coald, his humiliation complete, and without daring to look at his comparatively diminutive opponent, turned away. A corridor formed as people pushed back to let him reach the door; which creaked and slammed close behind him. The crowd, moderately disappointed at missing out on what had promised to be a possibly bloody spectacle, reformed into the previous configurations of individuals. Eyes followed Sander as he approached the bar. The corridor accorded to him was even wider than Coald's.

Sander leaned on the bar and gave Zygie a faint grin.

"What *is* it with people today?" he muttered.

"Things not going your way?" she said archly.

He pulled a face. "It's been a trying day," he admitted. "Drink?"

"The usual."

Zygie retrieved a stein from a rack and drew a draft from a wooden tap. She placed the stein in front of Sander.

"What's up?" Zygie asked, knowing that here was one man from whom she could expect an honest, non self-serving reply. Sander was fully aware of who and what she was — and she had an inkling of *his* role in the greater scheme of things as well.

"I need help," he admitted.

"Help? - You?" She considered him as he took a sip of the brew. "What can I do?" There was no doubt that she would do whatever she could. She owed Sander. Besides, he was her friend. Maybe her only one; with the possible exception of Ailin.

A pity that Sander couldn't be more. But he was not the One; and never would be. Just a friend whom she would trust with her life, if it came to that.

"I need a new factotum," he said. "One I can trust not to report every one of my movements to Silas — like the one I've just dismissed"

Zygie shook her head. "You may be asking the impossible."

"You think so?"

"I *know* so," she said. "Even those who are not corrupted when you employ them will be shortly after you do. Everyone has some family or other . . ."

He looked at her shrewdly. She gave a tiny shrug, tacitly agreeing with his unspoken retort. Not everybody. *She* didn't . . .

Sander's gaze softened. Compassion sneaked in.

"If it's just a matter of getting someone to clean your house . . . I could help with that."

"It's more than that," he said.

"I know. But it can't be done. This is Tergan."

Sander took another thoughtful sip from the stein.

"You may be right," he mused. "Still, even so . . ."

"Jolie could do it," Zygie suggested. "If it'd make you feel better, I could do it with her; just to make sure."

He looked at her gratefully. "Would you? For a little while at least? Until I've figured something out."

Zygie grinned. "Figure soon. Being a wielder of brooms and mops has never been my ambition."

A patron slammed his stein on the counter beside Sander.

"Fill it up," he ordered. Then, becoming aware of who sat talking to Zygie, he hastily retrieved the vessel. "I beg your pardon," he muttered and made his way further down the bar.

Sander shook his head. He drained his stein in a series of long draughts and put it down.

"I have to go."

"Short visit."

"Affairs have reached a point of instability. It's not prudent to divert one's attention for too long. I almost forgot the reception for the Duke of Brys."

"Don't tell me you were invited."

"Ha! A Councillor? Never." He paused thoughtfully. "No — but I should be at the castle."

"You're concerned about her."

"Very."

"You cannot be there all the time."

"Indeed, I cannot. This is what worries me."

"You worry too much."

"I wish I was. As it is, I sometimes suspect I don't worry enough."

"You will become old and gray with all that worry."

Sander's dark-blue eyes crinkled at the corners. "Unlike you."

"Sssh." She lowered her voice.

He grinned. "Just a man paying a compliment to an attractive woman."

Despite herself she could not help but smile. "You're bad."

He placed a hand on hers. "Be careful." He always told her that.

"You first." She always said that, too.

She looked after him as he made his way through the other patrons until the creaking door swung had shut behind him. Sander, she reflected, had not aged one iota since she'd met him, more than ten years ago. But he was not a magice — and, being male, certainly not a circe either.

So, what was he?

*I'll find out some day*, she promised herself.

—

Fridswid saw Zygie look up. He jerked back from the window. Not now!

Had she seen him? More than that: had she recognized him?

He told himself that it wasn't likely. Even then, in Keaen, more than . . . fifteen? sixteen? . . . years ago, she had owned an inn — down in the harbor district, where it was the only tavern without a brother attached to it — and he'd just been one of many patrons. That she should recall his face — especially when he'd been so very careful not to show it here all the times he'd followed Sander to *The Daenean Stag* — it was unlikely.

He leaned against the wall just beside the window and cautiously looked in; followed the humiliation of Coald at the hands of his former employer; marveled enviously at the ease with which Sander handled the big man. Sander knew arts and techniques that betrayed him as maybe even more dangerous than Silas suspected. His acquaintance with Zygie, who had lived in Keaen — had been born there, for all he knew — only added to Fridswid's suspicions.

Not that he had ever communicated these things to Silas. Such snippets were held in reserve for the unfortunate day when it might be required to prove his usefulness because other things had gone awry. Fridswid,

who considered himself a cautious man who planned ahead, now congratulated himself on his foresight. The day had indeed come. Silas would not be pleased — unless Fridswid could come up with intelligence that would prove even more useful than the scraps he'd been able to accumulate during his tenure in Sander's employ.

With a crash the door of The Stag flew open. Coald emerged. The spring-loaded door slammed shut behind him. Coald stood for a few moments, breathing in the night air, before slinking off along the alley; a humbled man, his slouched stature betraying his defeat. It was dangerous to cross Sander of Orgond.

Fridswid remained where he was, peering in occasionally, observing the exchange between Sander and Zygie. That they were friends was glaringly obvious. Maybe even lovers. It might not appear that way now, but . . .

Sander left the taproom. Soon he would appear at the entrance. Fridswid hurried to the corner of the building and hid in a narrow passage between it and the next edifice. He shrunk into the darkness as hurried footsteps approached, passed by, and presently faded away.

Fridswid cautiously stuck his head out from his concealment. Sander passed under one of the few street-lamps, flickering smokily.

What was he to do? Should he follow his former employer — possibly just back to the house? Or . . . and here Fridswid had a novel thought, should he maybe make use of . . .

The moment for decision came and went. Sander was lost in the darkness and the few other passerby. Fridswid emerged from the passage and squared his shoulders. He might have to wait a while; possibly until closing time. But he had nothing better to do.

Though, why waste his time? She was going to know soon anyway — and now that Sander was gone, what did it matter if she recognized him? Fridswid grinned wolfishly. He'd imagined this scene many a time. Time to make it real.

He entered the taproom and ensconced himself at the bar, contriving to find a place where Zygie herself served him. Nothing in her demeanor gave him any reason to believe that she recognized him. Fridswid emptied his stein, asked for another, working himself up into a pleasant state of courage.

Another wench arrived, relieving Zygie of the need to play barmaid. Fridswid waited until the woman had disappeared through a door behind the bar, then exited through the creaky side door and turned left. Another door led into a small lobby which acted as a reception of

sorts for guests who might wish to use The Stag as a hotel.

Fridswid rang a small iron bell, attached to a piece of cord to discourage casual pilfering.

A moment passed. Zygie appeared through a door. She saw Fridswid and paused, maybe remembering him from the taproom.

"Yes?" The voice was strong; pervaded by an unexpected strength. Guarded, too. A combative glint in her eyes. Fridswid decided to dispense with the elaborate game he'd planned.

"The years have been kind to you," he said.

The change in her face was instant and remarkable. Pugnacity was replaced by an inert, impassive mask that gave nothing away. Fridswid, who considered his ability to read faces and demeanor to be superior to most people, was surprised at the change. He had expected something else.

Zygie said nothing, forcing him to elaborate. "The last time I saw you, you . . . looked just like this." He paused significantly. "And you ran a tavern pretty much like this. In Keaen." The words hung in the air.

She started to say something, but decided against it. Fridswid was disappointed. He'd expected her to tell him that she didn't know what he was talking about.

Still, her reaction was vexing. Surely, she must realize that he held her fate in his hands. It looked like she wasn't as bright as he had always assumed.

"Silas' men will not look kindly upon the presence of a Keaenean spy in Sacrael — and even less upon one who consorts intimately with one so close to the powers as Councillor Sander . . ."

She heaved a deep breath. For the first time since he'd faced her he noticed . . . what?

The notion, fleeting as it was, dispersed almost immediately when she issued a tiny, almost contemptuous, smile.

How dare she?

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Why should I . . ."

"What do you want?" she repeated. "Don't waste my time. You've come here because you want *something*. What is it? Money? Sexual favors? Free drinks?"

Fridswid saw his tactical advantages slipping away from him. What a harridan!

He straightened a trifle. "Nothing so crass," he said.

She raised her eyebrows. "What then?"

"Information," he told her.

She chuckled. He realized with some dismay that he

had not intimidated her in the slightest. Whatever advantage he'd had in the early stages of the exchange had been ephemeral and now had vanished irretrievably.

"Information?" she echoed mockingly. "From me?"

Fridswid decided to retrieve some measure of control over the conversation.

"So far, nobody knows who you are," he said. "I'm the only one who knows about your past." He grinned. "And your friend Sander, of course." He paused and considered her. "Does he not?"

She shrugged. "What is it to you?"

"At the moment, nothing. However, the Councillor is an important man. If he were found to . . . consort . . . with a Keanean spy, this might have consequences."

Her face had set into a mask again. Good. He was touching on sensitive issues.

"Do you understand what I'm telling you?" he asked her.

"I understand that you're trying to blackmail me," she admitted. "I just don't understand what you actually *want*; what I could possibly tell you that you'd consider 'information'."

"Oh, but that's simple. I just want to know whatever there's to know about Sander."

Her eyes hooded. She knew a *lot* about Sander! Fridswid congratulated himself on his perspicacity. Silas would be very pleased. He might even forget about his dismissal; possibly an advancement lay in the future.

He could see her thoughts falling over themselves in their haste to adapt to the new situation.

She regarded him coolly. "Sander," she said, "we . . . used to be lovers. That's all."

*Not all, I'm sure.*

"Former?" Fridswid echoed. "Then what was he doing here today?"

"Asking for my help."

"With what?"

She shrugged, as if the matter was insignificant. "He asked me to help him find a new man-servant. He dismissed the old one because of unsatisfactory performance."

*Unsatisfactory performance?*

Fridswid opened his mouth but shut it again immediately.

"Anything else you'd like to know?"

"Why ask *you*? You're just a . . ."

"A glorified tavern wench?"

"I . . ."

"I'm someone he can trust not to foist a spy upon him," she snapped.

"There's more to it than that," he insisted brusquely, trying to cover his discomfiture.

"If there is, I don't know what it is," she retorted. She motioned toward the door. "And now, I think you ought to leave."

"I . . ."

"*Leave!*" Her voice cracked like a whip. Fridswid flinched.

"How dare you . . ."

The words died in his throat. For the second time today he was faced with the galling realization that he was . . . weak.

He could feel her stare on his back as he walked out of there, trying to his best to put on an appearance of dignity.

— —

Zygie stared at the closing door. The momentary panic she had felt when it appeared that the man had actually *known* . . . Instead all his interest had focused on the possibility of her being a spy, and having an undue influence of Sander. That was bad, of course, but it could have been much worse. For a moment there she'd feared that her days in Sacrael were numbered.

And what then? Where would she go next. Where *could* she go? The longer she lived, the greater the danger of exposure, especially in a 'public' profession such as hers. Female tavern owners weren't exactly common, and she was not exactly plain, and people were bound to remember. Like this . . . cretin.

Who was he anyway? One of Silas' spies? Almost certainly. But it also seemed that he had an agenda of his own.

So, what was his interest in Sander?

Zygie came to the inevitable conclusion. She returned to her quarters and retrieved a woolen poncho from her wardrobe. She went into the taproom and told the girls there that she would return soon. Then she hurried off to find Sander.

— —

Evadne appeared at the reception. Her entrance, as always when she wanted it to, made a definite impact. The hundred-odd guests in the banquet hall ceased their conversation when the *ma tre* banged his staff on

the black tika floor. Evadne, all false smile, swept into the hall. Her one-piece gown of green-and-pink silk molded itself to the contours of her body, revealing a cleavage sufficiently expansive to attract everybody's attention, and yet not so bold as to provoke justified complaints about excessive exposure. In other words: a gown to devastate the male guests — quite unlike the voluminous, flouncy pink or white meringues worn by the other ladies, almost all of whom were either older or uglier or both.

Everybody stared. Politely, but stare they did. Which was the intention, and Evadne was gratified. No doubt there would be heated discussions behind her back; but this worried her little or none. The opinions of women at the court of Tergan accounted for little — even those of her aunt, Tamar, who eyed her with ill-concealed disfavor.

Roi Hengiste, king of Tergan, her uncle, had been in deep conversation with a paunchy individual of royal bearing, but whose mostly bald pate, pasted as it was with stray ringlets of disappearing hair, severely detracted from the impressive appearance he did, no doubt, wish to project. His dress also — an austere black jacket, worn over a white, frilled silk shirt, with dark-blue breeches, white socks that ended in dainty shoes fit more for a woman than a man — was unflattering, and maybe even ridiculous. He reminded Evadne of a human pingo. Not that she'd actually laid eyes on a pingo. They lived in the cold waters of the far north and were said never to venture as far south as the Valley. But she'd seen drawings . . .

