
The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

No.9, August, 2001

Published with Cosmopolis No.17



Castle Keaen

Illustration by P. Rhoads

The Zael Inheritance, Chapters 17, 18 and 19	
by Tim Stretton	2
Tergan, Chapter 8	
by Till Noever	12

Copyrights are owned by the respective authors. All rights reserved. The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement is published in cooperation with *Cosmopolis*, and edited by Joel Anderson and Paul Rhoads. The CLS is devoted to showcasing literary work in any form, including

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

The Zael Inheritance

Chapter 17

Lamarck's period of leave had expired and he returned to the office. He felt that he had been away for a long time, although it had in fact been a mere three weeks. It was well known that a sojourn off-planet had this effect; Lamarck sourly thought that this had been part of Rolando's plan in removing him from the scene. A dose of Corinth perspectives might make him a little less inclined to be obstreperous over his removal from the Zael case.

As he strolled towards the Tower of Commerce, only slightly late, he wondered whether Rolando's design had been successful. His attempts to make progress on the case in Stellapolis and Moir's Town had not been satisfactory. He had embarrassed himself to no purpose at the Manse of Tranquillity, and while Smederevod's testimony might be of peripheral value, it hardly constituted a major breakthrough in discrediting Laura Glyde's story, let alone the wider problem of finding the true Taslana Zael.

It was in this sombre mood that Lamarck arrived at his office. Voorhies looked drawn and tired, and although she evinced a routine enthusiasm at seeing him, she was listless and distraught. Rolando was not in the office at all: he had left Lamarck a roster of new cases requiring his attention, the usual Contracts mish-mash of missing persons, faithless partners plus a couple of Revenues Department frauds. The Chrysopolitan authorities did not employ detectives of their own; if they suspected malfeasance they engaged Pangalactic to ascertain the facts. Lamarck had some expertise in these financial cases and he was not surprised to see two added to his inventory.

Lamarck spent the morning reviewing the case files on the screen before him. None of the assignments was stimulating and he soon found himself eager for lunch. Voorhies was rarely at her desk, but when she returned Lamarck accosted her.

"Kate, could you force yourself to lunch at Casimondo's?" he asked.

Voorhies looked harassed. "I don't know: I ought to stay here in case anything turns up."

"Such as? Nothing has 'turned up' in a month. An hour at Casimondo's is unlikely to blow the case. And Susifer has your com code anyway."

Voorhies sighed. "I suppose you're right. Somehow I haven't felt much like Casimondo's recently."

"All the more reason," smiled Lamarck, "to step down there now. I might even have some news on the Zael case for you . . ."

In deference to Voorhies's oppressed schedule, the glaxes took the auto-tram down to the waterfront. It was a rare overcast day and the clouds loomed gloomily low over the water. Voorhies was sullen and not disposed for conversation. Even the presence of Achernar tree-snake on the menu did little to improve her spirits.

Lamarck was not one to bear feminine ill-humours in silence. He tucked into his cloned beefsteak with zest and remarked:

"Is it me? Or is the whole of Chrysopolis equally under your disfavour?"

Voorhies looked up sadly. "I'm sorry, Geir," she said. "Things haven't gone well while you've been away. We've made almost no progress on the case, and Rolando is . . . and . . ."

"I begin to understand," said Lamarck. "I'll make a deal with you: tell me what's been going on, and I'll throw my small discoveries on the table. If nothing else, I can give you some advice on dealing with Rolando."

Voorhies smiled weakly. Lamarck thought again how tired she looked. Her porcelain complexion always had a fragile aspect—an entirely false one—and today she seemed on the verge of fracturing into countless pieces. Voorhies only functioned adequately after a good night's sleep, and Lamarck suspected that repose was presently elusive for her.

"We seem to have made no progress while you've been away. We have been carrying out checks on Laura Glyde's background on Heimat while you've been away. Central record-keeping on Heimat is very lax—they have some nonsense about it infringing civil liberties—and getting the information to prove that Laura Glyde was alive on Heimat before Taslana Zael disappeared is proving surprisingly difficult. Whether that's coincidence or something more sinister I don't know."

Voorhies had grown in vigour as she marshalled the facts. Lamarck decided that there was nothing amiss other than frustration over a stubborn and important case.

"What about the publicity campaigns?" asked Lamarck.

"Responses from those have dwindled. We've had no new claimants for a week, and we don't even get many purported sightings now. We have to admit that the sensopics have failed."

The sensopic campaign had been Voorhies's idea, but she faced its failure squarely. Her tongue-twister sat before her untouched, though. She wasn't enjoying recounting all this; justifiably enough, thought Lamarck. He ought to take some satisfaction in the degeneration of a case he had been sacked from, but seeing Voorhies so affected he suppressed the thought with only a token struggle.

"That leaves Laura Glyde," said Lamarck, conscious both of a trepidation and a sudden tension in the conversation.

Voorhies smiled ruefully. "This is not an area where you are popular at the moment. She is still claiming to be Taslana, of course. Narosyn has put a manslaughter case before the Judiciar: but the Judiciar won't put it before the courts—and do you know why?"

Lamarck laughed. "Because there's no evidence and she's innocent. The judicial system of Chrysopolis protects the liberties of the citizen against overzealous policing."

"Not quite," said Voorhies, who could not repress a smile. "The Judiciar won't pursue the case because of your testimony. He says that if the only eyewitness, who happens to be a Pangalactic officer, gives evidence as slanted as your statement, he has no chance of a conviction."

"He's right," said Lamarck.

"The only offence Narosyn can go with is illegal possession of an instanarc gun. They're holding it in reserve, but really we've got nowhere with her—and I'm afraid they blame you for that in the Management Suite."

"So be it," said Lamarck with affected unconcern. "When will they realise that they can do more with Laura Glyde than pin an irrelevant infraction on her? I maintain she is your *only* link with Taslana Zael: but

no-one knows how to use her."

Lamarck was suddenly intense. "Except me . . . Kate, I was cracking her. Can't you see that now? She is no use to us locked up in the Anastasia."

He drained his tongue-twister with a theatrical flourish. Voorhies said:

"Geir, let's not have this argument again. Rolando has made his decision and I think it's the right one. If you can think of anything to help with the case, I'll be grateful; but it's too big a risk to put you back in with Laura Glyde again."

"Rolando!" said Lamarck with some scorn. "Where is he now? He has botched this case from start to finish. Corinth will have his scrobs."

"He is a worried man, that is certain. They say that Allaiao Gazmend is strongly displeased at the lack of progress, even that he is coming to Chrysopolis to demand explanations in person. Heads will roll, Geir."

"Including mine," said Lamarck wryly. "But somehow I think that will happen regardless of the outcome of this investigation. You are safe enough: the Board will settle for frying Rolando."

The conversation moved onto Lamarck's visit to Corinth. Voorhies shared Lamarck's low opinion of the value of what he had uncovered but was in no mood to crow.

As they returned to the office, Voorhies said, "You ought to give Nina a call. She is scared out of her skin. Since Dr Mamoulia was murdered, she has a round-the-clock guard until she cracks the DNA mask, which she hasn't yet. I don't think she's too happy with you, either."

"Who is?" asked Lamarck. "She has no cause for complaint."

"That's not how she sees it: you never told her how dangerous the Glyde sample was, you let Dr Mamoulia's killer escape, and you didn't even ask how she was after the attack or say goodbye before you went offworld."

"Ah, well," said Lamarck genially. "Some work required on the customer care skills, eh?"

"I don't know how you can treat her like that," said Voorhies. "What did she ever do to you?"

"She wanted to take over my life," replied Lamarck flippantly. "What more could she have done?"

Voorhies shook her head. "She *loved* you! Is that so awful?"

Lamarck compressed his lips. This was not a conversation he wanted to have.

"Aren't you being melodramatic? This isn't the synopsis."

Voorhies smartly pressed the stop button on the auto-tram. "I'll walk the rest of the way," she said, and quit the vehicle with a flourish that Lamarck could not help feeling was distinctly overdone to one who was familiar with Laura Glyde's exits.

The next few days passed slowly. Voorhies was sullen and uncommunicative, while Rolando remained away from the Tower of Commerce, attempting, if rumours were to be believed, to forestall the arrival of Allaiao Gazmend on the planet. Lamarck pursued his new cases without enthusiasm. Voorhies had agreed with Rolando that a meeting would be set up between Laura Glyde and Smederevod as soon as the latter arrived on Chrysopolis.

Lamarck was aware that he really ought to talk to Nina, who was still immured behind round-the-clock security attempting to crack the screening process used to disguise Laura Glyde's DNA sample. Partly from perversity, and partly from a general disinclination, he deferred making the call. He realised that in his current mood he would be unlikely to provide an emollient presence.

Chapter 18

Events began to move with rather greater pace during the next week. Rolando returned to the office, where he announced to Voorhies that his attempt to persuade Allaiao Gazmend to remain on Zael's World had proved unsuccessful. Gazmend was coming to Chrysopolis as soon as his schedule permitted, and was likely to demand an immediate reckoning. Rolando was edgy and irascible; his florid complexion took on a deeper hue than normal, and he reserved particular scorn for Lamarck. Voorhies, despite her lack of progress, remained comparatively in favour.

Lamarck was scrolling idly through the files of one of his financial cases, attempting to prove that the services of an escort agency had been funded from revenues more properly attributable to Chrysopolitan Fiscal Affairs Bureau, when his comlink pealed.

"Lamarck," he rapped.

"Prime Apprehensor, it's Andreas Smederevod. I am at the Bonaventura Hotel. At your convenience I am available to help on the matter we discussed."

Lamarck was instantly alert. He had not, he realised, expected Smederevod to leave the seclusion of Moir's Town to undertake this fool's errand.

"We need to speak to our claimant to arrange a suitable time and venue. I will call you back and have someone collect you."

"Could you come yourself, Prime Apprehensor? There have been certain events since our arrival that cause me uneasiness."

Lamarck reflected that he was not supposed to be involved, even peripherally, on the case. His eye was caught by the tedious transactions schedule on his comscreen, and his doubts sloughed away.

"You may rely on me, Mr Smederevod. I will be in touch shortly."

Breaking the connection, Lamarck sauntered over to Voorhies's desk.

"Smederevod is here," he said. "You'd better arrange to get Laura Glyde in."

Voorhies looked up coolly. "Thank you. If you tell me where Smederevod is staying I will administer everything. You may return to Fiscal Affairs."

"Not yet," said Lamarck. "Smederevod will deal only with me. He is distrustful of conditions on Chrysopolis."

"Don't think you're going anywhere near Laura Glyde," Voorhies responded. "If you want to bring Smederevod here—a waste of everyone's time anyway—feel free. But don't imagine you have any role to play in resolving this case."

Lamarck shook his head in genuine puzzlement and dismay. "I don't know what has got into you, Kate. It's not like you to hold a grudge—and even less characteristic of you to close your mind to evidence."

Voorhies coloured. "As to grudges: act like a fump and you'll be treated like one; and as far as evidence goes, show me some and I'll look at it. The only interest Pangalactic ought to have in Laura Glyde is for infractions against Chryso-politan law, and Narosyn can handle that."

"Just fix the meeting with Laura Glyde, Kate. Leave the proper smarsing to folk with more open minds."

Rolando, who had appeared unnoticed, interjected at this point. "I was waiting for you to finish your argument. Since I only have fifteen years until retirement it occurred to me that I could not spare the time," he said.

Lamarck shrugged. Voorhies looked embarrassed but still annoyed. Rolando addressed himself to Lamarck.

"Geir, you are not supposed to be involved in the Zael case. I allocated you a new tranche of cases, and according to the files they are still all outstanding. Rather than interfering in Voorhies's cases, I suggest you return to your own."

"But you're all missing the point—"

"Enough! Allaiào Gazmend is in Otherspace even now. In a matter of days he will be here—and he won't want to listen to how much time you've wasted on a side issue. Since Smederevod is here we'll talk to him and put him in with Laura Glyde. But remember this: your obsession has unbalanced our entire investigation, a fact that will be remembered at the end of it."

"You were acquiescent enough in the beginning, and if you'd had faith in my abilities we might still have got somewhere."

Voorhies, who had been chastened and silent, now intervened. "Sir, I think you are too harsh on Geir. We all agreed that—"

"Shut up, Kate!" cried Lamarck, spinning to face her. "I don't need your help, and if I had it would have been useful a damn sight earlier than this."

