
The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

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We are very happy to have Tim Stretton and Till Noever continue their stories this month. The editors have been assured by a crack squad of proofreaders, recently engaged by us at great expense, that the titles are complete and correct this time. Even so, despite lavish compensation, the proofing squad will not guarantee their work, citing the traditions of their trade and advice of legal counsel.

Contrary to our expectations Zack Fance has not turned in Chapter Seven of Planet of Retribution in time for publication. Our offices did recently receive a

garbled message transmitted from an unnamed system in the Beyond, of which Fance was purportedly the author; although it was difficult to determine the precise intention of the communication, having been relayed too many times for much of the original text to have survived, we infer from its tone that Fance is in no great difficulty (other than apparently having been trapped in the nympharium of an outland despot for a period early in November, from which he eventually managed to escape), that he will be back in the Reach sooner rather than later, and that he will bring with him the manuscript for Chapter Seven.



Arna was impressed by Ytty's workmanlike technique.

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

Due to Mr. Fance's absence the editors have decided to include a short story by a writer new to our pages, Robert B. Bergquist. His piece concerns a doubtful ghost and the nuisance it causes on an obscure farm, and we hope you give it more attention than our proofreaders did.

— Paul Rhoads and Joel Anderson

Tergan

* * *

Chapter 3

Roi Hengiste waited until Toffel, with ill grace, had left the study. He turned to Weltig, who stood at one of the windows, staring down at the courtyard below.

"Toffel is vexed," he noted dryly.

Weltig turned around. "Sire, Toffel is an idiot."

Hengiste smiled thinly. "I know this. You know this. But I doubt Toffel knows. Still, he has his uses. His counsel regarding palace matters is cogent, and in most matters I have found it prudent to listen to him. He is cognizant of the latest intrigues and keeps Silas on his toes. Of all the Councillors I think he may still be the most reliable."

Weltig shrugged. "Toffel is loyal. That much I believe."

Hengiste chuckled and sat down on a soft arm-chair with a red velvet cover.

"Come," he said to Weltig, with the air of one who was speaking to an equal, rather than an underling.

Weltig took his place in a twin to his king's chair. He appeared to relax minutely. Hengiste regarded him with a faint smile. "I want to talk politics of a larger scope," he told Weltig. "For that I can do without Toffel; and he knows — and resents it. But that's *his* problem."

"One day it will become mine," Weltig presaged.

"Try to postpone it for as long as possible," Hengiste advised him. "I am getting too old to train a new Councillor." A pause. "And I do not," Hengiste continued, "wish to wait for the treacle-like passage of events in Keaen to provide me with an opportunity to do what I should have done a long time ago."

"Events are taking on their own momentum, Sire. The Tegels have left the conference. They will secede."

"And the young whelp?"

"I think he will do nothing but try to consolidate his position with the other barons. Once he can be sure of them, *then* me may make a move."

Hengiste nodded. "My assessment exactly." He leaned forward. "What moves is he capable of?"

"Armist of Keaen?" Weltig wagged his head. "He is a boy. Immature. Hesitant."

"He didn't hesitate to depose his father," Hengiste reminded him.

"He became an instrument of the Pacers — and the magice-at-court."

"Not to speak of his other tutor: the former weapons-master," Hengiste noted.

Weltig's face twisted into a brief grimace of anger, which went as quickly as it came. "Caitlan of Tinagel is not in the Valley at this moment," he said stiff-facedly. "As for Laetis or Pandrak . . ." He paused and thought hard. "Armist of Keaen is the apex of the power-structure. Of that there is no doubt. Laetis and Pandrak exert influence, but the people look to Armist. Therefore . . ."

He fell silent again.

"Therefore?" Hengiste prompted. "Come, my old comrade-in-arms! I sense that you are about to suggest something useful."

Weltig grinned. "Thank you for the compliment, Sire."

Hengiste shook his head. "You have not always been successful in your endeavors, but I know that I trust you more than anybody."

Weltig rose. "I am yours, Sire." He bowed his head, then looked his king in the eye.

Hengiste waved a negligent hand. "Sit. Let's reserve the formalities for public occasions."

Weltig resumed his seat. "I would like to make amends for my failures. This one would . . . balance the scales."

Hengiste shook his head. "I did not mean to imply . . ."

"Sire, for what I have in mind I would not trust anyone else. And this time there will be no . . . obstacles."

Hengiste eyed him shrewdly.

"There always are," he said. "They may not be called 'Caitlan of Tinagel', but . . ." He left the sentence hanging.

"One day there will be a reckoning with Caitlan," Weltig rasped. "He will return and I will be there. No matter where he cares to hide."

Hengiste smiled thinly. "I didn't think that would be his disposition."

"He has a woman now. He is becoming soft."

Hengiste raised an eyebrow. "Really? That does change things."

"Quite so."

"Still, why are you so keen on doing this yourself? There are safer ways to dispose of Armist of Keaen."

"The less people know, the better. Silas . . ."

"Do you doubt Silas' loyalty?" Hengiste enquired.

"He's loyal enough, Sire," Weltig replied. "Efficient, too. Even Harrap was no match for him. The intelligence required to capture the young Keaen — it was Silas' network that provided it." He grimaced. "Silas is loyal — but

he has his limitations. He tries to please too many people at once — which will have repercussions. Possibly soon.”

“When do you want to . . . do this?” Hengiste wanted to know.

“The Conference is scheduled to end the day after tomorrow. On the following day there will be a public ceremony and joint ‘declaration’ for the benefit of the citizenry. On such an occasion it will be difficult to shield the attending dignitaries with the required efficiency.”

“That soon!” Hengiste’s face evinced approval. He smiled at Weltig. His voice was unusually gentle. “I’m fortunate to have you. Everybody else seems to think we have all the time in the world.”

— —

Delfis, Councillor to Tamar: a stocky undistinguished individual of early middle age, with a wisp of thinning black hair, a jutting forehead, a pair of watery colorless eyes, the hands of an artist, the hairy buttocks of an elec, and possessed of vigor and stamina that pleased his mistress.

That he intensely disliked her never seemed to occur to Tamar; and if it did, she refrained from showing it. The fact was that he not just disliked her. ‘Revulsion’ was more appropriate. For one, Delfis preferred men to women, youths to men, children to youths. For another, Tamar’s age and a physique shaped by decades of torpor did nothing to make her attractive to potential sexual partners. But maybe the worst of his abasements was that, in order to keep her content, he had to address himself to her grossly responsive body at least once per night. Indeed, Tamar was a woman of significant appetite. But her smell made him nauseous, the sounds of her abandon were grotesque, the sight of the white expanse of her flaccid skin heaving under him . . .

The less said — or thought — about it the better.

Despite all this, she was his best hope to grasp whatever power lay within his reach. Of course, if he’d been Councillor to Gervase or Hengiste he wouldn’t have needed her. But he was not in that happy position and would have to make do with what pathetic morsels fate chose to throw in his direction. And so he swallowed his disgust, and smiled, serviced, flattered, and counseled her — slowly working her toward the position where she might be persuaded to . . .

He turned away as he dressed so he didn’t have to see her sprawled on the bed. Making it look as if it was not

a turning away, but a matter of necessity. He fastened the loose pantaloons of the Councillor’s attire and slipped a shirt over his head.

“You mean it?” she said from the bed.

Delfis forced himself to turn around, thanking whatever providence had prompted her to cover herself.

“Mylady,” he said, subtly softening the firmness of his words, “I do. They will accept a woman — if there is no male.”

Tamar’s jowled face twisted into a petulant frown.

“Men,” she said, charging the word with a wealth of meanings, ranging from detestation to desire. Delfis prudently refrained from reacting in any way.

“The situation you project,” she noted, not unreasonably, “assumes that the men are not present.”

“True enough.”

“They are unlikely to cooperate,” she said.

“Equally true.”

“If they suspected that one wanted to change the status quo, they would be alarmed and might take . . . measures.”

“If they knew. — maybe.”

“How could they not suspect?”

“A number of diversionary tactics suggest themselves.”

“It is risky. Maybe too much so. The consequences of failure do not bear consideration.”

That was as far as she was going with this today, he realized. He wasn’t going to push her any further. Already she’d come a long way: to the extent of broaching the subject herself, needing only the slightest of hints to latch onto it. Once upon a time she wouldn’t even have *dreamt* of thinking what she thought now. His ministrations had indeed been fruitful; the seeds he’d planted had rooted themselves firmly in her mind.

“You are correct, of course,” he agreed, yielding. If and when she assumed the throne (with his invaluable assistance), she would require a lot of careful guidance. Done judiciously it could indeed make him into the most powerful man in Tergan.

He bowed. “If Mylady will excuse me. I have certain matters to attend to.”

She rolled on her back and made a gesture of dismissal. “Do what you have to. I expect you back here in the evening.”

“Of course, Mylady.”

He bowed and left her along with her thoughts, her eyes staring blankly at the ornate ceiling above the bed.

— —

Weltig spent almost an hour of circuitous meandering through the streets and establishments of the nether regions of Sacrael before he was satisfied that he had shaken off whoever might be following him. Two men at least; both known to him, both among the most competent of Silas' internal spies. Weltig was frankly annoyed with the waste of such excellent operatives. Silas and his moronic paranoia and political ambitions! The same men could have been used much more productively in the pursuit of genuine malefactors, or maybe individuals of dubious merit, such as — and the name rose unbidden — Sander of Orgond.

After a furtive look around and assuring himself that, for this instant at least, nobody appeared to pay much attention to him, Weltig ducked into the narrow space between the flaking wall of a brothel and the wooden frame of a warehouse. The pungent smell of alien spices wafting through the cracks in the woodwork assaulted his nose. Tunarek from Unterthal. Maybe galk. Whatever it was, it made his eyes water. There was also the reek of stale urine left over from those who used the nook to relieve themselves.

Weltig waited, trying not to breathe. People walked past. A few cast incurious glances in his direction. What he did was not their business. One of the unspoken rules in this part of the city.

He waited some more. Patience was a virtue. Weltig knew this. The few times he'd forgotten it had been times of defeat and humiliation. Oddly enough, in each instance, it had been Caitlan who had been the instrument of misfortune. As always even the thought of Caitlan made his viscera crawl with loathing.

Patience!

Weltig waited.

When he was convinced that the pursuit had indeed been lost he emerged again and took the shortest route to a narrow, two-storied building, wedged in between two taverns, facing the western piers and the ships berthed there.

Weltig knocked on the door and stepped back so he could be seen from above. At a window on the second floor a face appeared and vanished again. Weltig returned to the door which opened a few moments later. Ubereier, the venefice, regarded Weltig with his unsmiling countenance. Most of his facial muscles had been paralyzed years ago when, because of a lack of caution and circumspection, Ubereier had himself become the victim of a venomous attack. That he had only lost the control of his facial muscles was a testi-

mony to his skills with counter-venoms.

Without a word, Ubereier stepped aside to let Weltig in. He secured the door and motioned for his guest to ascend the narrow steps leading to the second floor.

At Weltig's hesitation Ubereier shook his head. "You are safe." His voice came slurred as he had lost control over much of the muscles of his mouth as well.

Weltig, tense despite the assurance, proceeded up the staircase. They ended up in a room a room pungent with the acrid reek of a thousand substances — most of them either lethal in themselves or in suitable combinations — and cluttered with vessels of all shapes and sizes, some open, some sealed, large and small, all without label, their contents known only to Ubereier's encyclopedic mind. Here the venefice paused and looked askance at his visitor.

"I plan to kill a man from afar," Weltig told him. There was no point in being anything but completely frank with Ubereier. "The delivery must be silent, yet accurate," he continued. "I will probably not be able to approach the target closer than, say, thirty paces — and even that's being optimistic. The poison should be slow-acting, in order to maximize the confusion arising from the action."

Ubereier nodded. "I sense urgency," he said slowly.

"Unfortunately this is true," Weltig admitted. "If I'm to accomplish what I've set out to do I must leave within the day."

"Only the fool rushes to meet his fate," Ubereier retorted. The sardonic note came through despite the speech deficiency.

"Only a fool ignores a golden opportunity," Weltig said. One proverb for another.

"Wait here." Ubereier pushed past Weltig. "You may be in luck. I may have the substance and the method of delivery."

Weltig carefully refrained from even thinking of touching anything in the room. He heard the venefice making noises in an adjacent room. Presently Ubereier returned. In one hand he held what appeared to be a walking-staff; in the other a small, oblong box. The staff about as tall as Weltig himself; straight like a stretched piece of string; probably cut from the trunk of a young pine. The outside had been carefully carved with swirls and jagged patterns, which had been stained to enhance the effect. A very impressive piece of workmanship.

"I obtained this from a visiting assassin who's an assassin no longer."

Weltig interpreted this statement to mean that the

assassin had been sent to dispose of Ubereier — and had failed. With the harbor conveniently close it was not difficult to guess where the body had ended up. However, Ubereier did not believe in throwing away perfectly good equipment.

The venefice twisted the top off the staff, to reveal an opening. Ubereier turned the staff upside down and twisted off the bottom as well. He presented the staff to Weltig, who discovered that it was hollow, a precise straight bore having been cut out along its length.

Ubereier directed Weltig's attention to the small box, which he opened, to reveal a collection of tiny darts, consisting of a wooden shaft with a needle-sharp metallic tip and a feathered tail. Ubereier handled them with exaggerated care. The metal tips, Weltig saw, were mottled with a dark substance, which Weltig took to be poison.

"I think we'll remove this stuff," Ubereier said, in his slurred intonations, "and replace it with klogl."

He noted Weltig's blank face. "Klogl takes four to ten days to fulfill its purpose, depending on the dose and other factors, some of which remain unknown. The victim alternates between progressively shorter periods of lucidity and equally progressively longer periods of dementia and paralysis. Eventually the paralysis becomes terminal. There is no antidote."

Weltig was impressed and said so.

Ubereier named his price. Weltig agreed without batting an eyelid. One didn't haggle with Ubereier.

The venefice told Weltig to sit on the top of the stairs as he went about the business of coating the darts. When he was done he called Weltig back in. He gave him the staff and the oblong box and pointed at four of the darts lying on a table.

"I've stripped the poison off these. You may use them for practice. The three in there," he pointed at the box in Weltig's hand, "have been dipped in klogl. You're planning an assassination. It only takes one. If you miss . . . the others won't save you."

He wrapped the four darts in a cloth and handed them to Weltig. "You've chosen a dangerous path," he said softly.

"For Tergan," Weltig replied.

Ubereier shrugged, but said nothing. Weltig handed him the purse at his belt. "This is slightly more than your fee. Credit the balance to my next purchase."

"Of course," Ubereier said. Something in his tone told Weltig that he was not expected to return. Ever. In which case the venefice would pocket the surplus.

Weltig left the house of poisons, feeling conspicuous as he sauntered back to the castle with the staff. The guards eyed him curiously. Weltig stopped and demonstrated some old, almost forgotten, skills of whirling the staff in the manner of stick-fighters. The guards were suitably impressed.

Weltig left the staff in his quarters, locked up the darts in a strongbox, and went to see his king. A short time later he returned to his quarters, collected what he needed, and rode out of the castle in the late hours of the afternoon, heading for Keaven.

—

"Do I *have* to?"

Evadne was unimpressed.

So was Sander. "Strength and flexibility are critical," he said. "These you will have to learn first."

"I just want to know how to defend myself"

Sander took a deep breath. The argument had been predictable. Evadne would not submit to what to her must appear like arbitrary exercises. But she had to.

Sander held up his hands. "Here you must make a decision. The outcome will determine whether we will continue with this . . . practice."

"We will!"

"We may not. If you are unwilling to become a pupil whose trust in the teacher is implicit — at least as far as the subject under consideration is concerned — if you cannot do this we cannot proceed."

"I have no intention of doing endless pushups on my arms and legs, or of flexing in the manner in which you've indicated. Especially not in the presence of . . ." She stopped in mid-sentence.

". . . a man?" Sander completed. "A Councillor?" He shrugged. "If this is your decision, Mylady . . . so be it. If you cannot accept the teacher-student relationship, then I have nothing to teach you." He bowed. "Mylady, I regret that this is so, but I must now excuse myself"

He headed for the door.

"Where are you going? I have not given you leave to . . ."

Sander turned around. "Is there anything else?" he asked indifferently.

"No! I just . . ."

Sander allowed himself a thin smile. "Then it would more prudent if I did not stay."

Evadne stared at him for a few moments, her face set in a mix of anger, frustration, and something else . . .

"If I must, I must," she muttered grimly. "If . . ." She made a low angry sound. "I do not care to die just because I was unable to defend myself. It would be excessively stupid."

Sander nodded. "A waste indeed."

"What else must I suffer through during this . . . training?"

Sander kept a straight face. "Since you ask, I might as well tell you. There will be the need for physical contact. You will have to attack me, as well as fend off simulated attacks *from* me. As the practice proceeds, the interactions will probably cause some, occasionally painful, bruising. This is all a part of the training procedure."

Evadne's eyes flashed. "Intolerable."

"Indeed. Even more so since all of this has to take place within these confined quarters. A *salle* would be much more desirable. On the other hand, there is an advantage to practice in such conditions. They simulate reality much more closely. And, after all, your aim must be to attain a state of proficiency where the injuries will be inflicted upon your opponent; not yourself."

"You mean I'd have to . . . touch . . . you? Allow you to touch . . ." Sander reflected sourly that the notion appeared to cause a significant conflict within her.

"A necessity," he agreed, "no matter how . . . undesirable . . . this may be. However, your real opponents are hardly going to conform to polite standards of conduct."

"Oh, you find this 'undesirable'?" she retorted.

Her response puzzled him. "It would certainly be considered . . . inappropriate — though, as I said, it is virtually unavoidable within the context of the training."

"Hmmpfh!" She folded her arms across her chest and stared at him. A range of conflicting emotions flitted across her face, most of them too fleeting for Sander to identify and make sense of them.

Finally she sighed and dropped her hands.

"What must be done must be done," she muttered. "I do not care to die a helpless victim." She dropped her arms. "Where shall we begin?"

Sander considered her gown: a highly impractical green-and-white garment with sufficient cleavage to distract even the most determined of misogynists. The fabric was revealing enough to ascertain that she wore very little in terms of undergarments. Hardly a suitable outfit to do press-ups, high-kicks, and *keit* attacks.

"You'll need to change into something more . . . appropriate."

She looked down on herself; up again, into his face. A

rueful look; a suppressed smile.

"Indeed," she agreed. She turned to the door of her vestiary.

"Wait here," she commanded.

—

'Undesirable?'

As Evadne stepped out of her gown, she wondered why she had put it on at all. It was clearly unsuitable for the purposes of martial training.

Undesirable?

How dare he? Intolerable, arrogant . . .

She stood there, nude, considering her reflection in the mirror of Laska crystal.

Undesirable?

The Duke of Brys certainly hadn't thought so. He would gladly have spent the night telling her just how desirable she was. As, Evadne suspected, would just about every other normal male around the castle. Of course, the list also included some . . .

Evadne's thoughts veered away. She heaved a deep breath and looked at herself. The truth was that no man would ever have her. No matter what happened, she would always see the distorted visages of Gervase and Narvin hovering above her, depriving her of any joy she might derive from what ordinary people considered an extremely pleasurable practice.