As if she still needed drawings when here was a human parody of the species. Evadne bit down on her incipient smile.

Her entrance disrupted the deliberations of the two leaders, conducted somewhat apart from the main throng of attendees.

So this, Evadne thought, is the Duke of Brys. What a laugh. Next to her uncle, the king, he looked . . . pathetic. And yet it was said said that he was a powerful man indeed.

Hengiste stepped forward, the duke in tow. "My niece," he said, "the Lady Evadne."

The duke took her proffered hand and bent over it. Evadne felt his lips brush the fine hairs on the back. She hated it when they did that. Hiding her dislike she smiled.

"I'm delighted to finally meet you," she breathed.

From the corner of her eyes she saw Gervase, standing

between two ladies far beyond his age, with whom he'd been making polite conversation. Across the distance he caught her regard. His mouth turned up into a cold, almost predatory, smile. Then it was gone, and the face was indifferent again. His nose, she noted with amused detachment, exhibited all the expected after-effects of the bruising it had taken. Some cosmetics had been applied to conceal the worst if it, but there could be no doubt that Gervase's pride was severely damaged. If he thought that people — behind his back of course — commented on his condition at great length he was probably right. And not to know *how* it had happened: that must surely be even more vexatious.

"The pleasure is all mine," crooned the Duke of Brys. "If I may be so bold as to request your company at the banquet table?"

Hengiste's face distorted into a brief grimace of annoyance, which came as fast as it went. No doubt the duke's inconsiderate request had ramifications for the seating arrangements. She had, it seemed, again succeeded in disrupting everybody's carefully laid plans. What a terrible shame.

"I would like nothing better." She gave the duke the full benefit of the most radiant smile she could get herself to fake and heaved a deep breath. As expected, the duke's attention was immediately riveted to the visible expanse of her cleavage. He averted his gaze almost immediately, but she saw that he was breathing faster than he had been.

Hengiste noticed it, too. He shot her a venomous look, which she countered with a smile of such limpid innocence that even he found it difficult to maintain his disapproving mien. He shook his head minutely and took pains to conceal his sentiments. The duke offered Evadne his arm and stepped aside to chat to her about inconsequentialities. Evadne, not entirely pretending her interest, enquired about Consinante, and found that, despite herself and the ridiculous company, she was actually enjoying herself more than she had for a long time. Far away places fascinated her, and this duke, with his odd, though easily understood, accent, was a real person from a far-off land.

From a corner of her eyes she saw the king signal to a footman and give terse instructions. The footman hurried off.

A short time later Hengiste clapped his hands: the signal that the banquet was about to start. The guests moved aside to make a passage for the king. The duke and his charming impromptu hostess followed Hengiste

into that part of the hall where stood the huge tika table used for such occasions. On the way they passed by Gervase — who, as the heir presumptive to Hengiste, would normally have been seated long before Evadne, but who now, by the same protocol, actually would have to wait until she and the duke had taken their places.

He concealed it well, she thought, but she felt the loathing behind the facade. When he and the woman at his arm fell in behind them, his presence like a physical prod in her back. She turned to the duke and whispered a jocose remark into his ear. He laughed uproariously. Pompous jerk! But he served her purpose, and so she humored and charmed and befuddled him, and the banquet passed without incident.

Much later it was done. The company had split into male and female groupings, each gravitating toward opposite ends of the banquet hall. A massive curtain had been drawn between the table and the party. Behind it, the discreet noises of servants removing — probably consuming — the detritus left over from the feast.

The duke had parted from Evadne with evident regret. Before releasing her into the company of the women he had even seen fit to drop hints about his availability to continue their association later on in the night; going so far as to be very specific about the location of his quarters. Evadne had smiled sweetly and said nothing.

She did not even bother to feign interest in staying around to hear the ladies chatter and gossip. Now that the men were away, and Evadne's admirer safely at a distance, Tamar gave her a severely disapproving look; even issued a brief remark to the effect that she had no right to go against propriety and fashion as she had done. Evadne bent closer to her aunt and told her that she was being tiresome beyond belief. Then, before Tamar had recovered from the shock of her insolence, Evadne swept out of the room. There would be consequences, but right now she didn't care. The evening had been as much of a success as it could possibly have been. If anything, even better!

Evadne stopped as the big door swung shut behind her, cutting off the party noises. Two guards stood at attention beside it, their halberds held at a precise angle with stiff arms, their blue and green uniforms pressed and clean for the occasion. Hengiste was very fastidious about the appearances he presented to his guests. The servants attending to the organization of the banquet would have sullied the stately dignity of the occasion. There was no sign of them. Indeed, the hall in which

she found herself was almost devoid of people; looking and feeling empty, despite the ornaments and grandiose paintings, the gilded brocade wall hangings, and the semicircle of marble statues; lit by a ring of hundreds of candles, set in holders along the walls. Underneath her feet a lush carpet in red, yellow and mauve that swallowed all sound and added an almost surreal air of silence.

Evadne reflected that the duke must be an important man. Hengiste had gone to some length to make the occasion festive, even colorful; to the extent of engaging a large troupe of performers and musicians to provide suitable entertainment for the duke's retinue on the following day. Cosinante of course built warships; sleek two-masted galleys, that could outrun anything in the world, hold hundreds of soldiers, and whose low profile lend them the stealthy quality of a stalking elec. Hengiste, his ambitions piqued by the unrest in Keaan, might indeed evince interest in such vessels, which he might need at a very short notice indeed. Here, no doubt, were to be found the motivations for Hengiste's attention to the duke's whims.

Evadne crossed the hall and ascended the broad stairway. From the landing at the top she looked back down. The door to the banquet hall opened again. Evadne, following an urge from her deepest subconscious, ducked out of sight behind a pillar and cautiously peered around it. Gervase stepped into the hall, paused, his gaze raking across the hall. Even from this distance, his injured nose was a grotesque disfiguration. Evadne felt a savage satisfaction. It was nothing compared to what she was going to do to him one day.

Gervase's head turned to face in her direction. Evadne shrank back behind the pillar. Why was he coming out so soon after her? She held her breath and waited.

From below, muted voices. Evadne peered around the pillar again. From somewhere Jago had appeared, now conversing with his master. The Councillor pointed. Evadne ducked out of sight.

Jago! Had he been watching, concealed somewhere out of sight. Waiting for her maybe?

Time to leave! Evadne turned away and hastened to gain the next flight of stairs. She crossed a patch of bare parquet floor. The hard soles of her dress shoes scraped over the bare wood. Evadne froze and listened. A moment of panic. Then, the obvious, albeit undignified, solution. She bent down, removed the shoes, and, carrying them in her hand, continued up the stairs with increased urgency.

Level three. Level four. Even the sound of her dress on the stairs seemed too loud, betraying her to those she was sure were following her.

Evadne gained the fourth level. The hallways and corridors here were dimly lit. As it happened, the route she'd taken had no guards. Regular patrols passed through here only once every hour.

Evadne hurried as much as she could in her impractical garments. She turned around a bend. Another, just ahead, and she would be safely in her quarters. She would summon Arguitte to keep her company. Anybody but nobody.

She turned the last corner. Her headlong rush stopped. A figure blocked the passage. The light was dim. It might have been anybody. As Evadne stood frozen the figure moved. Evadne turned to flee.

"My lady?"

Evadne exhaled explosively. She peered at Sander, who had stepped out into the circle of light cast by one of the gutting oil-lamps.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed.

"Is anything the matter?" he enquired.

Evadne, her legs weak, leaned against the passage wall, breathing hard.

"Gervase," she panted.

"What did he do?" Sander snapped.

Despite her condition Evadne noted the tone and regarded him in surprise.

"My lady?" Sander's voice was carefully neutral again.

"I think, he's . . . following me here. And Jago . . ."

Sander nodded. "Gervase is persistent," he said softly.

Suddenly he froze in an attitude of concentration. He made a sharp motion with his hand. Evadne started to say something but an imperious gesture shut her up. Then she heard it, too. Footsteps: hurrying closer.

Slowing down.

Evadne looked at Sander, who had placed his finger on his mouth. "Trust me," he whispered.

"What?" she hissed.

"Don't move!" he said, so lowly that she could hardly hear him. And then again, "trust me . . ."

Evadne was confused. Sander backed away out of the circle of light. He held up a hand; signaling her to stay where she was?

How could she?

She looked back whence she'd come. The footsteps were close. She looked around at Sander.

He was gone.

What?

Too late!

Around the corner came Gervase and Jago, hurrying, but cautious. When they saw her they stopped and looked at her. Astonishment metamorphosed into triumph.

"Well," Gervase intoned, his voice sounding hollow. He nodded to Jago, who moved a few steps away, into a position designed to block the other route of possible escape. The passage to her room was a dead end. The trap had closed.

Gervase approached another step. Evadne pushed herself off the wall. No point in facing him like a frightened infant. Whatever happened (where was Sander?), she had her dignity. Especially in front of . . . them.

"What do you want?" she snapped.

Gervase peered at her. His breathing came heavy through his mouth. He indicated his damaged proboscis. "What do I want?" His voice was distorted by the injury. "I want to know who did this!"

"Another victim of your unwanted attentions maybe?" she suggested.

Gervase took another step forward.

"Something very strange happened to me today," he hissed.

"Freaks tend to have strange things happen to them," she pointed out

He ignored that. "I lost my memory today," he said.

Evadne frowned. "Your memory? — Lost it?" She pretended to consider the issue. "Isn't your statement intrinsically contradictory? If you have no memory of something, how can you know that you've lost it?"

"Spare me your witticisms," he snapped. "I want to know who helped you."

"Helped me with what?" Evadne laughed. "Really, Gervase, you are becoming excessively tiresome." She made as if to turn away. "Now, if you don't mind, it's been an arduous evening. I'm really very tired."

Gervase took a quick step to one side, effectively blocking the way to her room. On a signal from him Jago approached her from the other side.

"You're going to tell me who is helping you with whatever it is you're hatching," Gervase grated.

"That won't be necessary." The voice came from her left.

Sander!

He stepped into the circle of light. Jago uttered a soft hiss.

"You? What are you doing here?" His eyes widened as understanding began to form.

Sander took another step.

Gervase glanced at Jago. "How did *he* get . . . into this?"

Jago shrugged. "Mylord, I do not know. But I will find out."

"I doubt that very much," came Sander's voice.

"Cretin!" Gervase's head snapped around. "Ingrate. I'll have you . . ."

"How's the nose?" Sander enquired sardonically. Evadne noted the complete absence of deference in his tone.

Even in the dim light Evadne saw Gervase's face assume more of the coloration of his bruised proboscis.

"Not that it matters," Sander added. He raised his hand which held the same device she'd noticed this afternoon. Sander pointed it at Gervase. A tiny hiss. Sander pointed at Jago. Another hiss. Sander stood still. Brooding.

Gervase and Jago collapsed within a breath of each other. Sander pocketed the weapon — for a weapon it had to be, though Evadne had never seen its like.

"Nothing is ever straightforward," Sander mused, almost as if to himself. "I wonder why that is so," he said, smiling faintly.

Evadne snapped out of her paralysis. "He knew," she said.

"I neglected to take Jago into account," Sander admitted. "Memory is not just contained in our brains, but also in the recollections of those around us"

"What are you going to do?" she wanted to know.

Sander considered the sprawled bodies. His face was somber and thoughtful. "The easiest way . . . well, I suppose killing them . . ."

Indeed! The end of Gervase. Just like that. Maybe not the revenge she'd hoped for, but dead was dead.

"By all means."

Sander shook his head. "I'm not a murderer."

"When they come to, they will have no such qualms," she snapped.

Sander grinned and fumbled in the pocket of his jacket. He came out with a small vial, which he hefted thoughtfully.

"This shouldn't be administered more than once a day," he mused, "but I suppose in this case we'll make an exception."

"What is this . . . poison?"

He held up the cylinder of polished metal.

"Think of it as a potion that prevents the things we remember for hours or maybe even a day from becoming things we remember forever. It is during periods of

sleep and profound relaxation that this transfer of memories takes place. But when I administer the substance they will forget everything they've learned since they rose this morning"

Sander knelt down and rolled over Gervase's body until his mouth faced up. He unscrewed the top of the vial, held open Gervase's mouth, poked in a finger and did something there, before allowing a few drops to fall into it.

Fascinated despite her revulsion Evadne stepped closer.

"I is absorbed by the tissue underneath the tongue," Sander explained.

Evadne grimaced and stepped back again.

Sander repeated the procedure with Jago. He got up, tightened the vial's lid, and slipped it back into his pocket. "We'll have to drag them well away from here. Maybe down to the next level; to remove suspicion of any connection between their condition and yourself."

She stared at him. "What manner of secret lore do they practice in Orgond?"

Sander smiled. "Not all of Orgond, Mylady, is versed in these arts," he said lightly.

"So you say."

"It is the truth."

"But your masters know of this lore?"

"They taught me all I know," he admitted.

"I see," she said softly. The truth was that she *didn't* see, but, again, this man had acted as her protector. As much as it galled her, but there was something in her that told her that this was not the time to probe and prod.

