
The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

No. 7, April-May, 2001

Published with Cosmopolis No. 15

— CONTENTS —

Planet of Retribution

Chapter 7
by Zack Fance
Page 4

* * *

The Zael Inheritance

Chapters 12, 13, & 14
by Tim Stretton
Page 8

* * *

Tergan

Chapter 6
by Till Noever
Page 19

— LETTERS —

Many thanks for the new CLS. I always eagerly await the continuation of Zael and Tergan. I also enjoy reading Prince Jacquard and I think it is wonderful you are publishing it in French.

This time the wait for CLS was a bit longer than usual. Cosmopolis did not appear until the 4th of April (bimonthly now) but when it was available for download, CLS 6 was not. Reading Cosmopolis indicated that CLS 6 should be on the website but it did not appear until the 8th. I am not trying to imply a few days delay is a problem, I am just trying to set the scene of an avid reader of the CLS desperate for his fix. I do have a problem though with CLS 6, which is its format. Normally I print the CLS on 120gms ivory paper, with the intention of having the whole lot bound when say 500 or so pages have accumulated. The new landscape format does not make this impossible, but if bound with the other CLS's in one volume,



'Lamarck was one of the last to leave the *Brabantia*.' Page 15

Illustration by P. Rhoads

it would make for awkward reading. Am I the only one with this problem? Are you going to stay with this format?

Thanks again for an excellent magazine.

EDMOND FERDINANDUS

* * *

Bruce Downing wrote:

In the most recent *Cosmopolis* Literary Supplement, readers are asked to comment on formatting options and I am happy to do so.

1. I much prefer the 2-column to the 3-column presentation.
2. I have no interest in an "e-book" CLS. The pdf acrobat presentation (particularly if the 2-column format is restored) meets my needs beautifully.
3. At the risk of being dismissed as a monoglot, I'll also say that I think publishing non English items is not an attractive feature in the CLS. For me, it just means I skip such articles. I highly doubt that more than 5-10% of *Cosmopolis* readers can read French fluently or even semi-fluently (at least take a survey!). Why not simply provide a 'français' or 'english' or 'deutsch' button to translate the whole thing IF multiple languages are desired for presentation? Never again do I plan to try to remember whether nouns are 'masculine' or 'feminine' or the whole menagerie of affected inflections. But that's just me.
4. I very much enjoy CLS in terms of its content.

The CLS replied:

Glad to know someone cares! We will certainly be going back to the old format. No one has ever made a peep before, but now that we have learned that the two-column format was well liked, we may even reset the offending issue.

As for the stories in French: don't forget that the VIE is an international project, and that Vance sells more books in France than America!

Bruce added:

I've spent a bit of time considering how best to communicate my feelings on the language issue and I'm going to give it my best shot. Henry Lucas to the wit-

ness stand, please! When using *Cosmopolis* as a vehicle to discover Howard Alan Treesong, Gersen distributed a free copy to all. This would have been useless had people been unable to read the article. The implication is that *Cosmopolis* was accessible to everyone, presumably with a separate translation for each language. An issue of *Cosmopolis* with articles in different languages would allow enjoyment by a handful of polyglots only. Now I don't question your statement that Vance sells a lot in France. This great and talented writer should sell a lot everywhere! My point is that both French and English should be able to enjoy all the articles and I think Henry Lucas would agree. The way forward to me seems to be a 'français' button for those who wish to enjoy the excellent content in French. Publishing one issue only with articles in different languages suggests the Tower of Babel to me rather than a cosmopolitan publication.

I'd guess we I are in agreement that all Vanceophile peoples should enjoy the CLS but that you are more comfortable with one issue with multiple languages while I prefer multiple single-language issues.

Thanks for your letters. We appreciate this kind of feedback and encourage others to comment.

The publication date of CLS 6 mentioned in *Cosmopolis 14* and the date on which the PDF file was actually available at the download site were at odds, as Edmond mentions. CLS more often than not is finished before *Cosmopolis*, but it's not always easy to coordinate publication dates, even when both are composed by the same individual, as has been the case for the last few issues. While CLS is collected by download, *Cosmopolis* is mailed direct; the last mailing occurred at a moment when our access to the download page was temporarily interrupted. The announcement in *Cosmopolis* should probably read, 'The CLS will be available "soon" at the VIE download site.'

Our last issue's format was an experiment. The editors, lacking real data, had presumed that many or most CLS readers read it on their computer monitors; the horizontal format was an intermediate step toward a layout intended specifically for the screen. We may yet attempt this if any interest is shown, probably as a second, parallel version of the magazine, with a more

screen-friendly page size and a larger typeface. We'd be happy to further response to this idea.

Again, submissions of stories for CLS are invited. As the small type says, we are 'devoted to showcasing literary work in any form, including fragmentary, which bears the influence of Jack Vance.'

We're glad to have Till Noever and Tim Stretton back, and Zack Fance has reappeared from somewhere, sporting an exotic new stock of beverage recipes and, while responding to our questions with a smile only, he has been forthcoming with his manuscript.

— THE EDITORS

Copyrights are owned by the respective authors. All rights reserved. The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement is published in cooperation with *Cosmopolis*, and edited by Joel Anderson and Paul Rhoads.

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

The Planet of Retribution

(Volume II in the
Deranged Astrophysicist series)

Chapter VII

* * *

Excerpt from: Mauld's Tourist Guide to the planet Hamilton:

Hamilton, the other inhabited planet of the Zubenelgenubi system, is in every way the contrary of its sister, Golfo. The latter is a crude world, of inhospitable terrain, savage autochthonous fauna, and peopled by picturesque, violent or uncultivated primitives. The former is temperate of climate and free of any native fauna, savage or otherwise, including insects. It's native flora consists exclusively of blossoming vines and shade trees of medium size.

Hamiltonian society, in utter contrast to the political turmoil and warlettes of Golfo, is run according to an orderly and beneficent system of paternalism which has ensured peace, prosperity and social harmony since its foundation, by Sir Bentley Spottiswood Hamilton the amateur philosopher of Bath. The main urban center of Hamilton is a double city, commodiously disposed over six hills, three on each side of the river Tee. Aeir, to the east, and Pinciyn to the west, are conveniently linked by twelve bridges, the so called Cloaks of Sir Walter Raleigh, making intercourse between the two halves of the city easy and practical. The heart of Pinciyn-Aire are the famous 'river houses' where reside members of the Great Families (see appendix 7 for details concerning these important families and their famous 'river houses'). Each river house has its own name, history and, above all, gardens.

The 'tone' of Hamiltonian society, as expressed in the succession of 'mondations', is determined by three particularly distinguished families: DiAndros, Cremore, and De. The previous 'mondation' was adjudged: 'forthright, ebluessent and framatic'. The present 'mondation' is deemed: 'flippantly morose with sursaults of gaibeleen'. The social activities of the Great Families are: hunting to hounds on imported Arabian ponies, formal garden parties, and weekends spent at castle or manor of any of the seventy two domains which divide the habitable surface of the planet, each ruled by one of the Great Families.

The lesser folk of Hamilton serve their superiors as cooks, chambermaids, grooms, masons, garbage collectors, plumbers, roofers, tailors and so on. These people, who have the privilege to be in direct contact with the Great Families — often to the point of intimacy — are known as the Great Knaves. The Great Knaves live in comfortable circumstances in a series of fine residences on the hills behind the river houses. The Great Knaves also possess vacation homes in the domains, and enjoy their own separate schedule of country visits. Their sports are dog grooming and country dances.

On a lower social level are the Lesser Knaves. These folk serve the Great Families in the same capacity as the latter serve the Great Families, and live in picturesque country villages clustered around Pinciyn-Aeir. Their sports are chicken fights, and evening promenades in the light of colored paper lanterns.

Below the Lesser Knaves is the lowest class on the Hamiltonian social scale: the Varlets. These folk live in caravans which wander the world from end to end, thieving, scavenging, or performing menial jobs for the Lesser Knaves. Their sports are the frog jump, and somersaults to music of the ukulele.

The rustic diversions of the lower orders are often attended by members of the Great Families, in disguise, eager for those simple pleasures and frank sensations denied them by the rigid etiquette of their own social rank.

Pearson, in amazement and alarm, opened the copy of Galexapolis and read:

Is it a new kind of natural disaster, or the most heinous crime of the millennium? In either case it is a galactic tragedy; the famous and beloved 'Red Planet', to say nothing of the scientists at work there, some 700 people in all, has been mysteriously obliterated, abstracted, wiped out of existence! Martian weather satellites captured the event on visigraph: in mere seconds the planet Mars collapsed in upon itself, dissolved into a blue cloud, and disappeared. But why? How? Who? Was the Beldune 'natural disaster' not so 'natural' after all? Is the galaxy seized by a virus of exploding planets? Twelve years ago Beldune evaporated into nothingness, and reference has been made to the so called 'Deranged Astrophysicists', but no proof has been discovered . . .

Pearson glanced at the date on the cover, made a quick calculation: Karkassus had been on Golfo when Mars was attacked. This malfeasance could not be

attributed to him, at least not directly.

Pearson paid the score, surreptitiously tucked the copy of Galaxopolis into his cummerbund and hurried from the hotel. In the street he discovered commotion. Trumpets sounded from the central tower. Zebulchers galloped past on sweating zebuls. Breke was already mounted, and watched the passing zebuls with concern. "No doubt the zeet merchant has already been questioned. We can not leave town too quickly."

Pearson mounted, and they moved off toward the port of their original arrival—a direction opposite to both race track and tower—maintaining a dignified pace and nonchalant mien. Suddenly Breke stretched out his arm and brought Pearson to a halt. "In the midst of this catastrophe a thought occurs to me! What about the young woman?"

". . . You mean securing her as a hostage?"

"Why not? Our position would be enhanced. Should we suffer capture by the zealots of Scratch Flats, or worse, the minions of Karkassus himself, control of Fleurdian would be a card to play."

Pearson pointed at an alley to the right. "The Explorer lies that way." They urged the zeets into a bone jarring trot, followed the alley, and emerged into one of the wide avenues radiating from the town center. They paused and peered up and down. To gain the Explorer they would now have to move directly toward the tower, where a considerable crowd had gathered. Trumpets sounded as stridently as ever. Pearson hesitated, but Breke, sparing him only a hard-eyed glance, moved ahead up the street, though not venturing out into the middle of the through-fare.

Pearson trotted up behind him: "Another thought; perhaps she will follow us of her own volition."

"To cross the plateau on the back of a zeet, with the adult male population of Scratch Flats in furious pursuit? Is it likely?"

"She need not be apprised of this aspect of the matter. Four days ago, in circumstances not altogether different, she was eager to join me. I'll tell her the ship is parked five minutes away." They had now come abreast The Explorer, which was on the opposite side of the avenue. They brought the zeets to a halt.

Breke spoke. "All well and good, if she agrees. But we can't spend days and weeks getting her into the mood. If she won't come straight away, we use force."

"And when they see us carrying off a struggling

girl?" Both glanced at the tower.

"True . . ." muttered Breke. With the tower a mere three hundred yards away they felt exposed. The sun beat down on the broad stretch of sand. The milling crowd and scuffling zebuls raised dust about the municipal well so that the under-arcades of the tower were veiled in haze. "If she won't come on her own, we must tie and gag her, and carry her out between us as if we were three friends taking a walk."

"If there are customers present, this may not be practicable . . ."

"We have no time to discuss plans in all their aspects! We must act!" said Breke in sudden impatience. To Pearson's consternation he dug his heels into the zeet which shambled forward, crossing the area between them and The Explorer. Sweating with apprehension, feeling the pressure of vigilant eyes, Pearson followed. They tied the zeets to the Explorer's hitching post, and proceeded to the door where, thanks to The Explorer being set back from the street, they were temporarily invisible. Pearson now held Breke back with a hand on his shoulder.

"She knows both of us, but does not know we are associates. To avoid a tedious explanation give me one minute alone, then follow."

Breke nodded. "I'll load your pack onto my animal."

Pearson took a deep breath, pushed open the door, crossed the threshold. No customers were present. The tables were unoccupied. The trumpet blasts did not penetrate the adobe walls, and the atmosphere of the restaurant was hushed, except for muffled clanging from the kitchen. Three waitresses arranged tables for the evening meal. One was Fleurdian. Pearson paused by the door and the three looked up. Fleurdian, from the far end of the dim room, did not recognize him at first and looked away without interest, but then looked back to make a new inspection. Her mouth dropped open in surprise, then clenched tight in emotion. The nearest waitress approached with a polite smile: "Welcome to the Explorer Sir! We serve only the finest gourmet food! May we help you? Dinner is not served until seven o'clock . . ."

At this moment Fleurdian called out: "Never mind Otilly; it's a friend." Otilly sniffed, but returned to her task. Fleurdian approached. She spoke in a low sharp tone: "It seems you are not a man who knows his own mind!"

"You yourself appear to be of an mercurial disposition. I last saw you far from here," rejoined Pearson, looking at her with a steady gaze.

"Well, what do you want?"

"My circumstances have evolved. The ship is a short distance from here, and I leave immediately. Would you care to join me?"

Fleurdian began a brusque motion, but halted abruptly. She squinted at him, and screwed up her lips, shrugged, glanced around the restaurant with an air of seeing it for the first time, threw her wiping cloth over the back of a chair, and addressed the other waitresses: "I must go out for a moment with this man. I will return immediately."

Otilly looked up in alarm and bleated: "Zingo will not be pleased!" But Pearson was already leading Fleurdian out the door.

"I will be only too glad never to see Zingo again!" she laughed. "His boorishness is second only to my father's . . . but why such a hurry?" Pearson had taken her by the elbow, hustled her to his zeet, mounted, and was now offering her his hand in order to pull her up behind him. Meanwhile Breke had also mounted. Fleurdian looked at Breke in surprise: "Well well! The mysterious desperado!" She looked from one man to the other, frowning: "You two are known to each other, perhaps?"

"Exactly right," answered Breke. "But if we are to prolong our association we must get to the ship without any delay."

Fleurdian took Pearson's arm and climbed up behind him. "You fellows may be in a rush, but I am not! First we must go to my room and collect my belongings."

Breke frowned at Pearson. "Which way is your room?" he asked.

"Just over there . . ." she said, pointing in the direction of the tower, and noticing the gathered zebulchers. "My, what a crowd! And why such trumpeting?"

"Never mind!" said Breke. "I know a short cut to your room; follow me!" and he set off toward the edge of town, with Pearson following.

"Hold! What kind of 'short cut' is this? You go in exactly the opposite direction!" complained Fleurdian.