Undesirable?

He was a Councillor? What presumption of him to even *think* such a thought . . .

She turned away and dressed in white blouse and a pair of pantaloons, loose around the legs and waist, tight around the ankles. She completed the outfit with a pair of daka-leather moccasins and a sleeveless woolen vest. Another inspection in the mirror. Modesty was catered for. Sander would not have to suffer 'undesirable' sights.

Why should she care anyway?

Which she didn't.

She returned to the other room. She thought to detect approval on his carefully indifferent face. He had taken off his Councillor's garb and stood there in clothes he must have been wearing underneath; linen breeches and a loose one-piece long-sleeved shirt. He still wore his usual shoes, which, Evadne now realized, were a compromise between the decorative footwear expected from a Councillor, and something more suited to a fighter.

Interesting. The things one noticed once attuned to the appropriate nuances and meanings.

“What now?”

“Preparatory exercises and stretches,” he said. “Follow my example.”

Evadne clamped down on her incipient complaints and protests. She would *not* show any more weakness than was unavoidable. It was insufferable enough that, compared to him, she felt clumsy and torpid. To evidence just how inadequate she really was . . . Intolerable!

This bred a grim determination: to become just as good; not just for the sake of self-defense, but for her own self-respect. So she persisted and did as he showed her, even if her muscles ached and her brain screamed for relief at the interminable series of conditioning exercises; the need to integrate complex movements, steps, reflexes, deflections, punches, parries, ripostes, evasions, advances, retreats; another series of stretches to finish it all off, when he was finally done with her.

“Well done,” he said, the approval ringing true. Still, Evadne noted the absence of the obligatory ‘Mylady’. He hadn’t used it once during the whole session. Evadne vaguely wondered if she should reprimand him for the implied lack of suitable respect; then decided that it would not be politic. Right now she needed him more than he needed her. She would have to relax the rigid formalisms of their interaction.

Not too much, of course. As yet there had been no . . . inappropriate . . . contact. But she could see where the sessions were going. Some of the moves he’d tried to teach her were very suggestive indeed. The slow-motion simulation of a jab that ultimately must be delivered with the speed of lightning and careful precision; the equally languid parrying motion of the left arm, followed by a counter-jab of the right fist. A dance more sensuous than any she’d ever been asked to perform at any of the court’s many balls. Just as well that there were no witnesses to these sessions. Nobody would credit her assurances that these were, indeed, training sessions.

Sander, she noted, also was perspiring, though not nearly as heavily as she. The shirt clung to him now, confirming what she had long suspected. There was little surplus fat on Sander of Orgond.

He bowed perfunctorily. “In order to avoid muscular aches, I recommend a hot bath, followed by a massage with ganta-oil. This will relax the muscles and stop them from cramping. The consumption of breads, cheese, and milk is also highly recommended. Intoxicants should be avoided — if for no other reason

but that they slow down one’s reactions.”

Sander had departed. Evadne summoned Arguitte and ordered her to prepare a hot bath in the aquecamera down the hallway. It did not escape the abigail’s attention that her mistress’ dress was unusual for the time of day and the general context, and that her skin was rosy with the after-effects of what must have been extended exertion.

It was inevitable that Arguitte speculated privately as to the cause for Evadne’s condition. It was equally inevitable that she confided about the matter to other female members of the servantry. In the absence of more detailed intelligence, the supposition that, after years of abstinence, the Lady Evadne had finally yielded to the urges of the flesh, was not unreasonable. That she had enjoyed it Arguitte deduced from her unusually benign demeanor.

The rumor soon became accepted fact. It’s origins were soon lost. Only Arguitte and Edeen, the cook she’d first told the story, still remembered the beginnings. The servantry, always eagerly for gossip about their masters’ secretive doings, carried the news home with them. Within less than a day a large portion of Sacrael *knew* that the Lady Evadne was bedding *somebody*. The identity of that individual became the subject of endless speculation. Likely candidates ranged from one or more of the regular fourth level guards, through the unattached Councillors (thus including Sander in the circle by implication), to the highest levels of the royal court. Deviants speculated as to the sex of the other party involved, but in general it was agreed that Evadne would have chosen a male partner. This conclusion was founded on other unfounded speculations about ‘facts’ pertaining to Evadne’s life.

The rumor reached The Stag on the evening of the day of Evadne’s first lesson with Sander. Zygie heard it with skepticism, but finally decided to take Sander aside when he arrived at the Stag that evening to take a brief meal. He had to know — and if he didn’t, she must surely tell him. If Evadne was indeed bedding someone — a notion she found incredible, Sander having painted a rather grim picture of the problems resulting for Evadne from the traumas of her childhood — then everything was changing; and Sander *had* to know.

Zygie was bemused when, upon telling Sander the whole thing in her room behind the lobby, he listened with puzzlement, which was soon followed by a peal of laughter. She hadn’t seen him so amused for a long time.

Presently he supplied what he considered to be the correct explanation.

"She's actually agreed to this?" Zygie asked, not quite believing it.

"After I suggested it, she was very keen on the idea," he told her, grinning broadly.

"You have strange ways of doing things," she told him.

He looked at her. "What do you mean? What's 'strange' about it? I'm teaching her how to avoid getting killed."

The corner's of Zygie's mouth twitched. "Yes. That's true."

Suddenly Sander's merriment evaporated. Zygie knew what he was thinking.

"Damn!" he hissed.

Even before the rumor had left the castle it had reached the ears of Silas, Roi Hengiste's spymaster. Silas, after a bout of incredulity, summoned Arguitte and ascertained that she was the origin of the rumor. After interrogating her at length he was prepared to believe that the outrageous story might indeed be true.

Silas pondered his options. What should he do? At some point in the future, Gervase — who had a personal interest in Evadne — would hear about this, and he would judge him, Silas, on what the actions he'd taken at this very moment. Pretending that he hadn't known would make him appear incompetent. Not informing Gervase would cast doubts on his loyalties to the heir presumptive.

Silas came to a decision. He sent one of his underlings to find Jago and ask for an immediate audience. Jago arrived and was acquainted with the 'facts'. Jago, initially as incredulous as Silas, was finally convinced and immediately returned to his master to communicate the grim intelligence.

The effect was startling. Gervase's face drained of all blood and became a pale mask, in whose center resided the grossly misshapen nose, still purple and blue from the bruising it had taken; a circumstance worse for the fact that nobody actually knew *what* had really happened. A few moments later Gervase's faces reverted in color and turned almost as purple as his proboscis.

He spat out only one word: "Who?"

Jago, his heart in his throat, made a gesture of denial. "This is not known."

"*What?*" Gervase shouted and jumped up from his chair. He grabbed Jago by the lapel of his Councillor's tunic and shook him. "Don't tell me that!"

"It is the truth, Mylord," Jago croaked.

Gervase pushed Jago away from him with a violent jerk. The Councillor slammed against the nearest wall and stood there, staring at his master.

"The *whore!*"

Gervase started pacing around the room. He stopped, took a few quick steps and reared over Jago.

"Find - him!" he rasped. "Today!"

"Mylord . . ."

"*Now!*"

Jago fled the room.

"Wait!"

Jago returned.

"Mylord"

"Gizel. The ingrate! I want to know where he is, what he does, who he does it with, what he eats, drinks, smokes. I want to know *everything!*" Gervase worked to regain control over his emotions, but the image of Gizel and Evadne . . .

"It's Gizel," he spat. "I know it!"

"Mylord . . ."

Gervase turned on Jago. "Do you doubt me? How can you not see it?"

"I am in complete agreement, Mylord."

Gervase exhaled explosively. "I will not have it," he declared with malignant finality. "She's mine, or she's dead."

"The latter option," Jago reminded him, "was the one Mylord had favored."

"None of your precious assassins, hired with my valuable funds, seems to have managed that!" Gervase said unpleasantly.

"Contingency, Mylord. However, it has recently occurred to me that there may, indeed, be a simpler and much more economical approach. If Mylord wishes I will pursue it to the best of my ability."

"By all means, do!" Gervase retorted sarcastically.

—

The news about her recent sexual escapades reached Evadne in a roundabout way. Gizel obtained the intelligence through his Councillor, Philander, who had a close, and torrid relationship with a certain Yllias, one of Silas' trusted lieutenants. Unlike Gervase, who nurtured the anger in his heart, Gizel went straight to Evadne to confront her with his displeasure at her choice of another man over him. He considered that it might be Gervase, but dismissed the thought almost immediately.

If he was certain of anything it was Evadne's loathing of their cousin.

So, who was 'he'?

He confronted her at the earliest opportunity.

"Who?"

Evadne narrowed her eyes. "What kind of poison have you taken this time?" Gizel liked to experiment with substances provided to him by a certain apothecary; substances which induced peculiar states and perceptions.

"Answer me!" he commanded, his whiney voice rising to a high pitch.

"I might," she retorted, "if I knew what you are talking about!"

"Your lover!" he shouted. "The one you betrayed me with."

Evadne's mouth dropped open. "You *are* delirious!"

"You deny it? How can you? Everybody knows!"

"And what exactly is it that everybody knows?" she said dangerously.

"That . . . that you had him here . . . today. That you . . ." His eyes fell on the bed. "You . . . how *could* you. Don't you know what I . . ."

"Be quiet!" she interrupted.

Then her eyes widened.

"Aha!" Gizel exclaimed. "You cannot deny it! Why, Evie, why?"

Laughter bubbled up from inside her. She failed to control it and it broke free, filling the room with a sound the walls hadn't witnessed for many years.

Gizel, misinterpreting the laughter, gave her one last look that was accusing and pitiful and loathing all at once, and fled from her presence. Her merriment followed him through the hallways, until he had gained the lower levels and it faded into the background sound of his racing footsteps and heavy breathing.

Who?

Who had . . .

It was . . . inconceivable. Unspeakable.

Evadne stopped laughing when the implications of the whole affair finally penetrated several layers of critical analysis.

—

Some further reflection on the part of Arguitte also brought together several strands of thought. For example, she recalled meeting Councillor Sander on the previous day — only to find her mistress in a somewhat . . . unusual . . . disposition. And today, when Evadne had dismissed her with a flimsy reason for

wanting to be left alone, she had briefly gone down to the main kitchens — only to again meet Sander, on his way up along the servant's staircase, like he always did on his way to . . .

The Lady Evadne? — Councillor Sander?

Of course, such a liaison wasn't entirely impossible. Evadne's aunt also bedded a Councillor, and had done so for years — and Sander was infinitely more attractive than the gross Delfs.

Sander . . .

Arguitte almost told her friend Edeen, but then decided against it. The truth was that she actually liked Evadne — despite her many failings and her occasionally insufferable mien. Evadne was somewhat of a mournful figure, surrounded by an aura of unspoken tragedy and grief. When her mistress did not treat her like dirt — which, it must be admitted, she did far less often than most other of the high much-a-mucks around the castle — she was really quite a sweet person. Somewhere behind the mask there lurked a young woman who yearned for love and affection. The notion had triggered Arguitte's romantic imagination, and when she carelessly and excitedly blurted out the great news to Edeen that Evadne had finally yielded to her desires, she had definitely not anticipated that the news would spread so widely so fast. And then Silas had subjected her to an unpleasant interrogation!

No. *This* little suspicion she would keep to herself. Let Evadne find some happiness in the privacy of her own quarters. She had yearned for it for long enough.

—

Latouche managed to gain entry into Castle Sacrael by means so primitive that it was almost laughable. If this was their so-called 'security' it was a miracle that they hadn't all been exterminated a long time ago.

Latouche had observed his man, a certain Ossifer, for several days. Even prior to his final agreement with Toffel, he had made good use of the idle time to explore ways of getting into the Castle. Ossifer operated a one-man transport business of sorts, contracting his cart to the services of one the bakeries providing bread and pastry to the castle's kitchens.

On the morning of this day Ossifer, as usual, pulled up outside the bakery's front door, to have his cart loaded with baskets of loaves and buns, sweetmeats and pastry. A specially constructed rack allowed for two layers of baskets to be carried on the back. Latouche,

inspecting the cart from afar, had determined that the arrangement of the baskets left enough space in the middle, so that a man might hide in it without fear of discovery by anything but very close scrutiny. The guards never troubled to scrutinize the cart. They knew Ossifer by face, and usually waved him through with only a cursory inspection of his tattered pass.

Ossifer pulled away from the bakery, turned a corner. Suddenly, out of nowhere another man appeared beside him on the jack-board. The stranger wore an ordinary tunic, tied together at the waist, but that's where 'ordinary' stopped. Even Ossifer, thick as he was, detected the lethal air surrounding the man.

"What . . ." he began.

"Quiet!" hissed Latouche. "Turn left here."

"I . . ."

A sharp pain in his side made him gasp. He jerked away and glanced down at a sharp dirk whose tip had punctured his own tunic and drawn at least some blood.

"Left!" Latouche ordered.

Ossifer did as directed. Latouche made him pull up and briefly explained his intent. Ossifer was reluctant to cooperate, but Latouche exerted his persuasive talents: he jingled coin in front of Ossifer's nose and threatened death if he did not comply.

Ossifer continued to express his reluctance to join in the scheme. Latouche countered with decisive arguments why Ossifer, if he valued his life, should cooperate no matter what objections he might contrive. In the end Ossifer, motivated by his survival instinct and further prompted by the vision of gold coins in his pocket, agreed to the plan. Latouche ensconced himself in the center of the stack of baskets, reminded Ossifer of the consequences of betrayal, and composed himself to wait while Ossifer drove to the castle. There was a brief moment where Latouche could almost *feel* matters teeter on a delicate brink. He tensed and prepared himself for the worst. But the moment passed; the cart rumbled on into the castle grounds. Ossifer pulled up around the back, near the scullery entrance. Latouche emerged from his hideaway, handed Ossifer several coins, and advised him that, should he belatedly decide to change his mind, he, Latouche, would definitely find him and cut his throat. Ossifer appeared convinced. Latouche decided that there was no need to kill him. If he'd had the slightest doubt, he would have, right here and now. The presence of a freshly-killed corpse would, of course, have attracted attention. Undesirable, fraught with the potential for unwanted complications, but not

necessarily detrimental to his plans. Still, letting Ossifer live was, in the balance, the safer way to go.

Latouche ducked into the scullery entrance. He narrowly evaded a kitchen-hand coming down the passage by ducking out of sight into a small room, lined with racks holding victuals, most of them in sealed jars. When the kitchen-hand had passed Latouche emerged from his hideout and proceeded down the passage, turned right, thereby bypassing the kitchen area, and continued to work his careful way along the, thoroughly memorized, passages that led to the place where his victim was most likely to be found. He passed a number of servants. Some of them eyed him curiously, but said nothing. Others greeted him as if they knew him. Maybe, he told himself, he looked like someone else of their acquaintance around here. A convenient and fortuitous accident.

Latouche moved with an air of deliberate purpose; which, so he'd determined a long time ago, always made people believe that you had a right to be where you are. Those who dawdled were much more likely to be considered out of place and therefore potentially suspect.

In this manner he gained the second level without a challenge. He considered very carefully before stepping from the servant's staircase into the 'general' area. From this moment on affairs became inherently uncertain and would require improvisation and adaptation to circumstance.

The basic goal was simple. He had to kill Prince Gervase, mutilate the body in the manner stipulated in the contract, and then, for his own benefit, get out of the Castle alive. Translated into terms of the real world, the task resolved into complex branches of possibility, few of them clearly defined, and most of them fraught with perils.

Latouche briefly chided himself for his hesitancy. Given a unknown set of contingencies he was no better off waiting than acting immediately. He spent a moment in running over the floor-plan for level two in his head, then opened the door and, prepared for anything, stepped out the servant's access into a vaulted passage, which, so the plans indicated, formed a closed loop about halfway between the center and the periphery. It surrounded a block of rooms and halls, most of which had fallen into disuse. The decimation of the royal court through the recent years' spate of assassinations had depleted the area of most of its occupants. A series of corridors, radiating out like spokes on a wheel, led from the circular passage to other quarters, among them Gervase's.

The passage was lined with flickering oil-lamps. The vaulted ceiling was blackened from uncounted years of smoke. Someone had, attempted to decorate the otherwise bare walls with an assortment of pictures — probably those not wanted anywhere else in the Castle. The decorator's intentions had only been partially fulfilled. The passage still looked desolate and even crude, very much at odds with the outer appearance of Castle Sacrael, whose graceful shape and ornamental turrets projected an impression that the inside, too, might be similarly decored. Latouche, who despite his occupation considered himself a man of taste and discernment, found the contrast jarring.

The fall of footsteps approaching. The patrol, making its regular round. Latouche crossed the passage, hastened along, away from the guards and halted at a door on the inner periphery of the circle. He operated the latch and pushed. The door swung open, admitting him into a pitch black room. So far, so good. He had hoped that the deserted quarters might provide him with a suitable temporary hideout.

He closed the door and waited, listening. The guards' steps approached and receded. Latouche emerged from the room, oriented himself, and moved down the passage, into the direction of Gervase's quarters.

— -

"I don't care what you do," Gervase told Jago. "Gizel must go."

"The disposal of a prince . . ." Jago began.

". . . requires funds," Gervase completed. "I know, I know. I have a reserve, which I must needs breach."

Jago made no comment. The 'reserve' was a part of the royal treasure of jewels, gold, and plata, which Gervase had contrived to pilfer. Hengiste, Jago suspected, knew nothing of the theft, and would have been most put out if he did. But the allowances traditionally bestowed on the princes and drawn from the royal exchequer, were not adequate anymore to finance the assassins needed to dispose of those members of the royal family that required disposal. Unattached, competent assassins were expensive. The required funds could, of course, be raised by putting aside those allowance moneys not needed for one's immediate purposes; though this was laborious and invariably interfered with the desire to advance one's image through the pretense of wealth. Alternatively one could pursue . . . activities . . . which brought in a suitable profit. Thus Gervase had commer-

cial interests in several sea-going vessels. 'Remunerative Equivalences', in return for favors both immediate and conjectured, made up another component of extra income. 'Immediate' favors included the intervention in matters of business and criminal practice. Gervase had indulged in this form of revenue generation on numerous occasions, each time to his handsome profit. As the heir presumptive he was much sought after when such matters arose. Jago was his faithful intermediary, who profited not only by being dealt a small share of Gervase's profits, but also by cheating his master through misrepresentation of those profits: all with the implicit consent of the other parties involved.

But Gervase, rich though his pickings had been, had indulged in a spree of hiring free-lance killers, who had not only decimated the royal household, but also the contents of Gervase's purse; causing him to consider falling back on gains gotten through very dangerous means indeed.

"I shall do my best Mylord," Jago told Gervase.

Gervase waved him away. "Do it now. And find me that wench . . . you know the one . . . who brought me supper last night."

A mere child, albeit a well-developed one. Jago shrugged. Gervase's tastes had always been inclined toward the young. Especially virgins, who were an obsession with him.

"I don't know if she's in the castle," he demurred.

"I don't care *where* she is," Gervase snapped.

"Mylord." Jago bowed and departed to find an assassin and the young maid.

