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# The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

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In this issue *Tergan* and *The Zael Inheritance* continue. We also include a story in which a suave traveler visits an unusual town where he learns something of the central dynamic of the universe.

As to Mr. Fance . . . our best wishes are with him, where ever he may be. Certain freelance correspondants connected to the Cosmopolis Literary Supplement speculate he may have become preoccupied by the gaming on Azure Whorl, while others claim he has undertaken a course of religious study at Gladbetook, on Moudervelt. Letters, flowers or gifts (make checks out to 'cash') may be sent to the address below.

— The Editors



"Just so," agreed Fredigger; "proximity equals amelioration." Page 25

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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](mailto:prhoads@club-internet.fr)

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# The Zael Inheritance

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## Chapter 8

Lamarck said sardonically, "And seemingly something you couldn't have said earlier."

"Geir, I don't want to discuss it over the com-link," said Laura.

Lamarck inwardly commended her discretion. "It might not be wise. But if you have information to help our enquiries, you should contact Pangalactic. You should not be using my personal com-code."

"I am sorry if I am offending Pangalactic etiquette," said Laura coolly. "I thought the fact that I had important information might permit calling you at home. After all, as you say, you will charge for the time anyway."

"Laura, this isn't about protocol. It's my job to be suspicious, and you will pardon me if I show a degree of scepticism that you are suddenly prepared to talk to me when three hours ago you would scarcely open your mouth."

"I do not find Apprehensor Voorhies a sympathetic listener. She is predisposed to disbelieve me."

"Nonetheless, the Apprehensor is part of the investigative team. Whatever you tell me, I will tell Voorhies."

"Not quite everything, perhaps," said Laura, unleashing her crooked smile again. "Are you coming or not?"

"Unless you can give me some idea of what this about, no," said Lamarck. He decided that her irresistibility quotient was markedly reduced by the interposition of a com-screen.

"The responsibility is yours, Geir. But answer this question: are Pangalactic having me followed?"

"That's a matter for —" began Lamarck, before tailing off. He knew that Laura was not being tracked by Pangalactic.

"I'll be there in half an hour," he said, and broke the connection.

As he took the airlift down to the lobby, he wondered what this could mean. He and Voorhies had con-

sidered putting a tail on Laura Glyde and decided against it. No-one else in Pangalactic would have had her followed without telling him. But why would anyone else do so? Maybe Laura would be able to help answer that.

The evening was balmy and pleasant. Normally Lamarck would have chosen to walk to his destination, but the Grand Duchess Anastasia was too remote for this to be a practical option. Hailing an auto-tram, he settled down to enjoy the ride. The night was darker than yesterday, with both moons waning and a light cloud cover.

As the auto-tram glided through the streets of Mezzanotte City, Lamarck tried to identify his feelings. He had an unaccountable conviction that he was acting improperly. Perhaps he should have called Voorhies to tell her that he was going. Nonetheless, what Laura had told him was undoubtedly worth further investigation, and if learning the truth meant going along with her schemes, then so be it.

The impropriety, if any, lay in his attitude to the interview to come, he decided. He could not deny that he felt a certain exhilaration at the prospect of seeing Laura again, and that exhilaration was not primarily, or even materially, derived from the thought of unearthing further evidence. He was not approaching the matter with the cool detachment so necessary to the work of the smarse. He was uncomfortably aware that this was one reason why he had not checked in with Voorhies.

The auto-tram arrived at the Anastasia, and Lamarck felt that he had seen enough of the establishment to last some time. He sprang into the foyer, to be greeted with a knowing smile from the head clerk Festig.

"Do you never go off duty, Festig?" asked Lamarck sourly.

"Others perform my duties during the mornings," said the clerk. "Your visits generally coincide with the latter part of the afternoon or the evening."

Lamarck thought to detect reprobatation in this reply but, as so often in dealing with the Anastasia, he could not determine its exact source.

"I trust that your debate with Apprehensor Voorhies is concluded," continued Festig. "Such behaviour is rarely witnessed in this hotel."

"Behaviour such as people expressing real emotions,

you mean? I can well believe that the Anastasia sees little of that. Be so good as to inform Miss Glyde of my presence.”

Festig complied with a stiff bow as he retired into his communication booth.

“You may ascend,” he said after a brief conversation, and Lamarck, disinclined to wait for the airlift, leaped up the familiar stairs.

He knocked at the door and awaited Laura Glyde’s summons. Laura opened the door herself and invited Lamarck in with a fluid movement.

“Geir! Thank you for coming. I’m sorry I had to be so cryptic on the com,” she said softly.

Lamarck made an easy gesture, and sat down on the comfortable settee as Laura indicated. She seated herself in a window-side chair.

“Today has not advanced either of our aims,” he said with a smile. “It may be that now we will finally make some progress.”

Laura smiled her smile. She had, Lamarck noticed, changed her outfit again. This time she wore a black high-necked sweater with a black and gold waistcoat, and a short black skirt and black tights.

“Perhaps you would like a tongue-twister,” she said, indicating the array of drinks provided with the room.

“Later,” said Lamarck. “First I think we need to deal with your information. Am I correct in thinking you believe yourself followed?”

“There is one man I have identified. There may be others. He is your height, dark, thinner build than you. Are you allowed to tell me if he is Pangalactic?” asked Laura.

“Strictly I am not: but since the tenor of my questioning will reveal my ignorance of him, I lose nothing by admitting that we are not tailing you.”

Laura nodded. “I confess I had hoped that he was a glax.”

“This is not intended as an impertinent question: how do you know you are not imagining this? Could the man in question not simply be another guest at the Anastasia?” asked Lamarck gently.

“Geir, I grew up a child of the Zaels. Kidnap was always a possibility. We were taught to be alert: I know how to spot tails— and how to lose them. There doesn’t seem much point in the latter since he— or they— know where I’m staying. He can’t be an Anastasia guest because I’ve seen him all over town.”

“Have you pointed him out to the hotel staff?” asked Lamarck.

Laura shook her head impatiently. “He does not just sit in the lobby. If we went down there now we wouldn’t see him. But somehow by the time I get into the city he is there.”

“Naturally I know how to conduct a tail, and how to identify one,” said Lamarck. “I did not notice anything at Casimondo’s last night.”

“He wasn’t there,” she said. “It may be that on seeing a glax he chose to leave aside his work for the evening. Every time I have been into the city by myself I have been followed.”

Lamarck pondered a moment. For the first time Laura looked worried. “Geir, what can they want?”

“If ‘they’ exist— and that is not proved— you will have to help me with this. You know more about your background— and indeed your identity— than I do.”

Laura set her mouth. “I am Taslana Zael. I have told you that: how can I make you believe me?”

“Tell me where you’ve been for the last seven years,” responded Lamarck unsmilingly. “Unless you’re honest with me I can’t help you.”

“I *have* been honest,” said Laura, looking into Lamarck’s eyes. “I may not have told you everything, but everything I have told you has been true.”

“Even if that is so,” replied Lamarck, “that doesn’t fall within my definition of ‘honest’. Truth is when you answer all of my questions fully and accurately.”

“Geir, I can’t! Please believe me, I have told you everything I can, and I haven’t lied to you,” implored Laura, her rich blue eyes moist.

Lamarck jerked up from the settee. “This is insane, Laura! You are obviously frightened and you want me to help you: but you won’t give me all the facts.” Dropping his voice he said, “Trust me, Laura. If you’re in trouble— even if you’re not Taslana Zael— tell me. However deep in this you are, you can always get out.”

Laura looked away. “Oh, Geir, please don’t do this . . . please don’t be— understanding.” There was a catch in her voice. “Why did you have to be like this? I can’t, I can’t . . . ”

Her face was turned away from Lamarck, but he suspected that it was wet. He was conscious that he was on the verge of a major breakthrough, but somehow he had difficulty in thinking consecutively. Images of Laura Glyde in his arms seemed to disrupt his ability

to make a rational analysis.

"Laura, Laura . . ." he murmured; then, with a last desperate attempt at analytical thought, "if you've been stringing us along, *now is the time to tell me*. If you are in danger, I can — we can — protect you. If you know who these people are . . ."

"I don't — I don't," gulped Laura, now openly in tears. "Geir, I don't think you can help me."

Lamarck sat down and composed his thoughts with an effort. "I can, and I'm going to. It will be easier if you tell me everything but I can do it without."

Laura looked at him with an expression he could not read. Lamarck continued, "You're going to go downstairs and take an auto-tram to Casimondo's. I will stay here, and follow you shortly. I should be able to pick up any auto-tram following yours, and once at Casimondo's we will identify any unsavoury lurker."

After a pause Lamarck continued, "If you know who they are, it will be much easier if you tell me."

Laura had regained her composure. "I promise you," she said in a low, soft voice, "I don't know who these people are, or why they're following me. If you believe nothing else, believe that."

Lamarck nodded. "It's easier if I do," he smiled dryly. "Are you ready?"

Laura laughed for the first time in an aeon. "Ready? Look at me! I need at least a quarter of an hour!"

"This is hardly a social occasion," said Lamarck. "It is not necessary to make extensive preparations."

"I can hardly turn up at Casimondo's with my make-up in this condition," she said, smiling weakly. "A girl has standards." With that she disappeared into the cleansarium.

A resilient young woman, reflected Lamarck. She had regained her composure remarkably quickly; so rapidly, he thought, that she might never have lost it at all . . . it occurred to him, not for the first time, that he was perhaps not the best judge of the genuineness of women's behaviour. Where was Voorhies when she was needed?

Some twenty minutes later Laura emerged, her preparations including an entirely new outfit, a knee-length one piece woollen grey dress which accentuated the slimness of her figure. All traces of her earlier discomposure were gone, and her smile was in working order again.

"Now I'm ready," she said. "Don't be too long."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" asked Lamarck.

"I'll be fine," she said, walking past Lamarck towards the door. "But thank you for asking." With a light and brief squeeze of his hand, she stepped briskly out into the corridor.

Lamarck permitted himself an inner smile. Her knack for an exit had not been disturbed by the evening's events.

He watched from Laura's window as she walked towards the auto-tram rank. In the warm evening she did not wear a coat, and Lamarck registered the smooth sway of her hips with a rueful regard. Her figure was less rounded than the criterion of Chrysopolitan ideals, but Lamarck felt that what she lacked in curvacity she gained in trimness.

She stepped gracefully aboard an auto-tram, and it was only a matter of seconds later that a man appeared and boarded another tram in the rank. The man was tall, slender and muscular in keeping with Laura's description; not to be trifled with, Lamarck decided as he sprinted from the room to engage his own auto-tram. Where had he appeared from? It seemed to be inside the building. But this was a question to be resolved later.

Laura's auto-tram moved off into the distance, with the tram of the man Lamarck had styled 'Nemo' following closely. Lamarck's own auto-tram proceeded further behind, barely in eye-contact. Lamarck felt that Nemo was in rather too close pursuit to be a professional tail but then, unlike Lamarck, he did not know Laura's ultimate destination.

It was only a little later that Lamarck stepped from his own auto-tram a short distance before Casimondo's, and walked the last hundred yards along the waterfront. By now, both Laura and Nemo would be ensconced. Entering the lower terrace, he saw Nemo standing at the bar, ordering a short tongue-twister. Laura was nowhere to be seen, and Lamarck surmised that she was on the upper terrace. Lamarck settled down to observe Nemo for a few minutes. The latter displayed little agitation, and Lamarck formed the impression that his mental processes were not of an especially electric nature.

Seeing that Nemo had taken up a station in the corner where anyone leaving would be observed by him, Lamarck decided to join Laura upstairs. Ordering two long tongue-twisters, he made his way up the

stairs. The upper terrace was again unpopular this evening, and Laura sat coolly at a table, smiling slightly as she saw Lamarck. He saw that the lizardskin girls were back, scales gleaming even in the Mezzanotte night, and gave them a nod of recognition as he sat down.

"Did you see him?" Laura asked, as Lamarck sat down and gave her a glass of tongue-twister.

"Yes. A professional heavy rather than a trained snoop, I think. His tailing technique is somewhat basic. He would appear the sort to get his way by force rather than stealth."

"What do you intend to do now?" asked Laura, her eyes intent.

"It might be productive to ask him some questions," said Lamarck. "I am not sure that he is the conversational type; I may need to be at my most persuasive. First, though, our tongue-twister. His evening is dependent on our convenience. And he is unlikely to risk showing himself on our terrace," he continued, indicating the scattered range of customers.

"In that case," said Laura as she sipped at her tongue-twister with a grimace, "we might as well enjoy ourselves."

"Tongue-twister is an acquired taste," said Lamarck, "and enjoyment is possible without it. Most pleasures, however, are enhanced by a glass or two."

"It is like drinking an alcoholic unripe lemon," she said. "I am no tippler at the best of times."

"Chrysoopolis has few more popular recreations," said Lamarck. "It is particularly favoured in Pangalactic circles."

The pair sipped their drinks in an easy silence. Lamarck again noted her remarkable stillness, a quality far more alluring than more overt flirtation. She appeared to be finding the tongue-twister more palatable than she had expected; Lamarck wondered if she would be any more forthcoming once it had taken effect.

After a while Laura said, looking down at the table, "Geir, I shouldn't really ask you this . . ."

"That means you've already decided to," said Lamarck.

". . . but: do you believe me?"

"In what sense? I believe that you're here on Casimondo's upper terrace, sliding into the first stages of intoxication: somehow I don't think that's what you

mean."

"My inquiry was on a less metaphysical level," she said with smiling irony. "All I meant is, do you believe that I am Taslana Zael?"

"You were right," said Lamarck. "You shouldn't have asked. I have a simple, basic and practical precept: believe evidence, not witnesses."

"A neat quip," said Laura with a smile. "It doesn't convince me for a second. You couldn't do your job without developing a skill for reaching snap judgments about people's veracity."

"That may be how it is on the sensopics: in truth we can't afford to be so cavalier. Our hunches won't convince the Judiciar: only hard evidence does that."

"Maybe," said Laura. "But you have your own ideas about me. I would like to know."

Lamarck found this conversational ploy unobtrusive. "Since I am investigating your claim, I am hardly likely to reveal my private opinion, especially as the results of the bio-test will resolve the matter."

"That's the point!" cried Laura with more animation than usual. "Once the tests prove that I am Taslana, there will be no merit in your believing me. In your parlance you will have believed the evidence, not the witness. Geir, I want you to believe *me*. We have spent time together, and I don't want you to think I am a 20 billion mark fraud."

Lamarck said, "There is another scenario, and I admit it carries some currency at the Tower: bio-test evidence will disprove your assertion. I would appear rash at the very least to have privately endorsed your claim then, and it may be that your only satisfaction as you started a long jail term was that you had hoodwinked a sad glax."

"Would you truly be sad to see me imprisoned?" she asked lightly.

"That wasn't entirely what I meant," said Lamarck. "You must understand that I can't come to a view on your claim without all the evidence being gathered, and my private speculations are of little account."

Laura was silent as she looked down at the table and spoke to Lamarck. "I know that you don't believe me. You don't have to admit it, and I shouldn't have asked you the question." She looked up with her deep blue eyes. "Can you understand that I have been alone for a long time, and I need someone to believe in me for myself? Even if I am, as you and Voorhies think, part

of some elaborate fraud, I am very exposed. Geir, this is all so much harder than I thought it would be.”