"I'll need your help," he told her.

Evadne shook her head. For the second time today she was going to act as a . . . the thought wasn't even to be completed. What had she come to? The Lady Evadne, in a stunning gown, but no footwear, carrying bodies through the halls of Castle Sacrael!

Evadne sighed and bent down to take Gervase's legs. Sander grabbed him under the arms. He stood for a moment in an attitude of listening; then nodded. Together they dragged her cousin along the hallways, down the first flight of stairs; to deposit him on the landing at the bottom. They hastened back to repeat the procedure with Jago.

"And now, Mylady, it is probably safe to return to your quarters," Sander told her.

"Where are *you* going?" she wanted to know.

Sander grinned wryly. "I'd better leave the castle. It is

not my habit to be here at this time of the night. Someone might take notice.”

“Why *did* you come here tonight?” she wanted to know.

Sander shrugged. “I . . . had a notion that I might be needed.”

“You skulked around my quarters? On a hunch?”

He smiled crookedly. “Something like that.”

Sander returned home when Janus was high up in the sky. He was tired and felt like he could sleep for days.

The house was dark; a reminder that there was nobody to take care of the small everyday tasks: like lighting the candles, stoking the fireplace in the cold season, stock the larder, prepare his occasional home-meals.

Sander inserted the key into the lock of his front door.

The rush of quick steps. Sander whipped around, prepared to defend himself. He relaxed when he saw who it was.

“What are you doing here?”

“I had a visitor,” she told him. “After you left.”

He opened the door and let her inside. They sat down in the lounge and Zygie told him what happened after he left her.

“That was Fridswid,” Sander said musingly. “I wonder why . . . ”

Odd. Very odd.

“What am I going to do?” Zygie wondered.

“Nothing. I will take care of him.”

“He knew me in Keaen. He noticed that I hadn’t aged. He might just . . . ”

“I’ll take care of it,” he reiterated. “I don’t know how yet . . . I’ve got more than enough worries as it is . . . but I will keep him out of your life.

She stood. “Thank you.”

Sander hugged her. She was his only friend in this place; the only one he could trust. The relationship was mutual. He would do what he could to protect her. Whatever it took. If Fridswid became an issue . . . well, that was Fridswid’s misfortune.

“I may have to pack up anyway,” she said, pulling back from him. “I’ve been here for over ten years. People will notice. Maybe they already have.”

“We’ll see. Don’t do anything precipitous.”

She agreed, albeit reluctantly. He accompanied her to The Stag and waited until he saw her appear behind the bar in the taproom. He went home and prepared to go to

bed when he spotted the two containers Evadne had given him earlier in the day.

The sight of them renewed his anxieties. He could not protect Evadne all the time. This was a fact. If they were going to poison her and using such devious ways as an apothecary to accomplish this . . .

What could he *do*? The tools he had at his disposal: his talent: *sabér*; the regenerators in his bloodstream; the needle-projector; a small biochemical synthesizer . . . all of it designed to be either invisible, or incomprehensible to anybody but himself — and to enhance his own chances of survival. Not at all intended for the use to which he was putting them.

But what was he to do? There had been no communication with the outside for more than a hundred years! His father, just as perplexed as the son whom he’d trained for the task, knew nothing more than what his own father in turn had taught him! Sometimes it seemed as if the whole thing was just another legend, cooked up by the mind of some imaginative story-teller.

Except that there *was* the training machine — safely hidden under his ancestral home. And the needle-projector; and the biosyn; and when he cut himself he stopped bleeding almost instantly — and he *hadn’t* aged at all for a long time . . .

What was to be his fate: to repeat the pattern set by his father and those before him? Find a wife; lie to her from the moment they met; bear a son. Or a daughter? Could a woman do this thing? Who knew? It was supposed to be a boy. Such were the instructions.

Transmit the knowledge; seed the regenerators into the child’s bloodstream; ensconce him as his successor in the traditional Councillor’s role assigned to the Madeäst clan of Orgond; pretend to die in an accident, out of sight of everybody, while actually leaving the Valley, never to return to the land where he was born . . .

Sander tossed and turned in his bed, unable to find a comfortable position.

Those who had come, many years ago, and . . . changed . . . his great-great-grandfather . . . Did they still exist? What — who! — *was* out there? What would they say, what would they do, if they knew what Sander had come to?

Sleep came later, but it brought no answers.

— -

Toffel, most elevated of the Councillors by virtue of

his exclusive access to Hengiste, met with Latouche under the cover of darkness, in a narrow alley behind a brothel called *Little Girls* — that being a complete misnomer since all of the whores working there were long past the flower of their youth. Toffel, unused to clandestine encounters with assassins in the dingy quarters of Sacrael, was in a foul mood. Latouche had insisted on this meeting place, and Toffel had had no good reason to deny the request. That he had to walk some considerable distance on joints afflicted with the first signs of a painful inflammation was unpleasant; but he told himself that this time he had to make an exception. Latouche, after all, came with the highest recommendations from those in the know. There was also the small matter of the target. Anybody who was going to be asked to go after Gervase — whose influence was considerable, and who, so it was said, was closer to Silas than anybody else, excepting maybe Hengiste — anybody aiming for that kind of target had a right to be humored.

Latouche was a dark silhouette in the alleyway, towering above the Councillor, a lean predator whose face remained an inkling, and whose economic movements were executed with precision and lethal elegance.

"Why did you want to meet me?" Toffel asked, intimidated despite his comparatively exalted rank. Here and now 'rank' was a meaningless term.

"I always meet my clients," the assassin said. The voice was soft, almost feminine, tainted by the faintest hint of a coldness that was like a chilly winter wind blowing in from the north.

"Well, now you have."

"Indeed."

"You are satisfied with the terms?"

"They are satisfactory. You have the information?"

Toffel handed over a roll of parchments. "Floor-plans, guard rosters — as requested."

"Good. You are aware of my conditions?"

"Irreversibility."

"A contract is final. Amendments are moot. The agreement, once entered upon, is equivalent to a drawn weapon that must drink blood before being resheathed."

Toffel nodded. A queer way of looking at things, but then, Latouche was not of the Valley. Fontaine was distant and probably inflicted with many strange customs. Who knew what went on in the mind of this man? It was sufficient that he would fulfill the contract as stipulated — that, when they found Gervase's corpse it must be mutilated in a rather particular way — so that it

looked like a crime of revenge, and would therefore be blamed on the Lady Evadne, who, as everybody knew, hated Gervase with a consuming passion. Her performance at the banquet tonight — the matter having communicated to Toffel by his master, a very much displeased Roi Hengiste — had evidenced the matter anew. It was all fitting together very nicely.

"The contract is binding and final," he affirmed. He detached a pouch from his belt and handed it to the assassin. The dark figure took it and hefted it. The coins inside jingled.

"The balance will be collected when the contract is fulfilled"

"Let it be so," Toffel agreed.

"Go now," Latouche commanded. "Do not look back."

Toffel, Councillor to the ruler of Tergan, thought it wise to comply with the assassin's instruction.

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The pain in his face occupied his world. Everything focused around that one sensation: the throbbing, stabbing agony that pounded through his head, bouncing echoes forth and back like the resonances on the inside of a giant drum.

In moments of clarity, an indistinct face. A woman. Gervase tried to concentrate, focus, dissipate the pain by fixating on that beautiful countenance; but as he pushed it fled, and when he tired to coax it back by retreat it refused to follow.

Other inklings, shards of hidden meanings. A naked body heaving in rhythm with his own. Slick perspiration that . . .

The agony in his face pushed it all into the background.

"Mylord?"

The last of the tenuous images snuffed out, like a candle in a gale. The groping tendrils of his mind probed in a void.

"Mylord, can you hear me?"

Gervase's eyes snapped open. Above him the round, large-pored face of the royal quack; thick-lipped, rheumy-eyed, foul-breathed. Beyond him a familiar ceiling. His bedchamber.

"Get away from me!" Gervase snapped. The face receded. Gervase turned his head; saw several guards, standing at attention; Jago, sitting on a chair, looking sick.

Not as sick as himself. Gervase gasped as another

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wave of pain flared in the center of his face. He took several deep breaths until the agony had subsided — a brief moment of respite.

“What happened?” he croaked. “Why am I . . . like *this*?”

Jago levered himself out of the chair; came over on unsteady legs. He stopped beside Gervase’s bed.

“Mylord, I do not know. They . . . found us. On a landing on level three.”

Gervase closed his eyes. The throbbing of his nose intensified. Strange amorphous shapes danced before his eyes.

Without prompting, from somewhere, deep in his subconscious, a name bubbled to the surface.

Evadne.

Nothing more.

Evadne.

Always Evadne . . .

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# The Zael Inheritance

\* \* \*

## Chapter 2

The headquarters of Pangalactic Security Services Incorporated (Chrysolopolis) were spacious and well-appointed. Pangalactic, a private corporation enjoying a statutory monopoly on law enforcement across the so-called “Terran Hegemony”, was naturally a profitable concern.

Jaden Rolando, who basked in the title “Puissant Apprehensor”, was head of Pangalactic’s Contracts Division on Chrysolopolis; his job was to ensure a steady flow of income from private individuals and organisations wishing to draw on Pangalactic’s specialist expertise. The contract with the New Church of the New Lord was just one example.

On the morning after Lamarck and Voorhies had brought Jozef Bazlukin to justice, Rolando took a com-link call of some significance. After ending the conversation he stared pensively into the dormant screen. Much of the Contracts Division’s work was routine, even vapid; this morning promised something very different.

He pulled ruefully at his jowls, which had begun to sag alarmingly in recent months. He made a note to book himself into Genix Cosmetic; it seemed as if he was likely to be facing a degree of public exposure, and it would be necessary to project a rather more dynamic appearance. In truth, he could do with rather less body-fat all round. Reluctantly he accepted that a full-scale Adiposity Realignment was called for. At least he had had his hairline reseeded last year; that expense, at least, could be avoided this time.

His humour not improved by the thought of another Adiposity Realignment — would it be his fourth or fifth? — he emerged from his upper floor office into the working area used by the other members of the Contracts Division. Casting his irritable gaze around the room, he soon found that matters were not to his liking. Approaching Voorhies, who was trim, composed and busy as ever, he asked:

“Apprehensor, has Prime Apprehensor Lamarck condescended to join us this morning?”

Voorhies, well-schooled in rhetorical questions,

responded with the weary irony customarily employed by Pangalactic officers — or “glaxes” in the popular parlance — the galaxy over.

“He would appear to be pursuing an independent line of enquiry this morning, sir.”

“And which of our fee-earning cases would this ‘enquiry’ be connected with, Apprehensor?”

“It may be that the Prime Apprehensor is attempting to generate a new contract and so inflate the level of our fee income,” suggested Voorhies brightly.

Rolando glowered. This kind of slippery insolence had been learned directly from Lamarck’s book: he was having altogether too much influence over Voorhies, formerly the most amiable of his officers.

“It may be,” he rejoined, “that the Prime Apprehensor is attempting to generate a termination of his own contract. See to it that you do not identify your own fortunes too closely with his.”

At this moment Lamarck himself chose to make an entry. “Good morning, sir. Good morning, Kate,” he said with studied neutrality, but cursing inwardly. It was most unfortunate that Rolando should be around at the very moment he arrived late. His superior could be pushed a long way — Lamarck was an expert at assessing Rolando’s tensile strength — but he had been stretching his latitude too close to its limits recently.

“Ah, Prime Apprehensor,” Rolando said with the icy precision of diction which usually boded ill for his subordinates, “Apprehensor Voorhies was just attempting to cover for your absence. Fortunate for you both that she needs improvise no longer.”

Lamarck made no response.

“I wonder at you, Lamarck,” continued Rolando. “We have worked together for what, ten years? I don’t deny your talents, but the equilibrium between them and your faults is becoming unsettled. The Bazlukin arrest is the only worthwhile contribution you’ve made this year.”

Lamarck gave Rolando a dry look. “The problem, as well you know, is that Contracts isn’t generating enough work. There are six of us in Contracts and we’re only bringing in enough cases for four. But you’re in charge — you don’t need me to tell you that.”

Rolando’s florid face took on an even ruddier shade. “If that is so,” he said sharply, “it won’t be Apprehensor Voorhies whose services I dispense with.”

Lamarck laughed aloud. “If you want to transfer me back to Corinth, go ahead. If not, Apprehensor Voorhies and I need to interview Bazlukin.”

“Hand that over to Investigations — Nouredin can

deal with it. You may adjourn to my office, with Apprehensor Voorhies.”

Inside Rolando’s plushly appointed suite, Lamarck and Voorhies seated themselves according to their modes; Lamarck deliberately languid, Voorhies cool, upright and attentive.

Lamarck caught sight of their reflections in Rolando’s window-wall, high high above the city. Voorhies, looking slightly unfamiliar in mirror-image, was more attractive than he usually realised. Her raven hair was cut in a short cap in the current Chrysopolitan mode and her porcelain complexion had just a touch of colour. Lamarck was not an inveterate womaniser and he had never yet conducted a relationship with another glax; but he saw no harm in inwardly acknowledging Kate’s attractions occasionally.

