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# The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

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fragmentary, which bears the influence of Jack Vance. Letters to the editor will also be published on a discretionary basis. Letters and submissions should be addressed to: Paul Rhoads, at [prhoads@club-internet.fr](mailto:prhoads@club-internet.fr)

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Author's preface:

This is a short chapter, which ties the events in the prequel to *Tergan* (titled *Finister*, after the continent on which most of the events take place) to what's happening now.

In order not to leave the reader completely bewildered, she or he might wish to go back to the first instalment of *Tergan*—with particular attention to CLS 2, page 5—and re-read sections IX and X.

# Tergan

## Chapter 7

### The Galatadian Valley: Finister

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They emerged from the ship and stood in silence. Caitlan visualized the rectangular door closing. A faint whir; a hiss; the door closed and the hull was smooth as it had been when they first arrived. He visualized it opening again; with a satisfactory response.

The others were watching him curiously.

"Why do you do this" Nerys wanted to know.

Caitlan shrugged. "Just to make sure . . . that it all works as it should."

Fliz voiced what was on all their minds. "What do we do now?"

They looked at each other, each finding their perplexity mirrored in the others' faces.

"Let us consider the our choices," Caitlan said. "There are, in essence only two. We can either leave here and return more or less as we came. This is the slower alternative, and possibly also the safer one. We meet up with the *Passage Trader* and return to the Valley. We return here when we've decided what to do with our discovery."

"And the second possibility?" Fliz asked.

Caitlan grimaced. "From what we know now . . . there's almost no doubt that we could learn to . . . sail . . . this ship. For all we know it probably sails itself. I mean, it hears our thoughts. By now it has learned to speak to us in our own language. Who knows what else it can do? We could . . . fly? . . . it back to the Valley and hide it somewhere. Then we go on to Keaen—without the need to return to Gaskar and two or more weeks at sea and all the uncertainties along the way."

Caitlan glanced at Ailin. "What do you think?" She still looked quite pale, and, though she was a circe, his heart told him that he wanted to spare her the ordeal of the long journey home.

"Where would we hide the ship?" she wondered. "It would have to be in the ranges somewhere. How would we get home?"

"Or," Nerys noted, "to be quite practical about it: how would we even get it out of here?"

Caitlan grinned. "I have an inkling that, once we decide to . . . sail . . . that's not going to be a problem."

He could see that the thought appealed to, at the same time as it frightened, them. No wonder. He wasn't feeling quite as assured as he made out. The thought of . . . flying . . . It occasioned a certain anticipatory queasiness. Man was not created to fly. He walked; he rode on horses, in wheeled vehicles, maybe ships. But fly?

"How *would* we get down into the Valley from the Ranges?" Ailin wondered.

"We take the horses," Caitlan said. "There's a large cargo area. They will be skittish, but I'm sure we can deal with that. We find a place to hide the ship and ride home."

"You make it sound easy," Fliz said siccantly.

Caitlan chuckled. "Nothing is easy. Some things are just less difficult than others."

Indeed. And was this thing going to be easy?

Caitlan had a feeling that it might be. He didn't know why, but he just did. He considered the others and saw apprehension and uncertainty. This ship-of-the-void plainly frightened them. Ailin saw it as a strange creature that must surely be alive, since it could speak and also exhibited clear evidence of thought. Fliz, though less in awe, exhibited a distinct reluctance to try and explore its capabilities. Nerys, the Gaskarian waif, was a bit more adventurous than her larcenous lover, and had been the one to suggest that the ship needed to listen to them talking in order to learn their language—a notion that had proven very accurate indeed.

Caitlan could feel their reluctance to embark on the adventure he had suggested. They, who had braved grave perils and won through it all, now hesitated to take the, to him obvious, next step.

How about himself? Ever since Pandrak had taken him and Ailin into Nameless Keep and shown them the

secret room in the rock below—ever since that day Caitlan had been wondering; trying to adjust to this new knowledge which he knew lay before them all, waiting to be accepted and used. And when he had finally stood before the ship it was like a revelation; for here was a promise of something unexpected; vast in scope; exhilarating in its possibilities. Unlike the others he was not only not afraid—though the thought of flying still made him faintly nauseous—but indeed excited.

So what if all this seemed strange and impossible? Only weeks ago he had been temporarily dead—only to be resurrected by Ailin and then made virtually immortal himself.

He would have considered *that* impossible. And yet it had happened.

One moment he knew this, and the next moment he knew something different—and the world was not the same again. Just like it wasn't now, that they stood in this cave, besides an artifact older than history and yet completely new and full of promise.

Assumptions. It all came down to what one assumed to be possible or plausible. And the ship-of-the-void was possible. This was a fact. For here it was, and they had been inside it. There was no point in denying the obvious truth. The voice inside the ship, coming seemingly out of nowhere, its words growing progressively more intelligible as it learned their language, had filled in the gaps and corrected the fallacies in Pandrak's version of the tale of how men had settled this world. Of the how and the why.

Caitlan realized, with a certain surprise, that he not only believed what he'd been told, but that he welcomed it. It opened up vistas never expected. A new universe awaited exploration. He was eager to take the next step, which to him was trying to explore and control this ancient contrivance. He had no illusions about it being alive. It was just a machine. Like a siege engine, like wood-working tool, like a . . . ship. That it could speak was a marvel indeed, but knowing what he knew now, he was quite willing to suspend his judgment and accept that such things were possible, and that they had been created by men—like himself, like Pandrak, like Armist, or Fliz . . . or maybe by women, like Ailin or Nerys . . . for why should they not?

That he could not understand the 'how' . . . what did it matter? It was possible. It had been done. Men had

crossed the dismal void between the stars and settled entire worlds.

And why not? What was so difficult about accepting that which stared you right in the face—just because it didn't fit into whatever you happened to believe?

Facts were facts. Some of them, he reminded himself, might be subject to interpretation, but these here weren't. Nobody could mistake the presence of this ship-of-the-void for anything but what it was: evidence for the truth behind so many legends of this world. From 'Pastor's Paradise' to the mysteries of that part of history lost in the mists of time. And with what they knew now, with what the ship's voice had told them . . .

They also knew now that the mystery room underneath Nameless Keep was a buried vessel, just like this one. The same room like the one they'd found down there. The same kind of table fixed to the floor with equally fixed chairs arranged around it. At Caitlan's request the ship had produced a spherical map of their world, just like the one they'd seen beneath Nameless Keep.

Another mystery solved. Pieces falling into place.

Like the legend of 'Pastor's Paradise', a world on the other side of Caravella—where the mother-ship, named 'Pastor Larquis', waited.

The 'silks'? Nowhere but in the Galatadian Valley could one find silks. And here rested the ship . . .

Hints at a truth—like the statues of Yeolus and Tyssel. Distorted over the centuries by ritual and inaccuracy.

Caitlan noticed that they were all looking at him.

For what?

Leadership?

Certainty?

Caitlan sighed inwardly. So, it had come to this. He had wanted it to be a decision by the four of them—but the truth was that it was he who would decide. He put an arm around Ailin's shoulders. Just a few hours ago he had lost her—only to have her returned to him by . . . what? He didn't even begin to understand the 'how' and 'why' of that! He only knew that his mind reeled back from the abyss he'd stood beside when he had thought her lost forever. *That* he could not face. But making this ship-of-the-void transport them back to Keaen: that was a task he'd accept joyfully and with a keen sense of the challenge it represented.

"I think we should try it. What have we got to lose?"

Nerys nudged Fliz. "Methinks he's right. To be honest, I am not looking forward to the long journey back. The jammers. Gaskar. Endless days at sea." She glanced at the ship. "If we can make this work . . ."

Caitlan grinned. Nerys was a surprising young lady. Fliz didn't know it yet, but, once Nerys shed her hesitancy—which she would soon enough—she would be his equal, and maybe his better, in more ways than one. Fliz had some surprises coming!

Caitlan looked down at Ailin. She pursed her lips skeptically. "We're going to *fly* home?" Her tone left no doubt that the thought held no great attraction.

Caitlan chuckled. "I know how you feel," he assured her. "My stomach does somersaults whenever I think of it." He looked at the others. "It is decided than?"

Their assent was muted but unanimous.

The matter turned out to be almost trivial. The ship's voice informed them that, indeed, their skills were not required beyond the point of specifying the destination and such details about their course as they considered necessary. More intricate navigation could be accomplished by the simple expedient of visualizing what had to be done.

"Let's ensure that we don't all imagine something different," Caitlan told his friends.

Fliz held up his hands. "I leave the navigation in your hands, Caitlan. I want nothing to do with it."

A general mutter of assent greeted this announcement. Caitlan thus became the de-facto captain and steersman of the ship-of-the-void. He was so immersed in the task of familiarization that he lost track of time.

Not so Fliz, who suddenly remembered the horses tethered outside the cave entrance. He and Nerys went to attend to them. Ailin sat herself opposite Caitlan on one of the oddly shaped and textured chairs, rested her chin on her hands, and looked at him with a twinkle of amusement.

"You are enjoying this," she said.

Caitlan chuckled. "I am."

"You're not at all . . . surprised . . . at anything anymore—are you?"

He shrugged. "After the last few weeks and months?—How could I?"

Ailin looked around the strange room; at the immaterial image of their world floating above the table. She sighed. "I wish I could take it all in my stride—like you."

Caitlan rose and came around the table. He sat down in a chair beside her and took her hands. "Some things take longer to get used to than others. Everybody is different. Everybody can do different things. I cannot heal people . . ."

"Yes, you can," she interrupted him. "You brought *me* back." Her face was pale, her hands tightened around his. "It was horrible. It was like . . . I was me . . . and at the same time I was not . . . Just . . . scattering . . . and all the pieces that made up what I am just flew apart . . . never to come together again." She leaned forward and kissed him. "You did more than just 'heal,' my love. You put me back together. Because of you—and you alone—the pieces became *me* again."

"*You* did it!" he insisted.

"I did some of it," she agreed, "but you called me, and you lit up the gray nothingness, and showed me the way." She paused. "Just like you've always done. Like you did as a boy, when you defended a circe prosecuted by the people of your village."

Caitlan swallowed. Ailin sat on his lap, put her arms around him, and buried her face in the crook of his neck. They sat there like this, without talking, until Fliz and Nerys returned.

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With a percussive sound the wall rocks blocking the entrance to the cave flew apart and tumbled down the cliff face to join the debris at the bottom. Under Caitlan's direction the ship-of-the-void lifted like a feather and flew out of the cave, to settle on the valley floor outside. Fliz, who had taken the horses some distance away to avoid spooking them, approached, pulling them behind him. It took some effort and patience, but in the end the animals were persuaded to enter the ship's cargo hold, accessible from the outside through a large sliding door. The moment they were inside they soiled the hitherto clean floor. Caitlan grimaced, but some things just could not be controlled. He visualized the door to close, which it did, causing the horses to display renewed unease. Lights came on. Caitlan and his friends worked to calm the animals.

Fliz and Ailin went outside to procure grass. Presently the horses calmed down. They were unsaddled and reined to a railing. Caitlan was concerned what would happen when the ship started moving. He had witnessed horses confined in holds on ships.

In the event he didn't have to be concerned. The ship's movements were quite unnoticeable inside. It lifted like a feather into the late afternoon sky. An immaterial image of the outside world was displayed above the table, beside the spherical map. They saw the land fall away underneath them. Details merged to become general features. Trees became tiny and presently disappeared. The Galatadian Ranges shrunk to the size of a human arm.

The movement stopped. On the spherical map Caitlan indicated their approximate destination. A tiny red star appeared at a small distance beside the globe, directly above the Galatadian Valley. Presently it started moving slowly. At the same time the other image changed; the outlines of the Galatadian Valley moved out of their view, to be replaced the expanse of the Central Steppe. The steppe ended. They overflowed the ranges extending from Thalonica to Port Ish. Yonder bay: was that Port Ish? The ship continued to move east. The coast of Finister appeared underneath. The Teeth of Magog exhibited themselves in the last rays of daylight by the spume and spray of the Limpic Ocean breaking against them.

Then, just water. Another coastline. Caitlan and Ailin recognized the shape from another map at Nameless Keep. Caitlan swallowed a lump in his throat. Ailin's arm around him tightened. There was Keaen Passage—and Keaen: a tiny coruscation in the descending darkness.

Home.

The ship's voice offered a different display which nullified the effects of darkness. Caitlan agreed to the change, and presently they saw the landscape underneath as if it were full daylight. He made the ship halt in its progress.

"Where are we going to hide it? The Ranges are vast."

Ailin smiled. "I have a better idea. Why don't we leave it where no one dares to go—and yet some may?"

Caitlan stared at her. "The Woods!"

"And we're almost home," she said.

"Now I know why I love you."

"It took you long enough to figure it out!" she laughed.

She turned to Fliz and Nerys and explained the nature of the Myrmidic Woods; how circes might go there without fear; how few others dared to intrude because of the creatures living there.

At their skeptical faces she laughed. "Caitlan is protected—for . . . certain reasons. And if you are with us, so are you."

The ship descended some distance and hovered above the Western Myrmidic Woods. They located a tiny glade in the southern portion, not too far away from the point where the East Road crossed the Tor.

Caitlan ordered the ship to alight in the glade. Without a jolt they sat down.

"I suppose we have wait until morning," Caitlan said. "We'd better look after the horses."

He made his way to the cargo-hold where he found the animals calm but attentive. The place reeked of horse manure and urine. The floor was slippery with wetness. Caitlan patted the horses and wondered what he could do to assure their welfare. The night had barely begun. At the very least, some fresh air. He hesitated and sniffed the air. It stank, but not as much as one would have expected under the circumstances. Some ventilation system? Another mystery to be explored.

Caitlan would have liked to have opened the door, but they were in the middle of the Myrmidic Woods in the pitch-dark of the night. He wasn't going to let any of them go outside right now; not even Ailin—no matter what she said.

He grinned to himself. Better not mention it even. She would go out of her way to prove that she was correct and that she could move freely about even if you couldn't see your hand before your eyes.

He patted the horses again. They would be alright until daybreak. Not as comfortable as they could be, but they would come to no harm.

He returned to the main cabin. The others wrinkled their faces and grinned.

"Phew!" Fliz waved his hand in front of his face trying to dispel the waft of air that came with Caitlan.

Ailin laughed. "I can see it's going to be a long night," she said.

Nerys cleared her throat. "I, too, am in need of

doing what the horses did," she admitted.

The situation clearly was far from ideal.

"I wish we could have some light outside," Caitlan said.

"The exterior lights have now been activated," came the ship's voice.

"What?" Fliz frowned. "What's it saying?"

"I think," Caitlan replied, "it is telling us that we should go and take a look outside."

