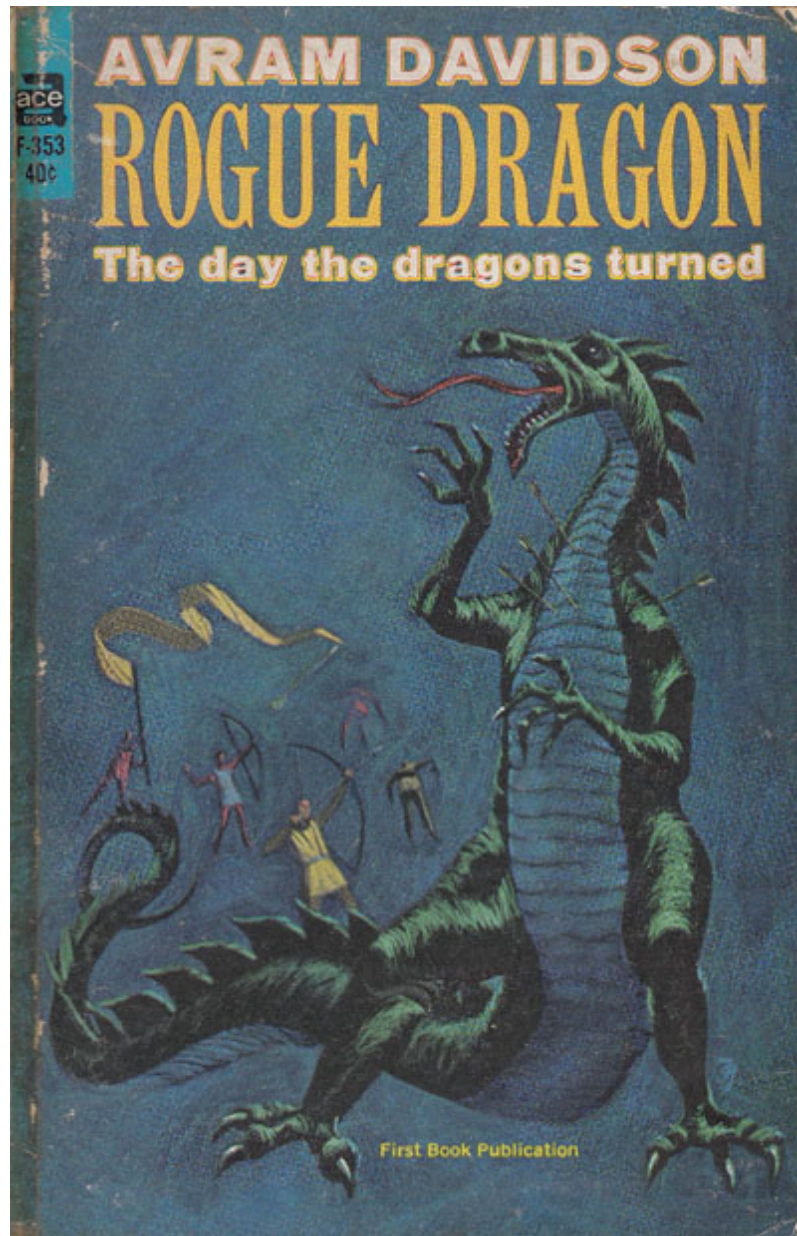


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AVRAM DAVIDSON



ROGUE DRAGON

CHAPTERS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

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I

They had flushed the bull-dragon in Belroze Woods and paced him for about a mile before he came up against the other line of beaters and turned to fight.

For a moment the whole hunt fell silent. Jon-Joras, feeling (so he thought) like a virgin at her first assignation, heard only the sound of his own troubled breath; felt sweat starting on face and body. The dragon seemed to crouch in his place on the far side of the clearing, his crest quivering. A moment passed. The great head moved a trifle, (uncertainly,) and the faceted, gem-like eyes rolled in their hooded sockets—blue, green, blue-green light flashing in the beam of moted sunlight which suddenly broke through the trees. Then, incredible how long it was, the red and bifurcated tongue leaped out from the mouth, quivered, tasted the air. It was blowing right towards him. Body rather than mind (if mind it had at all... and what thoughts must it think!) probably making the decision, the dragon darted off to the left.

Instantly the silence was shattered. The beaters were trotting left, clashing their cymbals and howling, the musics blared on their harsh-voiced shawms, the archers (all neat and trim in their green tunics and leggings) nocked their arrows and poised. The dragon halted. At a signal, so swiftly that Jon-Joras scarcely saw the motion, a flight of arrows was loosed; in another instant were visible only as feathery shafts ridged in the great beast's side.

To say that the dragon hissed was only to confess a limitation of language: ear-drums trembled painfully at a sound the auditory nerves could but faintly convey. The dragon *hissed*. A spasm passed along the great, pierced flank, and tiny runnels of dark blood began their paths. The dragon halted, turned its head from side to side in search of its tormentors, its cheek-nodules swelling with rage. The wind shifted, bringing a rank, bitter odor to Jon-Joras. He felt his skin grow cold and his heart expand.

Then the bannermen ran forward, teasing their flags on their long poles. The hiss broke off suddenly and the air vibrated with the roar which succeeded it. Here, at last, was an enemy which the dragon could see! Head down and neck out-thrust, it began to move towards it. At the first, slowly and ponderously, each immense leg placed with care. The bannermen seemed almost now to dance, in their traditional movements... the figure-of-eight, the fish, the butterfly... faster now... the wasp... the flags, white and

red and green and yellow, whipping through the roar-tormented air.

And faster and faster came the great bull-dragon, now at a lumbering trot, turfs flying as the great splayed feet came pounding down, shaking the ground. The cymbals ceased, the horns, too. The trot became a gallop, a charge, and the men broke into a shout as, in one sudden and tremendous movement, the dragon reared up upon its hind legs and came bounding forward upon them, its forelimbs slashing at the air. In one accord, the flags dropped to the ground, the bannermen swiftly twirled their poles, winding up the wefts at the ends of them. The colored cloths had danced and teased—suddenly, suddenly, they were gone; furled, grounded, hidden in the grass; and the bannermen crouched.

Bewildered, the great beast paused again. Twenty feet above the ground the huge head growled and rumbled and it turned from side to side. From the left, a flight of arrows stitched the now-exposed chest. The dragon screamed; the dragon tore at the barbs; it plunged in the direction from which they came. And the cymbals clashed three times and another flight of arrows, now from the right, stitched the creature hip and leg, and three more times the cymbals sounded and as the dragon sounded its pain and fury and swiveled its head, again the bannermen twirled their palms and pinnacled their poles and once again their bright flags played upon the air.

The dragon bellowed and the dragon charged. Striped with the blood that coursed along its paler underside, it thundered down upon the bannermen. Once again flags and flagmen vanished. Once again the dragon paused. Again and again it hurled its great voice upon the wind. Jon-Joras saw, midway from throat to fork, like a blazon on its fretted hide, the white X-mark. He thought he could see the great pulse beating in the mark's crux, and then—sight and sound together—heard the crack of the huntgun behind him and the crux vanished in a gout of blood. The blood gushed forth in a great arched torrent. And the dragon stretched out its paws and talons, showed its huge and harrowing teeth in a scarlet rictus, sounded its hoarse, harsh death cry, and fell face forward onto the ground which trembled and shook to receive it.

"Pierced!" a voice cried the traditional acclamation, high and shrill and exultant and shaking. *"Pierced! Pierced! Dragon pierced...!"*

It broke off abruptly as Jon-Joras suddenly recognized it as his own. And all the music sounded.

=====

The man who shot the dragon was a Chief Commissioner Narthy from somewhere in The Snake, that distant constellation whose planets all seemed to abound in precious metals and rare earths . ; . and rich, hunt-buying Chief Commissioners like Narthy.

Actually, the C.C. wasn't a bad sort, though quite different from Jon-Joras's own superior. He joined the ring of men crowding around to congratulate him on his kill.

"A fine shot, Hunter!"

"Well-placed, Hunter!"

"—and well-timed—"

Narthy, sweating and grinning, mumbled his thanks, his shyness before other, vastly more experienced Hunters vanishing before his pleasure in the the new—the so suddenly gained—title. Conscious of the cameras, "he sucked in his pendulous belly and tried to look appropriately grim. Then the Master of the Hunt came over for the ritual, and the well-wishers fell to one side.

The Master was a stocky man with a sunburned, wind-cracked face; his name was Roedeskant, and, unlike most of the hunt masters, who were of the Gentlemen, he was not, although bred on their estates. He had been cool and sufficiently self-assured during the hunt, but now—aware of the cameras and of his low-caste accent—he fumbled a bit.

Partly because he was embarrassed by the embarrassment of Roedeskant, and partly because the sight of pudgy, grinning Narthy being ritually bloodied did not much appeal to him, Jon-Joras turned and walked away. His own home world, the *beta* planet of Moussorgsky Minor, was nowhere near The Snake (where he had never been and never expected to or wanted to be). No one who knew him would see him in the 3Ds for which Narthy had payed a small fortune and which he would doubtless be showing to his friends, family, associates, subordinates and such superiors as he wanted to impress for the rest of his life.

The scent of the strong-smelling grass rose, pungent, as he stepped on it heavily in his hunt-shoon, but it was not quite strong enough to overcome the bitter reek of dragon musk. A voice beside him said, “What a rotten shot!”

Surprised, rather than startled, Jon-Joras turned, said, “What?”

It was someone he didn’t know, dressed in the white garments of a Gentleman—a tall fellow with bloodshot eyes and grizzled hair. “Rotten shot,” the man repeated. “Badly timed. Trembly trigger finger, is what it was. These novices are all the same. Why that bulldrag had at least another quarter-hour’s good play in him! No... Don’t tell me that Roe signaled him to shoot, I know better. Oh, well, *they* won’t know better, back in The Lizard or The Frog or wherever ‘*Hunter*’ Barfy or what’s-his-name comes from—”

He looked at Jon-Joras with shrewd, blue eyes. “Not a Company man, are you?”

“No. I’m one of King Por-Paulo’s private men. Jetro Yi, he *is* a Company man, is going to arrange the hunt. I’m just here in advance to make his personal arrangements.”

The man in white grunted. “Well, to each his own, I don’t hold with monarchies myself, having to renew your damned crown every five years, make concessions to the plebs and scrubs: poxy business, elections. No. But of course, no reflections on your own local king, mind.” Having probably a notion of quickly changing the subject of his probable tactlessness, the Gentleman added, “Kind of young aren’t you, a king’s private man?”

The subject of his youth being a somewhat touchy one with Jon-Joras, he brushed back his shock of black hair and said, a bit stiffly, “Por-Paulo is a good man.” His youth—and how he came, despite it, to hold his position. Brains, ability, judgment, and a top rating at the Collegium, all good reasons, sufficient ones, no doubt. But when a young man is young, and the son of a young (and lovely) mother, when he cannot remember his father, and when rivals in his peer group are ready enough to hint that he need look no further for his real paternity than the Magnate with whom his mother is most often seen, why—

“No offense,” repeated the older man. Then, “Your customs don’t forbid self-introductions, do they? Good. Allow me, then.” He stopped, put his hands out, palms up. “Aelorix,” he said.

Jon-Joras stated his name, placed his hands, palms down, on the other’s. Aelorix said, formally, “I am yours and mine are yours.”

Thankful that he had taken the trouble to look into local ways, Jon-Joras said, “Unworthy.” Behind them, the musics struck up a tune of sorts and Narthy was led around the dead dragon. Aelorix raised his eyebrows and made a disrespectful noise.

“Base-born, I shouldn’t wonder,” he growled, indicating the triumphant chief commissioner with a jerk of his head. “Roedekant is a good Huntsman, none better. But *he* knows his place, more than I can say for a lot of basies, local and otherwise, I remember when he was one of my old father’s chick-boys. Fact. Where are you at, in the State?”

An implausible vision of the hefty Chief Huntsman as a bare-legged boy chasing dragon-chicks through the woods and thickets made Jon-Joras think a moment before he was able to answer the question. The—the *State* ... oh, yes... confusing local speech-way: if the City proper was termed “the State,” what did they call the whole City-State? Answer: by its name, of course. In this case, Peramis.

He said that he was staying at the Lodge. “That’s no good,” Aelorix shook his head. From somewhere deep in the woods a faint bellow sounded over the raucous music, and the higher note of another dragon almost at once seemed to respond to it. Instantly diverted and alert, the Gentleman cocked his head, harkened a moment, pointed. “Off there. A big cow-drag, by the sound of her. Word of advice. When you hear those love-calls, don’t go to eavesdrop... No, the Lodge is no good. Stay with me. At Aelorix. What? Till your boss-chap arrives.”

Jon-Joras, sensible of the compliment, flushed slightly. An invitation to stay at the Gentleman’s seat, and the one from which he took his name and style—“Only proper, courteous, a king’s private man,” he heard his would-be host say—no common compliment, from all he’d heard and seen about the Gentlemen in the short time he’d been here on Prime World (*Earth*, the locals called it; name sounding so startlingly archaic on out-world ears). He could hardly refuse, of course. More—he wanted to accept.

He wanted to see for himself what the semi-feudal life was like at first hand. Then, it was his duty to his elected king, too: the more contacts he made, the more pleasant he could make Por-Paulo’s stay. Only—

“Would it not be difficult,” he said, slowly, “if I am there, where I wish to be, to coordinate my work with Jetro Yi?”

For answer, the Gentleman pulled out an instrument like a whistle, blew a couple of notes on it. Immediately a man detached himself from the throng and came running towards them. “Company Yi,” called Aelorix, as soon as his servant was within hearing distance. The man nodded, made a sketchy, informal salute, and ran back. In a few moments he returned with Jetro, the latter not running, but coming at quite a brisk walk.

“Company, I want to host this young fellow at Aelor’.”

Yi made his eyes go round, as if astonished there could be any objection. “Of *course*,” he said. “As the High Nascence *wishes*.”

“You’re to keep in touch with him,” the Gentleman ordered, as casually authoritative as if he were a director of the Company, “twice a day. And have his things sent over as soon as you get back to the State.”

“Of *course*—of *course*—”

“Get along, now.”

As Yi, having bowed almost to his navel, departed, Aelorix said, without malice, “Flunky...”

Narthy was now making the first cut in the green-black hide. The skimmers would do the rest of the work later, and, before he left, the Chief Commissioner (now “Hunter,” too) would be presented with his

silver-mounted belt, his braided hatband, and enough dragon skin to upholster all the seats and sofas in his villa if he desired to. The cost of tanning, like everything else, was included in the immense fee—in this case, mined and mulcted from the rich flesh of The Snake Worlds—which he had paid in advance to the Hunt Company.