His eye drifted over to his own familiar reflection and he decided that his posture was not all that it might be. As usual when not undercover, he was immaculately dressed in a dark suit of durable fabric — a habit he had brought with him from Corinth, where temperatures were somewhat lower — offset with a brilliant white shirt.

Rolando looked as tired in reflection as he did in reality. He was a man who had gone as high as he was going to go in Pangalactic: by almost any standards he had been a success; but Lamarck suspected that among the few who considered his career a failure was Jaden Rolando himself.

Lamarck realised that his superior was speaking and redirected his attention.

“You have done good work on the New Church contract,” Rolando said. “When you operate in harmony you are my best-performing team. Sector headquarters on Corinth have just signed a contract which they say will need my keenest resources: to me, that means you two. It is high-profile and high-earning. Considerable merit will accrue to all involved with a successful outcome.”

In spite of himself Lamarck straightened in his seat.

“What is the nature of the contract?” asked Voorhies. “And why is it high-profile?”

“That you will soon see. The contract is with TLZ Spaceways, and it requires Pangalactic either to locate or to confirm dead the heiress of the TLZ fortune, Taslana Zael.”

Lamarck stiffened and glanced at Rolando with an emotion difficult to read, but clearly containing conflicting undertones: “I didn’t imagine that TLZ would be enthusiastic to transact business with us.”

“Because we prosecuted them in the past? TLZ are too hard-nosed to hold a grudge. They want Taslana Zael found — and Pangalactic is the agency to do it.

“As you may know, the Puissant of TLZ Spaceways, Dasien Zael, was murdered two years ago. His sole surviving heir was his daughter, Taslana. Relations within the family had not been cordial, and five years previously Taslana had chosen to disappear and has never reappeared since. Taslana nonetheless remains heiress to 20% of TLZ shares, enough to make her comfortably the largest shareholder. Those shares are currently held in trust by the executors, TLZ Spaceways Inc.

“On Dasien’s death, the Controller of Specie, Allaiao Gazmend, assumed the position of Puissant in the Corporation. Unlike Zael, he was not a shareholder and his position is dependent on the various financial institutions who hold the majority of TLZ shares. Recently those institutions have become restive, and there have been rumours that Gazmend’s tenure as Puissant may be coming to an end.

“Gazmend is not a man to relinquish such a position lightly. He is dependent on the backing of a major TLZ shareholder, and without the banks behind him he lacks that. As Puissant of TLZ, he has taken the decision that a more concerted effort to locate Taslana should be made. If he can find Taslana, and secure either her active or tacit support, then her 20% shareholding will be enough to keep him in power. Given Taslana’s previous ennui with TLZ, it seems a justifiable gamble that she will not be interested in the day to day running of the corporation. Finding Taslana cannot worsen his position; it can only strengthen it.”

“So Allaiao Gazmend is using his standing within the corporation to safeguard his personal position?” asked Voorhies.

“That need not surprise you,” said Rolando with a quick glance at Lamarck. “His career to date is not one of extreme scrupulousness. What is important to us, however, is that he is acting with legitimate authority, regardless of the impurity of his motives. The contract he has awarded us is valid and potentially very lucrative for what is ultimately only a missing persons investigation. A successful conclusion could restore the fortunes of the Chrysopolis division.”

“One question occurs to me,” said Lamarck. “Why is the contract with the Chrysopolis office? TLZ has no connection with this planet.”

“That’s part of the reason. The contract could hardly be administered on Zael’s World: firstly we don’t have an

Enforcement contract there, so we have only a token office on the planet; secondly, it's felt that if the investigation is carried out too close to the Zael sphere of influence, we may become distracted by extraneous factors. Zael's World is in this sector, and after the sector headquarters on Corinth, Chrysopolis is the next largest office.

"Corinth specified the use of my best officers on this. As far as I'm concerned, that's you two. Find Taslana Zael, or prove beyond all reasonable doubt that she's dead. You have all the resources you need. Just do the job."

Voorhies, habitually enthusiastic, cried, "Watch us! This is well within our powers."

Lamarck's response was more muted. "Forgive me a degree of cynicism, sir: in my understanding dealings with TLZ rarely have a satisfactory conclusion, and our knowledge of the career and conduct of Allaiaio Gazmend hardly adds to the probability of an optimum outcome."

Rolando, who customarily resented Lamarck's dour response to case allocation, showed a degree of conciliation. "I understand your misgivings, Geir. TLZ have a poor odour within Pangalactic, and justifiably so. But remember: TLZ are the client here; they are not a suspect and they are not under investigation. We have a contract with them: and I intend to fulfil it with application and skill. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir. It just seems a little ironic."

"I am as aware of that as you are, Geir," he said with the first warmth he had displayed that day.

Lamarck and Voorhies returned to the main office to consider the case files. Voorhies studied her screen with customary intentness, while Lamarck made a more dilatory examination of the material before him.

"All this is better discussed over lunch on the promenade, don't you think?" Lamarck suggested to Voorhies at the conclusion of their morning researches.

"Indeed it is," responded Voorhies. "The melancholy saga of the Zaels certainly induces an appetite. Where shall we eat? Casimondo's?"

"An excellent choice. We may be some time, and the sun catches Casimondo's upper terrace throughout the afternoon."

The two agents took the airlift from their 77th floor offices and strolled out into the pleasant midday Chrysopolitan sun, Voorhies summoning an auto-tram as they did so. Lamarck pulled out the sunshades he affected, partly for aesthetic reasons and partly to coun-

teract a sun noticeably brighter than his homeworld's. The journey from the heart of Mezzanotte City to the waterfront was swift and uneventful, and soon Lamarck and Voorhies found themselves ensconced in a favourable corner of the upper terrace at the unassuming but agreeable "Casimondo's Cordial Cafe" ("Earth cuisine a speciality"). Sited at one end of the waterfront with a view over the great river and estuary which had originally determined the city's location, Casimondo's enjoyed a relaxed charm far removed from the bustle of the city centre.

Lamarck touched a stud on the table and a small com-screen rose from its centre, which he swung to face Voorhies with a somewhat ironic gallantry. She touched the screen to call up the menu and indicated her choices: Ophiuchian green-crab with a toasted salad of blue vegetables and Canopian tubers, followed by a curry of spiced Aldebaranian stoat-cat in honey, washed down with a measure of long tongue-twister.

"I despair of your palate, Kate," said Lamarck. "Wherever we go you eat green-crab and stoat-cat. Don't you ever feel the urge to try something a little more adventurous?"

"At least," retorted Voorhies, indicating the menu items chosen by Lamarck, "all my food is natural. I don't have an appetite for cloned meat."

"Cloned meat is not unnatural; there can be no reasoned objection to eating an animal created for that purpose. The cow that's providing my 'steak a la terra' originally lived a hundred or more years ago, but it's of the very best stock. What's the objection to cloning it over and over? You know Earth cows haven't thrived on Chrysopolis."

"Cloning is repulsive. Animals evolved to reproduce in a certain way, not to be grown in a vat. It's repellent. How can you eat something that was created in that horrid way?"

"Very tasty it is, as we'll see if anyone ever delivers our order. It's exactly the same animal as if it had been born conventionally, but produced at a fraction of the cost," asserted Lamarck.

"And you always were worried about your expenses claims . . . If it's acceptable to clone animals, why is cloning people illegal?" demanded Voorhies.

"There's no similarity. Why should anyone want to clone a person? There is a purpose to cloning food animals; it's a cheap and convenient process."

"People have been cloned, as well you know. There are laws regarding the legal status of human clones."

“True, but that’s legitimising the situation after the event. Scientists have certainly cloned humans for a variety of unsavoury reasons, but that is hardly a reason to forswear cloned meat,” contended Lamarck, illustrating his views by devouring with gusto the steak a la terra which had now arrived. Voorhies more primly tackled the Ophiuchian crab salad before her.

The meal was of the standard the glaxes had come to expect of Casimondo’s, and once it was concluded they sipped their tall glasses of tongue-twister. “Now might be an opportune moment to review the Zael case,” said Voorhies, since Lamarck was clearly not going to. “What have you learned? And what did you and Rolando mean when you were talking about TLZ being difficult to deal with?”

Lamarck leaned back in his seat and collected his thoughts. Looking away over the great estuary with its flotilla of ion-boats, he said:

“To start with the second point: some years ago the planetary government on Aquamonde awarded Pangalactic a contract to investigate possible abuses of monopoly powers by TLZ against Aquamondain citizens. They believed that TLZ was trafficking in arms, jerkies and illegally indentured artisans — slaves, effectively. Pangalactic’s preliminary investigation indicated that the allegations were possibly true and they set up a major long-term undercover operation. The operation went wrong, a Pangalactic operative was killed and there was insufficient evidence to tie in TLZ senior management to the practice. Pangalactic prosecuted and convicted two TLZ captains but could not make charges stick to anyone higher up. The truly guilty parties, possibly including Zael himself and beyond a doubt Allaia Gazmend, were never apprehended.

“Ever since, Pangalactic and TLZ have not enjoyed the most constructive relationship.

“As to today’s case, I’ve dredged up a range of background information. The basic story I’m sure everyone is familiar with, but I’ll run it from the top.

“As you know, TLZ Spaceways, like Pangalactic, holds one of the Historic Monopolies. Nobody other than TLZ is allowed to make commercial interstellar journeys. Ever since Johannes Zael first set up TLZ when the Otherspace Drive was developed, that monopoly has applied. The argument then was that the research and development costs in the field were so high that commercial competition was inappropriate. Undoubtedly Zael was a pioneer and his right to a monopoly patent was undisputed. Even today, Drive technology is expen-

sive, although the arguments for the TLZ monopoly are now more questionable.

“Inevitably, with the growth of space travel over the centuries, TLZ has become unimaginably wealthy, and a 20% block of shares remains in the Zael family. The TLZ monopoly is regarded as significantly the most lucrative of all the Historic Monopolies — the franchise for interstellar security held by Pangalactic is nowhere close.

“Over the years the Zael family has earned a reputation for spectacular ill-fate. The Zaels were never profligate with their offspring — that would have required excessive dilution of the family wealth among cadet branches.

“Taslana’s father was Dasien Zael, who held the full 20% family shareholding in TLZ — the family was always scrupulous not to split its holding. They might parcel out cash, but never shares. That 20%, conservatively valued at 20 billion marks, has stayed in a block since the formation of TLZ. Dasien’s marriage to Taslana’s mother, Carlotta, was not happy. They had a son, the heir Tancredin. He was a couple of years older than Taslana and was intended to inherit the family shareholding, while Taslana would be compensated from the other vast assets the family held.

“The family was dysfunctional even by the standards of plutocrats. Tancredin and Taslana were initially educated at home by a tutor, Andreas Smederevod, who eventually left the Zaels’ employ under a cloud and sold the rights to a somewhat sensationalised sensopic about the terrible lives of the plutocrats. There have been more scholarly biographies of the Zaels, but Smederevod’s is both the raciest and the best-known: the two factors may be connected. In none of the biographies is either of the adult Zaels flatteringly portrayed.

“Tancredin, not surprisingly, grew up headstrong, wilful and eccentric although, according to Smederevod, in a thoughtless rather than malicious way. When he was twenty-one he was killed when his Firedaunt Panther crashed into a mountain. There have been attempts to make this appear suspicious, but he was known as a reckless pilot with a penchant for reckless stunts and a dislike of the navcom. More sinister reasons are not necessary to explain the death of young Tancredin Zael.

“Carlotta was a weak personality who appears to have dabbled in just about every mind-expanding drug known to science. Shortly after Tancredin’s death her experi-

ments ceased since a pharmacopoeia of eleven previously-uncombined substances proved too much for her neural chemistry. She became permanently insane, and to this day remains incarcerated in a private asylum.

"Taslana had a reputation for independence but, in the Smederevod sensopic at least, had a closer acquaintance with the galaxy of real people than others of her family. At fourteen she insisted on being educated off-world — admittedly at a somewhat exclusive establishment — and she made what seemed to be genuine efforts to integrate into life away from Zael's World.

"At eighteen she was given a life interest in a comparatively small number of Zael shares, although enough to make her affluent in her own right. She had not been on good terms with her family for several years, and shortly afterwards she disappeared, and did so very skilfully. The life interest in the TLZ shares, which would have made her easy to locate as long as she collected the money, she assigned to a financial institution in return for an annuity. She was still equally wealthy, but she was wholly divorced from the Zael heritage and her money was now untraceable. Despite all the efforts of her father to locate her, she was never found."

"He should have called Pangalactic," said Voorhies. "If we can't find someone, no-one can."

"True," said Lamarck. "But for various reasons, Zael — this was around the time of our investigation into TLZ — was reluctant to approach us. He preferred to use his own resources and contacts to find her. Had she remained on Zael's World, where TLZ is the effective government, I am sure he would have been successful. Taslana had lived offworld, though, and almost certainly chose to live her life in the galaxy at large. Creating a false identity, while illegal, is not difficult if one has money.