“I didn’t say that I disbelieved you,” said Lamarck too quickly. “There is evidence to be weighed up, and it’s futile to form a judgement beyond that.” He looked at her. “I realise that you’re on a strange planet and you’re a long way from everything that you know. Laura, whatever has happened in the past, whatever you have done, can’t you trust me?”

Laura turned her head away.

“I can’t promise you that everything will be all right: but I can promise you that I will do what I can to make it so,” Lamarck continued. He reached out to touch her hand as it played nervously with the top of her glass.

“This is not a Pangalactic deal; I am giving you my word as a man to a woman that if you are honest with me I will look after you.” Lamarck was conscious that this wasn’t what he had intended to say, and that the conversation was outstripping his prudence.

Laura snatched her hand away and jumped upright.

“I don’t want your cheap deal!” she cried. “I don’t want your manly protection! I want you to *believe me!* If you just trusted me you wouldn’t have to worry about ‘looking after me’.”

Her eyes darkened beyond their normal shade, and her mouth contracted to an asymmetric slit.

“Laura, I— ”

“Don’t talk to me, Geir. I thought you were going to listen to me— and instead you graciously offer me your noble sanctuary. You are as bad as Voorhies— worse, she never tried to take me in!”

She turned to go. Lamarck took her wrist.

“Laura, you are not going like this. There is a man out there who has some kind of unfavourable designs on you. Be rational; I didn’t mean— ”

“Oh didn’t you? Let go of me, Apprehensor: I will sue you for wrongful arrest if you don’t. And don’t follow me. If this is your ‘protection’ I’d rather take my chances. I have had to look out for myself before.”

She jerked her wrist free, and spun on her heel towards the stairs.

## Chapter 9

Lamarck, stunned by the suddenness and heat of Laura’s explosion, sank wordlessly back into his seat, and mechanically drained his glass of tongue-twister. The few other patrons of the upper terrace ostentatiously looked away. One of the lizardskin girls whispered something which her friend seemed to find inordinately amusing. Lamarck briefly considered what he might have done to cause Laura’s dramatic response. Was it touching her hand? She had seemed to invite that. Had she thought he was offering her a plea bargain? Or had she taken exception to his assertion that he would look after her as an act of personal patronage? He hadn’t meant it like that, but he suspected it had sounded that way.

Coming to his senses, he realised that Laura could be in danger: Nemo would undoubtedly have seen her leave, and it was unlikely that her welfare was his chief priority. He looked out from the upper terrace, and saw Laura walking, quickly but seemingly aimlessly, along the waterfront. As he looked, Nemo came into view: he was clearly following Laura, and none too subtly. Lamarck, who had made it his invariable rule never to run after a woman, decided an exception was necessary in this case and dashed from the terrace and out on to the waterfront.

Nemo was sidling some fifty yards behind Laura. Lamarck concluded he was a truly incompetent tail; but his function seemed likely to be at least as much to daunt as to remain obscure. Laura looked round and saw Nemo; she increased her pace, and for the first time Lamarck thought she was uneasy. She looked around for an auto-tram, but it was late and there was none to be seen. It was always the way with public transport.

Lamarck decided that this was the moment to intervene. It was clearly necessary to interview Nemo at some stage, and it seemed sadistic to allow him to continue to unsettle Laura to no purpose. He increased his pace and narrowed the gap between himself and Nemo.

The tail became aware of Lamarck’s footsteps in the still night. He was now in an awkward position: he could not afford to close up any further on Laura, but neither did he want to be apprehended by Lamarck. He seemed to feel that the latter was the more pressing

danger, and he increased his speed. Laura looked nervously over her shoulder, and saw that Nemo was perceptibly closer. On one side of her was a railing separating the waterway from a narrow landing stage some twenty feet below which ran alongside the estuary; on the other a series of retail businesses now closed for the evening. There was nowhere to go but straight on—and the auto-tram rank was far ahead.

“Stop! Pangalactic officer!” called Lamarck, eager to arrest matters before they proceeded any further.

Nemo appeared to take no notice. Lamarck called another warning and, pulling his pulse-gun out of its holster, started to run towards the man: he wanted to avoid shooting if at all possible, and Nemo did not seem disposed to offer violence.

Nemo was discomposed by Lamarck’s approach, and moved into an easy lope to maintain the distance between himself and the glax. In so doing he narrowed the gap between himself and Laura, who clearly believed he had broken into direct pursuit of her.

“Stop! Pangalactic officer!” cried Lamarck again, although he was some way back from Nemo, who had begun to outdistance him. His attempts to head off trouble were having the opposite effect.

Laura seemed to have realised that she could not outrun Nemo. To Lamarck’s horror she turned to face her pursuer and raised her arm: she had produced a weapon from somewhere. Zael or no Zael, she was evidently prepared for this kind of situation.

“Stand back!” she screamed. Her voice was unsteady but her arm remained level. “Instanarc gun! Stand back or I shoot!”

Lamarck’s dread was somewhat lessened by the thought that at least Laura was only carrying an instanarc; the worst that could happen to Nemo was a twelve-hour snooze.

Nemo paid no heed to Laura’s warning: his prime motivation seemed to be to elude Lamarck. He was now only some ten feet or less from Laura. Suddenly there was the distinctive hiss of the instanarc gun and Nemo toppled backwards out of sight. By chance he had been opposite a gap in the railings where stairs led down to the walkway below. Laura stood motionless with the gun pointed uselessly ahead.

Seconds later Lamarck arrived on the scene. “Laura! What the hell have you done?” he said with a lapse in his customary urbanity.

Still pointing her pulse-gun at the space where Nemo had been, she said in a high voice: “He was chasing me! I told him to stand back and he carried on!”

“Stay there!” snapped Lamarck. “And put that gun away.” Carefully he walked down the steps to locate the narcotised Nemo.

“It was only an instanarc,” she called out after him.

At the foot of the stairway he saw the motionless Nemo. He stepped cautiously over to the supine figure. With shock and horror he saw the position of the man’s head; there was no way a functional neck could allow a head to loll like that. Lamarck had seen dead men before and Nemo was plainly another. Lamarck swore a violent series of muffled oaths.

A footstep alerted him to Laura’s presence. “I told you to stay there, you slack-witted bitch!” he snarled. It took a lot to undermine his composure, but when it went it was truly lost.

Laura gave a soft cry, whether at Lamarck’s unsuspected harshness or because she had caught sight of the grotesque angle of Nemo’s neck.

“No!” she whispered. “Geir, no! He can’t be dead!”

“The fall broke his neck,” said Lamarck tonelessly. Laura fell to her knees and retched into the sea. There was a sudden reek of tongue-twister.

Lamarck walked away and, after a decent interval, went over to her. He had recovered his composure, but with coolness came measured realisation of the magnitude of this event.

“Don’t worry about it now,” he said, a touch of sympathy in his voice. “It’s happened. I’d better get Investigations down here.”

He put a hand on her shoulder and steered her back up the steps. Laura sat down on the top step, shivering uncontrollably as she stared out into the bay.

“Here,” said Lamarck gently, proffering his jacket, “I think you’d better take it this time. And I’m sorry about what I called you.”

With a nod whose meaning he could not fathom Laura wrapped the jacket round her shoulders. He used his personal com to summon various Pangalactic personnel, and then dialled Voorhies’s code. After half a minute a bleary-eyed Voorhies accepted the call.

“Yes,” she said sleepily.

“Kate, it’s Geir. I’m on the waterfront just past Casimondo’s with Laura. Can you come down? There

have been some serious developments.”

Voorhies could tell from Lamarck’s face and tone that these developments were not of a satisfactory nature.

“I’ll be there,” she said, “but I warn you, at this time of night I’m not going to be outshining Laura Glyde.”

Looking across at the pale and shivering Laura, Lamarck felt that this might not be the case. “I shouldn’t worry about that, Kate,” he said.

He went over and sat on the step beside Laura. “There are going to be a lot of questions,” he said. “Killings are not common on Chrysoopolis, even relatively accidental ones like this. Where did you get the instanarc?”

“I always carry one,” she said dully. “It was part of my kidnap training—and so was using it.”

“That part of the instruction seems to have been effective, at least,” said Lamarck. “Not everyone can hit a moving target, even at that distance.”

“It seems callous to ask this when I’ve just killed someone,” she said in a listless voice, “but am I in trouble? I really did think he was coming after me and it was an instanarc gun.”

“There are obvious mitigating circumstances,” said Lamarck. “Tell the truth and I suspect that you will be relatively safe. The fact that you used a non-lethal weapon takes us away from the realm of murder, although it does not rebut manslaughter.” After a pause he continued, “Without wishing to allude to previous disagreements, it is a reasonable observation that if you have any new information you may have been withholding, now would be a good time to mention it.”

Laura looked tiredly at Lamarck. “I cannot even argue with you about it, Geir.”

Suddenly she went limp and leaned sideways against him. “Geir, I’m sorry about what I said earlier. I’m so scared . . . please help me . . . please . . .”

As she tailed off into incoherence Lamarck put his shirt-sleeved arms around her, and she nestled her head silently on his shoulder. He was conscious, deep deep down, that this was injudicious conduct, but he could hardly do anything else . . .

Some time later—it might have been a second, but was probably somewhat longer—a voice interrupted them: “I find it impossible to imagine the chain of circumstances than can have led to you petting a suspected fraudster in front of a warm corpse,” said Voorhies.

Lamarck sprung to his feet. “Kate! It has been a long evening . . . things are not as they appear.”

“Let us hope not,” rejoined Voorhies, her hair tousled and her eyes puffy. “It would over-tax my imagination to concoct a theory to explain this in any adequate way.”

“Luckily you do not have to do so. The truth is comparatively straightforward and will soon be known.”

“I might also ask,” said Voorhies, “what you were doing here with Laura Glyde in the first place?”

Lamarck shook his head. “I am only telling the story once tonight. I will defer it until the snoops get here.”

“In that case we haven’t long to wait. Here are Narosyn and his men now.”

Prime Apprehensor Narosyn was a middle-aged rumpled man, almost the public image of a snoop. He had a nose like a root vegetable and a salary that did not stretch to Adiposity Realignments. Lamarck knew him as sound, methodical and determined, a steady career glax.

“Well, Geir, are you going to tell me what’s happening here?” he said.

Lamarck drew Narosyn away from where Laura was sitting and gave an edited account of the evening’s events.

“There is no doubt that she shot him, albeit with an instanarc; the only questions relate to her state of mind when she did so. To me it looks like an unfortunate accident, and my report will be saying so.”

“You draw conclusions faster than me,” said Narosyn. “Granted she knew he had been tailing her, and he was running towards her; but what was she doing with an instanarc? It may be non-lethal but it’s no toy. And by your account she knew you were around.”

“She didn’t know where I was,” said Lamarck. “If you remember, we quarrelled.”

“I have to say, Geir, that I am unclear as to the nature of your relationship with Laura Glyde.”

“You are not the only one,” said Voorhies with heavy irony as she rejoined the conversation after helping Narosyn’s men examine the body.

“She is an extremely important feature of a major Contracts case. The course of the investigation required me to verify that she was being tailed. That, at least, I have achieved.”

“At a heavy price,” said Voorhies. “A key witness

dead and another likely to face manslaughter charges at the minimum. If you want to call that 'achievement' I don't suppose I can stop you."

Lamarck spun away from Narosyn to face Voorhies. "I hardly think a manslaughter charge is likely. If you have nothing constructive to say, I suggest you take your pert arse back off to the bed where it so clearly wants to be."

"Constructive!" spat Voorhies. "Like canoodling with that hussy, I suppose! If you want 'constructive' insight, think about this: your Laura Glyde shot an unarmed man at point-blank range with an illegally-held weapon. There was intent to injure and that means manslaughter. You think she can walk away from that?"

"Unarmed?" snapped Lamarck.

Narosyn nodded. "He carried nothing but an ident-chip revealing him to be Roban Maevart of Corinth, and a few marks. Regardless of your account, I can see my boss petitioning the Judiciar for manslaughter charges."

"Maroc, without wishing to compromise your investigative integrity, I think this is one that we ought to make go away. It would make our contract much more difficult to fulfil if she were facing charges."

"Geir, she killed someone!" said Voorhies. "We can't just pretend it didn't happen, however inconvenient it is for us."

"She killed an offworld hoodlum who had it coming, clearly without any intent to do so. In the interests of investigative smoothness. . ."

"Doesn't justice come into this anywhere?" cried Voorhies.

"Rolando is likely to take my view, I think," asserted Lamarck. "I was there, Kate; I saw what happened. There was no guilty intent. If we leave her be we are not letting a murderess walk free."

"I am not sure if you are sufficiently objective to judge 'guilty intent' in this," snapped Voorhies with some venom.

Narosyn interjected: "I don't know about your contract: but the decision on charges isn't one for Puissant Apprehensor Rolando to take. If an offence has been committed here it falls under Chrysolopolis's Enforcement Contract, and it's my boss, not yours, who will decide whether it goes to the Judiciar."

Lamarck nodded, acknowledging the pertinence of

Narosyn's remark. "Take her statement here, will you? She is not going to skip the planet, and she is only useful to our investigations while she is at liberty. If we send it to the Judiciar and he decides to try her we'll think again on her freedom."

Narosyn assented. Voorhies merely scowled. As Narosyn walked off to take Laura's statement, she said to Lamarck:

"What is happening to you, Geir? Every time you see her, she inveigles you into something. The way you were defending her tonight—it was almost impassioned."

"I wasn't defending *her*, Kate," said Lamarck with reasonable calm. "I was arguing that our contract—and the interests of wider justice—might be better served by keeping charges out of this. The fact that I believe she acted innocently, while true, is a secondary consideration."

"I wonder," said Voorhies. "I know the way we tried to question her this afternoon didn't work, but that doesn't mean that your strategy is any better. I am worried about you, Geir. I have never seen you so close to a contract before."

Lamarck smiled. "This is my job. I want to get to the bottom of this; and we won't do that by bullying Laura Glyde, or dragging her through the courts on an unrelated charge."

Voorhies looked at Lamarck thoughtfully. "You have always been a skilful advocate of any position you chose to adopt," she said. "The facts remain: we have com-link footage that proves Laura Glyde is not Taslana Zael; she caused a man's death tonight; and I find you with your arms round her in the street."

"The circumstances were hardly everyday ones," said Lamarck without heat. "As you say, she had just killed someone. And remember, we have agreed that I am to build up a rapport with her."

Voorhies shook her head in wonderment. "Rapport! We can argue this all night," she said as she walked off. Turning, she added, "But only you know if you are on the right side of the line."

"What makes you think I know?" Lamarck quietly asked the cool night air. With a shrug he walked over to where Laura was giving her statement.

"Let's run this once more," Narosyn was saying. "You gave him two warnings that you were about to shoot?"

"I was pointing the instanarc at him: twice I told

him to stand back. He didn't—and I shot him. How could I have known an instancarc would kill him?" said Laura firmly.

"And this was the gun you used?" asked Narosyn, indicating a weapon sealed in transparent wrapple.

Laura nodded. "I brought it in from Heimat. I know it is illegal here but there were reasons why I had it." She looked at Lamarck. "The Prime Apprehensor understands why."

"I'd suggest you don't pursue the weapon angle," said Lamarck to Narosyn. "It is illegally held but the reasons for it aren't relevant to your inquiry."

Narosyn gave Lamarck a reproving look. "I'll be the judge of what's relevant, Prime Apprehensor." Turning back to Laura, he said, "I think we've learned as much as we can tonight, Miss Glyde. If you'd be prepared to come down to the Tower of Commerce tomorrow, we can resolve any further mysteries then."