Somewhere downwind the cow-drag once again blared her presence and her need; again, replying and following, the bull bellowed. Aelorix listened, his face puckered.

He shook his head, seemed faintly puzzled, faintly disturbed. Jon-Joras asked if anything was wrong.

“No... Not really at all. I know the cow... don't mean we've met, socially, but one becomes familiar with the calls of all the drags around, sooner or later... But I don't know the bull. Well, well.” He took his guest by the arm. “Come along. Aelorix, ho!”

=====

Aelorix-the-place seemed less an estate than a city-state of its own, repeating on a smaller scale the pattern into which all the civilized parts of ancient Earth had formed after the planet's emergence from the dark and painful chaos of the Kar-chee Reign. Its fields and groves were pleasant to see after the somber forests, and at first Jon-Joras could not tell which of the many wooden buildings clustering closely where brook and river met was supposed to be his host's seat.

A scene in the market-place or courtyard quickly diverted his thoughts from this. A group was gathered around two men dressed in dirty hides who were arguing with what, by his manner, appeared to be an upper servant. This one looked up at the entrance of the Gentleman and said, “Ah, here's His Nascence.”

“Here's the Big,” muttered one of the men in leather-expressing the same thought in cruder speech. They looked to be brothers. And they looked sullen. One of them now picked up a filthy fiber bag, tumbled its contents on the cobbled ground. Jon-Joras stepped back. They were the severed heads of animals, one huge one with mottled teeth and bloody muzzle, the others tiny.

“There, now, Big,” the man rumbled. “Look a' them!”

“Mmm...” Aelorix, noncommittal, gazed down. “What say, Puedeskant? Eh?”

They gets their yearly dole,“ his man growled, stubborn.

“But look a' the *size* a' she!” one of the brothers protested. “Now, Big, ain't such a karchen sizey bitch—and all o' them karchen pups, look how many!—ain't them worth a bonus, Big?”

Aelorix grunted, prepared to move on, paused. To Puedeskant he said, “Give them some fish, then.” The brothers seemed a little appeased. Jon-Joras, looking back, saw the steward unclasp a knife and slash the ears of the strange animals. His host, following the look, smiled. “So they don't take the heads elsewhere, try the same trick. Dirty chaps.”

“But who are they?”

“Doghunters... Up here, guest—these steps.” They began upon a long covered wooden walkway, curving gently upward and to the right, gardened courtyards on either side and potted plants and caged birds lining the rail below and above on the walk itself. The younger man admired the neatness and the taste of the scene, but tried to fit the spoken phrase into his recollection of his readings. *Doghunters...*

Suddenly the key fitted and the wards turned. “Free farmers!” he exclaimed.

He saw his host's mouth give a slight twist. "Fancy name," he said. "Doghunters. Useful in their way. But—dirty fellows." Somewhere ahead music sounded, as different from the elaborate orchestrations of his home world as it was from the crude—though, in its setting, appropriate—harshness of the hunt musics. The covered walk continued to curve on ahead, but the two took a broad branch to the left. The clean planking here was covered with soft reed mats on which designs had been traced in red.

The same motifs were extended and elaborated on the oiled-paper windows of the high screen door whose panels parted silently to admit them; and the melody grew louder. Jon-Joras found himself in a place so strange to him that he stopped short and drew in his breath. It was more a hall than a room, but it contained things in it never seen by him in any hall before. Built around part of a hillside, seemingly, it had a little waterfall plashing and purling in one corner of it; and the tiny stream moved in its channel across the floor to a pool in the center. Bright colored fish swam and darted there. In another section a garden of stepped-back semicircular shelves rose around and retreated from a tall, cylindrical aviary, a rainbow of birds which provided their own background to the music.

The source of this was in a floor of light from a windowed cupola: a dark-skinned woman in a full, embroidered robe. She sat, unseeing, at her instrument, from which came the flow of tinkling sounds, her ringed fingers moving across the keys with stiff but beautiful precision. Suddenly she saw or heard, perhaps felt, them. The music ceased. Jon-Joras might not have been there, for all the notice she took.

"Ae, what news?" she cried.

"The usual," he said, shrugging. "A hunt—an outworlder. Usual kill. Too quick, though—"

Lustrous eyes, beautiful tan face expressed something between anger and distress. "I don't mean that! Don't dissemble—what *news*?"

He hesitated; she saw it; he saw that she saw it. "You make too much of trifles, ma'am—"

"Ae!"

"Nothing but a bull-drag. Southward in Belroze Woods. His epithalamion. I didn't seem to recognize his cry. That's all."

An expression which was not relief, quite, but which yet relaxed the look of tense concern, passed across her lovely face. It did not linger long. Her long fingers left the instrument, came together before her throat, and clasped.

"I do not like it," she said, almost as if to herself. "No. No. No... I do not like it..."

II

Although the 3D scoping equipment here on Prime World was as good as anywhere in the multi-world Confederation ("the lands of the Starry Compact," as Por-Paulo had called it in a speech—inwardly wincing, so he confided in Jon-Joras, at the purple phrase), the local economy did not run to any viewing system: the Hunt scenes could be shown off-world, not there. Communications were non-visual. Some faint reflection that 2D was surely at least possible had engaged Jon-Joras's mind, but not for long. Prime World was, as far as the Hunt Company was concerned, chiefly a game preserve; had been little more for centuries. The hand of the Confederation rested lightly, very lightly here. What was good enough for the Hunt Company in this now remote and passed-by globe seemed good enough for the Confederation.

The face of the communicator was nothing but an instrument board, and Jetro Yi, when he called in as

directed next morning, was nothing but a voice.

“I’m lining up one of the best Hunters for your principal, P.M.,” he said, in his usual important tones. “A Gentleman by the name of Thuemorix. One of the *best*—”

“That’s good, Company.”

“He’s promised to draw us a prime bull. A five.”

“How’s that?”

“A *five*. Dragons are at prime at five years. After that, well, they begin to go downhill. And before that, too green. I mean, huh-huh, literally as well as figuratively, huh-huh. How would it look for your king to come back with a skin that anyone who *knows* anything, well, they could at one glance just tell by the color that he hadn’t had a first-class hunt? Wouldn’t look good at all. You take some of these pot-bellied parvenus, come here in a hurry, all *they* want is the prestige, well, huh-huh, if they draw a hen-dragon or an old crone, who’s going to know the difference, the circles *they* move in; skin could be pea-green or rusty-black. But not for your principal, no sir, nothing to worry about.”

And he pumbled on and on. There was nothing immediately requiring Jon-Joras’s attention. In a few days he expected to have a lodge lined up for him to look at, to be let with staff while the owners went south on a long visit. “But nothing immediate. So just enjoy your stay with His High Nascence.”

“All right, Company.”

“And I’ll report tomorrow morning.”

“All right, Company.” He flicked off before Jetro Yi could give a resume of all the face-to-face conversations he had had with Jetro Yi. When you had heard him once you had heard him forevermore—unless you had a boundless appetite for the commerce of the hunt.

Leaving the communicator, he strolled at ease through the charming, rambling house out towards the by-buildings in which he knew he would find his host inspecting the livestock. Aelorex was in the deer-sheds, greeted him with a wave of his hand towards a fat gray doe that was being washed around the udders prior to milking.

“Beauty, isn’t she? Won two prizes.”

“I must accept that judgment, sir. We have none like this out my way, on M.M. *beta*.”

“No, I suppose not... This your king’s first hunt?”

Jon-Joras tentatively stroked the doe’s soft muzzle. It was Por-Paulo’s first *dragon* hunt, yes. (“That’s the only kind that counts,” his host said firmly, with the self-contained assurance of an untraveled provincial.) Jon-Joras described Por-Paulo’s three quests for *sundi* in the swamps of Nor, before his first election—the absolute protective coloration of the *sundi*—how (so the king had described it) it seems as if a triangular piece of swamp suddenly hurtles through the air. “It’s not a game for the slow, sir. Instant reflexes, or death.”

“Mmm...”

“He’s gone five or six times for dire-falcons, too, out of the aeries of Gare. A thousand, two thousand feet up, if you miss—”

“Mmm...” Insecurely mounted on one winged creature and aiming at another, fiercer one, as it swoops and spins and dives, hooked beak and razor talons. But all Aelorix said was, “Mmmm... I don’t deny there seems to be an element of danger. But you can get *that*, you know, from all I hear (oh, wouldn’t go myself if you paid me), just trying to cross a road in one of the populous planets. No. A hunt, you see—”

They left the deer-shed, host courteously leading guest by the wrist, and crossed a wide place of beaten earth. “— is not a mere matter of *danger*. Not a dragon hunt, at any rate. It’s a matter of ritual, art, music, skill, color, tradition. There’s more to it than just exposing yourself to a chunk of mud with teeth in it. And this is an acknowledged fact. Ask any Company man, ‘What’s your most popular, most sought-after, most expensive hunt?’ One answer. ‘Dragon.’ It was true, this last. Jon-Joras said nothing.

“Furthermore—” and here Aelorix suddenly ceased looking rather pontifical, and exceedingly grim, “furthermore, these other items of game (if so you call them), what are they to those that hunt them? Nothing, really. Trophies. Mere sport. Nothing more. Whereas, the *dragons*,” his mouth curled down, “we hate them. Don’t be in any error about that. *We hate them!*”

This came as completely surprising to Jon-Joras, for nothing he had heard previously and nothing in Aelorix’s voice as he had discussed them earlier, had prepared him for this sudden emotion. It was as though the man had just remembered... and remembered a most unpleasant memory, too.

“Why?” he asked, astonished.

With a grimace and an abrupt gesture, the Master said, “It was the Kar-chee... They were the Kar-chee’s dogs. They hunted us. Now we hunt them.” Then the mask dropped again and he said, pleasantly, “Come and see how the training’s coming on.”

Jon-Joras, wondering mightily but saying nothing, yielded to the friendly hand upon his back, and walked on as desired.

On one side of the wide place a group of young, naked-chested archers were shooting at training targets. An elderly bowmaster with stained white moustachios walked up and down behind them, a switch in his hand. The targets hung high in the air and swayed in the wind; whenever a cadet made what was deemed too bad a shot—*whisshh!*— the switch came down across the lower part of the back. “Mm—*hm*,” the Gentleman signified his approval. “Nothing better for the aim. Notice how careful old Fae is never to catch the shoulder-muscles. Ah... I see my boy’s had one miss already this morning. Let’s see if he has another.”

They paused. Aelorix’s younger son, a chestnut-haired boy in his middle-teens, stood in his place at line, a thin red wheal marking his skin just above his belt. The old man barked, the boy whipped out an arrow, raised his bow, let fly. Jon-Joras could not even see where the shot landed, but his host made a satisfied noise. The bowmaster paced his slow way down the line, said not a word of praise.

On the other side of the field several squads of bannermen danced about with bare poles. A sudden thought entered Jon-Joras’s mind, passed his lips before he had time to consider if it were polite to mention it. “Isn’t this sort of an establishment expensive to maintain?”

“In my case, yes, because I like to see my people here at home, not hired out for Hunts all over the place. And I don’t take Hunt contracts, myself. Don’t have to. My older boy won’t have to, either. But I suppose the younger will, unless I divide Aelorix in my will, and I won’t. Don’t believe in it. Keep estates in one piece. I’ve got a smaller place up the river and he shall have that, and I’ll start him off with a small establishment of his own. The Company will see that he gets a few good contracts until his reputation firms up. (That’s where most of your best Hunt Masters come from: younger sons, you know.) The Company knows me, I know the Company. Hate to think if we had to depend on Confederation.”

He did not elaborate, but added, a trifle defensively, “Not that we, not that I, have to depend on the Company, either. Far back as memory goes, this family has never had to buy a haunch of venison, a peck of potatoes, or an ell of common cloth. Show me a Gentleman that does and I’ll show you a family going down hill,” he rambled on, proudly. “That’s how Roedeskant got his estate, you know. Family that had it, never mind their name, extinct in the male line, anyway; they went *down* and he went *up*. Well, he earned it, I credit him, yes. Council of Syndics shall change his name to Roedorix at the next Session, or I’ve lost all my influence and shall engage myself as a Doghunter.”

They paused for him to watch the fletchers at work and to test a new batch of arrowheads with his thumbnail along the edges. He poked into a pile of potatoes and satisfied himself that the ones underneath were as good as those on top. He sampled the cheeses and sausages and the apples to see that they were being properly stored, and was en route to the armory to show Jon-Joras his huntguns, when a party of several coming towards them through a grove of trees sighted them and called out.

“Chick-boys... what are they doing back so soon?”

The boys—some of them actually *were* boys, shock-headed imps with gapped-toothed grins, never having known a day’s school or a pair of shoes; others were all ages up to gray-beards who had been *boys* forty years ago—beckoned their lord and set down what they were carrying. These, as Jon-Joras came up, proved to be wicker baskets, covers tied on with ropes of grass; from within them came a shrill twittering sound.

“What’s up, boys.”

All talking at once, they undid the baskets. “Ah, now, Nasce’, looka here at these beauties—” “Isn’t they a fine lot, Nasce’?” “Have a eye on’em, won’t y’, Nasce’—” They held up about a dozen young dragons, deep yellow with just a faintest tinge of green along the upper body in some of them.

“Very nice, very nice,” Aelorix said, brusquely. “But if you’ve slacked off searching just to show me a batch of chicks— No. You wouldn’t. What’s up?”

They fell silent, eyes all turning to one man who stood by the sole unopened basket. He opened it now, reached in gingerly, winced, lunged, and drew out something which brought a roar from his lord. “What in blethers are you dragging *that* back for? It’s not a chick, it’s a cockerel—do you have six fingers and want to lose one?—and a marked cockerel too! What—?”

The man with the gawky dragon-child needed both of his hands to hold it, but another man pointed to the mark, the gray X on the underside which would grow whiter with age. Aelorix bent over, silently, to examine it as the chick-boy nudged the scaly under-hide with his scarred thumb, and the dragon-cockerel chattered and snapped at him.

The Gentlemen snapped up straight, his face red and ugly, criss-crossed with white lines Jon-Joras had not noticed before. “What son of a dirty crone marked that?” he cried. His rage did not surprise his men.

“Marky? Marky?”

An old—a shambling old chick-boy—whose incredibly acid-scarred hands testified to the contents of the ugly can he carried, shook his head slowly and sadly, eyes cast down. It might have been over the sorrow of a ruined grand-daughter.