"The tragedy of the Zaels had one final twist. Two years ago Dasien Zael was assassinated on the steps of TLZ headquarters on Zael's World. The assassins were never caught and the motive remains a mystery."

"I remember that from the sensopics," said Voorhies. "The local police attempted to deal with it themselves, and since there was no interstellar aspect Pangalactic had no jurisdiction, and the Zael government declined to purchase an Investigations contract with us," said Voorhies.

"You approach the matter from Rolando's perspective. It was the most newsworthy single crime in the galaxy for a generation, and you can only see it as a squabble between the planetary authorities and Pangalactic

Security Services Inc."

"No! This 'most significant crime' was beyond the wit of the local bumlbers, and Pangalactic would have found it easily solvable. If the planetary authorities had given us the original Enforcement contract, instead of trying to run the planet in-house, the assassination might never have happened."

"Your faith in the power of Pangalactic would be naive among the general populace: in a Pangalactic employee it is truly bizarre. You think that a law enforcement agency run by us would have protected Zael? When we win an Enforcement contract we just re-employ the existing local officers at half their previous salaries. The local government is happy since it incurs neither the full cost nor the inconvenience of day to day law enforcement."

"Geir, you are so cynical it frightens me. Pangalactic is the sole stable force in the galaxy. You act as if it's just another profit-creaming monopolist like TLZ or Genix."

"Are you suggesting otherwise?" responded Lamarck sourly. "Pangalactic is accountable directly to its shareholders and only indirectly to the populations of the worlds on which it operates. Why has Rolando been so intolerable lately? He was not always thus. The reason is as simple as this: his returns on capital are 15% down because he gambled on increasing the proportion of 'payment by results' contracts on Chrysopolis. We haven't got the results and he hasn't got the returns. Now sector headquarters are wanting to know why."

"That might be true at the top, Geir — but what about galaxes like us? We only get our salaries, and they are hardly remarkable. We care about justice and order — shareholder returns are nothing to us. Solving the case — that's our way!" declared Voorhies, her complexion freshened and the breeze ruffling her short hair.

Lamarck smiled. "One of the many reasons I like working with you, Kate, is that you remind me why I do this job. Sometimes I have difficulty remembering — when I was on Corinth it did seem like you tell it. Since I came to Chrysopolis, I don't know, the link to the shareholders seems that much more direct, and the link to 'justice' that much more tenuous. And then, of course, I worked for Rolando before he joined Contracts, and he was different too. At one stage they said he would be Sector Puissant — and it seemed true. Now look at him: 'performance indicators', 'contract specifications'".

Voorhies leaned across and neatly flicked Lamarck's glass out of his reach. "You know our rule, Geir. When

## Chapter 3

we start on Rolando, it's time to get back to work . . . ”

“Ha! You define ‘diligence.’ Let’s go,” smiled Lamarck, entering the office credit code into the touch-screen in settlement of the lunch account.

The officers chose to stroll back to the office through the warm afternoon glow from Sadal Suud rather than riding the auto-tram.

“How should we go about this?” mused Lamarck. “Missing persons cases can be tricky, especially if the person has money and doesn’t want to be found.”

“I think a two-pronged approach. Firstly, massive publicity: ‘ARE YOU TASLANA ZAEL? 20 BILLION MARKS AWAIT YOU — AND THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE!’ This has an excellent probability of success if she is prepared to be found.”

“She has hidden successfully for seven years. Why should she break incognito now?”

“It’s one thing to turn your back on a fortune when you know that you can claim it any time: it takes more fortitude if you are about to be declared officially dead and the money allocated elsewhere. And my other option is calculated to unearth her if she’s still in hiding. We try to follow the trail of what happened when she disappeared. We have access to information that Zael’s people didn’t when they tried to track her.”

“After seven years? She will have a new identity and possibly a new appearance. She could be, literally, anywhere,” objected Lamarck.

“The odds are she’s alive. She was eighteen when she vanished, and rich. An actuary would tell us Taslana Zael is still alive. If she set herself up with a new identity she had help: who would she have turned to? She had a privileged existence, and privilege, by definition, is restricted to the few. There are a finite number of leads to her: she will not have delved deep in the Zael’s World criminal classes.”

“You’ve convinced me — as long as you don’t suggest Geir Lamarck trudges around Zael’s World sniffing out a seven-year old trail . . . ”

“I never expected as much,” laughed Voorhies. “And I shan’t be doing so either. We have spirited youngsters for that kind of work. Besides, much of what we need to do can be done from here.”

“Then we’re agreed. Let’s go and work on our sensopic broadcast.”

The Pangalactic Security Services Incorporated office on Chrysoopolis was transformed. A world of pleasant climate, mineral wealth and a contented populace offered little real challenge to law enforcement. The tide of galactic events rarely rose high enough to lap against Chrysoopolis’s shores. The award to the local office of the contract to find an heiress — and what an heiress! — missing for seven years was a major media event on the planet, and indeed throughout the galaxy. Even on super-jaded Earth, raddled, metropolitan and hyper-sophisticated, citizens attended to the news broadcasts when Chrysoopolis was mentioned.

At the hub of activity — albeit behind the scenes — were Pangalactic operatives Geir Lamarck and Kate Voorhies. Lamarck, tall, languid and cynical, was the public’s idea of a glax; Voorhies, six inches shorter, methodical to the point of obsessiveness with a streak of stern moralism, corresponded less to the stereotype. Lamarck and Voorhies had co-ordinated the massive publicity campaign intended to tell every household in the galaxy that Pangalactic was looking for Taslana Zael and that 20 billion marks’ worth of shares were waiting for her. Jaden Rolando, their superior officer, was for a spell the most familiar face in human space — and miraculously slimmer than a month before — as he delivered the simple message:

ARE YOU TASLANA ZAEL? SEVEN YEARS AGO YOU **DISAPPEARED**. NOW CLAIM YOUR INHERITANCE OR LOSE IT FOREVER. IF YOU SEE THIS MESSAGE, CONTACT YOUR LOCAL PANGALACTIC SECURITY SERVICES OFFICE, OR APPEAR IN PERSON AT THE PANGALACTIC OFFICE IN MEZZANOTTE CITY, CHRYSOPOPOLIS. SIMPLE CHECKS WILL BE CARRIED OUT TO VERIFY YOUR **IDENTITY**, AND YOUR INHERITANCE WILL BE RELEASED SOON AFTER.

IF YOU BELIEVE THAT A PERSON YOU KNOW **COULD** BE TASLANA ZAEL, CONTACT PANGALACTIC. TLZ SPACEWAYS INC. WILL PAY A SIZEABLE REWARD TO THE FIRST PERSON TO **IDENTIFY** TASLANA ZAEL.

The information available to Pangalactic in confirming the identity of claimants was the sample of **DNA** normally taken at a child’s birth and entered on the **DataBank**. **DNA** matches were admissible evidence throughout the Terran Hegemony, and the officers were confident that a genuine claimant could be positively identified.

Pangalactic offices on almost every world had their share of "Taslana Zaels" presenting themselves during the first week of investigation. Most were discouraged when the DNA testing procedure was explained, along with a disquisition on Pangalactic's propensity to take legal action against those who maliciously wasted its time. Bogus claimants risked a civil action from Pangalactic as well as criminal proceedings — often administered by Pangalactic itself under Enforcement contracts — for infractions against the planet's fraud and identity laws.

Lamarck and Voorhies sat down to review the results of the first week. Lamarck's hand toyed idly, for the thousandth time, with the small holographic locket which contained the last known image of the seventeen-year old Taslana Zael. He touched the button on the underside of the disc and the likeness of Taslana, eight inches high, sprang up. He looked without any new insight at the display. She had a slight figure and a face which was pleasant if unremarkable. The eyes were large and widely-spaced, with a short, straight nose that was too thick to represent conventional standards of beauty. Her cheekbones were high with every indication of becoming striking once she grew out of her puppy-fat. An emotion somewhere between disdain and indifference was reflected in the set of her mouth, and Lamarck deduced that Taslana had not been a girl who relished posing for her portrait.

For whatever reason, the Zaels had chosen to economise on the locket technology; they had not even produced a moving image. Lamarck thought sardonically of Guiscard's jerkies; unsavoury as they were, they had at least been a technological advance on the equipment which the galaxy's richest family had employed.

"Stop looking at that hologram and attend to the matter in hand," said Voorhies sharply.

Lamarck laughed and shut the image off. He had looked at it so much he could see it in his sleep. It didn't help him get any closer to the character behind it.

"Very well," he said. "The story so far: 277 tentative claims, of which 273 have been withdrawn before the DNA test. A further 47,000 contacts with Pangalactic offices from persons claiming to know the 'real Taslana Zael.'"

"I knew mentioning the reward at the beginning was a bad idea. We should have kept it back until we were desperate," said Voorhies.

"Local offices can weed most of them out. If Mr X on Arcopia says his neighbour Miss Y is Taslana Zael, all

they need to do is run Miss Y's DNA from the DataBank against Taslana's DNA sample. We need do nothing here . . . and that's how we like it"

"Eliminating negatives is a key part of the investigative process; however, the galaxy contains several trillion humans, and we have eliminated 47,000. It may take some time at this rate; although we can at least remove the male half of the population from our enquiries."

"Not necessarily!" said Lamarck. "One claimant on Anjou was male. He claimed that his attempts to conceal his identity had been sufficiently comprehensive as to include a gender transformation"

"If true, it would constitute commendable, if excessive, thoroughness; if false it shows a remarkable degree of imagination," suggested Voorhies.

"We need not rule on this one ourselves: the claimant, a Farrukh Shah Bazadi, withdrew his claim on being informed that the penalties for fraud on Anjou ranged from amputation of the little fingers to 'penis cropping,'" said Lamarck with a wince.

"This one is even more bizarre!" cried Voorhies, indicating the screen before her. "Ramona da Ruiz, of Avalon, claimed to have sheltered Taslana Zael for two years. Fearful of discovery — and here I quote the official record — Miss Zael suborned a technician of Genix's Experimental Research Division to perform a radical untried genetic modification procedure. The process did not act in the manner anticipated, and Miss Zael was transformed into a cat."

"Mrs da Ruiz produced the cat in question, and submitted it as the rightful claimant of the Zael Inheritance. She was prepared to submit the animal to DNA testing, but felt that a negative match would not disprove her claim, since the animal had been the product of a genetic manipulation process."

"It has the merit of internal consistency, and might prove difficult to discredit. It is not that much more far-fetched than the Lizardskin treatment," mused Lamarck.

"You under-rate the local Pangalactic office's tenacity. A glax accessed Mrs da Ruiz's veterinary records, and matched the "claimant's" DNA to that of her cat Smudgepaw, age approximately twenty-three years. At this point the chronology of Mrs da Ruiz's claim collapsed and she now finds herself defending a writ from the local Pangalactic office."

"A salutary tale," declared Lamarck. "Attempts to hoodwink Pangalactic can end only in dismay!"

"Irony does not suit you," said Voorhies frostily. "The

fact remains that we are no nearer discharging our contractual responsibilities. If Findabel's report from Zael's World doesn't show a degree of progress, Rolando may well become fractious."

"I have Findabel's initial report here, and it's fair to say that progress is limited. I don't think we ever really expected to make a breakthrough on the planet itself."

Even as the glaxes digested the report from the Zael's World agent they were summoned by a choleric Rolando.

"Your headway so far has been minimal," asserted the chief as he leaned back challengingly in his SmartChair. "We have spent millions on sensopic broadcasts and generated no solid leads. Findabel's researches on Zael's World, while undoubtedly diligent, so far appear unpromising. Any further ideas?"

"The investigation is still in its infancy," said Voorhies. "If Taslana Zael wants to be found, the sensopics will be money well spent, since she will surely see them. If she doesn't want to be found, then Findabel's trail provides another option; the TLZ reward money offers us another. And it may be that now we have access to TLZ's own records that we uncover something new. Those records should tell us who left Zael's World around the time that Taslana disappeared: it could easily generate an important lead."

Rolando appeared sceptical. "Lamarck, do you concur with Voorhies's analysis?"

"By and large, sir. Until we have trawled the TLZ records we will not know how useful they are; and Findabel appears to be making all the progress on Zael's World that one could expect."

. . . *in other words, zero*, Lamarck finished the assessment inwardly.

"I have put great faith in the pair of you," said Rolando portentously. "My disappointment will be correspondingly great if that faith is misplaced."

"I believe the Elders of the New Church of the New Lord made an almost identical point, sir, in almost identical language," said Lamarck, not entirely successfully suppressing a grin.

As the days stretched into weeks the case developed a routine: various claimants presenting themselves or being presented, occasionally persisting as far as a DNA test; increasingly irritable reports from Zael's World; and an unavailing attempt to correlate the information held on TLZ's own records with Pangalactic's DataBank. Neither Lamarck nor Voorhies was by any means highly-strung: but the frustrations of the case were

sapping for both. Increasingly they looked forward only to their lunches on Casimondo's fine upper terrace; one day when rain pent them indoors, Voorhies suffered an uncharacteristic flash of temper and swore at Lamarck — which was not quite unique — and also at one of the computer technicians, which certainly was.