Laura inclined her head. "Of course. Thank you."

Narosyn walked to one side with Lamarck. "I don't know what smarse trick you are running here, Lamarck," he said, "but I see a potential conviction for manslaughter. You needn't think we will overlook this just to keep one of your witnesses out of trouble."

"I thought we were on the same side," said Lamarck. "If you think Rolando will let you squeeze her just to score a point off us, you delude yourself to an unusual extent."

"The Judiciar makes the decisions, Lamarck," said Narosyn, his eyes seeming to Lamarck to contract like a little pig's. "All we do is present the facts—when you aren't obscuring them. I take it that you will see that our witness gets back to her hotel safely."

"Can we take you home, Kate?" Narosyn asked Voorhies, indicating the Pangalactic aircar he and his snoops had arrived in.

Voorhies looked at Lamarck for a moment. He was either oblivious of her scrutiny or choosing to ignore it. With a shrug she said, "That would be generous. I should be in bed by now."

She walked off towards the aircar. Turning, she called, "Geir! I will see you tomorrow—be careful."

Lamarck twitched his head in a curt nod. Voorhies climbed into the aircar next to Narosyn, who smartly took the vehicle aloft. In seconds they were gone.

Laura sat silently on the waterfront wall, lost inside Lamarck's jacket. Subdued as she was, she still retained

her remarkable stillness and poise. Walking over, Lamarck said quietly, "Come on. You should be in bed too."

With a weak smile, she said, "How does one get an auto-tram at this time of night?"

"There are ways," said Lamarck, touching a button on his personal com. "There are advantages to being a glax even if it doesn't always seem that way."

"What have I done?" she asked, almost to herself. "Geir, I have killed someone."

"Leave that to us," said Lamarck. "In my reckoning, you acted reasonably under the circumstances. Investigations may not think there is sufficient evidence to put before the Judiciar; the Judiciar may not think it warrants a trial if they do; and I find it unlikely a Chrysopolitan jury would convict you even of manslaughter."

"That wasn't quite what I meant," said Laura, fixing her steady eyes on his face. "I took a man's life today. That might not mean much to a glax; it is something new for me."

"I have seen people die before, for certain. Some ask for it; some don't. I reserve my sympathy for the latter cases. Maevart put himself in a situation where a violent ending was a possibility. He is as culpable in his death as you are."

"You are kind to say so," Laura responded with a half-smile. After a pause she said, "I never thought it would be this difficult."

"When you say 'it' . . ." asked Lamarck delicately, "are you referring to claiming your inheritance, or to some wider programme . . . ?"

Lamarck was uncertain whether Laura would flare up or cry at this extension of his enquiries. Inevitably she did neither. With a smiling shake of her head—which Lamarck noticed made her hair swing most becomingly—she said:

"Do you never cease your investigations, Prime Apprehensor? In truth I am hardly disposed for further questioning tonight. Prime Apprehensor Narosyn was polite enough, but he lacked your capacity for irony."

Lamarck laughed. "There you see the difference between the smarse and the snoop. Be careful with Narosyn, though: he is persistent and more subtle than he appears."

The auto-tram arrived and they stepped aboard.

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"I am surprised," said Laura, "that you give me advice on how to deal with one of your colleagues. I had expected to have to engage an attorney to learn such information."

"You have all the free advice I am going to give you," said Lamarck. "From a purely selfish viewpoint, you are more use to me at liberty than in the Judiciar's Suite."

Laura gave Lamarck a sideways look. "I am glad that my liberty is so important to you."

"Your freedom will allow our investigations to proceed with greater despatch," said Lamarck, skating around her irony. "You should not read my interest in it as an endorsement of your claim."

Soon after, the auto-tram arrived at the Anastasia. Laura stepped from the vehicle onto the gravel before the hotel.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Lamarck asked as she turned to go.

Laura raised her eyebrows quizzically. "Of course. I'm afraid this evening has displaced my manners. Thank you for looking after me tonight, Geir; I know I haven't made things any easier for you."

"I was thinking of my jacket," said Lamarck, indicating the garment around Laura's slender figure. "It contains, among other thing, my Pangalactic identification."

Laura slipped neatly out of the jacket. "Thank you for that as well," she said softly. "Goodnight, Geir."

She leaned forward and brushed Lamarck's cheek with her lips; her cool hair kissed his face as she moved. Lamarck was aware of a momentary scent and she was gone. Something in him gave a wrench as she ran into the foyer. He did not even attempt to clarify what he was feeling; he knew the task was beyond his powers. Pensively he commanded the auto-tram and it smoothly began its glide back to his apartment.

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# Tergan

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## Chapter 4

KEAEN

Weltig came to the capital of Keaen on the most expeditious route: via Fort Tachwyn and down the Great North Road. It was risky using Tachwyn as an entry point; people here knew him, and it would not do if he were recognized. In order to prevent such an eventuality he had removed his beard and trimmed his hair. His appearance altered like this, he wouldn't have recognized himself. He'd been bearded and long-haired for decades, and people, at least on cursory inspection, were not likely to make the association.

To further disguise his intent he wore a skull-cap and the utilitarian leather garb of a courier: one of those individuals delivering messages and smaller items of significance that could not be transmitted by pigeon. Couriers were generally left alone by the military. There existed a tacit agreement between all that the plying of a courier's trade required a certain measure of confidentiality, and that leaving them to their devices was generally a good thing.

Of course, some couriers were also spies. This much everybody knew, but ignored. A spy-courier was not overly troublesome, because he was *visible*. Spies operated much more effectively in obscurity.

The disguise of a courier suited Weltig. He had to get to Keaen in a hurry — and couriers were always in a hurry. So he was just doing what was expected of him. He arrived in the capital after a grueling ride, interrupted only by the hours of darkness when he had holed up in Daerfil. To ride the Marsh Road and the roads of northern Keaen in the darkness: that even he didn't care to contemplate.

He rode into town in the late afternoon, stabled his latest mount, took his saddlebags and the hollow staff, and found a himself quiet nook in an dead-end alley between a couple of dilapidated buildings in the a quiet part of the harbor district. There he changed out of his courier's outfit into something less noticeable: the

plain grimy supertunic of a street-beggar, with a soft tattered felt cap that slouched low over his head and served to conceal much of his face. He hid the saddlebags underneath a pile of rubbish at the end of the alley. Unless he was very unlucky indeed, it would not be found so soon. He was going to return here when his work was done, and he had to become the courier again and return back home. This at least, was the plan.

Presently he emerged from the alley, leaning on his staff, and shuffling along with the air of one who came from nowhere and had nowhere to go. Like many of his ilk he would make his way to the decagon, there to while away some of his limitless time to listen to tomorrow's 'Declaration of Purpose' by Armist of Keaen and his barons.

And to kill Armist . . .

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The Declaration of Purpose was almost complete. The scribes were laboring and sweating over it — now that the barons, the Pacers, and Armist had finally come to an agreement of sorts. As expected, the compromises had been difficult. The Pacers in particular were not overly pleased with the result. Mirne and Screef had fought hard and succeeded in inserting a clause which indicated desirable future directions as they wanted it: an increased participation by selected Pacer representatives — to be chosen by a system yet to be determined and agreed upon by all — in the process of governmental decision making. They had, however, not been able to push through another clause which would eventually have led to making the position of the Keaen obsolete and purely ceremonial.

In truth, Armist wouldn't have minded such a development. If nothing else, it would have allowed him to surrender his responsibilities to others, and maybe in due course bow out of the game of 'statecraft' altogether. Tahlia shared the sentiment entirely. She was prepared to make her contribution, but not to extend her tenure forever.

Forever: that, too was a sore point. Unresolved issues.

The barons, however, very much aware of the effect the devolution of the Keaen's position would have on them, had strenuously resisted the insertion of this

clause. Armist had sat and said nothing as they and the Pacers battled—in occasionally heated exchanges—for a mutually agreeable compromise. In this matter he had declared himself neutral, much to the puzzlement of barons and Pacers alike. Mirne may have divined his reasons, but if she had, she gave no indication of it.

Armist and Tahlia did, however, intervene in the delineation of the position of the Keaen and the relationship of the House of Keaen with respect to the people and the barons alike. The old system of ‘vessels’ was abolished completely. In order to prevent creating a situation like that existing in Tergan, where the intracine fights had reached absurd proportions, a clause was inserted which stipulated that only with the consent of the newly formed ‘Consultative Council’ could members of the House be joined to each other. Such assent should be based, so the clause stated ‘on all pertinent considerations, including those involving the attachment or lack thereof of the parties involved’. Also added was a sub-clause recommending the continuing ‘joining of the House and the people of Keaen’ as a matter of political virtue—though no compulsion was implied.

The ‘Consultative Council’ was Pandrak’s invention, and had been accepted without major disagreement. Details had been subjected to extended discussions, but overall reason prevailed.

The composition of the Council agreed upon was:

Two representatives of each barony—to be selected by the baron, and including either himself or a suitable proxy, plus one other person selected internally by each barony according to their whim.

Four members of the House of Keaen, or suitable proxies, to be selected by whatever method the House chose. The number was chosen to reflect the significance of the position of the House as the apex of the hierarchy.

Three Pacer representatives: more significant than any of the barons but less than the House of Keaen.

Each representative had one vote. A vote could only be counted if a person duly authorized to cast such a vote was actually present at a meeting. The Council thus consisted of a maximum of seventeen persons, at least ten of which had to be present to form a ‘working council’. A convocation of the Council could be initiated by any group of members totaling at least six votes. The place of meeting was Castle Keaen; though,

if the castle was not available—for whatever compelling reasons—the venue could be changed as agreed upon by the parties.

Decisions by the Council became law if at least ten of the votes cast favored it. The Keaen had the power to veto such decisions. The Keaen could not veto decisions arrived at by at least thirteen votes—which usually implied that everybody else was against him.

Decisions which altered the content or the spirit of the Declaration of Purpose, however, had to be unanimous.

At Armist’s insistence—and much to the surprise of everyone else—another clause was inserted which gave the Council the authority to indict any of its members of behavior at odds with the letter and spirit of the Declaration of Purpose, and to initiate any such action as was required to remove the person from office. Such an indictment required at least fourteen votes, implying that, if for example the person indicted was the Keaen himself, it would require one of his own delegates to vote in favor of the indictment.

Why did he want such a peculiar provision?

“It is sufficient to provide a mechanism for initiating action against Tegel—which I cannot see any way of avoiding!—at the same time as it provides at least one safeguard against the possibility that a Keaen tries to circumvent or nullify the Declaration. Admittedly, it is not likely that one of the House members votes against the Keaen, but, on the other hand, if he or she does, it is obviously an occasion to consider action for deposing him.” Armist shrugged. “No system is perfect, but this one combines safeguards with the discouragement of frivolous political power games.”

The signing of the Declaration of Purpose was scheduled for the following day and would be a ceremonious occasion to be conducted for all to see in the Decagon. For this purpose workmen had erected a large wooden platform near the northern side. From six poles flew the banners of the barons, the House of Keaen, and the Pacer’s hastily contrived flag: a stylized representation of two hands growing out of each other’s wrists and clutching the wrist of the other one. A large table with seventeen chairs, one for each Council member, was placed on the platform. Two of these would be empty, just as the seventh flag-pole flew no banner: the Tegels’. Their signature would have to

wait until a willing signatory occupied the seat of power in Caelar.

The signatories were:

For Cedrea: Tyfal and his first seneschal.

For Port Ster: Kiefer and his chief man-at-arms.

For Kint: Lydd and his chief advisor.

For Laska: Keel and his wife, Ciara.

For the Pacers: Laetis, Mirne, and Screef.

For the House of Keaen: Armist, Tahlia, Pandrak, and the Chief Scribe of the House.

A procession of these fifteen filed from a row of four coaches that had pulled up in front of the dais. They were attired in various ways, as each considered appropriate for the occasion: the parties from Kint and Cedrea with more formality than those from Laska and Port Ster. Tahlia wore a simple loose dress of maroon and yellow; Armist a green suede jacket over a white shirt, knee-long dark-gray breeches with white socks, light brown shoes. Pandrak wore his usual gray outfit, and the Scribe the gown of his profession. The Pacers exhibited garments which suited their disposition: Laetis and Screef projected a certain gray bleakness, Mirne an energetic red, yellow, and white.

The Decagon was packed with bodies. A phalanx of soldiers kept free a corridor for the signatories to pass. About thirty paces from the platform stood one of ten statues, aligned with the corners of the Decagon. Each of these figures, depicting heroes of legend and ancient history in displays of dramatic gestures or poses, stood on a pedestal of square cross-section, and about the height of a man.

Behind the statue nearest to the platform stood Weltig leaning on his staff. Thirty paces was as close as he'd been able to get. It was a trade-off. He might have gotten closer, but the platform was surrounded by soldiers. Aiming and discharging the projectile by blowing into one end of the tube required careful coordination: aiming, releasing an explosive exhalation, keeping the weapon steady in the critical moment of the projective leaving the tube: not a trivial set of requirements in the crowd. In order to aim at all he had to lift the staff above the heads of the people around him and level it at the target while possibly being jostled by those near him. During his practice runs he had determined that with the staff supported atop some solid object he could easily hit a target at forty paces. The statue's pedestal provided such a sup-

port. It could also be used as concealment from the prying eyes of the soldiers while he readied it by removing the caps on the ends. The bystanders might wonder what he was doing, but if he knew anything it was that ordinary people generally didn't conceive of the impossible happening—and the assassination of Armist of Keaen was just about the most conceptually impossible thing on anybody's mind right now. Even the soldiers would not think of it, but saw themselves as being here mainly for the purpose of controlling the crowd. Laetis might try his best to keep them alert, but his control was limited. Harrap's old guard would have been more much more disciplined and alert.

Besides, the crowd wasn't what Armist's so called 'security' should be worrying about. The people milling around him were eager and expectant; strangely euphoric even. A peculiar notion. After all, what did they expect? That things were going to change, just because of a rearrangement of the power structure? Armist of Keaen and the barons—even the Pacers, though they thought of themselves as populists and revolutionaries—were just redistributing the wealth and power at the top. It still rested on all those gathered here: the shabby ones, the merchants, the tradespeople, the sailors, the whores, the pimps, the thieves plying their trade even now . . .

Weltig's arm jerked. An iron fist clamped down on the wrist of an urchin whose hands had only a breath ago been inside Weltig's tunic, fumbling around for valuables.

The urchin squirmed silently, his eyes glaring their defiance and hatred at Weltig. He tried to kick him, but Weltig kept him at arms length. He gave the boy a cold look. The kid, suddenly cognizant that this wasn't just a pathetic beggar, stopped fighting.

Weltig twitched his head and let him go. The urchin disappeared into the crowd. Weltig returned his attention to the podium where the signatories had lined up. A fanfare blew. The signatories sat—except for Armist of Keaen who stood straight, looking out over the crowd.

Weltig wondered what he was thinking. He also knew that this seemed like the ideal moment. With a deft twist he removed the upper cover. A glance inside the tube showed him that the projectile was lodged in its place as it should be. Weltig lifted the staff and reached down to remove the lower cap. It was all done

in one fluid motion, so smooth that even those almost jostling him paid no heed, especially since their attention was fixed on the Young Keaen, who now addressed the crowd, speaking of what had been done.