Outside Gervase's quarters stood three guards, two of them assigned to accompany Gervase no matter where he went. The total loss of the memory of one day's activities had had a profound effect on Gervase — and Jago alike. The notion that somebody had had the audacity to do this to the prince and himself, was frightening.

The third guard followed Jago through the passages. The Councillor felt vaguely safer with him around, but not enough to actually relax his vigilance, or to jump and jerk at every unexpected sound or movement. He would, of course, have to dismiss the guard at some time — when he left the castle to pursue matters that he really did not want to become widely known.

— -

Latouche backed into another empty room as a man in a Councillor's robe and a guard strode down the passage.

They had emerged from one of the radial corridors. Latouche considered his position on a mental map of the castle and decided that the Councillor had indeed been Gervase's.

He paused at the branch and listened. He thought he heard the sound of men's voices, but could not be certain. The contracting Councillor had told him that Prince Gervase now insisted on a permanent guard outside his quarters. This was inconvenient, but Latouche had considered a number of ways for dealing with the situation; none of them foolproof, but then what was?

He readied his weapons and entered the branch. Some distance down two men stood against the wall. Guarding the door of their master, no doubt. Latouche grinned and slouched into a servile shuffle as he approached them. They noticed him. Their stances assumed an air of extra alertness. Latouche proceeded without hesitation until he was level with them. He made as if to pass them by. They relaxed minutely. Latouche, his body a lethal coiled spring, swung around. The daggers in their arm clamps slipped into his hands, through their leather armour, under their breastbone, and into their hearts. They died within moments of each other and slumped to the ground.

Latouche stood still. So far everything had been ridiculously easy.

He listened.

Nothing. If anybody behind the door had heard anything, he was making no move to verify what it was. Latouche sheathed one of his daggers, operated the door-latch and pushed open the door. At the other end of a large elongated room stood a young man, clad in the a yellow-and-green jacket, knee-long brown breeches, white stockings, and soft black ankle-high boots. A recent nasal injury lent his face a somewhat grotesque mien, offset as it was against the pale skin of the cheeks and forehead.

Gervase indeed!

Latouche threw his dagger. It arced through the air, performing a full turn by the time it had reached Gervase . . . who jerked aside. The dagger impacted on the wall behind him and clattered to the floor.

Latouche chided himself for his misjudgment and assessed the situation.

Gervase, with unexpected nimbleness, lunged over to a nearby corner and picked up sheathed sword which stood there. With a hiss it came out of its scabbard. Gervase slid behind a table and pointed it at Latouche.

"What are you doing here?"

Latouche stood still, pondering this unexpected situation and the least dangerous and most efficient option to counter Gervase's futile attempts at self-defense.

Gervase, the sword still pointing in Latouche's direction, sidled over to another corner of the room. Before Latouche divined his intention it was too late. Gervase grabbed an ornate bell-pull and yanked. Hard. And again.

There would be no time for proper execution of the contract. Not now.

Latouche bowed in acknowledgment of his temporary defeat and grinned sardonically. He turned and hasted back the way he'd come. By the time the clang of a general alarm began to sound through the castle he was outside its confines. He reached the guards at the gate before they had been informed about the seriousness of the situation. Nonetheless, one of them held him back.

"Who are you? I've never seen you here before!" Suspicion was written all over his face.

The guard died with a dagger between his ribs. Before his comrade had grasped what was happening he also was quite dead.

From nearby came a shout. Several guards from other parts of the grounds converged on his position.

Latouche *ran* and presently disappeared into the intricate maze of streets in the harbor quarter. Noting the futility of their pursuit the guards who'd chased after him gave up and returned to the castle — all the while arguing about how to best conceal their failure.

—

"So," hissed Gervase, "she wants me dead!"

Jago saw no reason to disagree. "I have investigated a more parsimonious option. A word from you and it will be put into action."

Gervase scowled. "Parsimony? Ha! What will it cost me?"

"The matter will be handled . . . internally," Jago said with delicacy. "As such, anonymity cannot be guaranteed."

"Aha! Who?"

"Silas — through the agency of Evadne's maid"

"Silas . . ."

"He is keen to accumulate favor"

"Not just favors. If he does this for me . . ."

"When the time comes, Mylord, we can deal with Silas"

"Of course. I'm concerned about the maid. Women blabber."

"Silas has assured me that this one will not live long past the completion of her task."

"All I have to do is agree?"

"That is all, Mylord."

Nothing is free, thought Gervase. And so I become beholden to Silas at last.

And Evadne would die.

Was this what he wanted?

Of course not. But Evadne would not yield: that much was bitter reality. That she should send an assassin after him bespoke of a lethal determination. No matter how much he wanted to see her squirm as he took her: more than this he valued his life. Evadne, the ultimate prize, whose defeat would constitute the ultimate proof of his manhood, was also the greatest danger to him. Even if he took her — finally took her . . . one day she would slip a knife between his ribs or poison into his food. To allow her to live was to doom himself.

Jago was right. He usually was in such matters. Where Gervase had dreamed of conquering not the Tergan throne, but also Evadne, Jago had remained focused on what truly mattered.

Gervase grimaced. The truth tasted acrid and foul, but there it was. It had taken an assassin in his own quarters to realize that.

"I agree," he said.

—

Sander gained to Evadne's suite with excessive precautions. Never before had he felt compelled to be so careful not to be followed. Ascending from level two to level four he had been at pains to avoid any servants on the stairs; going so far as to turn around and pretend to go the other way when he heard someone's footsteps coming down his way. He had ducked into a level three exit, waited until whoever it was had passed, and only then resumed his way up.

He knocked on the door to Evadne's quarters.

"Who?" came her faint voice.

Sander leaned close to the door, spoke as lowly as he could.

"Sander."

He heard the grating of a latch being withdrawn. The door opened a trifle; Evadne's face peered through the slit. She pulled it open. "What are you doing here?" She motioned imperiously. "Be quick!"

Sander stepped inside. Evadne, wearing a loose gown of light-blue silk, closed the door, drove home the latch,

and leaned against it.

"Have you not heard?"

"How could I not?" he said wryly.

"You cannot come here anymore. It's . . . impossible."

Sander shrugged. "Of course . . . if Mylady so wishes."

"Oh *stop* it!" She pushed herself away from the door.

"I do not 'wish' it! But the rumors . . . If it became known . . ."

Sander waited.

"Say something!"

Sander shrugged. "What can I say? The rumors are misguided, but they are real nonetheless. It appears that already they are considered factual"

"Precisely! And if someone saw that . . ."

Sander nodded. "It would be embarrassing indeed. It appears, Mylady, that you have no choice but to submit to the dictates of propriety. Your training will have to cease. I will devise other ways to ensure your safety." He bowed minutely. "I apologize for causing you alarm. With your permission I shall leave immediately."

Again he inclined his head and, without awaiting her reply, turned to the door.

"Damn you!" she exclaimed. "Just *wait!*"

Sander looked around.

"Mylady?"

"I haven't given you permission to leave!"

"Forgive me." A trace of mockery.

"You are insolent."

"I am practical, Mylady," he advised her. "With every moment I spend in your quarters the danger of the rumor becoming embellished with further lurid details increases."

"I don't *want* you to leave," she said testily.

Sander's face was studiously neutral. "What *would* you have me do?"

Evadne threw her hands up in the air. "I don't *know!* I need you . . . Your training. Your skill. I don't know where else to turn." A flash of anger. "I do not like this, Councillor Sander, but it looks as if . . ." She turned to the window and looked out. Sander looked at her silhouette, framed with a thin golden halo by Caravella's light, and held his tongue.

Evadne turned around. "How can I know that . . ." She couldn't bring herself to say it.

Sander shrugged. "You cannot."

"I will become an object of derision and mockery — just like Tamar."

Sander said nothing.

"Gervase and Jago will guess who took their memory,"

she added.

Sander shrugged.

"Doesn't that . . . concern you?"

"It is vexing, to be sure."

"'Vexing'? Is that all? Do you not fear your own death?"

"It is a contingency to be avoided," he agreed.

Evadne shook her head in perplexity. "You are either the bravest man alive or the greatest of fools," she said pensively.

Sander smiled "The two, Mylady, are not necessarily exclusive."

Somehow the last remark broke the ice. Evadne chuckled, despite her misgivings. "I think I shouldn't be doing this," she said, "but . . . who cares about the rumors! They come and they go. I have already instructed the king's scribe to produce a document to legitimize our association. What damage is done is therefore done indeed"

"Indeed," Sander agreed. He inclined his head. "Shall we proceed with the training program?"

"Why not? Let me change into something more suitable."

She disappeared into her vestiary.

"You kill me." Evadne, winded, exhausted, sore, leaned over the bed, supporting herself on weak arms.

"Maybe," she panted, "it won't need assassins to finish me. You seem to be doing it for them." But despite the ache in her limbs and body she felt strangely good. She lifted her head and looked at Sander, who stood near the window, a faint film of perspiration on his face and bare arms. Did he never tire?

She thought back to the carefully choreographed movements of the defensive exercises he'd put her through. Slow at first; then progressively faster, until she reached the stage where her body simply would not coordinate with her mind to get it in the right sequence. How could she ever expect to remember all these movements? How could she possibly expect to execute them in an emergency, when she would not even have the time to *think*?

"You will," he said, as if he'd divined her thoughts.

Evadne straightened and faced him, her arms hanging at her side like limp appendages.

"I require a hot bath," she said.

Sander nodded. "It will make you feel better." He hesitated visibly.

"What?" she asked.

"It might be wise to wait for a while. At least until . . ."

"Until what?"

She noted that he was trying to be delicate.

"You've almost killed me!" she snapped. "This is hardly the time to be timid about telling me something you obviously consider important."

His lips twitched. "The outward signs of heavy exercise, Mylady, are virtually indistinguishable from those of . . . you know what I mean. It might be prudent to wait until such signs have completely disappeared before interacting with anybody outside this room."

Argutte!

Suddenly Evadne understood the origins of the rumor. She communicated her suspicions to Sander, who agreed with her analysis. "It is difficult," he said, "to be aware of the ramifications of every step we take. You must not blame yourself."

A knock on the door. Evadne jerked.

"Who is it?"

"Argutte, Mylady."

Evadne took in Sander's appearance; her own state. Argutte would have all her suspicions confirmed.

"Later!" she said loudly.

"Mylady . . ." Despite being muffled Argutte's voice carried urgency. "I must speak to you. It is . . . a matter of life and death."

Evadne and Sander looked at each other.

"What now?" she hissed. "Wait a moment!" she said loudly in the direction of the door.

"I have an inkling this may be important," Sander said thoughtfully. He glanced at the door to the vestiary. "I'll wait in there."

Evadne waited until he had gone, then drew the latch and let in Argutte. One look at her abigail's face told her that something was indeed gravely wrong. Argutte came into the room, looked furtively right and left, and wrung her hands. "Oh, Mylady . . ."

Evadne closed the door. "What is it?"

"Oh, Mylady . . ."

"Calm down," Evadne said, somewhat roughly. Argutte dissolved into a flood of tears. Evadne stood there, completely at a loss about what to do next. She wanted to call Sander to deal with this, but dared not.

Argutte bit down on her cries and wiped her face with the sleeves of her gray servant's blouse. The weeping petered out into sniffles and small sounds of woe. Evadne waited, impatient but aware that there was nothing she could do but wait.

Arguitte looked up at her with red eyes. "It's just that . . ." She almost fell into another crying fit, but somehow controlled it. She took a few breaths to calm herself, then spoke coherently.

"I've been ordered, Mylady . . ." She paused. Evadne waited. Arguitte visibly pulled herself together. "I've been told, Mylady, to . . . to . . . kill you."

The door behind Arguitte flew open. Arguitte jerked and glanced around in fright. She uttered a startled exclamation when she saw Sander.

Sander towered over her. "Who?" he grated.

Arguitte swallowed. "Master Silas, sir." Despite the situation and her confusion she obviously found enough time for her own thoughts about finding Sander here.

Over Arguitte's head Sander's eyes met Evadne's.

"How?" he wanted to know.

With trembling fingers Arguitte withdrew a glass vial from somewhere in her skirt. Sander took it and held it up against the light. The liquid was clear and colorless.

"What is it?"

"I . . . I don't know . . ." Arguitte admitted. "I don't much know about things like this. I am supposed to put into Mylady's drink. Tonight and every day after, and each time an extra drop, until . . ." her voice faded.

Sander looked at the abigail, and Evadne noticed that his expression was almost gentle. "Thank you, Arguitte," he said softly. "You have done a good thing."

"Thank you, sir," Arguitte replied timidly. "But . . . what do I do now?"

Evadne suddenly understood the poor woman's dilemma. What she had done . . . it might have grave consequences for herself.

"Why?" she asked softly. "Why did you . . ."

Arguitte gave her a small smile. "Mylady's always been good to me," she said simply, lowering her eyes, and wiping her nose on a sleeve.

Evadne found herself blushing. 'Good'? She had been 'good' to Arguitte? Her temper, her flare-ups, shouting . . .

'Good'? What would a woman like Arguitte consider 'bad'?

She looked up at Sander's face and saw similar thoughts reflected there.

Evadne suppressed a flash of anger. How dare *he* think this?

The emotion passed as quickly as it had come.

"Arguitte," she said with unaccustomed gentleness, "I thank you."

Arguitte's eyes flicked from one to the other. She

licked her lips and started to say something.

Sander held up the vial. "It has the looks and viscosity of water," he said. He unstopped the vial and waved it under his nose. "Doesn't smell either," he noted. "No poison I know."

He took the vial to the window, looked out and tipped it upside down to pour out the contents. When this was done he took the vial to the wash-rack in the corner, filled it with water, and tipped that into the basin. He repeated the rinse several times before filling the vial with water. He rinsed the stopper, replaced it, and returned the vial to Arguitte.

"There. Now you go ahead and do exactly what you've been told. Be furtive, but make sure at least some of Silas' spies *sees* you do what they want you to do. If it doesn't work . . . well, at least you can say you've done your part. You can always claim the poison was inefficacious."

Arguitte stared at him in obvious amazement at so cunning a plan. Sander smiled and patted her on the shoulder. "And since you're so loyal to your mistress, there's something else you should know — but must never tell."

"Believe me, sir . . ." Arguitte started.

"I believe you," Sander said. "And what you should know is that your mistress has engaged me to instruct her in the methods of the martial arts. So she can defend herself against attack — you understand? But we must train in her quarters, so that nobody knows. — Do you understand that?"

Arguitte glanced at Evadne, who nodded.

"So you're not . . ." Arguitte blushed deeply and swallowed hard. "Forgive me," she whispered.

Sander chuckled. "Nothing to forgive, Arguitte. We're deeply in your debt. But now you must run and draw the lady her bath."

Arguitte curtsied and retreated to the door. "Yes, of course," she muttered. "Of course. I'll do it right away. Thank you, Mylady. Thank you, sir."

In her distraction she bumped into the door. Evadne unlatched it for her and let her out.

Evadne closed the door again and leaned against it. "That was a great risk you took: showing yourself?"

"I know."

"Do you trust her?"

"She spoke the truth," he said.

"How can you be sure?"

"I know it."

"I wish I did."

"Not even Silas could invent a plot so convoluted and devious which included this whole scene," he said. "He's clever, but not *that* cunning."

Evadne sighed. "No," she said softly, "I suppose not."

She fell silent and went over to her bed where she sat down.

"He's going to kill me, you know?"

"Silas? No, he won't."

"Gervase," she said softly. "It's him. You know that. Silas is just the executioner."

"Gervase will not succeed," Sander assured her.

She looked up at him.

"Yes, he will. He has the will and the resources. And he hates me. Oh, how he hates me . . ." She looked down at her hands, folded in her lap. "And how I hate him," she said softly, passionately.

"I understand . . ." Sander began.

Evadne's head came up. "You understand *nothing!*" she grated. "You have no idea of what is really happening."

Sander said nothing.

Evadne interpreted his silence as contemptuous disagreement.

"You *don't!*" she shouted. She got up and stood inches from him, spitting her fury. "You are just a . . ." Rage shook her. His face, so close to hers, was impassive. How could he even *presume* to understand? Ingrate!

Without volition her right hand whipped out and slapped his face — just to wipe off that equanimious mask.

The impact jarred her arm and jerked his face aside. Her hand dropped to her side. And then — and the shame of it made her nauseous — she realized that the expression in his face, now bearing the mark of her hand on one cheek, was not indifference — but compassion.

"Forgive me," she whispered. "I didn't . . ."

Sander still said nothing.

Evadne took a deep breath. "Gervase hates me," she whispered, "because he cannot have me. He never could and he never will. He hates me because his father had to complete the rape the son had started. He hates me because I humiliated him for life when I left him with the mark of my teeth on his nose."

Why was she telling him this?

How could she not?

Then Sander did something very unexpected. He raised his right hand and, ever so gently, laid the palm against the left side of her face. He left it there and . . . she wasn't sure, but she may even have pushed against it, so

that it rested firmly on her cheek, its warmth seeping into her, making her feel . . .

"He will not succeed," Sander said, and somehow she almost believed it.

Sander took his hand from her cheek, an odd expression on his face. "I must go," he said his voice sounding like it wasn't quite his. "Keep your door locked. If you wish to leave the castle advise me of your intention. Have all of your food tasted — in front of your eyes. Do not allow yourself to be deceived."

Evadne nodded mutely. Sander turned away, threw on his Councillor's garb over his training outfit, and, with a brief nod in her direction, left her — and when he had gone she felt so alone, it was all she could do not to call after him to make him return.

* * *

The Zael Inheritance

* * *

Chapter 6

Lamarck arrived by auto-tram at the Grand Duchess Anastasia Hotel, the most exclusive on the planet. The building was not large — the number of folk willing and able to pay its rates at any one time was not copious — but it achieved without effort the élan which the Tower of Commerce could never hope to approach.

Only six storeys high, it was loosely modelled on a country house of old Earth, with a ramshackle mixture of architectural styles and spacious grounds. Set in countryside away from the city, it aimed for a pastoral ideal which it missed only by a hair's breadth. The impression was of an ancestral home evolving over the centuries as one generation after another added to the original, although it had been designed in one unit and was less than 150 years old.

Not simply an icon of design, the Grand Duchess Anastasia embodied in its social attitudes all the reserve and punctilio calculated to lend an air of exclusivity. Expensive — even exorbitant, according to some — as its rates were, mere money was insufficient to command respect at the Anastasia. The parvenu might choose to stay once: he would be unlikely to make a return visit. The appearance of, say, a lizardskin girl would be unimaginable.

Lamarck was not one to endorse the social philosophy of the Anastasia, nor of such exalted status as to command automatic respect there; nonetheless, as a Pangalactic operative, he was accorded co-operation, if not cordiality, so long as his behaviour remained within reasonable bounds. Visiting dignitaries, not always popular folk, invariably stayed at the Anastasia, and Pangalactic's security services were often of use. Both organisations acknowledged their symbiotic relationship.

Lamarck therefore did not attract the disdain that his everyday status might have warranted when he presented himself at the main reception. In the cool of the early evening he wore his sober dark suit, a reassurance to the management of the hotel that he intended no offences against their stylistic conventions. He stepped

across the spacious lobby, tiled in a discreet black and white pattern, and spoke to the Head Clerk.