After three weeks the glaxes began to admit, if not yet to each other, that they were running out of leads. Findabel remained on Zael's World, as much to placate Rolando as from any real belief that he would unearth any worthwhile facts; the TLZ passenger database still proved so uncooperative as to suggest sabotage to an increasingly agitated Voorhies. Only the steady stream of claimants across the galaxy — and occasionally on Chrysopolis itself — reminded the glaxes that the investigation still proceeded.

It was on an afternoon in the fourth week of the investigation that the breakthrough which was to determine the course of the investigation was achieved. Lamarck and Voorhies had spent an especially depressing lunch-time at Casimondo's and, as Lamarck had little enthusiasm to return to the case, the pair walked back to the office. Among all of the idiosyncrasies which caused their colleagues to think them eccentric, this preference for the oldest mode of locomotion was seen as the strangest. In an age of free, congenial and automated transport, the notion that a person might choose to arrive at his destination on foot was seen as at best bizarre, at worst affected. Voorhies suspected that Lamarck was motivated at least partly by sheer perversity, here as in so much else of his conduct. Lamarck, for his part, gave no thought to the reasoning behind Voorhies's preference. Had he considered the matter, he would no doubt have reflected that Voorhies would choose the mild inconvenience of walking to the tedium of an unaccompanied auto-tram journey. But he gave the subject no such attention.

Each enwrapped in their own thoughts, the glaxes wended their way up the steep incline from the waterfront to the Pangalactic offices. Pangalactic occupied half of the 85-storey "Mezzanotte Tower of Commerce", an imposing structure intended to reflect the mercantile confidence of the capital city's authorities. The tower was curiously beautiful in an impractical way, an elaborate double-helix design intended to represent human DNA. Much of the cost of the building had been financed by Genix, who enjoyed a Historic Monopoly on all genetic treatments, and their influence had been responsible for the remarkable shape. The

planetary headquarters of Pangalactic occupied the whole of one of the strands of the double-helix, and hence stretched from the bottom to the top of the building.

The intention on the tower's construction had been for the very tip of the upper helix to contain but a single office, the ultimate status symbol for some Chrysolopolitan plutocrat of the past. Practicalities had intervened when Pangalactic had taken residence, and an aircar landing pad now sat with illusory precariousness atop the building, and from certain angles lent a bizarre asymmetry to the tower. The Planetary Puissant's suite now occupied a more modest location a floor down. The principle remained, however, that the closer one ascended to the summit of the tower, the higher-ranking the dignitaries contained. The Contracts Division nestled close to the apex, a tribute not so much to the esteem the contract-glaxes were held in, as to the significance that sector headquarters attached to the profits generated by the division.

Within Pangalactic mythology, miscellaneous characteristics were ascribed to the various divisions, and these remained remarkably constant from world to world. Contracts divisions, whose operatives were known as "smarses" — a contraction of "smart-arses" — the galaxy over, were loved by their sector headquarters, and postings within Contracts were highly sought; this desirability arose through both the variety of workload and the opportunities which arose for the ambitious to catch the eyes of superiors. Large contracts with planetary authorities often involved the use of officers from Investigations and Enforcement, and this naturally led Contracts officers to imagine themselves vastly superior to their colleagues, and equally naturally caused furious resentment among those colleagues. Contracts was seen as embodying arrogance, snobbishness and an aversion to any kind of mental or physical exertion.

Particularly intense was the rivalry between Contracts and Investigations ("snoops"). There was much overlap between Contracts and Investigations work, with Contracts officers invariably occupying positions of authority (but, at least according to Investigations, with snoops doing all the work). Investigations was in some way a median caste, carrying out those planetary security issues outside the run of normal Enforcement contracts, but on occasion embodying an interstellar dimension more akin to Contracts work. Those Investigations glaxes involved in such interstellar work

intensely despised their planet-bound brethren. Snoops had the stereotype within Pangalactic of deviousness, guile and chicanery.

Service within Investigations often led to transfer to Contracts for able officers; few glaxes were recruited directly into Contracts. While snoops regarded smarses with jealousy and seeming contempt, it was accepted in both camps that a snoop invited to join the smarses would accept with alacrity.

Enforcements was the bedrock of Pangalactic. The core of the corporation's income was the planetary Enforcement Contract, that routine policing function which, under the Historic Monopoly, only Pangalactic could provide. Some planets — such as Zael's World — evaded the spirit of the Monopoly by engaging only a token Enforcement Contract, and supplementing this with policing operations of its own. Such recidivism was rare, since any agency operating outside of the Pangalactic aegis could not access the mighty DataBank built up by the corporation over the centuries, which was essential to almost all aspects of policing.

Enforcement officers — "fumps" as they were known in the glax argot for reasons long forgotten — performed a huge range of tasks. Not all of these, contrary to the slurs of smarses and snoops, were of equivalent stature to locating the holders of lost ident chips, or preventing escaped pets from roaming the streets; nonetheless, routine played an important part in the effective operation of an Enforcement Contract, and fumps were characterised within Pangalactic as slow-witted and lacking in initiative.

On each planet the fumps were attired according to the local traditions; on Chrysolopolis this meant a jaunty and highly visible array of smart navy trousers and orange shirts, a throwback to the religious affiliations of the original colonists of the planet. Indeed, the livery had outlasted memories of both the settlers and their sacerdotal doctrines, which over the past three hundred years had fallen victim to the evangelism of Charity de Groot and her New Church forebears.

The two smarses arrived back at the Tower of Commerce only shortly after the close of their scheduled lunch-break. Voorhies, as was her wont, expressed concern at the marginal overstepping of their allotted span; Lamarck chose to emphasise the positive aspects in their having decided to return at all.

Scarcely had they returned to their desks when they were approached by their administrative aide, Susifer, a chic brunette for whom Lamarck nurtured — secretly,

he falsely believed — a regard beyond the professional.

"Excuse me, Prime Apprehensor," said Susifer. "There is a Miss Laura Glyde outside wishing to see you urgently in connection with the Zael case."

With a grin at Voorhies, Lamarck said: "Send her in to Suite B, Susifer. We could use a lead."

Shortly after, Susifer led a young woman into the suite occupied by Lamarck and Voorhies. Before either could react to the familiar features before them, Laura Glyde stepped forward to shake hands with Lamarck.

"Good afternoon, Prime Apprehensor. I apologise for misleading you as to my identity, although I am sure you will understand the reason. My name is Taslana Zael."

Lamarck appeared stunned. The woman in front of him was clearly from offworld — her dark, tight garments could not have been worse chosen for the warm Chrysopolitan climate — but her features were indistinguishable from the holo-image of Taslana Zael.

Voorhies said crisply: "Your ident-chip suggests that you are Laura Glyde of Heimat. In the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary, that is how we must regard you."

Laura Glyde — or Taslana Zael — showed no surprise. "I understand your scepticism. I am sure that there have been several other claimants —"

"462," muttered Lamarck.

"— and that with so much money at stake, there are certain formalities you will need to perform. If it will make the process easier, I am happy to submit to DNA, retina and fingerprint scans as necessary."

Voorhies shot Lamarck a raised-eyebrows glance which the latter interpreted as "confident, if nothing else."

Lamarck was silent a moment. He had recovered from his original surprise, and saw that there were important questions to be answered. "Will you excuse us for a few seconds, Miss Glyde? We have procedures we must set in motion."

"Of course," said Laura Glyde lightly. "I do not expect the money today."

Voorhies snorted. "Since it will not be forthcoming, that is as well."

Lamarck and Voorhies retired to an ante-room. "Well?" asked Lamarck.

"Brassy imposture!" pronounced Voorhies. "She rings wholly false. There is an actressy quality about her."

"My hunch is with you," said Lamarck. "But how do you account for her appearance? She is not just similar to Taslana: she is as near identical as the lapse of seven

years can allow."

"Nano-surgery? The latest Genix cosmetic procedures can alter appearance at the molecular level without leaving any sort of micro-scarring for scans to pick up?"

"In theory I suppose it's possible. That hardly equates to ease, or even likelihood. How abundant is the technology and the expertise to perform nano-surgery of that quality, regardless of the cost? This is hardly an everyday cheekbone lift."

"For 20 billion marks I'd be prepared to lay out something in advance. Wouldn't you?"

"Yes — but no matter what she looks like, she can't fool a DNA test: it would be money wasted. This is more than a simple scam."

"Let's just process her. Either the DNA test will expose her, or she'll incriminate herself. And one more thing: she's a snooty little bitch."

"Hardly relevant," countered Lamarck, "and not, I think, true. She is poised, cool, confident and by no means unattractive. Why do women always aspire to poise themselves yet regard it as snootiness in other women?"

"Geir! Ignoring your misogynist stereotype, she shows all the hallmarks of a hussy! Trust you to see that as poise . . ."

"Enough, girl," growled Lamarck. "Let's do the tests."

Lamarck led the way back into the interview suite. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Miss Glyde. I'll take you through the formalities shortly: Apprehensor Voorhies has some administrative arrangements to attend to."

Laura Glyde smiled a strange crooked smile that seemed simultaneously to combine irony, warmth and individuality. "I regard myself as in your hands, Prime Apprehensor."

"If you don't need me, sir, I'll be aspiring to poise at my desk," said Voorhies curtly, stalking out with a poor attempt at hauteur.

Laura Glyde raised her eyebrows. Lamarck reached for the persona known as "languid affability".

"Determining the identity of any claimant will not be a decision made by a Pangalactic officer. The first stage will be to conduct a series of biological tests, which will serve to eliminate those not matching our base data.

"I have to tell you that these tests cannot be fooled by any known contrivance. If your profile is different to that of Taslana Zael, you are not the same person. That much is simple. What I would stress at this point is that a person posing as Taslana Zael would be guilty of a significant fraud against the laws of Chrysopolis, as well

as a civil offence against Pangalactic Inc. The assumption of a false identity by a private citizen is also a felony under the Hegemonic Constitution. A person acting thus would therefore be guilty of a serious range of criminal and civil offences. While Chrysolopolis enjoys a relatively benign penal code, the results of a sustained imposture of this nature would be likely to result in a prison term.”

“Since I have already claimed two different identities during our short acquaintance, I would appear to be guilty either way,” suggested Laura Glyde with a smile.

“In a technical sense that is the case. There are degrees of culpability, though. If you admitted here that your claim to be Taslana Zael was simple prankesomeness, well, nothing is on record, and I would not hinder your departure from the building.”

“I understand that you have to issue these warnings, Prime Apprehensor, and insofar as they are designed to safeguard my future assets, I am grateful to you,” then, with a touch of ice, “nonetheless: I am Taslana Zael. The sooner the formalities begin, the sooner the affair can be concluded to both our satisfactions.”

Lamarck shrugged. “If that’s how you want it: follow me. I get paid either way.”

Lamarck and Laura Glyde descended fifteen floors in the airlift, to arrive at the Physiological Facility. Laura Glyde was conducted through the testing procedure, pressing her fingers against a glass plate, recoiling from the flash of a retina camera, and submitting to an imperceptible needle-prick blood sample from the thumb. Lamarck noticed that her poise was undisturbed throughout the process.

While the tests were performed Lamarck took the opportunity to give her a covert scrutiny. The tight off-world garments, however impractical they might be, certainly displayed her slight figure to good advantage. Was this the woman whose image he had so often studied? Her hair, a dark blonde, was longer than the Chrysolopolitan style and flicked up off her shoulders. It had been shorter in the locket but that hardly signified. The unusually short nose, the widely-spaced eyes, the high cheekbones: all came straight from the hologram. The face was a little thinner, but that could easily be the work of time or slimming treatments. He cursed again the poor quality of the holo-locket. The most notable features of this young woman were her engaging crooked smile and her sinuous grace of movement: but the girl in the locket had neither smiled nor moved. Would Taslana Zael carry herself with such self-con-

tained poise? Yes, she would, thought Lamarck; but so would any young woman who had an education like Taslana’s; or any competent pretender. It was an imposture, surely, but it was a clever, resourceful and convincing one.

The business concluded, he escorted her off the premises. Outside the Tower of Commerce he took his leave.

“The test results should be through tomorrow. Where will you be staying in the interim?”

“I am at the Grand Duchess Anastasia Hotel, Mezzanotte Villas. You know it?”

“Ha! You are not economising! I take it that you were made aware of the tariffs before checking in?”

“I am expecting to inherit 20 billion marks’ worth of shares: in addition I have a comfortable annuity.” She smiled her crooked smile at Lamarck. “Economising is for those who must eke out their lives on Pangalactic salaries. Good afternoon.”

Laura Glyde tossed her hair with a practised sweep and sauntered off towards the auto-tram rank with a wiggle which appeared so natural it could only be artifice.

“Miss Glyde!” called out Lamarck. “One question, which you are under no obligation to answer: why come back? You have been away seven years, and the inheritance has been there for the past two. If you can afford to stay at the Anastasia, why bother?”