Voorhies was open-mouthed at the vehemence of Lamarck's assault. She was not one to take rebukes lightly, but before she could return Lamarck's fire, Rolando stepped between them.

"What is happening here?" he demanded. "Not only did you use to be my most successful team, you were the most harmonious. Lamarck, I can only assume you would enjoy a period of suspension; Voorhies, you have better things to do than wrangle with a glax who isn't even working your case. I'd suggest you start by contacting Laura Glyde."

"Yes, sir," she said, and called up the Anastasia's comcode on her screen.

"Lamarck," continued Rolando, "you have your cases: return to them."

A little later Voorhies walked crisply over to Lamarck's desk. "I have spoken to Laura Glyde," she said levelly. "Can you have Smederevod here for fifteen?"

Lamarck nodded. "I will taxi him in and leave. You cannot have less desire for me to meet Laura Glyde than I have myself."

"Let's not argue again," said Voorhies. "Can't we just get this case over and forget it ever happened?"

"You tell me," said Lamarck. "I'd better get over to the Bonaventura and pick up Smederevod."

There was no response to Lamarck's comlink call to the hotel. It was hardly reasonable to expect the Smederevods to stay shut up in their rooms all day, he thought, so, leaving a message with the hotel management in case they returned, he set off in an auto-tram to pick them up.

The Bonaventura was a consciously modern hotel; pointed and narrow. While it did not cultivate the deliberate exclusivity of the Anastasia, it was by no means cheap, and was normally patronised by offworld business folk and the like. Lamarck arrived and presented himself at the reception.

"Prime Apprehensor Lamarck, Pangalactic," he announced crisply to the pert young woman at the desk. "Has Mr Smederevod accessed his message yet?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. He had a visitor just after eleven and he has not accessed his messages or gone out since. I believe his visitor is still with him."

Lamarck's instincts immediately protested at this scenario. "Did you see the visitor?"

"No, sir," replied the girl, whose name, Lamarck

noted, was Xariste. "I only come on duty at twelve. The screen for Mr & Mrs Smederevod's room shows that we signed in a Mr Hax who has not yet left."

The more Lamarck thought about this the less he liked it. Smederevod had been on Chrysolopolis for three hours; he knew no-one on the planet; he had owned to uneasiness during their conversation; and now he admitted a stranger to their room for some two and a half hours. Things were clearly not as they should be.

"Xariste, can you page them again? It is very important that I speak to Mr Smederevod if he is there."

"Of course," said Xariste. After a pause: "There is no response, sir."

Lamarck nodded. He had hardly expected one. "Can I go up?" he said. "I am concerned that there may have been a mischief."

Xariste's eyes widened. Her fingers stiffened involuntarily and her hard purple nails scraped on the shiny marble desk-top. Recovering her composure she handed over a molecular key.

"Room 816, eighth floor."

"Thank you," said Lamarck. "I may be over-reacting; say nothing to anyone yet."

Xariste nodded, secretly thrilled by the potential drama unfolding to dazzle her tedious employment.

Lamarck left the airlift on the eighth floor and looked cautiously around. The red-carpeted corridor was empty, as one might expect during the early afternoon. After striding along to 816, Lamarck pressed the attention peal. As he expected, there was no answer. He pushed the molecular key against the lock pad to deactivate the locking mechanism and slowly pressed the "open" button. As the door slid back Lamarck stepped back out of the way. If "Mr Hax" was still around Lamarck wasn't keen to walk straight in on him.

There was no noise from within the room. Lamarck cautiously stepped into the doorway, his pulse-gun in his hand. The main room seemed empty. Lamarck walked around the big double bed which obscured part of the apartment from his view; then he saw that it wasn't empty. Andreas Smederevod was there; but he wasn't going to be helping Voorhies with her enquiries. Not in this incarnation, anyway. He had been shot, once, in the head with an old-fashioned projectile weapon. These guns were, as every sensopic addict knew, the choice of the self-respecting profes-

sional assassin. Although they didn't have the rate of fire or sheer destructiveness of a pulse-gun, they were held by some to be more accurate, and required more skill to use. A professional assassin made a statement when he used a projectile weapon; it was a statement that Andreas Smederevod had been unable to refute.

Lamarck knew without stepping closer that Smederevod was dead and that he had been that way for some time. It seemed unlikely that "Mr Hax" was still around. Understandably enough under the circumstances he had not signed back out at the reception desk when he left.

Where was Falumella Smederevod? According to Xariste, she had been in the room when Hax came to call; it was scarcely credible that the assassin had let her go on her way. The door to the cleansarium was closed. Lamarck jerked it open and leapt back on the slight chance that Hax was still concealed within, but even as he leapt away he saw this was not the case. There was only one person in the cleansarium, and she was neither Hax nor alive.

Falumella Smederevod had evidently put up more of a fight than her husband. From her state of partial undress and the tub of water beside which she sprawled it seemed that she had been about to take a bath when Hax had appeared. Lamarck could imagine her hearing the shot and looking for some means of escape. She had been alert when Hax entered the cleansarium and had evidently dodged about enough for more than one shot to be necessary.

One bullet had shattered the mirror; another had made a mess of her abdomen; the third, mercifully, had killed her outright before the slower agonies of the second had had time to set in.

Lamarck closed the door and went back into the main room. Glaxes became inured to violent death; nonetheless Falumella's corpse was a thing of vastly greater horror than her husband's, and Lamarck preferred the company of the latter.

He called up Investigations on his personal com, and was put through to Narosyn. "You'd better get down to the Bonaventura. I've got a couple of chills, and they're linked to the Zael case. Tell Voorhies and get her to stall Laura Glyde, too."

"I'll be there myself. You're keeping me in a job these days," said Narosyn, rubbing his potato of a nose, and broke the connection.

Lamarck considered the fate of the Smederevods. He had brought them here on what Rolando and Voorhies considered little more than a whim; and now they were dead, grotesquely so. He thought of Falumella flirting with Peppingen only a fortnight before, of Andreas reading *King Lear* in the sun with fourteen year-old Taslana Zael. Some glaxes, he knew, dealt with the horrors they saw by denying the humanity of the corpses before them. Lamarck had never picked up that knack, and maybe had never wanted to. He always tried to see the dead as individuals, believing that this attitude made it easier for him to get into the cases behind the bodies. One way or another a glax became hardened, but it was more difficult when you had known the "chills" before they cooled. While not feeling active guilt, Lamarck acknowledged that his agency had been partly, if innocently, responsible for their deaths. But only one person was truly guilty: "Mr Hax".

Some half hour later a group of glaxes headed by Prime Apprehensor Narosyn and augmented by Apprehensor Voorhies appeared. Lamarck dispassionately gave his statement to Narosyn, who sent his underlings away to interview any of the hotel staff who might have evidence to contribute.

Lamarck sat in a comfortable armchair while Voorhies examined the apartment. Medical and forensic personnel carried out their abstruse rites. Lamarck and Voorhies looked at each other warily from quarter-glances. Finally Voorhies said to Lamarck:

"Somehow I think Narosyn will be wanting a few more questions with Laura Glyde."

Lamarck reflected for a moment. "She would, initially at least, appear to have a motive to have Smederevod killed. In a couple of hours he would have denounced her story."

"And she was the only person, outside of Pangalactic, to know that he was here."

"Yes—but when did she find out? Only you and Narosyn have been dealing with her; Narosyn knew nothing about Smederevod's arrival. That leaves you: when did you mention it to her?"

"When I arranged the meeting this morning: about twelve."

"As I thought," said Lamarck. "Hax came up here at about eleven: I assume that Smederevod had been dead

for the best part of an hour by the time you spoke to Laura Glyde."

Voorhies silently pondered this. Lamarck continued:

"How did she react when you asked her to come in and see Smederevod?"

"Surprised at first, and then uneasy. Both understandable reactions given Smederevod was likely to undermine an already flimsy story still further."

"Assume for a moment," said Lamarck, "that somehow she knew Smederevod was on his way. Presumably she also knew that she could not fool him; immaculate as her nano-surgery is, and however thorough her research, she could not expect to convince someone who had known the original Taslana as well as Smederevod. Fair assumption?"

"Of course. So to stop him exposing her she has him killed."

"This is where I find the logic hard to follow," said Lamarck. "Having Smederevod killed would be a big risk; she would have known that she would fall under immediate suspicion. What is the worst that could have happened if she'd left him alive? He'd have said, 'That's not Taslana Zael.' So what? The bio-tests will show that in the end anyway. His testimony would not even have been the most powerful evidence against her; indeed I wonder how important it would have been in court."

"I agree," said Voorhies, "that it wasn't a necessary or even sensible move. But she is panicking, over-reacting. That's understandable: we have the squeeze on her and she knows it. To expect all of her conduct to be cool and rational under those circumstances is to miss the point."

"Maybe. But Laura Glyde *has* been cool and rational throughout. Losing her head like that doesn't seem consistent to me."

"She lost it on the waterfront, and a man died."

"That was different," said Lamarck. "She was under physical threat. What we're talking about today is psychological pressure: and one of the few things that we agree on is that she is extraordinarily resistant to that."

"Who else had a motive to have Smederevod killed? It had to be someone who could not afford to have Laura exposed," said Voorhies. "If it wasn't done at her instigation, it was done by her syndicate. "Mr Hax" sounds very similar to the man who killed Dr Mamou-

lian and shot you. Both killings fit the same motive: to suppress firm evidence that Laura Glyde is not Taslana Zael.”

Lamarck paused. “Suppose we are looking at this the wrong way. What if they are not trying to stop us proving that Laura is an impostor, but simply that they’re trying to *delay* it? They must know that we will crack the screen and make the whole Smederevod testimony irrelevant. What damage could Smederevod have done them that wouldn’t have happened anyway? Only this: it would have exposed her *sooner*. For some reason the syndicate needs to prolong our uncertainty.”

Voorhies smiled and sat on the bed, oblivious to the corpse only a couple of feet away. “Why can’t you always be like this?” she asked. “When you want to be you are such a good snoop. You always have a different angle.”

“I have had a ‘different angle’ on Laura Glyde all along: but you and Rolando won’t let me develop it.”

Voorhies shrugged. “Going back to your original point, it leads to the question: what advantage could the syndicate derive from the scheme you’ve outlined? Why do they want us to think that Laura Glyde is Taslana Zael when they know we will eventually prove she isn’t?”

“Two theories, it seems to me,” said Lamarck, all animosity towards Voorhies forgotten in the pursuit of a solution. “First is one we’ve already considered: Laura Glyde sues us for obstructing her suit and gets all the evidence heard in Chryso-politan Probate Court. If at that stage we can’t prove that she’s not Taslana and we can’t produce our own Taslana, she has a good chance of winning. The suit will be decided on the balance of probabilities by a jury: she’d come across well with a jury, and given a decent attorney you might easily back her.

“The second theory: they are setting up Laura as a decoy. While we’re concentrating on her, they’re looking for Taslana themselves, and have distracted us. If that’s their strategy they’ve been very successful: more than they could possibly imagine, given the squabbles and infighting we’ve had.”

Voorhies pondered Lamarck’s theories. “The first strikes me as more likely,” she said. “Initially I thought she had no chance of success, but now I am not so sure. If she could have convinced you—and to me that looked a distinct possibility at one point—then she

must have had a very good chance. It’s the same principle as the killing on the waterfront: the Judiciar won’t prosecute there because he knows your testimony will undermine his case.”

Lamarck smiled. “It is the nearest we have come to a convincing explanation. It accounts for Laura’s conduct, it accounts for Dr Mamoulian’s death and the two murders today.”

“What it doesn’t do,” said Voorhies in frustration, “is get us anywhere nearer the real Taslana. Laura Glyde is a side issue.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Lamarck quietly. “Suppose our theory is right. It’s an expensive, high-risk strategy, and it’s one that was ready for implementation right from the start of our investigation. Would you have done that if you’d thought the real Taslana Zael was going to step forward? I don’t think so: you’d have moved only if you knew she was dead—maybe if you’d killed her yourself, even—or you had certain knowledge that she wasn’t going to declare herself. If that’s a sound assumption - and it appears one to me—*then whoever is back of the Laura Glyde conspiracy knows the truth about Taslana Zael*. QED. Maybe even Laura Glyde herself knows.”

Voorhies stood at the of window the Smederevods’ last apartment looking down into the street below. “You make it sound so convincing,” she said. “I wish you were still on the case.”