As Weltig readied his weapon by resting it on the pedestal next to him as if he was just leaving it there for a moment, it occurred to him that Armist of Keaen, callow youth that her was, also exhibited definite qualities of statesmanship. His speed was devoid of flowery turns of phrase, and therefore all the more impressive. The crowd drank the words from his lips.

A dangerous demagogue! All the more reason why he had to go. Indeed, the effect of his demise must now be even more deeply felt.

It was time. Weltig took a last casual look around. Even those behind him had their eyes fixed on their young ruler. Weltig bent down. He took a deep breath and put his lips to the end of the staff, aiming as he had practiced. Armist was supporting himself on the table as he leaned forward to the crowd, who, to a man, did the same thing.

Weltig released his breath in one pent-up gush. A brief resistance as the projectile came loose of its seat; a release as it sped out of the tube.

At that moment Armist chose to stand straight.

—

Armist took a breath and stood up, scanning the crowd. Then, an impact at his shoulder. A small stinging sensation. Armist looked down; saw a tiny arrow sticking out of his jacket. A small cylindrical piece of wood, a needle-sharp point, a tiny ring of feathers at the back.

Armist looked up. Had anybody noticed?

Instinctively his eyes scanned the area where the projectile might have originated. He saw a man turn away and disappear in the crowd. On the pedestal of a close-by statue lay a long, thin, very straight piece of wood.

Pandrak on his left looked up and saw the arrow. His eyes widened. He stood up. The attention of the others was suddenly aroused.

Armist made a quick gesture. "Not now."

"Armist . . ." Tahlia began. Her eyes were wide and frightened.

Armist shook his head. He looked over the crowd

and slowly, deliberately pulled the tiny arrow out of the jacket where it was lodged. He held it up.

"There are those who wish me ill," he said loudly, his voice ringing over the hushed crowd, which finally had caught on to the fact that something was seriously amiss here.

"They will not succeed!" he concluded. "The Declaration will be signed— here and now. Let us proceed."

His co-signatories gaped at him. He shook his head firmly. "Let us finish this." He laid the arrow on the table. Pandrak found a piece of cloth somewhere and wrapped it up as, ceremoniously, the barons and their proxies one by one dipped quills into ink and scratched their names on the parchment.

Armist glanced at Laetis, who stood, impatient to be relieved of his duty as a signatory to get on with the business of finding whoever tried to assassinate the Keaen in broad daylight and despite all his, Laetis' efforts, to protect them all. Again Armist softly shook his head. Laetis grimaced but gave no further sign of his impatience.

Tahlia had taken hold of Armist's left hand and was holding onto it tightly. Armist sensed that she was in a state of near panic. They had braved grave dangers in the past, but this here was something new and unexpected. He returned the grip of her hand and gave her a reassuring smile.

The Declaration document came to them. Tahlia signed it; then Armist. It passed to Pandrak who added his signature and handed it on to the Chief Scribe of the House. Finally it came to the Pacers. When they had finished the process the Declaration was handed back to Armist who held it high. A cheer went up from the crowd; spread until it filled the square with a solid wall of sound.

Armist made a gesture. The crowd fell silent.

*Statecraft*, Armist thought. What a strange activity this is. He could imagine how the adulation of so many and the sensation of power originating from it could become an intoxicant. In the event, he did not want it. It nudged him just enough to give him a taste— and a taste for its dangers at the same time.

*Beware.*

Beware indeed.

Another fanfare ended the ceremony. The signatories filed off the platform. Laetis, finally free to pursue

his duty, disappeared from sight.

Pandrak took hold of his son's arm. "I need to look at your wound. The arrow is almost certainly poisoned."

They climbed into their coach. Tahlia ensconced herself beside Armist and hugged him to her.

"Wave at the people," he told her.

They forced themselves to attend to the necessities of crowd-pleasing until their coaches had left the square and passed through the throng that had collected alongside the route back to the castle. Only when the castle entrance lay behind them did Armist allow himself to relax.

Armist lay on his bed. His upper torso was bare. Pandrak was examining the tiny puncture wound on one side of Armist's upper chest. Almost no blood had been drawn. The heavy fabric of the jacket had impeded the projectile, which might otherwise have lodged much deeper.

"I'm fine," Armist said to Pandrak.

"Right now you may be," his father said critically.

"Do you really think he's been . . ." Tahlia couldn't get the word out.

Pandrak looked at the wound through a lens of Laska crystal.

"It exhibits no sign of infection. That's good—but ultimately insignificant."

He got up. "I don't know what to do," he said, his despair coming through despite his attempt to hide it. "There's no doubt it's poison. The question is: what kind? What effect does it have? Is the dose delivered by the projectile sufficient to be fatal?—for fatality is surely what the assassin would have had in mind. How long does it take for the effects of the poison to exhibit themselves? What can we do when we know the details we require?"

"I'd like to know 'who' or 'why,'" Armist noted. "The Tegels? Tergan? Someone we haven't even considered?"

He rose, picked up his shirt, and put it on again. Tahlia stood beside him and fussed about helping him button it up. Her fingers trembled. Armist took her hands and held them against him. "Do not worry, my love."

"How can I not?" she exclaimed and burst out in tears.

Armist held her against him as she stood there and sobbed, releasing some the pent-up tension that had been held in check until this moment.

Armist looked over her head at his father. He saw nothing but concern there. Armist smiled thinly. Pandrak shook his head and picked up the arrow from the mantelpiece, where he had placed it earlier.

"I'm going to consult some people on this matter. There may be a way to determine the nature of the substance in other ways."

—

All of Keaen was taking this day as an opportunity for a long overdue festivity. The last occasion for merriment had been Armist's *fael*, and that had been a washout; in more ways than one. The Young Keaen had not been in attendance, being a Tergan prisoner at the time, after absconding from his home in the company of his sister, who in turn had been restored to her home—reluctantly, as was well known—and was being wedded to the Baron Tegel without any visible show of enthusiasm; an occasion remarkable only for its dreary weather. An eminently forgettable episode; especially given the events and scandalous revelations that followed, and which had shaken Keaen to its foundations.

It was hoped that those foundation had now been re-established. This day, henceforth to be known as the Day of the Declaration, was bright and sunny; which many took to be an auspicious omen. Apart from the noxious Tegels, everybody who should be present was, and there was no reason not to celebrate. The assassination attempt was a minor snag, which Armist's casual way of treating it had demoted into apparent insignificance. So little was talked about it that Weltig, who had managed to re-assume his courier persona, wondered if maybe he had failed again. It was a bitter medicine for him to swallow. The holder of the title of Keaen appeared to be blessed with a particular good fortune—with regards to Weltig anyway. The arrow had missed the target: the area around Armist's relatively exposed neck and upper chest. Instead it had lodged in the jacket, which was made of leather and might well have stopped a missile already slowed down by a flight of thirty paces or more. He simply didn't know—and could do even less about it now. Whatever

happened, it was out of his hands, and all he could do was to return home and await the future.

He returned to the stable, reclaimed his horse, and, without further ado departed the capital. He made haste and went back the way he had come. The courier disguise again saw him through. He was forced to overnight at Haran's Respite, which made him uneasy, but there was nothing he could do about this either. On the next day he departed with first light and arrived at Daerfil in the late afternoon, after hard-riding four different horses. It was grueling but only when he had gained the northern end of the Marsh Road did he allow himself to breathe freely.

He rested in Daerfil and arrived back in Sacrael after a more leisurely ride. Immediately upon his return—complicated near the end by having to convince the guards at the gate that he was, indeed Weltig!—he asked to see Hengiste. The king received him almost immediately.

When he saw Weltig's appearance he smiled. Weltig allowed himself a rueful grin.

"Sire." He bowed.

Hengiste waved a negligent hand. "Spare me the formalities. How did your mission go?"

Weltig reported on the salient points of his adventure.

"I think I succeeded," he concluded. "Even a tiny scratch should leave enough poison to be effective. It may take a little longer to work, but the end result will be the same."

Hengiste nodded. "Well done, my old friend."

He questioned Weltig some more regarding the events he had witnessed.

"The boy has talents," he mused. "It's almost a pity he has to go." He clapped Weltig on the shoulder. "Well done. Let us hope that the outcome is to our liking. Meanwhile," he allowed himself a smile, "I like you better with your beard."

"I intend to grow it back as quickly as I can," Weltig agreed.

—

The visitors and their entourages were departing. The Laska delegation boarded the ferry to Fingael and left early: the first to go. Baron Keel gripped Armist's hand. "Watch your back," he advised.

Armist grinned. "Or my front, as the case may be," he agreed.

Shortly afterwards the party from Kint boarded their boat; Lady Heloisa pale as a sheet in anticipation of the swaying voyage back. Baron Lydd inclined his head at Armist and Tahlia. "I hope that we'll meet again soon."

They assured him that the sentiment was mutual, and he departed in good spirits.

Kiefer left during mid-morning, heading out along the Great North Road to Port Ster. He expressed his desire to visit again soon, and was welcomed to do so at his pleasure.

Baron Tyfal, Lady Ciara, and their party lingered until noon, hoping maybe that Jaslyn would change her mind and show herself to see them off. When this did not appear to be forthcoming they finally decided to leave. Tyfal took Armist aside and thanked him again for the release of his daughter from Kistof's clutches.

Armist shrugged it off, tired of the subject. He was tired. Period. The conference, now that it was over, had left him with a sense of achievement, but also a great fatigue.

"She and Tahlia are good companions," he told Tyfal. "She is welcome to remain here until she decides to do whatever she decides to do."

"That is extremely kind of you."

"Think nothing of it."

When they were gone Armist heaved a sigh of relief. He and Tahlia went back into the castle and prepared to ascend the steps to their quarters to rest. Armist had not taken more than ten steps when the world around him faded out of existence.

Armist came to in his bed. He was lying on it fully clothed. Attending were Tahlia and Pandrak. At the door stood Laetis, brooding.

"What happened?" Armist asked. He wasn't feeling so bad now at all. He raised himself on his arms.

"Please . . ." Tahlia said to him. Her eyes were red.

"What is it?" he asked . . . and then remembered.

He exhaled sharply and lay back. He grasped Tahlia's hand and looked at his father.

"It seems like there was enough poison," he said softly.

Pandrak nodded. "It appears that way." He hesitated. "I'm trying to determine what you have been adminis-

tered." He laid a hand on Armist's forehead. "There is no fever—which excludes a whole range of substances."

"I feel strong," Armist said. "Let me try and get up."

He did, refusing their help and found that he could. In fact, even the fatigue which he'd felt earlier was gone. He told Pandrak as much.

His father grimaced. "That, too, might be valuable information.— And now I must go and pursue this matter. Let me know immediately you feel even the slightest bit out of the ordinary." He glanced at Tahlia. "And *you* tell me if he doesn't!"

Tahlia hugged Armist. "He'll be sensible," she promised.

Pandrak left. Laetis approached. "I must shoulder the blame for this," he said bleakly. "It was my responsibility . . ."

"Don't fret about it," Armist advised him. "Have you made any progress in determining who did this?"

"The truth?" Laetis scowled. "We have not the slightest idea."

"I thought as much."

Laetis made as if to leave, but hesitated. "There is another matter." He looked from Armist to Tahlia and back. "I . . . regret . . . bringing this up, but I have to consider eventualities."

Armist understood only too well. "I will have a document drawn up to establish the succession," he said.

A small gasp from Tahlia. Armist tightened his arm around her. "Laetis is right. I have no intention of dying, but if this happens—if it happens at any time in the future—there must be a . . . procedure . . . by which a successor is instated without delay. Especially at a time like this."

Laetis inclined his head. "Again, I'm sorry.— And now I must attend to my duties."

Armist dismissed him and Laetis left. Tahlia stared at Armist. "You cannot . . ."

Armist put his arms around her and stroked her hair. There was a pit in the hollow of his stomach. He knew what it was: fear. Fear of dying; of leaving her behind; of never seeing their child; of just . . . not being anymore.

So much to lose . . .

He told himself to pull together; that there were more important things than his apprehensions. If this poison could not be defeated, if it killed him, he had to

make sure that Tahlia and the child were safe. That's what mattered. He had to suppress his fears and focus!

"Don't be afraid," he said into her hair; and he knew that he was talking to himself as much as Tahlia.

—

Pandrak had found Maibach, the venefice, only after extensive enquiries. He didn't usually move in circles which had ready access to such individuals, but with the assistance of Laetis and his connections a name emerged, and late on that day Pandrak stood before Maibach's residence in the northern part of the city, not far from the start of the Great Northern Road.

It was getting dark. Pandrak stood before the building and contemplated his next steps. He was tempted to enter using the gait-of-stealth and survey Maibach and his residence before revealing himself. However, something told him that this might not be the wisest course. An accomplished venefice of Maibach's standing did not arrive at his position without making many enemies. This in turn necessitated a certain paranoia, which would no doubt prompt the man to establish certain security precautions. Pandrak had no intention of getting caught in what might well be a lethal man-trap set by the venefice.

He therefore took the direct approach and rapped on the narrow entrance door.

There was no response.

Pandrak rapped again, louder this time.

"What do you want?"

Pandrak stepped back to see, in a window above him, the pale outline of a man's head, barely visible in the dying light.

"Advice."

"Advice? Ha! Who sent you? Who are you? Why should I give you advice?"

"My answers to your questions:

"Your name came up in a conversation with a certain Olberg.

"Necessity.

"Pandrak, magice-at-court.

"Because if you don't, this land may be at war soon."

There was a pause.

"Wait."

The window closed. A short time later the door was opened, revealing the dim outline of a man inside a

black rectangle.

"Come in!" the venefice muttered. "What are you standing around there for?"

Pandrak hastened to comply. He entered a dark hallway and stood, while Maibach locked the door behind him and then told the magice to follow him. Pandrak, guided at first only by the sound of Maibach's footsteps and then by the illuminated rectangle of an opened door, entered a small room, dimly-lit by a fat candle standing on a table. The rest of the room was bare, except for a mantelpiece around a cold fireplace, and a couple of rickety armchairs near it.

Maibach urged Pandrak to one of the chairs and planted his own bulk into the one opposite.

"Pandrak," he said slowly. "An august visitor if I ever had one. What can one like me do to help?"

"Identify a poison," Pandrak told him, and elaborated.

Maibach listened in silence.

"Klogl," he said when Pandrak was done.

"Klogl?"

"A strange poison. *Any* amount entering a person's body is sufficient to kill — and will do so without fail. The initial symptoms are as you describe. Periods of well-being, followed by subsequent lapses into progressively longer and more profound periods of unconsciousness. Eventually: death. This is klogl, one of the most vile poisons known to man. It's only drawback is that it kills slowly. You don't poison a man with klogl unless you're content to have him take his time to die — or unless you actually desire this. A man poisoned with klogl has ample time to take revenge, of course; which is what makes it less than popular compared to substances such as urefact or blith, which require minimal, albeit tiny, doses to be effective, but which kill much faster; and though there exist antidotes, their availability in time is so improbable that they might as well not exist."

Pandrak sat still for a few breaths. "How can you be sure?"

"I cannot — unless you provide me with the weapon used to poison . . . your son. It is you son, is it not?"

"Yes. — And I do have the weapon."

Maibach jumped up. "Then why didn't you say so?"

He took the wrapped-up bundle from Pandrak and told the magice to wait. He disappeared through the door and returned a good while afterwards.

"It is as I thought," he confirmed bleakly.

Pandrak sat still.

"How long?" he asked Maibach.