He went to the door and caused it to open, only to find the woods around them lit up brighter than Caravella could have. From every side of the ship, just above the level of the top of the door, a ring of tiny brilliant suns cast their beams around the ship's periphery, outlining the noquos at the edge of the glade.

"Will that keep the elecs at bay?" Caitlan asked Ailin, who stood beside him.

She nodded. "This would keep *anything* at bay," she noted dryly.

Caitlan chuckled. "It seems like we won't have to attend to our bodily functions in the cargo hold after all."

The night was long. They took turns to stay awake and watch over the horses or anything else that might eventuate. Caitlan had made the ship extinguish the lights. It wasn't likely, but being lit up like this might just attract undue attention from others than elecs and whatever Myrmidic creatures might lurk far and near.

The morning came with a clear sky, as was the wont for this time of the year. The ship's occupants emerged from their vessel and prepared to leave. With due attention to the woods around them, they saddled the horses. Caitlan wondered how they were going to clean out the cargo-hold. Remembering the recent past, he put the question to the ship and received a surprising reply. Presently the door to the hold closed; there was a delay of a few breaths; a muted sound coming from the inside; then the door opened again. The floor was now as clean as it had been before they started.

Ailin laughed. "How often have I wished for something like this to happen to the bar of Cortez' Tavern!—Maybe I could get to like this contraption after all. If only it wasn't so . . ."

"Spooky?" Fliz suggested.

"Spooky," Ailin agreed.

They mounted the horses, who had been nibbling on the dew-soaked grass.

"Do we know where we're going?" Fliz wondered.

Caitlan looked at Caravella, did a mental review of their position, and pointed. "That way. Due south-west. Somewhere there we'll find the East Road."

"And," Fliz noted siccantly, "someone has, of course, also figured out how we are going to find the ship again."

Nerys looked at him—then burst out laughing.

Fliz looked at her, perplexed. "This is hardly a trivial issue."

Nerys ceased laughing. "Fliz—oh love of my life—tell me: how did we find the ship in the first place?"

Fliz' mouth fell open. He blushed and cast a quick glance at Caitlan and Ailin, who had been following the exchange with amused interest.

"I . . . Hmmpf . . ." He shook his head, grinning at his own folly.

"Love of my life?" he asked Nerys.

"Do you doubt it?" she said archly. "Even though it appears that even you are not perfect after all!"

They all laughed. Caitlan instructed the ship to seal it's doors.

"What if somebody *does* find it?" Ailin asked.

Caitlan addressed the ship. "I would like to issue an instruction which excludes others but ourselves from being able to issue instructions. Is this possible? Will this instruction be effective?"

"The instruction will be complied with."

"Then I instruct you not to obey any instructions but those issued by either of those present here and now . . . as well as individuals identifying themselves as either 'Armist', 'Pandrak', or 'Tahlia'."

"The instructions will be complied with."

They set off and entered the noquo forest, which was dense but passable. Nevertheless, progress was slow. The ground was still soggy from what must have been an extended period of heavy rains. The woods enveloped them like an eerie womb. The sounds of distant and not so distant . . . things . . . provided an unnerving background. The horses, sensing the unseen presences, were edgy and required constant control. Fliz and Nerys controlled their nervousness with difficulty.

They came upon a fast-running creek. Horses and

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riders alike drank eagerly. They continued and, as Caravella passed its zenith, emerged from the woods onto a plain.

Here they stopped and looked around. Caitlan heaved a deep breath of relief. In the open at last.

"So, this is the Valley," Fliz said. "Right now, it's beginning to look much better."

They continued due south-west and finally came upon the East Road. Again they halted.

"To Cedrea," Caitlan suggested. "The shortest way to Keaen."

"We could head for the Tor," Ailin suggested. "Ships sometimes stop at the ferry to pick up travelers."

Caitlan didn't reply. His attention was focused on the ground.

"What do you see?" Ailin wanted to know.

Caitlan pointed. "A large group of mounted horsemen passed this way—maybe only hours ago. Heavy wagons. They rode in formation. Soldiers. Heading east."

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# The Zael

## Inheritance

### Chapter 15

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Lamarck presented himself at the Pergamon on time the next day. The weather was more satisfactory than it had been the previous day, with rain threatened rather than actual, and Lamarck, although unsure of exactly what he hoped to achieve, was relatively sanguine about the day's prospects.

After a short delay in the foyer, he was met by Apprehensor Peppingen, a tall fair-haired young man in his mid-twenties, sporting an immaculate black uniform and a modest air.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "I have instructions from Planetary Puissant Galar to provide you with any assistance you may need."

"Good morning, Apprehensor. I understand there is a private aircar at our disposal?"

"Yes, sir. I have reserved the Firedaunt Ultra, a most responsive conveyance, for our use. The compound is this way."

As the glaxes walked over to the compound, Lamarck asked, "Which division are you in?"

"I am in Investigations, sir, as I believe you once were."

Lamarck smiled. "You don't need to call me 'sir' in every sentence. Every tenth or so will be sufficient to remind me of my exalted status."

"Yes, sir. I mean—"

"Starting from now: I expect nine sentences free from the word 'sir'. I am a detective, not a bureaucrat."

"Yes, Prime Apprehensor."

"You are resourceful, if nothing else, Apprehensor Peppingen," said Lamarck. He wondered why Thade Galar had given him such a pup.

"Where to, Prime Apprehensor?" asked Peppingen as he leapt into the gleaming Firedaunt Ultra.

"Southern District C," said Lamarck. "The Manse of Tranquillity, if you please."

Peppingen looked at Lamarck quizzically. "That is a lunatic asylum," he said.

"I doubt that is the term employed by the proprietors or the advertisers; nonetheless, you are correct in all fundamentals."

Curiosity contended with decorum in Peppingen. Training eventually gained the upper hand: Peppingen kept his questions to himself. The vast city slid by below them. In Stellapolis, as in most major cities the galaxy over, private aircar flight was forbidden, and the glaxes enjoyed a clear sky. Peppingen used the opportunity to hone some of his more daring manoeuvres and display the exacting specifications of the Firedaunt. Lamarck bore this stoically for a while before ordering the Apprehensor to desist.

Shortly the density of buildings began to thin; the aircar cruised over residential districts and soon found itself over the suburbs. Peppingen handed the craft over to the navcom which brought them close to their destination; he then reasserted control of the vehicle, which he set down in the grounds of the large estate which was their goal with an unnecessary circular flourish.

Retracting the hood and vaulting from the aircar he declared, "The Manse of Tranquillity."

"Thank you, Apprehensor," said Lamarck gravely as he made a more dignified exit from the aircar. "Remind me to recommend you next time my enquiries take me to an aerobatics school."

Their conversation was disrupted as a man and a woman fled past them crying, "Save us! Save us! An invasion from space! The aliens are here! They'll kill us all!"

Two staff in smart green uniforms dashed in pursuit, one of them cursing the glaxes as he ran past. Peppingen raised an eyebrow. "Inmates or staff?" he asked Lamarck.

"Irrational conduct is not the preserve of the insane," said Lamarck. "It would be rash to draw conclusions from insufficient data. The uniforms would tend to suggest an official capacity, but one cannot be certain."

The glaxes strolled up the gravel path towards the manse itself. Shortly before the entrance they came upon the foursome they had encountered earlier. The green-suited ones sat astride the other two, attempting to subdue them by means of suppressant sprays.

"Aliens!" cried one of the captives, before lapsing into unconsciousness.

"I hope you were right," said Peppingen, "otherwise we have witnessed the lunatics taking over the asylum . . ."

One of the green men shouted at Peppingen, "What are you doing, landing an aircar in the garden? Don't you realise there are confused people here?"

Peppingen walked on with a shrug. "No doubt we have enlivened matters greatly by our conduct," he said.

"For a fact we have added little to the eponymous 'tranquillity,'" concurred Lamarck.

Lamarck led the way into the main reception of the manse, which clearly had once been a large private house. He showed the receptionist his credentials.

"Prime Apprehensor Lamarck and Apprehensor Peppingen, Pangalactic Security Services Incorporated. We are here to see one of your patients."

"If you want to see one of the guests," he said, "you will need a doctor to accompany you. Who were you wanting to see?"

"Carlotta Zael," said Lamarck evenly.

The receptionist, scowling out of a narrow face, gave Lamarck a look of frank scrutiny. "I cannot imagine what profit you hope to derive from such an interview."

"That is why I am the glax and you are the functionary. Kindly summon the necessary medical personnel," said Lamarck more brusquely than he had intended.

"Very well," she said, with an unfriendly stare. "If you'd care to sit down."

Lamarck nodded and wandered over to where Peppingen was looking around. Shortly afterwards a dark-haired woman of indeterminate age appeared, wearing the traditional white coat.

"Prime Apprehensor Lamarck? I am Doctor Rubens. I believe there may be a misunderstanding; I was told you wished to interview Carlotta Zael."

"Interview' might be too formal a term; however, I would like to speak to her if that is possible."

"It is hardly advisable," she said. "This facility may be known as the Manse of Tranquillity; but the guests we have here are all beyond the reach of conventional medical treatment. There is nothing that Genix can do for them. This is a private establishment which allows

guests to live out their lives with as much dignity as possible. The majority of guests here are beyond cure or hope. Carlotta Zael is one of the very furthest gone."

"I understood from my scrutiny of her committal report that she was capable of rational thought and speech during lucid intervals. If it is possible to speak to her, I must insist on it," said Lamarck.

"It is difficult to explain her condition to a layman. She is sporadically 'rational' in the sense that she is—at times—capable of consecutive thought. She has little or no sense of who or where she is—mercifully—and she becomes excitable when agitated. Unfamiliar events unsettle her, and I am concerned at the effect an interview by two glaxes might produce."

"Apprehensor Peppingen will not be taking part in the interview. All I want to do is assess for myself her mental state in relation to an enquiry I am undertaking," said Lamarck.

"You are under a misapprehension, Prime Apprehensor," said Dr Rubens. "Carlotta is not fit to testify, nor will she ever be. She is, quite simply, permanently insane."

Lamarck compressed his lips. "I understand what you are saying, doctor. It is not my intention, now or ever, to produce her before a court. There is much informal evidence that a glax tries to collect, not to adduce in court, but to settle his own mind. My interest in Carlotta Zael is entirely of that nature."

"Follow me," said Dr Rubens. "If you insist on seeing her, I cannot prevent you. If she becomes agitated, though, I stop the interview immediately: You will learn nothing useful from her in that state, and you will merely distress her and leave her refractory."

Lamarck nodded. Dr Rubens' position was understandable.

"One question," he said. "How much does she remember about—her family circumstances?"

"She knows that her son is dead and her daughter missing," replied Dr Rubens. "We have never told her that her husband is dead. In truth, she has never seemed that interested. By the time she was committed their marriage had collapsed."

"Dasien Zael had her committed?" asked Lamarck.

"Yes," said the doctor. "It was a formality; her condition was such that there could be no other course of action. It was a way of making sure that Dasien Zael

remained her legal guardian.”

“So who is her guardian now? Is she a ward of TLZ?”

“To all intents and purposes. The name on the papers is Allaiao Gazmend’s, who, I am sure you know, is the Puissant of TLZ.”

The doctor and the glaxes strolled through the corridor. As they neared their destination the feel of the building became less a country house and more a prison. Hideous mournful shrieks emanated from some of the rooms.

Lamarck shuddered. “Is it always like this?”

Dr Rubens gave him a businesslike but not unsympathetic smile. “One has to become used to it, or we would end up in the same state as the guests. Today is worse than usual, though. It is the hairdresser this morning, and he has not appeared. The guests rely remarkably on routine. Nearly all of them, no matter how deep they seem in their own world, follow on some deep level the rhythms of the outer world. Something like the non-appearance of the hairdresser upsets their internal balance.”

Lamarck shook his head. “You have my genuine admiration, doctor. My job is dangerous and frustrating; but I would not swap it for yours.”

“I am no saint, Prime Apprehensor,” said Dr Rubens. “One has difficulty sleeping the first week; after that it becomes somewhat easier.”

From a room opening on to the corridor an elderly woman lurched into the corridor. She stared emptily into Peppingen’s face, before fixing her gaze on Dr Rubens.

“Jane. Hair.”

Dr Rubens gently put her arm around the woman. “Shush. The hairdresser will be here soon,” she said. “Wait quietly now.”

An attendant issued from the room and led the woman away. Peppingen looked pale and disturbed, and Lamarck felt little better.

“I never realised that such places existed, doctor — or such poor creatures. I am — I hardly know the word for it,” said Lamarck quietly.

Dr Rubens smiled faintly. “You had better compose yourself. This is Carlotta Zael’s room,” she said, indicating the door before them.

She touched her hand to the authorisation panel and the glide-door slid open. Lamarck and Peppingen fol-

lowed her as she entered the room. An orderly slipped out, leaving only the glaxes, Dr Rubens and a haggard woman in middle age.

Lamarck cursed softly and turned away. Dr Rubens glanced at him inquiringly. “Prime Apprehensor?”

“I’m sorry, doctor,” he said. “It’s just that she looks like her daugh— like someone I know.”

The resemblance between Carlotta Zael and Laura Glyde was certainly striking. The unusually short, thick nose, the eyes of a strange, deep, startling, blue, the shape of the face; all could have been Laura Glyde aged by a quarter of a century. Lamarck tried to regain his equilibrium. Laura Glyde ought to look like this woman; she had been nano-sculpted to do so. The thought did not wholly remove his discomposure.

“Carlotta,” said Dr Rubens softly. “This is Prime Apprehensor Lamarck from Pangalactic. He would like to talk to you.”

Carlotta Zael looked at Dr Rubens with a gaze simultaneously intent and vacant. The doctor inferred unease from it.

“You are not in trouble, Carlotta,” she said, looking across at Lamarck. “He would just like to talk to you.”

She indicated to Lamarck that he should approach. The room was large, and Carlotta Zael sat in a comfortable chair in the light of the barred window. Lamarck took four or five slow strides to where Carlotta Zael sat. He was not entirely sure how to proceed, and not for the first time he wondered why he had decided to come here.

“Carlotta,” he said gently. “Carlotta.”

She turned her head to look at him, although with seemingly scant interest.

“I’m not going to hurt you. Will you answer some questions for me?”

Carlotta continued to observe Lamarck inertly. He noticed how well cared for her short hair was. The hairdresser evidently featured large in the guests’ lives at the Manse of Tranquillity.

“Carlotta,” he continued. “Can I ask you about your daughter — about Taslana?”

Carlotta Zael sat back a little further in her chair; Lamarck seemed to have captured her attention.

“Taslana?” she said in a soft flat voice, with a trace of a smile. Lamarck’s stomach contracted at the expression’s similarity to Laura Glyde’s crooked half-smile.

"Do you know where Taslana is?" asked Lamarck.

"No. She went away," said Carlotta Zael.