"Don't worry," Pearson assured her. "My friend has an wonderful sense of direction!" At this moment there arose a great commotion behind them. Glancing over his shoulder Pearson could make out the militi-

amen, on the upper levels of the tower, peering at them through macroscopes. He called out to Breke: "We've been noticed." Breke turned quickly into an alley, with Pearson close behind, and they urged the zeets to best speed.

"Where are you taking me?!" squawked Fleurdian, suddenly conscious that she was embarked on more adventure than she had bargained for.

"To the ship!" Pearson assured her. "It is not far."

"Where is it, and what are you running away from?"

"I was running away the first time we met, do you not recall?"

"You ran away the last time we parted also." Pearson found no reply, and Fleurdian chuckled. "Still, you are a man who plays the game of life by his own rules. I admire that."

"The trick," replied Pearson struggling to keep his balance on the bouncing zeet, "is obliging others to play by these rules. The sleight is not always easy."

"And my things?" Complained Fleurdian.

"Things!" Pearson replied arilly. "What of them? Forget them! We will get you new things, better ones." Fleurdian snorted, and would have made a stinging reply, if avoiding a fall from the bouncing zeet had not required all her attention.

They hurried down a series of passages and into an outlying district east of the race track. It was composed of the usual maze of fenced gardens. Galumphing forward in zeet style, they finally arrived at the edge of the town, demarcated by the brush fence which, in this sector, was tall enough to block the view of the steppe. They looked right and left for a gate, but none was in sight. Just then, at no great distance to the north, seven mounted zebulchers burst onto the peripheral path, instantly spotted them, and bore down with yips and whoops. Pearson and Breke faced their zeets at the fence and spurred them forward. The zeets clambered at the brush with sharp fore members. The section of fence went down, and a view of the plateau spread before them. The zeets struggled over the tangle of fencing, but once across this barrier, they found themselves perched on the narrow verge of steep slope; a great gash in the steppe bordering the south eastern sector of Scratch Flats.

The terrain below was invisible because of the shoulder of the slope. Their pursuers now arrived at

the break in the fence. Pearson and Breke spurred their zeets and plunged downward. The slope immediately became a nearly vertical cliff, barren but for occasional clusters of stunted trees. The hardy zeets lowered their haunches, stiffened and spread wide their fore members, and skidded down into the ravine on the loose gravel and scree, slipping and sliding, but not toppling. Their riders hung on with both hands. The ride ended abruptly in the saddle of a hummock.

Fleurdian's eyes were wide in alarm. Pearson turned and looked up. Their pursuers had not followed, but were busy at the upper brink, prying and heaving. Seconds later large rocks began rolling and bouncing down at them. They clambered up the hummock. The rocks bounded past, crashing into the brush which choked the base of the ravine, or thudding to a halt in the saddle, where they had been only seconds before. The rocks had failed. The zebulchers made no move to follow them but waved their fists and bellowed invective. Then they became silent. Breke breathed a sigh of relief. "Ha! they lack the courage to follow!"

Pearson frowned. "Yes, but why? And what are they looking at with such silly expressions? Behind them there was a squeal. Fleurdian twisted around and screamed. Pearson and Breke turned in their saddles in time to see a man-size lizard scuttling up the hummock on its hind legs, fore-claws extended and fangs bared. The zeets reared, and clawed at the creature, who flailed back at them. The riders were thrown to the ground. Pearson and Breke rolled clear, drew their projacs. With converging beams of plasma they reduced the creature to a charred skeleton which collapsed at the feet of the snorting, bucking zeets. Pearson, struggling up, grasped their reins.

With their pursuers still looking on, the three put themselves in order. Leading the zeets they picked their way down the into ravine, though the thorny brush, and over tumbles of boulder. Pearson and Breke held their projacs at the ready.

"This is not pleasant!" said Fleurdian petulantly. "I'm going back. My things are still in Scratch Flats. The thorns are ripping my clothes and these sharp rocks are ruining my good shoes."

"Do you want another encounter with one of those lizard things?" said Breke.

"Give me a projac then. I know how to use it."

"I think not," growled Breke. "Stay close and don't

complain."

After two hours of hard going, the ravine opened out, and they were able to clamber back up to the steppe. Their pursuers had watched them awhile, but had not followed. Making best use of what cover was offered by the scraggly copses sprinkled across the steppe, they continued away from Scratch Flats until dusk, and into the night.

* * *

The Zael

Inheritance

Chapter 12

* * *

When Lamarck presented himself at the office the next morning, Rolando indicated that his presence was required urgently.

"Sit down, Geir," said Rolando with a florid geniality that Lamarck found ominous. "Perhaps a short tongue-twister?"

"No thank you, sir," said Lamarck, who thought it best to wait until he understood the purpose of the meeting before determining his own demeanour.

"I found your altercation with Apprehensor Voorhies yesterday unfortunate. As you know, I regard you very highly as a team, and anything that disturbs your optimum functioning discommodes me."

"Kate spoke as she found, sir. You will not find me denouncing her."

"Your loyalty is commendable and, indeed, what I expect. I would be interested, between ourselves, to know what you made of her views."

"Kate was courageous enough to make her points in my presence. I would extend the same courtesy to her," said Lamarck.

"I am not trying to entrap you, Geir," said Rolando affably. "I am merely interested in whether you think there was accuracy in her observations. We have worked together long enough for that to be a reasonable request?"

"Indeed, sir. In candour I found Kate's position, although not wholly inconsistent with the available evidence, to be based on a flawed assessment of my relationship with Laura Glyde. In my judgement that part of the enquiry had been proceeding along the lines originally envisaged."

"Essentially, then," said Rolando, "you disagree with Kate's thesis?"

Lamarck nodded.

"Disappointing," said Rolando, "especially since I am

disposed to concur with her conclusion—and indeed, her recommendation."

"I understood as much yesterday, sir," said Lamarck tonelessly.

"You have been working hard lately. It may be that you need to take some of the leave owing to you," said Rolando.

Lamarck laughed mirthlessly. "Come on, Jaden! We have been through enough together that you can throw me off an enquiry without platitudes about 'working too hard.' Don't insult my intelligence or my integrity: if you want to run the investigation without me around, say so."

Rolando nodded. "Since the diplomatic approach is rejected, Geir, I say this: take a month off. I do not want to see you in the Tower of Commerce, and I don't want to hear of any further involvement on your part in this enquiry. You have become too embroiled with Laura Glyde and, additionally, you are now involved with her potential prosecution on the Maevart death. Clear out, and leave things to Voorhies."

"I appreciate your honesty more than your diplomacy," said Lamarck. "You are making the wrong decision, but it is yours to make. Is that all, sir?"

Rolando sighed. "For now, yes. Go away, enjoy some free time, and come back in a month. But make sure you leave a contact number in case the Judiciar wants to interview you."

Lamarck compressed his lips, inclined his head fractionally, and quit the room. In the corridor outside he met Voorhies.

"Whatever he said to you," she said, noting Lamarck's sour countenance, "I hope he doesn't try it on me."

"Unlikely," said Lamarck acidulously, "since he has just handed me an informal suspension. I'll see you in a month, maybe."

"Geir! He can't! This is your case."

"Not any more, poppet. It's all yours now," said Lamarck with a humourless smile.

Voorhies's hand went to her mouth. "This is my fault—I shouldn't have—oh, but Geir, I had to—"

"Kate, you are not to blame for this. Rolando has lost his nerve. He wants me out of the way before Laura Glyde eats me alive. He remembers the time I botched an undercover operation for him in the past."

"Geir, I don't know what to say," Voorhies said.

"Perhaps it will help you to go away; but I wish you were here to help me with the investigation."

"In truth there isn't enough happening to justify two of us being involved anyway," said Lamarck.

Voorhies was silent for a moment. "Goodbye," she said, and impulsively hugged Lamarck. "I'll see you soon. And Geir—you could do worse than give Nina Haecht a call while you're away."

Lamarck disengaged himself affectionately from Voorhies's clasp and chucked her on the cheek. "Look after yourself, Kate. I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you."

Returning to his desk, Lamarck cleared out those few personal effects that he might be likely to need in the month ahead. He made his farewells to those smarses who were not out on some kind of contract, and swiftly left the building. The idea of returning to his apartment was unappealing and soon he found himself on Casimondo's upper terrace, almost deserted in the mid-morning.

Looking out over the sun-dappled marina and sipping a hot herbal cordial, Lamarck reflected over the course that events had taken. Removal from an enquiry was the most stinging insult a glax could face, arguing as it did that one's superiors believed that contract income was being endangered. It was the first time he had been dropped from a case, and it was a bitter taste.

On his second cup of coffee, as the cordial was known, he found his thoughts turning to Laura Glyde. Since he was no longer involved in the investigation of her claim, he found himself able to face a little more squarely the nature of his feelings for her. He had promised to look after her, and in this he had failed her. He was the only glax she trusted, and he had let her down. He knew that she would never confide in Voorhies or Narosyn; and he still believed that she had been close to doing so with him. Narosyn had committed himself to trying to snap her, when Lamarck's instinct was that she would bend far more readily than she would break.

He wondered what she was doing now. Had her intimations of loneliness and vulnerability on Chrysoopolis been assumed as part of her scheme to entrap him? She had seemed genuine, at least in this regard, and her fear when she had learned she was being followed also rang true. Lamarck had seen

dread often enough to recognise it. He imagined her immured in the Anastasia, unable to go out in case she was followed, and awaiting the arrival of Narosyn's snoop squad to arrest her.

Voorhies would not understand this, he thought. Kate had only seen her with her defences up and had justifiably formed her impressions of a tough, exploitative adventuress from that. Lamarck remained convinced that he had been close to something else. He could see that she had been manipulating him, but not far below the surface was a frightened girl who wanted to trust him.

It was Pangalactic's loss as much as his that Rolando had not backed his judgement; but he had a feeling that Laura would also suffer. That seemed to perturb him more than the other adverse aspects of the situation.

Finishing his coffee, Lamarck looked out over the waterfront again. This morning in the warm sunshine the tableau was one of gentle, relaxing beauty. He had to remind himself that less than two days earlier Laura had shot a man down in the dark here.

Lamarck pulled himself from his reverie, and finding it nearly lunch-time, dialled up a clone steak from the com-screen, and accompanied it with a long tongue-twister. Without Voorhies the pleasure was more muted than normal, although the steak was prepared to the exacting standards associated with the establishment. Lamarck admitted to himself that he would like some company. Much as he would like to see Kate, she was wrapped up in the case at the moment and would feel it unethical to discuss it with him under the current circumstances. Nina at least would understand, he thought. They were on better terms these days than they had been for some time.

Almost without making a conscious decision, Lamarck found himself outside the Genix laboratories. Strictly speaking he should not be strolling through the foyer in this casual manner since he was scarcely here on Pangalactic business; but, he reflected with conscious casuistry, a glax is never off duty.

Nina's face lit up as Lamarck walked into the room. "Geir! You can't keep away from me," she said with a seemingly innocent smile. "You can't expect us to have cracked the screening process since yesterday."

"You were sufficiently vague as to allow all inter-

pretations to be possible,” said Lamarck. “Today seemed as likely as tomorrow or next week.”

“The prospects of success are improving,” said Nina. “Big Mama is interested: she has done some testing herself, and she is calling in favours from all across the Corporation.”

Lamarck conveniently forgot that he no longer had any reason to find this interesting.

“Has she made any progress?”

“Ask her yourself,” said Nina with a smile, as Dr Mamoulian entered the laboratory. Tall, heavily-built and stern, she had always regarded Lamarck’s flippant attitudes as provoking.

“Good morning, Prime Apprehensor. I take it you are here in connection with your mystery sample. I would be disappointed to learn that you were paying social calls on my subordinate,” said the new entrant rigidly.

“It is never my aim to lower your opinion of me, little scope as there is for that to occur,” said Lamarck. He thought it politic to keep the nature of his visit businesslike as long as Dr Mamoulian was around.

“Well, the sample is finally with the right person,” she stated. “Dr Haecht, although a keen and talented analyst, still requires the many years of experience necessary to make a really top-notch scientist.”

Nina merely smiled at Lamarck. Dr Mamoulian’s hauteur and pretensions had long been something of a joke between them. And Mamoulian really was a peerless analyst.

“Well spoken, Doctor,” said Lamarck with a barely suppressed smirk. “I trust you are able to back up your claims with concrete results?”

“Impatience,” responded Dr Mamoulian majestically, “is the fault of the younger generation. I often remark on it in Nina, and it hardly needs to be said that it is prevalent in your own conduct.”

“Out of interest, Dr Mamoulian,” said Lamarck, no longer troubling to conceal his mirth, “have you ever worked at the Grand Duchess Anastasia Hotel? I believe that the staff there would strongly endorse your strictures.”

“The flippancy that passes for wit among you and your associates is the mark of an uncultivated mind. Since you find it impossible to maintain your attention in any quarter for more than two consecutive sentences, I say this in concise and cogent language: the

principle by which your DNA sample has been masked is comparatively simple. The practice is somewhat more complex and will require a degree of persistence to unravel. You need not fear, however, that it will prove a matter of any great difficulty.”

“Excellent,” said Lamarck. “Perhaps you would care to reveal to Dr Haecht the methods you intend to employ, and I need trouble you no further.”

“Dr Haecht has duties of her own to perform,” said Dr Mamoulian. “I will myself undertake the necessary procedures, irksome as it may be for you to liaise with me rather than your *belle*.”

It was an embarrassing element of Lamarck’s dealings with Genix that Dr Mamoulian, who concealed a genuine affection for Nina Haecht, refused to believe that Lamarck had ended their relationship. Instead she preferred to believe that he was desperately trying to rekindle the encouplement, and that Nina looked on him with disdain. Lamarck had found no way of apprising Dr Mamoulian of the facts, and Nina either didn’t care or enjoyed Lamarck’s discomfiture.

“I am more interested in the results than the agency by which they are provided,” said Lamarck.

Dr Mamoulian indicated the wall-clock. “That agency is about to take her lunch. You may return to discuss the matter later,” she said, and sailed from the laboratory.

Nina looked at Lamarck. “Have you had lunch yet?” she asked.

“Shamefully, I have,” he responded. “However, I will keep you company during yours. In truth there is something I should tell you.”

Nina looked interested. Recently she had had little chance to be Lamarck’s confidante.

“You pique my curiosity,” she said. “I thought you only talked to Kate these days.”

“Let’s go,” he said. “These labs always have made me uncomfortable.”

Nina secured the laboratory and they made their way to the airlift and the Genix reception. Leaving the compound a little ahead of them was the regal figure of Dr Mamoulian.