“It’s largely thanks to you that I’m not,” said Lamarck dryly but without rancour.

“True,” she responded with an embarrassed smile. “But Rolando was so firmly behind the judgement that nothing I said could change his mind—even if I thought that was a good idea, which I don’t.”

“Come on. We’ve seen enough here,” said Lamarck, walking towards the door. “Did you tell Laura why the interview was cancelled?”

Voorhies shook her head. “I told her Smederevod had been unavoidably detained,” she said with a bleak smile.

Lamarck could not resist an answering grin. “Not an inaccurate account: I think you ought to expand when we get back, though. After you,” he continued as they approached the lift entrance.

Chapter 19

At the end of his shift Lamarck returned to his apartment and sank into his massage-chair. It had been a long and draining day. The sensopic news had as its second story the murder of the Smederevods. The story made the connection between Smederevod and the Zael biography but had not thought at this stage to ask what the couple had been doing on Chrysopolis. Narosyn was on the bulletin informing the reporter that "a number of leads were being followed but no arrest was imminent." If Mr Hax could be tracked to ground then Narosyn would do it; Lamarck had always found him a solid and reliable glax. Hax was either a member of the Chrysopolis underworld or an offworld assassin. In the former case the glaxes' informants would soon know about it; the latter was clearly likelier, and made for a more difficult investigation. The Pangalactic database was a powerful tool, though: it would be able to identify everyone meeting the specified physical parameters entering Chrysopolis legally; and undetected entry to any major planet such as Chrysopolis was highly unlikely.

At the end of the news story was a résumé of progress on the Zael case. Recently the media had lost interest in the investigation, but the topicality of the Smederevods' deaths made it once again newsworthy. The reporter considered that the trail had gone cold on Taslana Zael, and that the likeliest outcome was that she had died soon after leaving her home planet.

Lamarck was bored and dispirited. A long bathe in the cleansarium and an early night beckoned, he decided. As he rose from his chair the peal of his comlink sounded.

Voorhies, he decided, since they seemed to be on speaking terms again.

"Lamarck," he said languidly as he touched the "receive" button.

"Geir!" said the quiet but urgent voice of Laura Glyde.

Lamarck felt a shock whose exact nature he could not determine. He could not remember how long it was since he had spoken to Laura; it seemed simultaneously an eternity and a microsecond.

"Well? Are you going to say anything?" she continued. She was sitting close to her comscreen and her

face filled the entire viewing area. She looked tired but her eyes had their usual vivacity.

Lamarck recovered his composure. Twisting himself into a more upright posture in his chair he said:

"The first thing I'm going to say is that I'm not supposed to be talking to you. I'm not working on the Zael case any more and I'm a witness to the waterfront killing for which you are being investigated. I can't think of a legitimate conversation we could have."

Laura displayed her crooked smile to Lamarck for the first time in several weeks.

"You never seemed to me like a glax who did things by the book. Added to which, I've seen the sensopic news, as I'm sure you have. I know Andreas Smederevod is dead, and I know you were on Corinth. It seems to me that you have something you ought to be telling me."

Lamarck pursed his lips. "I wasn't aware that I had to keep you informed of our investigations, especially ones of which you are the subject. I can hardly resist observing that Smederevod's death would have been somewhat fortunate for any Taslana Zael impostor, though."

Laura was silent a moment. She wasn't smiling. "Geir, I need to see you. Don't tell me you aren't allowed to, just come over here now."

Lamarck laughed. "Talk to Voorhies if you have anything to say."

"Voorhies is dogmatic. She is not prepared to credit anything I say. Geir, listen to me: you have one hope of cracking this case, and that hope is me. Cut me off, and you cut off your way out."

Lamarck pondered. He knew that all calls in the city were routinely monitored; Laura had articulated the very debate he and Voorhies had had earlier in the day. He could prove by reference to the recorded call the soundness of his motivation. What did he lose by going along with her?

Laura continued. "I know that you are not popular with your hierarchy at the moment either. If you listen to what I'm going to tell you, you can regain some of the kudos you have lost."

"I'll be there in an hour," said Lamarck. He was conscious that he was not acting sensibly; but the time for being sensible, he reflected, was long past.

Lamarck changed into a dark suit, and made sure that his pulse-gun was fully charged and picked up a couple

of other useful accessories; violent events seemed to attend Laura Glyde. He toyed with the idea of calling Voorhies, but he knew what she would say, and decided that imagining it would be equally instructive as enduring it and considerably less wearisome.

Only slightly late, he alighted from the auto-tram at the Anastasia. Striding across the foyer, he noted that the head clerk, Festig, was not on duty. He showed his credentials to Festig's deputy, and sprang up the stairs. Pausing outside the door, he was conscious of an unsettled feeling in his stomach. Understandable enough, he thought: if the evening went wrong there was a good chance he would end it suspended or worse.

He knocked with a confidence that he did not feel. After a short pause the door opened and Laura Glyde stood before him. Lamarck felt a curious inner wrenching.

"Geir!" she said softly. "Thank you for coming."

She motioned for him to enter the room. She was wearing a black low-necked dress, belted at the waist and rather longer than current Chrysopolitan modes. The expanse of smooth white skin around her collarbone was adorned by a simple gold chain which drew his eyes down to the neckline of her dress and beyond.

"Does anyone know you're here?" she asked, with what Lamarck felt was transparent eagerness. Unfortunate, he thought, that so attractive a woman was so manifestly mendacious.

"Yes," said Lamarck. "I notified the office I was coming."

This was true in a sense, he thought, since he had agreed to the meeting over a comlink he knew was tapped.

As she poured two tisanes she had been preparing, she said with a smile, "You don't trust me very much, do you?"

"No," said Lamarck dryly.

Laura laughed outright as she sat down. "I suppose I haven't given you much reason to."

"There is an easy way to overcome that," said Lamarck as he sipped his tisane—a variety he had not tasted before. "Tell me the truth: all of it: now. I understood from our com conversation that you had some such intention."

Laura settled back in her chair. "Sometimes you have a very linear mind. Immediately you launch into the Kate Voorhies school of investigation which has

brought you to your present state."

"You might enjoy this sparring; I don't," said Lamarck, suddenly nettled. "Today I found two innocent people lying in their own blood, and plenty of it. That wasn't pleasant; now I have to decide the exact degree of your complicity in their deaths; that is hardly enjoyable either."

"I didn't know they were on Chrysopolis until Voorhies told me; by which time, I understand, they were already dead."

"I'm not saying you killed them yourself; but friends of yours surely did. The question for me is: did you know about it? Did you even order it?"

Laura stood up. "Geir, I've given up telling you I really am Taslana Zael because I realise you won't believe me until you have to; but it's true, and that means that I knew Andreas Smederevod. He meant a lot to me when I was young. I'm sorry about the girl, but I never knew her. Andreas was different."

Lamarck said nothing. Laura continued. "He was one of the only people who seemed to care about me when I was a girl. I hadn't seen him for over ten years, and I thought his book was disloyal and a betrayal, but I can't believe he's dead. Not like that."

"Do you want me to tell you what 'like that' really means?" asked Lamarck harshly. "How Falumella Smederevod tried to escape? How it took three shots to kill her? What her last moments must have been—"

Laura turned to face him, her eyes blazing. "I didn't do this! Not directly, not indirectly. Don't think you can shock me into blurting out my complicity, because there is no complicity. I had nothing to do with it! Andreas was an old friend and I'm sorry he's dead. Believe that or not, as you choose."

She sat down quietly. "Why is this happening?" she said, more to herself than Lamarck.

"You know that better than I do," said Lamarck softly. "This is an adults' game and maybe you didn't know that when you got into it. All I can say to you is what I've said before, and I know it's a cliché: honesty is the best policy."

Laura looked sadly at Lamarck. "Honesty? What good does that do?"

"There are times," admitted Lamarck, "when it is counterproductive; but something tells me this isn't one of them. Laura, you know I don't—can't—trust you, and you know why. So if there's to be any trust, it

has to come from you. There is no reason for you to distrust me.”

Laura looked into Lamarck’s face. “No,” she said. “Believe me when I say I trust you as much as I trust anyone. I just don’t know if even that’s enough.”

“When I was on Corinth,” said Lamarck after a pause, “I didn’t just see Smederevod. Just outside Stellapolis there’s a— facility. When I was there I saw a woman very like you. Hauntingly like you . . .”

Laura looked away. “The Manse,” she said flatly.

Lamarck nodded. “You know who the woman was. You can see how she might have been once, but now . . . It was a harrowing visit. By all accounts she hadn’t been a likeable woman: but you wouldn’t have wished this on her. They told me she wasn’t lucid too often; well, she was when I met her. There was only one thing which seemed to animate her in our conversation: her daughter. She thought I had come to tell her something had happened to Taslana and she went off the scale. They had to sedate her and that wasn’t very nice either: there is nothing ‘sedate’ about the process of sedation.”

Lamarck stopped. Laura was gently sobbing. Wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, she said barely audibly: “Go on.”

“There isn’t much else to say. I just thought how poignant it was that she didn’t know what happened to her daughter. What a mercy it would be if at the last she could know the truth about Taslana.”

Laura’s face was turned away. “Do you know the worst part?” she said. “The more I show that this is affecting me, the more you’ll think I’m a callous actress scheming on other people’s misery. I can’t do this! I can’t do this!” she wept.

Her face was buried in her hands. Lamarck was unsure how to proceed. If Laura Glyde was an actress, she was a damn good one. His instincts told him that her distress was genuine: but how could it be?

“I’m sorry,” he said, and he was, although he didn’t know why. He touched her shoulder lightly. Before he knew what was happening she was in his arms with her head on his shoulder.

“Laura . . .” he said, trying to disengage himself.

“Don’t say anything,” she said almost silently. “Don’t do anything.”

Lamarck realised that he had no wish either to say anything or to do anything. Sitting on the sofa he gen-

tly held Laura against him. Unconsciously he was aware that this was scarcely rational conduct; he kept this perception in his unconscious.

Lamarck was uncertain how long they remained immobile on the plush furniture. On some level he felt there was something both right and inevitable about this; he also realised that neither Rolando nor Voorhies would look upon events in quite the same light.

Softly he stroked the hair which Voorhies had characterised as “mousy”. Laura looked up. “Are you going to kiss me?” she asked with a half-smile.

“No,” said Lamarck, “I—”

“I think you are,” she said, and pulled his face down to hers.

Lamarck returned her kiss with a passion whose existence startled him. He looked into her astonishing eyes and he was lost. If he was going to do this, he might as well do it properly . . .

* * *

Tergan

Chapter 8

A week of unseasonal, blustering rains and gales had come and gone. It left behind roads flooded with rivers of mud, a swollen Lake Teela, and bog-like pastures. In the major cities, though it had swept the dust from cobbled streets, it had also caused congestion of the inadequate drains, and brought rats and sewage pouring along the streets, bringing disease and an occasional death to those city dwellers who had to live in the filth. Now that the winds had died down, the cities reeked of ordure and decay.

Despite this, when the early rays from Caravella fell on the glistening roofs of Sacrael, they bounced off in all the colors of the rainbow, and in the slanted light from hundreds of thousands of shingles the steam rose up from in swirls that climbed into the crystal clear morning sky, only to vanish into nothingness, as if they had never been.

From the gates of Castle Sacrael emerged an unusual procession. At the head two mounted heralds, carrying the banners of the state of Tergan and the Junco dynasty. Behind them rode ten guards in the gold-blue-and-green uniform of the king's personal guard; men specially selected by Silas himself for the task of guarding the king on his journey. Then came Hengiste, riding a horse, shunning the foppish alternative of a carriage. Behind him trailed Toffel—with very muted enthusiasm. Toffel had no taste for horseflesh, but neither had he any choice but to follow Hengiste's lead.

Behind the king and his Councillor followed another ten guards, while the tail of the procession was made up of two covered wagons carrying Hengiste's valet and groom, as well as a selection of members of the lower servantry, whose duties would include cooking and attending to the king's needs if and when such requirements arose.

The procession continued along the Avenida of Kings, to the great astonishment of the citizenry, who collected along the roadside to watch their monarch

pass by to destinations beyond their ken. It then passed through the eastern outskirts of Sacrael and presently found itself on the muddy Orgond Road.