Laura Glyde turned to face Lamarck. Again she smiled her crooked smile, but Lamarck felt that this time it was being used as a stall rather than a beguilement.

“I am Taslana Zael, Prime Apprehensor. That may have made me unhappy in the past, but calling myself ‘Laura Glyde’ doesn’t change who I am. If I really am going to be Taslana Zael, I might as well be Taslana Zael with 20 billion marks. Thank you for asking: it’s the first time I felt that you might believe me.”

“I didn’t say —” began Lamarck, but it was too late: Laura Glyde had stepped onto an auto-tram, and was gone. Lamarck looked reflectively into the middle distance. Turning on his heel, he re-entered the Tower of Commerce and took the airlift back to his office.

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# The Planet of Retribution

(Volume II in the  
*Deranged Astrophysicist* series)

## Chapter VI

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From Chapter 7: *The Capture, Domestication and Training of the Great Hairy Erb*, of: *The True Country Gentleman: Traditional Techniques and Modern Innovations*, by Fedor Karkassus.

*. . . the erb can be taught to understand human speech, but not to speak it. His capacity for vocabulary is comparable to that of dog or custastre, but his understanding of whole phrases is greater. He will obey without hesitation the command: 'Go fetch me that meat!'. Or, equally: 'Leave that woman alone!' However, most negative instructions are difficult for him. If you instruct the erb: 'Do not defecate upon the floor!' he will likely as not do the opposite, understanding only 'defecate' and 'floor'. If you do not want him, let us say, to kill people, it is of no use to say: 'Do not kill those people!' He will probably kill them and you can only try to restrain him by shouting 'No! No!' He is baffled by questions. It is of no use to say: 'Do you see that man?' This is beyond him. But you can say: 'Kill that man!' and he will do it.*

*But no factor is more important in the control the erb than the innate authority of the commander. More than habit, familiarity, more even than training, it is his sense of your superior will which sparks the erb to obedient action. . .*

Pearson awoke to find Breke still asleep. He dressed quietly and went downstairs, where breakfast was being served in the common room. He sat at a table facing a poster showing a zbulcher, perched on a splendid mount draped in a green blanket, and carrying a long pole terminated by an odd arrangement of ropes. The bartender, now wearing a short red coat and acting as waiter, silently set before him a bowl of boiled grain, a carafe of slime, and a mug of hot dark liquid.

"Excuse me," said Pearson, pointing at the mug; what is this substance?" The man seemed to slowly emerge from a trance.

"That? Cuetal, of course."

"A tea of some sort?"

"You do not know; 'cuetal'?"

"I am not sure. Perhaps you would remind me?" The man seemed non-plussed. He put down his tray, seated himself beside Pearson, and studied both him and the steaming mug with the air of a sailor studying an unknown knot.

"It is a brew . . ." he began at last. But when he attempted to amplify this remark only produced gestures and puzzled expressions. Finally he gave up. "Some like it." He stated. "Most do. I like it myself. It wakes you up, you see. I brewed this pot myself. Try it, stranger, you may like it."

Pearson sipped. The cuetal went down his throat like dry sand, and his face puckered from chin to forehead. The whiskered man watched in puzzlement. "Why do you not stir in slime?" Pearson, with a fatalistic shrug and avoiding direct inspection of the substance, did so and, pondering the fate which had carried him to Scratch Flats, tasted. The cuetal was now transformed, and even agreeable, if still a bit acrid. "That's the purpose of the slime," explained the man as if to a intelligent child. "Put some on your millifax too; but not too much, unless you are willing to be called a vulgarian."

Pearson was eating porridge and drinking cuetal when Breke appeared and seated himself moodily.

"Good morning to you, Breke," Pearson said with synthetic cheer. "You will enjoy the local breakfast, but be sure to add slime; that is how the locals render it edible."

"I have evolved an important improvement on our plan," Breke announced.

Up until recently Pearson and Breke had the habit of discussing their common obsession to the exclusion of all other topics. But Pearson's mood deprived him of his old single-mindedness, and now he tried to avoid the oppressive subject by evasion: "Tell me first about your evening at the Explorer. How was your meal?"

Breke peered at him questioningly. "The meal was excellent. I recommend zebul steak . . . but what of that? When she served my after-dinner cordial I engaged Karkassus' daughter in conversation." He laughed mockingly. "What a chatter-box! She had much to say about the deficiencies of Scratch Flats, as well as the restrictions put upon her by her father."

"Such as?"

"Her Father refuses to allow her to come and go as she pleases, nor may she keep the company of her choice. When I remarked that she seemed free enough, she pronounced a diatribe upon the management of the

Explorer, the owner in particular, going so far as to call him an 'implacable tyrant'?"

"If her father forbids her both to come, and to go, how is it she is not safely at home in Kloot, and instead holds employment here, in Scratch Flats?"

"According to her story, she confronted her father with an ultimatum: if he continued to spy, and forbid her to have the friends of her own choice, he would never see her again. The father then used foul language, which outraged the daughter." Breke paused to shake his head in bemused deprecation. "She states that no man may insult her and escape retribution." Pearson winced. "Is it not disgusting?" Breke, without taking notice of Pearson, went on with a sneer. "This ditty-doo of a female vows retribution upon the man who destroyed our world, and why? Because he called her a 'zebula in heat, with brain to match'! For once I find myself in accord with an opinion of that pompous criminal; Fedor Karkassus! What marvellous impertinence! Does she not perceive the aura of evil and guilt generated by her progenitor? She must! How could she not? But she simply ignores it; such a person deserves to share his fate!"

Pearson made a nervous motion. "What was the substance of his remarks?"

"Phaaa! A petty family quarrel; all about nothing! He informed her that if she persisted in her folly she could strike out on her own. He would not interfere, but her allowance would be suspended."

"Hence employment, at The Explorer?"

"Correct."

"But why here, and not elsewhere?"

"A mere coincidence. She left Kloot with the first caravan, which happened to be going to Scratch Flats. Karkassus himself arrives today by air car."

"Did she mention me?"

"Indeed she did, at length and with indignation. Her mind is fixated on her personal disappointments to an amazing degree."

Pearson grew thoughtful: "Could not the same be said of many of us?"

Breke looked at him in disapproval and gave another of his dismissive snorts. "There is an important difference between expunging a dangerous maniac for the benefit of all humanity, and the petty lust for sexual liberation indulged in by this kitchet\*."

"What else did you learn?"

"She said that Karkassus has five of his special erbs as bodyguards and protectors of Triompho. They are at their post now, in the stable at the racetrack; we will have to deal with them according to our little idea. The steeplechase, which Karkassus has entered, is scheduled for tomorrow, in mid-afternoon. Fleurdian is avoiding her father and refuses to attend the races."

"What else?"

"What else? My wonderful plan, of course!"

"Well, what is it?"

"At last you show curiosity! Have you become ill of late? You seem a different person."

"Perhaps I am."

"Nonsense." Breke stated with decision. "People remain who they are. The psychologists and their bone-head theory of 'evolution of the personality' have their cephalic lobe lodged in their sub-coxigeal cavity." He spit on the floor.

Pearson sighed. "Perhaps you are right. Still, I am wondering if . . ."

"Don't wonder!" interrupted Breke, "act! Any other course is enervating. Of late you are too given to brooding. Where is the cheery and clever Kirk Pearson I used to know? Is the whole human universe not in mortal danger? What end is served by brooding; we have an important task to perform!"

"So it would seem, but what is this task, exactly? Where is the true danger located? Why have the Deranged Astrophysicists made no second aggression in the twelve years since Beldune was destroyed? There is mystery here."

"Ha!" laughed Breke in disgust. "Have you yourself not demonstrated to me a hundred times the errors in such weak-minded, pacifist logic? The ostriches and ideologies have at last polluted your thinking! Is this the fire breathing Kirk Pearson of old? Obviously the Deranged Astrophysicists bide their time, awaiting the ideal moment! By destroying Karkassus we strike them a great blow!"

"But for what ideal moment do they wait? And why wait so long? In fact, why wait at all? Since they want to rule the universe, and they possess a weapon of terror that makes them master of it . . ."

"Theories and speculation!" complained Breke. "We know Karkassus destroyed Beldune, do we not?"

"Indeed. So much, at least, is unambiguous."

"That is all we need to know. By expunging him we not only perform retribution, we cleanse the universe of the most dangerous criminal viper of all human history."

\* Kitchet: term for a pubescent female, originated in the Cora system, and now galactic slang.

Are you still in agreement with our plan?"

Pearson nodded. "Nothing better suggests itself. Though there remains one unfortunate aspect . . ."

"Which is?"

"Fedor Karkassus will be unaware of who killed him, or why."

Breke produced his broadest smile: "Ah ha! This is exactly right. But I have found a way to repair the deficiency."

"Ah? How then?"

With the air of a man performing an act of prestidigitiation, Breke said; "I will simply call him by telephone, and we can have a brief chat."

"He has a phone number?"

"The daughter provided the necessary information. He will be residing at a ranch called Xalodima, one of the few establishments telephonically equipped. There is only a single public telephone in Scratch Flats — incredible, no? — but it will suffice."

"Where is it located?"

"At the Municipal Telephonic Exchange, on Malistofa street. We can go there now and make the call."

"An interesting concept. But such a call will provoke Karkassus to redoubled precautions. We must first imbue Triompho with the agency."

"True," admitted Breke. "Let us perform that task without delay."

They armed and equipped themselves, and then hailed a zebul hack and asked to be conveyed to the racetrack. The hack proceeded down the wide sandy street, turned right onto the principal thoroughfare, and proceeded toward the edge of town. The thoroughfare was a hundred yards wide, and lined with two and three story adobe building each with its arcade. These arcades allowed pedestrians to enjoy shade from the bright sun. The dusty avenue itself was busy with wagons and zebulchers driving herds of zebuls and other creatures. Directly behind them, in the exact middle of town, was the tallest structure in Scratch Flats: a round, four story tower made of adobe pillars and crowned with a conical roof of light blue tiles. This tower protected the municipal well, as well as providing a lookout station, and lodging, for the militia that guarded it.

As they neared the outer edge of Scratch Flats, the arcaded buildings gave way to fences of brush and woven wattle, bleached gray in the sun. Behind the fences were private houses surrounded by gardens of low, gnarled trees hung with small, shriveled fruits colored yellow, orange, scarlet or vivid maroon.

Eventually they arrived at the race track. It occupied a vast compound near the edge of town, and was surrounded by the same style of rude fencing. Pearson and Breke alighted in the crowd near the main entrance. This was a substantial structure with a tile roof which also marked the terminal point of the great avenue. Broad roads led off in either direction. At the end of these, though dust clouds raised by zebul hoofs, they could discern the outline of gates giving access to the open steppe. Through the portal could be glimpsed the stands, corrals and barns. Pearson and Breke avoided the main entrance. Instead they followed the fence, turned up an broad street particularly busy with animal traffic, and followed along until they came to the gate serving the stable barn. This was a vast, low building with wide doors opening towards the track to accommodate the dramatic appearance of the processions that began each event. There were several subsidiary doors at the back. The race track, and the stands themselves, were separated from the stable area by a dense grid of corrals, each holding an animal or contingent of animals.

Pearson and Breke, boldly emulating zebulchers on ordinary business, crossed the yard and entered the barn. Though the open doors the dark interior was dramatically lit by swathes of light penetrating the doors and small window, and reflecting secondary sparkle from the bright sandy ground. The air was rank with the odor of zebul. They penetrated the dark spaces, busy with human and animal activity and sound. They searched here and there, and eventually, rounding a great stack of fodder, came upon a closed stable guarded by five hairy erbs, leaning and sitting in relaxed attitudes. The zebulchers gave the creatures a wide berth; in the wild, erbs would attack and eat anything that moved.

In their exploration of the market at Kloot, Pearson and Breke noted that every merchant offered for a sale copies of a book entitled: *The True Country Gentleman: Traditional Techniques and Modern Innovations*, by none other than Fedor Karkassus. They had bought this books and studied it. They judged it an unpleasant, vain-glorious work, which betrayed its author's proud and criminal nature. They had given careful attention to the passages concerning removal of portions of the erb brain, but the crucial informations were garbled and vague — intentionally, so they supposed, to keep the technique secret. The section on training, however, was more explicit and, on the basis of hints contained therein, had devised a strategy to deal with Karkassus'

erb guard. Now they must test their theories.

Pretending to be simple zebulchers about their business, they drew as near to the erbs as they dared. The number on the stable door, 276, was evidently the address of Triumpho. The erbs were engaged in a desultory conversation of rasping monosyllables. Apparently the brain excision which had rendered them domesticatable had left their capacity for speech, such as it was, unimpaired. Unlike their wild counterparts, these seemed listless, well fed and sluggish; still, they were murderous beasts and not to be underestimated.

Pearson and Breke then familiarized themselves with the general layout of the stables, and calculated certain distances. Having made this reconnoiter, they then spent half an hour exploring the neighborhood adjacent to the track, a network of sandy tracks between small adobe huts, each surrounded by fenced gardens. There were few people in evidence; apparently all were attending the races which, from the evidence of cheering, and trumpet calls, had apparently begun.