In the lunchtime rush the compound was busy as Genix employees left to make their way to an auto-cab. In the press ahead of them a man in sunshades and a nondescript linen suit brushed against Dr Mamoulian. She seemed to stagger and fall, and suddenly there was

a scream.

"She's bleeding," came a shrill voice.

"Call Voorhies—and an ambulance!" rapped Lamarck to Nina, vaulting through the crowd in pursuit of the man who had approached Dr Mamoulian.

In the crowd Lamarck was uncertain that he had identified the man correctly. With a minimum of ceremony he eased the milling crowd aside, and as he closed on his suspect the man began to run. Although there were plenty of auto-trams around he continued on foot; the mark of a professional since one auto-tram could not outdistance another. The man's best chance of escape lay in remaining on foot.

Lamarck pursued him as he ran back towards the centre of the city, where his chances of mingling with other folk were maximised. The assailant was fleet and Lamarck had difficulty in remaining in contact; however, he knew he was in good condition and wondered whether his quarry could sustain this pace for long.

"Stop! Pangalactic officer!" called Lamarck, but seeing that this had no effect he concentrated on his pursuit. The assailant continued to run back towards the city centre, but this was some way off and soon Lamarck became confident that he would run his man to ground. There were few pedestrians, but Lamarck was still concerned about the dangers of injury to bystanders, and kept his pulse-gun holstered. With any luck his man was not carrying a gun; after all, he had attacked Dr Mamoulian with some other weapon.

Suddenly the man wheeled towards Lamarck. *Whoomp! Whoomp!* heard Lamarck as he instinctively threw himself to the ground. Two pulses landed dangerously close and Lamarck realised that his hopes had not been realised.

As Lamarck reached for his own pulse-gun he felt himself knocked backwards and an agonising burning in his shoulder. He struggled to remain conscious but his vision darkened and the world grew faint.

* * *

Chapter 13

Lamarck felt a pain in his right shoulder. He flexed it and that hurt more, so he abandoned the tactic. Gently he opened his eyes, and became aware that he was lying on his back; and in the street.

Slowly he began to remember: he had been shot, and passed out. He did not know how long he had been unconscious, and he quickly looked around to make sure that he was no longer in danger. The street was empty and he eased himself to his feet. It was, he realised, the first time he had been shot, and he was not eager to repeat the experience.

Summoning an auto-tram on his personal com, he settled down to wait and assess the extent of his injuries. The shoulder hurt but the wound, though bloody, appeared fairly superficial. There seemed nothing that could not be remedied in the Genix medical laboratories. Grimacing as he stepped on to the auto-tram, he tried to tell himself that pain was all in the mind. His shoulder could be mended, and easily enough; it was the damage to his jacket that was irreparable.

He arrived back at Genix headquarters, fortuitously enough the site of a superior medical facility as well as the scene of the crime, to find most of the crowd dispersed. Voorhies was sitting on a seat with her arms around a quietly sobbing Nina. Dr Mamoulian lay ominously in the position he had last seen her, and from the negligent attitude of the medical personnel Lamarck deduced that her wounds went beyond serious.

"If you have a couple of minutes, gentleman," he said to the medical technicians, "I require attention."

The Genix operatives showed little enthusiasm and strolled over to Lamarck with the air of men who had seen worse. Lamarck felt that, skilled medics as they were, their interpersonal skills required attention.

Voorhies looked up at the sound of Lamarck's voice.

"Geir!" she called. "Are you all right?"

Lamarck summoned his driest grin. "It's only a scratch," he drawled. "But he got away. What did I miss?"

"The start of a murder enquiry. Narosyn is looking after it," she said, gesturing to where the dogged snoop was already taking witness statements.

"Hello, Maroc," he said. "I suppose you want to interview me."

"There were at least twenty people who saw what happened," he said, "and none of them seems able to give a coherent account."

"It looked to me as if he stabbed her. He did not want to use a pulse-gun, although he had one,"—here Lamarck indicated his shoulder—"because he was in a crowd and he hoped to get away before anyone realised what had happened."

"A professional," said Narosyn.

"Yes. He stabbed her, ran off, and when he realised he couldn't outrun me he shot me instead. He didn't even bother to kill me; it would have been unnecessary effort. And if I hadn't happened to be on hand he wouldn't even have had to break sweat."

"Voorhies says this is wrapped up with the Glyde case. Can you think of a motive?"

"She had just started asking some awkward questions about a genetic manipulation procedure that is tied up with Laura Glyde's DNA sample. I think someone was worried that she would solve a puzzle that the quizmaster wasn't ready to have answered yet."

Voorhies had walked over. "You might want to talk to Laura Glyde again," she said to Narosyn. "Wittingly or not, she is part of this."

"You might not, as well," said Lamarck. "There is only weak circumstantial evidence tying her in with the murder."

"Geir, I hardly need to remind you that you have no official status on this inquiry. You are a witness and nothing else," said Voorhies sharply.

Lamarck snapped: "Do what you like, Kate. If you want to run the enquiry into the ground, I can scarcely stop you."

Narosyn interjected, "Is this your own quarrel, or does it have some bearing on the enquiry?"

"Kate will tell you all," said Lamarck, and stalked off towards the ambulance for the medics to attend to his shoulder.

Voorhies shrugged and began to brief Narosyn on those aspects of Laura Glyde and the Zael Inheritance which his previous investigation had not covered.

After finishing her conversation with Narosyn,

Voorhies came over to the ambulance. "Are you badly hurt?" she asked.

Lamarck shrugged. "It's painful but, I'm told, fairly superficial. With a regenerative it ought to be as good as new in a week."

"You ought be careful," said Voorhies. "You could have been killed. That's not like you."

Lamarck gave a tight smile. "Any rational glax tries to minimise risk. Sometimes there is no alternative, though. If I'd caught the man we'd have had a major breakthrough."

"Leave the breakthroughs to me," said Voorhies. "You aren't supposed to be here at all. As I remember it, you are on leave."

"I was only here to see Nina," protested Lamarck. "And that was largely at your behest."

Voorhies shook her head with a smile. "My advice has changed: get your regeneration treatment done, and go offworld for a couple of weeks."

"I was thinking only minutes ago that there are some people I might like to see on Corinth. I could go tomorrow," replied Lamarck with a strange smile.

"Geir! I recognise that look. You are not involved with the Zael Inheritance any longer . . ."

"Not quite true," said Lamarck. "I have not officially been removed from the investigation: my only instructions are to keep away from Laura Glyde, and I will do so. I am going to Corinth—which is, after all, my home planet—to see some old friends. If I get the chance to transact any Pangalactic business, well—a glax is never off-duty."

Voorhies looked unhappy. "I don't know what you are planning and I don't think I want to," she said. "Just don't go messing up my case; indeed the optimum course is for you to stay away from it altogether."

Lamarck flexed his shoulder and grimaced. "I intend, simply to break up my recreation, two informal interviews, neither of them with persons who have a direct bearing on the inquiry. At the worst I will have wasted a couple of hours; it may be that I end up with some information for you. Trust me—and don't say anything to Rolando."

Voorhies acquiesced unenthusiastically, and Lamarck sprang into the Genix medical facility. The doctor scanned Lamarck's wound and touched his arm with a spray designed to promote rapid tissue regeneration.

"Have you ever taken regeneratives before?" he asked.

Lamarck shook his head. "It hasn't been necessary in the past. I try to avoid pulse bolts where possible. Their effect on natural fabrics is unfortunate," he said.

"The compound stimulates the body's repair mechanisms far beyond the normal," said the doctor, ignoring Lamarck's irony. "You may find that you are unnaturally hungry over the next week or so, and you will have less energy than usual. Crimebusting is inadvisable for that period. Try to avoid overtaking yourself."

"I find that a practical programme under most circumstances," rejoined Lamarck. "It's usually my superiors who fail to concur."

With a brisk thank-you Lamarck quit the surgery. Outside he saw Nina, now artificially composed as a result of some palliative draught. Narosyn and two of his men sat by. Lamarck concluded that Nina had to be considered at risk now: it seemed likely that Dr Mamoulia's work on the Glyde sample had cost her life: could Nina be next in line?

Speaking quietly to Narosyn, Lamarck said, "Make sure that Dr Haecht is given round the clock protection. She is working on a sample that has cost one life already, and I don't know if she realises how much danger she is in."

Narosyn nodded. "I'll get an Enforcements detail on it. This case of yours has caused something of a stir: two murders outside of the Mezzanotte ghettos in a day. The sooner you and Kate clear it up the better."

"Not my case, Maroc," laughed Lamarck with not entirely appropriate hilarity. "Kate is looking after things now. I'm off to Corinth for a holiday."

"I had been intending to interview you," said Narosyn with a frown. "And now you tell me you're going offplanet."

"Contact the Corinth office if you want to talk to me. I'll check in with them when I get there."

Lamarck stepped vigorously out of the Genix building and summoned an auto-tram to take him home to pack. It was only once he was in the conveyance that he realised that he had not said goodbye to Nina.

* * *

Chapter 14

The TLZ spaceliner *Brabantia* spent five days in Otherspace bypassing the expanse of space between Chrysopolis and Corinth, the sector capital. The two planets were near-neighbours in interstellar terms, and traffic between them was frequent. Corinth, the larger planet, had been colonised some 200 years before Chrysopolis and was considerably more populous. The capital city, Stellapolis, was one of humanity's largest, being home to 150 million souls, or what passed for them in the metropolis.

For Lamarck, ensconced in one of the cheaper cabins, the voyage to Corinth was a journey home. In a small town on the southern continent, far from Stellapolis, he had grown up, and enlisted in Pangalactic. His progress in the organisation had soon taken him away from Corinth, and with the exception of odd visits to Stellapolis, he had rarely returned. Chrysopolis was a more congenial and less frenetic world, and the oversight troubled him only infrequently. Nonetheless, as the spaceliner approached Corinth, Lamarck was conscious of a familiarity which, if not exactly pleasurable, at least had something of nostalgia in it.

Each of the planets of the Terran Hegemony had its own unique aura. Earth was always known as "the blue planet", although centuries of environmental degradation meant that there was a diseased, grey aspect to the home-world. Overcrowded and denuded of resources, Earth was regarded with an awed respect as the home of humanity; but few lived there who had a choice.

Those who did have a choice of habitation might well choose Corinth, a lush and green world. Temperate and fertile, the abundance of natural resources and absence of inimical lifeforms made Corinth a congenial environment. The terraformers of Planetary EcoSystems had had little to do when preparing the world for colonisation; almost everything necessary for human habitation was there.

A paradise the planet might have been; but no environment peopled by half a billion humans was without problems. While Stellapolis was one of the cul-

tural and technological marvels of the galaxy, it was also notorious for its ghettos of sprawling squalor and its astonishing crime rates, scarcely paralleled away from Earth itself. The other habitations on the planet more closely approximated the ideals of the original colonists, eager to make a new life away from the man-made hell that was Earth; nonetheless Stellapolis was a city where every rational person knew how to use a pulse-gun, and carried one.

Lamarck was glad as the *Brabantia* approached planetfall that he had had the best part of a week to recover from his regenerative treatment, which had indeed left him feeling somewhat enfeebled. Stellapolis was no city to visit half-fit.

"I love spaceliners," said Ilona Petrovic, an expensive young blonde sporting a new lizardskin treatment with whom Lamarck had flirted a significant portion of the voyage away, "but I always worry about the landings. The ships seem so big and so clumsy."

"Your concerns are groundless," responded Lamarck in his practised glax drawl. "You can scarcely have missed TLZ's safety propaganda. In all the centuries of commercial space travel there have only been thirteen fatal accidents, and six of those were caused by terrorism. TLZ may not be models of altruism; but they know that a loss of confidence in the Hattenkat Drive would put them out of business."

"You employ a mixture of cynicism and inductive reasoning, which is not the basis of an unanswerable argument. The fact that we landed safely last time is no proof that we will do so this time."

"If you want to give yourself a frisson I can't stop you," said Lamarck with a smile, "but the fact remains that no commercial spaceliner has ever crashed on landing. I need to get to Stellapolis and I'm prepared to gamble on the winning streak continuing to get me there. So, apparently, are you."

"One always meets such fascinating people on the spaceliner," said Ilona, lowering her scaled eyelids demurely in a way that Lamarck had come to find rather tiresome. She was too intelligent to need to go in for such prattle. "It makes a degree of risk acceptable."

Lamarck, shifting his arm in its sling, looked from the viewport at the planet below them.

"We will soon have landed," he said. "Then you will learn the meaning of 'risk'—the moment you step out-

side of the spaceport. The natives are by no means all friendly."

"I would expect Pangalactic to keep me safe," Ilona said. "After all, my father pays his taxes to allow them to do so."

"Pangalactic are masters of the possible; they do not attempt miracles, which in Stellapolis provides them with a degree of latitude. As a former Stellapolis fump I feel compelled to point out that the city's crime rate is well within the tolerance set out in the Demographic Formula."

"You may think you can blind me with science, Prime Apprehensor, but it isn't so. I know that the Formula allows ludicrously high levels of crime in deprived and urban areas, and that in cities like Stellapolis, Pangalactic can get away with almost the whole population in jail and incur no penalties. We did it at school," she declared triumphantly.

Lamarck could not help laughing. "I suspect that you skipped the history lessons when they covered the Formula. It is true that it allows for much higher levels of crime in areas where social conditions are not optimum; but that's a simple response to demographic pressures. You malign Pangalactic unduly."

Ilona smiled. "I would expect you to say no less, Prime Apprehensor. I am sure you would not guarantee my safety, however."

"It is hardly for me to give such assurances," said Lamarck. "I would suggest, though, that by staying in the Aurelian Quarter, as you intend, you maximise your chances of a carefree sojourn in the metropolis. It is a fact—some would say a regrettable one—that Pangalactic is more inclined to secure the public weal in affluent areas of the city. You will be safe enough where you're going."

"From you that virtually constitutes a guarantee," said Ilona. "I will disembark with rather greater confidence as a result."

The *Brabantia* negotiated its way through the atmosphere with practised ease. Lamarck had been party to enough landings not to feel the need to witness another, and, making his excuses to Ilona he returned to his cabin to collect his effects. Attractive enough as she had been at the outset, Ilona Petrovic had become wearing towards the end of the voyage. There was nothing he could complain of in her conduct, but on extended acquaintance her charms had

seemed obvious and shallow. Rather than being refreshed by her ingenuousness, as he normally was by such girls, he had found her after a time artificial, tedious and insipid. It was some time since he had known a lizardskin girl—the technique was still regarded as not quite respectable on Chrysopolis—and he remembered that the ones he had known previously also tended to the vapid. He had never admitted to Voorhies that in his days as a Stellapolis fump he had conducted a more than satisfactory relationship with a lizardskin girl; but in retrospect he wondered what the appeal had been.