“Not my stuff, Master Ae,” he said. “Nope. That’s a coarse, karchen stuff, very coarse, y’ see.” He prodded it with a caricature of a finger. “See how deep it’s cut? I dunno a marky ’round here, ’r north, ’r south, who makes ’r uses stuff like such. And look where he put ’n, too, the dirty son of a kar-chee’s

egg—”

“Yes,” his master said, bitterly, “Yes, look. Cut its throat,” he ordered, abruptly, and stalked away with quick, angry steps. Suddenly he stopped and turned back. “Not a word to any one! The Ma’am is not to hear of this.” It was a long few minutes before his breathing calmed enough for him to say to his mute guest, “Young man, you must amuse yourself for a while. I must counsel with my neighbors on something. Pray pardon and excuse.”

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But the Ma’am had already heard. Her weeping was loud as Jon-Joras came into the house. He thought it was best to make excuses of demanding duties, and to depart. It was not urged that he change his mind.

=====

Peramis was not much different from other of the city-states of Prime World, that ancient planet from which the race of Man had begun its spread across the galaxies. It had stripped itself bare, exhausting its peoples and minerals, in launching and maintaining that spread. So it was that, population dwindled and resources next to nil, at a time when the son-and daughter-worlds were occupied in their own burgeoning imperialisms, old Earth had had to stand alone when the Kar-chee—the black, gaunt, mantis-like Kar-chee—came swooping down from their lairs around the Ring Stars. Alone and almost defenseless. And, defenseless (in all save their native wit) and alone, what remained of her people had had to fight their way up. Small wonder the very name of the conquerors had, in its corrupted but still recognizable form, become a common curse.

The establishment of Confederation, and a belated recollection of and attention to the first home of man, found scarcely a remnant of the old status still remaining. Gone were the great cities, gone the great states and leagues of states. There might have remained even less than a little, had not the Kar-chee been perhaps more interested in the sea than in the land. In response to impelling plans and reasons known only to themselves, masses of land had been blasted and submerged; others had been heaved up out of the primordial muck. Rivers had been changed in their courses, mountains laid low, mountains raised high.

The old maps were of limited use, where useful at all; and Jon-Joras, gazing at the slow-turning, giant model globe in the lobby of the Lodge, was obliged to forget his ancient history. That done, it was no great feat to locate Peramis, Sartor, Hathis and Drogue, the four city-states which—nominally, at least—divided between themselves the land-mass (more than a peninsula, less than a subcontinent) most frequented these days by those bound on dragon-hunts. And beyond was the uninhabited terra incognita called “The Bosky.”

Aelorex of Aelorex had been right enough in his way. Dragon might perhaps not be the deadliest game, but they were the most prestigious. In ancient legends, preserved in richest form in the worlds of the Inner Circle, those first settled in the great wave of expansion, there were references to dragons. They did not seem to fit the present-day creatures at all. One theory had it that the dragons of the mythic cycles had retreated deep into forests and jungles (or, perhaps, the depths of the seas) and so escaped the attention of reputable historians, evolution... mutation... accounting for the apparent changes. Had the rupturing of the deeps, perhaps, brought them forth again? Jon-Joras wondered.

Others would insist that the Kar-chee brought the beasts with them, pointing to the existence in all their ruined “castles” of great sunken amphitheatres which the remnants of Man on Earth united in calling “dragon-pits.”

One thing alone seemed fairly certain despite all the several theories: Before the Kar-chee came, if there were dragons on Prime World, no one knew of it. And by the time the Kar-chee ceased to trouble, the presence of the dragons was one of the great realities of Terrene life. Somewhere, somewhen during the Kar-chee Reign and the chaos, the mystique 'of the dragon-hunts had developed. And by now, centuries after, it was the only resource of the despoiled planet. Whatever the explanation, it was all very strange, indeed.

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“Odd to think we all came from there,” someone, pointing, said over Jon-Joras’s shoulder as he stood musing before the circling globe.

He nodded, half-turned. It was the Confederation archaeologist, a certain Dr. Cannatin, whom he had, from time to time, heard lamenting in bar-lounge or Lodge-lobby the effort involved (and the money!) in dredging up a single artifact of the ancient days—or rejoicing on the latest one he had nevertheless managed to find.

“How is your new dig coming along?” Jon-Joras asked politely.

Cannatin, middle-aged, and fat, and depilated according to the custom of his native world (wherever it was), looked rather like an ambulatory egg. His round mouth made a grimace. “Hardly getting anywhere at all. The plebs... that’s not what they call them here, is it? No matter. Dog-robbers? Doghunters. Free farmers, as they like to be called—hard people to deal with. They would rather dig potatoes than build sites. Hunt ruins? Rather hunt dogs. And I have to pay through the nose when I can get them, too.” He sighed.

“I’m thinking of giving up around here, setting up a base camp on the far side of the river, near Hathis.”

Jon-Joras asked if the lower class in Hathis was more amenable to archaeology, and Cannatin shook his naked head. “Not thinking of *them*, I’m thinking of the nomads. The tribespeople. There’s a few of their main trails converge over that way. Now, these people going wandering in and out and all around. They must know of sites nobody’s even heard of. So I’m moving. And *soon*—”

The sudden note of urgency surprised Jon-Joras, but before he could inquire, Cannatin, with a mumbled excuse, hurried away. Jetro Yi was not at the Lodge, so Jon-Joras thought he would look for him at the Hunt Company’s offices, seeing more of the “state” en route. A number of pony-traps in the road outside the spacious lodge grounds solicited his custom, but he preferred to walk. Usually the streets in this part of Peramis town were quiet, with few pedestrians; but scarcely had Jon-Joras crossed through the park at the next crossroads when he began to hear crowd noises.

A bend in the stately, tree-lined promenade brought him in sight of the throng, moiling around on the wide mall in front of an important-looking building with a white plastered portico. He had seen its picture in the Company’s travel brochures, reduced to miniature, clients not being much interested in the local architecture; but for a moment he could not recall what it was... the State Hall?... the Chamber of the Board of Syndics?

A blind beggar squatting on the pave lifted his head as Jon-Joras approached. “No room in the Court, your Big,” he croaked, raising his cupped palms and asking a donation. Jon-Joras gave him something and, wondering at the crowd, asked what was going on in court. The beggar canted his head as if to assure himself that no one else was near, said, “Ah, your Big, it’s that dirty Doghunter what killed the Gentleman. For why? Claims the Hunts people trampled his ‘tato patch. Course they paid ’n for it, always does. But them Doghunters is mean greedy, never gives nothing to a blind man, wanted more, he done. Gentleman gives him a piece of stick to bite on, they fights and he kills ’n. Terrible thing, your

Big...”

Jon-Joras left him whining and walked on to the mall. A small group of Gentlemen were standing close together in earnest talk; one of them, with repeated angry gestures towards a larger clot of plebs, seemed urging some sort of action. Jon-Joras’s path led him athwart the larger group, and he paused a ways away to listen.

“—dirt, less than dirt,” a burly man in a greasy buckskin which left half his broad, hairy chest exposed, was saying. “First comes their own kind, then comes their bloody dragons, then comes their damned servants what kisses their backsides, and then comes their pishy customers from out-worlds. Out-worlds! Did out-worlds help us when the Kar-chee come?” His hearers growled and shifted. “And as for us, ‘Less than dirt,’ I says. We is good enough to hunt the wild dogs in the woods to keep things safe, but no more’n that. ‘Free farmers,’ we calls ourselves. Hah! How free c’n we be when our fields what we plants with sweat is no more to them than a path to run on or a wastegrounds to tromple on?”

Times there are when the much goes slow and the little, quick; but now it was that the much went quick—and quicker yet. A cry echoed down the mall, all heads turned, nearer, near, from the Court: “*Guilty! Guilty! Death!*” A shout, fiercely triumphant, from the Gentlemen—the man in the buckskin hurled himself upon them—in an instant the mall was a mass of bloody turmoil into which Jon-Joras felt himself carried away. He struck out, was struck back at.

The crowd, now become a mob, surged back and forth. He fell on one knee, lifted his arms to ward off being trampled on. But the mob had swarmed elsewhere. For the moment he was safe, and then, looking around as he began to rise, he saw the girl on the ground to his right. She was slender and slight and pale, a trickle of blood upon her face.

He started to lift her up. She opened her eyes, her face convulsed with rage; she struck at him, leaped away free. In another moment she was lost in the screaming crowd.

III

The mob did not manage to free the convicted man but did manage to wreck the Court House thoroughly, and was in the act of burning it when the hastily summoned soldiery attacked. The standing army of the City-State of Peramis was small, but it was disciplined and the mob was not. Hence the battle, though nasty and brutish, was also short. The plebs, still roaring defiance, scattered, leaving their dead behind them.

The murderer, who had killed the Gentleman in a fight over more compensation for his hunt-trampled crops, was executed as scheduled; and in the usual manner: bound and gagged and hanged by his feet in the main square, he was filled with arrows by a squad of masked archers.

Whether this was a mistake or not, was much discussed at the Lodge. Chief Commissioner Narthy, killing time until the arrival of the weekly aerospace ferry for ConfedBase—the only area of Earth under direct Galactic rule, it was located on the landmass which the Kar-chee had created out of the Andaman Islands—“Hunter” Narthy treating the lounge-bar to a farewell round of drinks, insisted it was a mistake.

“Why, they’ve given the mob a martyr,” he said, sipping. “Everyone of those poor, down-trodden plebs that witnessed the execution is a potential rebel leader. No... the execution should have been carried out privately, if at all. Then a program of education and land-reform, taking into cognizance the legitimate aspirations of the pleb-peoples—”

But an elegantly-dressed trader from the Blue Worlds shook his head. On the contrary, he said, to do in

secret what had always been done in public would have been to admit to a fear of the mob. And nothing, he said, is more calculated to increase a mob's power.

"Besides," he went on, caressing his glass, "*what* legitimate aspirations of the pleb-peoples' exist? Every Doghunter would like to be a Gentleman, and who can blame him? But who can agree that this is a legitimate aspiration? An armada can't consist of all admirals, can it? As for the right of Hunts to go across plowed land—why, it's part of the age-old principal of eminent domain. This planet has no other resource but its Hunts, no other justification for Confederation being here—or for anyone from outside ever visiting the place."

A middle-aged Company PR man nodded. "And without us," he said, "the place would sink back into barbarism. You can't base a civilization on planting potatoes. No, we owe it to our ancient Mother World to continue our fructifying contact with it."

However convinced the lounge-bar was, much of the population of Peramis thought otherwise. The atmosphere in the streets was hostile, several visitors were jostled or stoned, and that night a Gentleman's country seat was attacked and burned and a number of its loyal servants slain. All in all, Jon-Joras thought he understood why Dr. Cannatin had decided to set up his base of operations elsewhere. He sought out Jetro Yi.

"What do you think of arranging my king's hunt in another city-state?" he asked. "Sartor or Hathis or Drogue? It would not do for his visit to be disturbed by all this unrest."

Jetro shook his head. "It would stir up jealousy, P.M. Utterly. We always try to avoid creating antagonisms of that sort."

Jon-Joras scanned the map. His finger pointed. "How about this area called The Bosky? Base the hunt in Peramis, officially, but have it there, in no-man's-land."

However, Jetro even more earnestly opposed this. He doubted that such arrangements could be completed in time—he was, in fact, certain that they could not. Jon-Joras afterwards concluded that Jetro was likely much more concerned with the loss of his commission if the Hunt was held in another district... but he felt himself ill-equipped to argue against those who held the local ground. He allowed himself to be persuaded that the trouble was dying down (indeed, it did seem to be), and set to work on his own task of preparing for Por-Paulo's visit.

The estate of Thuemorix seemed quite satisfactory, despite its distance from the town—more than twice as far as Aelorix, for instance. He hired a flyer, contracted for food, equipment, extra servants, entertainment, and all the thousand and two things needful. It was not only that he wanted his efforts to be successful from a career point of view. He sincerely liked Por-Paulo. The elective kingships of M.M. *beta* were mankilling jobs. Por-Paulo needed the change.

Thuemorix himself, a middle-aged man with a wry sense of humor, had made the very courteous gesture of sending his family on ahead to Hathis-port, where they had close friends. He stayed behind to offer his assistance to Jon-Joras. "I find that the warmth of affection is often in inverse proportion to the distance between the friends," he said. "As it is, they'll give me such a hail-and-fare-well party in Hathis that we'll never forget it. Between sea-sickness and the fact that we'll have to spend at least four months with my wife's aunt in Bachar, I'll be needing all the pleasant memories I can get."

He brought out his best from the strong-rooms and storerooms to furnish the quarters engaged for Por-Paulo and his aides and guests, moving furniture with his own hands to be sure it was arranged right. Jon-Joras had been helping him, and they were looking around them in sweaty contentment, when the signal of a flyer brought them out to the wide park-like lawn where the vessel had put down.

“What’s up, Roe?” the host called out as they approached. “Don’t tell me—an imprompt?”

Roedeskant nodded while several Gentleman called greetings. “Yes, your High. Wish you’d come along. A big drag’s been sighted by the river fallows what’s part of the Lie lands, and as its Gentleman’s owed me a drag this two-three years, why, he’s kind enough to have give me the hunt of it. Now, your High will recollect that I owes *you* a drag. So, if he don’t mind taking it now as an imprompt—?”

Thuemorix didn’t mind at all. His face lit up. “Just the thing for a send-off,” he said, directing his servants to get his huntgun. “And one for my young guest, too. I don’t think it improper for you to take a chance on a shot,” he said to Jon-Joras, “before your liege arrives, since it’s an imprompt, and hardly counts. Won’t give you a title if you pierce your dragon, you see. We are so particular about the dragons, you see,” he said, his manner suddenly becoming much more serious, “because the dragons used to be so particular about *us*. Do you know what I mean? The Kar-chee used them like dogs, to hunt us down. That’s why, I suppose, that we never use dogs to hunt anymore. Fact. Only of course they are a bit bigger than dogs, a bit fiercer... and, leaving sarcasm aside, infinitely more intelligent...”

Jon-Joras said, “I had really known nothing about all this—”

Thuemorix nodded. “It’s a wonder that there were any of us alive at the end, there, at all... Well.” He relaxed, smiled a bit, and with a wave of his hand invited the outworlder to admire the view below.