Maibach made a small gesture. "He was well for the first day. That means a small quantity and a young man at the peak of his physical powers and health. He will probably have at least one period of unconsciousness per day. Presently the period will become longer. Then there will be two or more, followed by intervals of lucidity, during which he will appear less and less energetic. With luck he may live for a week. Without it," he shrugged, "anything is possible. His last day or days will be spent in a coma from which he'll never emerge. The more he rests the longer he'll live. The poison spreads faster the more active a person is." Maibach considered the magice. "This is the way it is, Pandrak. I cannot but tell you the truth."

Pandrak looked up. "I thank you." He stood. "I have to go." He reached under his tunic. "What do I owe you?"

Maibach shook his head. "This service is free of charge."

Pandrak nodded. "Thank you again."

Tahlia wasn't present when Pandrak, with extreme reluctance, broached the dismal news to Armist. His son listened with a pale, but determined face.

"Do not tell her," he said.

"You must," Pandrak insisted. "She will know. There is no other way. Concealment would serve no function."

Armist rubbed his hands over his face. "What am I to do?"

"About what?" Tahlia's voice came from the door.

They looked at her. Tahlia stepped into the room. One look at Pandrak's face told her everything. She went pale and rushed over to where Armist stood. "What is happening?" she asked Pandrak. "Did you find out?"

Pandrak nodded.

"I will tell her," Armist said softly.

"Tell me what?" Tahlia asked Armist.

When they didn't answer . . .

"Tell me *what*?"

Pandrak simply disappeared in the manner of one who knows the gait-of-stealth. Tahlia didn't even notice.

"Armist?" She looked into his face and read the

truth. "Armist . . ."

He told her. She listened, her head against his chest, sobbing softly, and clinging to him like it was the last time already. When she knew it all he stopped talking and they just stood there. Finally she stopped shaking, and when she took her head off his chest to look at him, her eyes were red but dry.

"There has to be *something* we can do. Things can't just . . . end . . . like this!"

Armist shook his head. "Maybe they do," he said sadly.

Tahlia's eyes widened. "Ailin . . ."

"There is no time."

She hugged him again, quietly this time.

"I'm not losing you like this," she said softly. "Damn it, I'm not going to lose you." A pause. "You're a magice, aren't you? You're supposed to be . . . well, immortal . . . What about that?"

"Not entirely," he said. "I can still die. And I'm not a healer. Only circes are"

Tahlia stopped breathing.

"Nyla!" she exclaimed.

"Nyla? Who is Nyla?" Pandrak wanted to know.

"A circe," Tahlia told him. "At least we think she is"

She elaborated. Pandrak, who had not heard this facet of the story of their flight from Keaen, was inclined to agree.

"We take Armist to Nyla," Tahlia said eagerly. "She will heal him. There's nothing circes cannot do, right?"

Pandrak shrugged. "Let us assume that this . . . Nyla . . . can and will help us. I suggest that I go and fetch her. Armist should not ride. In fact," he said to his son, "to give me the time I need you must do as little as possible."

Armist opened his mouth to say something, but Pandrak cut him off. "You want to live?" he said sharply. "Then do what you have to do! In this instance that means rest!"

Armist raised a defensive hand. "I get it!"

"Good!" Pandrak took a deep breath. "And now tell me where I can find this Nyla."

Pandrak left Keaen along the Reach Road in the middle of the night. According to his calculations he should get to Telara Station by the time it opened at

first daylight; when the pods and elecs had withdrawn into their hideaways and men could venture forth again. As a magice he was not concerned about night-creatures. They would give him a wide berth. There was something about a magice that kept them at bay. Pandrak had never understood what exactly it was, but right now he didn't care. He had a job to do and very little time to do it in. He would do this, no matter what. He had even taken Praetor Morgen's lightning weapon. Whatever stood in his way would be dealt with summarily and without hesitation.

The road was a pale band winding itself slowly to the plateau on which resided Telara Station, illuminated by Janus riding high in a clear sky. The horse was nervous, but presently derived a measure of courage from its rider's determination and proceeded at a good pace. When the first glimmer of morning brightened the horizon beyond the craggy peaks of the Eastern Ranges Pandrak drew up outside Telara's gate, only moments after it had been thrown open for the day. The men there gaped at him as he rode in. Nobody, but nobody, could have dared . . .

But this man had. He had survived. Therefore he was . . . different. That much everybody immediately understood. Pandrak's requests were attended to with alacrity. He left again a short time later on a good fresh horse. He passed Cread Way turnoff and continued on to Tinfeil, where he changed horses again, before heading north-west along the Cedrea-Tinfeil Road. He pushed his mount hard and had to exchange it at the second waystation for another.

The countryside changed. The proximity of the Myrmidic Woods was evidenced by the increasing frequency of tika trees; small ones mostly, though on occasion an old one, rearing high into the sky, could be seen off to the western side of the road.

A small, ill-defined track led off to the south-west on the left side of the road. Pandrak recalled his instructions. He left the road and followed the track for a small distance. To his right he saw tilled fields. Further in the distance what might have been a farmhouse. Pandrak left the track and headed cross-country. The farmhouse drew closer, revealed itself to be a house with an attached barn. Pandrak rode into an untidy yard. A lank youth stopped carting bales of hay and eyed the newcomer. He called out. A man and a woman of early middle age emerged from the barn,

followed by a girl on the edge of womanhood. All were dressed plainly and clearly had been laboring inside the barn.

Pandrak hailed them and got off his horse. Already it was clear that these were not 'Barch and Nyla'. But maybe these folks could help.

They could. They knew those he was seeking, though they hadn't seen them for weeks. The farm was just over yonder, and would he like the son to come with him to show him the way.

Pandrak thanked them but declined the offer of a guide. He remounted his horse and continued on his way. It was late in the afternoon when he spied the farm. He approached and rode into a yard of a very different appearance, this one being tidy and well-kept.

As he halted his horse a man emerged from the house.

"And who would you be?"

Pandrak got off the horse and extended a hand. He had considered evasions and subterfuge, but there was no time for such things.

"I am Pandrak," he said. "The magice-at-court at Castle Keaen. And am I talking to Barch?"

The man's eyes widened with surprise. "Magice you say? And you know *me*? What an amazing thing this is!"

Pandrak shook his head. "Hardly. Especially since you and your wife some time ago proved such excellent hosts to my son and his . . . sister."

Barch's eyes widened. "We did?"

Then his face darkened and closed up. "We did . . ." he said grimly. "But that was before . . ." His lips pressed together.

"Before what?" Pandrak enquired. He glanced around the yard but 'Nyla' was nowhere in evidence.

"What do you want?" Barch asked curtly, his tone very much different from what it had been.

"I need to speak to your wife," Pandrak told him.

"I have no wife."

"But . . ."

"I *had* a wife," Barch grated, "but no more."

Nyla, whoever she was, had not died: this much was certain. Barch's expression was not one of grief but of anger.

"What happened," Pandrak asked gently.

"I do not want to talk about it!" Barch snapped. "If it's her you want go and look somewhere else. Find

whatever other fool she managed to deceive into giving her a home." He turned away.

"Wait!" Pandrak said sharply, using an inflection which implied irresistible authority.

Barch stopped as if he'd run into a wall.

"What happened?" Pandrak asked, in the same tone of voice.

Barch turned and gazed Pandrak from empty eyes.

"She's a circe," he muttered.

"I know that," Pandrak said. "Where did she go?"

"She just left."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"The truth!"

Barch's internal struggle was mirrored in his face, which twisted and jerked. "I thought she was just a normal woman. A gifted one, but just a woman. She always had the touch—but that was alright: some women, they just have it." A sigh. "Then I found out."

"How?"

"She . . ." Barch winced as if in pain. "I had an accident. The bullock gored me. She made me live. Then I knew her for what she was."

"And then?"

"Then nothing. She left."

"Why?"

"Why do circes do anything?"

"What did *you* do?"

"I didn't do nothing!" Barch said stubbornly.

But Pandrak saw the guilt. "Yes, you did."

"How would *you* know?"

"I know."

Barch's expression wavered between truculence and guilt. Pandrak asked no more. He knew anyway. Barch, unable to deny anymore what he must have suspected, but never had dared to admit, had found himself unable to bear the thought of a life with what amounted to an immortal wife—who would survive him and be a youthful as ever when he was just a toddery old man.

Few men could face such a situation with dignity. Love was a tenuous thing and could not necessarily be relied upon to bridge the abyss between the world view of a circe and that of a mortal man. Only rare individuals, like Caitlan of Tinagel, had the mental scope to encompass such a relationship—and to gain the devotion of one such as Ailin.

Pandrak's thoughts veered away from the here and

now? Where were Caitlan and Ailin? Had they succeeded in stopping Rutger? Were they even still alive? Rumors had reached him that the ship which carried them and the magices had foundered in a severe storm and that no survivors had ever been found.

Futile broodings. Pandrak redirected his attention to Barch.

"I regret your loss," he said softly.

"I didn't lose nothing!" Barch declared.

*Yes, you did!*

But Pandrak did not voice the thought. The man was in enough pain without having salt poured on his wounds.

"There are other women," Pandrak said, but it sounded lame, even to himself.

"And who'd want to come and live out here?" Barch said despairingly.

"Why not live in Cedrea?" Pandrak suggested. "Your brother surely would welcome it."

"What do you know about my brother?"

"I've met him," Pandrak said. "He's a good man. He's helped to make things in Keaen better. Maybe he can help you."

"I doubt it." Barch turned and shuffled away.

Pandrak looked at his retreating back. The Barch he'd encountered bore little resemblance to the congenial—though somewhat paranoid—individual Armist and Tahlia had described. This one was grim, sullen, and loaded with guilt.

The magice wondered if he should try to mend things. He finally decided that he wouldn't. He couldn't. Nobody could. Besides, it was none of his business. There was nothing here he could possibly make right. Despite his limitations, it had been Barch's decision not to accept Nyla for what she was, thus prompting her to leave and submerge into obscurity yet again. Barch, no matter his excuses, bore a large portion of guilt. Somewhere Nyla would now be trying to make herself another life; having been reminded yet again that she was an outcast, a freak, whom nobody wanted in their midst, not even those who claimed to love her.

What a miserable world. Were these people really worth his attention? Were they worth sacrificing *anything* for?

More futile questions.

Pandrak remounted his horse and rode away. He had greater concerns than Barch.

There was no Nyla to save Armist.

His son would die.

And there was nothing he could do.

—

Tahlia sat on a chair beside their bed, on which Armist rested, unconscious, breathing shallowly—but at least still breathing. She held his cool hand in hers and pretended that with the warmth of her own hand life and strength flowed into him. It couldn't just end like this. Not here, not now. Indeed, it could never end. This thing was a crazy aberration in the fabric of reality that must surely be put right again soon. Pandrak would find Nyla and take her here to bring her Armist back; to give their daughter a father.

Tahlia stopped herself.

'Daughter?'

The thought had come easily, and it had just seemed . . . right.

A girl then. And it was good. Armist would love it.

She slipped off the chair, lay down beside him on her side, facing him, and placed one arm across his chest.

*Live. — Please live. — For I don't want to live without you.*

There was no sign that he had heard. But still she projected the thought and hoped that somewhere, somehow he knew . . .

A rap on the door.

"Who is it?" Tahlia called out.

"The Lady Jaslyn, Mylady," the voice of the guard came back.

"Beg her enter!"

Tahlia saw the door open and Jaslyn step into the room. Despite everything Tahlia smiled. Jaslyn was a good woman. Close enough to Tahlia in age to share at least some similar concerns—close enough in her background to share points of reference, meanings, the little somethings of life that came from having been raised here and not there; in the company of these people but not those; used to thinking this way but not that. So much went into making someone comfortable with another, and just *liking* them was only one part of it. Jaslyn shared enough to make her familiar, and Tahlia liked her as well. A good companion to have around.

Jaslyn was the fifth visitor since nightfall.

The first had been the scribe who had presented to Tahlia the document—already counter-signed by Pandrak before his departure—in which Armist fixed the order of succession in case of his death (an unthinkable eventuality, but one he at least had considered). He had also—with Pandrak, Tahlia, and the Scribe as his co-signatories—ordained a chain of command for the period during which he might be unconscious. This chain started with Tahlia; then came Pandrak; then—if by some miracle he arrived in an opportune moment—Caitlan; then Laetis.

Armist—lucid at the time—and Tahlia had affixed their signatures to the document, as did the Scribe in their presence. He then left to have the document copied by his underlings; after which he would lock it up in the Castle’s documentary vault: an iron chest with a heavy padlock, which stood in a room accessible only through an ancient tika door, which was padlocked with an even larger lock.

Shortly after the Scribe had left Armist declared a sudden onset of weakness and collapsed on the bed. Soon after that arrived Laetis, who disputed the wisdom inherent in the order of power as fixed by Armist’s document. Tahlia pointed out, somewhat testily, that the matter had been agreed upon by all the signatories, who also happened to be the same people who signed the Declaration. Laetis prepared to argue the point. The magice was not at the Castle. Neither was Caitlan. How could government function if no one was at the head?

Tahlia controlled herself with difficulty.

“You have read the document?” she asked sarcastically.

“Of course, I have.” Laetis was perplexed at the question.

“And who, to your understanding is directly in the line of command under Armist?”

“You are, but . . . ”

“But *what*?”

“You are . . . ” Tahlia could see that Laetis wasn’t prepared to accept this particular challenge, which he must have thought would not be issued, or else he would not have come into the room with such ludicrous suggestions.

“I’m glad we understand each other,” she said, with a dangerous edge to her voice. “And now I would like to attend to Armist—so, if you don’t mind . . . ”

Laetis left with what good grace he could muster. Tahlia watched the door close behind him. Laetis, she thought, had changed since she first had known him. The transition from a covert revolutionary to one of the most significant individuals in the government of Keaen had done things. He thought thoughts he would not have entertained before. He missed things he would have understood otherwise. There had been a time when he wouldn’t even have dreamed of challenging her.

Tahlia wondered what it meant.

The third and fourth visitors had been Mirne and Screef. They came together to see Armist, only to find him unconscious. Mirne obviously found the sight disturbing. Screef—who had been extremely close to death himself, and whose condition at the time might have made death look like a welcome relief—noted Mirne’s condition and, somewhat shyly, put an arm around her shoulder: a gesture which she obviously enjoyed.

“What can we do?” she asked Tahlia.

Tahlia, who sat beside the bed holding onto Armist’s hand, shrugged.

“Hope.”

“He must live,” Mirne declared with passion. “It would be the greatest of tragedies if he did not.”

She went over to Tahlia and hugged her. “If there is anything we can do . . . ” She looked at Screef, who nodded minutely. “I mean ‘anything’. We . . . ” she hesitated, “we are Pacers and this where our loyalties must lie—but he is our friend and this is where our loyalties *are*.”

Tahlia looked at Mirne and saw new meanings in her expression and in her tone.

“Laetis doesn’t like the order of command,” she said. Screef nodded. “We know.”

“What do *you* think?” Tahlia asked them.

Mirne smiled. “You heard what I said. I meant it. And I spoke for both of us.”

Tahlia nodded thoughtfully. “Thank you.”

Mirne looked at Armist. “Don’t die,” she said softly. “We all need you—more than you’ll ever know.”

In Mirne’s place now stood Jaslyn.

“You need to rest,” she told Tahlia.

“I’m lying down,” Tahlia said. “I can hardly rest more.”

At that very instant the rhythm of his breathing

changed. Tahlia froze. For one horrifying moment she thought . . .

But, no . . .

Armist opened his eyes. His head turned and he saw her.