Lamarck found himself contrasting Ilona unfavourably with Laura Glyde, whose personality appeared so much more subtle and testing. Yet Laura was, he reminded himself, part of a major criminal conspiracy, and possibly guilty of manslaughter or even murder. As a law enforcement officer he had no business finding such a woman so much more captivating than Ilona Petrovic. He was not normally so contrary. What, he wondered, would Kate make of it all? He had a fairly good idea. Instinctively he shied away from the reasons he had come to Corinth in the first place; they were not, he sensed, entirely unconnected or entirely innocent.

A little later Lamarck realised with a shock that he had spent so long in reverie that the ship had landed. Loading his luggage aboard the auto-valet with his good arm, he strode from his cabin with only his Pangalactic ident and his pulse-gun. Ahead of him in the disembarkation lounge he saw Ilona and gave a cheery, if guilty, wave. He was conscious of a degree of unjustified uncharitability in his thoughts towards her.

"I thought you were going without saying goodbye," she said.

Lamarck deployed his dry smile. "It took me longer to pack with one arm than I thought," he said. "Enjoy Stellapolis: I might see you on the return journey."

With a friendly farewell Ilona turned and made purposefully for the exit, eager to enjoy the sensations of the new city. Lamarck looked after her with a wistful glance: how nice to have such an uncomplicated life, and how much easier to conduct such a life with money.

Lamarck was one of the last to leave the *Brabantia*. He felt it strange to be on Corinth again, and he

realised it was five years since he had last been here; and it was still raining. This was the Stellapolis he remembered. Sending his luggage on to his hotel, he summoned an auto-tram.

"Pangalactic headquarters!" he said, and settled back to join the familiar ride. The auto-trams here were packed far more densely than in Mezzanotte City; the traffic management computers in Stellapolis were reputed to be among the most powerful processors in the galaxy. There were few pedestrians in Stellapolis; not, as on Chrysopolis, from disinclination, but because a person on foot in the great metropolis would be almost instantly mown down by the auto-trams as they shot past at ninety miles an hour.

As the auto-tram approached the Pangalactic headquarters, Lamarck slipped his sling off. His shoulder no longer really needed it, and he would cut a less impressive figure among the glaxes if he was wearing it; and this was a culture where respect was all. The auto-tram came to a halt and Lamarck stepped out into the light drizzle. He set his shoulders—wincing at the twinge of pain this action caused—and stepped into the lobby of the sector headquarters.

All was as he remembered it: cool, clean and anti-septic, with tasteful plants, subdued lighting, and a beige décor. The sector headquarters resembled a hospital more than did most medical facilities. It was sited well away from the ghettos and by deliberate intention very little policing went on here. The Pergamon, as it was known, was primarily an administrative centre.

Lamarck thought to recognise a face at the reception desk.

"It's Sergeant Boden, isn't it?" he said.

"As it says on the nameplate," grunted that worthy, without looking up.

"Not the most effusive of welcomes for an old colleague," drawled Lamarck.

Boden carefully looked up with the air of a man who did not welcome surprises, and scrutinised Lamarck. Nodding slowly, he said, "Your face is familiar, for a fact. It's Apprehensor Lamarck, if I'm not in error."

"A minor error only, Sergeant. I'm Prime Apprehensor Lamarck now, with the Contracts Division on Chrysopolis. Who are the great folk here now?" asked Lamarck with a smile.

"Westerhaven is still Sector Puissant, of course. Thade Galar is Planetary Puissant—she must have been Puissant Apprehensor when you were here, Lewison d'Este took over from her, old Beltane is Head of Investigations and Carey Craman is Enforcements Boss."

Lamarck digested the information. "Craman made it then? He looked like being Zone Captain for ever when I was here."

"One of the old school, is Carey Craman. I never thought they'd make him Boss, but when Grabb retired last year he got the nod. They say Lewison d'Este and Westerhaven froze out Thade to get him made up to Boss."

"Lewison d'Este wasn't here when I was, but I know of him from his days on Arcopia. A smart type, they say, and a strange ally for a rogue like Craman, I should have thought."

"Ah, no, Prime Apprehensor: Lewison d'Este and Thade Galar hate each other: 'like poison' is the saying, I believe. Once Thade blocked Carey's promotion, d'Este's support was assured."

Lamarck had never been a man for organisational politics. It was accepted that divisional chiefs would be perpetually manoeuvring and jockeying for position, which rarely made for an edifying spectacle; on this occasion, though, Lamarck paid attention. He needed someone on his side in Stellapolis and it was important to know the balance of power.

"Are any of them here today? I'm on an investigation," asked Lamarck, with partial truth.

"If it's a smarse matter, it's d'Este you should be seeing; I'll see if he is about."

"How about Craman? I'd like to see the old rogue again."

Boden called up the information on his com-link; dialling an appropriate code, he said into the screen, "I'll put you through. Kaietta, it's Sergeant Boden on the front desk. I have a Prime Apprehensor Lamarck from Chrysopolis to see Mr Craman."

Kaietta's reply was indistinct, but Boden indicated to Lamarck to go up. "You know the way?"

"Of course. Thank you, Sergeant."

Lamarck took the airlift into the higher echelons of the Pergamon. The Enforcements Director's secretary escorted him into Craman's office and arranged for refreshments. Craman, peppery with a dyspeptic

look, extended an affable hand.

"It really is Geir Lamarck!" he said. "It's good to see you on Corinth again. Sit down, sit down."

"It is strange to be back," said Lamarck, truthfully enough. "Congratulations on your promotion to the Fifteenth Grade, sir."

Craman waved a hand. "Internal politics, nothing more. Thade Galar always found me a lout and a loon; that counted for more than policing skill with Westerhaven and d'Este. So it goes; plus, of course, with Grabb retired, there was no-one else who knew a damn thing about maintaining order in Stellapolis."

"I managed to get from the spaceport to the Pergamon without incident; you must be doing something right."

"Ha! Don't tell anyone, but this city polices itself. The ghettos have their own rules and I don't even try to maintain order there; the affluent quarters need little protection from me, with the security systems they have. It's only the strip in the middle I need to worry about, and I put virtually a whole city's fumps there. That looks after Stellapolis, and the rest of the planet is straightforward enough."

Lamarck noted to himself that Craman had neglected to mention the "arrangements", pecuniary and otherwise, with gang bosses that he had introduced as Grabb's deputy to ensure that their activities were limited to strictly demarcated areas. It was such activities which earned him his respect with desk sergeants and his "old-school" tag.

For half an hour Craman and Lamarck discussed old times. Lamarck had spent time as a Stellapolis fump and knew Craman and his methods well. Eventually the conversation turned to more relevant matters.

"And what brings you to Corinth, Geir?" asked Craman.

"I am executing a Chrysopolis contract. A couple of potential witness are on the planet. I would appreciate the loan of an aircar and an officer for a few days, and the issue of Pangalactic credentials valid on Corinth."

Craman looked uncertain. "You will need to tell me more about your contract. I assume you are acting with Puissant Apprehensor Rolando's authority?"

"That authority might best be described as 'implied'. In truth, I am not sure if he knows I am here. The leads I am following up fall in the category of 'long-shots'."

Carey Craman scowled, and rubbed his ruddy chin. "I am to understand that you are here on your own initiative, without the consent or knowledge of your chief?"

"That would indeed cover the majority of the facts, although not, I think, the spirit of the investigation."

"You always were an individualist, Prime Apprehensor. That is not the Pangalactic way; not on Corinth, at least. I might have thought, after your experiences in Investigations, that you might have learned the value of teamwork a little better," said Craman.

"I cannot imagine what channels you have which would give you an accurate knowledge of my career in Investigations," said Lamarck.

"One learns things at the Pergamon, Prime Apprehensor. As far as your request goes, I will fulfil it: the instant, and not before, that you provide Puissant Apprehensor Rolando's explicit consent. Is that sufficiently clear?"

"Absolutely so, sir. I will trouble you no longer."

Lamarck stalked from the office. Plan A had been unsuccessful; time for Plan B. Stepping along the corridor he found himself before the Planetary Puissant's office.

Recognising the secretary, he slipped his ident-chip onto the desk and asked, "Is the Puissant about, Deandra?"

"*Prime Apprehensor* Lamarck, I see! It is nice to see you after all these years! I am afraid she is in a meeting with Mr d'Este at present. Would you care to wait?" asked Deandra, who, thanks to the marvels of Genix treatments, looked some years younger than when he had last seen her.

Lamarck felt that he had little option and set himself to wait. He chatted idly with Deandra and learned as much as he could about the circumstances governing life at the Pergamon. After around half an hour a tall angular man strolled languidly from the Planetary Puissant's office. Lamarck surmised that this was the famed Lewison d'Este, one of the rising stars of the sector. A young man to be Puissant Apprehensor on a sector headquarters world, he thought. Even so, he doubted that he was Thade Galar's match.

As soon as Lewison d'Este had departed Thade Galar herself emerged from her office. She did not appear to be in a good humour. A woman in her early

fifties, small and punchy, she had been a legendary Puissant Apprehensor for twenty years, a terror not only to felons but her subordinates; but she got results. Now, it seemed, she had been made Planetary Puissant on the retirement of the previous incumbent. Her progress would have been faster but for the well-known enmity of Sector Puissant Westerhaven and several members of the Pangalactic board.

Her gaze fell on Lamarck, who felt a degree of trepidation. He had worked with her in the past, and had never been certain of the quality of her regard for him. Thade Galar was more destructive than most forces of nature, and Lamarck had always sought to avoid her disesteem.

"Do I see Apprehensor Geir Lamarck?" she asked in a powerful, well-modulated voice.

"Prime Apprehensor now, but yes indeed, ma'am. I had hoped for a few minutes with you."

Thade Galar fixed Lamarck with a gaze which in earlier ages might have been used to nail criminals to a cross.

"It is customary to make an appointment to see a Planetary Puissant, Prime Apprehensor. One does not simply sit outside the door."

"In truth ma'am, I had hoped not to disturb you. My original appointment was with Puissant Apprehensor Craman, but he proved uncooperative, even obstructive."

"Obstructiveness is all that corrupt bibulous oaf is fit for," said Thade Galar with throwaway contempt. "If you had serious business—which, since you are here from offworld, I assume you have—you should have seen me in the first place. Deandra, postpone my appointments while I deal with the Prime Apprehensor."

With a wink at the secretary, Lamarck followed Thade Galar into her office, which enjoyed a markedly more favourable view than Craman's. Lamarck outlined the history of his request, dwelling on Craman's boorishness and obstreperousness.

Thade Galar listened to Lamarck in silence.

"As a snoop you always made a favourable impression on me, Prime Apprehensor. A Puissant Apprehensor is only as successful as the results her subordinates obtain. In that regard you never let me down on the occasions you were seconded to me. I know that your career has suffered in recent years, and that your association with Jaden Rolando has not

helped you. I cannot remedy that; it is an occupational hazard in the same way that pulse-guns are such hazards.

"Reading between the lines of your story, I sense that you are acting against the wishes of your superiors. That does not make you wrong. Clearly you do not want to tell me the details of what you are doing. You are asking me to trust your judgement blindfold."

"Yes," said Lamarck. He had never been sure of the best way to deal with Thade, but composure was likely to be more productive than expostulation.

Thade Galar smiled, an event which Lamarck found at least as unsettling as her frown. "I know what it is to be dependent on one's own judgement, Prime Apprehensor. In my career I have often had little else to rely on."

Punching an authorisation code into her comscreen, she said, "Your credentials will be waiting at the front desk. Return at 9-30 tomorrow and ask for Apprehensor Peppingen; he will help with your investigations."

"Thank you, ma'am. I appreciate your support."

Thade Galar merely flexed her lips. "If you will excuse me, Prime Apprehensor; I have other appointments."

Lamarck inclined his head and left the office. Taking the airlift to the ground floor, he collected his credentials and called an auto-tram to take him to his modest hotel. All in all, it had been a successful day.

* * *

Tergan

Chapter 12

Keaen

* * *

Another day had come and gone. Where was Pandrak? What was detaining him? A day's ride to the farm; another day to return.

Tahlia ran cold. What is Nyla wasn't there anymore? What if there was no help?

Tahlia made a vexed sound.

Unacceptable. Inconceivable. Armist would live. Nothing else made any sense.

He came up behind her and touched her shoulder. She turned around and hugged him. There was so much more she wanted to do; wanted *him* to do; both of them. . . But they had to be content with the embraces and the kisses, no matter how much she yearned to lie with him as man and woman. The bitter irony did not escape her. There was a time when they had not been allowed to be together for quite different reasons: because then they had been thought of, and had thought of themselves, as siblings. Tradition and law had forbidden what they both wanted.

But had that stopped them? For a while, maybe; but then nothing could stop them.

But now there was. . . this. As she kissed him and he kissed her she wondered if they had simply tempted fate too much. There was only so much you could get away with, and somewhere along the line fate had decided to teach them a lesson.

I understand! she told fate. *Now you can make him well again.*

Armist drew back.

"I love you," he said softly. A minute hesitation. "And I'd better lie down."

They barely made it to the bed before he collapsed.
Please live.

Their ride was brought to a sudden halt when Zygie's horse stepped into an ilkworm hole. It's ankle snapped with a crack. The horse emitted a whinny of pain and collapsed, throwing off Zygie, who landed on her head and lost consciousness. The horse, it's ankle still lodged in the hole at an impossible angle, lay on the ground, twisting and making woeful little sounds.

Pandrak pulled up his own horse and wheeled around. He jumped off and knelt down beside Zygie. Forcing himself to calm he carefully he touched her here and there, felt for the obvious signs of broken limbs, spine, ribs. Then he gently turned her around, to reveal her face, scratched and bruised from the fall. He brought his face close to hers and heaved a sigh of utter relief when he felt her shallow breath. At that moment he could have cried, but he bit it back and focused on the task at hand.

He looked around. On one side of the road reared the wall of the Myrmidic Woods, already sinking into gloom in the deepening twilight; on the other reposed the expanse of the Myrmidic Marsh, from whose boggy foundations rose a constant haze of steam that made the air humid and carried with it the stale, faintly sweet fetor of decay. The clumps of tussock, lestens, and the crooked stalks of the helbekias reached as far as the eye could see.