Over the forests, denser and denser as they proceeded upriver, the thick meadows and marshlands, the flyer made its way. The atmosphere was cheerful and relaxed. An impromptu hunt was evidently quite a different thing from a regular one. Many of those aboard were younger sons—some of them surprisingly young, including that son of Aelorix whom Jon-Joras had seen at target practice. Evidently the archers today were all gentlemen amateurs.

“Drag’s a monstrous big one, I hears,” said Roedeskant. “The tenant at Lie village sent word down by boat. Don’t know his call, they says.”

“A wanderer, I suppose. Seems to me that there’ve been rather a few more of those than usual, wouldn’t you say, Roe?”

A shadow seemed to fall over the Master Huntsman’s face. “P’raps so, your High,” he muttered. Young Aelorix looked at him, suddenly somber. Then someone started a song, and, one by one, everyone joined in.

The dragon I met in the morning,

I followed him all the day.

I’d waited since my borning,

My dragon for to slay.

“Getting there,” someone said. “There’s the island—”

The musics they grew tired.

Their horns they sounded hoarse.

But I with zeal was fired

As I paced my dragon’s course.

The archers fired a volley,

My dragon for to turn.

When I saw him turn in folly,

My heart with joy did burn.

It was hardly great music or good poetry, Jon-Joras thought, wryly. In fact, it was rather dreadful. But it had a swing and a beat to it. The Aelorix cadet was singing lustily, beating his fists on his naked knees.

My dragon rushed on towards me.

His talons ripped the air.

My bosom swelled with wonder

To see this sight so rare.

My dragon roared like thunder,

His mighty teeth all bare.

My life cannot afford me

More joy than I had there.

I sighted on his crux-mark,

His vital part to pierce—

The rest of the words were lost to Jon-Joras in the babble of voices as the flyer put down in a clearing in the woods, not a great distance from the river. A small group of men was waiting for them; one of them, a tall stalwart fellow in his thirties, dressed in fine-spun, proved to be the tenant—the others were his sub-tenants. By his manner of speech he might almost have been a Gentleman himself, and, indeed, Jon-Joras had learned from the casual comments of the company, that he was the natural son of one.

The bannermen were in the acts of fastening the colored wefts to the ends of their long poles when the low, rather mournful cry broke upon their ears. All heads went up, turned this way and that. They sniffed the wind like animals. “Not too far off,” Thuemorix muttered. “*None* too far off...”

Roedekant quickly got things in order; while he was doing so, Thuemorix repeated the instructions he had given Jon-Joras in the flyer. “Don’t fire until you’re told to,” he concluded, “if you *are* told to. And aim *only* at the crux of the X, remember that. If you hit it, you pierce the only nerve-ganglion that counts. Otherwise you can spend the rest of your life shooting into him, if he’d let you—Holy Father! *Already!*”

He shouted. Lights glinted onto faceted eyes. Thuemorix shouted, Roedekant flashed his arms, cymbals sounded and shawms blared. The dragon came hurtling out of the woods. The bannermen danced and waved to draw him to the right. He ignored them. Cymbals clashed, arrows flew. He ignored them. Bannermen and archers closed in towards him, running. The dragon, running swiftly, too, ignored them. He reared up upon his hind legs and the archers filled the hide of his belly with their barbs and this time he did not ignore them.

Pivoting upon one great jointed column of a leg, he came pounding down upon the archers. “Oh, blood!” someone cried. “A rogue! A rogue! *Rogue dragon!*”

The bannermen flew like deer, teasing their bright flags under his very snout. He roared. They downed their poles and fell, hidden, to the grass. The dragon did not stop, came charging on. Screams and turmoil in the grass.

Blood upon the great clawed feet of the dragon.

“Shoot free, shoot free!” Roedekant shouted. “Any with a sight—*shoot free!*”

Jon-Joras saw three men raise their guns, fire almost together. The dragon came on, the dragon came on, two more shots, then three, then four, the dragon came on. The archers held their ranks, firing their useless shafts. Not one turned to run. And the dragon, hissing, screaming, flanks and chest and sides and stomach bristling with arrows, bleeding, eyes flashing dreadful beauty, the dragon stooped upon the archers. His talons swept to right and left, his head darted down, came up, jaws grinding, head tossing through the reddened air.

The son of Aelorix fired his last shaft as the great bull-dragon’s claws swept him off his feet. The boy’s mouth was open, but no song now came from it.

The beast was everywhere, and so, at last, he was in the sights of Jon-Joras’s gun. *Aim only at the crux of the X* ... He remembered Thuemorix’s voice (where was Thuemorix now?) saying the words. But the crux of the X had been obliterated by all the shots poured into it, was a gaping and bloody chasm. Unthinking, automatically, into it he fired his own shot. And fired. And fired. And—

Someone ran into him full-tilt. His last shot before the gun fell went wild. The man, whoever he was, beat upon him with clenched fists, screaming in terror; at last threw him down and ran. Stunned, scarcely able to breath, Jon-Joras felt the concussion of the great beast’s feet, saw out of the corner of his eye, something vast, something bloodstained go sweeping by. There were screams and screams. A voice cried out, shrill, thickened, ceased.

The sky darkened, wheeled, became a whirling concentric circle. Jon-Joras felt himself go sick and cold. And all was black.

=====

Somewhere in between his fainting and his awakening he had heard what he now identified as the sound of the flyer. A sudden tenseness of his muscles warned him just in time to turn his head. He vomited. Then, fearful, lay back for a long moment. But there was nothing to be heard except the drone of flies.

The sun was out and birds called. How many people had come on the impromptu hunt? Jon-Joras, numbed by the sickening sights that lay all about, did not know. Nor could he guess how many might have made their escape in the flyer (if any but the pilot had) or into the woods. No one answered his calls... at first...

Only when he held the bloodied head on his knees did he realized that he had never known the boy’s name. Aelorix’s boy stared blindly right into the sun. “Tell... tell my mother...” he began.

“I will. I will,” Jon-Joras said. And waited. And waited. But the dead lips spoke no more. Tell his mother! What could he tell her, he wondered, that she had not already guessed and feared!

Numbly following the custom of his own people, he laid a clot of earth on each closed eye, and straightened the arms at full length, folding the hands together in a loose clasp. “*‘Ended is this scene and act,’*” he said. “*‘May the curtain rise upon a fairer one. ...’*” He could not remember the rest of it.

=====

When you have no idea in which direction anything is, it makes as much sense to go in one direction as another. The river and the Lie village were not too far away, but he had no notion where. The sensible thing was obviously to wait right where he was until help came. But this was the one thing he could not do—not at that field of death, over which the dark birds had already begun to circle.

He made a circle of his own around the clearing, and took the first path he found. The afternoon was late indeed before he dared admit that, wherever the path led, it did not lead to the Lie village. And then he heard the dogs. It should not have come to him as the heart-swelling surprise it did. Where there were Doghunters, there were bound to be dogs. Besides, had he not seen their severed heads? Recalling the mottled teeth in the bloody muzzle, he broke into an awkward, stumbling run.

Someone was there; he saw the glimmer of cloth off to one side on the slope. Instantly upon his outcry, it vanished, and he left the path to follow, leaping over fallen trees and little rivulets running through the soft, mossy earth. Someone was there ahead of him in the darkening daylight. . .

A girl.

“Please!” he called. “I won’t hurt you! I don’t want— They’re all dead, all the others—the rogue dragon—”

She stopped at that; stopped and whirled around. The shock of it stopped him, too. For a moment they stood staring at one another. It was the girl he had tried to help on the Court House mall; the girl who had struck at him, run away, as she was, in the next instant, running now.

“Don’t leave me here alone,” he cried, despairingly. “The dogs—! The dogs—!” They were nearer now, and nearer and nearer; they seemed to be all around him. He could no longer see the girl. He snatched up a stick of thick wood and looked to see a large tree that he could get his back against—or, better, climb. But he was passing through an area that had been burned over not many years enough before; there were no large trees at all.

“*Don’t run!*” A man’s voice. He whirled around. The dogs had been on all sides of him because the men who were leading them on thick ropes of braided leather were on all sides of him. He let out his relief in a gusty sigh and let the stick drop.

“Oh, Lord. . . I’m so glad to see you. . . I was on the hunt, back there—” he gestured, indefinitely; he no longer knew just how far or in what direction “back there” was. The men were dressed in hides and cloth; two of them handed over their leashes to others and came towards him.

“It was a rogue dragon, and it wouldn’t die, it wouldn’t *die*—” The words caught and clicked in his throat.

The two men looked at each other. Little lights seemed to kindle in their eyes.

“*Was it?*” said one.

“*Wouldn’t it?*” said the other.

They came up to him and he put out his hand. With untroubled but with deft emphatic movements, one took that hand and one took the other and they swung them behind his back and tied them fast with thongs.

“Walk on,” said one. “Just walk. No tricks. It’s easier to let loose the dogs than to hold on to them.”

He picked up Jon-Joras's stick and thumped him in the ribs with it. "Walk!" he said, again. Jon-Joras walked.

IV

There had been no ponies on MM *beta*. It seemed to Jon-Joras that there was no longer any skin on the inside of his thighs. His hands were now free, but his feet were bound instead, by a line passing under the pony's belly. The dogs loped alongside, from time to time looking up at him—hungrily, it seemed. Their eyes glowed red in the torch-light. He did not remember dozing off, but when he snapped awake, two men who had been holding his arms on either side withdrew.

The uncertain flaring light showed nothing that told him where he was. Not on the interminable path any more, for certain; it was not wide enough for three men to ride abreast. One of the riders grunted, pointed. Another, nodding, said something which vanished into a yawn. Jon-Joras, following the gesture, saw a great black block of rock canted at an angle. Vines grew over it. There was another. And another. The soft thudding of the ponies' hooves suddenly began to echo, the air was instantly closer. They were in a tunnel of some sort; a tunnel which wound around and around, always up-hill. The smell was faint, but it was an alien smell, and he shuddered at it.

A wave of cool air washed his face; the echo vanished. Stars were overhead, but only overhead... not to the sides. He felt, rather than saw, the encircling wall which must be there. Where this place was, and *what* this place was, he had no idea. But he felt certain that it was never built by the men who held him captive.

The hunt itself had taken toll of him a drain of nervous energy equivalent to many days hard work; his long walk, his flight from the dogs, the ride... He fell from the pony, but the pain (as they loosed his bonds) seemed academic. His body was being hurt, but he—Jon-Joras—was not his body. Vaguely, he was aware of being half-carried down a long, winding ramp into a room where torches blazed in sockets on walls so high he did not see the tops. Food was set before him, he ate, nodded, slumped onto the tables. Men stripped him of his trousers, rubbed his sore skin with curiously-scented salve. He fell asleep again while this was being done.

But even in his sleep he heard the hissing, heard the low, almost melancholy call of the dragon.

=====

He awoke on a pile of hides and rushes, sunlight streaming through a window very high up. He blinked. It was not a window, but a breach in the smooth black wall that went up and up and up... The room he was in was not quite a wall, but a partition of planks which scarcely reached higher than his head. He began to get up, stopped, with a sharp cry of pain.

Every muscle seemed sore—including muscles the existence of which he had not known before. He thought that a hot bath might relieve the soreness in tendons and ligaments, as well as remove the grime and dried sweat—but he feared what it might do to the raw skin on the inside of his upper legs. And, at any rate, where in this place—half improvised camp, half ancient ruin—could he expect to find a hot bath?

The answer came sooner than he expected. A fat, toothless old woman came bustling in with a bowl of hot water and a rag. "You'll have to get up now," she said. "I'm going to be needing this room to sort my potatoes. Wash up and get along."

If this were a prison, it was an odd and informal one. He winced, but was glad of the wash, such as it

was. “I don’t know where to get along *to*,” he said, scrubbing gingerly. The old woman said that this wasn’t her problem. So, carrying the trousers he didn’t dare to try to put back on, he wandered out into the hall which sloped down between the partitions. Again the light coming through the hole far up caught his attention. He followed the shaft of sunlight to where it lit on the opposite wall, and it was there that something struck his attention.

It appeared to be a frieze; high up as it was, and at a bad angle, obscured by dirt and cobwebs in places, he could not clearly make it out. But one figure seemed to leap into focus. It was not a human figure. With a blink and a shudder, he understood. He was in one of the ruined and abandoned castles of the noisome and chitin-mantled Kar-chee.

But who the people were who had moved into it as a hermit-crab moves into an abandoned shell, he had yet to learn.

At any rate, they took a friendly enough interest in him as he hobbled slowly along. Someone offered him a fried egg; someone offered him a boiled potato. Someone offered him a finespun tunic that had seen better days. And someone offered to apply another dressing of salve to his saddle-sores, and to bandage them as well. He accepted all these offers.

After thanking the last donor, and finding that he could now walk much more comfortably, he said, “I am not complaining... but how is it that I’m not tied anymore?”

The bandager, a middle-aged man with a broken nose, said, matter-of-factly, “Why, because you couldn’t get out of here until we were ready to let you. Other than that, it’s Liberty Hall.” He chuckled briefly.

Jon-Joras said, “But I must get out of here. I have duties... outside.”

The bandager gave a grim little nod. “We all have duties... outside. For the time being, though, some of us have our duties... inside... as well.”

“Forgive me. But—you don’t talk like a Gentleman *or* like a Doghunter. I’m an outworlder, and easily confused.”

“I’ll tell you. At one time I lived in the State. The town or city, I mean. Drogue. Never been there? Not much of anything. I liked it, though. I was a shopkeeper. Had a little house on the outskirts. A garden plot.” His sentences got shorter and his face grew redder. “My land bordered a Gentleman’s, you see. Ogorix. Rot his blood... One day I came home. Tired. Sit in my garden. I thought.

“Garden? You see one here? That’s what I saw there. His High—” —the word he uttered was not “Nascence”— “had decided to extend his training grounds. So, rather than take a chunk out of his own grass or garden, he merely appropriated mine. Not a flower, not a plant did he leave me. His bloody musics were tramping up and down and under my window where the rosebeds had been.”

In the fight that followed, the shopkeeper had gotten his broken nose. He went from his house to find his shop wrecked, returned from his shop and saw the smoke of his burnt house. “So I went to Hathis. But things no better there I found. The Gentlemen do as they like in every place. Except here. Here, we do as *we* like. But we don’t like it here, much. And sooner or later...”

His mouth twitched. Then he said, in a smothered voice, “You’ll see. Go on, now.”