"I am trying to find Taslana. Do you know where she went?" Lamarck asked, knowing that she could not possibly possess such information.

Carlotta shook her head slowly.

"If she wanted to run away, where would she go, Carlotta?" continued Lamarck. "Where would your daughter hide if she was unhappy?"

Carlotta scrutinised Lamarck closely. She either did not understand the question or she was not going to respond to it. He approached the subject from ever more oblique angles before accepting that Carlotta Zael was not going to speculate on the matter. He changed the subject.

"Carlotta, it is a little while since you've seen Taslana, isn't it?"

Carlotta nodded.

"Would you know her? If she came into the room, would you know her?"

Again Carlotta nodded. Lamarck reached into his jacket and pulled out the holographic locket of the seventeen-year old Taslana and switched it on.

"Do you know who this is, Carlotta?" he asked gently.

Carlotta let out a great cry. "Taslana!" she keened. "Taslana! Taslana!"

"Prime Apprehensor!" interjected Dr Rubens. "Enough! Put that thing away!"

Lamarck switched off the holo-image. It had no effect on Carlotta Zael. "Taslana! Where is my Taslana?" she cried.

Dr Rubens swore at Lamarck. "I knew I should never have let Pangalactic in here," she said.

Carlotta's voice dropped. "Pangalactic?" she whispered. "He's come to tell me my Taslana's dead . . ."

"No, Carlotta," said Lamarck quickly, "that's not it."

With a great cry Carlotta Zael launched herself at Lamarck. "No! No! She's not dead! Not this time! I won't let you!"

Lamarck was borne to the ground. Dr Rubens shouted into a communicator, "Emergency restraint, now!"

Lamarck struggled with the possessed intensity of the force attacking him, pain screaming through his regenerating shoulder. "I won't let you!" she screamed again and again.

Peppingen tried to pull Carlotta away from Lamarck, but his intervention was ineffectual. It must have been only seconds later that three orderlies appeared, roughly hauling Carlotta Zael aside and sedating her with an instanarc spray.

Lamarck lay on the floor, unhurt but overwhelmed. Dr Rubens cast him a scornful glance. "I hope you have what you came for, Prime Apprehensor. You will get nothing else . . ."

Slowly rising, Lamarck said, "I am sorry, doctor. It was not my intent to cause this affray; but I owed it to Taslana Zael—and her mother—to ask those questions . . . If I've made your job more difficult I'm sorry."

Dr Rubens relented a little. "My job is difficult enough, Prime Apprehensor. You have not materially complicated it. There is a cleansarium at the right hand end of the corridor. You might care to join me after you've cleaned yourself up."

"Thank you," said Lamarck. "Apprehensor, could you check that the aircar is still safe? I would not care to be stranded here. I will join you presently."

Peppingen, still and subdued, walked out with some relief. The Manse of Tranquillity had not conduced to his own repose. Soon after Lamarck also left the room to find the cleansarium. Looking behind him as he left the room he saw Carlotta Zael slumped unconscious on the floor, with orderlies lifting her slight limp frame erect. He felt a pity and a sadness that he had never felt before.

Locking the cleansarium door as he entered, he sank bonelessly to the floor. He had been completely drained by events. In part this was an understandable reaction to being attacked by a woman possessed, but he was conscious of a deeper discomfort than that. Carlotta Zael had looked *so* like Laura Glyde: it had been like seeing Laura herself in that pitiable state. The eyes had been Laura's but drained of all vitality, all personality, all—sparkle. The notion was unspeakably harrowing.

Even Carlotta Zael's mannerisms had seemed to echo Laura's. He could understand the face looking the same; but he was at a loss to account for the affinity of expressions on the two faces. It had been a deeply disturbing experience. He had never before realised how close Laura Glyde had come to *being* Taslana Zael. To be able to smile the same way as the girl's mother . . . It

was uncanny, frightening, and oddly moving. He was glad that Voorhies had not been there.

Finishing his ablutions, Lamarck descended to see Dr Rubens.

"Thank you for your time, doctor," he said. "I cannot leave without one more question: why do you think Carlotta reacted as she did?"

"Her everyday conduct, almost by definition, is irrational," said Dr Rubens. "The sight of a Pangalactic officer, and the holo-image of a daughter she has not seen for many years, can easily be seen to have a perturbing effect on her. I don't think we need to be too surprised."

"But she said *not this time!* and *I won't let you*, as if this had happened before," said Lamarck. "It was as if I had triggered some specific event in her memory."

"And so you did, Prime Apprehensor. Remember, her son Tancredin died in an aircar crash. Once already she has had the experience of someone arriving to tell her that her child was dead."

Lamarck nodded. "I had forgotten that. I'm sorry. I should have been more tactful in my inquiries."

Dr Rubens said: "Perhaps you will answer a question for me, Prime Apprehensor. I watch the sensopics like anyone else: it is obvious that you are part of the team trying to find Taslana Zael. What did you hope to achieve today?"

"I hardly know," said Lamarck. "I felt that I had to explore all the evidence. If Carlotta had a hunch as to where her daughter might be, I wanted to know. I ought to have realised that it would never have worked."

Dr Rubens smiled. "One thing I have learned in my profession: you never know what will work. Your idea was unsuccessful; it was not necessarily misconceived."

Lamarck shook hands with Dr Rubens as he took his leave.

"Goodbye," she said. "I hope you find her; but equally I hope never to see you here again."

Lamarck could think of no appropriate reply, so he merely inclined his head and turned to walk towards the aircar in the light rain which had just begun.

"Back to the Pergamon, Apprehensor," he said. "No chatter, and fly in a straight line."

Peppingen took the aircar aloft, and did just that. Lamarck, silent in the passenger seat, speculated on why he had wanted to learn whether Carlotta could

rule on Laura Glyde's authenticity when he already knew the answer; and whether he had gone any way towards achieving what he had set out to achieve.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 16

The next day Lamarck and Peppingen found themselves in their aircar flying south towards the residence of Andreas Smederevod, on the continent Seclusa, tucked away below the equator. The majority of the population lived on the northern continent, Manna, but some chose to live away from the burdens of civilisation, and ranged themselves in a cluster of small townships on Seclusa.

One such was Andreas Smederevod, formerly tutor to the young Tancredin and Taslana Zael. His employment with the Zaels had come to an unsatisfactory close, and he had prepared an account of life in his employers' household, *Zael: The Lost Family*. The account had been an immediate success, with its tales of violence, drug-taking, double-dealing, sexual misdemeanours and spectacular unhappiness. Folk the galaxy over seemed to take comfort in the fact that the Zaels were endowed with a superfluity not only of capital, but of woes; the one seemed to counterbalance the other. Smederevod's fortune had been assured with the sale of the sensopic rights to his work. He retired to the privacy of a Seclusa estate and took little part in public life.

Seclusa was no short journey from Stellapolis—which was why its inhabitants lived there—and the glaxes flew down to Moir's Town, the nearest sizeable habitation to Smederevod's estate, the day before the appointment Lamarck had arranged. He had been surprised at how readily Smederevod, who had a reputation for guarding his privacy, had agreed to see them.

Peppingen had found the visit to the Manse of Tranquillity unsettling, and expressed his hopes that Seclusa would prove more satisfactory.

"It depends," said Lamarck, "on how you define 'satisfactory'. I grew up on Seclusa, and in truth little happens there. If there were a competition to identify the location 'Arsehole of the Universe', Moir's Town would surely be on the shortlist. Think of it as a couple of days in the sun, and expect little stimulation."

"I am puzzled," said Peppingen as he negligently guided the aircar south. "Puissant Galar told me I

would learn much from observing your investigative technique. To date, in truth, I struggle to formulate any precepts based on your procedures."

Lamarck laughed. "It may be that Puissant Galar is indulging in irony at both of our expense. I was never a textbook snoop when I worked here, and I am no textbook smarse now."

"The Puissant told me that your methods were unorthodox; she said that every office needed one such—but only one."

"There may be a compliment in there somewhere," replied Lamarck, "but it is buried deep. I suspect you will learn little from this investigation: I am operating on the periphery of my contract, because the more regular avenues are being explored on Chrysoopolis. What you observe is a mixture of hunch and desperation. The Zael Inheritance is a big contract, and we are in danger of achieving nothing."

"What do you expect to learn from Smederevod?" asked Peppingen.

"In truth, I am not sure," said Lamarck with a smile. "Zael's World is a very closed community: most who know what happens there won't talk about it. Andreas Smederevod is different; he realised the commercial value of his experiences and has cashed in on them. If he can help me feel what it was like to grow up as Taslana Zael, the journey will have been justified."

"Am I missing the point?" asked Peppingen. "You must have the information to perform biotests: all of this background is unnecessary."

Lamarck said nothing for a moment. "One of us is missing the point: I could not say with certainty that it is you. I work on the principle that you can never know too much about the circumstances surrounding a case: it is a philosophy out of keeping with my Puissant Apprehensor. His view is that you do the minimum necessary to fulfil the contract specification, because anything else reduces profitability. He is right in one sense; but yet—"

Peppingen shook his head. "You are too subtle for me, Prime Apprehensor. Pangalactic is a commercial enterprise. It provides planetary security to generate a return for the shareholders; so I was taught at the Lyceum."

"Perhaps I begin to see why Thade thought you might learn something from me," said Lamarck, "although whether she will like what I teach you is a

different question.”

The glaxes arrived at Moir’s Town in the evening, and checked in to an unpretentious—and not over-clean—hotel. Lamarck was not disposed to conversation, and after two drinks in the hotel bar they retired to their rooms.

The next morning the glaxes rose early and, in the invariable tradition of Pangalactic, made a hearty breakfast. One never knew what victuals the remainder of the day would bring. Suitably set up, Lamarck called Andreas Smederevod to confirm their arrival, and Peppingen took the aircar aloft.

Smederevod’s estate was some forty minutes from Moir’s Town. Peppingen set the aircar down in the spacious grounds with his customary flamboyance, and the glaxes disembarked. A portly rubicund white-haired man of middle height awaited them.

“Prime Apprehensor Lamarck, we meet,” he said in a rich hearty voice.

Lamarck inclined his head. “And my colleague, Apprehensor Peppingen.”

“You will stay for lunch, of course,” said Smederevod. “We get very few visitors here. The house is this way.”

Peppingen gave Lamarck a raised-eyebrows look. Lamarck half-smiled and they followed Smederevod up towards the house, which was neither large nor elaborate.

Entering the back door, Smederevod called out, “Falumella! The Pangalactic officers are here!”

A pretty blonde whose age Lamarck put at around nineteen appeared. Smederevod beamed.

“Gentlemen, this is my wife Falumella. She will welcome some company, I am sure. Falumella, Prime Apprehensor Lamarck and Apprehensor Peppingen.”

Peppingen gave a gallant bow, while Lamarck ventured a modest handshake. “I hope we will prove stimulating guests,” said Peppingen.

“Always remembering that we are here primarily to conduct Pangalactic business,” said Lamarck. He felt that the inquiry was unlikely to be expedited by Peppingen flirting with Smederevod’s wife.

“Indeed so, indeed so,” nodded Smederevod genially. “Still, I am sure you will want to see the vineyards while you are here. Falumella and I have devoted much time to their design and construction.”

For the next hour or so the foursome toured the

spacious and carefully maintained estate. The spectacle was a fantastic array of colours and scents, stimulating yet wholesome. Lamarck considered that the function of the vineyard was at least as much aesthetic as commercial; and indeed Andreas Smederevod was unlikely to be dependent on its revenues.

Lamarck noted with disfavour that Peppingen appeared to be devoting his attentions solely to Falumella. He tried to distract her husband with a steady stream of questions about the estate, but Smederevod seemed to pay little attention to the giggles from the pair in front.

After a while Smederevod said, “Apprehensor Peppingen appears to be entertaining my wife adequately. She sees few young folk out here. Perhaps we might leave them to themselves, and you can ask me the questions you have come here for. There is a charming shaded terrace over here, and I have a bottle of decent blue-grape from my northern slopes awaiting us in the grotto.”

Lamarck assented to the proposal, since Smederevod did not appear to mind Peppingen paying court to his wife.

“I am not wholly clear,” said Smederevod, as they settled themselves on the terrace, “what help you think I can be. I can add little to the work of professional investigators.”

Lamarck collected his thoughts carefully. “There are various complicating factors in our enquiry, factors on which you will appreciate I can scarcely expand. Let us say that it would help me if I had a better understanding of the Zael family and Taslana’s place in it before she disappeared.”

Smederevod nodded. “I am not sure how thoroughly glaxes conduct their research nowadays. I have, in fact, written a book on precisely that subject which would furnish the answers to most such general enquiries.”

“I have studied your book, Mr Smederevod. The question arises—and not in any carping or pejorative way—as to how—*rigorous*, I suppose is the word—the account is. One can imagine it being true in the largest sense of the term, without that veracity necessarily residing in every detail.”

“There are laws of defamation on every world, Prime Apprehensor, and the rich are notoriously litigious. I and my publishers were aware of this when we prepared the work. *The Lost Family* is factually correct,

and if anything understates the strangeness which I found in Zael society.”

“Tell me, then, about the Zaels: not what they did, but what they were like,” said Lamarck.

“It is long since I have thought of them,” said Smederevod. “They employed me, and they cast me aside unjustly. They refused to make amends, so I used them to provide me with employment via a different source. As it transpires, they were greater benefactors as enemies than they had been as friends.”

“Certainly your book portrays neither adult Zael favourably.”

“Understand me, Prime Apprehensor: neither Dasien nor Carlotta Zael was a vicious person. One would have had to be an exceptionally strong character not to be corrupted by the material wealth they possessed. Strong they were not; and they were undone.

“Dasien Zael ought perhaps to have known how to deal with his state; he at least was born to it. He was, though, a weak, sentimental and stupid man. He was always the prey of any stronger personality close by. In his early twenties he spent time on Heimat, learning how TLZ operated in the galaxy at large, which clearly was very different to affairs on the family’s fief-world. It was the first time he had been away from his father—a much more dynamic man—for any length of time, and he engaged in a kind of rebellion. He fell under the influence of an ambitious young man in the Heimat office: of course, that man was Allaiao Gazmend, a most pernicious friend. The two of them became inseparable, and Gazmend’s rise within TLZ was assured.

“Dasien also met and fell in love with Carlotta Tawney, a beauty from the planet’s aristocracy. They became engaged, and Dasien refused to break it off despite pressure from his father; he showed that complete obstinacy which is only available to characters deficient in both strength and intellect. Dasien and Carlotta married; old Zael threatened to disinherit Dasien, but since he had no other children he had to relent.