"How long?" he whispered.

"About an hour," Tahlia told him and hugged him tightly.

"Help me up," he said. "There is much to do, and not a lot of time to do it in."

Tahlia knew the tone. It was pointless to contradict him. He would do as he thought he had to do. This was Armist, and Armist was Armist, and she loved him more than anything, and that was that.

—

Pandrak gained the East Road and looked around. To the right: the way to Tinfel and back to Keaen. To the left: the way to Cedrea, his and Armist's home; and the place where Armist's grandfather, Tellam, still lived, refusing, despite the change of power, to set foot into the capital, which he considered a place of corruption. Tellam admitted that Armist probably was changing all that, but it would take time, and until it was done, he wanted nothing to do with Keaen.

Tellam had to know what was happening to his grandson; especially now that Armist was dying and Pandrak knew not what to do to help. If only he could find the circe . . .

Pandrak froze.

*The circe?*

How about just *a* circe?

Ailin was too far away, but there was another.

Maybe . . .

Ailin's friend.

. . . Zygie . . .

Sacrael . . .

So far.

Yet . . . what did he have to lose . . . except his son? The hope was faint but it existed.

Sacrael.

Pandrak made a quick mental calculation.

It was getting dark; the horse was tired. He might just make it to Salma's Nook. Change horses there; go on to Cedrea. Change horses again, and onto the Center Road. It would be dark, but so what? If he didn't push

the horse too hard, he could be at the North and Center Road junction by daybreak. From there, Sacrael was just a day off.

Then to find the circe— *if* she still was there!— and another two days back to Keaen.

They might just make it.

*Please be sensible*, he told his son. *Don't make me be too late. Don't make it all become a wasted effort.*

But how could it be? Nothing worthwhile, no matter how unsuccessful, was ever wasted. There was no more worthwhile thing in the whole universe than to save his son.

Pandrak kicked the horse into motion as he headed north at best speed.

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# Dogbold the Deft

\* \* \*

Dogbold limped across that stretch of territory known as “Barnum’s Waste” to folk farther north. From time to time he glanced over his shoulder or adjusted his direction to profit from what cover could be had—mainly shadows cast by gigantic rock spires thrusting skyward at erratic intervals, out of the hard, pebbly ground. Twice he had been obliged to throw himself under thorn bushes to avoid the attention of raptors. Once he had attracted the notice of a molting bung, but as luck would have it the creature’s middle leg was confused in the shreds and folds of skin, and Dogbold had escaped. Barnum’s Waste was not the most reassuring milieu Dogbold had ever known, but he did not travel it by choice.

Dogbold’s appearance was not at its best. His cheeks had become drawn and his eyes lacked their customary sparkle. His once fashionable silk suit, decorated in broad vertical bands of orange and yellow, bordered in tasteful brown stripe, was in a pitiable state and hung loosely on his diminished frame. His jaunty, long-limbed step was hindered by the boot he had lost, and the orangy sun, profiting from the absence of his hat, beat cruelly on his head. His hair, usually coifed in style, hung limply down over the top of his ears.

In the midst of his tribulations the memory of recent events at Poodle’s Tavern still rankled. In particular, a certain roast fowl remained uppermost in Dogbold’s mind. “A mere bush hen!” he muttered to himself in disgust—though the characterization ‘mere’ was perhaps not fully apt. The hen, a humble creature in itself, had been prepared by Poodle with morels and shallots, and served with a flourish of hot raisin drippings. Nevertheless, had it merited the disproportionate hullabaloo provoked in the tavern? That a hungry man should attempt to fill his stomach: was this such an amazing crime? Poodle himself had deemed it so, as well as the habitués of the tavern—in particular a massive man, known as Liggitimus, who had intended the succulent hen for his own consumption. Liggitimus had even paid for this privilege. But, Dogbold asked himself, was ‘right’ truly on the side of Liggitimus and his coin, over-fed and besotted with

lucre as he was?

Testing the question for the hundredth time Dogbold decided it admitted no clear resolution, and put it aside. Other problems, though directly related to this roast bird by the ineluctable law of cause and effect, demanded his immediate attention: he was in the middle of a dangerous no-man’s land, he was missing both hat and boot, and—this above all—his hunger had gone unappeased for the last ten days. The icy dew which formed in large droplets each morning on the ground, though it also soaked his clothes and chilled him cruelly, could be sucked off the rocks; it was the only sustenance he had enjoyed on the Waste. There was probably nutritive value in certain darting scorpions, which had often to be stepped around, or even in the large, hopping spiders which hunted them, but Dogbold was unsure how to extract the venomous ganglia of these creatures. His present circumstances were, therefore, not optimal. But Dogbold the Deft was both quick of wit and decisive of action. He prided his capacity to note, and seize, every advantage, however obscure.

“In the midst of tranquillity and plenty,” Dogbold reasoned, “men are subject to neurosis, or: ‘mental and spiritual dystrophia’. But, thanks to the insuperable difficulties which, at the moment, confront me, I, Dogbold the Deft, am alert to essentials! Herein lies my advantage: awareness of my true priorities!” Dogbold cataloged these in his mind, using the classic system of hierarchical arrangement according to importance:

- 1 - ‘Food’
- 2 - ‘Shelter’
- 3 - ‘Clothing’

His course was now clear: ignoring extraneous distractions and secondary considerations of any kind, he must procure these items in a spirit of pragmatic efficacy . . .

But where? The open area he presently crossed, hobbling on his skinny shanks, was absent of item one: ‘Food’. He also failed to discern anything resembling item ‘3’, ‘Clothing’. As to item ‘2’, ‘Shelter’—Dogbold glanced nervously sky-wards—the vicinity of yonder stone spike, while its advantages could not be compared to those of a well appointed hotel, at least offered better concealment from the gaze of raptors

than the naked peniplane. On the other hand, were a snapjack to be crouching among the thorns . . .

Where were his other options? A return to the north imposed passage though Hangman's Gap. But Hangman's gap was, in effect, the main street of Vremp, where Poodle's Tavern was situated. Dogbold was unsure if his reappearance would be appreciated by Poodle, or Liggitimus . . . or even Liggitimus' loyal friends, who had been both numerous and belligerent. To the east were fly infested swamps. To the west formidable cliffs piled up to form the Prognantian mountains, habitat to tigers and flame bats. "Uninviting though it might seem," Dogbold concluded, "south remains the direction of best hope." He congratulated himself on this correct assessment of the situation, and proceeded on his way.

Dogbold's calculations had not been erroneous. Two particularly difficult days of travel later, Barnum's Waste gave way to a more normal landscape. The mountains fell aside, the swamp was drained away by a river, and the view ahead opened upon a wide valley. Like carpets spread across the terrain, areas of pink, pearly beige, and several shades of dark green bore witness to the cultivation of quiena, barley, hops and shrebbers. Tall slender trees lined the river, their branches holding aloft delicate clusters of leaves which glimmered in the light like copper coins. Others trees, like crooked coat-racks festooned with wisps of dark shag, bordered meadows where troops of long-horned ruminants grazed, or rested in the shade. Best of all, in the middle distance was a town, though farther off Dogbold discerned hamlets and steadings shimmering like insects in the bright mist. He proceeded in haste, eager to locate nourishment.

As he approached he could not help remarking some odd characteristics of the town. First of all, its poor situation. Instead of occupying one of the rises near the river, or a protected area by the fertile hills, it exposed itself to the four winds in a spot inconveniently distant from both, and even stood in the midst of a marshy slough, the last manifestation of the northern swamps. The most prominent structure was also peculiar: a heavy cubic building lacking both windows and chimneys. The houses themselves, though well built of stone to traditional designs, were crowded around this edifice like eager goslings clustering

around a mother goose—in spite of open and unused territory beckoning on all sides. Meanwhile the largest and finest manse—apparently the town hall, municipal court house, or the palace of a local grandee—was the single exception to this rule, being quite outside the town, and up on better ground. In other respects the place seemed ordinary enough. And the inhabitants, from a distance at least, looked well fed and smartly dressed.

Circumnavigating impenetrable clots of lally weed, slinking around puddles, and hopping across rivulets, Dogbold made his way forward. Near the town Dogbold discovered a pair of children busy hunting frogs in a pool. At his appearance they showed neither fear nor friendliness, but peered at him as if he were a will-o'-the-wisp, a swamp bird, or some other natural phenomenon. When he greeted them they gave no answer, but continued their quizzical inspection. Dogbold shrugged and moved on. Nearing the northern verge of the town he noted that, while the town itself seemed a solid urban mass without interstitial spaces, the outermost houses, though crowded in on the others, used the adjacent open ground for spacious gardens, often with a decorative tree or sun-house. Reaching the edge of one of these gardens Dogbold noted a stout matron sitting in her gazebo. She watched him with an intent and puzzled expression, much like the frog-hunting children. Dogbold chuckled at these manifestation of provinciality; had these people never seen a stranger come down from the north? He was about to perform a salute and make polite inquires, when the woman scuttled up to him and, without a word of introduction, began touching and patting as if to determine whether or not he were an apparition, and of what sort. At last she demanded: "What manner of thing are you?"

Dogbold, who was not for nothing known as 'Dogbold the Deft', retained his aplomb and suavely replied: "I am a voyager from the north. Though I have recently encountered bad fortune, I am in fact a personage of importance and wealth. At the moment I am keen to procure a meal."

"A voyager from the north?" repeated the matron dubiously, as if Dogbold had claimed to be Seraster, King of the Stars.

"Indeed! I have come down from Vremp, by way of Barnum's Waste."

The matron raised her eyebrows, stood back, and

inspected Dogbold from up to down, and back again. At last, with sly suspicion as if she had caught him in some disreputable act, she demanded: "Where is your kepi?"

"Where indeed?" replied Dogbold smoothly. "I have lost it, and now I do not know where it is."

"Wait here," she commanded, and bustled into the house. She returned with a cap in the shape of a truncated cone, which she fit on Dogbold's head. "There; that's better! You seem partly real already." It was a peculiar remark, to which Dogbold did not know how to reply, so he made a small bow and attempted to steer the conversation back into a more normal vein.

"Tell me, my good dame, where may a man obtain a meal in this town?"

His interlocutrice frowned in disapprobation: "A 'man' may obtain a meal in several places. There is Phylo's Tavern to begin with. But Phylo was not born yesterday: his tavern is a respectable establishment! In either case the condition for taking meals is that a 'man' who wishes to do so, exist."

"But I exist perfectly well!" protested Dogbold.

The woman sniffed. "So you say! What do they call you?"

Dogbold hesitated: "Several names have been used . . ."

She held up her hand: "Inflict no catalogs upon me! I am busy with my various panevolences and can not waste precious time parsing grandiloquent sets of self-serving designations proffered by an illusion. Simply tell me right out: how do you name yourself? — whatever you are."

Dogbold drew himself up as straight as his aching feet would allow: "I am: Dogbold the Deft. My immediate concern is nourishment. I would appreciate your directing me to Phylo's Tavern, where . . ."

Again the woman held up her hand. "Not so fast! I am not Nilla Bumpsaple, Panevolent Benefica, because I stand idle with my finger in my nose! First things first: what are you?"

"I am as you see," stated Dogbold, "a person in need of nourishment, of which I have enjoyed little, or none, for an extended period."

"I must escort you to the Magisterium," continued Matron Bumpsaple without heeding him. "You will be examined."

"I need no examination," explained Dogbold, "I need

food."

Matron Bumpsaple shrugged dismissively. "Things such as yourself do not need food."

"Like all men, I must eat, which I have not done for twelve whole days!"

"You see? You have done perfectly well without any food for an impossible duration, as is normal for your type."

"What type is this?!" cried Dogbold, becoming exasperated with the woman's obtuseness.

"What type indeed? This is the very question I ask myself! But the mystery of your beingness will be elucidated by the Magisters." With these words she clutched Dogbold by what remained of his sleeve and marched him briskly into the town, careless of puddles and mud, which in any case were unavoidable in the narrow streets. Dogbold came staggering after as best he could.

"You have strange habits in this town. What is it called?"

"Town?" repeated the matron with a puzzled air. "Ah! you refer to the dwellings; these are mere incidentals." She gave a little toss to her head which both dismissed the houses and expressed a low opinion of Dogbold's knowledge. "As a Non-thing you would naturally lack awareness of where you are."

"I have the honor, then, to be in a place of importance?"

"You understate the case. No place is of more importance than here. It is because of the Baakaa."

Dogbold failed to understand. "The town is called: 'Baakaa'?"

Matron Bumpsaple was puzzled: "What town? The Baakaa is not a town; it is the central dynamic of the universe! It is located here."

"Where?" asked Dogbold, still failing to comprehend. Matron Bumpsaple pointed ahead, indicating the cubic construction Dogbold had noted earlier.

The cramped alley soon opened upon a square surrounding the odd building, and Dogbold saw several dozen people lounging against its walls. However, on closer approach, he noted that instead of the vapid expressions appropriate to loungers, they looked intent and earnest, as if hard at work at some important task, though all that seemed to occupy them was chasing mosquitoes from their faces with small whisks. Matron Bumpsaple, noticing Dogbold's puzzlement,

again indicated the structure and offered a further explication: "The three Nusses are there. They regulate and distribute the universal force."

"But I see no door," said Dogbold. "How do the Nusses gain egress and ingress?"

Matron Bumpsaple laughed. "As you do not exist, your ignorance is no surprise! You are null in all respects! But I will instruct you, which will augment your beingness from zero, to zero plus 'x'; where 'x' is an important but still minor quantity! The Nusses are not persons requiring ingress as you foolishly imagine. They are the living stones — or 'scient crystallines' if you prefer — the three regulatory elements: Aynomi, Soodunomi and Nomme. They divide the universal force into its three dynamic principles, and distribute them in whorls and vortexes. Thanks to close proximity we profit maximally from these healthful effluvia, and are thus superior . . ." here Matron Bumpsaple was seized by a fit of sneezing, certainly due, thought Dogbold, to the stagnant, dank and insalubrious air of the

place. When her fit was over, though still snuffling, she resumed her explanation: "We Benefers even aid the Nusses by harmonizing the stresses." She nodded toward the apparently idle folk. "Our work is important. The universe would be a mere chaos without us." Matron Bumpsaple wiped her nose on a blue handkerchief which she then tucked back into her bodice.

"Interesting," muttered Dogbold, "but where is Phyllo's Tavern?"

"Just yonder, up that avenue; you can see the sign."

Craning his neck, Dogbold peered up a crooked alleyway and caught a glimpse of a small sign painted with a rosebud.

"Should we not just step in for a moment to refresh ourselves? This also will augment our beingness."

Matron Bumpsaple made a negative signal. "Not only do you lack complete footwear, but your clothes are in tatters and your kepi is too small. In any case you are not a man, thus you require no refreshment despite your obsessive concern with food. Come to the Magisterium."

Dogbold had by now decided that Matron Bumpsaple was not a woman to be relied upon. He would have ended their association by ruse or force, but his trek across the waste had left him without wit or strength

for the exertion. In addition, Matron Bumpsaple was not a woman to be taken lightly; she was both energetic and full-figured.