In some ways it was as if a highly eccentric Gentleman had moved his estate, herds, followers chick-boys and all, into the black basalt ruin of the inhuman and forest-laired Kar-chee castle—and then mixed it all

up, humble-tumble. Here a woman hung a cloth bag full of soft cheese to drip, there a fletcher picked through a pile of feather in his aproned lap. A young boy practiced scales on an old horn. A woman on a stool stitched colored cloths into banner wefts, from time to time giving her rather dirty baby's cradle a rock with her bare (and dirtier) foot.

But nowhere, anywhere, was there a hall windowed with oiled and painted paper, bright with flowers and gay with birdsong and the sound of water, where a dark woman in embroidered robes sat making crystal music.

A vision of the shattered face of the boy with chestnut hair rose before Jon-Joras's inner eyes. What connection there might be between that bloody death and this curious wild encampment, he did not know; only that he felt a stirring conviction within him that such a connection there was. And then, through the contented confusion of the courtyard, a man with a scarred face picked his way.

He did not see, or seem to see, the prisoner at large—or for that matter, anyone else—but everyone saw him and marked his passage. The man was tall, with little deep-set eyes under black brows like nests of snakes. The bones of his face seemed about to burst through the reddened skin, the mouth was an all but lipless slash between the grim nose and the almost impossibly long and heavy chin. The scar went from scalp to neck, interrupted only by the stump of one ear. His feet tramped the black slabs as if all his enemies lay upon them.

Almost automatically, Jon-Joras stopped still and drew in upon himself until the man passed; entirely automatically, he fell in behind—well behind—him. Only as he followed after the unnaturally stiff figure, hands clenched at sides, did the formed thought reveal itself to his upper mind: *where this man was, the answer was.*

And so, passing through the wake of whatever emotion lies between fear and awe, Jon-Joras followed on as if drawn by rope and held by magnet.

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Perhaps it was only a dream dragon that he had heard in his sleep that night. But the one he heard now was no dream—unless this whole scene, Kar-chee castle and court and all, unless *it* was a dream, too. His ear-drums vibrated with the hiss that became a scream. But—*perhaps* it was a dream!—no one else so much as looked up. And still the man walked on and on.

He stopped only at a low wall and there he leaned over. Jon-Joras walked on a bit, then put his hands on the parapet and peered. The thick, dark odor of dragon caught him sharply between nose and throat, but he didn't turn away. Below him in an area partly ringed with seats, a dragon came rushing down the ground. His hide was thick with arrows and the stumps of arrows, and a smell Jon-Joras knew from other places, other times, came from the beast—the fishy stench of old, of rotten blood.

At first glance the scene below appeared to be a normal dragon hunt. Almost at once, though, Jon-Joras saw the differences. It was like seeing double. There, for instance, was the row of archers. But behind them was another row. The arms and hands and bows of the archers moved. The row behind them, clad in the same leaf-green, moved not. And in front of the row of archers was a trench.

The dragon came beating down the ground. Another flight of arrows bored into his hide. He neither plucked at them nor slackened pace. The thought came into Jon-Joras's mind, *this one is no virgin!* At his near approach, the front row of bowmen seemed to vanish into the earth—one jump—the narrow trench, too narrow for a dragon-paw, received them. The row of dummies swayed slightly on the shaking ground. But the dragon ignored them. Unwavering, it rushed on and on.

From behind a low earthen wall directly in his path, up leaped a row of figures, bright banners waving on long poles. Jon-Joras had to squint and peer a moment before realizing that these, too, were dummies. The dragon plunged on through their midst. Jon-Joras flung his head around and his eyes flew down the arena to see what lay dead ahead of the plunging questing beast. He had not far to look.

There were the figures in huntsmen's clothes, guns in hands. Bellowing his hatred, pain and rage, the dragon came on and on and in great, maddened leaps, flung himself upon the group. Jon-Joras had not seen this one trench. He blinked as the figures vanished into it. All but one of the figures vanished into it—that one, a dummy fastened to a stake, flew first right, then left, then was lifted high into the air to be worried as a rat in the jaws of a dog.

Something splashed and splattered on Jon-Joras's face and chest. Thoughtlessly, he raised his hand, wiped at it. It was warm. It was blood. He looked, incredulous, at the figure which the dragon now held in its paws and tore into bits. And then he vomited again.

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"*That*, you see," the tall man with the scar said, abruptly turning to him "is what happens to *traitors!*"

His voice had started out astonishingly soft and smooth, the face as blank as ever; but on the last word the face convulsed, the voice rose into a shriek, cracked upon the last note. The hands leapt up from his sides. Jon-Joras fell back. Then the face struggled, the mask fell into place again. So did the hands.

The voice was soft again. "You outworlder—you're a boy. A pawn, a slavey. You don't know, does you? What's been going on here on our old Earth? Think about the worst enemy they's ever had in your world. Times it twice, add to it. And think what rotten things turns traitor, turns enemy. Is *that*—down *there*—*too* bad for it? Oh, no, boy. No... Too, good." The voice fell lower on the last word, and the effect was somehow more frightening than when it rose. The tiny eyes glinted. The thin mouthed stretched.

Abruptly, he beckoned, turned his back, started down a ramp. And again Jon-Joras followed. Dimly he wondered if the Prime World, supposedly so old and so tired, might not be too much for him. Its unexpected vigor, wasted as it was in strange ways, was all too different from the tight and organized hegemonies of MM *beta*—where even the unexpected was predictable.

They came at last to a scene untouched by the turmoil and disorder of the rest of the place: a chamber immaculately clean, furnished with a trestle bed, a table consisting of a wide plank set on two more trestles, and a doorless cabinet lined with shelves. There were no chairs.

"My name is Hue," the tall man said. "Not Huedeskant and not Huelorix—just Hue. Never mind telling me yours, I know it since you come here. We been watching you. We watches everyone. First, naturally, I thought maybe you was a spy. Now I think you isn't. Probably..." His sentence ended on a significant pause.

"Where was the dragon hunt yesterday? Near the Lie village?" He went to a map on the wall and marked it with a piece of charcoal. "Tell me about it. *All* about it."

His gaunt, scarred face remained impassive, but his tiny eyes glittered under his Medusa's brows. Then he was silent a while.

"All right," he said, answering an unspoken question. "Here it is, see. What justifies the Gentlemen, that they lives on others' labor and does what they likes with others? Why—they hunts drags. Yes. And the drag is terrible big and terrible dangerous. Isn't he? Of course. You has to go out after him with beaters

and musics and bannermen and archers and guns. Yes. And to make damned sure that you kills him, you takes him when he's a chick and marks him with acid—feels carefully for that certain spot and paints the X so the crux is right over it. Correct?"

Jon-Joras nodded.

"All right," said Hue. "Now. If the Gentlemen really had any interest in putting down dragons, they'd have the chick-boys kill 'em... and not mark 'em. Right?"

"Yes, of course—but you're making a point that no one needs to have made. Of course they preserve dragons, the whole place is nothing but one big game preserve."

Hue said, "Right. And they's the game wardens. And what're we? Poachers? We lives here, too. Haven't we got no rights? No. None. Once in ten years, maybe, one of us is lucky enough to get took on as a servant to a Gentleman. And once in, maybe a hundred years, some servant is lucky enough to get made a Gentleman—"

"Roedeskant!"

"Yes... Roedeskant... Does he remember what his grandser was? His stick is heavier against us than anyone's. Or *was*. Don't know, yet, if he got away alive. But, to go back. The drags, now—"

His flat voice droned on. But Jon-Joras was far from being bored at what Hue had to tell him, told him with the endless attention to and reiteration of detail which only the monomaniac is capable of. Distilled, it amounted to a realization that the dragon, *if left alone*, was harmless: a sort of gigantic chicken, with no brain to speak of.

No one needed beaters to go round up sundi so that they would come and be hunted; it was not necessary to tease and to confuse dire-falcon with banners and musics and archers.

The entire principle of the ritual murder which constituted a dragon hunt was *misdirection*. Anyone in good health and who could keep his head, could manage to stay out of a dragon's way—if the dragon was not goaded into frenzy. Such skill as there was in a hunt was mostly on the part of the bannermen. The function of the archers was only to goad the beast—and create a picturesque pattern of arrows on his hide—and make him rear upright, so that his X-mark was exposed. Anyone who could hit a moving target could kill a dragon.

And the dragon was thus always killed.

Wasn't it?

Pea-brained as the species was, the individual members were still, like any creature, capable of learning something from experience. But no dragon was allowed to do so, under the Hunt system. All talk of small, feeble Man the Hunter pitting himself against the skill and cunning of the great dragon was cant and hypocrisy. The novice dragon had neither skill nor cunning, just his teeth, his talons, and his weight. Now and then it had happened, over the years, that some trembling finger on the trigger did manage to miss. If the dragon then turned and ran from the guns, his one vulnerable spot no longer visible—if the same dragon, escaped, was unlucky enough to come across another hunt— and again escape—

"Why, then, boy, you got the one thing that every Gentleman fears more than anything in the world. You got a dragon that knows better. You got *a rogue dragon!*"

Light blazed in Jon-Joras's mind. His body, which had been drooping with stiffness and with pain, jerked straight upright. "And that's what you're doing here!" He cried. "In the dragon pit—you're training

rogues!”

Hue’s scarred head nodded, nodded slowly. “That’s exactly what we’re doing in the dragon pits. We’re training rogues. We’re training the drags so that they’ll know better than to be distracted by banner-wefts and music. We’re training them so that they won’t waste time plucking at arrows. By the time we’re done and he’s ready to be released, you’ve got a dragon that’s what the Master Huntsmen claim every drag really is.” His voice sank and his thin, lipless mouth opened wide.

“And aren’t they surprised...” he whispered.

Memories of that “surprise,” the terror and the panic and the bloody slaughter, made Jon-Joras wince and shudder. But another memory, at first as small and nagging as a grain of sand under an eyelid, grew and grew and became large. “But a rogue dragon,” he said, slowly, “is still only a dragon. It may have learned cunning, but, physically, it is the same. Training hasn’t changed the fact that if you put a shot through a certain place, it dies. I pierced that rogue yesterday, myself. At least a hundred shots pierced it... the crux of the X-mark was obliterated, it was a bloody pulp... but the dragon didn’t die. *Why not?*”

Hue looked at him, relishing the moment. “Why not? Why, because it’s true the dragon’s body hadn’t changed. But something else was changed. Not *in* the body. *On* the body. We don’t take drags that the Gentlemen have already fixed for themselves. Wouldn’t be fools if we did. Oh, no. We got our own chick-boys. And we finds our own chicks...”

Faintly, faintly, conscious of the cold creeping over him, Jon-Joras saw Aelorix looking at the dragon-cockerel, saw the acid-burned finger of the old marky pointing at the X-mark, heard the words, “*Look where he put it, too!*”

“It’s only a matter of a few inches,” Hue said. “A difference you can’t see when you’re looking up from below, and all excited with the hunt. Only a few inches, yes, boy, but it might as well be a few miles.”

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Everything else that Hue told him seemed an anticlimax, though he would have found it exciting enough if he had heard it without the other. There had always been outlaw bands of one sort or another in the forest. But previously, generally, they had been content to remain in the forest.

The one now established in the old Kar-chee castle, however, had no such intentions.

And now a thought which had for some time not been far from the surface of Jon-Joras’s mind rose to his lips as well. *The old Kar-chee castle...*

“But I don’t see,” he began slowly, then proceeded more rapidly; “I don’t see how, if the dragons are as naturally stupid as you say—”

“They are! They are! I do say! No man alive knows more about they, boy, than I do. Dragons had been my science, boy, my library. I know what I tell you.” His thin, almost invisible lips curled away from his teeth.

Jon-Joras, who had paused, brushed his black hair from his forehead, and went on, in part repeating himself in order to complete his question: “If the dragons are as naturally stupid as you say, how is that the Kar-chee could have used them as—so to speak—dogs, to hunt the people down with?”

Hue’s fierceness was somewhat abated by his genuine puzzlement. His perplexity did not seem that of one who merely did not know an answer, rather it was the baffled attitude which comes from inability to

understand the question. “What you mean, boy? That’s what the drags *was*— Karches.”

Now it was Jon-Joras’s surprised incapacity to comprehend. “But the Kar-chee were not dragons—”

“Course they was! What else was they?”

Jon-Joras gestured. “Back down there, near where I slept last night, there’s a frieze—”

“There’s a *what*?”

“A frieze, a relief... Pictures I Carved into the wall, up above.”

Hue shrugged, as he might shrug off a merely mildly-annoying insect. “Oh, them things. Not Karches, boy. Just big bugs. Karches is another name for dragons, just like ‘drag’ is another name for dragon.” Questions, more questions, tugged at Jon-Joras’s mind; he poured them out. How could the pea-brained dragons have ever conquered the Earth and transformed its land and sea—this was the burden of them. But it was clear that Hue knew nothing and cared nothing of all that. Whatever mass of legendary and ignorance his history consisted of, it was not the past which concerned him. So, in the face of his growing annoyance, the conversation changed from the past to the future.

“What do you intend to do about the dragons, if you get into power,” Jon-Joras had asked. And the answer was immediate.

“When we get into power? Drags? They shall all be killed, every one of them—in the egg, and out.”

“And... the Gentlemen?”

“They shall all be killed, every one of them—in the egg, and out.”

At first Jon-Joras thought that Hue had not fully heard nor understood the second question, was still replying to the first. But then he realized that both of the questions had the same answer.

V

And in the night, the Kar-chee chastle was penetrated.

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He had slept but ill, his aches and pains contending with what he had heard from Hue, and what he could not forget of the rogue dragon in the wood and the rogue dragon in the pit, at keeping him at least half-awake. He had heard the noises for quite some time before he even paid much attention to them—padding of feet, whispering, scuffling—and then, when he had begun to wonder vaguely what it was about—

He smelled the smoke and guessed the fire before a scream came, signaling chaos. As even a man whose house is rocked by an earthquake may pause to put on his shoes, so, now, Jon-Joras, while the castle exploded into uproar, slowly and painfully drew on his trousers. They were fighting in the corridor by the time he got there, men of the castle against men he did not know, men in fleecy capes.

Jon-Joras did not know them. But they seemed to know him. “There’s the outworlder!” someone shouted. He turned to try and identify the voice, knowing only that the accent was strange.

Someone seized his arm. “Run! Run!” he cried. “Follow our line—follow our torches—when you see the last one, tell him, ‘*Pony and pride!*’ You got that? Then, run!”

Jon-Joras ran. That is, he proceeded at a painful, agonizing stagger. The torches of the strangers were made of reeds bound in bundles, easy to distinguish from the tarry sticks of the castle-folk; nor were the strangers hard to tell apart, either.