“Dasien and Carlotta returned to Zael’s World and soon, of course, had two children. There were early signs that the marriage was unhappy, and Carlotta could have had no idea of what life on Zael’s World would be like. It is one thing to be a society beauty on a liberal world like Heimat; but Zael’s World is a very

closed society, built around TLZ, and she was effectively a princess, and a usurping one. There were several families who had hoped their daughter would marry Dasien Zael: consequently Carlotta found no very ready welcome.

“Carlotta is obviously a tragic case, although I find it difficult to be objective about her. When I knew her, she was mean, jealous, vindictive and paranoid. Her spite cost me my place. Yet I suspect she was not always that way. She met enmity on Zael’s World from the first, and I doubt that her husband gave her much succour. There was no shortage of false friends, I am sure, and through their agency she became, in time, dependent on various chemical substances which slowly ate away at her mind. If she was paranoid, that was partly because she really was being persecuted, and partly the cumulative effect of the drugs she became addicted to.

“She grew to hate her husband, but in her possessive and febrile way she certainly loved her children. She provided Tancredin with an ally against his father, and she tried to keep Taslana out of his way. She wanted Taslana to grow up as her daughter, not as a Zael; for a fact Taslana strongly resembled her mother.

“It was Carlotta’s attitude to Taslana that cost me my job. Dasien was not a good father, and he was certainly unhappy with the way Tancredin was turning out; but in his heart Taslana was his favourite, although I don’t think she ever knew that. He resented the way Carlotta was trying to turn her against him, and he tried to see her without Carlotta’s knowledge.

“Sometimes we would do our lessons in the gardens when the weather permitted. Tancredin would study with me in the morning and then I would teach Taslana in the afternoon. Dasien learned of this arrangement, and frequently he would come and sit with us while we did our afternoon studies. The summer when Taslana was fourteen was long and hot, and Dasien used to try and sit in at least twice a week; Gazmend ran the shop, as it were, and Dasien was able to slip away easily enough.

“I don’t think that Dasien was ever happier than during those long hot afternoons in the sun. He obviously adored Taslana, and she was quick and sharp at her lessons, especially the humanities. I thought to teach her a little Shakespeare, and sometimes we would read the parts, and Dasien, although no great

scholar, would join in. One afternoon, I remember, we were studying *King Lear*, and they played out the scene where Lear and Cordelia meet at the play's end. Dasien was profoundly moved; Taslana was adept at keeping her feelings under control. To this day I don't know what she felt about it all.

"Be that as it may, I knew that Carlotta would be incandescent if she learned that Dasien was seeing Taslana in that way, and so regularly. I thought the wisest course was to say nothing. Carlotta found out—nothing stays secret on Zael's World—and in her paranoid way thought I was scheming to turn her daughter against her. One of her henchmen came to me in the night, and told me if I hadn't left the planet by sundown, I wouldn't see the sunrise after. I cleared out my effects, and I've never seen any of them since."

Smederevod paused and took a draught of wine. "I tell you, Prime Apprehensor: my book was a model of restraint."

Lamarck nodded. "Evidently. This morning's account presents Dasien Zael in a different light to the venal buffoon of the sensopic."

"My published chronicle is perhaps oversimplified, but provides a summary of Zael's character that all his associates would recognise. The Dasien Zael who sat in on Taslana's lessons revealed himself but rarely; maybe only Taslana and I ever saw it."

"Andreas, you have presented the Zael's with an immediacy far beyond the sensopic. Tell me about Taslana."

Smederevod sucked in his pendulous lower lip.

"Taslana? I find her the hardest to tell you about of them all: she was so self-contained. I was her tutor from the ages of eight to fourteen, and there was a core to her that I never plumbed. Tancredin was a much more straightforward boy: one could always follow his calculations. Taslana either never calculated at all—her instincts were invariably sound—or did it so quickly that it seemed instantaneous."

"Did her subsequent career surprise you? The way she went offplanet after you left—and then her disappearance?" asked Lamarck.

"Neither strikes me as out of character. Of course she wanted to escape Zael's World, which she can only have seen as a prison; and each of her parents would have been happy to see her out of the other's influence. As for her disappearance: she had seen what

the Zael Zillions did to those who came into contact with them. Her decision seems the only rational one, given her upbringing. Tancredin's death, though it left her sole heiress, would not have tempted her back. Once she made a decision, she stuck to it; and money would have had little appeal for her."

"You know that we have been trying to locate her? That if she doesn't reappear she will forfeit her inheritance?"

"That will not worry her, Prime Apprehensor. I assume that she has a normal life now; she will be more concerned about forfeiting that."

"You think, then, that she won't come forward voluntarily?" asked Lamarck quickly.

Smederevod shook his head vigorously.

"She will not. And I hope you won't misunderstand me if I say I hope you don't find her either. She has the right to remain free if she chooses."

"She would hardly be sacrificing her liberty by coming forward. She has the right to refuse the inheritance."

"And be the prey of every sensopic jackal in the galaxy?" snapped Smederevod with some asperity. "If she stays away she acts rationally."

Lamarck studied his wine for a few moments.

"You have not seen Taslana since she was fourteen," he said eventually. "If you saw her now, would you know her?"

"She would be what, twenty-five, now? How does a girl change in eleven years? If you gave me an identity parade, I could not guarantee to pick her out. I knew her as well as anyone; but it was long ago."

Lamarck was not certain why he was pushing the conversation in this direction, but he continued. "It is not so much a question of picking one from many, as a yes or no. Suppose a woman stood in front of you and said, *I am Taslana Zael*: would you know if she was telling the truth?"

Smederevod, normally the most fluent of thinkers and speakers, sat silent awhile. "She would be changed," he said at last. "She is older, and I am sure she must have altered her appearance. But yes, I think I would know her, no matter how she had changed."

"You must realise from what I am saying that we have a claimant to Taslana's identity. It is not a question of appearances," said Lamarck, drawing the holimage from his jacket. "This is Taslana Zael at seventeen.

There is a woman on Chrysopolis who looks all but identical. Surgery could alter appearance that way; but I know of no technique which could make her Taslana Zael inside as well as out. Could you look on the inside and see Taslana?"

Smederevod now spoke more decisively. "Yes. No-one could convince me that they were Taslana for any length of time if they were not."

Lamarck leaned forward. "Andreas, will you come to Chrysopolis, and talk to the woman who says she is Taslana Zael?"

Smederevod paused a moment. "You think she is, don't you? I can tell from your body language, the speed of your speech: you think you've found Taslana Zael."

Lamarck jacked back in his seat. Levelly he said, "I am asking for your independent judgement. What I think is immaterial. There are other, objective, ways of determining identity; they can be time-consuming. Your opinion will be informal but useful. Come to Chrysopolis; speak to her; decide. That is all I require of you."

"Very well. Pay my fare, and my wife's, and I will be there. I have to attend to the grape harvest: but in two weeks I should be free," said Smederevod.

"Thank you," said Lamarck.

Lunchtime approached, and the pair strolled back to the house, each alone with his thoughts. Lamarck was puzzled—and a little disturbed—by Smederevod's conviction that he endorsed Laura Glyde's claim. How could he have given that impression? Laura, as Voorhies would remind him in an instant, was proved by compelling, if inadmissible, evidence to be an adventuress. He could no longer escape the conclusion that he wanted Laura to be what she claimed, to be Taslana. It was that desire, rather than credence of Laura's claims, which had prompted the signs Smederevod had noted.

Lamarck was gloomy as he completed the walk back through the well-tended garden. He had never considered before that he *wanted* to believe in Laura, but now the thought had struck him he could not deny its force. The glax in Lamarck wanted to unmask her as a brassy impostor; but the man in him wanted to exonerate her. He gave a sour smile; the first part of Laura's plan had worked. In spite of all the evidence against her, he was emotionally on her side. He realised that Voorhies had

been right to think that his objectivity was being compromised; he had nearly been caught out, and it was only on another planet, away from Laura and the investigation, that a chance observation had brought him to his senses.

He might as well tell Smederevod to stay on Corinth, he thought. What benefit could he derive from ferrying Smederevod and his wife to Chrysopolis at Pangalactic's expense? Laura would refuse to accept her congé from him, although he supposed it would at least give the glaxes a little extra bargaining power in attempting to squeeze her. Still, best to save Pangalactic the spacefare, he thought; especially as it would only swell TLZ's profits.

Falumella and Peppingen were giggling on the patio outside the back door. Smederevod called out to his wife as they approached.

"Pack your things, my dear! We are going on a trip offworld and you have only two weeks to prepare. Prime Apprehensor Lamarck would like us to visit Chrysopolis," he cried.

Lamarck shrugged. There was a benefit, albeit a marginal one, in having Smederevod denounce Laura's claim. Sombrely he sat down at the table. He had not enjoyed the insight the morning had brought him.

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Dogbold the Deft

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## Farfalou the Magician

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The river fell away to the east. The hills retreated to the west. The southward track led Dogbold into a country watered by stony bottomed brooks flowing down from the highlands. At a ford he paused to wash, and did not neglect to rinse the mud from his purse, nor to fill it with coin-sized pebbles.

Orange sunlight bathed the landscape, and warmed the meadows and forests. Were it not for gnawing hunger Dogbold might have appreciated the perspectives of meadows and orchards, delimited by orderly rows of lemmantynias. Vapors rising from the grasses caught the sunlight and obscured the distance in bright mist. Dogbold climbed a fence into an abandoned field and plucked several un-ripe porpentines, which did something against starvation, but caused him intestinal ache.

He spent the night under a tree, and next morning arrived at the village of Barhoe. At an outlying farm he secured several hours employment harvesting bellamie. With coins tucked in his belt he took himself to the local tavern. Under an arbor of pomegranate vines a girl in a blue apron served him sausage, salad, brown bread, white wine, and a hisperdine tart. It was the first proper meal Dogbold had enjoyed in weeks, and to celebrate he ordered a beaker of apple liqueur, which he sipped at leisure, watching the comings and goings of the local population. Leaving the tavern he sought out the smithy, and with what remained of his earnings he purchased a rusty sword in a battered scabbard.

All that afternoon he marched south. At evening he found shelter in an abandoned barn, where moldy hay offered the most comfort he had known since the feather bed of the inn at Vrempe. At midnight small creatures began to move about the place, running over his neck and face. Dogbold took refuge in the open, stretching out on the hard ground. He awoke just before sunrise, shivering in the damp morning chill.

Climbing erect on his stiffened limbs he regained the track, and continued his way.

By late morning the country had undergone a change. The neat rectangular meadows gave way to large fields of irregular shape, sprawled over swellings and folds in the topography. Each was haphazardly bordered by untidy copses of ruthina and sapollo, and dominated by a majestic chestnut, under which the herds sought shade from the midday heat. Small hillocks appeared here and there, each crowned by a large house surrounded by gardens running down the slopes. Some were built in the modern style, with blue tile roofs and carved decorations. Others were exemplars of more ancient aesthetics. Yet others were hybrids, eccentric composite structures reflecting the whims of successive ages.

Hoping to find a few hours employment, Dogbold climbed a hill and approached one of these establishments. Near the house the way was barred by an iron gate. A bell-pull hung down from a brick pillar with a sign: 'ring bell'. Dogbold grasped the rope, and was about to yank, when he heard a voice: "Ho! where is it you are going? Not to yonder house I think?"

Looking around, Dogbold saw a man, well dressed in new clothes of linen and leather, sitting in the shade of a tree, enjoying his morning pipe. Dogbold bowed, and replied: "Yes indeed; I seek employment."

"Then I can save you your trouble: no employment is to be had"—the man jerked his thumb toward the house—"not up there anyways."

Dogbold replied coldly: "Thank you very much, but I prefer to check for myself." He pulled on the rope, causing the bell to clang. There was no response. The man looked on, puffing calmly at his pipe. Dogbold waited, then renewed his efforts; but no one stirred from the house.

The man chuckled. "Ring away all you like! It may scare the birds, but it will do you no great harm . . . no particular good, norwise."

"And why not?"

"No one is in! And besides; 'It is I who is the master at that house.'"

"Ah," muttered Dogbold.

Summoning all his dignity, he turned toward the man: "Surely there must be some task that needs doing: pruning of flowers, washing of floors, removal of rubbish?"

"Maximillian takes care of all that," stated the man.

Dogbold said: "Hard luck, for a man in a strange land, without coin."

"It is not only yourself who has troubles to be troubled by!" the man reminded him. "For instance, just this very morning, what do you think? The innkeeper of Bhremant came to buy my porker. Well and good you say? But at what price! A mere four hundred coppers! Ah, the insult! And my work, I ask you?" The man stood up to pace back and forth and wave his pipe in the air. "A prime porker, all apple-fed! Think on the salubrious life I have led it! Sunshine! Fresh herbs! Care and patience, like as it were of my own child! There's no better a one in the whole country! I sent him away, that innkeeper, I did, you can be sure! But my morning has been soured; and soured firm!" The man seated himself and looked intently at Dogbold with an expression at once aggrieved and interrogative.

Quick to make the most of any situation, Dogbold suppressed the impulse to manifest a stinging indifference. Instead he spoke in solicitous tones: "My condolences. What else might be troubling you?"

The man was favorably impressed by Dogbold's attention. "Thank you for this kind interest in my affaires! Indeed, I have much to worry me: the wife's bunion all inflamed, Maximillian who broke the handle on the shovel, the beans not yet a'sprout. . ."

"Is that all?"

"Well, let's see . . . the tea was weak this morning; always vexatious. It was the fault of Maximillian."

Dogbold declared: "You are indeed, if not a true martyr of fate, at least the victim of miscreance and/or negligence, on the part of others. I pity you most sincerely!"

"Thank you much!" replied the man with gusto. "It is most rare, in our days, for one to take notice upon the sufferings of another. Grasping manipulators, thinking only on themselves, such is all we see! You are the rare exception."

"It is my avocation," replied Dogbold. "Or you might think of it as a sort of service I provide . . . Some people even offer a gratuity, or consider it a form of employment, and pay by the hour . . . might you be among these?"

The man opened his eyes wide and inspected Dogbold anew. "An original point of view! But I advise

you not to count on me in this regard. Sympathetic attention to the troubles of a fellow man does not fall into the category of 'remunerable activities'. It falls in that of 'common decency', or even 'public duty'. Forget not; before you heard my troubles, I listened to yours!"

"True," admitted Dogbold, "but you failed to sympathize."

The man puckered his lips. "Speaking strictly, I cannot contradict your statement; I said no word. But my heart was with you."

"The quality of your heart would be easier to gauge if it expressed itself in a concrete act. For instance; you might offer a morsel of food to assuage my hunger. Perhaps your pig rejected one of its breakfast apples? Making me the present of such a fruit would also fall into the category of 'common decency'."

"Contrariwise! It would habituate you to beggary! I am far too charitable a man to corrupt others suchly."

Not deigning comment, Dogbold turned and continued on his way.