Zygie's horse scabbled with its good legs, uttering whinnies of pain and despair. Pandrak fumbled in his pocket, brought forth the weapon of lightning, and presently ended the animal's misery. The ensuing silence was profound. Even the wind had died down. The air lay heavy above the marsh, like a smothering blanket of humidity. As the air cooled the emanations from the swamp became more hazy and would presently restrict visibility to a minimum.

Pandrak redirected his attention to Zygie. He knew enough about circes from Ailin to understand that unconsciousness would not prevent Zygie from healing small injuries. At a very basic level the process was beyond the control of the conscious mind. But if Zygie's brain had been damaged by the fall. . . Pandrak dared not to take the thought further.

He looked at the woman's scraped face. Already the wounds had begun to scab over. Within minutes they would be effectively healed.

What was he to do? He could sit here and wait until the circe recovered consciousness. Then they could

proceed on one horse to Swampy Post station, get another animal, and go on.

But what if Zygie did not . . .

She felt, he noticed, quite cold. Clammy even.

Pandrak took off his riding jacket and placed it around her. He would have to get her to Swampy Post. Though he feared neither elec nor pod, and though Zygie had even less to fear, it was not a good place to be. She needed rest. A comfortable bed where she could recover her strength. They weren't going anywhere far tonight, this much was certain.

Pandrak carefully picked her up and carried her to his horse.

How was he going to get her inert form up there? He could not just lie her across the horse. He looked around and saw the rotten stump of an old cypress that had fallen over many years ago. The rest of the trunk had long since disintegrated under the influence of the rot and time.

Pandrak, still carrying Zygie, led the horse to the stump, tested its solidity, and found enough of a foothold to give himself a step up onto the saddle. After some risky manipulations he finally sat in the saddle with Zygie facing him, her head resting against his shoulder.

Pandrak urged on the horse and continued on his way through the growing darkness and the thickening fog.

He arrived at the palisade of Swampy Post about an hour later. By then the night was complete and progress over the last mile or so had been excruciatingly slow. From beyond the range of visibility the creatures of marsh and forest were calling out their laments and their challenges, depending on their disposition.

They weren't going to let him in. On the guard towers men aimed crossbows, perhaps thinking him a creature of the night. Only power of his voice, combined with the sight of his carrying an injured woman—hardly a likely ruse of a Night Creature—persuaded them to open the gate just wide enough to allow him inside.

Pandrak contrived to procure a small room with a single bed and not much else. He deposited still-unconscious Zygie on the bed and asked for a two bowls of water: one freshly-boiled, the other cold. He also requested and, upon presentation of another sil-

ver doon, obtained reasonably clean scraps of linen. The wife of Swampy Post's owner, keen to take advantage of this interruption of her routine, offered her assistance, but was firmly repulsed. She departed with ill-grace, darting a glance of moderate dislike at Pandrak which the latter registered only with a tiny corner of his mind. He closed the door to the room and proceeded to treat Zygie with a series of hot and cold compresses, designed to encourage the circulation of blood. He also used the occasion to clear the grime off her face and other exposed parts of her anatomy.

He called for, and was provided with, fresh bowls of hot and cold water, and continued his ministrations. Her garments were dirty from the ride and the fall. Pandrak, with some reluctance, and as much discretion as possible, divested her of the dress. Fortunately for his peace of mind she wore a thin woolen shift underneath. He covered her with a blanket and stepped into the corridor to call for assistance.

The station owner's wife appeared. Pandrak displayed Zygie's garments and asked her if she could procure clean ones of about the same size. He supported his request with a silver doon and was soon delivered an adequate replacement.

Zygie remained in a state of torpor and seemed not to notice what was being done to her. Pandrak forced himself to remain calm and to proceed as he had started. With Zygie clean, and the scrapes in her face and on her arms and hands now just pink striations of new skin, Pandrak could do little but sit on the side of the bed and watch the circe lie there, breathing shallowly but evenly.

He thought of Armist; hoped that he was holding on to life. And Tahlia, who would be frantic—but she was a strong girl and the best nurse Armist could possibly ask for; and the one person who would keep him in line and focused on his life, rather than things he 'had to do'. The boy took his duty far too seriously. One day they'd have to have a serious conversation about that.

One day . . .

Subjected to his forced inactivity, Pandrak also found time to focus his attention on Zygie. With this came the memory of a moment, back there on the road, after Sander had saved them. Something very strange had come over him then.

What?

It had been the second time in the few hours he'd known Zygie—and somehow she didn't seem to mind at all.

Pandrak wished he had a name for this . . . thing. He hesitated to even consider the more obvious ones. They could not possibly apply here. Still, this . . . thing . . . it lingered—though now he had it under firm control. But its very presence was subtly unsettling.

Almost without volition Pandrak reached out and ran a finger along the contours of her face; across the temple; past the slightly almond-shaped eyes, now closed, their long lashes locked together; over the cheekbone; down the gentle hollow of the cheek; down and around the soft, but energetic, jaw; along the tiny crease running from the side of a pert nose down to the mouth; coming to rest on the curve of her lips, and feeling the gentle current of her breath on his finger.

How old was she? Older than himself, that much was certain. Compared to her he was but a youth; despite everything that he was, and what he knew and how he'd been trained. He might have gone through hardships, but this woman had gone through more than that. He had always belonged somewhere; she had probably been an outcast from the instant her circe-dom had been uncovered. It was the sick way of the people to avenge themselves on those they feared. A fear born out of ignorance, and in this instance—such was Pandrak's suspicion—sheer jealousy.

Fools—fools . . .

In their midst there were those who could—and would—bring them and their loved ones back even from the brink of death. And what did they do? They persecuted and expelled them from their midst.

Pandrak gazed at Zygie's relaxed face and remembered what she was like when conscious. Always just slightly on guard, the eyes permanently wary, watching, observing, knowing. A bit like Ailin who, Pandrak guessed, had gone through trials of her own. Ailin, too, when one looked at her . . . there was an undefinable something that could not be pinned down, but which was a definite presence nonetheless. The only time the guard dropped was when Ailin looked at Caitlan: then the wariness vanished, to be replaced by a softness and a vulnerability that was almost too beautiful pry upon by observing it. More than once had Pandrak quickly averted his eyes because he had

been too embarrassed.

Pandrak took Zygie's hand in his and looked out the window; saw the swirls of mist highlighted by the night lights of Swampy Post. The circes, he thought, had never harmed anybody. They also hadn't asked for their gifts. They just were who they were: random acts of an incomprehensible natural world—just like his own talents were bestowed by causes far too erratic and unpredictable to fathom. That it had something to do with the Myrmidic Woods was certain; but that's as much as anybody knew.

Or maybe somebody did?

What about Zygie's friend, Sander, who was in possession of a weapon that didn't belong on this world—just like the cylinder in Pandrak's pocket didn't.

Who was Sander?—Not a magice, but . . . what? What was *his* agenda?

All Zygie had told Pandrak was that Sander wanted Evadne, Hengiste's only surviving niece, on the Tergan throne. Exactly why even Zygie confessed not to know.

Zygie . . .

Pandrak returned his attention to Zygie—only to find her eyes open and fixed on him with the usual expression of wariness—and maybe something else as well; something he didn't quite understand. He wondered how long she'd been conscious and watching him.

"Welcome back," he said softly.

"It's good to be back." A tiny smile. "What happened?" Confusion. "I remember . . ."

"The horse stumbled. You hit your head. I brought you to Swampy Post."

He remembered that he was still holding her hand and let go.

Zygie looked down at her hand but said nothing.

"We're probably going to be here for the night," he said.

"How long . . ."

"It is almost evening."

"I'm sorry."

Pandrak shook his head. "For what? Having an accident?"

"I didn't pay attention."

"It was dark," he pointed out reasonably. "It was an ilkworm hole, covered with grass. It could have happened in plain daylight - to anybody."

She continued looking at him with an unnerving

directness. "We could leave now. We'd be in Keaen tomorrow: before noon."

Pandrak shook his head. "You need to rest. Sometimes a timely pause makes for better progress afterwards."

She smiled. Her eyes almost lost their guarded look.

"I will obey," she said, curiously demure. "This time." A hint of flirtation? Surely not?

Pandrak stood up. "Good. Then I'll leave you to rest."

"Where are you going?"

"Just . . ." he searched for words. "To give you some privacy."

Zygie pushed herself up on her elbows. There was an odd look in her eyes: pensive, searching.

"What's your real name?"

Pandrak froze. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. On the Isle . . . they give you a magice-name, yes? Before that you were someone else. — Who?"

"A Cedrea youth called 'Kervran,'" Pandrak said. How strange the name felt on his own tongue.

"Kervran," she repeated softly, thoughtfully. "It is the name of one who searches . . . for truth."

Pandrak smiled crookedly. "I wish it were so."

"Aren't you searching for truth; about your own self? You, who defied his masters for the sake of his son? Are you not . . . uncertain?"

"About what?"

Zygie shrugged. Not easy with her propped up like this. "I don't know. Your place in the great scheme of things perhaps . . ."

Pandrak stared at her for a few breaths, unsure of how to respond.

Zygie smiled up at him. "When we're alone," she asked, "may I call you 'Kervran'? It sounds so much more like . . . *you* . . . than 'Pandrak'."

"If you want to."

"I do."

"I'd better go and let you . . . clean up," he said, suddenly in a hurry to leave. "There's a lavatorium at the end of the hallway."

He turned to the door.

"Kervran!"

The way she said it—it sounded almost . . .

Pandrak turned around. She was looking down at

herself. To his chagrin he found his face getting warm.

"I . . . wanted to make you comfortable. Your clothes . . . they were . . . soiled."

"You did this?" She grinned. "Why, how completely shameless of you. And how thoughtful to procure clean ones."

"I . . ."

Zygie flopped back on the pillow and laughed. "Do not worry, Kervran. I'm certain my virtue was safe with you."

She held out a hand. "Come here." When he hesitated, "please!"

Pandrak, his belly a curious, but not unpleasant, void, returned to the bed.

Zygie patted the side of the blanket. "Don't stand there like that. How can I talk to you if you glare down at me so fearsomely from your great height?"

"I suppose I don't want to appear fearsome," he agreed and sat down.

Zygie levered herself onto her elbows again and regarded him with an inclined head and an expression he didn't even begin to understand.

Or maybe he just didn't want to.

Or dare.

—

Kervran.

She liked it.

"Tell me about Kervran," she said.

Kervran—for this was as she chose to think of him—studied her for a moment. He sat awkwardly, as if half-wishing not to be there—and yet she knew that he liked being where he was.

It was ironic. A magice—and a circe. She should be in abject fear of him. The magices, more than anybody, had done their best to foster the image of circes as freaks who had no place in human society. That one of them should sit on the side of the bed, looking to oddly helpless . . .

She wondered if he had that same strange feeling in his belly that was spreading through her own. The truth was that she was feeling rather . . . uncertain . . . herself—and that it had nothing to do with her being so close to a magice, but that it was because he was who he was and something very unexpected

had happened the moment she'd seen him in her lobby.

Not that it was anything like what happened to Ailin, of course. That was out of the question. To even contemplate it was to invite disappointment and pain.

"What do you want to know?" he asked.

"Just . . . who he is . . ."

"Was."

"If you say so. Then tell me who he was."

"Just a boy, growing into a man, falling in love with a girl, experimenting with certain powers he had—never considering that his clandestine games might attract attention; that they might come and destroy his life, take him away, forever separate him from the only person he could not bear to be separated from."

For the flicker of a moment the countenance of the young Kervran replaced that of Pandrak—and then it was gone again, like a wisp of smoke in the wind.

"And your son?"

Pandrak . . . *Kervran!* . . . smiled wistfully. "Youth does not consider consequences. But there were. Joyful and tragic alike." He shrugged. "In the end all went . . . well. I lost Armist's mother, but I have my son—and I will have a grandchild; and all I want now is for my son to live to see it."

So it all came down to this? The magices destroyed because they drafted the wrong person? What supreme irony.

"I will do whatever I can to make him live," she promised.

"I know."

She hesitated, afraid to speak her mind. But if she didn't . . . now, that the moment seemed . . . right . . . then would she ever?

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to rush things. Once Armist was well again and there was time to think and plan and maybe just have some . . . time . . .

And yet . . . they were here.

She placed a hand on his.

"Back there," she began, and she knew from his expression that she didn't have to explain what 'back there' referred to, "I . . . we . . ." She took a deep breath and exhaled. "This is difficult."

He nodded.

He *knew*? And he didn't say anything? Leaving this to *her*? Or was he just being agreeable? In which case he really mightn't know.

Another look at Kervran though told her that he did;

but that he—as if that were possible!—was even more at a loss what to do with this . . . thing . . . between them than she was.

A magice in such a quandary? Was it possible?

Maybe not for a magice—but for Kervran . . . that was different altogether. And Zygie understood that this was indeed the youth sitting before her; in an older body, to be sure, but . . .

Was it true? How old was Armist of Keaen? In his twenties . . .

Twenty years? Had this man really been . . .

She looked at him and knew that it was true.

She turned sideways, so that she was supported only one arm, reached out with her free hand and took his. They had a lot to talk about. She could use talk to put off the inevitable. But she wasn't going to do that.

Of course, this wasn't an Ailin-Caitlan thing, but still, it was . . . significant.

Kervran was still looking at her with a curious mix of hope and something else. Dread maybe.

How could they have done this to him? How dared they presume?

Kervran's eyes widened.

Zygie smiled. "I'm not angry," she said softly. "Not at you."

"But you *are* angry."

"At them?"

"Who?"

"The magices of the Isle—who took Kervran's life away from him."

Kervran sighed. "They're gone. Whatever happened on the ocean, I know they're gone."

"But you're here."

His mouth twitched.

"That I am."

He was less tongue-tied now.

Good!

Zygie leaned forward and at the same time pulled him toward her. His face just had time to register a moment's disbelief before she kissed him.

It was a brief kiss, but it changed everything. The response, after the slightest hesitation, was unequivocal and passionate.

They separated. His face remained close. Her heart beat in her throat.

The expression in his face changed. Disbelief gave

way to a surprised kind of exuberance.

"I hope you know what you're doing," he said softly.

"I don't."

"I don't either."

"Does it matter?"

Those eyes . . .

"Let's find out," he whispered.

They did.

"I never had a man who's been chaste for such a ridiculously long time," Zygie told him. "I admire your . . . discipline." Her eyes, still pleasantly languid from their breathless and utterly satisfying encounter, searched his face. "Another man would not have had such . . ."

Pandrak—Kervran?—silenced her with a passionate kiss—which, only a short while ago, he would have considered himself incapable of. Indeed, it would not even have entered his mind that he could.

He lifted his head again. "Can we not discuss this?" he pleaded. "It is . . ."