Stumbling and now and then crying out in sudden pain, he made his way through the confusion as best he could. It was only when he stumbled in the darkness that he realized the the fighting was behind him. For a moment he stood still, listening to the echo of it. Ahead, in the distance a single torch flared, and by the uncertain light he saw, or thought he saw, a fleecy cape.

Slowly and fearfully, his hands groping out ahead of him, he made his way along. From the direction of the torch a voice cried, "Who's that? Speak out, or I'll arrow you—by my mother, I will!"

In a strangled voice Jon-Joras said, "Pony and pride!" Then he shouted it: "*Pony and pride! Pony and pride!*"

The man with the torch laughed. His hair and beard was the same light golden brown as his cape. "Come on, then... come on... Ah. The outworlder! How's the fight going, up there? Well enough, I suppose, if someone had time to give you the word. All right!" He stopped and selected a reed torch from a pile at his feet, lit it, handed it over.

"Now—" He gestured. "Straight along as you go, you come to a hole in the wall. Go through it. Wait! Take another light, slow as you're humping along, one might burn out on you. On with you!"

Actually, the torch did not burn out on him—quite. The hole led into a tunnel like the one through which he'd entered the castle, though smaller. Again, the faint and alien odor troubled him... he thought it must be the long lingering emanation of the Kar-chee themselves. The floor of the tunnel was thick and soft and dusty. The roof was hung with cobwebs. The small hairs of his flesh began to prickle. He could have cried with relief when he finally saw torchlight ahead, and the air freshened on his face.

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Riding, curled up on his side, on the soft floor of the litter was better than riding astride a pony, or even than walking. The litter was not there for him, as the person for whom it *was* there had made and was making quite clear.

"Time was, me coney-boy, when I could stride a cob with the best of them, yes indeed, ride all day, frolic and dance and make love all night. But those days are gone, yes indeed Gone before you were hatched, my chick. Or didn't they hatch on your world? Bear live, do they?"

A gust of laughter took the withered little creature in the corner of the litter. It was day, early day, now. But he could still be no more certain if it were very old man or very old woman there, buried in the mound of furs and fleeces; save that it had been addressed as *ma'am*.

"You listening, Jonny? Awake, are you? Good. Not that it makes much difference at me age, there I was, babbling to myself for hours, thinking you were listening, all the while you were dreaming away, but I went on babbling, anyway. We'll stop by and by for a bite to eat and something hot and sweet to drink. Now, then, must mind me manners—

"Ma'am Anna, that's who I am. Call me Queen of the North People, if you like; call me the Tribe-Hag, if it likes you better. One way you look at it, I pays taxes to their nasty, priggish little Lordships the High-Born Syndics of Peramis, Hathor, Sartis and Drogue, for the pleasure of me folks' wandering through what the stiff-necks like to think is their territory. Look at it another way, they pays me tribute for not raiding into their borders. What it amounts to, nowadays, want to know: We exchange presents. Eee,

the folly of folks!”

She winked, tittered, flung up her ancient paws. Then, with a mutter, drew a horn whistle from somewhere under her coverings, and blew on it. Almost at once a head thrust into the litter, and a hearty voice said, “Well, our ma’am, have you finished seducing this young cock-dragon? And can the rest of us, poor respectable nomads as we are, pause and rest?”

The old woman cackled and gestured. A horn blew, voices cried out, the litter (carried by two fat-bodied, short-legged animals that might have been small horses or large ponies) halted. And over the hot breakfast which presently made its way into the palanquin, to be divided between matriarch and guest, Jon-Joras reflected on what he had heard; for he had not been altogether asleep all during the ride, merely too tired to reply or comment.

The raid had not been planned to free him, although that had been part of it. The raid had not been planned to pick up a dozen or so likely young women, although *that* had been part of it, too. (The women had shrieked and struck their captors and engaged in some semi-ritual wailing until cuffed into silence, but they seemed to have accepted their change in fortune serenely enough after not very long.)

“That Hue seems to think that nothing but what *he* wants, counts, me coney,” old Ma’am Anna had complained. “Well, now. How stupid do he think the Gentlemen are? They know that something doesn’t smell right, yes indeed Sooner or later, they’re bound to come looking. Now, we North People, we mind our own business. And we do not want any troops and armies coming and poking around. Wars, you know, me boy, wars are catchy things.”

Boiled down, then, the raid had been intended to reestablish the status-quo before the city-states went to arms in order to re-establish it themselves. And, the dragons, she had said, were dead—dead in their enclosures behind the pit. Pausing with a piece of wild honeycomb in his fingers, Jon-Joras asked about that.

“How were the dragons killed, Ma’am Anna? I heard no gunfire. No one could have gotten a good shot by the torchlight, anyway. Besides, they were all marked wrong.”

She nodded, supped noisily from her bowl. After a moment, she wiped her toothless mouth, said, “That’s another thing, you see. Hue and his rogues. Rogue drags can be as bothersome as soldieries, yes indeed I daresay he intends they all go downriver, towards the hunting country. I suppose he does his best to drive them so. But they don’t, me cockerel, no, they don’t always stay drove...

“How were they killed? Why, we poisoned them. Never mind what poison. Leave at least one of us be able to eat with an easy mind.” She bent over in a spasm of silent laughter.

Breakfast over, the day quite on its way and the sun warmer, Ma’am Anna had the curtains of the litter drawn back and relinquished a layer or two of her coverings. The signal horn sounded, and the nomads got on their way once more. Far off in the bosky distance a faint smudge showed in the air on the horizon. The black stones of the sinister, alien Kar-chee castle would not burn, but just about everything the outlaw Doghunters had carried into it was flammable.

“How did Hue get his scar, do you know?”

Her wrinkled lips came together in a pout. She shook her head. “That was bad, yes indeed Someone with an -ix to the tail of his name—this was when Hue was just small of size—decided he didn’t find him meek enough. Maybe was drunk, too. However it was, he picked him up by the scruff and tossed him in with a dragon-cockerel that he happened to have around. The cockerel was bigger than Hue was... I don’t altogether blame the man. Things oughtn’t to be the way they are, altogether. But letting a madman

burn down the barn is no way to improve them.”

It was not a barn, exactly, which was burning back there. Her eyes followed his and, evidently, her thoughts, too. “Do they have dragons where you come from, coney?”

No. No, I suppose not. Because you never had no bloody Karches, did you, then? Lucky you. Did you know that they turn into Karches in the night-times? Yes indeed So you be careful, hear me now, in wandering off in the dark. Particularly if we gets near unto The Bosky. Fierce, terribly fierce, is them Bosky drags.“

Jon-Joras, torn between his desire to hear more of this new aspect of the legend—the dragon as were-Kar-chee— and his desire to hear more of the almost unknown land beyond the official territories of the city-states, decided that if he let her talk he might well hear of both. Which he did.

The nomads apparently knew very well that the dragons were not Kar-chee. How Hue and Hue’s people had formed the notion that they were, Jon-Joras could not guess and didn’t now try. The notion that at certain times and in certain places the dragons shifted their shapes into those of the long since departed Kar-chee was perhaps, however, not much more scientific. If at all.

“... they even changes their smell, me cockerel,” old Ma’am Anna hissed, wide-eyed in emphasis.

“I know how dragons smell, but how do... how did the—”

“The damned and bloody Karches? You knows that, too. You was in their castle for sure enough, yes indeed.”

Was that faint and alien odor that he had noticed, then, indeed that of the castle-keeping Kar-chee? Faint, faint, so very faint—yet still so distinct. The thought alone was capable of evoking it. Could it have lingered all these centuries? He could not say, could not begin, even, to conjecture. And, as for The Bosky—

Time and time again nomad bands had desired to graze their flocks on the rich and untouched grasses there. But the dragons were so incomparably fiercer in that region that it was long since any herdsmen had even thought of trying. Too, in times past, free farmers—individually and in groups and leagues—had endeavoured either to settle in The Bosky or at least to pass through it in search of regions where the Syndics’ writs did not run. Where farm land might stay farm land and not become a target-alley or a parade-ground, where potatoes might stay where planted until harvested and not be dug up and trampled into muck because they had impinged on dragon ground. That curious and strange loving hate existing between hunters and hunted... Off, then, their gear and baggage laden aboard crude wagons and on pack-horses, did they have any; or bending beneath the weight themselves, did they have none, the free-farmers had set off for finding places where they might be free indeed and farmers indeed and need nevermore be “dirty doghunters” save on their own account.

“Some come back quicker than they went, young outworlder. It made them content to suffer what they’d suffered in discontent but where the dragons don’t fight unless they’re coaxed or goaded. I says, ‘*It* made them...’ What did? Why to see how terrible them awful Bosky drags tore up them as went before them. In their blood they saw them, yes indeed, mere bones and shreds,” Ma’am Anna sighed.

Jon-Joras caught at a word. “ ‘Some’ came back, you say—?”

“You mean, and what’s of the others? Isn’t it clear? Them as was found torn and scattered, was them that never come back.”

He frowned and mused. There was nothing utterly impossible in this account, nothing of the historical absurdity of confusing Kar-chee with dragon nor of the physical impossibility of the one turning into the other and back again, so. But there remained one considerable question which alone put the whole matter into doubt.

“Are the dragons any bigger or any different there than here?”

“Nope.” Ma’am Anna smacked her gums. “Just fiercer, like I say.”

But... “And this was it:” “Why should they *be* fiercer there? I mean, with no one to hunt them and bother them, you’d think they’d be *less* fierce, wouldn’t you?”

“No, I wouldn’t,” she said, with inflexible logic; “because I knows they be *more* fierce. As to why, hee hum, old as I am and not fit for much, rather than go and maybe find out and be made into salad meat, by your leave, me coney, I’ll stay over here and in ignorance.”

And there the matter rested.

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They were due to meet up with the main horde at about noon; and, at about noon, they did. The camp was, like a Gentleman’s seat, a small city-state of its own. Tents and lean-tos dotted the area for about a mile, the small animals from which the fleeces evidently came milled and bleated, and ponies by the thousands—so it seemed—grazed in hobbles. And in the center was the great circular tent which was the Ma’am’s capitol.

“Mutton!” she directed, as she was being lifted down.

“I want me fat mutton—grilled and crisp and chopped fine!”

“Yes, our Ma’am.”

“And tomorrow I want the the flocks taken up to the white stony brook—that was all burnt over a while back, should be nice, fresh grazing.”

“Yes, our Ma’am.”

“Tomorrow. Not today. Today I want the children to go up there instead. Have ‘em bring all the buckets and baskets—there’ll be good berrying there.”

“Yes, our Ma’am.”

They set her down on a pile of fleeces and blankets raised off the floor, propped her up with pillows.

“Did Cuthy beg Brun’s pardon, publicly, like I said?”

“He did, our Ma’am.”

“Paid him twelve goats, too?”

“Twelve goats, our Ma’am. He wanted to include a wether, and Brun wouldn’t have it, but the Elders said a goat-was a goat, so he took it, rather than do without.”

She nodded. “That’s right. There’s many a buck with stones that does the nannies no good; this way he won’t have to wonder... Teach Cuthy to leave Brun’s woman alone. All right! All right! Get out, now!

Stop vexing me old head with all your questions. Bring enough mutton for the outworld boy, too. Come sit... of whatever way is comfortable for you... over by me. Now, then—”

She took his hand. “We’ll be here long enough for you to mend. What do you think on doing, once you can ride. again?” He said that he thought he’d rather not ride again at all, asked if she couldn’t send a messenger for a flyer to take him back to Peramis. “Ah, me cockerel, but isn’t that part of the question? What do you think on doing, once you’re back in Peramis?”

Seeing that he was still not understanding her, she explained in detail. What did he plan to say about things? The rogue dragon... the mysterious, secretive Kar-chee castle and what it contained... the nomad raid... He began to catch her drift; asked what she thought he should say.

Slowly, the old head nodded.

“That’s the point. Yes indeed, that’s the point. You see, me coney, few things are ever simple. If you go back and talk free, then the wasp’s-nest is stirred up for sure. The armies come out. We don’t want that, for our own reasons. And when the armies are out of the States, what’s then? Riots, I hear, in Peramis. Put down by the army. Maybe the Dogrobbers would just as soon sacrifice their tricks off in the woods, for a chance to burn things up.”

He had to agree that it was not simple. Certainly, he could not forget what had been done to the son of Aelorex, his former host, to whose salt he assuredly owed something. Certainly, he could not deny that the outlaws had just grievances. More: they, too, had been his hosts. Finding him wandering near their secret place, they had been justified in taking him prisoner; but they had treated him with kindness, once he was safe inside.

“Is Hue still alive?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know for sure. The men told me they saw him go down, before they had to withdraw. But they’re not sure he wasn’t in shape to get up again. Why?”

He told her why. “*They shall all be killed, every one —in the egg, and out...’*”

“When things reach such a stage,” Jon-Joras said, “the right which is based on having been wronged becomes a wrong in itself.”

The old woman stooped her chin upon her hands. She sighed. “Well... Well... We have to think. Both of us. But not now. Here they are with the mutton. If there is one thing I don’t have to puzzle about, it’s mutton,” she said, contentedly. “I like it fat. And I like it crisp.”

=====

From time to time in the next few days, Jon-Joras thought about his forcibly neglected duties. He knew that Por-Paulo would not blame him or think less of him; besides, the Hunt Company was experienced enough to fill the gap well enough in making arrangements. Meanwhile, there lay open before him the life of the nomad encampment, utterly strange to him except as a half-forgotten paragraph in half-forgotten books. In a way it was far freer than any life he had ever known, but it was subject nonetheless to the sway of law. The tribesmen elected their council of elders and over the elders was the old queen, Ma’am Anna, who ruled them all as the benevolent semi-despotic matriarch of a family. But even old Anna had to go where the grass was green and the water was sweet; even she could not prevent storm and snow and flood and disease.

She gave Jon-Joras a pony, as casually as she might give a child a sweet; the tribe had plenty of ponies,

after all (she said), and she could not burden her litter with him forever. He thanked her for the gift-somewhat fearfully, remembering how sore he had been from his first ride—and somewhat reluctantly, realizing that this probably meant he was not going back to Peramis in the immediate future. But there was nothing he could really do about it... except make the most of it.

He learned how to ride the shaggy little beast, gingerly at first, then with growing confidence and enjoyment, over the low swelling hills and flatlands fresh with new herbage; only a fleecy pad for a saddle, only a braided grass rope for a bridle, the sweetsmelling wind in his face instead of the strong musty odor of sheep which hung around the camp site.