In the early afternoon he arrived at the village of Bhremant. The commons were planted with elms and surrounded by substantial buildings of cut stone: a four story hotel, a town hall with a bell tower, a bath house with a mosaic facade, a temple, and several private residences. Less imposing was the tavern, a low structure of ancient and dilapidated aspect, though its wide terrace, notable for an arbor of cucumber vines, was inviting. But Dogbold, assiduous in his attentions to Fortuna, proceeded first of all to the temple. This was a raised stone platform with twelve columns arranged in a circle, supporting a wooden dome. Atop the dome was a zinc lantern of many windows and far-fadoles. In the middle of the floor a monumental stone effigy of the goddess stood on a pedestal. She was eight feet tall, half veiled and half nude. With her left arm she grasped a great wheel. In the crook of her right arm she cradled a giant cornucopia, and in her right hand she held a whip. Dogbold made the ritual bows, and began to recite the "*Invocation to good luck*".

A Priest approached. "Mere words are not pleasing to the goddess. Acts speak more loudly."

"Which acts?" asked Dogbold. "I could perhaps sing, but the songs I know best might not be appropriate."

The priest flicked his hand to indicate contempt for

the concept. From inside his robe he produced a bowl. "Song is just tunified verbiage; it is no act. I refer to this."

Dogbold peered into the bowl. At the bottom lay three coins. "Ah, now I understand! While I would normally be happy to render my homage in this manner, Fortuna has not been clement with me of late. In fact the present state of my finances will not permit even a modest contribution."

The priest jerked his head in surprise and used a bony finger to indicate Dogbold's purse. "For a destitute man, your purse is strangely round and heavy!"

Dogbold was discomfited but he made the best of the situation. With a hacking gurgle intended for an unconcerned laugh, he opened the purse and displayed the pebbles. "In the absence of coin I have been using my purse to transport my collection of special pebbles." The priest peered dubiously at the pebbles, exploring them with little jabs of his finger. Dogbold spoke on: "Meanwhile, how can I express my sincere devotion to the goddess?" He leaned toward the statue and, in a louder voice, added, "of whom I am the humble and devoted servant!"

Finding no coins among the pebbles, the priest's shoulders drooped. With a limp wave of his hand he indicated a broom behind the pedestal. "Sweep the floor," he directed in a toneless voice. "Leaves and other trash blow in and maculate the sacred premises. By chasing them out you will acquit your duty of worship."

Dogbold took the broom and swept, while the priest went and sat on a stool, his back propped against a column, eyes closed, meditating in the sun.

His task finished, Dogbold approached the priest. "Sir priest, now that my devotions are accomplished, I would like to make a request."

The priest flinched, and opened his eyes. "Ask", he said with a large gesture, "but do not count on receiving! Fortuna is notoriously fickle."

Dogbold glanced uneasily at the statue. "And yet the cornucopia is a hopeful sign", he suggested.

"True enough", agreed the priest. "But she carries a whip as well."

"What is signified by the wheel?"

"The wheel symbolizes wagons."

"Wagons? Why wagons?"

"Wagons are indispensable adjuncts to both farming

and commerce. Our prosperity and welfare depends much, not to say exclusively, upon these activities, and thus upon wagons."

"Interesting!" declared Dogbold, "I had never considered that."

"I am famous for the cleverness of my sage wisdom."

"In that case, what about Fortuna's veil? Why does she not clothe herself normally, or else show forth her nudity in full splendor? Would this not render devotions even more enthusiastic?"

"Perhaps," agreed the priest, "but the goddess has no need of seduction. Those who spurn her are condemned to penury and itching rashes. She finds these inducements sufficient, and thus does not stoop to vulgar solicitations."

"I do not spurn her, I am a devoted worshiper," complained Dogbold, "yet I remain utterly impecunious!"

"Do you have itching rashes as well?"

Dogbold admitted he did not.

"Therefore give thanks to Fortuna, who smiles upon you!"

Dogbold made a class-two obeisance to the statue. When he was done he reconsidered the effigy with a critical eye. "I still fail to understand her peculiar mode of dress."

"Like the wheel, it is symbolic."

"But what is the symbology?" asked Dogbold. "She shows parts that are best displayed in pairs . . . her eyes for example."

"It is an opinion sometimes expressed," replied the priest. "But the ancient masters of such statuary used *clairvoyance*. In the furor of inspiration they discerned their divine models. The reproduction is therefore faithful and true! Consider; a man may know aspects of his destiny, but others remain hidden! Thus the veil."

"What if we were to lift the veil away; could we not then uncover our hidden destiny?"

"The idea is impractical. The veil is made of stone."

"It could be cut away with a chisel," Dogbold pointed out.

"True, but then the 'hidden face of destiny' would be whatever the chisel-wielder chose it to be. The idea is jejune."

"Let us speak of a more practical matter. I am in need of food. How can I procure it in this town?"

The priest folded his hands over his belly. "I am

famous for the quality of my good council. People come from far, and from near, to ask, and to listen. But do not forget the first great law: *For each jot there must be a corresponding tittle*. Therefore, I do not dispense my precious knowledge gratuitously. Like all the others, you must pay.”

“As you know perfectly well,” said Dogbold with annoyance, “my purse contains pebbles only. However, if you can give me advice that leads to its being filled with coin, I will gladly share a percentage with you, on whatever terms you like—assuming they are reasonable.”

The priest shook his head. “That would be Speculation, while I deal in Absolute Verities only. The second great law is unambiguous: *Like begets like, but unlike does not beget like*. Thus, Absolute Verities cannot be bought with easy promises and vain hopes. They must be paid for, in true coin, and in advance!” He poked Dogbold in the chest with his wand, waved him away, and closed his eyes.

“At least prophesy my future!” pleaded Dogbold, loath to go away empty-handed.

“Very well,” agreed the priest, raising his eyelids with a show of effort, “but you may not like what you hear.”

Dogbold held out his hands and the priest inspected his fingernails. “You will form new alliances and take up a new profession. . . . But your trusted associates will mislead you. . . . In the end you will suffer humiliation and loss. That is all I can see.”

“This is no joyful perspective!” cried Dogbold. “How can I avoid such a fate?”

“Your fingernails are dirty; perhaps the numinations are perturbed.”

“I do not care to be misled, nor to suffer humiliation!” pursued Dogbold, “especially at the hands of ‘trusted associates!’”

“Pof! The solution is simple,” said the priest in a tone of exasperation. “Don’t go about with an attitude of innocent confidence in whatever persons you may chance to meet! May I offer you an unguent to cure itching rash? It is free of charge.”

“I have no need for such a substance,” replied Dogbold, wiping sweat from his brow with his sleeve.

“Not today!” said the priest brightly. “But tomorrow; who knows?” He held out a small box of folded paper. Dogbold took the box, muttered thanks,

and left the temple.

He crossed the green to the tavern. A large, gaily painted sign hung on a post:

❖ *The Carcass and Spit* ❖

ROOMS TO LET

Below these words was a painting of an animal roasting over a fire. Dogbold traversed the terrace. Three bird hunters were taking their ease in the shade of the cucumber vines. Dogbold nodded politely in their direction, and entered the tavern.

He found himself in a low but vast room, the ceiling supported by a forest of thin wooden pillars, etched with foliate patterns and blackened with age. Shelves on the walls were divided into cubbies marked with a name on a brass plate, each holding alimentary implements and naperies. At the back of the room was an enormous fireplace, equipped with a sturdy spit lying across a pair of adjustable iron tripods. As it was early afternoon, the tavern was empty, except for the innkeeper himself, seated by the fireplace in an attitude of dejection. Looking up at Dogbold, he called out: “If it’s food you’re wanting, you’re too early. Come back later—or better yet, don’t come back at all!”

“Why not?” asked Dogbold in puzzlement, “Have I already violated some local notion of proper conduct?”

“No indeed!” chuckled the innkeeper. “Here in Bhremant we are cosmopolitan, and easy in that regard. The fault lies not with you, stranger though you be, but with a certain pig farmer who understands nothing of commerce, and cares not a whit for my problems. Pah!” The innkeeper slapped his knee and spat on the floor.

“Ah, indeed!” said Dogbold, not sure his own encounter with the farmer in question would be of interest. The innkeeper seemed consitrated on his own problems, and turned away to stare glumly at the cold fireplace. Dogbold, at a loss for a more apposite remark, attempted to reanimate the conversation by introducing a topic of general interest.

“I know little of commerce myself, but I recently learned that wagons are an important adjunct to it.”

The innkeeper turned back, to look up at him with a blank expression. “So it may be. The case at hand

involves no wagons but, if you want to know, I am in a dilemma; this farmer has set an opportunistically outrageous price on the pig I had intended to use for tonight's feast; but I will not pay. Why? Because I can not pay! that is why! It is for this reason that you need not return, you or anyone else. There is no pig: there will be no eating."

"I believe I am slightly acquainted with the farmer in question. If you are obliged to do business with him, I pity you most sincerely. He is a dishonest trickster without conscience."

Dogbold paused. The innkeeper said nothing.

"You have my sincere condolences . . ." Dogbold continued.

"Never mind all that!" the innkeeper brusquely interrupted. "I abhor larmoyance."

Dogbold again changed the subject: "Is it possible to have a meal right now? Anything will do; a plate of boiled turnips for example."

"What?" bellowed the innkeeper in shock. "Boiled turnips, at such an hour? I am a large-minded man myself, but if others saw you chewing turnips before the dinner bell, you would be put in the pit for ten days! Here in Bhremant we are decent folk; impropriety is not tolerated."

"I never doubted it!" muttered Dogbold hurriedly. ". . . This pit; are meals served to prisoners? It is usually the case that thin soup, or other nourishing food, is fed to prisoners."

"No indeed! Eating is not allowed in the pit, for obvious reasons." The innkeeper shook his head ruefully. "Ha! Tonight the *Carcass and Spit* will be no better—if I cannot find an animal to roast!"

Leaving the innkeeper to his troubles, Dogbold retreated to the terrace. In the shade of the cucumber vines the bird hunters were still at their drinking, their nets draped over their shoulders, their swafters and projectiles laid on the paving, their cages stacked neatly. Dogbold, who never missed an opportunity to enlarge his acquaintance, or curry favor, wished them good health. One of the hunters, a great burly fellow, his head encased in a tight leather hood from which his ill-shaven jowls bulged like squeezed bladders, returned the salute.

"Good health to you as well, skinny gazook that you are!" He turned to the other two: "He looks as though he could use a dose of health, eh comrades? ha!" And

again addressing Dogbold: "What manner of stork be you, with that absurd bit of hat and fancy dress?"

Dogbold answered with dignity: "Thank you for your good wishes, which I accept with gratitude. As for your questions: I am as you see, and as for my clothes, they, too, are as you see."

"Bravely spoken!" laughed the second hunter, who was thinner than the first, and whose kit was a shade more stylish since he used a wide brimmed hat with one side rakishly tied to the crown and a long red feather in the band. "Pay no heed to Gustifer, who knows no other manners!" He slapped Gustifer on the back. "It's a good fellow at bottom, though murder for the birds—eh Gustifer?"

"That's how it is," grunted Gustifer. "No mercy for the birds."

"My name is Kampolion" the second hunter went on. "This chetif little fellow, here on my right, is Scragneustiffol. May we have the honour of your name?"

Dogbold made a formal salute. "I am Dogbold."

"Very well Dogbold!" continued Kampolion. "I see you have just arrived in Bhremant and, by the form of your hat, I take it you come from parts north?"

"Your suppositions are correct."

"In that case may I ask you which birds you saw on your travels? We are keen to hunt pennefers and titaroons, but the petralias have driven them away from the western forests. How goes it to the north?"

Dogbold made as if he were considering the question. "I remember seeing such birds . . . pennefers, and titaroons as well, but let me think, where exactly did I see them? Such remembering is thirsty work . . ."

Gustifer, his chubby hands posed on his widely spread knees, elbows well forward, turned to Kampolion: "See what you have done? Thanks to your sly provocation poor Dogbold is all in a sweat trying to remember his birds, and now you must buy him drink. Do not count on me to help defray such recklessly incurred costs! Dogbold may be stylish, but he is no ornithologist, by the look of him."

Scragneustiffol, who sported an oversize phrygian cap, an unkempt wisp of beard and long moustaches, spoke in a tone of reproach: "There is a shame! Just to spite Gustifer I will pay for Dogbold's drink. This is how civilized men behave! Dogbold, please join us! What will you have, a fine tankard of beer? Innkeeper!

A drink for my thirsty friend!"

Dogbold thanked Scragneustiffol and seated himself in the shade of the cucumber vines. The innkeeper brought a tankard of beer, and the conversation resumed.

"So, what of the birds?" began Scragneustiffol. "I am particularly keen to trap a brace of pennefers, which are very nice when boiled with onions and tarragon."

"I saw some of these. They are not close by, as I recall, but in the copses near Barhoe."

"Pennefers mostly go in the open fields," remarked Scragneustiffol.

"Perhaps these were enjoying the shade, as we do now?" suggested Dogbold.

"Perhaps," agreed Scragneustiffol. "The habits of birds are often mysterious. We must make an excursion to that area. But what of titaroons? Did you see the three-toed variety, or those with the huppette?"

"Both kinds, I believe. All in the vicinity of Barhoe."

"Strange," remarked Kampolion, "huppettes and three-toes do not fraternize; one always drives the other away from the territory."

"Perhaps the huppettes had not yet become aware of the three-toe incursion," explained Dogbold hastily. "Or perhaps my observations were inaccurate. It was dusk at the time."

"But at dusk the titaroons are all asleep in their burrows . . ." began Kampolion.

"Faguh!" cried Gustifer, "Dogbold here knows no more of birds than I know of silk-polychrome point-work. Scragneustiffol, your beer money has been wasted."

"I do not regret offering Dogbold hospitality," Scragneustiffol replied sheepishly. "It was a good deed."

"Speaking of good deeds" continued Gustifer, "better than using inebriating drink to extract non-existent information from this ignorant traveler, would be to inform him of the dangers that lie in his path, in case he plans to continue his journey to the south."

"Are there many?" asked Dogbold despondently.

"They are not of a nature to dissuade a determined man," stated Kampolion. "First of all, there is Farfalou the magician."

"Are you troubled with magicians in these parts?" asked Dogbold. "They are rife in the vicinity of

Masmoro as well, where I have suffered from their dispositions, which I have found to be 'variable', at best."

"Farfalou is not notably malicious, but give him a wide berth. When he becomes annoyed, the object of his displeasure must dance to the music of an enchanted orchestra, until he drops in exhaustion. Pass by his manse with a steady step. Do not stop to pay your regards, or to peer and watch, and all will be well."

"Very good. I will give Farfalou a wide berth. What next?"

"Shortly after you pass the manse of Farfalou you must traverse Frengi's glade."