"Good evening, Mr Festig," he said. "I am here to see Miss Laura Glyde."

Festig, middle-aged and seemingly deliberately, even flagrantly, staid, had a reasonable acquaintance with Lamarck, and considered him largely sound but a trifle indecorous: almost a compliment by his Olympian standards.

"Good evening, Prime Apprehensor Lamarck. I trust you are in good health?" said Festig with formal courtesy.

"So I am, thank you. Your own health is, I hope, as rude as when we last met?" responded Lamarck, who generally found it expedient to introduce no new conversational topic when dealing with the Anastasia's staff.

Festig appeared puzzled by the notion that an employee of the Anastasia might have health of any sort, good or bad, while on duty.

"Thank you for your concern," he said, evading the invitation to reveal even such mild personal information as the state of his health. "I will inform Miss Glyde that you are here, Prime Apprehensor."

"Before you do, Festig, perhaps you would answer one or two questions. This is Pangalactic rather than personal business"

Festig arranged his eyes and mouth to suggest that he could never seriously have envisaged Lamarck having personal business at the Anastasia. "Questions?"

"I am interviewing Miss Glyde in connection with an enquiry. Naturally I am concerned to validate her general reliability in deciding what weight to give her evidence."

"Prime Apprehensor, I do not believe that this establishment would be a residence for an *unreliable* person," said Festig stiffly.

"The reputation of the Anastasia is of course peerless, and the distinction of its clientele unchallenged: nonetheless even within the most distinguished gentility, there are varying strata of exaltation. I am merely attempting to ascertain — drawing on your unparalleled opportunity to observe the flower of many worlds — Miss Glyde's exact place."

"Your desire to cultivate this discrimination is a commendable one, and often lacking, if I may say, among the younger generation."

Lamarck bowed his head in acknowledgement, although Festig's phraseology admitted of more than

one interpretation.

"What, then, of Miss Glyde?" he asked determinedly.

"I should not, of course, discuss the affairs of clients. I speak, of course, in a purely personal capacity, and only out of a desire to co-operate with the planetary security services."

"I understand. Please continue on those terms," said Lamarck with the beginnings of impatience.

"Miss Laura Glyde is at home in the society of the Grand Duchess Anastasia," pronounced Festig in even and well-modulated tones. He then fell silent.

After a pause, Lamarck said, "Yes? I do not doubt the truth of your statement: but a greater degree of insight, even imagination, might be helpful."

"If there is a lack of imagination, Prime Apprehensor, it is on your part. It is not everyone who can merge with the customs of this hotel. The Grand Duchess Anastasia is a family, and an exclusive one. In saying that Miss Glyde is a part of this family, I say far more than might be conveyed in many more ill-chosen words," said Festig with an air of ineffable superiority.

"While on a philosophical level there is much in what you say," replied Lamarck, "the Pangalactic officer employs less refined analysis in his investigations. He is eager to know: does an individual act suspiciously? does she receive visitors? are any other aspects of her conduct noteworthy?"

"The world of the Pangalactic operative would appear to be a glut of crude sensation and base suspicion. While Pangalactic fulfils a valuable social function, I am not sure I would care to be acquainted with its procedures.

"In response to your specific queries: I have never 'suspected' Miss Glyde of ill-breeding, or even of less heinous taints such as criminality; you are, to my knowledge, the first visitor she has received; and it is not the place of a Head Clerk to regard a client's behaviour as noteworthy."

Lamarck considered that he had as much information as he was likely to extract from the polished functionary. "Thank you for the deliberation of your responses. I would appreciate it if you could inform Miss Glyde that I am here."

Festig stepped into a private com-link booth and paged Laura Glyde's room. "Miss Glyde is expecting you. She is in Room 216 on the second floor. Please go up."

Taking his leave with a nod and a smile, Lamarck took the airlift to the second floor. A wide spiral staircase provided an alternative route; Lamarck eschewed it, not from indolence but rather an aversion to the deliberate

quaintness that the installation of a staircase in a modern hotel represented. In any location other than the Anastasia, he reflected, it might even be regarded as vulgarity. He thought that the real Taslana Zael, a woman who had chosen to turn her back on wealth and privilege, would be most unlikely to choose a hotel with the values of this one.

Arriving outside Room 216, Lamarck looked for the 'attention' switch before remembering that the Anastasia did not have such modern conveniences. The doors to the rooms did not slide back on command; instead one had simultaneously to grasp and turn a circular knob. Lamarck knocked on the door and called out: "Miss Glyde! It's Prime Apprehensor Lamarck."

"Come in! It's open," came a rich, clear voice from within.

With an unpractised flick of the wrist, Lamarck twitched the door handle and opened the door. Laura Glyde rose from a plush settee to greet him. Smiling her crooked smile, she held out her hand. "Prime Apprehensor! I am happy to see you again, aside from my inheritance. Chrysoopolis is an attractive world, but I know no-one. A familiar face is a pleasant sight."

"I am not always so welcome a visitor," said Lamarck. "I suspect that Mr Festig's dusty heart does not beat faster at my arrival."

"Please sit down, Prime Apprehensor. Allow me to make you a refreshing tisane."

"Thank you, although I am sure room service will be able to supply refreshments."

"Indeed they can," said Laura Glyde. "But on Heimat, we show honour to a guest by preparing his drink ourselves. You would give me pleasure," she continued with a smile, "by allowing me to refresh you with tisane."

"I am happy to afford you pleasure," said Lamarck, "at so little cost to my own."

Laura Glyde pursed her lips, as if she had decided that her customary smile was not an appropriate response to Lamarck's sally. Turning away she began the business of making the tisane.

Lamarck took the opportunity to study the room. It was not one of the larger or more expensive suites, although in the Anastasia such matters were relative. The furnishings were few but select, and the window overlooked the extensive grounds to the front. Lamarck estimated the tariff at not less than a thousand marks per day. Laura Glyde was clearly speculating to accumulate.

Preparation of the tisane seemed a complex matter:

the small energy unit in the corner had heated to water to boiling, and Laura Glyde had infused the necessary herbal ingredients. Looking at her back, Lamarck noted the trimness of her figure. An attractive woman, he thought, regardless of Voorhies's views: and this was simply in rear elevation.

"It takes a little while for the full flavour of the herbs to leach out," said Laura Glyde, looking over her shoulder. "I am sure that you will find the final product relaxing."

Lamarck noticed the extraordinary blueness of her eyes for the first time, perhaps because he had only her face to focus on. The blue was deeper than the shade normally reserved for eyes, almost cornflower, and once they had attracted attention it was difficult to wrench it away again. Simultaneously Lamarck was captivated and alert; it would be interesting to check whether or not the real Taslana Zael had eyes of such a striking and noticeable shade. He did not remember it from the hologram, but that was some way short of life-size, and he had not looked into its eyes in the way that the ones in front of him seemed to demand.

"I am not familiar with tisane," said Lamarck, as much to distract attention from what he suspected might have been an impolite scrutiny as from any interest in the nature of the beverage.

"It is a mixture of herbs from Heimat," said Laura Glyde. "There are many different admixtures, each promoting a different state. The one I am preparing here emphasises reflection, calmness, and empathy."

"You brought these with you from Heimat?" asked Lamarck.

"No indeed!" laughed Laura Glyde. "I bought them in Mezzanotte City this afternoon. They advertise themselves as genuine Heimat herbs. The pack I acquired also included a mild sedative and a compound traditionally used to stimulate feelings of sexual attraction. I judged my final choice the most appropriate."

Laura Glyde filled two cups with the tisane, and handed one to Lamarck. "Enjoy this token of Taslana Zael's hospitality," she said with a formal half-bow.

"Thank you," said Lamarck gravely, conscious that he had somehow lost a point in this exchange.

As they sipped their tisane, Lamarck concluded that Laura Glyde had acquired more than herbs during the afternoon's shopping. The previous day, her garments, although of good quality, were clearly not of current Chrysolopolitan modes. Today, she wore a short skirt with bare legs as presently in vogue on the planet, and a

well-tailored red cotton tunic. The fashion, Lamarck decided, was at least as flattering as yesterday's attire. Her hair, reaching below the nape of her neck, remained somewhat longer than the prevailing Chrysolopolitan fashions. He noticed, too, that she wore no jewellery of any sort: he could not tell whether this was indicative of a lack of vanity or an excess of it.

"The tisane appears most effective in promoting calmness," said Lamarck after they had been silent a few minutes, and it had become apparent that Laura Glyde was not going to initiate conversation. "You have not betrayed the slightest unease at my visit."

"If you had been going to arrest me, I assume you would have done so before tisane. I reason that you have no intention to cause me serious distress, or your demeanour would be less cordial."

Lamarck laughed. "Some of my colleagues would take some satisfaction in deferring a pleasurable arrest throughout the duration of exactly such a visit. I am no such glax: however, there are some questions I need to ask you, Miss Glyde."

"I think you know me well enough to call me by my first name," said Laura Glyde. "Don't your interviewing psychology procedures instruct you to create a degree of rapport?"

Giving a half-smile, Lamarck said: "I can't imagine the ploy works once you realise it is happening. But you have honoured me with tisane: I think I can bring myself to call you Laura."

"I was hoping for 'Taslana,'" said Laura Glyde ruefully. "I see that must wait a little longer."

"To call you Taslana would imply a degree of endorsement to your claim which I am hardly in a position to give," said Lamarck.

"I understood that the results of your bio-tests would be available today. If they are accurate they will verify my bona fides."

"There are," said Lamarck, "certain irregularities in the processing of the tests. There will be a longer delay than I had anticipated in clarifying the results."

"You haven't lost the sample?" asked Laura with a smile. "One hears of such things happening. I am happy to undergo the tests again if it will expedite matters."

"We have not *lost the sample*," responded Lamarck tartly. "The procedures are not as clear-cut as the popular conception imagines. Some biological tests require time to provide an unequivocal result."

"No doubt," said Laura with what Lamarck suspected was a subterranean stratum of mockery. "What, then, is

the nature of your questioning, since you appear to have made no further findings?"

"My enquiries were of a more general nature. It would be helpful if you could tell me something about your background."

"So that you can catch me out? Hardly a productive use of your time, I should have thought," said Laura.

"However, I am the one conducting the enquiry. The scope of the questioning is clearly a matter for my discretion rather than yours," drawled Lamarck, feeling that he had evened the scores a little.

"Touché," laughed Laura. "If I am to submit to this somewhat clumsy line of enquiry, I would prefer it to be somewhere other than my hotel room. Where do the citizens of Mezzanotte City go to eat?"

"There is a little-known but excellent waterfront terrace. We can be there in fifteen minutes," said Lamarck, with a feeling that he had again been outmanoeuvred. Laura Glyde was not going to be easy to manipulate.

It was around an hour later that Lamarck and Laura arrived at the entrance to Casimondo's. Having acquired a new range of Chrysopolitan attire, Laura was clearly eager to make the most of it, and was now attired in a sleeveless dark green evening dress with a single item of jewellery, a plain gold necklace reaching to her exposed collarbone. Lamarck, while considering this unnecessary preparation for an interview, had to admit that the result was certainly more than satisfactory.

"Good evening, Casimondo," said Lamarck as the proprietor moved towards them. "Is the upper terrace busy at this time of night?"

"I always have a table for you, Prime Apprehensor. Follow me."

Observing the scanty range of occupants of the terrace, Lamarck reflected that Casimondo appeared to have a table free for the majority of the city's population. The lizardskin girls had long gone about whatever business the evening held for them.

"As you will see," said Casimondo, "the com-screens are restored to operation, and my range of delicacies is unmatched."

"No doubt," said Lamarck. "For now, two long tongue-twisters will be enough."

"A fruit flip will be sufficient for me," said Laura. "I am not intending to drink under interrogation."

Lamarck signalled his willingness to modify the order and Casimondo made the bow common to restaurateurs the galaxy over.

Lamarck and Laura seated themselves at the front of

the terrace, overlooking the waterfront and the marina behind it. Laura smiled her smile.

"What would you recommend?" she asked, indicating the screen.

"I had the devilled dog at lunchtime, which was excellent. Casimondo always provides a fine steak a la terra, and Apprehensor Voorhies enjoys the Aldebaranian stoat-cat."

"Dog!" cried Laura. "On Zael's World the menials eat dog because there is nothing else. You eat it from choice?"

"Why, certainly," said Lamarck. "It is something of a delicacy on Chrysopolis."

Laura shuddered. "A person who admitted to eating dog on Zael's World would be acknowledging themselves the lowest status imaginable."

"I thought you ran away from all that," said Lamarck acerbically. "However, I will not embarrass you by ordering it, if only because I had it for lunch."

He touched the code for steak a la terra. Laura appeared somewhat chastened.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I thought I had left it all behind. You can run away from a planet; perhaps it isn't so easy to shed your upbringing. I didn't mean to offend you."

She too called up the steak. "You can't imagine what it was like growing up the way I did. I suppose it would all sound familiar, even clichéd: 'poor little rich girl'. From as long ago as I can go back, I remember my mother being very unhappy. She was an offworlder — from Heimat, in fact — and she never realised what it would be like when she married my father."

"My father was not a bad man, but he was very conscious of himself as the product of the Zael dynasty. He was more concerned to be the Zael of Zael's World than he was to be Dasien Zael, husband and father. The only thing he ever did outside the Zael traditions was marrying my mother, and he came to resent her for that."

She paused in thought for a while. Lamarck chose to say nothing.

"My father was rarely there, and when he was he was more interested in Tancredin, who was going to be the next head of the family. I'm afraid Tancredin didn't respond very well to the scrutiny; from the start he just wanted to be a playboy. My father wouldn't accept that; there were quarrels, more frequent as Tancredin got older."

"Mother just became more and more isolated. Beyond a doubt she was an alcoholic. That took her further and

further away from me. It was obvious that I was unhappy and when I was fourteen my father let me go off-world to be educated, which I had been pursuing for years. That was difficult in a different way; even in the circles I was occupying I was a notable figure, the TLZ daughter; but after a while I settled down and I found it easier than at home. I resolved as soon as I could that I would leave the planet for ever.

"And I did so. By the time my father realised he needed to find me — after Tancredin was killed — it was too late. I had gone for good."

Lamarck sipped his tongue-twister. "All of that is in the Smederevod biography. It would not even require particularly assiduous research to construct the story. I cannot regard it as supporting your claim."

"It wasn't meant to!" said Laura with some heat. "I wanted to tell you about it. I have been Laura Glyde for seven years: tonight I can be Taslana Zael again."

"The kind of background information that I need," continued Lamarck smoothly, "is what happened after the Smederevod biography stopped. How did you get a new identity? Who helped you? Where have you been in the interim?"

Laura looked at Lamarck sadly with her deep blue eyes. "I can't tell you that, Geir," she said. "People broke the law to help me. I am not going to incriminate them."

Lamarck noted that Laura had put herself on first-name terms with him. "While commendable, this desire to protect your friends does not make it easier for you to prove your case. Is shielding criminals worth a 20 billion mark inheritance?"

"Maybe: maybe not," she said. "Since your bio-tests will verify my identity the point is not one of practical relevance."

Lamarck scratched his chin. Laura's composure was remarkable. Her refusal to reveal any details of her recent past weakened an already sketchy position. She must be aware of that: yet her confidence seemed undimmed.

"Let's set the enquiry aside until after dinner," she said, deploying her smile. "If, as you appear to suspect, I am a cunningly-disguised adventuress, believe at least that I would have done my homework. You will not catch me out on details."

"As you said: maybe, maybe not. I do my research and I know more about TLZ than you might imagine. But tonight's line of enquiry, in truth, appears unlikely to produce results," said Lamarck. As the steaks arrived, he continued, "I hope you don't mind eating clone."

"Meat is meat," Laura said. "I am no clone snob."

Lamarck laughed. "Refreshing. Voorhies will not touch it."

Laura asked, "Do you often come here with Apprehensor Voorhies?"

"It is a favourite lunchtime haunt. I don't think we've ever been here together in the evening."

"Forgive me for asking," she continued, "but are you and the Apprehensor —"

"Are we encoupled? No. Kate and I have worked together a lot and we are excellent friends. That is as far as it goes."

"I don't think the Apprehensor liked me very much yesterday."

"Kate is of a sceptical disposition. It was nothing personal," replied Lamarck, conscious that this was not completely true, and uncertain why he lied.

He thought that this enquiry of Laura's had been clumsy. It was the first discernible evidence of the Laura he had seen on the com-tap. He chalked it down as his first unequivocal victory of the evening.

The steak a la terra was excellent, and the pair ate largely in a companionable silence. The evening had all the warmth expected of the mild Chrysopolitan climate, and the two moons cast an undeniable enchantment. Laura's evening wear appeared to good advantage. Lamarck reflected that Laura Glyde was a woman who would always know what clothes suited her, even on a planet of alien styles. A pity, he thought, that she was a 20 billion mark fraudster.

"You are pensive," said Laura. "I hope you are not thinking of your cases so late at night."

"Only indirectly," said Lamarck with a smile. "Bewitching as these circumstances are, I am currently on duty. Somebody will be charged for my time: in this case, ironically enough, the Zael estate."

Laura returned the smile: "I will consider the money well-spent when Pangalactic submits its account. I never begrudge expenditure when it brings a return."

"Spoken like a true Zael!" laughed Lamarck. "Although I am not sure of the nature of the return in this case."

"Never scorn as valueless that which cannot be quantified," she said, looking into Lamarck's face.

Lamarck inclined his head. "Your dictum would carry little support at planetary headquarters. My Puissant Apprehensor will value this evening solely according to the revenue it has earned."

"You are not your Puissant Apprehensor, Geir," said

Laura. "It may be that you have your own opinion."

"I always have my own opinions, Laura. They are not relevant to the investigation."

The couple strolled back along the waterfront. The evening was getting late, and even on Chrysopolis, a chill was descending. Lamarck was conscious of Laura walking close beside him, suppressing a shiver in the cool sea-breeze. He felt an impulse, even while acknowledging its unqualified inappropriateness, to put his arms around her. Too much tongue-twister, he thought wryly. Or maybe Laura had slipped him the 'sexual attraction' tisane . . .

"You should have brought a jacket," he said. "Borrow mine," he continued with what he hoped was mere good manners.

Laura rewarded him with a smile and a flash from her strangely-hued eyes. "Thank you, but here is an auto-tram. I must go now, unless you have any further questions."

Lamarck was conscious of a pang of disappointment at her impending departure. "Not tonight. It may be that I need to contact you again, depending on the results of the bio-tests."

Laura looked up into Lamarck's eyes. "Thank you — for listening," she said in a low voice. She reached out and gently squeezed his arm and, almost in the same movement, leaped aboard the auto-tram.

"Goodbye," she called out, and the vehicle moved away. Lamarck reflected that her ability to time her exit-lines to the arrival of an auto-tram bordered on the uncanny.

He did not feel in the mood to take an auto-tram back to his apartment, which was not far away. The evening had not, he mused, been a success. He had not cracked Laura Glyde's story, he had hardly been able to see her manipulating him despite knowing she was doing it, and he was honest enough to admit that he found her strongly attractive. It was hardly the outcome he had intended. It was certainly enough to explain his lowness of spirits, yet he more than half suspected that Laura's departure was at least equally responsible.