Dogbold was led down crooked, damp, shadowy streets, and eventually back out into the open and light, in a place opposite the important building he had noted earlier — apparently not the abode of a grandee after all, but the so-called Magisterium. Built on a little rise, it was a handsome



"Should we not just step in for a moment to refresh ourselves? This also will augment our beingness."

building constructed of pale green stone. Its facade was fourteen windows wide, and decorated with pilasters and a floral frieze. The roof was of blue tile, and sported dozens of fancifully carved chimneys inlaid with colored stone, and a row of gables topped with elaborate finials. A wide path led across the swamp to the base of the hill. It was dry thanks to a raised bed of river stones, and several little bridges which crossed the rivulets. The path led up the hill, flanked on either side with decorative bushes trimmed into precise shapes. Matron Bumpsaple led Dogbold through a gate of fancy iron-work, and into the spacious gardens surrounding the Magisterium. A definite

improvement, thought Dogbold, over the maze-like swamp, or the dark and cramped streets of the town! The air of the place was also better than the stale gasses they had been required to breathe below. As they crossed the gardens Dogbold noted grandly dressed persons promenading in the paths and shrubberies, or conversing together under tunnels of blooming roses. He tried to attract their attention by waving his arm, but Matron Bumpsaple dragged him along smartly, hauling him up seven 'demi-lune' steps to the main entrance. A liveried servitor opened the door and bowed them into a large vestibule which traversed the whole building. Just behind the door was a reception counter which obstructed the way. Behind this counter, perched on a high stool, sat a wizened old man with an intent gaze. Dogbold would have made an appeal, but the receptionist, head to one side, scrutinized him with such intensity that he was temporarily discountenanced.

"What have we here?" asked the receptionist at last, addressing Matron Bumpsaple: "Man? Thing? Non-thing?" Matron Bumpsaple remained silent, and after a further period of inspection, he remarked: "His kepi is maladjusted."

"He has no kepi!" Matron Bumpsaple reported. "This is just one of Nacraster's old things."

"Where is he from then?" pursued the receptionist.

"He claims to come from the north," she said with a sneer, "and indeed, I watched him emerge from the Neant with my own eyes!"

"Really! What are his pronations and agnomens?"

"They are: 'Dogbold', and: 'the Deft', or so he pretends."

"Did he submit no corroborating documents?"

"I have not yet had the opportunity to examine them."

"Let us do so now," suggested the receptionist. He addressed Dogbold: "Documents please!"

Dogbold replied: "I am the unfortunate victim of injustice — or, at the very least, unfriendly treatment — and now I am as you see: without boot, hat, or document of any kind."

The receptionist made a soft clucking sound. "Not good," he muttered. He cogitated for a moment, pulling on his right ear with his left thumb and fore-finger. Then he rapped the desk with a small hammer. "Proceed to the salon!" he ordered. "Moglator Nisleffer

himself will attend to you." He rang a bell and called further orders through a small trap in the wall.

The servitor held open a gate in the counter, and Matron Bumpsaple escorted Dogbold into the vestibule and down one of the halls leading away into the wings of the building. The hall was decorated with tapestries of arcane design which Dogbold found intriguing but marred by crude workmanship. "This seems a fine place," he hazarded. "Might there not be some salt bread or potato soup on the premises? Allow me to remind you that I have not eaten for twelve days. Local customs of hospitality, which may be in force, should not be scamped."

Matron Bumpsaple looked at him in grudging admiration: "Ha! as a Non-Thing — for such I suspect you to be — you make a convincing display!"

"How can you be so sure I am a Non-thing, and not what I appear to be, namely a highly respectable, if hungry, person who exists fully and in all respects?" complained Dogbold.

"Is it not obvious? You come from Nowhere, therefore you are Nothing."

"Nowhere? But I came down from Vrem . . ."

"Extantness begins just over the northern rise," she interrupted impatiently. "You emerged from the Neant, and partake of it fully! We, who are experts in the matter of Being, and all its degrees, will determine your nature and quality."

"But I need food!" insisted Dogbold.

Matron Bumpsaple stamped her foot in annoyance. "Oh very well!" she grumbled. "Wait here; I'll fetch something, if only to silence your incessant complaints — though I must say: a creature, or non-creature, such as yourself, would do better to manifest more spiritual qualities, your material aspect being mere illusion." She ushered Dogbold into the Salon and closed the door.

The room was well appointed, with bright yellow drapes held back from the windows by gilded swags. There was a fine view of the distant river, as well as of the town below. Many 'objects d'art', some of more ancient, and much better, workmanship than the shoddy tapestries in the hall, were arranged on small tables or hung on the walls. Dogbold settled gratefully into an upholstered chair, rubbed his sore feet, and considered the advisability of stealthy departure. He had learned the location of a tavern — but, he reflected, he was presently no better furnished with

coin than he had been at Poodle's; a similar misfortune might therefore ensue. Meanwhile the Benefica Bumpsaple had promised to return with nourishment, apparently at no charge. And since the Benefica, while unconventional, did not seem dangerous or dire, Dogbold adjudged it advisable to wait where he was.

He was just beginning to plan the abstraction of one, or perhaps two, of the bibelots decorating the salon, when the door opened and an imposing individual stepped in. He was dressed in long green robes decorated with crude appliquéés of esoteric signs. He wore a tall pointed hat upon an over-large head, featuring prominent eyes and terminating below in a regally flowing beard. He stepped into the middle of the room and peered down at Dogbold as if inspecting an object. He then took three quick steps to a second vantage and, after a period, moved on to a third, fully observing Dogbold from every side. At last he spoke, in a sonorous voice.

"I am Moglator Nisleffer. What are you?"

Dogbold got to his feet as best he could for stiffness of limb and torso-twisting hunger. "I am Dogbold the Deft," he began, "and I. . ."

"Stick out your tongue!" demanded Nisleffer, darting near. In surprise, Dogbold obeyed. Grabbing ahold of his head with both hands to assure a better angle of view, Nisleffer inspected the organ. "Roll your eyes," he commanded. Dogbold did so, while Nisleffer peered close. Nisleffer stood back in satisfaction. In an insinuating tone he then asked: "I dare say you seem, to yourself, to be real?"

"Most real of all," replied Dogbold patiently, "is the hunger that has accumulated for the last twelve days in my stomach. I would appreciate assuagement, even were it no more than the dream of a non-entity."

"This answers my question," stated Nisleffer. "Your flippant attitude is characteristic of your origin."

At this moment Matron Bumpsaple re-entered the room with a tray, followed by several Magisters recognizable by their robes and head gear, which were similar to Nisleffer's but used different symbols and color schemes. On the tray were a pitcher of clear liquid, a cup, a plate of crackers, and a chunk of gray substance. Dogbold took a step toward the tray, but Matron Bumpsaple snatched it out of his reach. The Magisters made themselves comfortable on settees and sofas, and Nisleffer, holding out an arm to indicate Dogbold,

addressed the assembly: "We have here a 'replication'. My diagnosis is: 'stability of manifestation'. But we must proceed with dispatch, because you can never be too sure."

"What about the food?" asked Dogbold.

Nisleffer looked back and forth from the food to Dogbold in consideration. "An experiment!" he exclaimed at last. "Will the imaginary hunger of a nullity be assuaged by genuine nourishment?" He moved a statuette of dancing children off a guéridon, arranged the tray in its place, installed Dogbold, and offered him a napkin.

All watched as Dogbold ate and drank.

When he had finished Nisleffer stood up and clapped his hands. "We must now proceed with dissolution, beginning, as usual, with morcelation, obliterating all that is illusion and retaining only the true essence, which is to say: the biscuit and cheese."

"What of the liquid water?" asked one of the other Magisters.

Another leaned close to his ear and, in a half-whisper, replied: "It will be evaporated in the transmutation process."

"Just so," agreed Nisleffer. Then, turning to Matron Bumpsaple: "Will your Panevolence please focus a pure ray of Aynomic regenerative fluxion?" Matron Bumpsaple performed a curtsy and hurried from the room. Nisleffer made a gesture with his finger and two Magisters took Dogbold, who had understood none of this, gingerly by the arms and began escorting him from the salon.

"Where are you taking me?" protested Dogbold.

"It is pointless to make conversation with a Non-thing," said the Magister on his right.

"Correct," returned the one on the left. "Why say something, to nothing, and what for?"

"Indeed," chuckled the first: "What good is served by telling him we go to the laboratory?"

Ignoring further questions they led Dogbold to a large room filled with apparatus: a caldron, racks of instruments, shelves crowded with bottles and librams. They placed him on a table. Nisleffer opened a cupboard containing a set of large carving knives. Some of the Magisters selected knives and began to strop them on bands of leather attached to the wall for the purpose. Others lit a fire under the caldron, fetched basins and saws, or set out small tools of macabre aspect.

Nisleffer addressed Dogbold: "Lie back and be comfortable. After we disperse the illusion of your being, the ray of restorative fluxion will reconstitute the cheese and biscuit you consumed in the salon."

"What sort of procedure is this?" demanded Dogbold, beginning to grasp the direction of events. "Does every unlucky stranger, who comes down from the countries to the north, meet a similar fate?"

"There are no countries to the north," pronounced Nisleffer. "Apparitions, such as yourself, are projections of Nothingness, and we Magisters must study and articulate the nature of its essence; thus our 'procedure' as you call it."

"I should have approached from the east, or the west," muttered Dogbold. But Nisleffer overheard him.

"It would have done you no good! Nothingness, though more distant in these regions, is rife to east and west as well. The Baakaa, with our aid and intervention, projects Beingness as far as possible. But, beyond a limited zone, Nothingness reigns. Its occasional manifestations must therefore be sacrificed to the elucidation of its many mysteries."

Dogbold had heard enough. He hopped nimbly from the table, dodged to the window and, followed by moans of disappointment from the knife-wielding Magisters, leapt to freedom. "I return to Nothingness whence I came!" he called over his shoulder, in hopes the announcement would baffle pursuit. He dashed across the garden, vaulted a hedge, sprinted down the east side of the hill and, by a circuitous route through a bog of bulrushes, made his way undetected back toward the town.

Dogbold's first necessity: 'Food', had been satisfied, but only minimally; testing the quality of Phylo's Tavern remained high on his priority list. Meanwhile the rest of his list required readjustment. Since it was the middle of the day, the need for 'Shelter' was minimized, but 'Clothes', originally in third, must now be moved up to the first place—particularly considering that by changing his aspect he could better evade the murderous experimentation of the Magisters.

Dogbold cautiously approached the outer fringe of the town. Keeping to the cover of tufts of marsh grass and clusters of pussy willow, he was able to bring himself unseen to the verge of a garden. Then, by insinuating himself into a flowering bush, he gained a view

of the premises.

Four persons, dressed in fine afternoon clothes, were taking their ease in whicker chaise-longues, under a persimmon tree. They sipped a pale orange drink from tall glasses, nibbled on snacks from a set of bowls, and spoke in eager, serious tones.

A tall woman with long hair and large drooping eyes, spoke: ". . . I have, at times, felt highly enhanced. I have been attuned, harmoniously attuned . . . and yet, more recently, I have been less vibratory."

"Quite," agreed a man with a paunch and a beard like a ruff of fur. "Thus it goes: at times I am receptive, at others, not. I often ponder my reverberatory harmonics."

"Me too," interrupted a second woman in a languorous voice: "I also ponder my harmonics."

The conversation seemed solidly engaged. Dogbold retreated from his vantage and, under cover of the hedge, crawled up to the house and crept in a window. Then he boldly searched out a wardrobe, which he rummaged . . . Transformed, he made exit by the same window and scuttled down an alleyway in a crouch. Once in safety he stood tall and sauntered into the town, dissimulating his true condition with an air of nonchalance. He now wore a jacket of dark red plush, tight fitting pantaloons of turquoise silk, a short cloak of black pashmina, a pair of low boots, and a local-style kepi with a yellow feather in the band.

After a period of wandering in the maze of tiny streets, Dogbold at last stumbled upon the town square. There, pressed like a leech against the wall of the cubic building, was the Benefica Bumpsaple and a cadre of her fellows. Some had their eyes closed in concentration. Others used intent gazes in the direction of the Magisterium, apparently transmitting fluxion on conductive rays of vision. Dogbold tried to sense the emanations but felt only a small shiver in his back, perhaps caused by dampness in the air—which was also rife with swamp odor, though no one seemed to mind. Dogbold, desiring above all to pass unnoticed, refrained from holding his nose, and was also careful to chase mosquitoes in the loose-wristed local style. To avoid the Benefica's attention he circled around the opposite side of the square, and so came to the crooked alley where he had seen the sign of the rosebud.

Always eager to aid the goddess Fortuna, Dogbold had already formulated a strategy for procuring a meal

despite his impecuniousness. First, he would pretend capacity to pay. Then, after taking dessert and a cordial, leave before the bill was presented! It was a two-step program of admirable simplicity; it was even the same strategy which would have won the day at Poodle's—if the aroma of stuffed hen had not confused him and caused tactical error. But he had learned his lesson, and this time events would go differently! But first he must dissimulate riches. Dogbold searched the ground for pebbles with which to fill his empty pouch, but the streets were all mud, and in the end he was obliged to make due with this less than ideal substance.

Phylo's Tavern was a long room dimly lit by a row of dusty windows giving on the street. A fireplace to one side helped dispel the damp, a bar on the other supported a row of patrons, each nursing a tankard of beer. At four long wooden tables, diners sat erect eating stew or talking in measured and dignified tones.

Dogbold chose a seat. Phylo, a large man of mild expression, his massive hairy arms exposed by rolled-up sleeves, his barrel-like midriff wrapped tight in a stained apron, approached to take Dogbold's order. Dogbold pulled out his pouch and tossed it on the table. Instead of a reassuring 'chink', the pouch landed with a squishy sound, but Phylo seemed absorbed in the contemplation of some inner sadness and failed to notice.

"What is your pleasure, sir?"

"My good man," began Dogbold using his most urbane tones, "I do not mind telling you that I am famished. Serve me of your best, and lots of it!" With a wink he added: "As you can see, when the time comes I will be able to pay the bill, to say nothing of your gratuity!" Dogbold, with an air of complaisance, gingerly gave his pouch a little pat, and then wiped his hand surreptitiously on his pants.

Phylo paid little heed: "Naturally. Would you like our local specialty, or do you prefer a nice roast hen?"

"Roast hen is most appealing! But what is your specialty?"

"Pastiche stew. It is much consumed in these parts," said Phylo, indicating the other diners.

"How is it prepared?"

"In the usual manner; fresh charnay and chatowsies boiled in pold consommé, served with a salad of ramp and poached leaks."

"Very nice, but what do you use for meat?"

"Alas; nothing!" sighed Phylo. "Pastiche is a complex dish. Were I an expert cook I would include a pork knuckle, or several inches of ox tail. Properly introduced they would give a more suave flavor; but I do not have the knack. Still, I am a modest man, and this incapacity does not make me think any less of myself! My stew, though it is not to be compared to that of a master chef, such as you might find in a big city, will poison no one."

Dogbold was puzzled: "I have been informed that this town, though small in my own experience, is the center of the universe."

Phylo shrugged. "So it is claimed. I have my doubts."

"Have you yourself visited such a city where, as you say, better stew is to be had?"

"Indeed, indeed. I was even born in one. But who is to say what is real, and what is a dream?"

Dogbold considered this answer for a brief moment, then said: "I think I will order the roast hen. Is there stuffing?"

"Would you prefer turnips or groats?"

"Both if you please, and hot raisin drippings as well."

Phylo made a note with a stub of charcoal. "And to drink?"

"The best in the house!"

"'Best' is notoriously a matter of opinion," said Phylo wistfully, "but I'll serve you the Dark Wort. It is well liked, perhaps even more than the Dankwort."

"What is the difference between the two?"