Sheep and shepherds alike fell behind him as, food in his saddle-sack and water in his leather bottle, he set as his goal some distant landmark—a wooded hilltop, a pond glittering in the sun, a valley opening wide in welcome—and headed for it. No one, least of all Ma'am Anna, seemed concerned about his possibly not returning, any more than his earlier hosts, the outlaws, had been. He was after all as bound by his limited knowledge of the terrain as by the encircling high black walls around the castle of the swarming, conquering, and now-vanished Kar-chee.

Both Jon-Joras and the tribesmen, however, were in this guilty of one mutual mistake. Both realized that he did not know enough about the countryside to escape successfully. Neither realized that he knew little enough about it to get lost successfully. But he did.

Born and raised upon the infinitely controlled planet which was M.M. *beta*, where everything was so complex as to be simple, so controlled, so subdued, so organized, that even a blind man could hardly lose his way; Jon-Joras—despite theoretically knowing better—did not consider the possibility that one wooded hill, one pond, one valley, might well look just the same to him as another. He had always found his way back successfully before. If by nothing else, he guided himself automatically by the almost tidal regularity of the flocks and herds as they drifted back, campwards, as the day drew to a close.

He never thought to ask, and no one thought to inform him, that the lands towards which he rode that day had been so thoroughly grazed that the flocks and herds had been diverted from them, sent elsewhere. Once outside the perimeter of the camp Jon-Joras rode through empty fields -but this meant nothing to him. He noted the brook to leftwards, and headed in its general direction. But much broken land lay between them, and the source of the stream was in one of the many declivities he was bound to avoid. So when, at last, he finally saw a brook to his left, he did not realize that it was not the same brook but another and a farther one. Guiding himself by its course, eventually he turned the pony's head and began (so he thought) to ride back towards the encampment.

The cooling air and the still-empty landscape told him of his escape. But it was an escape as useless as it was inadvertent, one of which he could make no use. He had no idea of where he was, none of where he wanted to go, and (he realized with some surprise) little of even where he wanted to be. There on the hilltop in the sallow light of lowering day, M.M. *B* seemed infinitely far off in space and time and reality, Peramis was the mere thin fabric of a dream, and the encampment of the tribe little more than a setting from a 3D drama or travelogue.

He sighed. After a moment he began riding his mount in a slow circle on the rise of ground. He saw nothing and nothing and yet nothing. Sunshine and clouds wheeled in counter-circles, slotted shafts of light broke through the gathering dusk, and in one such thrust of brightness he saw three small figures riding along far away and below. He thumped the pony in the ribs and rode towards them.

=====

They were long in hearing him, indeed, it was only after he ceased to call after them that they turned

around, perhaps having heard the sound of the hooves... perhaps not even having precisely heard them... but become somehow aware of... something. However it was, they turned, drew rein, awaited him.

They were three in number—one was an older man, one was a younger man, one was a woman. To be more exact, a girl. To be even more exact, the girl who had repulsed his assistance in the mob scene before the Hall of Court... the girl whom he had seen and who had fled from him in the woods between the fatal coming of the great rogue dragon and his capture by the outlaw Doghunters.

=====

She had said something upon seeing him now and, obviously, recognizing him; something swift and low-voiced to her companions. And then for a long while, all four of them riding through the long, slow twilight over the empty plains, she said nothing, but slumped her chin into the blue cloak whose folds enveloped her.

The older man was a swart, stocky, grizzle-bearded fellow, his knees stuck out at angles from the sides of his thin gaunt horse. He wore a long cloak of the same blue as the girl, but, cast half aside, it revealed a garb of greasy buckskin beneath. Gold rings glittered in his hairy ears. His male companion was something else altogether—young, slender, upright and trim... *elegant* was the word which occurred to Jon-Joras. His tunic was Gentleman's white, his trousers the elaborate embroidered affair worn on festivals by tribesmen, and his cloak—arranged with elaborate neatness so as to leave his arms free—was fastened across his chest with a silver chain and clasp. A bracelet of gold chased-work encircled a wrist held out as stiff and proud as if it bore a hawk.

At length the elder cleared his throat and spat. He scratched himself reflectively. "I've been thinking on what you said before, Henners," he observed. "And I can't see that I agree, no, not one bit. There is nothing at all wrong with the triolet."

"Nonsense, Trond," Henners said, vigorously. "It is archaic, contrived, artificial, jejeune—and anything else you like. It altogether lacks the simplicity and directness of the couplet, neither does it lend itself to amplified assonance and alliteration."

Trond screwed his face up into a truly hideous squint, compounded with a frown. "But the couplet"—the last word exploded into an enormous eructation—"the couplet is so monotonous!"

And so they rode on, as the air turned blue and the sky went purple and the first tiny stars appeared, discussing different modes and meters of poetry; and finally the bright and dancing light of a fire shone before them. And another, and another. Voices hailed them, figures rose and crowded around. The girl dismounted, someone took her horse, she vanished from Jon-Joras's sight.

"Fellow poets," said Henners, gesturing, "allow me to present our guest, one Jon-Joras by name, an outworlder and sometime semi-captive of those coarse persons, the Northern Tribe. I think we may be of some small assistance to him in the matter of getting him back to a state... and I think we will find him not ungenerous, hem, hem, in the matter of expenses. Well! Are we not to eat and drink before falling to the making of new verses and rhymes, the chief end of such portion of mankind as dare deem itself civilized?"

Invitations were at once shouted, the guest was assisted from his pony and led to a seat by the largest of the fires, where a pair of lambs were grilling on a spit over a bed of coals. Someone thrust a goblet into his hand, of some drink which managed to taste both sweet and acid at the same time; and strong, and smelling of honey.

“First verse!” a voice close to him called. Others took it up. “First verse! Guest! Outworlder! First verse!”

The realization that he was to compose, instant and impromptu, a short poem, found Jon-Joras with an empty mind. Empty, that is, of everything except the feeling that there was something odd about the lambs which were becoming supper. He held up his hand, the crowd became silent. He spoke:

“Three rode forth, and four returned

When supper grilled and fire burned.

A mystery they found, ere sleep:

Whence came lambs, when there’s no sheep!”

The briefest of quiets followed the recitation. Then it was swallowed up in a burst of laughter. Someone pounded him on the back. Someone poured more drink into his golden goblet. And someone on the other side of the fire, whose face he could not distinguish, started a reply.

“Such miracles you find, our guest,

Along with drink and food and rest.

The truth we tell, although it grieves:

The simple fact is—we are thieves!”

VI

Poets there were on MM *beta*, though mostly employing verse forms so involved and elaborate as to make the triolet seem simpler than the couplet. And there were thieves there, too, although even the apprentice ones would scarcely bother with anything as small as a lamb. Poetic thieves, however, or thieving poets—this was something new to Jon-Joras. He suspected it might be something new (or, at any rate, something different) to students of societal set-ups throughout all the teeming galaxy.

And so, there by the leaping flames, he leaned and he listened—amused, amazed, disapproving, entranced—while Henners recited (in couplets and quatrains) his exploits in removing the jewels and gold and silver plate of His Serene Supremacy the Chairman of the Board of Syndics of Drogue, while the latter sat at meat in his high chamber.

With guests.

He was mildly annoyed at the distraction of having a voice break in on the recitation... at first. But when the words sank in, he forgot Henners and all his works.

“She’s a mean one, that baggage... isn’t she?”

Jon-Joras, turning his head and seeing Trond, face reddened by the fire light, had somehow no doubt who was meant by “she.”

“Who *is* she?” he asked, half-whispering. Trond jerked his head to the left, moved off, and Jon-Joras followed him. Henner’s voice was still audible when they stopped at last, but the words could no longer be made out. A fat and gibbous moon rode the cloud-flecked skies and afforded plenty of light to the park-like glade where the thieves’ jungle was set up.

“Who is she?” Trond repeated the question, sat himself on a moss-covered tree trunk lying where it had fallen in some long-ago storm. He did not answer the question, said, instead, “She claims you’re following her...”

Speechless indignation followed by indignant speech. She claimed that he was following *her*? If the truth was anything at all like that, it was strictly the other way around. He told the older man of finding her in the mob scene in Peramis when the Doghunter had been convicted of killing the Gentleman, of his own attempt to help her and how it had been repulsed—almost rabidly.

“That could have been an accident, our meeting the first time. She couldn’t have known I was going to be there, I certainly didn’t know she was going to be there. And as for the second time—” Abruptly, he stopped. Did Trond or any of his fellows know about the Kar-chee castle and what was being done there? And, assuming that he and they didn’t, did Jon-Joras want them to? Quick reflection decided him that he didn’t. He went on, a bit lamely, “—and the second time I was just lost in the woods, I’d gotten separated from the people I was with, and I was picked up by some Doghunters.

“I had no notion she’d be wandering in the same woods. And this last time, I—”

“You got lost,” said Trond, nodding, expressionlessly. “Again.”

The night was warm, but the young man felt his face go warm. “It may sound like an unlikely coincidence,” he said, defensively, “but you have to remember that I’m an outworlder... a stranger... And besides—how could I have known that she—and you—would be riding along at just that time.

Trond grunted. He produced an oddly-shaped piece of wood, thrust it into a pouch and did something to it, blew on the end of a stick he’d brought with him from the fire, and, when it glowed red, thrust the device into his mouth and touched it with the ember end. Odd little noises, then a cloud of smoke... and another... the acrid odor made Jon-Joras cough a bit—and then he remembered. Tobacco! Its use had not followed mankind outward to the stars, and even here on its native world it was suppose to be all but extinct. Where had Trond gotten the ancient herb? For surely the Poets cultivated no crops! Most likely he had stolen it.

“Well,” said Trond, on a prolonged note, with a puff, “I’m just telling you what she says. I could think of a lot of ways it might be true... if I was minded to... but I’m not. Why not? Because. Like I say. She’s a mean one, that baggage. As the triolet says—”

But Jon-Joras did not at that moment want to know what the triolet said. He grasped Trond’s knee, and repeated, “Who is she? *Who?*”

Trond puffed at his pipe a moment more. “Her name,” he said, “is Lora.”

Lora. “No... It doesn’t mean a thing to—”

“Maybe her father’s name might mean a thing to you.”

“Her father?”

Trond nodded. His pipe made a gurgling sound. “Yes. Tall, thin, *ukh*-looking man. Name of Hue.”

=====

Away in the night Henner’s voice ceased. There were cheers and applause. Jon-Joras, feeling stunned, feeling stupid, said, “But *she* hates me. Her father doesn’t hate me.”

Trond made a noise which might have been a grunt or a chuckle. “Don’t fool yourself. Of course he hates you. You’re an outworlder, aren’t you? Well, figure it out. According to him, according to her, if you—all of you—didn’t come here to hunt, the whole system would collapse. It doesn’t pay for itself, that’s for sure. Not hate you? He’s just older, has more control over his feelings, that’s all.”

In his mind’s eye Jon-Joras saw once again that grim, gaunt figure, preternaturally rigid, stalking the halls and walls and ramparts of the great black stronghold of the cold-blooded, castle-keeping Kar-chee; heard the screams of the rogue dragon in the pit, trained by torment—dragons: Hue’s enemy: prepared to fall upon Hue’s other enemy. Once again he saw the figure of the dummy that was no dummy, trussed and tied, then tossed and toothed and torn to bleeding fragments; heard the outlaw’s outraged cry, “That... is what happens to *traitors!*”

Hue hated him? Yes... it was clear enough now that he must. And what must he think of him now? What, but that he himself, Jon-Joras, freed by the nomad raiders, taking with him the castle’s secret, was himself a traitor? And Jon-Joras imagined himself bound and fastened in the dragon-pit, watching and waiting and hearing and smelling the maddened creature come trampling down the pounded ground towards him...

Nothing could save him from that, were Hue to take hold of him again. He felt his chin tremble and his skin grow cold and wet. If the daughter did not believe that he was accidentally present in the forest along the way to the outlaws’ castle, would the father? Not likely.

“They mustn’t take me,” he muttered, his voice uneven. “Not again. Not again.”

Trond pursed his wide mouth, waved his hand. “Not much danger of that,” he said. “You’re worth more to us by getting you back to one of the states. Provided, of course,” he raised his eyebrows, “provided, of course, you meant what you said. About our, uh, expenses... ?”

Jon-Joras assured him that, of course, he meant it. “Jetro Yi, the Hunt Company representative, has an ample fund, sufficient to repay you. Generously. Generously!”

The other man rose, stretched. “That’s all right, then,” he said, yawning. “We’ll get you back, all right. Oh—” A sudden thought seemed to occur to him. He put a hand on Jon-Joras’s shoulder, leaned so close that the reek of his tobacco was strong in the cool night air.

“You know one of ours, by the name of Thorm? Kind of a bandy-legged fellow with bulging blue eyes and his verses don’t scan? No? Well... Anyway... Watch out for him. Kind of carefully. Let’s be getting back to the fire, it’s growing cold.”

The moon continued to wander up the sky and a light mist was settling in the glade. The effect was luminous and ghostly.

“Thorm,” Jon-Joras repeated. “Why should I? I don’t know him at all. Does he know me?”

Trond stopped to rap his pipe against the boll of a tree. “No,” he said. “But he knows Lora.”

=====

Jon-Joras recognized Thorm at once when, as soon as they got back to the fire, the man stepped forward, gave him an ugly look, spat on the ground, then stooped, dug up the clot of earth with the spittle on it, and flung it into his face.

=====

“Well, *well*,” said Henners, in a tone of pleasant surprise. “This *is* an honor, young our guest. You may neither realize nor appreciate it, but it is truly very seldom that we accord the dignity of challenged combat, and all that it implies, to those not of our own select group. And certainly not as soon as this. Some might be inclined to disallow it... Eh?” He looked around in a politely questioning manner.

Trond said, “It’s not customary. It’s what you might call an innovation.”

There was a murmur of approbation. “Like free verse,” someone added, disapprovingly. But another voice said, “I wouldn’t be inclined to quibble. The guest’s poesies were really quite acceptable, I thought, from a non-poet—wouldn’t you agree? Voice vote! Voice vote!”

And the *Gos* outnumbered the *Nos*.

“Very well,” Henners said, equitably. “It’s go, then— Oh, if the guest accepts. Do you?” he asked. “Do you choose to accept the challenge and all that it implies?”

Jon-Joras felt that he would much rather not; much, much rather not. But he felt unable to say so. And he asked what other choice he had, instead.