He thought with foreboding of the course the next day's case conference was likely to take when he made his report. Voorhies would be insufferable, and present him as the sport of any obvious and manipulative woman, not without evidence. Yet Laura Glyde, although demonstrably manipulative, still did not strike him as obvious. She was an actress, granted, but a good one. Was the real Taslana Zael in any way similar? He didn't know, but he

felt that he would like to find out.

On reaching his apartment, Lamarck went straight to bed. Sleep, however, proved more elusive.

Chapter 7

Lamarck's mood was not improved the next morning by the poor night's rest he had taken. He had the feeling that the day was going to be trying. Voorhies was already at her desk.

"Hello, Geir!" she called with the air of one who has enjoyed eight hours' sleep. "Have you exposed the scheming fraudster?"

"Wait and see," snapped Lamarck. "I think we can say events are not going according to plan."

"Rolando wants to see us immediately. We should have an interesting conference this morning"

"Excellent," said Lamarck acidulously. "The ascent from my bed is justified."

At this moment Rolando appeared from his office. "Geir, Kate: are you available?"

"Yes!" called Voorhies with enthusiasm. Lamarck contented himself with a sour nod.

"So," said Rolando. "Kate, would you like to begin?"

"As you know, I have been concentrating on trying to correlate TLZ's passenger database with our own records. There are so many gaps in the TLZ data that it's almost impossible. I know Geir doesn't believe me, but I really think the TLZ database may have been deliberately corrupted."

"I didn't say —" said Lamarck before Rolando interrupted.

"This is serious," he said, pulling at his underlip. "There have always been unscrupulous elements within the Zael Corporation. Given that we are assured of the co-operation of Allaiiao Gazmend, since he is sponsoring our enquiry, it ought to be possible to resolve the problem. Leave that to me for now."

Lamarck interjected. "If there are potential obstructions within TLZ we ought to be very careful. This is not something we should be taking lightly."

Rolando paused as he chose his words with care. "Believe me, Geir, I have as much reason to be distrustful of TLZ as you do. The difference this time, though, is that Allaiiao Gazmend's interests go hand in hand in with ours. Of course he will help us only as far as it suits him; but in this case I think that is quite a long way."

Lamarck thought this over, and nodded with no great enthusiasm.

"You also conducted enquiries yesterday, Geir: please brief us on the results."

Lamarck briefly, and stiffly, outlined his evening with

Laura Glyde. Rolando was not disposed to push interrogation of his subordinate too far, but Voorhies had many questions.

"I can't understand how she can manipulate you in the way you claim without your being able to stop it. Is she really so skilful?"

"I can only say yes. Her conversational style is a kind of oblique banter. You pick up her tone and suddenly she changes it."

Voorhies sighed. "It's called flirtation. You know she is trying to make herself attractive to you, and why: yet you still succumb?"

"I am not saying I find her attractive," said Lamarck impatiently. "I am saying that I cannot crack her facade. She is too adept at keeping me off balance to allow me to test her defences."

"But she keeps you 'off balance' in a way that only a woman could."

"You really don't understand, Kate: it's not a sexual thing. She is amusing, charming company, I admit. She is very smooth and polished, and she is well capable of keeping the conversation away from where she doesn't want it. Last night she dropped in a chunk of the Smederevod biography — and did it relatively well. I made it clear that I wasn't about to be convinced by a rehash of the sensopics: and she as good as said 'Let's talk about something else' in such a way that it would have been churlish to refuse."

"If being 'churlish' is what it takes, then maybe you ought to let your urbanity go this once," said Voorhies in vexation. "It will be no consolation for us when she stings our client for 20 billion that you minded your manners!"

"Kate, you are being unjust. My job, we have decided, is to get close to her. I'm not going to achieve that by grilling her along with her steak."

Rolando intervened: "Geir has followed his instructions. If we want to put pressure on her later, we can do so. It does not sound to me, Geir, as though the evening was a failure: you appear to have gone some way towards earning her confidence. The payback will come when you convince her that she is better served by confessing than by perpetuating the fraud."

"That's true," said Voorhies, "but Geir has admitted that he has difficulty withstanding her manipulations. I have another suggestion: we should be throwing her off balance, the way she is attacking Geir."

"How?" asked Lamarck.

"She is obviously scheming to draw Geir into some

kind of unprofessional indiscretion, presumably with the ultimate aim of getting him to endorse her claim. She will be doing everything that she can to work on him, and her actions so far would suggest that she believes she is succeeding. Next time, though, instead of turning up for a cosy one-on-one interrogation over dinner, Geir will bring me along too. She has not hidden her hostility to me so far.”

Lamarck and Rolando considered the idea. Eventually Lamarck said: “It does seem a way of regaining the initiative. She will be prepared to work on me again: the sight of Kate is unlikely to be a welcome one.”

Rolando nodded. “If you think it will work, do it. Next time you interrogate her, do it as a pair. It is the oldest trick in the book: hard glax, soft glax. Give it a try.”

Lamarck and Voorhies left the office in very different humours. Lamarck had no real confidence in the ploy Voorhies had suggested, and felt that it reflected a lack of faith in his capacities. In addition he was unwilling to assume the sabotage of the database records — if it was sabotage — was as easily surmountable as Rolando thought. Voorhies was more confident: she felt that she was showing the force and guile necessary to crack the shell of the deceitful Miss Glyde. There were some things, she reflected, that you simply could not trust a man to do: seeing through the beguilements of a polished hussy was close to the top of the list.

It was later that afternoon that Lamarck and Voorhies found themselves in the lobby of the Grand Duchess Anastasia Hotel.

“Good afternoon, Mr Festig,” said Lamarck crisply. “May we speak to Miss Glyde?”

“I will inform her of your arrival, Prime Apprehensor,” replied the Head Clerk, indicating a subtle disapproval that Pangalactic officers should find it necessary to return on successive days.

“Do not,” said Voorhies with cruel relish, “inform Miss Glyde of my presence. This is an important feature of this afternoon’s visit.”

“I do not imagine that Miss Glyde will be materially influenced either by your presence or your absence,” said Festig with dismissive disdain.

Voorhies was familiar with the attitudes of the Grand Duchess Anastasia’s staff and betrayed no discernible dismay.

Festig ostentatiously paged Laura Glyde in full view of the glaxes, simultaneously illustrating his compliance with their instructions and his contempt for their manoeuvres.

“Miss Glyde, I am sorry to disturb you. Prime Apprehensor Lamarck of Pangalactic requests an interview.”

“No apology is necessary, Mr Festig,” said the cool invisible voice of Laura Glyde. “The Prime Apprehensor is always welcome. Send him up.”

Festig gave the glaxes a look of greater than normal disapproval. “I am sure you remember the way, Prime Apprehensor. You may ascend.”

“Thank you,” said Lamarck, while Voorhies, who was dressed with more care than usual in a loose jacket and well-cut slacks, made an ironic bow.

The energetic glaxes chose to employ the stairs, and soon arrived at the door of Laura Glyde’s suite. Lamarck, feeling somewhat shamefaced, knocked.

“Come in!” called Laura Glyde. The glaxes followed their invitation.

Laura was attired in a navy-blue long-sleeved tunic and a short grey skirt, obviously current Chrysopolitan fashions and apparently expensive. Her expression on perceiving Voorhies was not cordial.

“Prime Apprehensor, a pleasure: and your colleague; did we meet previously?” said Laura with chilly hauteur. Lamarck began to wish he had trusted his instincts over the inadvisability of this approach.

“Apprehensor Kate Voorhies, as I believe you remember,” responded Voorhies, obliterating Laura’s snub. “Prime Apprehensor Lamarck and I felt that there might be more information you could provide.”

“Is that so, Geir,” asked Laura with a pointed look at Lamarck. “I imagined that our discussion last night had resolved your outstanding queries. You need only have asked if you had been dissatisfied,” she concluded with a smile that Lamarck no longer found so alluring.

Lamarck said nothing. “Well?” said Laura. “Did you really forget your questions last night?”

“It is not so much a case of overlooking the questions, as finding your answers evasive and mendacious,” interjected Voorhies. “I am unclear what you hope to attain by concealing the truth.”

“Please sit down,” said Laura smoothly. “Geir, I am still waiting for your response. Apprehensor Voorhies was not present during your enquiries last night, and I can only conclude that she has been inadequately briefed on the ground we covered.”

Voorhies chose this moment to compel Lamarck into the conversation by her own silence. It began to dawn on Lamarck that speech was necessary.

“Miss Glyde — ”

"It was 'Laura' yesterday . . ."

"Laura, then, you must admit to a degree of reticence as to your whereabouts over the past seven years, and the methods by which you effected your disappearance."

Laura Glyde nodded slowly. "That I do not deny, although it seems that my memory is better than yours. I had reasons for my reserve on those subjects which I outlined to you. I see no reason to adumbrate them again, or indeed to furnish answers simply because the questions are repeated: I heard adequately when you asked them yesterday."

"Your poise does you credit," responded Voorhies. "I hope you will retain it throughout the penal process. Conspiracy to defraud is a serious offence. You are a long way from proving identity with Taslana Zael, and you may be sure that Pangalactic will press charges if it believes you to be in breach of any of the codes of Chrysopolis or the Hegemony."

"What exactly is your purpose here?" asked Laura with some asperity. "Bio-tests will verify my identity, and your clumsy and irksome enquiries will be revealed as not only boorish but inept. Unless you have any further, and novel, questions, I would be grateful for your departure. I customarily bathe at this hour."

Voorhies realised that Laura Glyde was unlikely to prove amenable to further enquiry. "If you choose not to answer Pangalactic's legitimate questions, there seems little point in wasting our time further. Prime Apprehensor, do you wish to contribute anything to this investigation?"

Crushed by the weight of scorn from both Laura and Voorhies, Lamarck contented himself with a weary shake of the head. The glaxes filed from the room, and shut the door behind them.

"Impressive investigative brio, Kate!" snapped Lamarck. "You nearly cracked her in there."

"At least I stopped you falling at her feet again. *Oh, Geir, how can you do this to me? After our romantic tête-à-tête last night?*" Now she realises she is on the end of a real investigation."

"And what does that get us? She was talking to me yesterday. All you have done is block her off. I hardly see how that has advanced any of our purposes. I thought we were meant to be giving her enough rope to hang herself: all you have done is taken her belt and shoelaces away!"

"She is already in the noose, Geir," said Voorhies heatedly. "Watch that she doesn't get your neck in it with her."

"Kate!" snapped Lamarck with quiet venom, "the lobby of the Anastasia is not the place for us to have a public quarrel."

Festig at his desk looked on with the beginnings of reprobation at the two glaxes.

"I am more concerned with what we will look like on sensopic news when this comes out. Pangalactic agents provocateurs will make an interesting story, especially when we let her and whoever is behind her off the hook. The way we are going, we may even have to pay out to her."

"I listened to your idea, Kate; I agreed to support your plan — and it was a bungle from start to finish. You let your personal antipathy towards Laura Glyde colour the way we approached today, and you undid what little merit there was in your plan by overt hostility as soon as we went in there. It is not worthy of you, Kate."

"How perceptive of you to deliver your assessment of my plan after it has failed. Had you not spent the past two days drooling uncontrollably at the very thought of her; had you not been an archetypal male jelly every time she came within pheromone distance of you; had your centres of reasoning not been bypassed by your glands; then Plan B would never have been necessary. And if you had backed me up in the interview, instead of simpering, then it might have worked," cried Voorhies with no attempt to stifle her anger.

"How like the female intellect — if the term is not self-contradictory —" drawled Lamarck, "to rationalise its jealousy of a woman conspicuously more attractive than she by projecting the effects of that very attractiveness onto everyone else, and assuming it to be the mainspring of all others' conduct. You are allowing your animus against Laura Glyde to influence your judgement."

"*Conspicuously more attractive?*" stormed Voorhies with a rage unparalleled in Lamarck's experience. "That mousy flat-chested trollop! If anyone's judgement is at fault here, it isn't mine."

Lamarck practised a sneer.

"Think about this, Geir," said Voorhies, suddenly quiet, "before this case, would you ever, *ever* have spoken to me that way? It's a serious question."

Lamarck thought a moment. "No, I don't think I would. I'm sorry — I shouldn't have gone so far."

Voorhies was still flushed and nettled. "I should say! Next time you think that my objectivity is impaired, think back to this moment."

Festig had finally emerged from behind his desk. "If

the Prime Apprehensor and the Apprehensor are going to conduct their investigative debates so forcefully, it might be better if they were transacted away from this establishment.”

“And you,” rapped Lamarck, turning to the Head Clerk, “remember that withholding evidence is a serious offence. See to it that you avoid doing so.”

With that the glaxes stalked from the hotel, trailing what little dignity remained. Both were pensive in the auto-tram as it returned them to the Tower of Commerce. As the tram approached its destination, Voorhies said:

“Geir?”

“Mmm?”

“Can you face going back to the office and explaining all this to Rolando? I know I can’t. Let’s just go home and deal with it tomorrow.”

“That’s the first sense you’ve spoken today,” smiled Lamarck. “You take the tram home: I’ll walk.”

“It’s a deal,” said Voorhies. “We’ll be able to think more rationally about all this tomorrow.”

Lamarck stopped the auto-tram and prepared to step off. Looking back at Voorhies he said, “I’m sorry about what I said, Kate. I didn’t mean it: it was just frustration.”

Consciously modelling his exit on Laura Glyde’s technique, he leapt from the auto-tram before springing off away from the Tower of Commerce. As he walked towards his apartment he reflected that his apology to Kate had been somewhat disingenuous. While genuinely sorry to have hurt her and slighted her professionalism, his implicit retraction of the assertion that Laura was ‘conspicuously more attractive’ was not a reflection of his true opinion. Sometimes, he thought, it’s politic to keep your views to yourself.

With some relief Lamarck returned to his apartment. He occupied an upper-floor dwelling in a reasonably affluent part of Mezzanotte City, no great distinction on a planet where the majority of the population lived in comfort. Dialling up a hearty meal on his com-screen, he switched on the sensopic set, and idly skimmed the channel menu.

Normally he took an interest in the sports channels but tonight there was little to entertain him. Competitive sport was not a major feature of Chrysolopolitan society, although a channel was devoted to the many water-sports popular on the planet. He flipped across to the Corinth sports, including *batumar*, a team inflatable ball-game which he had played when younger. Three dour sides cancelled each other out, and

after ten minutes he left the *batumai* to their stalemate.

Next he encountered an interactive romantic drama. Not being a connoisseur of such entertainment, he had the senso-threshold at a muted level. Idly he altered the emotional intensity-control to the top of the scale, and was ‘rewarded’ in the next scene, where the star-crossed couple finally consummated their long-thwarted passions. Rather than the insipid scene that his normal setting provided him, he saw, heard and felt a significantly more explicit representation of the pair’s coupling. It was not, he decided, a particularly stimulating experience: express as the director’s vision was, his imagination tended to the vapid and banal, and his drama was neither erotic nor imaginative. Lamarck amused himself by pushing the intensity-control to its lowest level in mid-scene, and the couple before him transformed from frantic horizontal writhings to a chaste, clothed and upright embrace.

Tiring of manipulating the fictional folk before him, Lamarck moved to an all-day news channel, selecting, as was his habit, a low level of emotional intensity and a sober presentation.

He marvelled for the thousandth time at the power of the sensopic. The news story he had selected was the Zael Inheritance, and an earnest young man seemed to stand in his room to tell him all about it. That the account was inaccurate in nearly every material aspect was a distracting factor; but Lamarck reflected that never in human history had bunk been peddled with greater power and flair.

The young man — a holo-composite and not a ‘real person’, nor even a representation of one — appeared to look Lamarck in the eye as he delivered his report.

“As the Zael Inheritance contract enters its fourth week, Puissant Apprehensor Jaden Rolando refused to confirm that Pangalactic was on the verge of an important breakthrough . . . ”

The holo-image cut to Rolando: “The investigation is proceeding along the lines originally laid down. There have been several postulants to the identity of Taslana Zael, but we are no nearer making a positive identification.”

Lamarck found the report somewhat tedious and, modifying his trick from the earlier programme, he slid the “demotic” control to its highest setting.

“So, Puissant,” continued the young man, now sporting a somewhat brighter outfit and a rather punchier tone, “with all the money you’ve spent on the case, your high-tech gadgetry and super-sleuths have bummed out?”

“Not at all,” responded the simulated Rolando, “we are still looking and we are sure that we will soon find Taslana Zael if she’s out there.”

“Of course,” continued the perky inquisitor, “she may be dead. You’ve thought of that?”

Lamarck thought that the real Rolando would have laid a real interviewer out for such a fatuous question delivered with such vacuous élan. The synthesisors had seamlessly reproduced the essence of Rolando’s answer to whatever question he had really been asked.

“She might be dead, and I have snoops offworld trying to find out what happened seven years ago when Taslana Zael went missing. Pangalactic have a lot of experience in finding people, and if anyone can find her, my snoops can.”

Lamarck decided that the real Rolando was vexing enough: to hear his answers to an interview run through a computer for the vocabulary and syntax to be filleted and senso’d into the homes of folk too lazy and stupid to bother understanding their own language was the acme of futility. Most people, he knew, preferred the demotivated version of sensopic to the actual words spoken, or the dramas as authors had written them. Language, the infinitely subtle and flexible tool which was the basis of reason and abstraction, was gently being pared down to a level where no thoughts more profound than an eleven year old’s vocabulary could express would be capable of articulation. Soon, he thought, there would be a new Historic Monopoly: LexTech, where acolytes would be given access to the full language module, and would be the only ones with the mental flexibility and development to rule themselves and others.

Frowning, Lamarck switched off the sensopic: he remembered now why he only watched sports: they, at least, were ‘real’ and not filtered through screens to make them intelligible to all. Sport, originally the deification of trivia, had become the only unadulterated human activity.

Lamarck’s musings were interrupted by the attention-peal of his com-link. He flipped the ‘respond’ switch.

“Lamarck,” he said crisply.

“Geir, it’s me,” said Laura Glyde with a calm earnestness. “I need to see you: please, it’s important.”

* * *

The Wight in the Ditch

* * *

1

Shortly before supper one evening Arna walked through his luminant fields. The path was narrow, and he put his boots down carefully to avoid disturbing the greenish-yellow buds.

Above the old beds, some of which had been cultivated for twelve generations and were becoming moribund, was Arna's new two-acre terrace. It had taken three years to form and burn the orange bricks for the retaining walls, and another two after that to build the walls and lay down the bedding earth. Arna had personally set out the new bushes, all of the Smiling Sun variety. They had thrived so far, and this season he should realize the first crop of bulbs from them. In the autumn at least two additional wagons bearing the Arnehid glyphs would race down to Intastora for the curing — which might delay, or after a few seasons even prevent, the sale of land to clear the farm's debts.

Arna climbed the brick steps to the new terrace and inspected the plants. Each had been correctly pruned, protected from whimpits by netting and bangles, and each had its bonnet secured by black and yellow cord; all was in order for rapid summer growth. But the most critical stage in the luminants' development was still to come. On the eve of harvest their roots had to be saturated with water from the nearby stream for twelve hours — no more, no less. The terrace would be drained as the sun rose, leaving the pods crisp and firm, ready for the rush to market.