"Could I not simply go around?" asked Dogbold.

"Impossible. The terrain will not allow it, unless you wish to add several weeks to your travels, and a set of dangers far worse than Frengi, like the flame bats in the hills, or the water people to the east."

"What is the danger in Frengi's glade?"

"It is Frengi himself. Frengi is a troll, and the glade is his private domain. He levies a tax on all who pass. His price is a purse of gold coin, and all must pay. Frengi is savage, but slow of wit. To avoid his excessive levy, offer him a closed purse filled with ordinary pebbles. Tell him it is enchanted, and that if he opens it before nightfall the gold will turn to dross! In his greed he will accept the purse. In his stupidity he will not dare inspect the contents before nightfall. By then you will be far away."

"This is a subterfuge which I think I can perform," said Dogbold, knotting the ties of his purse as Gustifer looked on in amusement.

"The last danger," continued Kampolion, "is the sphinx."

"What is a 'sphinx'?" asked Dogbold.

"It is a hybrid, a beast with the body of a lion, the wings and foreparts of an eagle, and the head and bust of a woman."

"When Kampolion says 'bust,'" put in Gustifer, "he means 'titties'. But don't get carried away, the sphinx is a dangerous animal."

Scragneustiffol spoke up: "Her titties are very nice, all white, conical and succulent! She does not mind if you enjoy them."

"Pass on by," advised Gustifer. "If such adjuncts are to your taste, better to find others attached on less unpredictable hosts. The sphinx is not to be trifled with."

"I'll keep that in mind. How can I cope with this creature?"

"She will demand the answer to her riddle." replied Kampolion.

"Ah ha! I am good at riddles!" said Dogbold.

"Perhaps you can answer this one then? 'What has four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs at night?'"

Dogbold considered, but finally scratched his head in puzzlement. "It is beyond my powers! I know of nothing that changes its number of legs, particularly in the space of a single day."

"Ha! It is a good thing we can give you the answer then, for this is the riddle of the sphinx!" With a wink Kampolion added "Those who fail to respond correctly are given short shrift."

Dogbold failed to understand the import of this insinuation but, not wanting to appear ignorant, he merely smiled. "In that case I am most grateful for your information," he said. "What is the answer?"

"Man!" cried Scragneustiffol.

". . . Man? How so?"

Scragneustiffol explained: "As a baby he crawls on all fours, as a man he walks on his two legs, and as a codger he hobbles about with the aid of a cane, which is a third leg."

"What sort of riddle is that?" complained Dogbold. "At Masmoro our riddles make more sense."

"This riddle is a famous classic!" protested Kampolion. "What do you reproach it?"

"To begin with, 'arms' and 'canes' are not 'legs', and a whole life is not a single day. The question does not correspond to the answer."

"It is metaphorical," Kampolion pointed out. "But I comprehend your objections; they are based on tenets of pure logic. But logic or no, such is the riddle posed by the sphinx, and such is the response you must give."

"One would think the sphinx would change her riddle from time to time, at least to confuse the locals."

Kampolion nodded his head sagely. "Indeed, so one would think. At any rate you are now equipped to leave Bhremant by the southern road, without mishap. However, why not bide here? You seem a competent person, and we could use a fourth in our hunts. Why not become our associate?" The two other hunters seconded the invitation. Dogbold would have accepted with gratitude, at least for a limited time, but he

recalled the priest's prophecy. By turning down the hunters he would avoid a doleful fate, and nullify an evil destiny!

"I am afraid I have personal business that will not permit me to accept your generous offer, for which I thank you nonetheless."

"Too bad!" said Gustifer, heaving himself erect. "Come along lads, it's off to the woods! We have urgent hunting to do, or tonight we do not eat. Good travels to you, Dogbold!" The hunters gathered their gear, and made for the west. Dogbold left Bhremant to the south.

Soon after leaving the village Dogbold spied the manse of Farfalou. It was an impressive structure, built on a berm not far from the road. Once upon a time it had been a fortress, but at some later point a tumult of airy apartments had been perched and cantilevered atop the grizzled military foundations. Dogbold dared to pause, for just a moment, and contemplate the manse, where, so he thought, eerie ideas evolved, and odd events occurred! But what thoughts and what events, exactly? Dogbold would never know, or so he told himself, shaking his head in bemusement and frustrated curiosity.

He turned, and continued on his way. But before he had taken three steps an explosion broke the afternoon silence. Dogbold jumped around in alarm. From the lower part of the manse a section of wall was propelled outward as if by terrific force. From the breach came a flash of amber, an unearthly projection that seemed to turn the sky black and throw the landscape into dramatic contrasts. This effect subsided almost instantly, and the billowing dust of the wrecked masonry obscured the opening. For an instant there was silence. Then came a confusion of animal cries. Bounding shapes surged from the dust cloud, running out into the garden and scampering away in all directions. Next came a flight of birds, large and small, which took to the sky helter-skelter. Lastly, a tall, gaunt figure climbed through the aperture; Farfalou himself, or so Dogbold estimated. Eager to escape the magician's attention, he crouched to observe the scene from behind a tussock of sharp grass.

Farfalou, holding out his arms and fingers at crooked angles, his long beard stiff as a dead branch, called after the departing creatures, but to no effect. In a high

apartment an upper window was opened with an impatient clatter. White lace curtains were pulled aside, and a small, round, neatly coifed woman's head appeared. The woman remonstrated with Farfalou. Farfalou attempted explanation. The woman was adamant. With a final dejected glance around the garden, Farfalou returned through the hole in the wall, his arms now limp at his sides, his long fingers hanging straight.

"Well, well!" thought Dogbold, pleased with this interesting spectacle, "so it goes at the manse of Farfalou!" Making sure he was unobserved, he got to his feet and continued down the road, but he had not gone three steps when his attention was caught by the sound of merriment, or high-pitched giggling, the source of which was behind a bush. Dogbold made inspection but discovered only a black kitten with honey colored rings on its tail. The kitten looked up at Dogbold with sapphire-blue eyes and, though somewhat out of breath, spoke.

"What fun! Old floozy botched the ninth syllable, and we all ran out the hole! Did you see the ruckus?"

Dogbold leaped back in amazement, but regained his composure almost instantly. "I did indeed!" he replied. "But how is it you can talk? Are you an enchanted princess, a victim of Farfalou's evil magic?"

"Not really," replied the kitten. "In fact I'm a tom. But Floozy uses his spell to make me sing soprano, and thus I can talk, though it may be the fault of the obscured fixative. What is your name, person?"

"I am Dogbold the Deft," replied Dogbold, his mind seething with schemes. "And yours?"

"Cats have no names, but they call me 'Hopscotch'—which is quite flattering, don't you think? It was the name of a great king of the past, or so I am told."

"Now that you have escaped from Farfalou, what plans have you made for your future?"

"I had not thought so far ahead. . . Meow! notice the interesting butterfly, fresh from its chrysalis!" To Dogbold's dismay, Hopscotch bounded after the insect, and disappeared out of sight in the meadow grasses. But he soon tired of the chase and scampered back to Dogbold. "What were you saying about my future?"

"Nothing in particular, but how are you going to get your daily saucer of milk, now that you must depend upon yourself to earn your livelihood?"

Hopscotch cocked his head to one side. "I had not considered that. Perhaps I will simply stay at home. In

fact I had not even considered leaving. Floozy's musical interpretations are eccentric, and somewhat annoying to a classically minded musician such as myself, but Madam Farfalou is a decent old party."

". . . How would you like to have cream three times a day?" asked Dogbold.

"Meow! that's more like it! I am tired of skim milk, I can tell you that!"

"I have an idea. What do you think it is?"

"Tell!"

"If you and I were to join forces, if we were to become associates for our mutual benefit, we could have cream all day long."

"Persons enjoy cream as much as cats?"

"Cream, or anything else we like! if we work together."

"I do have luxurious tastes," admitted Hopscotch. "What would our association of mutual benefit do, exactly?"

Dogbold crouched down, the better to converse with the kitten: "We could do many things, but the most obvious would be to create a circus act."

"What is a 'circus act'?"

"We would have a tent, a table and a basket. People would come to watch and listen. They would pay money. I would make an introduction, and then you would jump out of the basket."

"This does not sound particularly noble. Such antics will make us rich? Any cat could do as much, and the cats I know are quite poor, most of them anyway."

"Ah, but they are not associated with me, and you are not like other cats!"

"Meow!" purred Hopscotch, sniffing Dogbold's finger and giving it a lick with his rough tongue. "I always accept flattery, but in the case of this circus act I do not see how my superiority, obvious though it is, would give us a special advantage."

"The answer is simple," said Dogbold. "You can talk. A talking animal is a great novelty. You will be both rich, and famous—assuming you put your trust in the right manager."

"Meow!" said Hopscotch, trotting back and fourth. He again sniffed at Dogbold's hand, and rubbed up against his ankle. "All right then. The circus it is." He stood on his hind legs, and held out his paw. Dogbold took it between forefinger and thumb, and they consecrated their arrangement in the manner of gentlemen.

Dogbold, with Hopscotch gamboling around his feet, proceeded down the road, but progress was not quick. Hopscotch was constantly distracted. He chased a leaf fluttering in the wind. He stopped to inspect ants. He lay down to roll and stretch in the dust. If Dogbold called out, Hopscotch answered amiably, and eventually returned, but soon was distracted anew. Even so, it was not long before they came to Frengi's glade.

A great cliff, a rogue spur of the western highlands, barred the way to the west. Far to the east shimmered a lake. From the lake an impassable swamp extended almost all the way to the road. Between cliff and swamp was an orderly plantation. The troll Frengi, busy among his trees with a hoe, spied Dogbold and gave an avaricious cry. Throwing down his hoe, he snatched up a scimitar and ran to the road.

"Hold!" he cried, brandishing his weapon. "All who pass, must pay my toll!" Frengi was not tall, but he was as wide as he was high. His hip joints served as pivots for a pair of short and inordinately thick legs. Had he let his arms hang down, his knuckles would have dragged on the ground, but he carried them high. His head was small, and notable for sharp teeth and a scrofulous halo of individual hairs which grew like tendrils from the scalp. This head was perched high on a tall, thick neck, corded with muscle and tendon. The gray skin of this remarkable neck was translucent, and the blood in the bulging veins and arteries could be seen as it coursed up and down, to and from the brain encased in the diminutive skull. Frengi was dressed in a pair of neat overalls, with various gardening tools sticking out of the pockets.

"Never fear!" replied Dogbold. "I will pay your toll."

"Never fear?" growled the troll with a quick movement of his scimitar. "You should be the one to fear! My toll is a purse of gold coin. Go back where you came from, and fetch me one; then I'll let you past."

"I have already been informed of your price, and have it to hand." Dogbold took his purse from his belt and handed it to the troll, who reached out a long arm, grasped the purse in his misshapen fingers, and gave it a heft.

"Hmph. Now we'll see." He took a step back, threw down his weapon, held the purse up before his eyes and began working the knots with his clawed hands,

occasionally squinting suspiciously at Dogbold.

"Be careful!" cried Dogbold, "the gold is enchanted! If you open the purse before nightfall it will turn to rocks."

"Pah!" replied the troll, "I've been sung that song one time too many!" He kicked at a pile of pebbles by the side of the road, mixed up with torn purses. "This time I'll open it in the full light of day, and then we'll see what's what. If it's rocks again, beware!"

Dogbold frowned in annoyance. Things were not as the hunters had described. Luckily, he reflected, his sobriquet was 'Dogbold the Deft'; he would certainly find a way over, through or around this unforeseen difficulty. But what?

"Say there, sir, oh I say!" cried Hopscotch.

"What? Who?" The troll jumped from side to side, and looked all around, but failed to look down.

"Here!" called Hopscotch. Frengi's long neck bent forward, and his tiny eyes opened wide at the spectacle of the talking kitten.

"A talking vermin!" he exclaimed, kicking at him. "Be off!"

"In your place I would be careful what I did with that purse!" warned Hopscotch dodging nimbly back. "Dogbold here is a famous magician. If you open his purse in his sight, demons will pop out and eat you."

"Humph, I doubt it," muttered the troll ". . . but you never know." He turned his back, hiding the purse from Dogbold's view, but continuing to work at the knots, glancing over his shoulder suspiciously from time to time. Hopscotch approached, signaling to Dogbold with flicks of his tail and ears.

"Sir, oh I say sir! That's a sailor's knot. May I help you undo it?"

"Foolish vermin! I know how to open purses; look at the dozens I have opened already!" and he gave another kick at his pile. Hopscotch signaled impatiently to Dogbold, who at last understood. In a swift and practiced motion he drew his sword and, with arm held straight to transmit the full force of his lunge, jabbed the troll in the back. Frengi was as hard as a log; the sword barely penetrated. At first the attack seemed to have no effect, but the troll slowly stiffened. The purse dropped from his inert fingers. He began to tremble, and slowly raise his arms. With his arms outspread like a grotesque scarecrow, he began to shiver, and then to shake with such violence that Dogbold

could barely keep a grip on the sword. He tried to push it in more deeply, but it would neither penetrate nor retract. It was fast as a spike hammered into an oak beam. Dogbold would have abandoned the sword, and taken to his heels, but he found he could not; his hand was frozen to the grip. Frengi was now skittering wildly, wagging Dogbold like a rag at the end of a stick. Suddenly the troll gave a great groan, and crackling blue fire spattered from his head, engulfed his body and, as Dogbold watched in bug-eyed horror, Frengi collapsed in upon himself to become a wad of tangled flesh, alive with blue fire, on the end of his sword. The blue fire, having almost consumed the troll, crackled up the blade, and tried to engulf Dogbold's arm. Just as Dogbold was about to succumb to the blue fire, there was a great hissing noise, and what was left of Frengi burst into nothingness.

Dogbold was thrown back, and landed in the dust, still clutching his sword which had been reduced to a stub by the blue fire. Trembling, he picked himself up, brushed off his clothes, put the remnant of sword back in its scabbard and rubbed his arm, which the blue fire had covered with a rash of red welts.

Hopscotch trotted up. "That was good," he commented, "but it might have been better to whack off the head. The neck was so long; you could hardly have missed your stroke."

"Perhaps," muttered Dogbold, still shaken. "At any rate, we have escaped the tax."

"Don't say 'we,'" remarked Hopscotch. "Frengi asked nothing of me."

"Loyal associates share fortune and misfortune alike," stated Dogbold.

"True!" agreed Hopscotch. "Please note that it was thanks to my clever stratagem that we escaped the troll!"

"Yes indeed," said Dogbold, "but remember also, without me you will not become rich and famous!"

"Very well," said the kitten. "When do we start becoming rich and famous?"

"All in good time! First we must reach civilization."

"Come along then!" and Hopscotch led the way, tail held high.