Hengiste considered the backs of the dozen men preceding him. Already the clean uniforms bore splatters of brown mud. In another hour the mud would cover them completely. To think that he had to look forward to six days of this did not enhance his outlook on life. He could be sitting in his study and look out across the city instead of at the rears of a dozen horses, one of which chose this moment to void a portion of the contents of its intestine.

—

Almost a hundred miles away from the procession, at the Junction Inn, a pigeon delivered a message. The inn's owner, a certain Ilk, spied the little bird alighting on the roof, where it proceeded to strut along the cages, inspecting and communicating with the birds held captive in there. He climbed up to the loft and would have taken the message band from its leg, had Franz, who was on lookout duty for such just an event, not anticipated him. Ilk made as if to protest, but then sensed the presence of certain of his current guests not too far away. He backed away hastily and pretended that the whole affair had never happened. Penner, the only one of the fivesome who could read, took the message from Franz and proceeded to decipher it.

The five withdrew to a place outside the inn where they discussed the contents.

"He'll overnight at Pruid Far," Penner told them. "On the next day they'll try to get here. I doubt that the old fool will have the stamina, but that seems to be the plan."

"Which means that we'll do it at Mercy Boulder," Koreeth said.

Penner grinned. "Even if they leave Pruid Fair at the break of dawn, it'll be late afternoon by the time they reach the boulder. They'll be tired, bored, and sluggish, thinking only of rest and more rest."

"When do we leave?" Koor wanted to know.

Slik laughed. "No need to wear ourselves down by waiting all day long."

Penner agreed. "We'll leave mid-morning. That'll give us more than enough time."

—

From the battlements Delfis watched Hengiste and Toffel depart the castle. There they went, to their deaths. Thinking they had years ahead of them when it was two or three days at most. If he hadn't despised Hengiste as much he might have felt sorry for the old fool.

Delfis turned away to go speak to Tamar, when he saw that someone else also had been watching the departure. And not just that, but Delfis as well.

How long had Sander been standing there? What secret motives and designs lurked behind the high forehead?

Delfis paused in his progress. "A pleasant morning," he said to Sander.

"Indeed," the Councillor agreed. He looked at the receding procession. "Designs and desires," he said softly. His gaze returned to Delfis, who felt an inexplicable frisson of unease that ran like an icy finger along his spine. He was suddenly uncomfortably aware that he was alone with a man whose intentions were a total mystery to him and who exhibited an unhealthy air of physical competence. Involuntarily he took a small step backward. He could not be sure, but it appeared that Sander's mouth twitched with the tiniest indication of amusement.

"Who knows what the future hold, eh?" Sander smiled, but his eyes stayed cold.

Delfis' discomfort increased. Was the man a mind reader?

"There he goes," Sander said, nodding in the direction of the departees. "To make himself the ruler of the Valley. Do you know how many have Tergan kings have attempted this feat?"

Delfis indicated his ignorance of the matter. Anything to keep Sander talking, rather than thinking of maybe launching Delfis over the parapets.

"Eight during the last five centuries," Sander elaborated. "That means just about every one of them. With the notable exception of Koën—who had more brains than the rest of them taken together." He grimaced. "Unfortunately his children turned out to be bunch of degenerates who seem to be intent on making all the mistakes their father was at pains to avoid. And with the dynasty exterminating itself at their leisure, it seems like the other branches of the family might yet

take over where Koën left off." He chuckled siccantly. "Not that they're any wiser than the current batch—but it should be interesting watching them try their hand, don't you think?"

Why is he telling me this?

"You have some . . . interesting ideas," Delfis said cautiously.

Sander laughed softly. "Just making light conversation, Councillor Delfis." He stepped aside to create a space for Delfis to pass. "You'd better return to the princess and tell her that the king is on his way."

What did he know?

Delfis gave Sander a quick nod and squeezed past him, careful not to touch the other man. As he walked away he could feel Sander's eyes on his back like a prod with a sharp stick.

Sander watched Delfis depart. The smile on his face disappeared. He could not be sure, but something—maybe *sabér*—told him that the death of Weltig, like the rescue of Pandrak and Zygie, might have unexpected repercussions. If his informants were correct—and he had reason to believe that they were—Delfis had communicated with at least two significant miscreants about a week ago. Sander did not allow even for the possibility that these meetings were of minor consequence. One did not hire Penner and Attick for trivial reasons.

Was Hengiste a target?

Conceivably.

Was he, Sander, going to do anything about it?

Of course not. The truth was that Hengiste's demise would be very convenient. One more hurdle out of the way. And all of that without Sander having to bend a finger. Maybe fate or whatever providence prevailed in the cosmos was working his way.

The procession passed out of sight around a bend in the Avenida of the Kings. Sander turned away and made his way back to Evadne. He found her in her quarters in a state of what he diagnosed as 'four-walls-disease'. She needed to get out. The last week had been oppressive. Gray skies had always made her irritable, and a week of it had taken her to a state of enhanced edginess.

"Mylady," he suggested. "The day is going to be pleasant. Caravella burns away the moisture and warms the air. I would suggest an extended ride in the

country, possibly along the Oban Path. It is said to be especially beautiful and green after extended rains.”

Evadne agreed without argument and hurried into her vestiary to change. She was, Sander thought, very eager indeed to get out of her room and the halls of the castle. He summoned the new abigail by means of the bell-pull. The woman, a certain Odily, was about Arguitte’s age, plumper of stature, not half as agreeable in mien or looks, sharper of mind, more observant, and definitely in Silas’ employ—coming, as it were, from his list of suitable candidates. Not that Silas would be under any illusion that either Sander or Evadne were not aware of this fact. However, Sander suspected that this didn’t bother Silas in the least. And why should it, if it was more or less what was expected?

Odily responded to the summons with alacrity. Sander communicated her lady’s intentions. Odily was taken aback.

“Sir, I must tell you—I’ve never . . .” she stammered.

“Don’t tell me you cannot ride,” Sander said.

“I . . . I can’t.” Odily’s face exhibited a measure of panic. “Horses . . . they are so . . . big!”

“Well, you’ll be glad to hear that I wasn’t going to make you come anyway.”

Odily stared. “But, sir . . .”

Sander chuckled. “Don’t you think I can keep an eye on her?”

“Sir, I . . .”

“Do not concern yourself unduly,” Sander told her. “I just told you what the lady was going to do so you would not concern yourself when you found her absent from her quarters.”

Odily was going to say more, but Sander’s shake of the head shut her up. He motioned her out of the room, reflecting that she would communicate with Silas immediately, and probably cause the spymaster to dispatch at least one operative to keep an eye on Evadne and Sander during their outing. Since Silas’ spies would have told him that they were going out anyway, it didn’t matter much. Better to announce the matter openly and pretend that one didn’t care.

Evadne returned from the vestiary in a gray riding outfit. Highly unsuitable of course for a woman—and even more so for a princess!—since she wore semi-loose pantaloons instead of a riding skirt, together

with a blouse and above it a fine long-sleeved jacket of thin suede. Sander was not displeased; for what he had in mind, a woman riding in a woman’s fashion would have been quite unsuitable.

Still, even this outfit would not do.

“You look like a daring noblewoman or princess going out for a ride,” he said.

Evadne raised an eyebrow. “Then indeed I appear to be what I am.”

“True enough,” he admitted, “but would you ride through the city—for traverse it we must, unless you wish to use a carriage—and have everybody stare at you, and adjudicate your comportment, bearing, manner of riding, skill in handling horses, hair style . . .”

“Enough!” she exclaimed. “You’ve made your point. But what would you have me do? Wear a beggar’s clothes? The truth is that I have nothing that would *not* betray me for who I am.”

Sander admitted that he had not taken this possibility into account. “However,” he said, “a solution will come to me. Let us proceed to the stables where we’ll arrange for horses, and maybe a temporary disguise for you as well.”

The stablemaster’s eyes went round as he saw who had entered his precinct. As Evadne looked around herself Sander communicated his requirements. The stablemaster, who knew Sander well enough and owed him several favors, hastened to comply.

Sander called him back, and leaned close to the man’s ear. “Kaarl, I have another request. We’ll not be using a carriage—but the Lady Evadne is keen to remain unknown as she rides through the streets of Sacrael.”

The stablemaster cast a glance over Sander’s shoulder at Evadne, who stood several steps distant. “Indeed,” he murmured confidentially, “this outfit she’s wearing, it does not hide who she is.”

“Exactly.”

“Any woman on horseback will attract attention. It is a man’s thing to ride, and only noble ladies and those of deviant disposition would assume otherwise.”

“Your counsel then?”

Kaarl flicked Sander quick glance. A Councillor asking for counsel?

“I’m not certain she’d . . . appreciate . . . my suggestion,” he muttered uncertainly.

"I'll deal with it," Sander promised him.

Kaarl looked relieved. "If she could wear something over these clothes to hide that she's a . . ."

"Female?"

"Just so. A cloak with a hood, to hide her face, maybe." He looked at Sander. "And you might be advised not to look like a Councillor either."

Sander grinned. "I have no intention of looking like that," he assured the stablemaster. "Can you procure me a cloak for the lady? A clean one preferably?"

"I was thinking of a rain cloak."

Sander nodded. "If it's clean it will do."

Kaarl hurried off. Sander approached Evadne and broached his suggestions. After some resistance she agreed, though she was convinced that she would look 'positively ridiculous', a notion he was unable to talk her out of.

"Stop trying to make me feel better!" she told him firmly.

"How can you look 'ridiculous' when nobody will know who you are?"

She scowled at him. "There's a flaw in your logic, though I must confess it eludes me."

Sander smiled. "It shall be as you wish. If you think you'll look 'ridiculous' then the world will no doubt comply."

"Now you're being insolent!"

"I beg Mylady's pardon," he said, but he knew that he fooled her not one bit. Still, she allowed the matter to rest.

The stablemaster returned with a gray hooded cloak, made from thin, but densely woven, threads of untreated dacra-wool, making it relatively light and yet highly water-repellent. Sander sniffed and inspected it and found it to be well-used but clean.

"My wife's," Kaarl told him. "It's barely dry after the rains of the last few days."

Evadne displayed little enthusiasm for the garment.

"It smells."

"That's just the smell of the wool."

She yielded when she discovered that Sander was not going to come up with anything more to her liking. Meanwhile Kaarl had saddled two horses, taking care to select those which combined appearance and sense of enterprise with controllability. To Sander's horse the attached saddlebags holding victuals and water.

Evadne approved of the choice of mounts, as did

Sander who discreetly handed Kaarl two silver coins.

"There's no need . . ." the stablemaster began.

"Take them, buy your wife a new cape, and be quiet," Sander said, not unkindly. "Especially about the details of just happened here," he added. "If anybody asks, invent something plausible."

Kaarl grinned, pocketed the coins, and disappeared. Sander deposited his Councillor's tunic over a partition in the stable; then he and Evadne mounted and rode out. The guards at the gate allowed them through without a challenge. As yet Evadne had not drawn the hood over her head and they recognized her easily enough.

"Mylady." The sergeant on duty bowed, as did his three subordinates. Evadne acknowledged their action with a gracious nod, before riding out of the gate with Sander trailing her by half the length of a horse, as was appropriate. But as soon as the guards were out of sight he pulled up level with her.

"The next street on the right," he said. "And you'd better pull that hood over your head."

Evadne grimaced but did as he'd suggested.

They gained the freedom of the Sacrael Peninsula without attracting too much attention. By the time they were outside the city boundaries, Sander had long identified the two men following them. Now they hung back, such as not to be seen—which was comparatively easy as Oban Path wound its torturous way through the low, densely forested, hills of the peninsula. As long as the pursuers avoided a direct line of sight they were safe.

Evadne, Sander noticed, was oblivious of such trivia as spies. She had pulled the hood off her head. Her whole attention was focused on the surroundings. Despite all attempts by Caravella, the old beech woods which covered this part of the peninsula grimly hung onto their moisture. Oban Path, passing through the thickest of these forests, was still muddy from the rains, and the leaves brushing past them wet their faces and clothes. Caravella cast sharp flickering motes of light through the canopy. A rich scent, sweet with the blooms of the seasons, wafted through the trees.

Sander hung back again, allowing Evadne the freedom to be bound by the spell. He watched her from behind as she walked her horse, not bothering to duck the wet leaves, and occasionally even allowing herself the unusually frivolous act of batting at them,

so that they showered her with a burst of rain. It was, he reflected, something that she'd had far too little of; always cooped up inside the castle or its immediate environment. Outings like this were rare and usually carefully orchestrated, with Evadne in a carriage, and an abigail and guards for company.