The harvest was months away, though, and there were still a few details to be taken care of. Arna hadn't finished dickering with the wainwright over a price for the new wagons. The channel that would flood the new terrace was now in place, but the drainage had yet to be installed. Arna couldn't open breaches in the new wall, the method he used to drain the lower terrace; doing so would re-flood the lower one, and both terraces had to be drained simultaneously. Despite the embarrassment Arna had asked his brother-in-law at Bec for money again, and he had given Arna enough to allow for the

purchase of one hundred and twenty-seven hollow ceramic tiles. These were to be laid through the slope at the north end of the terraces, leading the runoff safely to the lower stretch of the stream.

That morning Arna had sent his nephew Billa and his cousin's son Salter out to finish this work. Billa and Salter were young, but both large and strong. Last night Arna had instructed them with a diagram and good advice as to the tools they'd use. He didn't know if he should be pleased or not to see them lying on their backs at the upper edge of the terrace near a heap of fresh earth.

"Hey there, boys! Are you done, then?" Arna called as he approached them. "There's other work to be done, you know. You should have come back to the house if you're finished."

They got to their feet. Billa picked up a spade. "We were just trying to figure out what to do," he told Arna.

"Yes, we were talking it over," said Salter.

Arna stood over them and looked down at the hole they had dug. It was wider than it needed to be, and a good two yards short of being finished.

"More likely you were talking horns and nonsense," Arna said; he saw a group of twigs on the ground near the boys, arranged to represent a man and woman coupling. "I don't know what I'll tell your mothers. I thought you two were old enough to work without supervision."

"We are!" Billa protested. "But there's something in the way."

"What's in the way?"

Billa went to the far end of the trench and pointed dramatically into the hole. Arna stooped and looked. The sun was behind the hills and it was getting dark. But there was something down there in the hole, that was true enough. He straightened up. "Well, get down there and grub it out."

"We already tried to break it up," Billa said.

"But it just cracked," Salter added. "And we couldn't go around it because you said we should make the way straight so the pipes didn't get washed out when the sluice was opened."

Arna frowned at both of them, and dropped into the trench. "You should have come back and told me instead of loitering out here all afternoon. Give me a pick."

Salter handed him one, explaining they had given up digging only a short while ago. Arna ignored him and studied the obstacle. The thing was a cylinder, perhaps two and a half feet in diameter, lighter in color than the sandy soil around it. The light was getting bad, but it

looked very smooth, much larger and of better quality than his clay tiles.

"I don't see any cracks," Arna said.

Billa jumped into the hole, pointing. "It was here, right here, a lot cracks, like a spider's web!"

The older man was still studying the cylinder. Arna had carefully determined the route the conduit should take, and this thing interrupted its path at the worst possible place. He poked the soil at either end of the cylinder. There was no telling how far it went under the ground. What was it? Another drain, perhaps, or the remnants of a spillway or some other waterworks? Family tradition had it that the farm had once maintained a corn mill, its wheel turned by the small but rushing stream. Eventually the farm's lands had no longer been able to support the growing of corn in any quantity, so the mill had been abandoned. There was considerable brickwork remaining, too hard to get at to make salvage worthwhile, but this cylinder might have saved him buying the new tiles if he had known about it sooner; they were going to have to dig it up in any event.

It was too late now. He'd save what he could of it, but this pipe had to go. An area of mosaic paving or a horde of clay tablets imprinted with Einnish glyphs would have stopped him, but an old drain pipe wouldn't interest even the most gullible antiquarian.

Arna swung his pick. The tip glanced off the cylinder like it was made of iron. He used it again, chopping at the packed soil that surrounded the left end of the obstacle. A slab of sandy dirt fell away and revealed another foot of pipe. Arna chopped on, hoping to find a joint where it could be separated. Billa jumped down and joined in, working on the other side and getting into Arna's way. "I could go back to the house and get a lamp," Salter volunteered from the brink of the hole.

There was no sign yet of a joint in the cylinder, but Arna decided it didn't matter. "It's not quite dark yet. We'll see if we can break it up a bit and take care of the rest tomorrow."

Billa pressed his lips together and frowned. "I cracked it before, I know I did." He swung his pick mightily. The point didn't bounce this time, but stuck like he had driven it into green wood. With some effort Billa freed it. Arna thought he heard a slight hissing from the puncture.

Before he could say anything Billa swung again. Now a network of twisting little indentations appeared like a wound around the spot he had struck, sinking in as if sucked down from inside the pipe. Almost at once they

heard a series of clicking sounds. The indentations rose again, as if the cylinder were restoring itself.

Billa blinked at it, slowly backing away. Arna felt a small shudder of fear. But this was his land, and whatever was under it was his property, too. He hefted his pick and slammed it down on the cylinder's side with as much force as he could.

It seemed to vibrate in distress. The indentations returned, deepened and spread. At the same time the soil surrounding the left end of the pipe shifted. A two-inch-thick slab of earth sloughed into the hole, covering Arna's feet. He heard a buzzing sound.

"It must be a big mudrunner, a real boot-biter!" Salter hissed.

Arna and Billa dropped their picks and scrambled out of the hole. They looked at each other, then slowly came back and stared into the hole.

"Nonsense," Arna said finally. "There are no mudrunners at Arnehid Farm." He went back into the hole, peering into the darkness where the cylinder met the earth.

"A sprite, then?" Salter wondered.

Arna hefted his pick. "Sprite, buin or bandihu, we've got work to do."

There was a sharp hiss. Billa shouted. Arna jerked his head around. Soil moved where the cylinder disappeared into the side of the hole. Two knobbed branches thrust out of the dirt, twitching like arthritic vipers.

Arna dropped his pick and scrambled out of the hole. Billa stood where he was, gaping. The earth shifted again, exposing more of the cylinder. Arna could see now that a circular section had separated itself from the main body of the cylinder, and now it opened further, like a little door. The branches emerged from this door. Others followed it, each of them tipped with three fingers. "Get out!" Arna hissed at Billa.

"What is it?" Salter yelled.

"Get up here!" Arna again told Billa.

"It's not a mudrunner," Billa whispered, moving backward in a hunch as he groped for his pick.

Something blunt and stout appeared in the little door, the source of the twitching branches. The thing rolled from the hole in the cylinder, gathered its branches, six in all, and raised itself up on them.

It was the size of a small pig, oily green, with an insect-like, segmented torso and a domed helmet or cap at one end. The creature squatted, then leapt with astonishing agility to the top of the cylinder. It caressed the damaged section with two of its stick-like legs, to no

apparent effect. The creature slid back to the bottom of the trench. It turned itself in a slow revolution, legs twitching, as though it were taking stock of its surroundings. It stopped when its domed cap pointed at Billa. Under the cap was a flat disk, which Arna couldn't help but think of as its face. He was amazed to see a series of glowing glyphs form on the disk. After a moment the glyphs disappeared. The thing raised itself and sang in a chirruping tenor. The words, if they were words, meant nothing to Arna.

The strange song brought Billa to his senses. He threw his pick at the creature.

The pick hit now, knocking a couple of legs away. The creature righted itself and swung its face-like disk back toward Billa. It sang again. Billa kicked dirt at it. "Get away from me!" he yelled.

It hadn't been very close to him, but at Billa's words the creature scuttled rapidly forward. It squatted, folding its legs double, sprang into the air.

Billa staggered as it hit him. The creature's legs clutched him tightly around the stomach. Billa screamed, arms spread stiffly, eyes popping as he watched the creature climb him. The thing removed its domed cap with two fingered legs and seated it firmly on Billa's head. Billa fell backward with another husky scream.

Salter dropped to his knees and hid his face in his hands. Arna jumped into the ditch and grabbed a pick. The creature seemed to understand his intent and dodged between Arna's legs, back into the hole from which it had come.

Billa lay writhing; his codpiece was wet where he had pissed himself. The creature's polished green cap covered most of his head, including his eyes and ears.

Glancing behind, Arna bent down and gingerly touched the cap on Billa's head. Billa made a strange keening sound and slapped him away, then leapt up and scrambled wildly out of the ditch. The creature came out of its hole and chased after him, running like Billa's shadow.

Arna shouted at Salter, "Stop him!"

Salter got up, but Billa was already crashing into the woods above the luminant terraces. Leaves flying up from the ground marked the passage of the pursuing creature.

Arna sent Salter running back to the house. In a few minutes Salter and five others came carrying lamps up the hill. They went into the woods, but if Billa could hear them calling he didn't respond. The lamps revealed no trail that could be followed.

They looked again in the morning. People at the

neighboring farms heard what had happened, and soon the nearer woods were full of people, many of them armed with bows or ancestral war-hammers. They called Billa's name or uttered loud prayers for the freedom of his soul. The liturgist from Malm went sprinkling the path before him with a specially distilled holy essence.

An hour after dark the search was given up. Everyone gathered in Arnehid's hall, where Arna's family and dependents set out food and drink as though they were feasting a funeral. Billa's mother Merrim sat in the corner clutching a younger son and daughter to her, eyes fixed accusingly on Arna.

The situation was discussed in detail. None of the searchers had seen the young man, though a few claimed to have seen his unnatural attacker. Truman of Bec said the thing had squealed at him from a high tree limb. Garnot, Arna's Great-uncle, described seeing it look at him from a hole in the side of a hill and speak with Billa's voice. "Our poor Billa-boy's soul has been taken by the sprite," Garnot concluded dismally.

Billa's mother moaned. Arna tried not to look at her. He asked Garnot, "What did it say?"

Garnot paused. "Poor Billa's words were distorted by the sprite, which had no proper mouth to speak with. I couldn't understand him."

"You should have killed the thing!" said Yalmer, one of Arna's male cousins.

"That might have been dangerous to our Billa, since the creature possesses his spirit," Garnot said.

"Verily," intoned the liturgist from Malm, frowning at a page in his Writs. "He is gone from our ken, but the boy's soul is doubtless in extreme peril." He looked at Arna. "Farmer Arnoc, you must have the Rites said for him at once."

Not everyone was convinced the creature had stolen Billa's soul, but all agreed he must be dead in any case. Several searchers had seen someone's tracks near the upper reaches of the stream. Blinded as he was by the cap the thing had put on him, Billa had probably fallen into one of the stream's violent cauldrons and been battered into sausage meat.

A few searchers went out again, but the Rites were said the next day in the farm's hall. The unusual circumstances of Billa's passing attracted a number of curiosity seekers. Some of them hadn't attended the ceremony, had never even known Billa, but Arna caught

them traipsing over his land in order to have a look at the fateful hole. He ordered them all away.

The day was solemn, and Arna felt solemn, as befitted the event, but he was also uneasy. Billa's soul had been read over, said farewell to and consecrated to Wennoc, but things didn't seem properly settled. Arna supposed part of his unease was due to a slight but persistent feeling of guilt. He knew there was nothing he could do for Billa now other than to support his mother and siblings, and he knew it could just as well have been Salter or himself who had been carried off by the . . . whatever it had been. Nonetheless he was head of the farm. He was responsible for better or worse for what happened at Arnehid.

He didn't continue with the drainage project. There was all summer to take care of that. His haste, part of the general busy-body feeling that entered him every spring, had been unnecessary. Arna, Salter and Yalmer erected a fence around the pit where the cylinder had been discovered. Many at the farm wanted Arna to fill it in, and Arna had already half decided to find some other way to drain his new terrace, but he thought that if the thing in the hole was left alone for a while, the sun shining down on it, exposed to Wennoc's fresh air and rain, any evil associations would be bleached away. Burying it again would only let the strangeness fester.

The other work went on as it always had, but Arna wasn't the only one bothered by Billa's tragic passing. Billa's mother Merrim went into traditional mourning, eating only cereals and herbs. Two days after the Rites she said that Billa had spoken to her in a dream. This was to be expected, since Merrim had the second sight, but one morning Arna's normally sensible and irreligious brother Brannig took Arna aside and confessed he had been wakened by sounds from a second-story porch outside his bedroom. "I'll tell you, Arna, when the wife says, 'Don't get up Branna, leave it be!' I pretended to be asleep. But I was listening, oh yes. It gives me the shudders to remember it."

"What did you hear?" Arna asked cautiously.

Brannig shook his head. "I could have sworn it was Billa himself, except that his voice was too high. He was singing that little song the kids used to sing, the one about the man in the moon."

"It probably *was* one of the youngsters, playing a trick on you," Arna said uneasily. "Don't tell anybody else, though. People don't need their imaginations stirred up right now."

The same night Hildu and Dorwald, returning from a

supper at Bec, claimed to have seen something running atop the house's highest ridgepole as they approached. Everyone fastened their windows when they went to bed. At midnight the girl Empy fled screaming from her room, having seen a hideous ghost peer at her from an attic scuttle in the ceiling of her room. Great-aunt Losia gave Empy (and several others) a tonic and everyone went back to their beds.

Arna lay sleepless, wishing he still had a wife to talk these things over with. In another few days his people would decide the farm was cursed and start leaving. It was true Arnehid had more residents than it could support, but it also needed workers . . .

Sometime in the hours before dawn Arna woke up. No one had screamed this time. He wasn't sure what had awakened him until he noticed a quiet scratching, like twigs fingering the window glass, moved by an uncertain breeze.

The sound seemed to be coming from the north window. Arna slowly raised himself, then slid his legs out from under the blankets. He told himself he was being so cautious because he was afraid he'd alarm whatever was making the sound and scare it away before he could investigate.

The floorboards were cold. He put his hand on the lamp, but didn't light it, deciding he was indeed afraid of alerting the scratcher.

The moon was in its second quarter and cast a dim beam of light into the room. Arna stepped softly to the window, keeping well out of the light. He leaned his shoulder against the wall and looked around the window casing.

And Billa stared back at him from behind the glass of the window. It was Billa's face, there was no doubt in Arna's mind about that. But only his face, flat and colorless, trapped in a disk of gray light.

Arna fumbled for the lamp. He thumbed the lighter, which sparked and gave flame to the wick, and turned back to the window.

The circle of Billa's face halved itself like a waning moon and disappeared. Arna put his face to the case-ment. He saw the creature run down the wall below his window like a huge bug.

He threw the window open and leaned out of it. A shadow crossed the grassy courtyard between the house and the outbuildings and vanished. Arna stopped himself from calling out Billa's name. He remained at the window for some time, then closed it and went back to bed. He lay awake until the sun came up.

At breakfast all the talk concerned what Empy had seen; the child hadn't said much herself last night and was still in bed, groggy from Losia's tonic, so everyone was eager to fill in the gaps with speculation. Arna told them nothing of his own experience, but determined to do something about it.

He left the luminant fields early and climbed into the attics. Shafts of dust-laden sunlight streamed through small windows and louvers in the gable ends. Everything seemed undisturbed and normal, but he wasn't looking for signs of the creature. He located some equipment that had belonged to his grandfather and carried it down to his bedroom.

Arna spent the hours after supper setting things up. He was used to trusting his own senses and considered himself quite discriminating in his beliefs. What he had seen last night, or thought he had seen, didn't fit fifty years of observation and experience. Before retiring he visited the family parlor, where most of the house's people were still sitting and nervously drinking more essence than was good for them. Arna had no word of criticism, but suggested they leave lamps burning in their rooms tonight and sing hymns to bolster their spirits.

Arna had a bath and went to his room. He lit no lamps and made no noise, but sat in a chair drinking tea. The ends of two long strings lay on a table beside him. His grandfather's cherrywood box rested on a tall, narrow stand near the window, hopefully invisible from outside. He heard someone singing — Trusa or Hildu, he thought, surprised anyone had obeyed him — but his room was isolated and this end of the house would appear dark and silent from outside.

It must have been close to midnight when the scratching came. Arna leaned forward in his chair, careful to make no sound. The scratching came nearer. Arna took up the first of his strings, pulled it gently, and heard a metallic click.

In a moment a disk of gray light rose outside the window. Breath caught in his throat, Arna jerked the other string.

Steel scratched flint. There was a soft whoofing sound, and for a second harsh light filled the room. Arna jumped blindly out of the chair, coughing in a cloud of acrid smoke. When he could see again he closed the hole in the box that the first string had opened, then looked out the window. The creature was already well away, but it seemed to be running with less purpose than it had last night. Arna opened the window wide and tried to wave

out the smoke.

In the morning he went to the kitchen, ate quickly and sent the others out to their chores without him. Salter and Garnot looked at him strangely. Arna went upstairs and arranged stoneware pans in a windowless closet as he remembered his grandfather doing. In an hour he had the solutions ready and he carried the cherrywood box into the closet.

It was difficult working by the dim ruby lamp. He got the back of the box unclashed and removed the plate of glass he had treated yesterday with imaging salts. He bathed the plate in one of the solutions. Ghostly shapes swam into being. The other solutions inverted the image and negated its sensitivity to light. Arna hesitated for a minute, then opened the closet door.

He propped the plate on the window sill, then sat down and stared at it. The image was somewhat blurry; he must not have adjusted the box's lens properly. But there it was, captured on the glass plate. The creature was just as he remembered it, though his grandfather's explosive light had revealed only the part nearest the window. He could make out several of its unnaturally straight, bulbously jointed limbs and the tiny, clawed fingers that had allowed it to scale the timber wall of the house.

But the disk in which Arna had seen Billa's face the night before was blank. There was no suggestion of anything resembling human features, no features of any kind. Arna sat thinking for a while, then got up to find his brother Brannig.

Brannig studied the image Arna had captured for several minutes, his face pale. "It's true then," Brannig said. "We have a haunt at Arnehid!"

"But look at the round plate," Arna insisted. "When I saw it the first time it was wearing Billa's face. Empy said she saw a face, too. Now look at my picture. When I caught the thing with Grandpa's imaging salts it had no face at all. Not Billa's, not anyone's."

"Maybe it was afraid you'd take Billa's soul back and hid it away."

Arna sat down. "Maybe I *did* take it. Think about it. The thing lived underground in the old pipeline for who knows how long. We've seen it only after dark since it came out."

Brannig found a jar of barley essence and poured them both a cup. "I suppose most haunts are afraid of light," Brannig said. "What of it?"

Arna took a drink and got up. He showed his brother the device their grandfather had used to create the flash

of light necessary to capture an image when there was no sunlight. He tapped some powder out of a bottle and told Brannig to stand back. Arna pulled the firing string. The explosion wasn't as blinding during the day, but Brannig rubbed his eyes. "Why did you do that?" he complained. "I remember what it's like. I was always scared of Grandpa because of those damned pictures."

"I wanted to remind you. Maybe the thing needs the dark to keep Billa imprisoned, maybe it has no power in a bright light." He picked up the picture he had made and pushed it at Brannig. "Look, Billa's face is gone!"

Brannig dutifully looked at it again. "If you're right the haunt won't bother us anymore. It won't be a haunt without a spirit." He poured Arna another cup of essence. "Good work, brother."

But that night the thing returned. Three people who hadn't been visited before saw it, and said that it wore Billa's maddened face. Arna's flash of light had been bright but probably of insufficient duration to free the boy's spirit permanently. The only happy news was that no one who kept a lamp burning was bothered. Casks of fuel were taken up from the cellar. Several people who had relatives at other farms decided to go for visits.