Pearson and Breke chose one of the huts, climbed the fence, and inspected both hut and garden. After pacing off more distances, and defining an exact route for Breke, they returned to stable 76 where the erbs were still lounging at their ease. Now, instead of talking, they distracted themselves with bits of broken glass with which they sharpened their claws.

"Are you sure you care to attempt this exercise?" whispered Pearson. "It will be unpleasant to recall that I myself sent them to kill you, as they will if they can catch you."

"Never fear. Do you have your equipment at hand?"

"Yes, yes," replied Pearson. "... Well, there is no point in delay."

"Indeed not! In any case we both carry projacs."

Pearson frowned. "Use of them will attract the personal attention of Karkassus; these are some of his prized beasts. The municipal authorities are likely to become interested as well."

Breke smiled: "Your purchase of the space ship with Karkassus' money has already attracted his attention; how much more indignant can he become? In any case; 'nothing ventured, nothing gained'. Are you ready?"

Breke positioned himself prominently by a rear door while Pearson walked boldly toward the erbs, who paid him no particular attention. He waited until there was a space clear of beasts and zebulchers between Breke and the erbs. Then he addressed them with a well rehearsed gesture and tone of voice: "Ho!"

The erbs flinched, dropped their bits of glass and looked around. Pearson strode three more steps toward them, pointing at Breke and calling out: "Go! Get that man — that man there!" The erbs, with simultaneous slow motions of their bristly heads, followed Pearson's pointing finger. Seeing Breke they inspected him for a long second. Then, in eerie unison, scuttled several steps forward, stopped short, and stood motionless. Pearson's heart sank, but the erbs were not diverted; before Pearson had time to draw a full breath they bounded forward in full pursuit. Breke sprang out the door, the erbs raced after him, claws fully extended. The zebulchers watched in astonished horror and cries arose in the yard. Pearson, unnoticed, slipped into stable 76.

The dark shaggy form of Triumpho filled the windowless compartment. Pearson tranquilized the huge beast with a slap sac applied to a spot on the neck; pulsing blood in the vein carried the drug directly to the brain, and almost instantly the animal toppled over. Pearson moved deftly aside to avoid being crushed. He then brought fourth an explosive pellet. With one hand he pulled open the great maw, and with the other thrust the pellet down the throat as far as he could reach. Pearson released the pellet, withdrew his arm and wiped it as clean as he could on Triumpho's fur. He administered a restorative to the beast, and then climbed into the adjacent stall, and so made his way until he could let himself out a door into a different part of the stable. He mingled with the crowd and left the building by the grand entrance facing the track.

Zebulchers were tending beasts in the corals, or lounging in picturesque attitudes. Pearson went to lean in similar style against a fence, attracting the curiosity of small goat-like creatures who came to sniff at his trousers and make mewing sounds. He waited until he saw the erbs shambling back to the stable, then circled the building, left the compound, and went out into the street. Breke soon appeared. His clothing was torn, and from the waist downwards he was soaked in muck.

"They did not allow me time to gain the safety of a hut." He explained. "But I was able to escape into a septic trough in the garden. By reversing the lid and clinging to the handle, I blocked their pursuit. How they scratched and snarled! Then they discussed the situation as best their brains allowed, while I listened, standing in sludge up to my waist."

"Apparently they decided to abandon their project."

"This they did! But the pro and cons of the question

absorbed them for several minutes!”

Breke’s eyes twinkled. Mortal danger, thought Pearson, always makes clear how amusing it is simply to be alive; an odd contradiction, or simply human logic? He wondered if their daily routine of assassination plots and desperate adventure, which had provided them a surfeit of such experiences, was not distorting their perspective. Were they not becoming hysterical?

In a turnip patch they found a gardener who politely hosed down Breke’s pants and Pearson’s sleeve removing the worst of the slobber and sludge. They then returned to the inn by hack, washed and dressed. At a nearby cafe they ate a cheerful meal of barbecued zebul, and drank goolug — with syrup. They then requested directions, and proceeded to Malistofa street where one of the low adobe buildings had a wooden lintel carved with the words: MUNICIPAL TELEPHONIC EXCHANGE, picked out in white paint. Since there was no point in exciting more attention than necessary, Pearson remained outside in the hack.

Entering the Telephonic Exchange, Breke found a bare room with a counter. Upon it sat a single large telephone, and behind it was an equally substantial woman.

“I wish to make a call,” said Breke.

“10 terquins. Whom do you wish to call?”

“The Xalodima ranch.”

“Payment in advance.” Breke produced 10 terquins and pushed them across the counter. The woman looked in a small book, pressed buttons on a keyboard and gave Breke the receiver. A set of whistles and squeals caused him to jerk the receiver away from his ear. The woman remained stolidly in place, looking at him as if he were an exhibit in a museum of curios.

He addressed her: “May I ask for privacy to complete this call?” Without change of expression, she made the universal gesture of thumb and forefinger rubbed together. Breke produced 5 terquins, which she accepted with an air of resignation, then slowly rose and waddled out from behind the counter to the front of the room where she perched herself upon one of the stool intended for the convenience of waiting customers.

Eventually a voice spoke in the receiver. “Greetings, this is Xalodima ranch.” Then, in an anxious tone: “Who are you, and what do you want?”

Breke spoke peremptorily: “My name is Philod Parnat. This is an important call, in fact it is a matter of life and death. Please call Fedor Karkassus to the instrument.” Silence. Breke waited. Then a rich, low

voice spoke.

“This is Karkassus. With whom do I have the pleasure of communication?”

“My identity is of no importance. Here is my message, listen carefully; in exactly one month you will be executed.”

“ . . . Who are you?” asked Karkassus in a suave tone.

“Your executioners are survivors of Beldune. Do you understand what I am telling you?”

Karkassus produced what seemed an effete sniff, and replied with smoothly: “Slander and improper logic.” An odd response, thought Breke, made in an odd tone, but he continued with his message.

“In fact your execution may be delayed or, on the other hand, may be hastened. It may even be effectuated today.” Smiling grimly, he replaced the receiver and left the Telephonic Exchange. He and Pearson then returned to the track. They bought tickets at the main gate, and found seats high in the stands from where they had a view of the whole course; a vast circle punctuated with obstacles. In the area inside the track contests were being held. Zebulchers with long polls tipped with loops of rope, chased various kinds of animals amidst special cries and the whinings of the captured beasts.

Horns sounded; the steeple-chase! premier event of the day. A procession of all the racers in their colors and with their escorts, emerged from the barn and passed down an avenue through the corrals. Triumpho emerged, long and sleek, draped in a dark red blanket, embroidered in gold and boasting one hundred turquoise tassels. He was led by the imposing figure of Fedor Karkassus and accompanied by his erbs, as well as a troop of twenty armed men; his personal guard. As a jockey, Karkassus was overly large, but so was Triumpho. The riders mounted and entered the chutes, the horn blared and, to the roar of the crowd, the zebuls dashed out. They thundered forward to the first jump in a stampeding group. They leapt the bar, and two riders were tumbled. Then, after fording a pond, Triumpho trampled out into the lead while the crowd cheered wildly. The detonator was in Pearson’s hand.

“Press the toggle!” Breke whispered urgently. But two zebuls moved up abreast Triumpho. “Press!” urged Breke, “kill!”

“Patience,” murmured Pearson, “the others are too close.” Now again Triumpho gained the lead. He pounded up to the next jump, but his stride was off. Karkassus bellowed orders in his secret language, but

Triumpho's jump was short. His belly hit the bar and he fell over backwards. The other zebuls surged up, inundating the scene in dusty confusion. But Triumpho struggled upright, and gave a great bound. At this poorly chosen moment, unable to contain himself any longer, Breke tore the detonator from Pearson's fingers and pressed the toggle.

There was a tremendous detonation, forcing the breath from the lungs. When the smoke cleared Pearson could see body parts, a ghastly mixture of zebul and human, strewn on the ground over an area fifty feet in diameter. At the side of the track Fedor Karkassus was pulling himself painfully erect. Clearly he had been thrown from Triumpho's back before the explosion.

Breke jumped to his feet, screaming: "Curses! The monster is still alive!" Pearson pulled him down and shook him by the collar.

"Be silent!" he growled. He seized the dismayed Breke by the arm and dragged him away. The astonished crowd was on its feet, jabbering and peering. Pearson hustled Breke down out of the stands, through the gate and out onto the road.

"You have foiled our plan, and also killed several innocent people!" Pearson reproached him. Shaking his head in frustration he added: "our situation has become delicate. We must leave Scratch Flats with all speed."

". . . Sorry," said Breke, abashed. "I thought he would be blown to bits. . . What should we do now?" They had proceeded a short ways down the thoroughfare toward town, and stood opposite a portal in the fence of bush wattle. Stretched above it on a piece of hide was painted:

*Oikquay Corral*  
*Mounts for sale or hire*  
*Feed and Tack*  
*Ekyn Lonesut, Prop.*

Pearson spoke: "Let us hire mounts here, recover our belongings, and leave Scratch Flats. With any luck, by the time a posse is deputized we will be well away, and can avoid suspicion."

"I can think of no better plan. . . ." Breke looked over his shoulder at the race track: "Flight, when our adversary is at last within striking distance; how galling!" he muttered.

"He is also attended by his guard." Pearson said. He opened the gate of the Oikquay Corral. They entered

and found themselves in a compound of no great extent, bounded by barns of adobe, roofed with thatch. Sitting in a corner on the ground was an old man with a leathery bald head and a long scraggly beard. He smoked a corkscrew pipe and was busy carving patterns on a stick with a small tool. Catching sight of Pearson and Breke, he threw down his work in a gesture of disgust and frustration. "I knew it!" He complained. "First an explosion. And now you two booglers swagger in to rob and pilfer! Ekyn and the boys are gone to the race and left me in charge; 'Shoot to kill!' they told me, but that is not my style." He frowned up at the sky in reproach, then turned back to his interlocutors: "Say! I was a man of passion and vigor in my time, but now I am as you see: a hollow husk. You can back up a wagon and take away every dish and dicket. I'll not utter a monosyllable of dissent!"

"We have no such intention," protested Pearson. "We simply need mounts and are willing to pay what is reasonable."

The bald man raised his eyebrows a full two inches, the skin of his scalp wrinkling into the semblance of a plate of beans: "Well!" he breathed, "may the great god Bilsterik deprive me of speech! Luck is with me! I'd have wagered my all, which admittedly is not much, that you two were thieves. But if it's mounts you require, your luck is worse than mine. All are away, except a couple of zeets."

"Zeets, you say?"

At this evidence of interest the bald man jumped up spryly: "A cross between zebul and bebra, and fine animals they are! Not so speedy as your zebul, but sure-footed and reliable! You traveling cross country?"

"That may be the case," said Pearson. "What's the price?"

"Fifty terquins a day, and five hundred deposit—each."

"Excessive," said Pearson turning to leave.

"Wait!" said the old man. "How about this: you buy these fine zeets, twins, three years old and full of the wanderlust. That way you save the daily charge. One thousand each."

"Make it eight hundred and you have a deal."

"Nine hundred. That's as low as I go."

"Done."

The old man led them though the barn, and out into an unkempt garden where the zeets were tied to a stunted tree. They were large bellied, sway-backed creatures, their shaggy grey fur showing evidence of mange. They

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were low in the knee, with long skinny necks holding their great, naked heads close to the ground so that the scarlet dewlaps trailed in the dust, possibly to discourage lice.

"Can they run?" asked Breke.

"No." The man responded simply. "But when the mood is on them, they amble along properly."

"We will need saddles and bridles," said Pearson.

"You can have the gear for another 200 terquins.

"How do you fancy my clothes?" asked Pearson.

"Fine city stuff," answered the man.

"I will exchange them against your own, as well as similar ones for my friend."

The bald man drew back in alarm. "Ah ha! So you are dangerous criminals after all! And now you seek to flee incognito!"

"Not at all!" Pearson protested. "We are merely anthropologists from Tribuche, and your garments are more authentic than these which we recently bought at the Gilleash and Galor Clothing Emporium."

"Ahh! Now all is explained, though I purchased my own outfit five years ago at the same establishment."

Pearson and Breke rode out of the Oikquay corral in a fair semblance of real zebulchers, though neither had previously ridden a zeet. Breke recovered some of his sangfroid and looked at Pearson critically: "Slump a little," he advised. "You look too tense to be a true zebulcher."

"I'll be a tense zebulcher. In any case you are the one they will be looking for; chances are the woman at the telephonic exchange has been questioned. Muss up your hair." Breke did so, and increased his own slouch.

Dismounting at the inn, they tied their zeets to the hitching post. They recovered their belongings and while Breke loaded the zeets Pearson went to pay the score. On the counter was a pile of magazines. His attention was attracted by one, the cover of which depicted an exploding planet in lurid colors. He picked it up: an issue of *Galaxopolis*, dated January 26 — three weeks old. The heading read:

MARS OBLITERATED!

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