Finally she seemed to remember who and where she was. She turned around and looked back at him. A cautious smile, almost as if she expected her innocent behavior to generate disapproval and censure. Sander smiled back. It wasn't difficult to be genuine about it. Her mood was infectious and despite the two spies at their back he was almost happy.

"Why don't I get to do this more often?" she wondered.

Sander guided his horse closer to hers. "You are now."

Evadne took a deep breath, gazed around her, and finally focused on Sander. "Why have you taken me out here?"

Was he imagining it or was there a hint of flirtation here? The air and environs seemed to exert an interesting effect on her.

"To give you a taste of freedom," he said.

"Freedom? To do what?"

"Whatever it is you want."

"What I want? Ha! What I truly want I can never do. And you will not help me. So—how can you say what you said?"

"Killing your cousin for what he did to you? Is that what you're thinking of?"

"It is my dearest wish."

Sander nodded thoughtfully. He prodded his horse to pass by her and looked back. "Follow me," he said and kicked the animal's flanks. The horse bolted and galloped off.

"Hey!" he heard her shout behind him.

He looked back, saw her sitting indecisively, then urging on her own animal, finally kicking its flanks as he had done, and setting it into full pursuit. Sander hoped that he hadn't been wrong about her riding abilities, because if he had . . .

He concentrated on his progress around the windy track which narrowed as they got further away from Sacrael. Glancing over his shoulder he saw that she was following apace. Her handling of her own mount was quite adequate. Sander smiled to himself and

urged his own horse to greater speed. The animals' hooves kicked up the muddy soil of the track and peppered him with brown spatters.

There came a point where the track entered open countryside. The forest was left behind, and the track wound through a giant field of broken boulders that looked like the leftover of a battle between giants who had used the rocks as missiles. The track here was rocky and dry. Sander slowed down his horse. Evadne did not. She caught up with him and with a small exclamation of triumph surged past him, taking the bends with very little space to spare.

Sander muttered something to himself and followed her at increased speed.

The track wound down the slope and presently merged into the gray sand of a long beach, running along the northern side of the Bay of Woe. Sander gave his mount full rein and caught up with Evadne. For a few breaths they raced neck on neck.

"They need rest!" he shouted at her. She shook her head, her eyes wide and excited, her face flushed from the wind and the exertion.

Sander transferred control of his own horse to his right hand and reached out with the left for her reins, taking them in a firm grip. Evadne glared at him, but he shook his head and, by some miracle managed to stop them both without mishap.

"They need rest," he repeated gently.

She was breathing hard. For a moment her eyes flashed her anger, but then the fire cooled.

"Let's trot them to those boulders," he said. "They need to warm down."

They stopped at an irregular string of rounded, man-high boulders reaching from the hills down to the water's edge. Sander dismounted and offered his hand to Evadne. She took it and jumped down; discarded the cloak and threw it into the sand.

"Phew!"

"Indeed." Sander turned his attention to the horses who stood, their sides rising and falling with their heavy breathing. He bent down and checked their flanks, legs, hooves. All seemed to be in order. He patted the animals, removed their saddles, and tied small lengths of rope to their reins, before leading them along the row of boulders to a group of straggling bushes surrounded by grass. He tied the ropes to the bushes and returned to Evadne, who had watched

his activities with interest.

"My father always said that man who doesn't look after his horse cannot be relied upon for anything," he told her.

Evadne nodded thoughtfully, but said nothing. She gazed along the Bay of Woe to where it opened into the Limpic Ocean. Long swells came in through the opening, cresting taller in the shallower waters of the bay, until they finally broke in small explosions of hissing thunder on the beach before them.

"I wish a ship would come and take me away from all this," she said suddenly. She turned around and looked at him. "Away from the schemes and intrigues; from my murderous family; from Gervase; from the memories; the pain."

Sander nodded. "That would be a useful thing. But we *are* our memories and everything that has gone before—and if we didn't have that then we wouldn't be who we are."

"Maybe I don't want to be who I am," she retorted. "Maybe 'Evadne' should be lost somewhere at sea, never to see the light of day again."

"Don't say that!" he said with more vehemence than he had intended.

She looked at him with astonishment.

"What I mean, Mylady . . ."

"Don't 'Mylady' me! When you say that it sounds like an insult—or a condescension as one might offer a child. You *say* 'Mylady', but you don't *think* it!" She gave her head a vexed shake. "What *do* you think, Sander of Orgond? What do you think of *me*?"

"The truth?"

"That would be appreciated!"

"I think," Sander said, choosing his words carefully, while still trying to be sincere, "that you are a remarkable woman who has had the misfortune to have been terribly mistreated—and that I wish I could figure out a way to help you to heal all those open wounds." He shrugged. "But, alas, that I cannot do."

"What *can* you do?" she wanted to know. She swept her arm in an arc, indicating the hills, the ocean, the boulders. "Why have you brought me here?"

"It is as I said," Sander told her.

"To show me freedom? What kind of freedom?"

"Of the open spaces maybe?" he said. "When people stare at walls and confinement all their lives their minds tend to become just as confined." He

motioned toward the ocean. "You said that you wanted a ship to come and take you away? Is that what you really meant? Wasn't it really that you looked at the endless ocean and suddenly saw no boundaries?—that your mind yearned to encompass that endlessness?—to let it take you away?"

She regarded him with a mix of puzzlement and inquisition. "You still haven't told me what I wanted to know."

"What is that?"

"What you truly think."

"I have . . ."

". . . offered me evasions. Always evasions. Hints. Allusions. Oblique references. Riddles about my mind. But never what I really want to know."

"Maybe it is better if you don't."

"Don't you think that *I* should decide that? Or do you not think me capable of making such decisions?"

Sander grimaced. "I consider you capable of a great deal—maybe more than you think yourself. But I am the one who knows what I know; and so I also have to make decisions—and one of these is that certain things have to remain secret until the day that . . . well, the day that they need to be a secret no longer."

Evadne leaned against a boulder and regarded Sander from underneath her long eyelashes. "Of the two of us, I don't know who's more alone in this world."

"You may be right."

Evadne looked around at the hills, then back at Sander. "Do you know that we're being observed?"

Sander chuckled. "Not very good, are they?"

"Silas?"

"Who else?"

"Our chaperones." She smiled.

"Guardians of propriety."

"Shall we give them something to report?"

"What did you have in mind?" he asked guardedly.

Evadne laughed. "Oh, come, Councillor, I would not do *that*."

Sander allowed himself a sigh of relief. No, not Evadne.

Evadne stopped laughing, her face suddenly pensive. A quick glance in his direction. A speculative set to her mouth.

"What then do you suggest?" He wondered what was on her mind right now..

Evadne's mood changed back to mischievous. "We

could do something . . . unexpected.” Her eyes danced. Maybe, he thought, his ‘treatment’ was working better than he’d dared to hope for.

“Let’s . . . how about we just . . . oh, how about a . . . race? On foot! From here to that rock over there.”

Was she serious? Dignified Evadne chasing along the beach like a little girl at play? Was it possible?

There was only one way to find out.

“Why not?” he said and bent down to take off his shoes.

—

She’d never thought that she could beat him, of course—and when she did it was by the length of a nose and only because he hadn’t really tired. She told him as much.

Sander’s face was studiously innocent. “Why should I do such a thing?” She noted that he did not outright deny it.

“Because I’m a princess and you’re a . . .” She broke off and shook her head. “Forgive me. It was a petty and unfair thing to say. You have no need to fawn and cower or curry favor with me. You did this because you’re . . . gallant.”

Sander chuckled. “Gallant? Ha! There’s an attribute nobody’s ever dared to hang on me.”

“Don’t deny it! False modesty does not suit you.”

“Modest? Who?”

“You really don’t like it if people say good things about you, do you?”

“People see what they want to see,” he said evasively.

“And sometimes some people, the clever ones like me, see what’s really there,” she said, “and all your dissimulations and evasions will not hide the truth.”

He regarded her with a rueful expression. “I fear you have the better of me, Mylady.”

“I told you not to call me that!”

“I beg your pardon.”

“Granted,” she said graciously. “This time. Don’t ever use ‘Mylady’ with me again. At least not when we’re alone and you don’t have to play the submissive underling. Keep it up for appearances by all means, but spare me the insult when we by ourselves. I shan’t take to it kindly.”

He took a deep breath and nodded. “As you wish.”

“I do so wish,” she declared with finality.

“Shall we see who gets back first?”

“No cheating this time!”

“I’ll try not to.”

“Try harder.”

As expected she lost. But the sight of watching him run in front and away from her, the muscles of his back playing under his skin as his legs pumped away, was worth losing. When they reached the boulders she made quite sure that she averted her eyes for fear of giving away her clandestine voyeurism. But maybe if they could race again . . .

Two more laps. She could look all she wanted.

What am I doing?

Who had asked that? And who was the stranger who had taken over her being and made her do . . . this? Take off her shoes and even . . .

Play crazy games like she were a little girl and Sander some handsome lad who’d happened her way.

Who are you?—What are you doing in my mind?

Or maybe she didn’t really want to know. Maybe she liked what the stranger was showing her, as bizarre and outrageous as it was.

She opened her mouth to shout at Sander; ask him to tell her what was going on inside her. But no words came—and when she leaned against the rock beside him, panting for breath and dizzy with the thrill of it all, she lost her nerve, and so she didn’t ask, no matter how much she wanted to.

—

“They did *what*?” Silas refused to believe such an absurdity.

“They raced each other,” one of the men before him confirmed, while the other nodded his assent. “First on horseback, and then of foot.—Twice!”

“On foot . . .”

“The Councillor disposed of his shoes and shirt,” the man said, scandalized despite all the things he’d seen in his grim life.

“The Lady also removed her shoes—and her jacket,” his companion added.

“They . . . did nothing . . . else?” Silas was waiting for the coup-de-grace.

“They sat down and ate and drank. They remained there for a while. Then they rode back.”

Silas frowned. “They must have been out there for a reason! What was the *point* of all this?”

By the blank looks on their faces he could tell that neither had any better idea than himself. Which was to be expected; after all he was the one who was meant to do the thinking.

He dismissed his men with a wave and leaned back in his chair to ponder the strange, surprising ways of the Lady Evadne and her new Councillor.

—

The northern end of the Teela Road joined with the Orgond road at Pruid Fair. From Pruid Fair the Teela Road wound its way through about twenty miles of gently undulating Tergan countryside, with a few scattered farms, but being mostly left to its own devices. Fask and hypher covered the hills, interspersed with an occasional copse of cypress, pine, white oak, or maple, and maybe even an occasional solitary tika or noquo. In a shallow indentation sat Halcion Station, a major stopover for travelers along this route. The proprietors of Halcion also owned another, much smaller waystation, Teela Downs, about another twenty miles southeast along the same road. Between Teela Downs and the ancient and venerable Junction Inn—which sat on the junction of the Teela and the Lakeside Road to Orgond—stretched another twenty-odd miles of, somewhat more barren, almost flat, countryside. About halfway along this stretch the ground had spewed forth a single lump of schist rock: Mercy Boulder—the origins of the odd name having been lost in obscurity.

Mercy Boulder was surrounded by a small copse of straggly trees and bushes all of whom took advantage of the trickle of water provided by a small spring near northern side of the formation. Its position and the clump of vegetation surrounding it, made it into the ideal place for the ambush Penner and his companions had planned. The horses could remain saddled, hidden safely behind the bushes, trees, and the rocky bulk. Hengiste would be killed, the assassins would run to their horses and, before anybody had really figured out what was going on, they'd be well on their way, with the guards probably after them—but those horses would be tired from the ride, and Penner had calculated that the risk of getting caught—and killed—was minimal indeed. Which was as it should be! There was no point in running the risk inherent in the assassination of a king, if one could not live to enjoy the fruits of

one's labors.

Penner, Franz, Koor, Koreeth, and Slik arrived at Mercy Boulder some time after noon and settled themselves in for an indefinite wait. They enjoyed a hearty meal; some, but not too much, wine; and, when this was done, rested out of sight of the road, sharpening their arrow heads, testing their bows and crossbows depending on preference of weapons, shooting at fruit stuck into the crooks of branches to practice their craft. At least one of them perched on top of the rock, watching the sparse traffic flow past. A few easy pickings there were, but Penner firmly rejected Slik's suggestion that they should take advantage of being here, and rob and kill a few passing travelers in the bargain.