They crossed Frengi's glade, and emerged from under the trees into wilder country. The way now led between rocky outcroppings, among which grew

gnarled trees and desiccated flowering bushes. They had not gone far when a scream in the sky caused Hopscotch to scamper behind a withered dendron and Dogbold to crouch in alarm. With a clatter of feathers, a great creature swooped down and landed on a rock. Dogbold recognized it as the sphinx, though it did not exactly match the description given by the hunters. Though its body was feline in character, it could hardly be described as that of a lion, being only the size of a dog. The wings, though impressive, had nothing of the eagle, being white, with much untidy down on the undersides. The front claws were impressive, but the resemblance to a human female was otherwise vague. The sphinx had long, matted, greasy hair. Its eyes, though large, were closely spaced under a heavy brow. Its nose was snub, with forward projecting nostrils. Its mouth was wide, with thin lips, sharp teeth set at different angles, and a surrounding fuzz of soft blond whisker which, from the diminutive chin, sprouted into a bifurcate wisp of curly beard. As for the bust, it was hidden under a breastplate of worked brass, strapped to its body with leather belting.

The sphinx emitted another scream, and Dogbold cringed in alarm.

"You must answer my riddle!"

"Ask!" said Dogbold, as bravely as he could in spite of fear.

"The cat first," ordered the sphinx.

Hopscotch stepped bravely forward.

"If you fail to give the answer, it will go badly for you!"

"Meow!" said Hopscotch in a courageous tone.

"Listen carefully, I will not repeat myself: What has no legs the first minute, six legs the second



minute, and four arms the third minute?"

Hopscotch cocked his head to one side. After a moment he spoke: "Meow."

"Correct," growled the sphinx in disappointment. "You may proceed. Now you!" it called, indicating Dogbold with a claw. Dogbold approached.

The sphinx looked him fixedly, and slowly winked one eye. Dogbold could not tell if it were an involuntary gesture, or a sign of aggression like a dog baring its teeth. "What has no legs the first minute, six legs the second minute, and four arms the third minute?"

"That is not the correct riddle!" complained Dogbold.

The sphinx jerked up on all fours. "I say what the riddle is!" it screamed in a passion of fury. "You must answer, or suffer the consequences!"

"But why change the riddle?" persisted Dogbold, at a loss for a more clever remark.

"I do as I like!" said the sphinx, with a sort of purring laugh. "Anyway, the answer to the old riddle had become a matter of public notoriety. They even dared to write it down in their books! So I was obliged to make a new one, which is harder to guess than ever! Now be quick; say your answer!"

"How many guesses do I get?"

"Only one, and if you are wrong—it will not go well for you."

"What about clues?"

"No clues!"

"But I have no idea what changes legs and arms in the space of three minutes . . ."

The sphinx chuckled, a hideous coughing sound, and made a shuffling motion; Dogbold suddenly found himself almost nose to nose with the creature, who raised a claw and lay it delicately on his chest. "I will count to ten. Answer, or meet your fate."

"Is this regular procedure?" asked Dogbold. "Perhaps others are allowed more time, in which case it would only be fair if . . ."

"One!"

"Hmm . . . no legs the first minute you say?"

"Two!"

"Six legs the next minute; but what has six legs? a crab?"

"Is that your answer?" asked the sphinx eagerly.

"Only if it is correct!"

"You must decide! Three!"

"Crabs don't have four arms in three minutes, at least I don't think so . . ."

"Four!"

"How about if I ask you a riddle?" proposed Dogbold, beads of sweat appearing on his brow. "If you call a tail a leg, how many legs . . ."

The sphinx pushed its face even closer to Dogbold's, and he now looked directly into its dark eyes, where tiny motes of light seemed to dance. Instead of screaming, it used a voice throaty and soft. "Five."

"Not a crab," muttered Dogbold quickly, "perhaps a mutant quadruped, or a bodisatva . . ."

"Six."

". . . bodisatvas might have four, or six, arms; but how many legs do they have? Not more than two I think . . ."

"Seven." counted the sphinx, in a voice even softer than before.

Hopscotch batted Dogbold's calf with its paw. "You're cold! You're not even in the right phyla."

The sphinx twisted its head to look down at the kitten. "No hints, I told you!"

"That's no hint! I simply informed Dogbold that he should think along other lines. For instance; he has not yet considered insects."

"Quiet!" barked the sphinx.

". . . What insect changes in three minutes?" muttered Dogbold.

"It's a metaphor," said Hopscotch.

"Ah! . . . But arms; animals don't have arms!"

"Indeed?" cooed the sphinx, "and what do you call these?" It put its claws delicately around Dogbold's neck, digging them into his skin, and drawing itself up along his body in a way he found disturbingly ambiguous.

"Hmmm, but four of them . . .?"

"Eight!" purred the sphinx.

Hopscotch spoke hurriedly; "The sphinx herself has four arms; it's not such a rare phenomenon."

"No hints!" growled the sphinx again, lashing its long tail in an ominous manner.

"That's no hint, it's a statement of fact. You do have four arms, will you deny it?"

"No indeed, but your interruptions become fatiguing. Go away. Leave me alone with this man."

Dogbold's eyes rolled in their sockets as his brain struggled to encompass new concepts. ". . . You mean

wings!" he cried. Hopscotch flicked his tail by way of answer.

"Nine . . ." counted the sphinx, beginning to smile, which threw its sharp teeth into prominence. Dogbold's mind raced. "If wings are arms . . . but what animal has no legs? snakes, worms, grubs . . ."

"Ten! Now you must answer!" The claws tightened on his neck, and the sphinx began to open its mouth, revealing a tongue tinged with green.

Dogbold swallowed, and finally yelped out: "A butterfly!"

The sphinx squealed in fury. It leapt back, and fixed Hopscotch with a baleful gaze. "This is your fault, miserable cat!" It spread its wings, and with a powerful flap rose seven feet into the air and fell on the kitten, who dodged under a charcoal bush just in time to save himself. The sphinx crouched down and reached under the bush to bat savagely at the kitten. Unable to reach him it backed off, panting in rage, wings out-spread, tail lashing, head low to the ground. It peered back and forth from Hopscotch to Dogbold; then, suddenly all a-droop, climbed back on the rock, lay down, and closed its eyes. "Go away," it moaned, waving a claw. "You disappoint me." Dogbold and Hopscotch did not wait to be dismissed a second time, but moved off on tip-toe.

When they were out of the sphinx's hearing Hopscotch spoke proudly: "Once again, I have saved you! What a heroic fellow I am!"

"I am sincerely grateful," responded Dogbold, wiping cold sweat from his face and rubbing his neck where the sphinx's claws had left indentations. He peered nervously around the sky, and spotted a large bird the look of which he did not like.

Hopscotch's mercurial mind had already skipped ahead to a new subject. "Let's work up our circus act; after I leap from the basket, what next? Do I sing? I am an expert singer you know? I have performed many concerts with the orchestra."

"Singing is good," replied Dogbold distractedly, looking over his shoulder. The large bird was still approaching, and now it dropped down at them. "Take cover!" Dogbold cried in alarm. He scurried behind a boulder, picked up a rock, and prepared to defend himself.

"Come back!" called Hopscotch; "it is only

Anaxagorus, the trumpeter!" Dogbold peeked around the rock. A large crow stood in the dirt by the kitten. It seemed a normal bird, except that it wore a pair of spectacles attached to its head by a length of red ribbon. The two animals conducted a dialog of caws and meowings, of which Dogbold could comprehend nothing.

"Come out!" called Hopscotch. Dogbold advanced and the kitten performed an introduction: "Dogbold, meet Anaxagorus; Anaxagorus, Dogbold."

The crow held up a wing, which Dogbold shook. "Anaxagorus brings us evil news: Snoutworthy is in mortal danger, we must return to Bhremant!"

"Who is Snoutworthy?" Dogbold asked the crow.

"Braak, Browk!" replied Anaxagorus.

"What does he say?"

"He told you that Snoutworthy is the cellist. But come, we must hurry back to Bhremant!"

"Wait! We can't return now; we must go on to the south!"

"What of Snoutworthy?"

". . . Snoutworthy must fend for himself."

"But we are associates! We are pledged to mutual benefit and aid: I saved you from Frengi and his tax, I rescued you from the sphinx and her wiles. Your honor now demands that you help me save Snoutworthy."

Dogbold rubbed his chin. Exasperating to be bested in forensic debate by a kitten! "I suppose it does," he answered grudgingly. "But afterwards we must hurry on to the south."

They returned the way they had come, Anaxagorus following on foot, though his teetering walk was not quick. To keep pace with the kitten, he was obliged to break into an occasional run. From time to time Dogbold also had to trot. They found the sphinx where they had left it, crouched on the rock; but it let them pass without comment, only glowering reproachfully at Dogbold. They passed Frengi's glade without incident, but to avoid the attention of Farfalou—busy with mortar and trowel repairing the breach in his wall—they took to the fields and made a detour around the manse. In spite of this they soon arrived at Bhremant, and hurried to the commons.

Anaxagorus, holding out his wing, indicated the Carcass and Spit, and cawed. Hopscotch translated, in

a whisper: "Snoutworthy is being held prisoner behind the inn." Dogbold, his head swimming with ideas for animal acts that could be arranged with such creatures as these, followed them as they surreptitiously approached the inn, and snuck along an alley running beside the dilapidated building. The structure was prolonged by a board fence five feet high. Hopscotch cautioned Dogbold to stand back. The kitten advanced, peered through a knot hole, then motioned the others forward. Anaxagorus peered through a crack. Dogbold peeked over the top.

Behind the inn, in the shade of a doorway, stood the innkeeper, sharpening a knife. In the center of the yard a pig was tied to a trestle, with several basins at the ready. Apparently the innkeeper's problem had been solved, and the evening meal promised to be a success! Dogbold wondered if he were not leaving Bhremant one day too soon. He crouched down and whispered a question to Hopscotch. "Where is Snoutworthy?"

Anaxagorus looked up at him sharply.

"There, in the yard!" hissed Hopscotch, indicating the pig through the knot hole. "You must distract the innkeeper. Anaxagorus and I will undo Snoutworthy's bonds. There may be a fuss, in which case you must protect our retreat. Rendezvous in Frengi's glade!"

"Very well," replied Dogbold dubiously.

"Be quick!"

There would be no meal after all! thought Dogbold, and the innkeeper would again be disappointed.

Dogbold hurried around to the front of the inn, where he found the three hunters, again installed under the cucumber arbor, drinking beer.

"Hoy Dogbold!" called Kampolion, "have you returned so soon? Were you enchanted by Farfalou, or whipped by Frengi? Join us for a drink and recount your adventures!"

"Certainly! But first I must fetch a tankard of beer — oh innkeeper!"

Kampolion spoke on: "We captured a pig, and so easily! The innkeeper is at the slaughtering board, even as we speak."

Winking, Scragneustiffol attempted a sally of *grivoiserie*: "Were you fatigued by the ardours of the sphinx?"

But Dogbold was already inside, calling for the innkeeper. The innkeeper showed his head through a

small door near the fireplace, knife and whetstone in his hands. "What is it? Hold your breath three winks while I bleed my pig!"

"Come back!" ordered Dogbold. "My thirst will not wait!"

The innkeeper scowled. "Wait it must," he said, turning away.

"Serve me beer, on the instant! . . . or . . ."

The innkeeper turned back: "Or what?"

"Just 'or,'" stammered Dogbold, but as the innkeeper again turned away, he added; "but when I say 'or', it is exactly what I mean!"

"And you mean exactly what?" growled the innkeeper, turning round again, and taking a menacing step forward. He was a big man, burly of shoulder, belly and hip, with a face round and red, and arms as thick as his calves.

Dogbold persisted: "Serve me a tankard of beer, I tell you, 'or'."

"'Or' again, is it? We'll see about you and your 'or's!'" He put down his knife, advanced upon Dogbold, grabbed him by the collar and the seat of the pants, carried him to the door, and slung him out like a sack of durable objects. Dogbold tumbled across the terrace and came to rest, with a thump, against a large earthenware pot planted with a cucumber vine.

The instant of silence which followed was broken by a crash from behind the inn, as of wooden boards being splintered. The innkeeper and bird hunters turned their heads in surprise and interrogation. Seconds later, at full gallop, Snoutworthy and Hopscotch, with Anaxagorus flying above, burst out onto the common.

"Ho!" cried Gustifer, jumping to his feet. He caught up his swafter, fitted a projectile, and took aim. Dogbold scrambled up, jostled his arm; the projectile went wide.

"What's this?" roared Gustifer swinging around. Kampolion, Scragneustiffol and the innkeeper stared at Dogbold in stupefaction. Dogbold did not stop to explain himself, but took to his heels. Gustifer aimed several more projectiles, but Dogbold's dodging was too much for him, and the shots again went wide.

Panting and gasping, Dogbold found Hopscotch waiting for him in Frengi's glade.

"Another fine adventure!" exclaimed Hopscotch. "Once more; I am a hero!"

"Don't forget my own heroism," said Dogbold, rubbing his bruises, and scratching at his arm where the welts caused by the blue fire had begun to itch. "Perhaps now we can proceed to the south, without further fuss or loss of time."

"What of Anaxagorus and Snoutworthy? Should they not join our circus act?"

"Well, perhaps." Dogbold cocked his head as if considering the pros and cons. "Why not, after all? I assume they are well-behaved and clean animals, who play their instruments with expertise?"

"Naturally. And the others?"

"What others?"

"Much of the orchestra was recently disbanded, as you know. Some have preferred to return to nest and burrow, but there are two violins, a flute, the first and second trumpet and the drummer who wish to carry on! We are counting on you to be our new impresario." Hopscotch led Dogbold into the glade, where a group of animals were gathered around Snoutworthy the pig. Snoutworthy stepped forward, bowed to Dogbold, and oinked.

"Snoutworthy thanks you for helping to save his life," translated Hopscotch.

Dogbold returned the bow. "You are welcome. I understand you play the cello?" Snoutworthy squealed several times.

"Snoutworthy is making reference to his interpretation of *Tinkler's 6 suites for cello solo*, which was so well received at last year's gala concert."

Dogbold bowed again. "A fine accomplishment, no doubt."

Hopscotch now addressed the other animals: "Fellow musicians, this is Dogbold! Dogbold is a fine fellow, and a personal associate of mine, who has agreed to replace Farfalou as our impresario and band leader! Unlike Farfalou, who kept us in cages and gave us no cream supplement on Sundays, Dogbold will take us on a world-tour, where we will gain fame and fortune." Hopscotch turned to Dogbold. "Dogbold, here are our violinists, Winky and Trixy." A pair of badgers stood up on their hind legs and bowed. "Nestor; our flutist." A squirrel wriggled his nose. "Second trumpet: Alcibiades." A crow, identical to Anaxagorus but whose spectacles were attached with a blue ribbon, made a solemn bow. "This is the drummer; Schmooph." A small shaggy dog hopped up and licked Dogbold's hand.