"No need to be embarrassed," she whispered. "You have deported yourself most admirably."

"I take that to be a compliment."

"It is . . . Kervran."

"I am Pandrak, too," he said seriously. It was all good and well for her to see his . . . other . . . self; but she had to understand that he also was what he was.

The smile fled from her eyes, but the guardedness he had expected did not replace it. Instead there was something unanticipated.

"I know," she said softly. "And it was Pandrak who kissed me just now—and who very thoroughly satisfied me before that."

"Then let me be 'Pandrak,'" he said. "for Kervran is long gone."

Zygie wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down, hugging him to her. "No, he isn't," she whispered.

Her legs, who were still hooked around him, tightened briefly as she pressed the rest of her body to his, occasioning a renewed flare of desire.

She smiled as she felt it. Her hips pushed against him; her breath came in delicious small gasps; her mouth searched for his and found it. As he kissed her, he felt her smile. He didn't know why, but he didn't care. Somehow he had contrived to make her happy,

and that was a thing to be savored.

In the back of his mind he also felt a vague guilt, because he was making love to a woman while his son was dying. But then he also knew that there was nothing at this very instant that he could possibly do about it. Besides, he had an inkling—and it was not a magice-thing, but something coming from Pandrak, the man—that what was happening here and now was not just a frivolous romp; and that the woman kissing him—and now uttering little sounds of pleasure as they rolled over and she moved on top of him—might do more than just save his son; that, after decades in a dazed kind of limbo, the last remaining magice might just . . .

She hesitated. Her mouth pulled back from his. Her hair fell over his face as she lifted her head.

"Why are you smiling?" she whispered.

Pandrak chuckled. His hands, who had been resting on her hips, roamed up to stroke her shoulders, caressed her breasts.

"A moment ago *you* smiled," he reminded her. "Maybe . . . for the same reason?"

She let out a small breath and sunk back down on him: two bodies connecting through a thin film of mingling perspiration and shared warmth—fitting together very nicely, he thought. Like they had been waiting for something to mold against, to flow around merge with.

"Wouldn't that be something," she whispered into his ear.

—

Tahlia sat on the side of the bed, holding Armist's hands.

They were getting colder each time he slipped away; twice already today, and the periods were extending to troublesome lengths. He had been like this for most of the night now—not in a healthy sleep, but stiff and unmoving, cold and inert, impossible to waken.

A rap on the door. Through the closed door the guard answered her enquiry. Laetis wanted to talk to her.

"Send him in."

Laetis entered, took in the situation, and approached the bed.

"No change?"

Tahlia shook her head. "Have you heard more?"

"Some. A courier pigeon brought a message from Poltz. He sends his regards and advised me that he went to see his brother, whom he hadn't seen for some time. Pandrak apparently had been to see him, too: about three days ago."

"Nyla . . ."

" . . . is not with Barch anymore. Certain . . . events . . . occurred, which prompted her to leave without a trace."

Tahlia felt the life drain out of her. Her grasp around Armist's hands tightened. Was he to be lost to her after all?

No!

"Where is Pandrak?"

Laetis shrugged. "That is a mystery. As you know, if the magice does not want to be seen he is not."

He hesitated.

"What?" Tahlia prompted him impatiently.

Laetis appeared dubious. "The mystery may not be as profound as I indicated. I cannot be certain of it, of course, but . . . but, at my behest, Poltz conducted certain investigations in Cedrea. He advised me that Pandrak may have passed through the city on the night of the very same day he visited Barch."

"He went to see Tellam!" Tahlia said hopefully.

"We considered this possibility. Tellam, however, assured Poltz that he had not seen Pandrak that night. Besides, I said Pandrak may have 'passed through'. A rider fitting the magice's description exchanged a horse at a stable on Skele Avenue during the evening. The hostler remembered the event because people don't normally do this at such a late hour. The rider departed at best speed toward Port Ster, determined, it appeared, to brave the road and the Myrmidic creatures alike. The hostler, divining the ridge's intention, attempted to dissuade him, but apparently was unsuccessful."

Tahlia frowned. "This makes no sense."

Laetis shrugged. "Maybe it does. Especially when one considers another, apparently unconnected, snippet of information from Fort Tachwyn, where one of my men conducted enquiries after I instructed him to do so by courier pigeon."

"Pandrak was in Tachwyn?"

"The evidence points that way. He appeared to be

in some haste and departed north, toward the Marsh. That was in the late morning."

Tahlia digested the news.

"It appears," Laetis said softly, "that he was heading into Tergan.—What would he be doing there?"

"I do not know," she admitted.

"He's looking for Ailin's friend." Armist's voice was weak.

Tahlia turned. "Armist! Are you . . ."

"Alive," he whispered. His attempt at a smile was unconvincing.

"Ailin's friend?"

"I don't remember her name. Father mentioned it when he returned from Skele. Ailin told him to call upon her in a time of need."

Tahlia lifted his hand and held it to her face. Maybe she imagined it, but it didn't appear so cold anymore. But, looking at his face, she also saw that, whatever was happening inside him, it was depleting his energy. Whereas yesterday he had emerged from his 'episodes' apparently unscathed she now almost physically felt the weakness in him.

Armist glanced at Laetis. "How are your investigations proceeding?"

Laetis stepped closer to the bed, more comfortable with Armist than just Tahlia. Indeed, or at least this was Tahlia's observation, Laetis appeared ill at ease around any woman who was not inferior to him in one way or another.

"They are inconclusive," he said to Armist. "The Tegels are still our main suspects. Their hatred for the House, and especially Tahlia and yourself, is great: and more so after Kistof's humiliation at your hands. My advice is to take decisive action before they can initiate other, even more serious, attempts to destroy Keaen—or whatever it is they have planned for it."

Armist gave a weak chuckle. "What else, do you think, they might have in mind?"

"At the moment? Revenge. Restoration of their pride." Laetis thought for a moment. "Then? Who knows? They cannot be so deluded as to think that they can replace the house. Not with such obvious lack of support from their peers. On the other hand, if they choose to avail themselves of Roi Hengiste's services, they might just reconsider their position and judge it to be well-supported. In that case, they will go for

the throne, scrap the Declaration, and put into its place whatever suits them and their new overlord, Hengiste.”

“You do not think that you might be overstating Hengiste’s ambitions?”

“Pah!” Laetis gave a short, sharp laugh. “It is an article of faith with the Tergan kings that they must one day rule the Valley.”

“This is folly!” Tahlia exclaimed. “Their army is small compared to what Keaen can muster.”

“Armies are not everything,” Laetis pointed out. “Military deficiencies, though significant, may be compensated for by other advantages. If there are no such advantages, then they must be created. This, I am confident, is the reasoning of Hengiste.” He scowled. “Such an advantage would be gained from killing you,” he said to Armist, “and this is the reason why I have not ruled out Tergan as the origin of the assassination attempt.” He made an apologetic gesture. “However, we have not been able to track the assassin. He was very good.”

—

Pandrak woke, disoriented and confused.

Where?—How?

There: the rectangle of a window. The first hints of daylight filtered through the gray mists of the Marsh.

He was lying on his right side, under a blanket: this much was still within the bound of normality.

He was not, however, in the habit of sleeping in the nude—nor was he used to finding close to him the warmth of another, equally nude, human body, and under his left hand the soft, round contours of . . .

So it hadn’t been a dream . . .

Zygie’s face was covered by her hair, some strands of which moved forth and back with the even rhythm of her breathing. Her right arm was draped over his left, the hand resting on his shoulder.

Pandrak allowed himself the luxury of a few moments of contemplation of her and the sensation of the skin of her hip against the palm and fingers of his left hand. He breathed in her scent and told himself that maybe he wasn’t quite awake—though he knew he was. But it was a pleasant bit of self-deception which gave him liberty to take in this moment before the trials of the day, which would inevitably come.

In the light of the morning: what had happened last night?

Did he dare analyze it?

Pandrak felt a vague apprehension whose source he could not fathom.

Zygie’s breathing changed. Her hand slid down his arm, paused, slid back up again, as if investigating whatever it was that it was touching. Then it stopped and, through the layer of hair, he thought he saw her mouth turn into a small smile. She lifted her hand off his arm and moved aside the hair covering her face.

And then Pandrak knew the cause of his anticipatory apprehension. He knew it because it was unfounded; because when he looked at her and she looked at him, neither of them speaking, what he had feared to see was not there. No guarded inspection. Instead there was a . . . softness . . .

It was still mostly the old Zygie, and the softness was tinged with just a trace of the wry mockery that he’d come to expect. But the wall had been lowered and instead of guardedness he thought he saw . . .

What?

Expectancy maybe?

Of what?

Pandrak felt clumsy and inadequate. He didn’t know how to deal with . . . this . . . Anything he’d do might be totally wrong and destroy whatever they had begun to build.

Following an impulse he moved his hand up her back, pulled her closer, and kissed her. The response was utterly uninhibited and immensely satisfying. Pandrak realized, not without surprise, that maybe he had done exactly the right thing.

They pulled apart a fraction. The thought of breaking the physical contact between them was . . . disturbing.

What odd thoughts!

“We have to go,” he said regretfully—still not letting her go. There was something else he had to say.

“When it is all done . . .” he began.

“ . . . we will continue with this unfinished business,” she whispered and kissed him quickly.

They left Swampy Post after a hasty breakfast on two fresh horses. Zygie had rejected the clothes she’d been given and instead asked for a more practical pair of loose pantaloons—which turned out just a tad too

large—a man's shirt, and a heavy linen jacket. She briefly returned to their room and emerged a changed woman.

"How do I look?" she asked Pandrak, not without coquetry.

She saw his look and narrowed her eyes. "Say something nice," she warned him. "This is functional, but I'd like you to say something nice anyway."

Pandrak shrugged, biting back a smile. "It looks . . . fine."

"Fine'? That's like . . . 'adequate!'" But her eyes were laughing at him—which was good because he was getting apprehensive again. He really had no idea how to deal with the kind of relationship he'd suddenly and surprisingly gotten himself into.

Zygie divined his apprehension and laughed. "Let us go and save your son. Then you can use Keanean treasury funds to buy me a new dress. Indeed, I expect it!"

"It will be done," Pandrak assured her, thinking of Armist and that he had to be there—soon.

She laughed and pulled him to the door. "Come. We have a long way to travel."

They reached the Great Center Road in good time and changed horses. Mid afternoon brought them to the North Road, and the early evening saw them arrive in the tiny town of Haran's Respite. A new pair of horses took them as far as the Weald crossing, where the station was about to lock up tight for the night. Myrmidic creatures were rare, but the few that there were had to be kept out. A single rampaging elec could kill many men.

One of the guards on the towers recognized Pandrak, which greatly facilitated the procurement of a new team of excellent horses, on which they soon headed toward Keaen.

Another clear night. On the Western Flatlands to their right lay a checkerboard of tilled fields, their boundaries dimly discernible in the light of rising Janus. The road stretched like a long ribbon ahead of them. The horses pounded the ground with a steady rhythm, their breath coming in short spurts of steam as they galloped along.

Then, in the distance, the first intimation of human habitation. Tiny lights as they entered the outskirts of the capital. Without stopping they charged through

the city, and thundered along Castle Parade, to come to a halt at the gates of Castle Keaen.

Pandrak made himself known and presently the two of them were escorted into the castle and up to Armist's chamber.

—

Tahlia was beyond exhaustion. Three times today Armist had been 'away', and now he lay unconscious again, his breath now coming in short labored spurts. Jaslyn had offered to watch over him instead of Tahlia; a suggestion which did not even have a chance of being considered. The middle of the night found Tahlia lying on the bed beside her comatose lover and father of their child, in a state of torpor herself, hardly able to keep awake, and yet struggling to be there, just in case he woke and needed her.

Tahlia jerked.

She had dropped off to sleep. She raised her head, looked at Armist, who lay, his mouth open, his face terribly sunken, his skin afflicted with a ghastly gray tinge.

A terrible fear shot through her. She touched his face . . .

The door flew open. Tahlia whipped around, prepared to release an angry tirade at the intruders. Instead she froze. Through the door came Pandrak. Behind him a woman. Both looked bedraggled, dirty, and tired.

The woman, without hesitation, stepped to the side of the bed. Tahlia, still disoriented from her exhaustion, her drowsiness, and the unexpected developments, made as if to fend her off.

"Let her!" Pandrak said sharply, though not unkindly. He came to the bed and held out his hand to Tahlia.

"Come," he said gently. "Let her do what only she can do."

Tahlia stared at the woman, who regarded her with compassion. "Please," Tahlia said in a small voice.

The woman nodded and waited until Tahlia had gotten off the bed. Then she sat down and took Armist's hands in hers. She closed her eyes and just sat there.

Tahlia turned to Pandrak. "Is she . . ."

He motioned her to silence and shook his head.

Together they waited.

—

When Armist opened his eyes he thought, for a few confused moments, that he was hallucinating. For Tahlia was not Tahlia, but an striking dark-haired woman who stared at him intently as if waiting for something.

For what?

And then he remembered where he was.—*What* was . . .

His gaze swiveled and he saw . . .

Tahlia . . .

His father . . .

His father?

He looked back at the woman in front of him—and now he recognized the signs. He'd seen them before. Once one knew what to look for, it was impossible to miss. The youthful countenance, afflicted with the experience of many years, troubled by dreary memories, wary of everything and everybody; the eyes, melancholy with un-asked for knowledge.

Ailin's friend.

He remembered her name now.

"Zygie."

Her face creased into a smile. "At your service," she said gently.

And then there was an exclamation from Tahlia who came running to the bed, threw her arms around his neck, and said his name over and over again as if it was the last thing she'd ever say.

Over Tahlia's shoulders he saw the circe smile. She rose from the bed and stood there for a moment with an air of profound satisfaction. Then she turned and looked at his father; who came over and embraced her. Father and son exchanged a brief look. Armist realized, with not inconsiderable surprise, that along the way his father had done much more than just bring back someone to save his son.

—

As they walked along the long curved passage toward the stairs that led down to the next level where lay his own quarters, Zygie hooked her arm under Pandrak's .

"I could do with a bath," Zygie told him.

Pandrak laughed, and it came from deep within him.

The terrible weight of the last few days had been lifted off him, and it was as if finally he could breathe freely again.

"That is the least I can do for you," he told her. He stopped and clasped her shoulders. "Thank you. Thank you for more than I can say."

She studied him thoughtfully. "What now?" she wondered.