The day wore on. Caravella slanted toward the western horizon. The air was charged with imminence.

—

On the morning of that same day, Hengiste's party left Pruid Fair before dawn. They had a long distance to cover and dawdling was not on Hengiste's mind.

The Onidic Tavern and the Myrmidic Taproom, Pruid Fair's most expansive inns, had been selected for the king's pleasure. The owners, less than enthused because they were expected to put up the king and his entourage without any recompense—this kind of thing being reckoned as equivalent to the payment of taxes that were the king's due—did the best they could to accommodate the demands of the visitors; and heaved great sighs of relief when they saw their backs.

Hengiste, who had slept badly, as he usually did these days, was in a foul mood. Toffel, not the earliest of risers and sore all over from the previous day's ride, felt the brunt of Hengiste's displeasure and duly transmitted it to underlings who could not do anything but suffer it in silence and bend their backs to the task at hand.

Caravella rose from behind the Eastern Ranges and burned away the morning mist. The day soon turned hot and bothersome, making the guards' uniforms itch infernally, while the heralds' flags hung limply in the windless day. Hengiste encouraged a brisk pace, and Toffel thought that maybe today would be the day he died, probably from sheer fatigue and the pain in his tortured rump.

They arrived at Halcion Station well before noon. The stop was far-too-brief: barely long enough to

exchange horses, take time out for a drink and a morsel of food, and to stretch one's legs. Then it was away again for more endless hours of torture.

The beauty of the countryside was lost on everybody, including Hengiste. The king held up better than most of his entourage—having practically learned to ride before he could walk—but his mind was occupied with the intricacies of politics and mental preparations for the upcoming negotiations. What should he offer Kistof—and should he even consider keeping to the bargain after the deed was done?

Too many questions. Too many imponderables. Until he met with Kistof and was able to assess the man face to face, there was only so much he could plan ahead.

Later in the afternoon they arrived at Teela Downs, where the procedure of exchanging mounts was repeated. This being a much smaller way-stop, there were not enough suitable horses readily available. Five of the guards therefore had to continue on their old, exhausted mounts. Hengiste, who had a deep affection for horses, was not happy with the arrangement and told the guards to follow at a slower pace, in order not to kill their horses. Toffel considered objecting to the scheme but decided that he was simply too tired to care. The party left Teela Downs and continued on. The five guards followed at a slower pace, muttering among themselves.

—

Slik waved from atop Mercy Boulder. "They're here."

The mercenaries collected their weapons of preference: longbows for Franz, Koor, and Slik; long-distance crossbows for Penner and Koreeth. They clambered up the boulder and ensconced themselves in places previously selected.

Penner gave a last admonition. "We came here to kill Hengiste. Let us make sure that this happens. I, Koor, and Slik will focus on the king. Koreeth and Franz, you get Toffel. But nobody—*nobody!*—discharged their weapon until I do. Any questions?"

There weren't. The five laid flattened themselves against the rock, waiting.

—

The entourage drew nearer to the massive excrescence called Mercy Boulder. The guards were too tired to take more than perfunctory note of its existence, much less thought to scan it for a possible ambush. Toffel was immersed in his private misery. Hengiste thought about the necessities resulting from having to administer the whole of the Valley. The servants on the trailing wagon chatted among themselves. Being all men, they looked forward to a few nights of whoring in Sansker, where their wives were far away, and the servants of the baron could do most of the work looking after Hengiste.

The troop attained a point of closest approach to the boulder. Unseen by all but the eldest of the servants on the wagon five shapes raised themselves into a comfortable position. The servant blinked. His mouth fell open, but still he did not understand. And when he did, it was too late.

The heavy iron bolt from Penner's crossbow caught Hengiste in the middle of the chest, throwing him backward and off the horse. Koor's and Slik's missiles found no target, nor were they necessary.

Toffel heard a thud and saw Hengiste slide off the horse, grasping at the shaft of the bolt in his chest, an expression of sickly surprise on his face. The horse reared and ran off into the fields to their right. Toffel turned his head to look up at the boulder when a double impact from a crossbow bolt and a long-shafted arrow impaled him and threw him into the dust beside his king.

The guards milled about, shocked out of their daze. Someone pointed and shouted. Eyes followed but the top of Mercy Boulder was devoid of people. Then, from behind the boulder, the sound of horses. The guards, still struggling to collect their wits, gathered and made off for the boulder, only to find their five quarries already at a safe distance, and pulling away faster than they could follow, across the fields and toward the east.

The guards desisted from futile pursuit. Their captain shouted orders and everybody returned to the scene of the slaughter. Hengiste and Toffel were beyond help and lay in the dust of the road staring at nothing from dead eyes.

The captain straightened, looked at his men, and pondered the grim prospects for his personal future.

—

Attick gained access to the palace and his victim by the simplest of expedients: his job. For Attick was one of the three lucifactors of Castle Sacrael, and as such had not only permission to be inside, but also virtually unlimited access to every hallway and room. In his care were one hundred and sixty three oil-lamps. He attended to the installation and lighting of two hundred and eighty four candles, and was also responsible for the two 'eternal flames': situated in two small turrets at the apex of the castle, and reachable only by means of a shaky ladder-like structure affixed to the outer wall, starting at level four. Among the lucifactors Attick's position was considered somewhat of a status indicator, though the other two played it down. Between themselves though they grumbled with envy, and never missed an opportunity to try and catch him at something that might bring him into disfavor. Attick merely smiled at such efforts. Both of his colleagues were too dense to even suspect that the strange death of his predecessor had been anything but an accident, and had been helped along by Attick, who had dislocated the man from the ladder and caused him to fall to his death on the parapets below. Attick, in order to avoid a similar fate befalling him one day, did his best to perfect his climbing skills until he became as adept at it as a plains elec.

Attick had been vetted by Silas, found bright but not too bright—by virtue of careful dissimulation—and acted as an occasional source of information for the spymaster. His presence on levels two and three went almost completely unnoticed by all. Even Delfis, who had seen him on many occasions, had not recognized him during their last meeting. Out of context, out of mind; and Attick was a master at invisibility, his fleeting presence so unobtrusive and normal that those in power took less note of him than they might a painting on a wall.

As Attick polished the brass casing of yet another lamp in the main thoroughfare of level two, he reflected that the disposition of Gervase was going to be his last contract. He was getting tired of the tedium of his routine, relieved only occasionally when he took on extra work inside or outside the castle. This work had, in the past decade, provided him with a reserve of funds that really made it quite unnecessary to do any-

thing but find himself a quiet sunny spot, maybe on the fabled Isle of Greel at the southern coast of Finister, where he could spend his days in luxury—and preferably a goodly measure of debauchery.

Attick averted his face as someone passed by him.
Delfis!

The Councillor continued on, not even glancing at the figure in the gray tunic polishing away at the bulbous oil holder of the lamp. He turned left into a stairwell leading to the next level. No doubt to see that gross deformity, Tamar. Attick shook his head at the folly of men. Why anybody would want to bed her was beyond him. Now if he had his choice, he'd pick someone with some zest, good looks, and smooth skin. Someone like that haughty block of ice on level four. Attick had an idea that underneath the ice there burned a hot flame, just waiting for the right man to free it from its prison.

More footsteps. Prince Gervase, his two guards following him closely. They stopped outside Gervase's quarters, about eight paces away from him. Gervase entered. The guards positioned themselves outside his door.

Attick filled the reservoir of the lamp with oil from a container, adjusted the wick, and placed it back into the wrought iron holder. He lit it with a small oil-light which he carried with him for this purpose, and moved on to the next lamp, a few steps away. This brought him that much closer to Gervase's quarters. Attick began his ministrations to the lamp. Presently a woman came along the passage, accompanied by another guard. He knocked on Gervase's door, entered, spoke a few respectful words, and then motioned to the woman to step inside. When she was in there he closed the door, nodded at the two guards beside the door, and departed.

Attick finished with the lamp and moved on to the next. This one was immediately adjacent to Gervase's door. The guard closest to him cast him a brief glance and then ignored him. Attick went through the ritual of cleaning, filling, and lighting, as he pondered the advisability of making his move now. The time *seemed* propitious.

Two guards, Gervase, the woman.

The guards: unaware of the threat, despite his proximity. Gervase: panting over a woman's body. The woman: naked and frightened.

Three easy targets.

Now was the time.

With slow deliberation Attick replaced the lamp and lit it. He picked up the oil container and took a step. This brought him to a position directly in front of the door and halfway between the guards. He hesitated, as if remembering something. He put the container and the small light on the ground. For the first time the guard's attention flickered in his direction. Attick smiled sheepishly and made as if to turn away. The guards relaxed. Attick, in the process of turning, lifted up and reached under the front of his loose tunic and pulled out two long-bladed dirks from their sheaths, strapped there with a belt of cloth. With the speed of a striking elect he whipped around spread out his arms and plunged the dirks into the guards' chests. One of them uttered a small rasping gurgle as he slid to the ground. The only other sounds were those of their bodies slumping on the ground.

Attick wasted no time on them. He pushed the handle and opened the door. At the same time he pulled a dirk from another sheath. Carefully this time. The blade was mottled with the stains of poison.

Attick stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. He took one step toward the bed where, under covers, were the shapes of two bodies.

Then . . .

"How good of you to come."

The voice came from behind him. Attick whipped around—to face two guards with crossbows trained on him. And Silas.

"If you move you die."

Attick glanced back at the bed, where Gervase and the woman had thrown off the sheets and sat up, fully clothed, and with no apparent intention of sexual congress.

Attick faced Silas. "How did you know?"

Silas smiled. A special, extremely unpleasant, smile. "Councillor Delfis is a foolish man. To think that I would not have my spies on him like ticks on a dacia . . ." He shrugged. "Mind you, we didn't know *who* it was that climbed into his window a few nights ago. Still," he shook his head, "you have been very careless. But this is what happens after a while. You had me deceived for a long time. I must compliment you on your skills."

Despite the situation Attick had to admit a certain admiration for Silas—and Gervase. Ever since his

meeting with Delfis they must have been prepared for this moment. Patiently; persistently.

It was over. What came now he knew as well as anybody. He spared a fleeting thought for his dreams of sunny beaches and tanned women.

All gone. Alas, the facts were incontrovertible, and now he must live—and die—with them.

Gervase or Silas?

Silas stood closer. The decision made itself. Attick pulled back the hand with the poisoned dirk and jerked it forward. Silas, with surprising agility and nimbleness, threw himself to one side. The dirk clattered against the wall. The guards fired their crossbows with precision. One of the bolts entered Attick's head through his right eye. He never even knew that he had missed.

—

Silas looked at the corpse. "A pity," he said. "I was going to ask him if he knew what the others were hired to do."

"Others?" Gervase enquired.

"A certain Penner also showed up that evening. Unfortunately he has disappeared from our ken. We'd better retain our vigilance. This matter is far from over."

"Get me Delfis," Gervase grated. "And that whore, Tamar."

Through the door came five more guards, who had been waiting in a nearby room, waiting for events to unfold in Gervase's quarters. No miracle could have extracted Attick from this trap.

On a signal from Silas the five, under the command of one of Silas' trusted sergeants, proceeded to Tamar's quarters on the next level. The sergeant rapped on the door. He waited for the length of one breath, then tried to open the door, only to find it locked. He motioned to two of his men. Twice they flung themselves at the door. The second time it burst open. The guards pushed inside, only to find Delfis standing, incompletely dressed, his condition still all-too obvious, while Tamar lay on the bed under the sheet she had pulled up all the way to her neck.

"Get out!" she screeched.

The sergeant was unmoved. "You are both under arrest."

"By whose orders?" snapped Delfis, trying to put up a defiant front.

"By orders from Prince Gervase," the sergeant said curtly.

"Get out!" Tamar shouted again. "Get out or I'll have you flogged!"

The sergeant signaled to his men. Two of them grabbed Delfis and, ignoring his struggles, curses, imprecations, and threats, frog-marched him out of the room. The other two, somewhat hesitantly, stepped closer to the bed. Tamar drew the sheet even higher.

"Mylady, if you do not comply, you will be forced," he said.

"You can't . . ." she squeaked.

"Take her," the sergeant ordered.