"Anaxagorus you already know." Anaxagorus nodded gravely.

Dogbold made a polite bow.

Dogbold surveyed his new orchestra. But something was missing. "Where are your instruments?"

There was a muttered conference of grunts, squeaks, chitterings, squawks and meowings. Hopscotch addressed Dogbold: "The instruments are back at the manse of Farfalou."

"Ah well," sighed Dogbold. "We must procure instruments elsewhere."

Hopscotch flicked his tail. "It is not so simple. Our musical talents are the result of Farfalou's magic. This magic fades, and must be renewed at regular intervals."

Dogbold's heart sank. "But I am no magician!"

"Never fear! Farfalou's magic is not his own! He gets it from a book, which resides in the music room. You must take possession of this book." He indicated the other animals: "At the same time the instrumentalists will recuperate the tools of their trade."

"What! Pilfer the manse of Farfalou?"

"It must be done. Without renewal, our talents dissipate and the music fades. But never fear; we will help you!"

"A great reassurance," muttered Dogbold. "But what of Farfalou? Will he not object to pilfering of his books and instruments?"

"It is true that Farfalou fabricated our instruments but, by right, they belong to us; he made them for us, and we are the ones who play upon them. As for his book; how did Farfalou himself come into possession? It is a point shrouded in mystery. Your right to ownership may be as good as his."

Dogbold was unsure he followed this reasoning, but a basic point was clear: if he wished to become impresario of an orchestra 'extraordinaire', he must penetrate Farfalou's private premises, and abstract certain "chattels and appurtenances"; as he ruefully imagined a judge describing the items in question.

As he mulled over the pros and cons of the situation, the rash on his arm suddenly caused him a violent itch. He scratched, but to no effect. Remembering the priest's anti-itching ointment, he took the paper box from his pocket, opened it, and extended a finger to gather a dollop.

At the sight of this, all the animals set up a clamor, and Hopscotch screeched out: "Watch out! Don't touch!"

Dogbold drew back his finger. "Why not?"

"It's the nasty stuff Farfalou fabricates for that tricky priest!"

"What is it?" asked Dogbold, drawing back his finger.

"A specific to provoke itching rash! Farfalou tested his formulae on us, until he obtained maximum efficacy. He sells it to the priest, along with the antidote, which is, naturally, much more expensive."

"I see," said Dogbold, carefully closing the box. "In fact I was given this ointment free of charge . . ."

"Even at that price it was too expensive . . . but wait!" cried Hopscotch. "I see how we may pilfer Farfalou in tranquillity, and at the same time gain vengeance upon him for his misdeeds, but we must act before sunset!"

The animals led Dogbold back to the manse. Keeping out of sight, they circled around to the shelter of a copse which commanded a rear view of the magician's residence. The back wall of the old fortification had been removed to create an open court which now served as kitchen garden. Linens were hung out to dry on a line strung between a pair of quince trees. At one extremity of the court a crude shed leaned against the wall.

"That is the latrine," explained Hopscotch. "Each evening before dinner, regular as clockwork, that's where Farfalou goes to do his business. The ointment must be applied to the where it will do the most good; Farfalou will then prefer to spend the next hour soaking his fundament in a tub of antidote! Madam Farfalou will remain in the kitchen, to keep the soup hot. During this time we can confiscate at our leisure."

The badger violinists took the box of ointment, scampered to the shed, entered, emerged a few moments later, and returned to the copse.

The orangy sun was settling in the sky, its lower limb showing a tinge of mauve. Beams of light, passing through the gaps between the branches of the trees, sploched the grey stone walls of the manse in patterns of gold and lapis lazuli. Smoke rose from the kitchen chimney. Dogbold could smell barley, lard and carrots; a fine soup! Dinner was almost ready.

Farfalou emerged from the house and marched across the garden, elbows wide, beard jutting stiffly forward. He entered the shed. After an appropriate

duration he reappeared, and made his way back across the garden. As he crossed the onion bed he paused, nose held high. He frowned, as if remembering something unpleasant. He scratched himself with one hand. He scratched himself, more vigorously, with both hands. He twisted around, pulled down his trousers, and inspected his hind parts, where a ring of rash was clear to see. He gave a cry of dismay and rushed back into the manse.

Losing no time Hopscotch led the troop forward, with Dogbold bringing up the rear. They entered the manse by the same door as Farfalou, and set off down a corridor, which twisted and turned in a confusing manner. They went up and down stairways and passed through several chambers, some of which seemed identical, as if they were passing twice through the same rooms. But Hopscotch led the way with confidence, and Dogbold decided his impression of wandering in circles was an illusion. They came to a stout oaken door, bound in iron straps. Above hung the head of a stuffed Fakkoshair, boasting six tusks.

"Open the door," directed Hopscotch. Dogbold undid the clasps, and pushed. The door gave way with a great creak. Dogbold advanced, and found himself in a large chamber of confusing aspect. Light came from three small arched windows high in the western wall. Shafts of orange light crossed the shadowy upper regions, illuminating the floating dust. Along one wall were cages of all sizes and shapes, equipped with hay bedding, and water troughs. Their doors hung open, and all were unoccupied. Along the opposite wall was a complex cupboard of many niches. Here, each carefully hung in its own niche, were miniature musical instruments of fine and curious workmanship. Elsewhere were work benches and shelves, stacked with the tools and materials of the instrument makers' art, as well as heaps of musical scores and a tumult of unclassifiable bric-a-brac. Dominating the room was a low stage, equipped with oddly shaped little chairs, and miniature music stands. To one side was a lectern, on which rested a massive book, bound in wood. Traced upon the floor, between the lectern and a squat pedestal standing near the wall, was a complex set of lines in various colors. The masonry behind the pedestal showed signs of recent repair.

The animals followed Dogbold into the chamber, crowded to the cupboard and, with squawks and cries,

claimed their instruments. Anaxagorus indicated the heaps of scores on the shelves with an extended wing, and cawed at the other animals. The badgers took their violins and seated themselves up on the stage. They raised their bows as if to play, but then seemed to forget what they had intended to do, and sat rigidly. Dogbold, even in these dangerous circumstances, would have been curious to hear their music, but Hopscotch led him to the lectern.

"There is the book; take possession!"

It was no ordinary libram. Dogbold took hold of one end of it with both hand and managed to lift it a few inches for a brief moment.

"I can never carry such a monster!" he complained.

"Never mind! Tear out the page of spells, that will suffice."

The cover was carved with the words:

*Bestiolari Melomanae*  
FOLOWITZ TINKLER  
*hoc fecit*

Dogbold lifted it back. On the first page no spell was in evidence. In fact the whole beginning section seemed to be an illustrated guide to the design and fabrication of musical instruments adapted to the morphology of paw, claw, and mouth parts of various animals.

"Where is the magic?"

Hopscotch leapt up on the lectern and scrutinized the book. "Farther on, no doubt." Dogbold turned more pages to discover an anthology of musical scores, mostly adapted from the masters, but which included original works by Tinkler himself, notably a suite entitled: *Dances for Man and Beast*, including: *Tarantula Tarantella*, *Hobo Hodown*, *Çorilla Çavotte*, *Caper of the Clowns*, *Salamander Sarabande*, *The Bellhop Hop*, *Boa Bourre*, and *Janisary Jig*. Dogbold leafed quickly past.

"Wait!" cried Hopscotch, "this is our repertoire!"

Dogbold shook his head. "From now on you must make do without."

"What? You are not suggesting we abandon the classics!"

"You must play with inspiration and invention" muttered Dogbold turning more pages. "You must improvise, or write tunes yourself..."

"The classics are the foundation of all serious art!"

remonstrated Hopscotch, but Dogbold, turning pages, made no reply. He came, at last, to the final page; here was the magic: words and symbols indited in several colors of ink, with illuminations picked out in gold leaf. He carefully tore it from the binding.

"Now, lead us away!" he said, looking up from the lectern. But the sight that greeted his eyes was discomfiting; the animals had lost their focus. Instruments lay abandoned on the floor. The pig had returned to its cage where it drank water from its trough. The squirrel had scampered up the shelves and was perched atop a stack of precious woods. The badgers were huddled together in a corner. The dog sniffed at Dogbold's foot. Each crow had found a perch, and Anaxagorus' spectacles were set at an odd diagonal, while those of Alcibiades hung off his beak, dangling at the end of the blue ribbon.

"What is happening?" asked Dogbold.

Hopscotch, an edge of panic in his voice, explained: "The spells have run their course! Farfalou was renewing them, it was this morning, when he fumbled the . . . szhe . . . soogh . . . mew . . . meow, meow!" The kitten looked up at Dogbold in alarm, then batted at the torn page to indicate the *Syllable of Song*.

"I must perform the spell so you may speak?" asked Dogbold.

The kitten nodded forcefully. He leaped from the lectern and scampered to the pedestal, still signaling frantically with paws and tail.

Dogbold set to work deciphering the magic. Above were cautionary instructions; below, a diagram. The latter was a syllabary in the form of a cross; a column of *ten* syllables intersected at the eighth position by *seventeen* others . . . Dogbold bent forward to trace out the diagram and explanations. The first *six* syllables, with their tones and prolongations, served to attune the local ambiance to Rilly, an antic quanticle of the Green realm; the *seventh* oriented the vector of puissance to Melotopia, a certain agglomerative—or village—of Rilly. These were references Dogbold failed to comprehend. The *eighth* defined the exact species of melomania sought. Tinkler had provided seventeen choices: tuba, harp, xylophone, and all the rest of the instruments, including voice, each marked with a clarifying illumination. The *ninth* syllable was a standard durative. Worms had chewed away the bottom of the page so that the *tenth*, the fixative, was no longer fully

legible. As for the durative, a note, written in saffron ink, cautioned against mispronunciation:

*Warning! Errance verging to alveolar explosives dilutes intentionment to chitterings and gigglings, while velar fricatives provoke rogue release of un-shaped Rillian expuissance.*

The latter error, in all likelihood, had caused the explosive damage to the manse earlier that day. Care must be taken in the matter of pronunciation!

Having understood the process, at least in a rudimentary manner, Dogbold hurriedly read out the spell; to no effect. Hopscotch made negative signals, tapping at his head and closing his eyes. Dogbold understood; the spell could not be read, it must be memorized, and then pronounced. He set to work, but the task was not self-evident. When he tried to take a syllable into his mind, it seemed to slide away and dissipate. He would gladly have put off the effort until later. Looking up in frustration he said: "Let us take our leave, while there is still time! We can deal with this obdurate magic later on."

But Hopscotch did not respond. He sat immobile, looking at Dogbold with a troubled expression. Not knowing how to leave the mazelike manse without guidance, nor what other course to adopt, Dogbold again fixed his attention upon the spell, and after several abortive attempts finally managed to insert a single syllable into his mind, and then a second. The syllables veered and trembled inside his skull, filling his brain with a clash of ringing harmonics. And the more he inserted, the more troublesome they became; squirming and wriggling like live-things. Dogbold clutched at his head to keep them from slithering out his ears, and tensed his throat against the repeated attempts of syllable *four* to worm down his neck into his torso. When at last all were lodged in his brain, and marshaled into a semblance of order, he tried to call them out. But now, in sheer capriciousness, they resisted leaving his mouth! Dogbold, using all his powers of calculation, herded syllable *one* into his mouth, and ejected it bodily by pushing with tongue and biting with teeth. To avoid a second nip, the syllable lept forth and sounded.

And so it went. One by one, with great effort, he expelled them, as Hopscotch looked on, eyes wide and staring. Each syllable, once spoken, insinuated itself

into the air, which began to twist and thicken.

The *fifth* syllable was particularly troublesome. Each time Dogbold forced it out, it seeped quickly back between his teeth. In the end he had to clamp his mouth shut, and wait until it had dissolved thoroughly, a matter of some minutes. During this time, to Dogbold's consternation, Hopscotch seemed to lose interest in the proceedings.

From the corridor came the sound of footsteps and a commotion at the door. A gravelly voice, trembling with menace, spoke: "What goes on here?"

Dogbold turned, to find himself face to face with Farfalou the magician. Farfalou's eyebrows were extrodinarilly long, and his eyes were like a pair of smoky lamps. His gaunt face was clenched into a mask of rage. His lower parts were wrapped in a dripping cummerbund. With one hand he scratched vigorously at himself, while in the other he held a barbed knout of black leather and iron. Without difficulty Dogbold apprehended the use to which the magician intended to put this dire implement.

In a spasm of mental effort Dogbold ejected syllables *seven* and *eight*. Farfalou advanced, lifting his knout. Dogbold raised his tongue against his palate, and called out syllable *nine*, distorting the sound into a velar fricative. It burst from of his mouth out into the now syrupy air, and generated a pulse of amber darkness. The pulse flickered about in the Rillian medium, orienting it into a single direction and accumulating potentitive velocity. Then, in a sudden gush, the spell slid past the kitten and slammed into the wall. The masonry was projected violently away, opening a gap into the garden.

With a yowl of rage Farfalou aimed a blow at Dogbold's head. Dogbold lunged for the opening in the wall, still clinging to the page of magical syllables. Hopscotch leapt from the pedestal and scampered into a corner, where he crouched. For an instant he peered at Dogbold, as if noticing an insect in flight, then abruptly lay down and began licking his paws.

Accidentally crushing a tiny brass trumpet under his boot, Dogbold gained the opening and sped out into the garden, now illuminated by the setting sun's last rays. Behind came Farfalou, who stopped in the breach, watching Dogbold sprint across the meadow. Without change of expression, Farfalou began calling out the dire syllables of *Hammaker's Masholium*. Dogbold

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stopped in dismay and turned; better to face his destiny than be transpierced by deadly magic from behind! He drew what was left of his sword, and brandished it defiantly. Farfalou intoned the final effectuating syllable.

At this moment Snoutworthy, perhaps planning an evening stroll or a final chew of fresh meadow grass before bedtime, crowded through the breach, toppling the magician backwards as he spoke.

The forces of the Masholium were liberated, but their trajectory had been wrenched askew. Ragged stabbing shapes caromed above Dogbold's head with a sound like steel sliding on steel. They crashed into the tree behind him, sheering away the leaves and setting the naked branches aflame. Stray morcelettes of expuissance shot out in random directions. One caught Dogbold in the face and knocked him over. Another cut through the great page from Tinkler's *Bestiolarum Melomanae*, dissolving it into a white dust which floated off on the evening breeze.

Shaking his head to reorient himself, Dogbold scrambled to his feet, and ran. He did not pause to enjoy the tranquil gloaming in Frengi's glade, nor did he stop among the rocks for a twilight tryst with the sphinx, whose opinion of Dogbold's comportment was thus further eroded.

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