"Now I send a footman to arouse Taler, the majordomo, who will be his usual impeccable self and arrange for a bath for you. Despite the grim appearance of Castle Kean, it does have several aquecameras; and the baths are quite sizable." He laughed again. "There are certain advantages to having a privileged position: such as ordering the drawing of a hot bath in the middle of the night and have it done."

"That's not what I meant," Zygie said.

Pandrak sighed. "I know what you meant."

"I thought so."

He took her hands in his and held them for a few moments. "I have no skills with women," he admitted.

Zygie laughed out aloud. "Really? You certainly deceived me last night!"

Pandrak found himself blushing, making her laugh even more. But then he saw the earnestness behind the facade, and he realized that he was not the only one in a quandary.

"I don't," he insisted. He grinned. "Certain . . . skills . . . are natural. I don't think they count."

Zygie raised herself on the tips of her toes so that her eyes were level with his. "Believe me," she said, "they count."

Pandrak cleared his throat. "About the bath."

"It can wait."

"I could have it arranged. It would take a while anyway."

"We're not moving from here until we have cleared up a number of outstanding issues," she said firmly.

"Such as?"

"Where am I sleeping tonight?"

"Oh, that! We have some excellent guest rooms."

"Do you want me to sleep in a guest room?" she asked archly.

Pandrak took a deep breath. "No."

"That's better." Zygie smiled and kissed him on the mouth. Pandrak, too besotted to remember where he was, responded in kind.

They separated. "Item two," she said. "The future, whose shape you alluded to in vague terms some days ago . . ." She smiled with false demureness. "Or have we been there and gone past it already?"

Did she really mean what he thought she meant? How could it be? The notion was intimidating and exhilarating, all at once.

"I . . ." Why was he unable to form a coherent sentence?

Zygie said nothing but her eyes remained fixed on his. Suddenly Pandrak realized that they stood at a fork on the road of their lives. She had made it so—and left him to decide which way to go. Now.

Why now?

Because, he told himself, that's where they were. He hadn't been looking, too busy with what had to be done, and too dazzled by something he'd thought long forgotten—never really pausing to think where it would inevitably lead. His magice's skills had, in this instance, chosen to desert him. Or, to be truthful, he had chosen not to use them; for whatever obscure reason.

No matter: here they were, and decide he must. One of the paths before him did not include her—and somehow that was quite . . . intolerable.

He took a deep breath. "I would like it," he said, very carefully, "if you . . . stayed here. With . . . me."

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" she whispered and kissed him again.

"It wasn't," he admitted. And it was true: there had been no decision to speak of. He'd never even contemplated the other path.

She detached herself from him. "I also have something to tell you."

"Now seems to be the time and place," he said wryly. "In the wee hours of the morning, in the hallways of a grim castle by the sea. The setting could hardly be any more suitable."

She smiled mischievously. "You know what they say about circes?"

"They say a lot of things," he replied, "most of them wrong."

"This one's right," she advised him.

"Enlighten me."

"You never had a chance—from the moment you stepped into The Stag."

Pandrak chuckled. "You think I don't know that?"

He regarded her for a silent moment. "Who says *you* had?"

"Hmmm." She kissed him again—and when she pulled away he was shocked to see that her eyes were moist.

"Don't disappoint me," she whispered.

"Do you think I would?"

She sighed. "No.—But I have . . . reasons . . ."

He took her face in his hands. "We all have reasons for this and that and everything else. Forget them—right now. As of today they have become invalid."

He wiped a tear off her face. His thumb left a streak through the dust and grime from the trip. "What do you say we have that bath *together*? And then we'll totally scandalize Taler by telling him that my quarters will now be ours."

Zygie hooked her arm under his. "We'll scandalize your son. He and Tahlia will be very surprised at this development."

Pandrak kissed her again. It was most enjoyable.

"I doubt that very much."

—

"I regret to inject *dolente* elements into such an unexpectedly joyful occasion—but it appears that the Tegels have decided to take their impunity to the extreme."

Laetis stood before them, his hands folded on his back and looking grim.

"Secession?" Tahlia said incredulously.

Laetis' face was taut. "It appears that he counts on Hengiste's support." He paused and cast a hooded look at Zygie, who stood off to one side, near Pandrak, looking out through a narrow window.

"You may speak freely," Armist advised Laetis. Glancing at his father he noted a brief lowering of eyelids, amounting to a nod of thanks. Other than that the magice said nothing. Indeed, he had said very little since he and the circe had arrived in what Armist considered his 'study'; the same office Hain had used to transact much of his business, but now left with few mementos of that period. Tahlia had made sure of that.

Zygie turned her head. "If you'd rather have me leave . . ."

"No," Tahlia said firmly. She addressed Laetis. "Say

what you have to say.”

Laetis gave a minute shrug, thus expressing his unvoiced exasperation at what he must have considered serious lapses in discretion at the highest levels on the Keaen hierarchy. Armist inclined his head so Laetis could not see his smile. The decision-making process and those involved in it lacked structure; something which Laetis found unsettling. His own approach to making decisions as leader of the Pacers had always been much more systematic.

“There are indications,” Laetis said, “that Hengiste is preparing to make a pact with the Tegels. Indeed, he could be on his way soon to meet Kistof in person: so important this is to him.”

“Sander’s not going to like that,” Zygie said softly, almost as if to herself.

Laetis turned quickly to stare at her. “Sander?” he repeated, puzzled. “Councillor Sander? From Orgond? What’s *his* significance? Why should he concern himself with Hengiste’s plans?”

Armist caught an exchange of glances—almost too fleeting to notice—between the circe and his father. Pandrak’s face was devoid of emotion. Armist knew the signs. Not entirely to his surprise, Zygie did, too.

“A stray thought,” she said. “I happen to be acquainted with Sander. He visits The Stag on occasion. He’s one of those not disposed toward Hengiste, and makes little secret of it.” She shrugged. “That makes him one of many—and, as you say, he’s is of lesser significance.” She paused. “The Tergan dynasty has always been infested with plots and schemes to dispose of each other.”

Armist glanced at Laetis to see if the circe’s attempt cover her tracks had worked. He couldn’t tell. Laetis’ expression was inscrutable.

“But Hengiste is in control?” he asked Zygie.

“It appears that way,” she confirmed and turned back to the window, as if not truly interested in the topic at all.

“If Kistof is allowed to proceed with his plans, he could become dangerous; especially if Hengiste chooses to interfere,” Laetis warned.

“What do you suggest?” Pandrak said.

“There are two options. Neither is perfect. Each is fraught with the possibility of calamity.”

“But there is one you favor,” Armist guessed.

“Removal of the head usually obviates the necessi-

ty of dealing with the body,” Laetis replied.

Silence greeted the statement. Pandrak and Armist exchanged glances across the room. He felt Tahlia’s hand on his arm.

“I will not murder my opponents,” Armist told Laetis. “This would have been the way of Hain. It is the way of the Tergan court. It is not the manner in which we solve our problems.”

Laetis shrugged, as if he’d been expecting the response and was prepared for it.

“Then there is only the other: a punitive expedition by a large force to compel Kistof to yield to necessity. This alternative of course relies on the unequivocal and immediate support by the other barons; thus incurring a debt which will weaken the House of Keaen’s position.

“It may,” he added, almost as an afterthought, “also result in any number of casualties.”

Laetis, having finished his analysis, stood in an attitude of waiting. Armist divined his thought processes.

Statecraft. The ugly side of it.

The reasonability of Laetis’ preferred ‘option’ was beyond question. Excision of the canker might well save the body. In this instance the root of the disease were not the people of Caelar, but those who ruled them and did so with the implicit acceptance of the House of Keaen. The garrison at Caelar was under the nominal command of Keaen, but composed of soldiers supplied by the local citizenry. If Kistof decided that he wanted to secede, those soldiers would have little choice but to do as he told them and take up arms against their fellow Keaeneans. Besides, they were from Caelar, and there was an issue of regional pride at stake as well. Many there looked upon Tahlia as they had been taught to see her: a murderess who had assassinated the former baron with calculation and malice. All that despite the fact that everybody knew very well what a disgusting pervert he had been.

Given this circumstance, the deliberate assassination of Kistof was more than just ethically questionable. The blame would be—justifiably—laid on the House of Keaen, and it wouldn’t help to make the inhabitants of Caelar more kindly disposed toward the central authority.

The second alternative was even less pleasant. It raised the specter of a civil war. An ugly prospect, with the likely deaths of many, innocent and other-

wise. Such an eventuality would make the state of affairs under Hain's rule appear blissful. If this war happened, Armist sensed, Keaven would disintegrate beyond repair. Hengiste, or whoever ruled Tergan, would finally see their hearts' desire fulfilled.

Neither alternative was acceptable. There had to be another.

"We will not assassinate Kistof," Armist declared with finality.

"It is the only . . ."

"We'll find another way. I will not become a party to such an act."

"It's either Kistof or many innocents."

"Is it?" Armist snapped. "Suppose you achieve your aim and Kistof dies. Then what? Who's next in succession? Tiffer? Tiffer will do the same as Kistof would have done. So—are we going to assassinate him, too?"

"He would not be missed," Laetis said siccantly.

"I will not have it," Armist reiterated. He looked at his father. "What do you think?"

"I agree with you," Pandrak said. "Yet I cannot think of any alternatives."

"Do let me know when you've found one," Laetis noted sarcastically. He cast another, strangely glowering, glance at Zygie, who was still looking out the window. "What's so interesting out there?" he asked her, his tone oddly harsh.

She turned and regarded him for the space of a breath. Her face had closed up tight. Armist glanced at Pandrak; detected concern.

"I've lived in Sacrael for almost a decade," she told them. "During that time the Junco dynasty has been decimated to a mere handful. Spouses and children have been murdered by hired killers. Hengiste, ambitious though he is, is also a figure of tragedy. It is said that he loved his wife and his children—only to lose them all to the stealthy hands of assassins, while those who instigated the deeds hid behind deception and lies."

She looked at Pandrak and her face softened. "Killing and lies," she said lowly. "Why is it always killing and lies?"

Pandrak did something he would have been incapable of in public even days ago. He bridged the distance between them and embraced her. Armist glanced at Tahlia, who watched the event with unconcealed

amazement and delight; at Laetis, who stood brooding, his tall lanky frame stiff and tense. Armist guessed at the Pacer's thought processes. It appeared that everyone in the room was against him. His reasonable suggestions had been flatly rejected by people who had no appreciation of political exigencies. Should he argue his case?

Despite Laetis' attempt at indifference Armist sensed undercurrents of stirred-up emotions. Over what? There was something here he didn't understand. Their disagreement was not a cause for antagonism. Laetis knew the give-and-take of politics better than anyone in the room. That one's ideas might encounter resistance, no matter how deeply they were held: that he should be familiar with. Besides, he was simply too intelligent to allow such a matter to irk him unduly. More significant disagreements had existed, and all of them had been resolved with one form of compromise or another. That Laetis should trouble to become emotional over this issue was incomprehensible.

Unless something quite different was bothering him.

The presence of Zygie—whom he might regard as an interloper? But had she not saved Armist's life? Did that not qualify her as one to be trusted?

Armist studied Laetis covertly. It almost seemed as if he was deliberately *not* looking at Zygie.

The pacer pulled himself together. "If you have a strategy to deal with Kistof," he said curtly, "I would appreciate it if you could advise me." He bowed perfunctorily. "I have business to attend to. Events in general do not hold themselves in abeyance until I'm ready to deal with them. So I must needs follow their lead and respond when the need arises. I beg your indulgence."

He swept from the room. The door closed with definiteness.

"What ails Laetis?" Armist asked Pandrak.

Pandrak and Zygie moved away each other, conscious of having exhibited more than intended.

"I don't know," Pandrak admitted. "He appeared put out."

"I know," Zygie said lowly.

All eyes fixed on her.

"Like so many, he's afraid—of me."

Armist started to say something but Zygie's gesture silenced him.

"Trust me," she said. "I know. His antagonism was like . . ." She breathed out sharply. She shook her head, vexed at her inadequacy, which prevented her from putting into words what she needed to convey.

"He also . . ." she began, but could not bring herself to continue.

"What?" Pandrak's voice was gentle. He touched her shoulder. She looked up into his face; then around at Armist and Tahlia.

"He . . . desires me.—And he remembers . . ."

"He *what*?" Pandrak exclaimed.

Her face exhibited a fleeting kaleidoscope of emotions. Anger, frustration, sadness . . . and then, looking at Pandrak, a great tenderness. Armist knew where he had seen that expression before—and again he marveled at the convoluted machinations of fate, which had contrived to throw Zygie and his father together in such an unexpected way.

"I used to own a tavern," Zygie said. "Here, in Keaen. In those days he called himself something else. As did I." She shrugged. "When you live as long as I have you forget things that other folks might remember. Things that don't seem important. There's only so much you can take with you into the future, and one tends to focus on what matters.

"Whoever he was then—he was . . ." she shrugged "not important. But he . . . desired me—like most ordinaries seem to desire us—at the same time as they profess to loathe us."

She shrugged helplessly. Pandrak stood close to her and placed an arm around her shoulder. Zygie fitted herself against him.

"You may not appreciate this . . ." she said, "but . . . have you ever seen an ugly circe?—We're all . . . attractive. Maybe not beautiful, but the attraction is real. Whatever it is that makes us what we are . . . it also gives us . . . this. And men . . . they sense something . . ."

She looked up sideways at Pandrak's face. "You sensed it," she said teasingly. "You told me so."

Armist watched his father blush: a truly memorable experience.

"I said . . ." Pandrak began helplessly, then chuckled ruefully. "Guilty as charged."

"I'm not complaining." Zygie nudged him in the ribs. "Neither, I'm sure, is Ailin, who had the same effect on Caitlan. As long as it's the right one . . ."

Her face altered, like she'd bitten on something sour. "But for every right one there are thousands who aren't. Many of them can be very persistent—and they can get very angry when they're not having things go their way. Laetis was . . . ardent. However, he found his sentiments unrequited. It was not very pleasant. He is an intense man—and he's one of the reasons why I left Keaen. He would not desist, and I was afraid that he might eventually expose me for what I am."

She sighed, suddenly uncertain. "Maybe . . ." She glanced at Pandrak. "Maybe I *should* leave. You and I—we can . . . when there's time . . ."

Pandrak cast a glance at his son.

Armist shook his head. "No. This is Laetis' problem; not yours," he declared. "He will have to learn to live with his disappointment and unrequited lust. If he cannot, someone else will have to take his place."

"But . . ."

"Please stay," Tahlia pleaded. She indicated Pandrak. "He become *so* much more agreeable since you've been around."

"Hey!" Pandrak protested.

Zygie laughed softly and did something with the hand that lay around his waist.