Arna was grim. Arnehid had no candlewoods ready for tapping and he'd have to borrow fuel from outside to keep the lamps lit if this went on. He and Brannig went over to Malm and had a talk with their liturgist. The liturgist could offer no suggestions other than they pray and maintain steadfast faith in Wennoc.

"There's nothing else for it then," Brannig said as they walked back to Arnehid.

Arna shook his head. "I hate to think of what it will cost."

"Probably less than keeping the house lit like we were having a wedding every night all summer."

3

The next morning Arna went by himself down to Intastora. He talked to a factor he knew and received a recommendation. Arna brought out the last of his ready money, for which the factor wrote out a bank-draft. He posted it along with the letter Arna had written to an address in Hannava.

Things were relatively quiet for a week, though there were still reports of noises on the roof. One afternoon a stranger trudged up the hill from the road, accompanied by Suza, who had been sent to Intastora to guide the visitor to the farm.

Arna had the visitor sent to the hall and served essence while he went up to change his clothes. When he entered the hall the visitor got up and held out both his hands in the Harnish manner. "I am Toivo Ytty," the man said.

Arna shook his hands. "Arnoc of Arnehid, son of Lindia and Arnoc. Did they give you something to drink?"

"Indeed, you are most gracious," Toivo Ytty said, gazing around the room. "You have some wonderful beam-work in the roof of your hall. I presume the faces at the tops of the posts represent certain of your illustrious ancestors?"

Arna nodded, though no one living could assign names to the wooden faces. He refilled his guest's cup and poured for himself. The essence was distilled from Arnehid's meager crop of grain and certain wild flowers found in the woods, and Toivo Ytty praised it beyond the requirements of courtesy. This fit the stories Arna had heard about Einnishmen, who, though they were supposed to be great connoisseurs of ardent spirits, weren't able to make decent stuff themselves. The man looked as he should, too — short, round-faced, with narrow eyes and yellow hair. But rather than modish city dress, he was wearing sturdy boots and an ordinary long shirt, belted over leather leggings. The bag on the floor beside his chair looked like that a notions peddler would carry.

Arna asked him how his journey had gone and received an interesting if overly detailed account of Toivo Ytty's trip from Hannava up to Limhol, from there to Intastora, accomplishing the final leg of his journey on foot. Finally he said, "And so if I understood your letter, your farm is in need of a ghost catcher?"

Arna nodded. "In a word, yes."

Toivo Ytty went on in a business-like manner. "The sum you forwarded should enable me to provide a diagnosis and probably a laying as well, or at least an estimate of the price for a laying; the precise cost of the work will depend upon the local geomantic features and the nature of the unwelcome Influence. Can you sketch out the facts for me? Your letter's description was rather vague."

Arna looked up to see several people who should have been at their work loitering on the hall's upper gallery. He called for Brannig and took Toivo Ytty into a small office where they wouldn't be disturbed. In anticipation of the ghost catcher's visit Brannig had painstakingly written down his own account of Billa's demise and the events that followed. Toivo Ytty looked at it briefly. The Einnishman showed more interest when Arna showed

him the glass plate, and he admitted he had never before seen such an image that could be authenticated.

"Can you identify it?" Arna asked. "What type of thing is it?"

Toivo Ytty pursed his lips and examined the plate from all angles. "It resembles a dry-well back-clutch in some respects, but don't quote me on that. I'll have to consult my texts." He put down the plate carefully. "May I see the place where you first came into contact with the Influence?"

They walked up to the new luminant terrace. Toivo Ytty climbed over the fence and jumped right into the aborted drainage trench. He examined the old pipe, a-hemming and nodding to himself, then took a spirit-bottle and a little hammer out of his bag. Ytty rapped the pipe, then pressed the bottle to the same spot and observed the pattern made by metallic threads floating inside it. He repeated the procedure in other places and made notes in a small book. Arna was impressed by Ytty's workmanlike technique. He had been afraid the ghost catcher would do nothing but burn incense, chant Old Einnish scriptures and caper about waving his hands.

Ytty asked where the Influence had first been observed. Arna picked up a stick and pointed to the cavity at one end of the pipe. "There was a little door there," Arna said. "It seems to be closed now."

Ytty was likewise cautious. He attached his spirit-bottle to a long extension and thrust it into the cavity where Arna had seen the door. When he withdrew the bottle and looked at it, Ytty pursed his lips gravely and made some more notes. Finally he methodically packed up his equipment. Arna held out his hand and helped him up from the pit.

Brannig couldn't restrain himself. "What do you think, ghost catcher? What is it?"

Toivo Ytty brushed the dirt from his leggings. "To be perfectly frank, I myself have never dealt with this particular sort of Influence. Certain signs are clear, however, and I can, with a good deal of confidence, identify the thing which plagues your farm."

Ytty wiped his hands with a handkerchief and took a large book from his bag. He found the entry he wanted and pointed to it, though neither Arna nor Brannig could read it since the book was printed with the old-fashioned glyphs sometimes still used in Einnish parts. "I don't think it's an ordinary back-clutch after all. What you have disturbed from its dark hiding place is, or so I believe, a magnetonic wight of the larger grasping class, sometimes called 'cappers,'" Ytty said pedantically.



"They tend to lurk in the hollow places under the earth, most often in buried ruins."

"A magnetonic wight," Brannig whispered in horror.

"Most polymer and ceramic wights are physically small and like to ride their human victims like a child on his pet pig, clutching him about the neck and bewildering him by means of spells whispered through an ear-vine," Ytty went on. "Others, such as yours, apparently, are too large for this to be practical, and so attach a familiar, so to speak, a representative of themselves, to their host's skull in order to ease communications; thus the appellation 'capper.' With this cap attached to his cranium, the victim sees and hears through the wight's own sensorium. Confounded in this way, he believes himself to *be* the wight, and is in fact capable of ordering its action. The ancient Heresiarchs trained themselves in such sleights, and used these wights to do things they were unwilling or unable to do personally, in places they were unwilling or unable to enter."

Arna asked, "Was it this cap that killed Billa?"

Toivo Ytty hesitated. "Not directly. But no one has undergone such training since the last Heresiarch was weighted and given to the fishes of the sea. Imagine a modern man whose mind has been transferred into such a creature. His body is left without a soul, blind and deaf. He is a mindless animal who wouldn't be long blundering

to his death in such territory as this," the Einnishman said, looking to the noisy stream. He pointed to a line of glyphs in his book. "A *maddened* animal if the creature has inserted mind-wires into his brain, as this passage indicates they are wont to do."

"Poor, poor Billa!" Brannig said.

Arna tried to sort out the apparent contradictions in Toivo Ytty's description of what had happened to Billa, but he knew nothing of these things and gave it up. "What can we do?" he asked the ghost catcher. "Can we kill the wight?"

Toivo Ytty frowned at the hole. "I doubt it very much. How can you kill something that has never lived?" He looked at Arna. "My advice is this: bury the conduit, erect a memorial to your relative and inscribe it with dire warnings to your folk that they never dig here again."

Brannig looked as though he would begin filling the hole that minute. Toivo Ytty held up his hand. "But first you must do this: set a careful watch, well out of sight, and wait until the wight returns, for return it will, since it must suckle at its magnetonic teat from time to time." He put his book away and glanced at the darkness gathering beneath the trees. "When it is well inside the conduit, bury it as quickly as you can. Beforehand I suggest loading a large weight of loose earth and stone on an easily displaced platform above the trench; the wight is unlikely to notice the trap. Arrange things so that you can pull the platform away at a moment's notice. Afterward pave the whole area with three layers of good brick, and quickly, before it can claw its way out. A thick flood of burnt lime slurried with sand and water of the correct proportions would do as well or better if the weather is dry.

"But however you do it, you must take care of this. If the unfortunate fellow's spirit has truly been swallowed by the wight, your farm will be cursed for generations if it is allowed to run free. And take further care — I am sure that any tampering with the conduit itself would be hazardous in the extreme. The wight was clearly meant to guard it, perhaps see to its maintenance. The line must have some dreadful, ancient significance. Give it a generous covering of earth, but do not disturb it otherwise."

"What about freeing Billa's spirit?" Arna asked. "The wight wears his face."

"And uses his voice," Brannig added.

Toivo Ytty hesitated, then looked them each in the eye. "Farmers, I simply don't know what to tell you." He smiled grimly. "How is that for frankness? You can't say

I tried to swindle you. My business is ordinary ghosts. I can take care of the occasional ear-vine or silence a voice-in-the-wall, but very few of my cases have involved genuine spirit robbery. Those which have required, besides myself, the presence of expert liturgists, antiquarians, and even a highly placed Lodge member or two, the sort who have access to the ancient vaults. I have some ideas about your case, but no authority or expertise. An amateur dealing with motile magnetonic wights soon finds himself running pell-mell down a very dangerous path."

"But will Billa be able to rest?" Arna persisted. "Will he be properly absorbed by Wennoc? Isn't there some way to get him out of the wight before we bury it forever?"

"I know the answer to none of your questions," Toivo Ytty said. He made a sign with his fingers. "Wennoc is gracious, and hopefully will show Billa mercy. But if you wish I can write to some specialists in Hoiin. The project would require a substantial expenditure of silver for their traveling expenses and so on — provided they were sufficiently interested to undertake such a trip in the first place. If I could send them your glass image that would help, of course."

"I'll have to study on that," Arna said. "But you noticed that in my plate the wight had no face. I used a powder that explodes with a bright flash of light to create the image. It seemed to drive Billa out of the thing, at least temporarily."

Toivo Ytty shouldered his bag thoughtfully. "Yes, I did notice that. But I think 'temporarily' is the operative word here. And I think rather than driving Billa's spirit out of the wight, your flashing light may simply have sent it into hiding it while the picture was being formed. Think of a candle lit in the noonday sun. You can scarcely see its flame, and yet it burns."

Brannig had said something of the same sort. Arna saw he would get no help here. He held out his hands. "I respect your advice, Toivo Ytty, and I think our silver was well spent. You will accept our hospitality for a week or two, of course."

Toivo Ytty shook Arna's hands, and then Brannig's. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to give you a better solution, Farmers, and though I fear I must accept only one night of your hospitality, it is most welcome. I wasn't relishing the thought of hiking back down to Intastora in the dark, charming town though it is."

"It *is* getting dark," Brannig said, thinking his brother had made a poor investment of the farm's money. "I don't

want to meet the wight — tell me, ghost catcher, will it attack anyone else before we catch it and bury it?”

Ytty shook his head. “I should think its visits to your house are of your Billa’s instigation, perhaps a half-conscious desire to be someplace familiar, acted on against the wishes of the wight itself. This is, when I think on it, a bad sign. Billa’s spirit is probably being integrated. He is *becoming* the wight, and will eventually add his human wiles to its own, the makings of a fearsome Influence indeed. The sooner it’s pent the better.”

They walked between the rows of luminant plants of the lower terraces. Toivo Ytty now had time to observe the plants in more detail and asked what sort of produce was grown at Arnehid. He didn’t understand at first why people would buy luminants. “Are these things your primary crop, then?”

Arna squatted to pull out a tiny weed. “We raise a few acres of grain for bread and brewing, and general kitchen stuff, of course, but the luminants are our cash crop.”

“Best in the county,” Brannig said.

“Where do you sell them? What do people do with them? Do they have some religious or ceremonial use?”

Despite the grim situation, the brothers laughed as they started down the hill. They could see some of Intastora’s lights, tiny specks over the four miles of intervening woods, a swarm of stars caught in the forest, varying in color between pale yellow, peach, cool silver, and a moon-like bluish green. Their colors identified the farms they had come from: Arnehid, Bec, Malm, Intastoc. Arna easily recognized his own luminant’s warm yellow, the friendliest of the colors, he thought. Bec’s Pearly Wonders were almost as pleasant and shone brighter, but their glow had usually diminished a good while before the next harvest.

Arna pointed. “Those lights are last year’s luminants.”

Brannig said proudly, “Arnehid had nearly fourteen per centum of the market last autumn.”

Toivo Ytty was confused. “You distill them for fuel?”

Brannig laughed again, but Arna shook his head at him. “I know that your home city of Hannava has no electrical essence, Toivo Ytty, but on the Einnish mainland many cities have this kind of fuel. Our luminants produce a pleasant light when a flow of electricity is supplied to them, much as the glass and wire bulbs do.”

“But ours are cheaper, and they last longer and give a prettier light,” Brannig added.

Toivo Ytty stopped and stared at them. “I know all about — but you *grow* light-bulbs? They come from

plants? And I wasn’t aware that the Harnish lands had any essence of the electrical type! Does Intastora have a dynamo? Don’t tell me their electricity falls from the sky, like that which lights Mennedal!”

“I won’t tell you then,” Arna smiled. “But Intastora has an essence well, or so they call it. They run copper wires from it to all the houses and shops. Didn’t you notice them when you passed through, strung all over like clothes lines?”

“I did,” Toivo Ytty said bemusedly. “But I wasn’t there at night. I imagined they were used to display prayer flags or something of the sort.”

They approached the rambling house, all its windows lit by yellow light. “Supper should be ready,” Arna told Toivo Ytty. “Do you like braised coney? I know Dugold fried some mushrooms, too, in case you don’t care to take animal meat.”

Ytty smiled. “No, no, I’m not high church. I was raised in Hannava, you know. I enjoy coney and hen very much.”

They went in to supper. The ghost catcher entertained and frightened them at table with stories of the haunts he had laid in the eery old mansions of the city. He praised the food and the farm’s beer, and proved his sincerity by drinking several pints. Afterward, as Arna, Toivo Ytty and four or five others tasted distilled essence in Arna’s parlor, Toivo Ytty expressed a desire to see a mature luminant. Brannig brought a few from the farm office. The ghost catcher turned one of the onion-like bulbs over in his hands. “It’s like a thin-skinned gourd . . . I notice it lacks the transparency of an Einnish glass bulb.”

Arna saw that he would have to demonstrate the quality of his luminants. He went to the office this time himself and found a small wooden box equipped with a crank and a pair of wires. Returning to the parlor he showed the box to the ghost catcher. “This is my dynamo. I use it to test the soundness of our luminants at harvest time.”

Toivo Ytty couldn’t hide his smile. “I see. Very compact and handy. The dynamo at Hoiin, which I myself have seen, occupies a space as large as the nave at Saint Lenyoi’s. A hundred engineers tend it, and it requires the broad waters of Lake Entene behind its dam to turn it.”

Arna gave him the ends of the box’s wires. Smiling tolerantly, Ytty held them in his hand and Arna turned the crank. Toivo Ytty felt a tingling in his fingers. His eyebrows rose in puzzlement. Arna spun the crank more quickly. Toivo Ytty yelped and flung the wires away.

The others laughed at this trick, which Arna liked to

play whenever he could find someone ignorant enough to hold the wires. "Sorry," he told Toivo Ytty. "But now you know that in spite of its size, my little dynamo can produce essence of the electrical sort, too."

The Einnishman frowned in embarrassment, but he wasn't completely convinced. Arna took one of the luminants. "You see the little copper prongs at the stem-end? They communicate electricity to the vapor created inside the bulb's husk as it ripens, and so excited, the vapor glows." Arna connected his box's wires to the prongs and lay the bulb on a table. He cranked the box, and the bulb emitted a soft yellow light. Toivo Ytty seemed impressed.

"We use a jig to insert the prongs into each of our luminants before we bring them to market," Arna explained. "This has to be done just after the bulbs are picked, before they harden. I take a dozen or so every season and test them like this to make sure of the crop. There aren't many of us who raise luminants, but we all compete to see who can do best."

The Einnishman cautiously touched the bulb, which glowed without heat. "But this is amazing," he exclaimed, and looked around at the farmers. "Do you export any of these marvelous things to the mainland? But you must not! I visit my cousins in Hoiin at the midsummer holidays each year, and I'd have heard of them."

"We'd certainly like to," Arna replied. He stopped turning the little dynamo and the bulb went dark. "But the luminants have to be cured, as we say, directly after they're picked and the prongs are inserted."

"What is this 'curing'?"

Brannig said, "They have to get a good shot of strong essence pretty quick after they're picked. Otherwise the husk doesn't harden and the vapor leaks away — no light then. Arna can't treat all our bulbs with his little testing dynamo, so they do it at the well in Intastora. You should see us hustle down to the town in the fall!"

Old Garnot, half-drunk by now, wagged his finger. "Years ago one farmer would try to upset the wagon of his neighbor and spill his bulbs. Oh yes, things used to be a lot rougher! The roustabouts we had with the boys from Malm and Bec!"

"So since you yourselves have no electricity other than your little box here, Intastora is your only feasible market," Toivo Ytty said. "Any place else is too long a journey for the curing."

"Intastora isn't big enough to buy everyone's total crop," Arna said. "The people there pick and choose, taking only the finest bulbs. But that discourages new

farms from trying the crop. We get by pretty well."

Brannig, thinking of the farm's debts, muttered, "Or we used to."

"When we're bothered by ghosts," Mellity said in an equally grim tone.

Arna frowned at them, but everyone else looked at the black windows and the parlor fell silent. After a few minutes Toivo Ytty stood. He bowed to them all, thanked them for their hospitality, then said a short prayer for their safety through the night, speaking in musical Old Einnish.

Arna brought Ytty up to the best guest room. The Einnishman insisted on extinguishing the lamp, saying he'd like a chance to see the magnetonic wight at first hand. Arna went to his room and slept through the night without waking.

At the breakfast table Toivo Ytty said he had sat up for a time, but then nodded off and had never slept more soundly. Arna's people were cheered by his words (though Arna thought that anyone would have slept soundly after the quantity of drink the man had taken), and they persuaded the Einnishman to climb to the lookout and pronounce a benediction over the farm before he left. Maybe just the presence of a ghost catcher had frightened the wight, even though Toivo Ytty hadn't been able to lay it. Arna and Brannig thanked him for coming and assured him they would keep him updated as to the activities of their wight. The entire household stood by the lane and waved the Einnishman goodbye as Suza led him off again toward Intastora.

4

In the evening Hatty set a bowl of hot meal mixed with chopped saint's toes fungus before her guest. He was more likely to sit at ease if there was fungus. "Will you eat, holy one?" Hatty said in a deferential whisper.

Siglam, Hatty's husband, bowed to the guest. "Would you have somewhat else, holy one?"

The guest said nothing but kept slowly waving his hands. He hadn't said much at all today, though old Turncki still sat on the bench, his pen ready to take down the mysterious pronouncements. At first Hatty thought the guest's silence was due to the group of foresters who had been camping out near the cottage, all their neighbors from within a two or three mile radius. But other than some initial confusion — blind to the grosser world, the guest had blundered into some of the onlookers — he now ignored them.

Some suggested that a liturgist or some other authority be notified of the holy man's presence here, but there wasn't one nearby, and Siglam decided an outsider would take their guest away. "They don't bother to visit us, and they turn up their noses when we bring our tree-ears and coney furs to the market," he had told his few neighbors. "Why should we share our holy man with the proud farmers and townsters? Everyone knows that saints keep to the forest so they can find sincere disciples and the proper tree for their final meditations."