"It is slight but definite. It resides, to begin with, in the names—though some consider this nuncupatory, insisting both are drawn from the same barrel."

"Nuncupatory'? Is this a local ingredient of your brew?"

"You will understand better if you taste. Shall I serve you a tankard of each?"

"Exactly right!"

Phylo returned to the kitchen, a boy brought a tankard of beer, and Dogbold began to look around with satisfaction; his fortunes were improving!

Sitting at the same table were two men of respectable appearance, engaged in conversation. Dogbold took advantage of a lull in their talk to make a query: "Gentlemen, I am newly arrived in your town, and am having some difficulty becoming acclimatized. Will you

enlighten me as to some of your customs?"

The first man wore a long pointed beard. He was tall, broad and lean, but stooped slightly as if to profess modesty. He spoke: "Our customs are dictated by the presence of the Baakaa, as you must know. Here, all is best because it is highly real."

His companion, a more diminutive person with great bushy eyebrows, a curled mustache, and an unconventional wide-brimmed kepi, endorsed the remark: "So it is. Tobin's expressions are colloquial, but essentially correct. Here, near the Baakaa, "esse" is enhanced to an ultimate degree."

Tobin smiled modestly: "Fredigger uses fancy words to say the same thing. In short: the nearer to the Baakaa, the better."

"Just so," agreed Fredigger. "Proximity equals amelioration."

Dogbold interjected a question: "Why is the Baakaa located in the midst of this pestiferous swamp, and not on more salubrious ground?"

Both Tobin and Fredigger looked at each other in surprise. "I had never thought of that!" exclaimed Tobin.

"Nor I!" agreed Fredigger. "It is a novel concept. However, I detect a flaw."

"Which is?" asked Tobin, who then nudged Dogbold with his elbow and spoke confidentially into his ear: "Fredigger will now amaze us with his erudition!"

Fredigger sipped his beer, then wiped foam away from his mustache with his sleeve. "What is the Baakaa?" he began impressively. Tobin was about to give answer, but Fredigger quickly held up both index fingers to indicate that the question had been rhetorical. "'What', I repeat, 'is the Baakaa?' It is, I say: the 'isness' of 'is', the 'ofness' of 'of', the 'willness' of 'would', the 'wereness' of 'was'."

"All that?" asked Dogbold, not sure he had seized Fredigger's meaning.

"Indeed, that and more! It is also the 'ifness' of 'if' and the 'mayness' of 'maybe'."

Dogbold considered: "Very well, but how does this prevent its being installed in a more agreeable spot? Even the 'mayness of maybe' might prefer drier ground!"

Fredigger used a smile of benevolent indulgence. "The fallacy in your reasoning is that mere men cannot choose where the source of Being will be situated. We

are limited to opinery regarding a theoretically ideal location, or to mere wishing it where it is not." He set down his mug with a thud.

"Why not sweep aside such theory, and simply move it?" proposed Dogbold. "Everyone would benefit were this source not obliged to do its generating from the middle of a fetid marsh! Surely the present situation has an adverse affect on the healthfulness of the fluxions?"

Tobin pounded the table with his fist: "The stranger's points have merit! My lumbago has been acting up of late; why not move the Baakaa over onto Riverview Rise, or to Happy Valley? Here the mosquitoes are barely supportable, to say nothing of the stink."

Fredigger shook his head and spoke with serenity. "'Esse' is 'here'. It is not subject to our whims."

Dogbold was puzzled. "Where is the great difficulty in building a new construction such as the one yonder? It is not notably graceful, but if you require such a thing as a focus for your municipal doings. . . ."

They looked at Dogbold with a mixture of annoyance and pity, and Fredigger spoke in condescending tones: "The 'construction', as you call it, is merely a casement. The Baakaa, source of all Being, is within."

"And the 'Nusses'?" asked Dogbold, eager to show he was not utterly ignorant of their affairs.

"Just so. The Nusses as well."

Tobin had become thoughtful. "The stranger looks at our problems afresh, and is perhaps wiser than he seems. Perhaps all could be moved: casement, Nusses, the Baakaa itself!"

Fredigger shook his head: "The Baakaa is inherent in this locality."

Dogbold put a cautious question: "Am I correct in supposing that it is the place itself, and not the building around it, which is the so-called 'Baakaa'?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes you are," answered Fredigger.

"Then why not simply dig up the ground from which the Baakaa emanates and transport it with the sod?"

Both men smiled at Dogbold's ignorance. Tobin spoke: "The Baakaa is not in the ground! It hangs a few inches above it. The casement serves mainly to protect our eyes from the fierceness of the gleam."

"How do you know?"

"It is a notorious matter of doctrine."

"Could you not then use some sort of engine to move the casement and Baakaa as a whole, or some smaller container to transport the Baakaa alone?"

Fredigger considered the proposal for a few moments. "There is no theoretical obstacle, that I can think of. But who is to say the Baakaa would cooperate in such frivolous displacements? Generation and perpetuation of Extantness must certainly preoccupy it more than our convenience."

Dogbold sipped his beer, and approached the subject from a new angle. "Why did the Baakaa choose this inopportune spot in the first place?"

"With the shifting of riverbeds, and the raising and lowering of mountains, this location may have been ideal a hundred thousand years ago, and may again become ideal in another hundred thousand years. In this between-time the Baakaa may find it advantageous to remain 'in situ'." Fredigger made a large gesture as if to dismiss all imponderables. "But enough practical metaphysics! Tell us about yourself: are you from Bhrement? or Barhoe?"

At this moment the door opened and Moglator Nisleffer, with two other Magisters, burst into the tavern. Dogbold shrank back in his chair. "Oye!" cried Nisleffer: "A self-confessed Non-thing has escaped from the Magisterium after consuming a plate of crackers and cheese. Its disappearance has interrupted an important experiment concerning the nature of Nothingness." He looked around the room with head held high. "Can anyone provide information leading to its re-apprehension?"

Response was sullen and unenthusiastic. Tobin asked: "How can we recognize this Non-thing?"

"It is thus and so," the Magisters explained.

Fredigger asked: "Might it not alter shape at any moment, and take the appearance of, say, a cat? Non-things are notoriously formless."

"This Non-thing is a 'replication'. Its manifestation is stable. Report its whereabouts to the Magisterium!" The Magisters left the tavern.

Tobin looked after them in disapprobation: "Always the same fanatical pursuit of Nothing!" he complained. "Where do our tax moneys go? To fill the guts of these illusion chasers, who live in luxury at our expense!"

Phylo called out from behind the bar: "Be glad you are real, it is a privilege not enjoyed by everyone."

Tobin looked puzzled: "Your remark is inapro-

pos. . . "

"Perhaps," interrupted Phylo, "but you complain too much and I have problems of my own."

"I've heard enough," grumbled Tobin. "In any case, I see what to do. . . ." He rose and left the tavern.

Fredigger, pouring the rest of Tobin's beer into his own tankard, addressed Dogbold: "Never mind! Tobin is hypersensitive and somewhat unpredictable."

"What about these Magisters; is Nothingness indeed real, or are they misguided? You seem like a man of sense; what is your opinion?"

Fredigger lay his finger along his nose: "Reality, my friend, will not be denied; throw it out the door with a pitch fork, it hops back in through the window! If Nothing exists — you may take it from me! — it must be real."

"That may explain one aspect of the matter. But the Magisters seem an impractical group."

"That they are. But we are glad to humor them. They are extravagant, but do no great harm. They give us spectacle, and interesting subjects of philosophical reflection. In short: they make up for their flaws with their virtues. Can the rest of us claim as much?" Fredigger sighed, took a great quaff of beer, set down the empty mug with care and exactitude, emitted a noble belch.

Phylo now approached the table with Dogbold's roast hen and placed it before him. The steaming bird gleamed golden brown in a bath of sizzling gravy. The bed of turnips, onions and mushrooms gave off a sharp, irresistible aroma. Dogbold tucked his napkin under his chin and raised his fork and knife.

"Hold!" commanded Phylo. "Customers must pay the score prior to consumption of victuals. You may now also pay for your beer."

With a rueful sense of 'déjà vu' Dogbold snatched up the hen and made for the door at best speed, but Phylo was quicker. He thrust out a foot and tripped Dogbold, who threw out his arms. The hen sailed through the air and fell to the floor. Phylo picked it up adroitly in one hand; in the other he snatched Dogbold by the scruff of his neck and flung him out the door. Dogbold, sprawled at full length in the muddy street, tensed against further assault.

A commotion was in progress in the town square, which momentarily distracted Phylo's attention. Briskly profiting from this un hoped for diversion, Dogbold

scrambled up, dashed into a narrow passageway between two houses, and made good his escape.

The sun set like a sodden orange fruit drooling down an old wall stained with grey lichen. A ruddy gloaming hung in the sky, while mauve gloom seeped down between the houses and filled the streets with dark. House-holders and merchants lit small green lamps to light the way of passers-by, and leaned out their doors and windows to test the quality of the evening airs.

Dogbold the Deft, crouched behind a heap of rubbish, considered his priorities. Previously at the top of the list, the need for 'Food' had been at least partially satisfied, to say nothing of the fine tankard of Dark Wort. His 'Clothing', though now somewhat spoiled with mud—thanks to a brutish over-reaction to what must, by any fair-minded person, be considered a legitimate attempt at 'asseveration of a basic and vital human need'—were still in the 'adequate' category. 'Shelter', therefore, was now at the top of the list.

Dogbold crept from his hiding place and circumspectly began hunting around for a comfortable place to sleep. His search eventually brought him to the town square where the crowd and commotion, which earlier had diverted Phylo's attention, had not waned. At its center was a small group, hard by the wall of the Baakaa's protective enclosure, among whom a lively debate was in progress.

Dogbold moved closer to see and hear.

Tobin, equipped with a pick-ax, a length of black cloth, and a box of stout planking reinforced by iron bands, spoke: "This swamp is no proper place for the honorable Baakaa! With this pick I will cut a hole in the protective wall and, using this blindfold to dampen the gleam, pack the Baakaa safely in this box. We can then carry it away from this mud hole to a better location of our choice—preferably Riverview Rise!" This speech found favor with the crowd and a cheer sounded forth.

Now Nisleffer spoke: "This plan is fraught with idealism and is doomed to tragic failure! The Baakaa is the source of Beingness, Tobin's box included! Only a brain attuned to metaphysical nonsense could conceive of transporting Being itself inside one of its own generated effects!" The audience, though most failed to grasp the reasoning which underlay the Magister's

point, nodded and murmured agreement.

A young, sallow-skinned man wearing his hair in the long "artistic" style, now jumped up: "The Magister's words are obfuscation! Are we not 'Autonomous Beings', integral aspects of Beingness itself? My associates and I profess 'Collectivist Legislation'; our progressive doctrine stipulates non-submission to the inscrutable whims of the Baakaa. We plan to 'co-determine' Reality, all by ourselves!"

A wave of muttered disapprobation swept through the crowd. Tobin spoke in scandalized amazement: "How dare you talk like that, and in the presence of the Baakaa yet! Do you not realize you are denigrating the source of your own being?"

The young man, shamed by this accusation, made a concession: "If the Baakaa wishes to join our votes and deliberations in a spirit of democratic fellowship, so be it. In recognition of its long and faithful service, it will be welcomed. But we have evolved beyond the need for monocratic tutelage, and the yoke must be shaken off!" Five people in the crowd emitted wild cheers, but the others gave them sidelong looks of uneasy disapprobation.

Nisleffer uttered a flat refutation: "Such reasoning is contrary to Paternalistic Authoritarianism."

"Hear hear!" muttered all the older men, while the women maintained a stony silence. In front of Dogbold one woman jabbed her husband in the arm, whispering menacingly: "Just you wait till we get home, then we'll see how it is!"

The sallow-skinned man waved his arms in excitement and shouted: "Falsitudination! This very morning I decided to shave my beard, and I did, as all can see! Reality bends to our whims!" At this tempestive outburst several people began talking all at once.

Not fully informed on the basic issues, Dogbold had trouble following the sophistics and lost interest. Resuming his search he soon discovered an alcove in a wall bordering the square. Inside, behind a stack of lumber, he noted a cubby worked into the masonry. Making sure he was unobserved, Dogbold shifted planks and other detritus, chased a family of toads out of the cubby, and crept inside. He found the place acceptably dry, if cramped. He decided to pass the night there, and composed himself to sleep. As he wriggled into place his foot dislodged a stone. He made inspection and discovered a decayed wall of sep-

aration into a secondary space. He pulled away stones and crept through the opening, to find himself at one end of a damp passageway with a vaulted ceiling.

In total darkness Dogbold felt his way forward, in hopes of finding a more secure and comfortable location for sleep. The passage wound this way and that, down and up. Eventually his hand fell upon a ladder. He climbed, and emerged into what appeared to be, after investigation, a rather large, approximately square chamber, empty except for three rocks in the middle of the floor. In the area between these rocks the ground was marginally dryer than elsewhere. Dogbold brushed away dust and cobwebs, and gratefully stretched himself out using one of the rocks for a pillow. The day had been agitated; Dogbold was exhausted and soon fell fast asleep.

In his sleep Dogbold had three dreams. In the first he was comfortably tucked into a bed with a soft mattress and eiderdown pillows. But each time he dozed off, he was disturbed by persistent knocking at the door. "A belated visitor", he thought, and got up to let him in. But each time he went to see who it was: not only was no one there, but—in the peculiar manner of dreams—there was not even a door.

Next, he dreamed that an evil magician had shrunk him to the size of a squirrel and trapped him inside a drum. Then, in an act of pure maliciousness, the magician gave the drum as a birthday present to a half-wit musician. The musician, lacking any sense of rhythm, made Dogbold miserable with mindless banging.

Lastly, he dreamed he lived inside an egg. The egg was the property of a hungry giant who intended to eat it for breakfast. The egg was served to the giant in a little dish. The giant took up the egg, and tapped upon it gently with his spoon. The egg cracked open. . .

Dogbold awoke with a start, and sat up, unsure where he was. Looking around, he saw a grotesque demon, surrounded in orange flames, bearing down upon him with evil menace. Then his mind became fully alert: the orange light was the morning sun streaming through a large fissure in the wall; the daemon was the silhouette of Tobin, his head tied up in the blindfold, feeling his way cautiously forward holding his pick-ax in one hand and his box in the

other. Behind Tobin a welter of faces peered through the aperture. Among them Dogbold noticed Matron Bumpsable the Panevolent Benefica, Nisleffer the Magister, Phylo the cook and Fredigger the amateur philosopher. All stared at him in astonishment, then dismay, then rage.

Dogbold did not offer explanations or even wait; he simply jumped to his feet and scrambled back down the ladder. Nisleffer, and the others, came hot on his heels, but in the darkness of the subterranean corridor Dogbold had the advantage. He quickly retraced his steps and emerged into the alcove. Peeking forth, he watched as the last of the rabble pressed through the fissure in the cubic construction which dominated the town square, calling out menace and clamorous vows of retribution—all based on premises Dogbold found dubious, or even illogical. He refrained from going forth to argue the points, and instead waited until all had disappeared inside. Then, just as Nisleffer's head emerged from the cubby, his great protruding eyes blinking in the light, Dogbold slipped away.

As he trudged past the Magisterium, Dogbold noticed several Magisters moping gloomily in the gardens. Though he was tempted to make a brief delay, only long enough to offer a few charitable words of comfort, he calculated that, under the circumstances, a higher priority was to proceed southward with no loss of time.

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