The guards, with some reluctance, which soon vanished as they began enjoying the game, picked up Tamar, still clinging onto her sheets and lifted her out of the bed. She shouted and struggled, but to no effect. She changed her tack and pleaded with them to allow her to get dressed. The sergeant made a motion with his hand. The guards released Tamar, who stood, clutching the sheet.

"Turn around!" she shouted, but her anger was laced with fear.

"Be quick," the sergeant snapped.

"How dare you . . ." her voice faded into silence.

With the guards facing the door Tamar dressed hastily. Then they ushered her out to join Delfis in Gervase's quarters. Her nephew looked at her with a mixture of contempt, loathing, and triumph.

"Before the king returns," he said, "I will deal with you. He won't have to agonize over what to do with you."

To Silas he said. "Take them down to the dungeon. Execute them at your leisure. Dispose of their bodies where they will not be found. There shall be no funeral for either."

Tamar muttered choked sounds, but found herself incapable of forming a coherent phrase. They dragged her and Delfis out of there and through the servant's staircase took her down to the dungeon. The smells of death and fear greeting her finally drove away any notion that this was all some nightmare from which she was about to wake up soon.

Tamar and Delfis were thrown into a cell together, where they slumped against the wall. Tamar started

whimpering and crying.

"Oh, shut up!" Delfis roared.

"How can you . . ." she sobbed. Through the filth on the rough floor she crawled over to him, but he pushed her away and stood up. He went to the door and placed his mouth against the spy hole.

"I want to talk to Silas!" he shouted. And again. And again.

Finally two guards appeared. Not the usual type. Big men, their faces subtly deformed by many years of exposure to and practice of their trade.

"Silas doesn't want to talk to you," one of them told Delfis. He grinned. "But you can come with us anyway."

"Where . . ."

Without a word they grabbed him and dragged him along the passage. They entered another room, containing devices that made Delfis' flesh crawl.

"I have to talk to Silas!" he shouted. "I have something to tell him. Something very important! About the king!"

They ignored his rantings. One guard grabbed him and shoved him closer to a waist-high wooden block, bearing the marks of many cuts by sharp instruments. The wood was mottled and discolored by dark blotches and rivulets. When Delfis divined the nature of the object he finally lost his self-control and screamed, at the same time voiding the contents of bladder and bowel.

The guard, with a mutter of disgust, grabbed him by his long gray hair, and forced his head down on the block, pushing his face against the stinking wood. Delfis struggled, still refusing to believe the dreadful thing that was happening to him. Only a short while ago he had been lying atop a warm human body. Now he was . . .

No!

The guard jerked on the Councillor's hair, forcing his head into immobility. Delfis felt another presence beside him. A grunt. The whistle of a sharp-edged object cutting through the air.

--

"I have consulted with the royal documentarist, Mylord." Silas was deferential but firm. "The inconvenience is regrettable, but the law is definite and unequivocal. A Councillor may be treated with preju-

dice if treason is in evidence. It requires only one reputable witness and the consent of one such as yourself. The execution of a member of the immediate royal family, however, is not possible without the written consent from the king.”

Gervase glared at Silas for a breath or two, then turned to Jago. “You concur with this absurdity?”

Jago shrugged. “Mylord, it is the law.” He hesitated. “If I may venture to suggest a different perspective. This rule, vexatious as it may prove at this instant, also offers a much-needed element of protection against malevolent intent from relatives.”

“It is absurd!” Gervase declared heatedly. “I can have her assassinated, but not executed?”

Silas inclined his head. “That, in essence, is the situation.”

“Then go and assassinate her!”

Silas wrung his hands. “That is not possible.”

“Why not?”

“There are . . . procedures,” Silas said. “Fine points of law. Assassination is acceptable because of its execution through intermediaries and its essential detachment from the originator of the order. Third parties are involved, who execute the contract for clandestine payments.

“This, unfortunately, is not the case here. Witnesses exist to your order to have the Princess Tamar executed. This lifts the veil of anonymity, and makes you responsible for her fate. Indeed, the situation is now reversed. You are, indeed, responsible for her *safety* now. Should anything untoward happen to her, the king may hold you personally liable.”

“He wouldn’t dare!”

“That may be so, Mylord,” Jago agreed, “but in law you now *are* responsible. And, while the Princess may be held in the dungeon pending a determination of her culpability and the sanction of her execution by Roi Hengiste, she must not be harmed beyond the point of inevitable physical inconvenience.”

Gervase shook his head. “I find this impossible to believe. Thwarted at every turn.”

“The Councillor has been executed,” Silas reminded him. “There is little doubt that the king will, upon presentation of the facts in this case, agree to sign the execution order. He is not overly fond of the princess himself.”

“He’s not ‘fond’ of anyone!” Gervase snapped.

Silas and Jago knew better than to do anything but nod in agreement; casting each other commiserative glances. They were not totally at ease with one another, but in this instance there was a resonance of sorts.

“Must I suffer her alive until Hengiste chooses to return from his jaunt?” Gervase hissed.

“Regrettable, Mylord, I can offer no alternative,” Jago admitted.

“Neither can I,” Silas agreed.

“Then what good are you to me?”

The question hung in the air, unanswered. It did not bother either the Councillor or the spymaster. Both knew that Gervase depended on them as much as they on him in this carefully balanced symbiotic arrangement. As long as none of the parties involved forgot their place and needs, the system worked. Gervase, no matter his failings, was not stupid enough to forget his own—elevated but dependent—position.

The prince heaved a peevisish sigh. “Well, if this is the way it must be, then so be it. Keep her down there, make sure she doesn’t die. Otherwise treat her like any other prisoner.”

Silas bowed. “Yes, Mylord.”

“And now leave me alone. Both of you. And bring me that wench again. I need something to take my mind off things.”

—

Some time after nightfall, Sander had returned to his house in Sacrael, reluctant to leave Evadne, but bowing to necessities. It would not wise to be seen with her all the time. A Councillor, even one in Delfis’ position had to keep *some* distance from the royal they were attached to. Besides, since Zygie’s departure, he’d had to attend to The Stag. Though Galahad ran the taproom with some skill—ably assisted by the twin sisters—he was not a giant when it came to the intricacies of bookwork, payments of moneys, procurement of supplied, and things along those lines. Sander, who wasn’t over fond of such dull activities himself, had spent a significant portion of the afternoon and evening attending to such details. When it was done, for the time being, he decided that a publican would never be the first profession of his choice.

He returned home to find the place empty and bare. Zygie and one of the sisters had left it clean and tidy,

but the hearth was cold and the rooms dark. Sander contrived illumination for his study and his bedroom, and proceeded to attend to outstanding matters. After making sure that the curtains were drawn and the front door locked, he lifted up the rug which covered most of the floor of his study and pried loose a certain floorboard. He reached into the space underneath and came out with a small oblong box, with a row of five knobs on the top. He placed the box on his desk, pressed the knobs in a particular sequence, and thus opened the lid. He took out his needle-projector and placed it upside down into a matching indentation in the bottom half of the box. A red charge indicator winked on and off in a rapid sequence. As Sander watched the indicator turned green. He removed the projector and returned the box to its hiding place.

Having done all this he now found himself at loose ends.

What to do now?

Return to the castle?

It would serve no purpose. There was nothing more he could do tonight. Evadne would take supper in her rooms, ensuring that Odily tasted everything before her eyes, and carefully watching her for furtive acts such as adding liquids or powders into food and drink after the tasting was done.

Sander would have been more at ease could he have been there when Evadne . . .

Indeed, he *had* to go.—Now.

Sabér—subtle, insinuating itself into his thought processes; as it sometimes did when he wasn't expecting it.

Now, here it was, heavy with significance—prodding at his mind. He had no notions *why*, but he suddenly knew beyond any possible doubt that loitering around his house would have dire consequences indeed.

Sander inserted the projector into its holder inside his garments and made haste to leave.

—

Jago rapped on his master's door. From inside came a curse, muffled words to the effect that he was to leave at once and leave Gervase to his sexual antics.

Jago rapped again. A few breaths and Gervase's disheveled and angry face appeared at the door.

"How dare you?"

Jago bowed. "Mylord. Grave news."

"What?"

"A message came by pigeon—from the Teela Junction Inn. The king . . . he has been assassinated."

Gervase froze.

"What?!"

"Yes, Mylord. Snipers, at Mercy Boulder. They killed the king and Toffel."

"Who cares about Toffel? How certain are you that Hengiste is dead?"

"The message was signed by the captain of the guard. I have dispatched a pigeon requesting independent confirmation." He shrugged. "Though, to my mind, the news is definite."

Gervase turned his head. "Get out!" she shouted. A few moments later a half-naked woman, clutching disheveled garments, pushed her way past him and ran away. Jago risked a quick glance to watch her bare, shapely back as she fled.

Gervase commanded his full attention. "If Hengiste is dead, then I am king, yes?" His face was flushed with excitement; his eyes glowed with a strange light.

"Mylord, you are. Subject to the small matter of confirmation of Hengiste's death by official messenger and investiture. But, yes, the law is that you are, as of now, the king-in-waiting, empowered with all the authority due to the ruler of Tergan."

He went down on his knees and kept his eyes on the floor. "Your majesty."

"Get up," Gervase said curtly. "You can bow and cowl all you like when it's the time. As for now, get me Silas and the royal documentarist. We have work to do, and I want it done quick—before anyone thinks to take advantage of my uncle's sudden demise."

Jago rose. "Silas and Filidec," he confirmed. "They will be here shortly."

He called a guard and relayed the order. Presently the three men found themselves facing their new ruler, who sat on the side of his bed. Already Gervase had adjusted himself to his new condition. His plans for the immediate future were clear.

"Execute Tamar," he said. "This is now a royal order—and if you need me to sign something to have it sanctioned," this was directed at Filidec, "then show me the document and it shall be done without delay."

The documentarist bowed. "Your majesty. At once."

He started to leave.

"Wait!" Gervase ordered.

Filidec froze. "Your majesty?"

Gervase addressed Silas. "Arrest Evadne and her Councillor. The charge is treason. I bear witness to their intent, as well as providing the royal seal to their execution.

"Execute the Councillor at once. Place Evadne in the dungeon."

Addressing Filidec. "Produce the necessary papers for her execution as well."

To Silas. "I wish to address her before she dies—so don't do anything hasty, or I'll have your head."

Silas nodded.

"Now all but Jago leave me!"

Silas and Filidec departed.

"I want the investiture to be initiated without delay," Gervase told him. "See that this is done."

Jago hesitated.

"Yes?" Gervase snapped.

"A . . . delay . . . is usually considered appropriate," Jago ventured.

"Delay be damned! As soon as Hengiste's death is confirmed I want investiture. There is no time to lose. The state cannot be without a ruler."

Jago bowed. "Just so, your majesty. I will see to it." He bowed and was gone.

—

Sander approached at the gates to Castle Sacrael, feeling uneasy and on edge. In the darkness, illuminated only by a few torches stuck in holders on the side of the gate, he saw a contingent of ten guards—double the usual complement. He slowed his steps. Any changes in what was a usually unvarying pattern had to be considered significant and indicative of larger issues lurking in the background.

Sander diverted his steps sideways and shuffled off. He had not taken more than twenty paces when he heard the sound of hurrying footsteps. A single individual. Sander forced himself to calm and continued walking. The footsteps caught up with him. Sander tensed, ready for immediate action.

"Councillor." The voice of Keran, his friend in the guard.

Sander stopped and turned around.

Keran was not in uniform. "Better keep walking," he warned Sander, and fell in beside him.

"What's happened?"

"I'm on my way back to the castle. Everybody's being recalled for extra duty. Rumor has it that Hengiste has been murdered."

Sander's head whipped around. "When?"

"Late today. On the Teela Road."

The implications were clear.

"So, Gervase is king-in-waiting."

"Exactly. And, if my information is correct—and, mind you, it's only rumor—Councillor Delfis has already been executed—for treason. Princess Tamar is in a cell, awaiting execution for the same crime. Princess Evadne has been arrested; and everybody's searching for Councillor Sander . . ."

Sander exhaled sharply. "Better get back to your duty then," he said softly. He touched Keran's arm. "Thank you."

"Stay away from the castle," Keran advised him. "there is nothing you can do but to get caught and killed."

They had reached a place out of the light. Sander stopped.

"Thank you, friend." He hesitated.

"You're not going to listen to good advice, are you?" Keran said knowingly.

"No."

Keran sighed. "I didn't think so."

Sander chuckled humorlessly. "You didn't?"