The prospective saint hadn't looked for a tree yet. First he must finish dictating his words of enlightenment, as saints often did. So far Turncki had taken down over a hundred lines of the guest's wisdom, parables of great subtlety that would take years to interpret.

The holy guest groped, found the bowl and ate some of the meal directly from it without using the spoon that had been laid out for him. But after a few mouthfuls he dropped the bowl, went to the floor on his hands and knees and began scrambling around the cottage's one room. He kept this up for fifteen minutes, and finally bumped a wall with his head. Everyone flinched, though they knew from experience the holy man wouldn't be hurt. When Hatty had found him running through the woods he had already been wearing his bone-like holy-hat. Hatty suggested it had been given to him by Wennoc in order that he be protected from other people's distracting spirit-waves. It fit his head as snugly as a second skull, covering his head with a glossy, eyeless mask. Only his mouth and a few wisps of hair at his neck were exposed. The holy man grunted at his impact with the wall, but it was an unconscious, animal response, and he kept trying to crawl into the planks. Obviously he was being shown things hidden from ordinary folk. At last he reached whatever spiritual realm he sought. He stood, pressed himself to the wall and made a show of climbing, though his feet remained on the floor. "Let me in!" he cried. As was usual when he spoke, a curving stalk emerged from his hat and hung ready before his mouth, certainly a signal that Wennoc's words were being poured out for the benefit of those who would listen. "Uncle, I see you in there! Don't be afraid! Help me get out of this thing!" the saint cried.

Pen ready, Turncki copied out the poetic revelations, which usually came only after dark. It was hard work for an old man who liked to go to bed early, and spiritually challenging. 'Uncle' was clearly a reference to Wennoc the sacred spirit, and 'this thing' must be Wennoc, the physical world. The rest of the statement

was confusing, and would require much pious thought to understand.

5

"I don't know how to get you out!" Arna shouted desperately at the ghostly image of Billa's face in the disk. The wight scabbled at the glass with its horrible little fingers. Arna backed away and lit a lamp.

The wight squealed in a mockery of Billa's voice. "Bright, too bright! It hurts!"

Arna left the lamp on the table and went back to the window. The wight had dropped from the wall and was trotting away, toward the woods.

It had been a bad idea to leave his room dark tonight, Arna knew now. He was only tormenting himself and Billa's spirit. But burying the wight as the Einnishman had directed, with the poor boy inside it, still thinking himself alive, would be worse than letting him haunt the farm. But that couldn't be tolerated either, or the farm would soon be abandoned. For better or worse the wight must be destroyed and Billa's spirit released from its prison. Arna waited for an hour, sitting in his chair and trying to pray, then put on his boots and silently left the house.

He crouched behind the wall of the new luminant terrace and watched. The night was already still, but now the sound of the bugs stopped; only a single sleepless bird called from the woods. Arna crouched lower.

The wight crawled wearily up between the luminants. Arna imagined it was going carefully, as though it were afraid of damaging the young plants.

It dropped into the ditch and wriggled into its hole; a wan, greenish light appeared as the door in the old pipe opened, then the hole went black again. Arna then heard a low, buzzing sound. The wight must be drawing strength from its magnetonic teat, as Toivo Ytty had said. Arna waited perhaps half an hour, then saw the wight come out and go into the woods, making little sobs as it ran. Arna blinked away an unwelcome tear of pity.

6

Arna left only enough candlewood essence in the house to keep the lamps burning one more night, but decided that wasn't enough. Brannig went to Malm and talked them into giving him another cask. He and a couple of the boys hauled it back in a cart, arriving only an hour before sunset.

Arna had taken a spade and excavated a small area under the ancient pipe. He arranged several large, flat pans around and under it, and he had carried two armloads of old bedsheets out of the attics, wadded them up and made sort of a carpet leading to the threshold of the thing's door. As the sun was going down he and Brannig filled the pans with lamp fuel and soaked the sheets. Arna dug in the bag at his belt and took out the firing mechanism from the flasher of his grandfather's imaging apparatus. He carefully placed it on one of the soaked sheets, near a pan of essence. Brannig wanted to have a lighted torch ready and throw it into the hole when the wight showed itself, but Arna was sure that any light at all would frighten it back into the woods.

When everything was ready they settled down behind the wall of the new terrace. Brannig whispered, "The moon is behind the clouds, but won't it see all this stuff anyway?"

"I hope not," Arna muttered, fingering the string in his hand. He hoped the wight couldn't smell, either. The aromatic odor of candlewood essence was strong, and he wasn't in the hole. He was losing faith in the whole scheme. There were too many things that could go wrong or not work in the first place.

And when the wight picked its way out of the woods, face bobbing like a dim, earth-bound moon, it hesitated at the brink of the pit. Its forward arms writhed, visible in the faint glow from its face, as though it were testing the air. But after a moment it crawled, half sliding, into the pit, just as Arna had seen it do last night. The wight made its way around the pans and over the wadded sheets with no evidence of suspicion.

"Pull the string!" Brannig hissed.

The wight paused. Arna gave his brother a furious look. But the wight went on, into the hole in the earth beside the ancient pipe, and light shone as the little door inside opened for it.

Arna held his breath. He waited another second, then pulled the string attached to the flashing mechanism.

Nothing happened. The string must be too long to provide the necessary tension. If he pulled too hard on it he'd probably yank the whole contraption out of the hole. He pressed his lips together and gave the string a slightly sharper jerk.

Arna saw a small spark, then heard a great whumping sound. His eyes were dazzled. The sheet under the flashing mechanism blazed high. A second later the fuel in a pan partially under the pipe ignited and sent flames gulping around it, illuminating the eaves of the forest.

Arna and Brannig heard a high-pitched squeal. The wight danced back into the open area of the hole. It spun once, twice, surrounded by flame. Rather than die, giving up Billa's spirit, or flee the pit, it crawled onto the blackening pipe, waving its legs in agonized distress. Another pan of fuel ignited. Despite the flames Arna saw a faint representation of Billa's face in the wight's forward disk, mouth agape.

This wasn't at all what Arna had planned. He had expected that the flames would kill the wight more or less immediately, or failing that, it should at least have run away. Its nest and magnetonic teat would be destroyed, and they'd be able to capture it.

There were more flashes as the fire jumped to the remaining pans. The ancient pipe seemed to bend and struggle under the wight. A stream of smoke whistled into a small hole in the pipe, like steam from a boiling kettle going backwards. The hole became a long crack, sucking in a great sheet of smoke, making a sound like a choking giant trying to breathe. The wight screamed. Brannig grabbed Arna and pulled him down behind the brick wall.

They heard the wight scream again. The terrible choking sound stopped. Arna tried to sit up but Brannig held him down. A great lightless explosion rocked the earth like a buried thunderclap. Then came the sound of a thousand dry sticks all breaking at once, and a brief, very brilliant flash of light. The brothers hunched and put their hands over their heads as bits of hot, melted stuff rained down on them.

Arna looked over the wall. The flames were almost spent. The pipe or conduit was gone. Its subterranean path down the hill was marked by trees leaning drunkenly into each other over a sunken furrow.

The brothers climbed over the wall of the new terrace. Arna stooped to touch something on the ground. He jerked his hand away, pulled a leather glove from his belt and put it on. Arna picked up a convex circle of hot, sooty glass.

He showed it to Brannig. "This is where I saw Billa's face!"

"No face now," Brannig sighed. "I know you didn't mean to put him through such torment, Arna, but he must be with Wennoc now, one with the world. It was better than burying him alive. Our work is done."

Arna wondered. He didn't like what he had done. Arna liked what he saw down in the valley less. He glanced at the sky. The moon was still hidden and there was no fog, but the valley was dark. "Where is Intastora?" he asked his brother.

Hatty took her hands away from her ears. Her holy guest had finally stopped rolling and yelling. He sat up slowly on the floor, arms stretched out behind him for support. "I can't see!" he said in a childish whine.

Turncki started to write, but he looked up from his paper, frowning. This was not a good portent.

The holy man hunched forward and put his hands to his head. He struggled, and with a sucking gasp his holy-hat came off, exposing matted hair and blinking gray eyes in a rather ordinary looking face. "Where am I? I was trying to save . . . I had to guard something?"

"Has he lost his holy transfixiation?" Turncki asked Siglam

Siglam said, "He must have fought a great buin in the nether realm of Hinnioc, and should be ready now to take up his final perch in the holy ellow we found for him! Wife, give him another dose of saint's toes."

Hatty thought this was a good idea, but the holy man pushed away a bowl of fungus steeped in beer and got unsteadily to his feet. "I'm back!" he said, looking at his body in joyful surprise. "I'm Billa, I'm me! I've got my own legs and hands!"

The crowd of grinning but somehow suspicious foresters pushed in around him. "Bless us with your wisdom, oh nearly sanctified one!"

The holy man bared his lips in a frightening, dazed smile, the best he could do at the moment. He stumbled, but got quickly to the door. The night was black, but he could tell which way was downhill, which way led to more civilized places.

In the morning Brannig and most of the household went up to the new terrace to look at the burned out hole. It would be hard to read or do much of anything after supper now since Arna had used all their lamp fuel and given what little cash they had to the ineffectual ghost catcher, but Arnehid's people were in relatively good spirits. They had candles and could always rig up primitive lamps with wicking and cooking fat. The important thing was that last night was the first that the wight hadn't been seen near the house, and there seemed little chance it would return. The head of the family had taken a great risk and things seemed to have come out in his favor.

Arna remained in the house, walking back and forth across his parlor. The moon of glass stood propped on his desk. Brannig had told him to throw it into the stream, but Arna thought it would be more appropriate to bury it under the warning monument the Einnishman had recommended — when and if he had money to build it.

Right now he had other concerns. They were vague, not so immediate as the haunt had been or his debts still were, but he feared they would soon become so. And he wasn't the only one involved, his wasn't the only farm.

Arna wasn't altogether surprised when he saw Toivo Ytty peering into the parlor window.

"No one answered the door," the Einnishman said when Arna let him in.

They sat down. Arna didn't pour essence. "They're all up the hill," he said.

"Where you have your luminant plantation," Toivo Ytty said.

"Yes, my luminants."

The Einnishman looked left and right as though he were afraid of anyone but Arna hearing what he was going to say, then leaned forward and launched into a rapid stream of talk —

It seemed he had become so intrigued by Intastora's use of organic luminant bulbs and its well of electrical essence, both hitherto unknown in Einnish parts, that he had decided to stay at Intastora for a day or two, thinking he would write up a paper on the subject and submit it to the Lodge at Hoiin. But last night, during a short-lived but spectacular show of light in the hills — the folk at Arnehid must surely have seen it, Toivo Ytty said, looking at Arna pointedly — all of Intastora's lights had gone dead. The cupola had flown from the little tower that sheltered the town's essence well, lifted by a fountain of sparks.

The lights hadn't returned by the time Toivo Ytty left the town, early that morning, watched by a number of grim-faced citizens who made no secret of their suspicion that the visiting ghost catcher might have had something to do with the problem. "Do you know anything of this, Farmer?" Ytty asked.

Arna stood up and walked to the window. "There's something I should show you," he answered reluctantly.

Before Toivo Ytty could question him further there was a commotion elsewhere in the house, the sound of a lot of people all talking at once. A moment later the girl Rampy flew into the parlor without bothering to knock. "Arna, Uncle Arna!" she yelled. "You've got to, you've — you won't believe it!"

Arna readied himself for an unpleasant revelation. Another guardian wight, probably, driven out of some lower, undestroyed region of the pipe and bent on vengeance. He went with Rampy, Toivo Ytty coming behind. What Arna saw in the kitchen surprised him more than he had expected to be surprised.

"What is the cause of all this excitement?" Toivo Ytty asked Arna, shouting to be heard.

Arna pointed to an unkempt young man. "That's my nephew, Billa."

"The fellow who was capped by the wight?" Toivo Ytty marveled. "I must interview him at once!"

Billa's mother Merrim came down the stairs, gave a loud scream, then pushed through the others to her son and wept as she smoothed his greasy hair. Arna heard Billa mumble, "It was awful, Ma, I was only two foot high. I ran and ran, but then I came back and hid up by the terraces. I was afraid, Ma, I was only two foot tall, but the wild pigs and the beakers ran away from me. But there was these invisible people, too, that talked to me and made me eat priest-mushrooms."

"You were possessed!" said Loisa.

"And I had things I was supposed to do," Billa went on. "I had chores to do, I had to fix something, but I couldn't . . ." He noticed Arna standing in the door. "But sometimes I could do what I wanted, and every time I tried to come home you wouldn't let me in!"

Salter said, "You scared everybody! You were a ghost!"

"Your countenance was horrid to behold," Garnot assured Billa.

"It wasn't his fault!" Merrim snapped, glaring at both Garnot and Arna. She patted Billa's hand. "You weren't yourself, Billa-boy."

"All the terrible lights, like bright suns! I couldn't see. And then, and then last night — the burning! And the conduit, the conduit lost pressure!" Billa grimaced and squeezed his eyes shut.

Toivo Ytty asked Arna, "What does this mean? How was he freed?"

"Let's go outside."

9

They walked up to the luminant terraces. Toivo Ytty inspected the burned out hole.

Arna said, "I destroyed the wight."

"And so doing released the soul it held captive. I'll have to get all the particulars and write this up . . . you destroyed the ancient conduit, too, it would appear."

"It sort of did that on its own."

Toivo Ytty looked at the furrow of disturbed earth and leaning trees. "If the line were long enough and bent slightly south, I'd say it might well lead to Intastora."

"You said their lights went out."

"And I would be very surprised if they were lit tonight."

Arna frowned stubbornly. "How was I to know they drew their electricity from up here in the hills? Wells are supposed to go straight down, not up and back and forth and then down."

"But we think of natural electrical essence as coming from the lamps in the sky, which is hardly more reasonable. Yet it does, and provides vast power to the Preceptors in Mennedal." The Einnishman brushed some debris from a brick wall and sat down. "It's not like water, that's certain, but it could be that Intastora's particular source of essence is down inside Wennoc. Ancient texts tell us of caverns down there, burning hotter than fire. Perhaps the heat was somehow translated into electrical essence and sent up to us, or at least to Intastora. Such notions have been advanced among the learned from time to time."

Toivo Ytty looked sadly up at Arna. "Where ever it came from, its path is gone and I'm sure no one can build a new one. The wight's duty may well have been to keep the conduit in working order, and it must have been doing so for time out of mind. The fire with which you destroyed the wight must have caused an explosive reaction with the line's essence, or some shielding influence. I must say I feel partially responsible. I wasn't able to rid you of your haunt, and now you have brought disaster down upon your farm by taking action yourself. Who will buy your luminants now? And your neighbors — they raise the same crop, don't they? What will you do?"

"If my neighbors don't drown me or take my hide for my debts, I suppose I'll starve."

Arna started walking along the furrow of disturbed earth. Many of the trees here would die; at least they'd have wood for the stoves next winter. He wondered if there was something in the wreckage of the old pipe he could salvage and sell. It had carried electricity, after all. Maybe there were nice, heavy strands of copper. But there had been no metal in the junk that had rained down after the explosion, just blackened twists of glass-like stuff.

But the farm had given Arna's people a living for twelve generations or more. After it could no longer pro-

duce saleable grain, there had been a trove of valuable antiquities under the meadow down by the gates, and then the luminant bushes, considered amusing weeds before their market potential was discovered. If only . . .

He turned, hearing Toivo Ytty call, but Arna couldn't make out his words. The stream that watered his terraces, now useless, was hidden by the trees, but even here it was loud.

The Einnishman walked quickly and joined him. "I say, Arna. Perhaps you can develop your distilled essence, the one you served me the other day. With a distinctive jar, a colorful label and a good marketing agent, it might become popular in Hannava, perhaps even the mainland. It was really very good."

Arna was touched by the man's concern, but thought the idea impractical. "What do they need with another obscure essence from the country? You sell a few dozen jars once in a while and go dry yourself. It's not as if we have a surplus."

"But you need at least a little hard cash if you're not to devolve into savagery. You must have a surplus of something."

"Yes," Arna agreed soberly. "Smiling Sun luminants."

"But you told me the bulbs must be subjected a jolt of electrical essence immediately after picking if they are to glow, and now you have no way to do that . . . have you ever tried making a mash of the luminants and fermenting them?"

They had come very close to the noisy stream now. Arna could barely make out Toivo Ytty's words, but he understood enough to laugh. Old Losia had tried fermenting discarded luminants, but the result was fit only for the bitterest of her tonics. Still, the people of Arnehid were nothing if not resourceful, at least when they had to be. If it hadn't been for one of the early Arnas fiddling around with the little hand-cranked dynamo and a freshly picked luminant bulb, they would never have discovered their virtue.

Arna pushed through the undergrowth and found the stream. It rushed along as if there was no tomorrow. He looked upstream, seeing the remains of the ancient mill and recalling the Einnishman's stories of the city of Hoiin.

"You'd best be careful here," called Toivo Ytty. "I'm sure you'll find some way to save your farm. Perhaps you can send some of your young people into service at Intastora."

The Einnishman must think Arna was contemplating throwing himself to his death. Arna turned to him.

"When I was a youngster I used to sneak into my father's office. Do you remember the little dynamo box that gave you such a surprise? I played the same trick on my cousins thirty years ago."

Toivo Ytty knit his brows. Arna continued. "I even took it apart once, you see. And I managed to put it back together before I was caught. There wasn't much to the workings. I wonder . . ."

Arna started walking again, up to where the mill had been, and the Einnishman followed him. "How much does copper wire cost in the market at Hannava?" Arna asked him. "You wouldn't know that, would you. But we've already got enough iron, and Yalmer's not a bad smith if you tell him exactly what you want. We're all good carpenters and there's plenty of wood, so the wheel would be no problem."

"Are you serious?"

Arna stood on the bank, quite high here, looking at the broken brickwork where Arnehid's mill had once stood. The sockets which had supported the water-wheel were still evident. He turned to the Einnishman. "It's just a question of scale."

"You're going to build a dynamo, a real one," Toivo Ytty said slowly. "What do you intend? Intastora must have gotten its power for nothing but a prayer of thanksgiving to Wennoc. They won't willingly pay you for it. And besides, how would you get it there?"

Arna blinked, then laughed. "I hadn't considered selling electricity to the town! But no. Intastora will have to figure things out for itself. I mean to cure my luminants, that's all. Not too ambitious a project. And the neighbors; I suppose I owe them that, at least for a season or two." His grin broadened. "Tell me, Toivo Ytty — do you know any factors in Hoiin or Parnala, anywhere they bring electrical essence into their houses, who'd be interested in taking on an excellent new product? I'd be willing to give a good agent four or maybe five parts of a hundred from the profits, especially if he has a little hard silver he wants to invest."

The Einnishman fingered his chin. "I must tell you that ten percentum is the usual fee for such agency." He raised his head and grinned back at Arna. "But yes, I know a number of commercial men from the mainland. I also have an ounce or two of silver myself that's not currently in use." Ytty put his arm over Arna's shoulder. "Come, let us walk back to the house, where we can find pen and paper. You have large plans to make, but don't forget the small ones. A tasteful yet showy polychrome label for the bulbs' packaging will require extra start-

up captial, being a nice little piece of work in itself, but nothing else does so much to convince the buyer he has a quality product in his hand.”

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