"Stop that!" he told her.

Her eyes were dancing in her head. "Yes, dear sir," she said with mock submissiveness.

"I'm glad we're agreed about this," Armist told them. "We do not assassinate our enemies—nor do we send away our friends just because their presence might upset delicate sensibilities."

Then he remembered something. "Who is 'Sander'?"

Zygie smiled. "Next to you, the best hope for an end to the pointless enmity between Keaen and Tergan. Sander supports Evadne, Hengiste's only surviving niece. If he succeeds in keeping her alive—and I know he is doing his best!—she may yet end up on the Tergan throne. And if she does, then Sander will be behind her—or possibly at her side, because I think this is how this thing is going to develop."

Armist nodded pensively. "So—then he rules Tergan with her. What does that signify? What makes him different from Hengiste?"

"Sander," Pandrak said quietly, "is not quite what he appears to be . . ."

—

Laetis left Castle Keaen and returned to The Fryl at the end of Thieves Alley. He felt more comfortable here. Castle Keaen was reminded him far too much of Caelar, the place of his birth. There was an air of oppressiveness about it, enhanced by the fact that the castle was riddled with spyways and listening holes, which had been an integral part of the structure since its inception. Though he had thoroughly investigated their network after his assumption of Armist's chief of security—and thus had a reasonably good idea of where privacy was assured and where it was not—he still could not get comfortable. It was irrational, and he knew it. But he had spent his youth in close proximity to, and inside of, the small castle that was the Tegel's fortified residence inside the fortified bulwark that in turn was Caelar. He could not help but associate Castle Keaen with the most unpleasant of memories of that time: the humiliations visited on his father, who had been a groom in the Tegel stables and who was treated worse than any horse; the betrayal by his mother, a woman of considerable beauty, who whored herself to a lower member of the dynasty in the hope of bettering her lot—only to commit suicide when she was finally discarded like a used rag, without her station having changed in any way.

Such were Laetis' associations, and whenever he left Castle Keaen it was like fleeing a prison. The Fryl was his haven and refuge, adapted to his own needs and uses as it pleased him. Here *he* ruled, and had to answer to nobody. Here he was not some underling in the power-structure, but the leader of the Pacers, a man respected and obeyed, and he had to justify himself to nobody.

As soon as Laetis arrived at The Fryl he summoned the three people he considered to be the closest to him and most likely to accomplish what had to be done.

There was Trefawn, who had been his lieutenant and second-in-command for more years than he cared to remember, and who had demonstrated his loyalty and capability again and again. Then there was Screef, who had been willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of the overthrow of the tyranny of Hain the Keaen. And, finally, Mirne. A woman of course, and as such of doubtful mettle. Still, experience showed that she

could be trusted and was competent beyond what one could rightfully expect from one of her sex.

The three assembled in Laetis' office: a small room at ground level, set out to the back of The Fryl where it connected to the buildings adjacent to Ieach Lane. The room had two exits. The first led to a hallway, which in turn connected to the front lobby and the tap-room. The second led straight into an underground system of tunnels, dug a long time ago by agencies unknown and extended over the years by the Pacers. These had finally been cleaned up, and the charred remains of a large portion of Hain's former elite corps had been removed and dumped into a communal grave-pit on the outskirts of the city. The system was again fully 'functional'—though, in the current climate, its purpose was somewhat in question. Still, Laetis thought, who knew what the future might bring? Armist was a good man, but he was still the Keaen, whether he professed to desire the office or not. With the position came certain dangers. Nobody in Armist's place could ever really be fully trusted—even if, as it had turned out, he had not been Hain's offspring.

The scene in Armist's study not so long ago had reminded Laetis that his vigilance must not abate. Not so much because Armist followed in Hain's footsteps—which he did not!—but because he was turning the whole system upside down. The boy had no appreciation of the requirements of statecraft. He was an excellent demagogue and the people loved him—but then he turned around and invited a circe into the most secret of discussions! She may have saved his life, but that was her only use. It was what circes were born to do—and maybe should be allowed to do—with all the proper safeguards, of course! It certainly did not give her the right to expect to be present at the exchanges of high politics where the most significant of decisions were made.

Especially not *this* one. She called herself 'Zygie' now. Once upon a time it had been 'Laila'. Laetis wondered if the magice was aware of this. He was clearly besotted with her and appeared even less capable of clear thinking than he had already evinced on other occasions. He should have been the one to set his son straight with regards to the requirements of statecraft. Instead he encouraged Armist's decisions, and supported his son's idealism and lack of pragmatism. This was a recipe for disaster.

And the circe? What possible contribution could a circe make to the formulation of difficult decisions? The other one—Caitlan’s lover Ailin—she also had meddled in men’s business. While Laetis had initially thought it quite charming to see Caitlan of Tinagel mellow under the influence of a woman, it had been less edifying to see him become . . . changed. His competence in matters of the martial arts notwithstanding, Caitlan had lost something. Edges had been blunted; competence dulled. Such was the influence of women who were allowed to gain too much power over men—and the circes had always had that power in overabundance. Laetis recalled only too well how ‘Laila’—did she even know her real name anymore?—had exerted a power over *him!* He, too, had come under that influence—and would struggle hard to ensure that this would never happen again.

He recalled how ‘Zygie’ had looked at him earlier. Memories had come flooding back, and with them feelings he’d long since buried. A circe! Now he finally understood how she had ensnared his feelings—only to dismiss him like an irrelevant play-thing.

Nothing much had changed about that. It was clear that she still thought herself too good for him. Instead she had chosen to target the magice, who promptly fell under her charms, with all that training and discipline he’d received on the Isle apparently quite useless.

He wondered if she’d told them about their former . . . connection. Probably not—or else in such a manner that it would present her in the best light possible. Maybe even making him out as some pathetic . . . Laetis’ mind shied away from the thought. It was just going to make him angry, and anger was something he could do without. He needed his wits about him to make some very complex and far-reaching decisions.

He looked at the three Pacers over his desk.

“Matters have reached a critical point,” he said. “There is work to be done, and I need people I can trust to do it.”

He paused to allow the significance of his words to sink into their consciousness.

“Kaeen is at a crossroad. What we do will determine its future course—maybe the future course of the whole of the Valley.” He proceeded to explain the political situation.

“So, Armist finds himself unable to issue an order to dispose of Kistof. I think I understand—and to an extent respect—his reasons; if ‘reasons’ they may be called. In so doing he endangers the lives of many, possibly innocents. I have decided that we have to shoulder the difficult decisions Armist of Kaeen and his cronies are unable to make.”

Trefawn got the meaning first. “You want us to kill Kistof?”

“That is the responsible thing to do. As well as those who would do the same as he.”

“Tiffer,” Trefawn supplied.

“He’s the most likely one. Being a pervert like his cousin, he will likewise hardly be missed. If anything, the people will thank us for it—though they will, of course, never know who did this.” He hesitated for a pregnant pause. “Nobody, but those in this room will ever know who did it.”

The reactions from Screef and Mirne were more muted than Laetis would have wished. Screef sat there with an emotionless face; as he usually did. Since his ordeal in Hain’s dungeons Screef appeared devoid of overt feelings. Sometimes Laetis wondered whether this was a mask, or if something more profound had happened to the man. Mirne might have been able to tell, but Laetis had a notion that even if he asked, which he was not going to, she might refuse to do so.

Mirne’s expression at his announcement troubled Laetis. She clearly made some effort to control an urge to speak up about, and probably against, the proposal.

When he challenged her she evaded the issue.

“There are arguments for both points of view,” she said and would say no more.

Laetis glanced at Screef. “What do you think?”

Screef waited for a few moments as he chose his words. “We are Pacers. We also are, by our free consent, subjects of the House of Kaeen. We—and this includes yourself—have signed the Declaration, which carries with it certain obligations. Your request is at variance with these obligations.”

“Trefawn?”

“Sometimes it is impossible to adhere to the simplistic guidelines set out by a document.”

Laetis considered the three. A surprising divergence of views had emerged. Surprising and disturbing. Screef and Mirne at least had suffered conflicts of

loyalty; this much was evident.

What were the consequences? Screef and Mirne had lost an essential part of their Pacer-hood. They didn't understand that being a Pacer was more than becoming a part of the political configurations of the time, no matter how progressive or advantageous they might appear. A Pacer was dedicated to the eventual realization of the goal that brought them together in the first instance: the abolition of the system of inequity which existed throughout the Valley and, from what he had heard, in other places as well. This goal must be kept in clear focus and, while too hasty a progress toward it would be detrimental—people could not cope with too much change—if there arose an occasion such as this, where someone like Armist failed to continue steering toward that goal, even if he did so for the noblest of reasons, then whatever corrective steps might be required must be taken.

The Pacers were the guardians of the future; its only insurance—and those like Screef and Mirne, who lost sight of the priority of their goal over all distractions, such as spurious loyalties to at best temporary agreements, were not true Pacers anymore.

Still, they had to be used and used correctly. And this implied that . . .

Laetis leaned back. "With such demurrals in our own ranks I will reconsider the issue."

Trefawn raised his head minutely and gave Laetis a hooded glance.

"I had hoped that we were of one mind," Laetis continued. "It appears that we are not. For the time being the issue is in suspension." He shrugged. "Who knows? Armist might come up with a better solution—though I cannot see how this is possible. Our range of our possible actions appear quite constrained."

He rose. "Let us keep the matter in abeyance. We will meet again when the occasion arises."

—

Screef and Mirne excused themselves and departed. In the hallway they separated from Trefawn, who went off in a different direction. Screef and Mirne left the Fryl and headed back along Thieves Alley, fending off the incessant assault of hawkers, stall owners, and street urchins trying to steal whatever

was not properly secured on their persons.

They gained the freedom of Gasse Tang and turned right, heading for nowhere in particular. Mirne hooked her arm under Screef's and they just continued walking for a while.

"He is going to order Trefawn to arrange the assassination," Screef said after a few blocks.

"I know. What are we to do?"

Screef turned his head and looked at her. "You are considering a dangerous step."

"Laetis will do this. You said so yourself."

"What good will that knowledge do Armist?" he said reasonably. "You must swear him to silence, which he will keep since he is an honorable man. But that also means that he cannot act in response. If he did, Laetis would know."

He stopped, forcing her to halt with him. "Laetis is a good man," Screef said softly. "But he is also convinced of the righteousness of his position. If you communicate his intention to Armist, Laetis' will see this as betrayal—and he knows only one way to deal with those he considers traitors."

Mirne's face was only inches from Screef's. "You are afraid for me."

"I cannot deny it."

She gave him a tiny smile. "And they think you have no feelings."

Screef's mouth twitched. "You know better than that."

"I do." Her light mood receded. "I don't know what to do."

"Whatever it is," he said, "don't do it today. If you call on Tahlia and Jaslyn tomorrow—like you do regularly enough—Laetis will see little suspicious about that."

"I feel like I need to do it now."

Screef took her arm and pulled her along with him. "I know; but it would be foolish to do so. Sleep on it."

She gave him a quick sideways glance. "Alone?"

"Not necessarily."

"Tonight, someone will have to make sure that I don't follow an impulse and do something rash."

"I'll do my best."

"That's all I want."

—

"This is the situation," Mirne told Tahlia during the mid afternoon of the next day. The two were alone. Jaslyn, realizing that matters qualifying as 'private' needed to be discussed, had excused herself, quite without rancor, and departed to her quarters.

"Armist will not be pleased," Tahlia muttered. "Indeed he must know immediately."

Armist appeared after a footman had run off to get him. When he saw Mirne he smiled at her. "How is my favorite Pacer?"

Mirne laughed, despite the situation. "Flattery, Armist of Keaen, will avail you not."

She turned serious and related her suspicions about Laetis' intentions.

Armist fixed her with a level stare. "If it was anybody else but you bringing me this news," he said evenly, "I would suspect that it was one of Laetis' elaborate schemes."

"Mirne would not . . ." Tahlia began.

Armist shook his head. "I know it, and I'm not suggesting it. But the whole affair is so preposterous — and dangerous! — that I find it difficult to believe." He frowned. "So this is how Laetis feels about his affirmation of allegiance . . ."

Mirne felt compelled to ask Armist not to take any action that might reveal, directly or by implication, his knowledge of what had just been related to him.

"Of course. You have my word. But I must deal with this. Inaction would constitute tacit approval of the plan." He grimaced. "You're not going to like what I'm about to say, but I suspect that you are an unwitting instrumentality of Laetis. It is all a question of how much deviousness we ascribe to him, of course. But, suppose that he suspected you might do what you have just done . . ."

"Impossible!" Mirne interjected.

"Not impossible. Implausible — maybe. But Laetis is as cunning as an elec. Such a double twist in plotting would not be beyond him." A pause. Armist considered her with unnerving directness. "Whatever he intends, whatever he plans, I cannot stand by and allow him to do this. Open action is not among my choices, but there must be ways of counteracting Laetis' intentions."

"Is Kistof really worth that?" Tahlia had stepped close to Armist and put a hand on his arm.

Armist shook his head. "Kistof? No, of course not. The world would be a better place without him.

Without Tiffer, too. Their victims would no doubt feel that justice has finally been done.

"But I'm not talking about Kistof. I am talking about the integrity of the House of Keaen. My integrity. Yours!"

"Statecraft may be desirable and necessary, but if it is dishonored by such means as Laetis has in mind — as Hain and his ilk would have been applied without batting an eyelid! — then it becomes something monstrous. I have sworn that I will not permit us to be corrupted by the choice of expediency over honor. This is what allows to me to claim that I'm different to Hain, even though I'm more or less occupying his place."

Tahlia nodded pensively. "And it's so easy to forget this," she agreed.

"But I will ensure that Laetis never knows what you've told us," he promised Mirne. "Whatever happens, it will be discreet and not attributable to any action on your behalf."

"That's all I ask," Mirne said.

"What can you do?" Tahlia asked Armist when Mirne had gone.

Armist looked grim and determined. "There is a drastic option, but I'm not sure that it isn't worse than what we're trying to avoid."

"What could that be?" she wondered.

"If Kistof knew who was coming to assassinate him . . ."

Tahlia's eyes widened. "You wouldn't!"

"I hope it won't come to that. One form of betrayal to compensate for another? It leaves a bitter taste.

"No — we have to take decisive action. I will apprise the barons of the seriousness of the situation and request their immediate assistance in this matter. I'll ask for as many men as each can spare. Then we march to Caelar and confront Kistof with the grim realities. Let us hope that he is not as stupid as he is twisted."

He embraced Tahlia and she felt his weariness.

"I wish Caitlan was here," he sighed. "I really could do with his help."

* * *