"You're not the kind to desert her in her hour of need."

"Her?"

Keran laughed softly. "Come, Councillor. You think it's not all over the place that you and the Lady Evadne . . ."

"That we *what*?" Sander enquired mildly.

Keran laid a hand on his shoulder. "I saw it, too."

Sander sighed. "Whatever you heard or saw—forget it. But, yes, you are right. I have a duty and leaving her in Gervase's clutches is not acceptable."

"So, how're you going to get into the castle?"

"I have no idea. I suppose I'll get arrested the moment those men at the gate see me."

"And executed," Keran agreed.

"I don't care to be executed," Sander said.

"Who does? And even if you got into the castle,

how're you going to get her out of Silas' carcery?"

"An overly nice term for a dismal place of pain and torture."

"You'll not get out of there alive, Councillor."

"And yet I have to try."

"I know. And I have to break my oath of allegiance and obedience."

Sander considered Keran's silhouette. "No, you don't."

"I'm assigned to gate duty. Unless arrangements alter, I'm also the duty commander. Watch the guard change. If I'm in command I will have an extra four two torches lit—under the pretext of it being a wise thing to do. When this is done approach the gate. As if by accident, I will happen to be at hand to receive your papers. Hand them to me and I will allow you in."

"It won't work. Other guards know me as well."

"I know. That's why I'll let you in under the pretext of luring you into a closed trap. I'll wait until you're out if our sight and send off one of the guards to report your presence to those inside the castle." He leaned closer and peered at Sander's face. "I have a feeling, Councillor, that you're capable of taking care of him."

"Why are you doing this?" Sander wanted to know. Inside himself he was torn. Keran, despite everything, could well be the willing bait in an elaborate trap.

"You know why and I know why," the guard said. "And we're the only ones who know."

Sander suddenly realized that, at this critical juncture, he was unable to do anything *but* trust this man. There were no other ways to get inside Castle Sacrael; no other way to help Evadne.

"Trust me," Keran said, as if he'd read Sander's thoughts.

"I do."

—

When they came for her she was dreaming of Sander. A pleasant dream—and more than that. They were back on the beach, like they'd been that day. Only now they weren't running but wrestling, and Sander was teaching her new moves of self-defense. And then he was lying on his back, and she was pinning him down, and then it wasn't wrestling anymore, and they were in her bed, and neither of them wore any clothes, and he . . .

Evadne jerked up with a fright at the rap on her bolted door.

"Who is it?"

"Open up!"

"Who is it? What do you want?" But she knew that whoever it was, their intentions were not beneficent.

Evadne took a breath. Another. Trying to quell her rising panic.

The door shuddered under an impact. Another followed soon after. At the third the latch tore out of the wall and the door flew open with a crash. Guards poured into her quarters. They surrounded her bed and made a passage for another guard in a sergeant's uniform.

"You are under arrest," he told Evadne. "By orders of the king."

"The king?" she exclaimed. "The king is on his way to Sansker."

"By orders of King Gervase," the sergeant said curtly.

She gaped at him. "Don't be preposterous."

"Mylady, come with us," he said, not without a faint undertone of reluctance. "If you don't, we'll have to force you."

Evadne, her thoughts falling over themselves in trying to come to grips with the implications of what she'd just heard, swung her legs out of the bed, acutely aware than, even everybody was staring—and not even trying to hide it.

'King Gervase'?

What had happened?

Hengiste!

Dead?

Had Gervase finally succeeded?

The implications of all this for her rushed in, left her dizzy with nausea.

Sander! Where was Sander? If they were coming for her, they'd be coming for him, too. And who else?

'King Gervase'! What a heinous notion.

"Mylady . . ."

"I'm coming!" she rasped. "Just let me get dressed." Maybe, once she was in the vestiary . . . There was a window, albeit a small one. If she could . . .

"That's not possible." The sergeant's tone was definite.

"But . . ."

"A dressing gown, perhaps," he suggested, not

unkindly. Then his face tightened. He could not appear that way in front of his men.

"Hurry!" he commanded.

Evadne complied with alacrity. She put on a dark-blue ankle-length dressing gown and allowed herself to be led away.

Where would they take her? To see Gervase?

But, no! They passed level one and went on down.

The dungeon? Would Gervase—even Gervase!—do this to her?

The answer came soon enough and it wasn't pleasant. She contemplated a protest as they opened up the door and the stench wafted in her face, but there would have been no point. So she followed them down the grim stairs, her head held high, but with despair in her heart.

Sander!

Be safe! Don't let them catch you.

At the bottom of the stairs they turned left into a dark passage, from which echoed a dismal symphony of low moans and other sounds of human misery. The guards grabbed lit torches from holders near the entrance and ushered into the hole. The reek finally overpowered her. Her insides heaved spasmodically. The guards jerked aside as she vomited to one side. She stood there, unable to walk, her stomach still heaving and twisting. Then she straightened again and continued along her grim path. A few steps further one of the guards opened a door. Evadne stepped inside—to face Tamar, hardly recognizable, who huddled in one corner, whimpering and groaning, racking forth and back with her fists pressed against her mouth. The door thudded shut behind her. The light of the torches was cut off. She was left alone with the sounds of the whimpering woman.

Only a few minutes later: approaching footsteps. The door opened. Flickering torch-light fell into the cell. As one guard waited outside another two stepped into the cell, went straight past Evadne, grabbed Tamar and unceremoniously dragged her out of the cell. Evadne pressed against a wall and watched in horror. The door shut again with finality. Darkness descended again. Evadne leaned against the clammy wall and closed her eyes.

—

Sander watched the guard changing. Shortly afterwards four new torches were installed above the gate. Sander watched some more and thought to recognize Keran's figure lurking near the five guards blocking the entrance to the gate.

He squared his shoulders and started walking. A guard stepped forward and challenged him, only to be pushed aside by Keran, who curtly demanded to see Sander's entry permit. Sander displayed it, all the while watching the other guards, who paid him close attention.

Presently, Keran waved him through. Sander caught small signals to the guards: a minute shake of the head, a small motion of a hand. The guards' attention never wavered, but they held back.

Keran motioned for Sander to proceed. "She's 'elow," he said, his lips unmoving and barely loud enough for even Sander to hear.

Sander nodded curtly, accepted his papers, and moved on, into the castle grounds. He stepped into a region of shadow; took a quick look around. Further down, to his left and right, guards with dogs, patrolling the fence. A foursome of guards flanked the main entrance to the castle. Back at the gate, a guard left the path in the direction of the kitchen entrance.

Sander discarded his Councillor's garb, leaving him with the garments he usually wore underneath. He extracted the needle-projector and, using the blotches of unlit path and lawn, to slide away, aiming to intercept the guard. He reached the kitchen entrance and ducked behind a bush.

Was he in time—or had he dallied too long. If the guard had chosen to run, it might all be too late.

Hurried footfalls. Sander tensed. The guard appeared. Sander leveled the projector and fired a small burst of four needles, aimed at the guard's face. The man's hand flew to his cheeks and he stumbled and collapsed. Sander, looking around for watchers, hurried to where he lay and dragged him by the feet into the shadows of some bushes.

Another pause. Listening again. From some distance away, men's voices; but they did not sound excited. Sander ducked into the kitchen entrance. He hurried along the passage, pausing to listen every few steps. A branch. To the left: the kitchens. To the right: store

rooms. Straight ahead: the way to the servant's stairs.

Sander peered into the passages to his right and left, heard voices from afar, echoing along the curves stone walls. He glided across the intersection and proceeded.

Right, left, and right again. Down another dank passage. The faintest reek of smells not originating from the kitchen: whiffs of the dungeon, pushed along the passage by a slight draft.

Sander considered his future. He set the projector to four needles per burst. Disabling but not killing. This was fine, as long as his victims did not see who fired at them. The moment they did they would have to die. The knowledge of the needle-projectors had to be guarded at almost all costs.

Therefore: stealth, decisiveness, speed.

Sander entered the passage at whose end lay the entrance to 'below'. He came into line-of-sight of the four guards on duty now. He estimated the distance. Four. A burst would be required. Some of them might die. Regrettable, but now was not the time for scruples.

Sander flicked a small level on the side of the projector and aimed. He depressed the trigger. A continuous burst of needles streamed along the intervening distance, hit the leftmost guard. Sander twitched the weapon. The burst swept over the others. Sander releases the trigger and flicked the lever again. The guards collapsed on the grimy floor, their halberds clattering against the stone. Sander cringed.

Another pause. Had anybody heard the brief noises?

Silence.

Sander hastened to where the guards lay, pushed open the door, let himself into the stairwell. The stink assaulted his nose.

Down. Don't pause. Time wasted was time lost irretrievably.

Footfalls ahead. Sander flattened himself against the wall representing the inner curve of the stairs. He aimed the projector and, as the guards came into sight, loosened a double burst. They made choked sounds and fell back down the stairs, their swords making a terrible ruckus as they rolled over and over back whence they'd come.

Sander raced after them, the projector extended before him. Delicacy and the preservation of human life be damned. He thumbed the dial to a lethal setting.

A hundred men could die from the charge now in the weapon. And they would if this was how it had to be.

The guards' corpses came to a rest, draped at grotesque angles across the steps. Sander ran past them. At one point he nearly slipped on a moist patch, but caught himself in time. He arrived at the bottom and paused. The ubiquitous background noises of human misery from his left. Other voices from his right.

A woman screaming and wailing.

Rough male voices.

Another screech.

A thud.

Silence.

Not Evadne! Please let it not be Evadne!

Sander turned left and, in the dim light cast by the torches at the junction, felt his way along the progressively darkening passage. She had to be here!

A door on his left. He leaned to the spyhole.

"Evadne?" he whispered.

No response.

Sander groped his way along. Another door on the left. The response this time was a dismal croak. Sander fumbled with the outside latch-bolt and drew it aside. He pushed open the door.

"Evadne?"

A scraping in the darkness. Sander backed away. Something grabbed onto his legs. Sander bent down and found two bony human arms, the hands grabbing onto his calves. He jerked them off, but they clawed back again. He delivered a blow at the owner. A miserable whimper. The pressure of the grip slipped away. Sander felt like being sick. What was he doing? How could he be so . . .

Evadne's face came back to him.

He could not save everybody here! A miracle if he saved himself and her he sought!

Sander stumbled backward, closed the door, drove home the latch.

Continuing on. Another door. Another enquiry. Something, somebody scrabbling at the wood.

Another door.

"Evadne?"

An exclamation. "Sander?"

"Evadne!"

Where was the latch? He found it, drew it aside, opened the door, peered into the darkness.

"Come!"

A whiff of her fragrance, overpowering even the stench down here. The sound of fabric against stone. A warm human presence.

"Sander," she whispered, her voice distorted by a sob of unbearable relief.

He reached out and touched her, found her hand and took it with his left.

"Come!" he whispered.

They headed toward the light of the junction.

Then, flickering lights ahead. Moving bodies entering the passage, approaching with lumbering steps. Evadne gasped. Sander whipped around and pulled her to him, smothering the sound. He looked back, saw the shapes drawing closer. Already their faces were distinct in the flickering lights of their torches. Sander detached himself from Evadne and aimed his weapon. A triple burst of silent killers. Men collapsed; torches fell to the floor. One of them, landing close to a body, set fire to fabric. A flame licked into being; cast a bright light through the passage.

Sander took Evadne's hand again. "Hurry now," he hissed and pulled her on.

The man whose clothing was on fire. It didn't matter: already he was dead. They squeezed past the men, barely avoiding the growing flames, and ran toward the junction.

From the other side the shout of voices. Sander aimed and fired blindly ahead, into the passage leading to Silas' quarters. The shouts were cut off.

They reached the junction. Sander dragged Evadne up the steps after him. She followed without a word. Her heavy breathing was at his back, but she made no complaint and when he looked back he saw her face set in grim determination.

She noted his regard and smiled. "I'm fine," she panted.

She wasn't, but that hardly mattered now.

They passed the two corpses and continued on. At the top of the stairwell Sander paused. Behind him, Evadne's breath came in tortured gasps. Sander motioned her to silence. She held her free hand over her mouth, thus quelling the sound of her breathing.

Sander peered into the foyer. All appeared quiet. He pulled Evadne through the door.

"Where now?" she whispered. "We'll never leave

the castle."

Sander had to admit to himself that he had not the faintest idea of what he was going to do next.

* * *