Henners cleared his throat, frowned slightly. “I, well, really, the other choice is so very unpleasant, I would really rather not go into it. My word as a rhymers. Accept the challenge. Eh?”

And Jon-Joras nodded. And a cheer went up.

A space was cleared, two wicked looking knives produced, one given to Thorm and one to Jon-Joras. There were ritual preliminaries, but he did not hear them. A chill was on his heart, and with all his chill heart he cursed this the world of his race’s birth and all its bloody ways. Knives! Duels! Combats! What did he know of such things? On his own home world nothing more dangerous than wrestling-

And, “*Go!*” cried a hundred throats.

Thorm came forward in a sort of dancing crouch that instantly put Jon-Joras in mind of a stance quite popular at the Collegium; finding that the knife in his hand not only felt unfamiliar but was likely to impede him, he thrust it between his teeth, and then, almost automatically, without a second’s hesitation, leapt forward, grasped Thorm by the right ankle, and pulled him off his feet.

A cry of delight went up from the crowd, including one man who was casually whittling the end of a long stick.

Thorm fell, Jon-Joras released the ankle and reached for the shoulders. But Thorm, whose knife was not between his teeth, slashed at him; Jon-Joras swerved, missed the shoulders, felt the knife tear his side. At the moment what he felt was not pain, but a sort of sick surprise.

They broke and parted. Jon-Joras had achieved the first fall, but Thorm, the first blood; and as they were engaged, not in a wrestling match but a duel to the death, progress so far was definitely his. One thing was clear: Jon-Joras must henceforth concentrate, not on his opponent’s shoulders, but on the wrist of the hand holding the knife.

What followed was a nightmare. The thud of body against body, the smell of sweat, the fear, the trembling, the scramble towards safety, the eye ever on the bloody knife...

... the bloody knife which once more, then twice more, then a third time more, grew bloodier yet from his own torn flesh.

It happened thus: Thorm had left himself open and Jon-Joras jumped him, had—almost—his fingers upon the wrist of the knife hand, felt his foot turn upon a pebble, swerved without meaning to or being able to prevent it, was seized by Thorm and carried backward, downward, backward— Then he partly righted himself, did, indeed, grasp the dangerous wrist. And so they found themselves, half-crouching, half-kneeling, unable to move one the other. But it was Jon-Joras, held fast by Thorm's arms and legs, whose back was to the fire. And his back was very close to the fire, and soon the smell of his singed tunic came to his nostrils, and after that began the pain. Pain unbearable.

He did not later remember doing what he knew he must have done. All he remembered was, suddenly, in the sudden silence, seeing—over Thorm's shoulder—the handle of the knife buried in Thorm's back. Thorm never said a word nor made a sound as he slumped, sagged, sank with all his weight into Jon-Joras's arms. Who, his back seeming all afire, screamed, gave a mighty thrust forward, felt himself staggering backward—

—and was grasped by many willing hands and pulled away. His smoking tunic was torn from his bleeding body. Voices cried, "*Take! Take!*" He stared at them, stupidly.

"Take what?" he asked.

For answer, someone seized the knife from Thorm's hand (the body lay where it had fallen, on its back, the prominent blue eyes staring at the starry sky, mouth open on a note of unutterable surprise), someone ripped open tunic and pulled up shirt, someone parted the pale skin of the chest with the knife, reached in, twisted, tugged, hand emerging with something dark-red and dripping. It was in an instant skewered on a long stick and someone handed the stick to Jon-Joras.

He grasped hold of it automatically and uncomprehendingly. "What... what do I do with it?" he asked.

There was a *huh?* of astonishment; then the man who had whittled the sharp end to the stick, this man said, "*Do* with it? Why, what else would you do with your enemy's heart—except grill it and eat it?"

Body shuddering, face twitching, Jon-Joras held it at arm's length, as far away as he could, straining to be quit of it. But it didn't vanish, it stayed where it was, and it dripped. "No..." he said. "No... No... I can't..."

"You *can't*? But—why *not*?"

Neither could he vanish himself. He forced himself to answer. "It. Is. Against. My custom."

At length the puzzled silence was broken by Henners. He took the stick with the pierced heart out of Jon-Joras's clenched, stained hand. "Well, if you can't, you can't," he said. "Of course, one must keep one's custom. But... Still... Well, all I have to say is, in that case, you've wasted a damned good man."

=====

Had Jon-Joras wisdom to know and freedom to choose, he could scarcely have selected anything better for him just at that time than that which was selected for him. No sooner was his back dressed with scented oil and his wounds medicated and bandaged, than Henners and Trond asked if he felt well enough to ride.

"It won't be very far," the older man said, a hint of constraint in his voice. "Then we'll take water."

Jon-Joras said that he did. "I'd appreciate it," he added, "if my pony could be returned, with my thanks, to Ma'am Anna. I don't want her to worry about where I am." She might worry about other things connected with his leaving her custody, but he could not help that.

Henners nodded, and they were on their way. The camp-fires had died down and the camp was sunk in sleep. Of Lora, there was no sign. The moon was low on the horizon as they rode along the trail—trail which must have begun to follow water quite some while before Jon-Joras noticed it—which was only when they suddenly swerved and startled to splash across the ford. The splashing must have been signal enough to alert the three men who came out of the moon-mist and darkness to meet them on the other side.

In the low-voiced talk which followed, he took no part until Henners broke off and spoke to him. “That’s right, isn’t it—you’ll pay the expenses of the boaters, the watermen, as well as ours?”

“Yes.”

He followed them along the narrow beach south of the ford, trees and bluff overhanging closely, the air very dark and cool and damp, the water widening, the water mumbling and cooing to itself in a low, slow, confident voice. “Best dismount now,” someone said. “Take my hand,” someone said. There was a shoving and straining in the darkness deep into the banks and suddenly there was a boat upon the water and they were in the water and it rose over their feet and onto their legs. “Take my hand... here... gently...” And they were in the boat.

For yet a little while the moon sent silver ripples and silver mist to mark their passage as they glided (with only now and then the plash of a paddle, so it seemed) straight down the water into the huge and ghostly moon. Then, slowly, then, rapidly, it sank into the water and was gone. For a while all seemed so black. Later, starshine showed them their way. And then the stream disembogued into a wider water which Jon-Joras knew must be the great river itself; it shook the long, low and narrow craft for a moment; then the boaters lifted their paddles in unison. *Ssss...* the paddles plunged into the bosom of the water... *ssss...* they rose again... And so, hissing the rhythm, the watermen guided their craft steadily out into the quiet water of the clear channel. And all of his sickness, his sorrow, his disquiet and his pain seemed to leave him, seemed to sink into the broad and watery plain he rode upon, seemed to wash away. And a cleanness and a quiet took a hold of him, and he floated off into a sleep.

He awoke into a misty, pearl-gray dawn. Henners sitting upright looked as trig and elegant as ever; Trond sprawled on a gunwhale, snoring loudly. Now for the first time Jon-Joras was able to a clear look at the boaters—all of a family, seemingly, or perhaps their looks were all of a clan—race—caste—rufous, long-haired little men, with skinny legs tucked under them as they tirelessly plied their paddles.

Well before the sun had done its work of burning the concealing mist off the water, the watermen had taken the boat off the main stream and up a narrow inlet leading into a still narrower, winding creek; and moored her to a skeleton tree near a tiny clearing. Quickly, they cut brush for a lean-to, trimmed the short and springy-twiggy sprigs of an evergreen for bedding. Trond half-scrambled, was half-pulled ashore; like a sleep-walker, began to snore before he sank down again. And they with him.

Once, springing stiff and terror-stricken from the slackness of dreamless slumber, Jon-Joras heard a dragon sounding its deep and melancholy mating call. But it was not near, and when next it came it was farther yet away. And the fatigue, and the ability of his young and healthy body to respond to it, was strong upon him; and he slept again. Not always restfully, to be sure: for once he waked to think he smelled again the ancient reek of the castle, and once he dreamed he woke to see a great, gaunt Kar-chee shadow in the moonlight...

When they were next all awake the boaters had speared fish and proceeded now to cook it. Trond smoked his pipe, Henners carefully made his toilet, the rivermen pretended to count their paddles lest the poets had stolen one of them... so, easily, the hours passed till dark came again and the voyage was

resumed. Jon-Joras knew now what the plan was and what was expected him: a landing near the thickets by the shallows of northern Peramis, a riverman to go with message to Jetro Yi, the Company man to come with the money to pay the “expenses,” and a point of honor to say nothing till time enough had passed for the guides (and guards) to be safely all away.

This was well enough with Jon-Joras. He felt slightly feverish, rather light of body and mind, day and night passed like gentle and unimportant dreams... in the background there were hints of hideous things... but only hints... and only in the background...

He was not quite sure how many of these days and nights there were (though surely not many). There was the hot smell of the grass and the resinous scent of the evergreen boughs, Trond and Henner now talking of Lora’s attempts to urge the Poets into counter-action against the nomad Tribesmen, now reciting to each other old verses or new or once again comparing couplets and quatrains and sonnets and triolets; the ruddy little rivermen squinting at them and him goodnaturedly and not understanding or caring about a word of it. There was the river at night, throbbing with its own great pulse in the incredibly yellow moonlight, golden buttery reflections rippling and melting and coalescing; and on a night like that a wedge of boats advanced towards them from downstream and another had spread out behind them from upstream, and—

“Yield! *Yield!*” cried voices all around, Trond swore, Henners wordlessly slipped from his clothes and was pale as moonlight as he dove into the stream, the boaters pulled their vessel around and darted for the higher shore, but then a bow twanged and one of the watermen cried out and caught at the shaft in his shoulder.

VII

“That was just for formality,” said a voice from the now hostile night. “We have guns, too. *Yield!*”

And added, for further formality, “—in the name of His Serene Supremacy, the Chairman of Drogue, who keeps the peace of The River.”

“We yield,” said Trond, sullenly. And the dark, swift craft were all about them.

“Go forward, boaters,” the voice directed. Two of the three played their paddles in silence, a silence broken by occasional calls from those guard-boats that had gone in search of Henners... evidently without success, for they by and by rejoined the formation.

They landed at a wharf bright with lamplight, and Jon-Joras, finally and completely emerged from the doze, or daze which engaged him through most of the trip, now observed the men who were surrounding them—after having emerged with precision from the flotilla. Challenges were evidently not the only things done with formality in Drogue; its armed force, in form-fitting black with adornments of crimson and gold, made a considerable contrast to that of Peramis, which (he remembered) was clad in loose greendrab.

“You are now under charge of arrest,” said a tall and grim-faced officer. “My report will note that you yielded on the second challenge.” He asked and received their names, proceeded: “The man Henners—who has succeeded in evading us for now—was indicted in absentia for grand robbery, *lese majeste*, and sedition of conduct. *You*, the man Trond—”

“I can produce a hundred witnesses that I was nowhere near Drogue when Henners—”

“—by your presence with the man Henners tonight, have become guilty of consorting with criminals.”

Trond shrugged. “The outworlder has nothing to do with all that,” he said. “He was lost and were guiding him back down to Peramis—that’s all.”

As if Trond had not spoken, the officer continued, “*You*, the man Jon-Joras, by your presence with the man Trond, have become guilty of consorting with criminals.”

Aghast, Jon-Joras cried, “But how far can you carry that?”

The officer, who had turned away with a gesture, now half-turned his head. “Infection never ceases,” he said. And continued on his way. Even before he had spoken, the black-clad river troops had closed in on Trond and Jon-Joras, bound their arms at wrists and elbows. No sooner had he uttered his last sibilant and turned his head away, than the two prisoners were led off at a fast half-march, half-trot that left no moment for anything but compliance.

The boaters had not been mentioned in the charges of arrest, had stood by with mournful faces and drooping heads, as if they knew what was coming. What came was a brusque grunt of a command from a petty officer. A pair of axes glinted, raised in the air. The rivermen broke out into a wail. The stove boat burned slowly. But it burned.

=====

Jon-Joras, well aware that he was unlikely to find here any faintest reflection of the enlightened penal policies of his homeworld, had conjectured vision of cells dank and narrow and festooned with fetters set into dripping walls. The reality was rather different.

They passed through a series of bleak and empty rooms whose desks and cabinets hinted at some activity during daylight hours. They passed through a room full of bustle and smells of food and drink—a sort of canteen for the troops—where a few score men in black and red and gold glanced at the prisoners and then returned to their eating and guzzling and gaming. Someone of them did indeed fling a question at the convoy’s guards—

“What’s ye got, Blue?”

“Candidates for Archie,” was the curious answer. The questioner looked at them with briefly quickened interest and pursed his lips. Then he bent to his meat and turnips as if nothing else concerned him.

They passed then through a series of apartments in each of which (so it seemed) a grumbling turnkey rose up from his pallet on the floor to let them into the next, wife and children sometimes opening a sleepy eye to peer a moment, sometimes—more often—continuing to snore on. And, finally, the last thick and barred door behind them, the guard in charge rasped a metal-tipped rod against a great reticulation of a grill-work gate.

And then, impatient, seized hold of a rope and began to toll a brass-voiced bell. And at least a hundred human voices broke into clamor.

Din and tiny lights burned overhead at intervals in the vast room, filthy rushes scattered underfoot, and from heaps of these reeds prisoners were still rising as the two new ones were let in through a narrow door in the great grill.

“Fresh meat!”

“New blood!”

“Who’s them?”

“What’s ye charges?”

The warder, roused from a little wooden room like a dog-kennel, cursed ineffectually, produced (after some search) a grubby and grimy little tattered book, signed in his new charges with his tongue protruding from the corner of his mouth. By the time he was done the other troopers were gone and many of the prisoners had returned to their sleep. Others, however, still crowded around and still put their questions.

The place—it was not so much a room or a hall or keep as simply a large leftover space inside the building—the place stank abominably, and many of those now thrusting forward their eager, open mouths, stank worse.

Trond, wincing, shoved them away—not gently. He peered through the rancid gloom, demanded, “Where’s the Poets’ Corner? Any poet here?”

The crowd muttered, milled around a bit, parted, finally, for a tall and thin and stooped old man who came blinking forward to be identified by Trond before he had focused his own bleary old eyes.

“Serm. Still here, poor ancient?”

“Still here... Who’s that? Trond; don’t tell me; it’s Trond. Well... I don’t know this young sprig. Give me a rhyme, my sib, with your name in acrostic.”

But Jon-Joras, depressed, made no answer. He breathed through his mouth. Trond and Serm mumbled, low-voiced, in each other’s ears. The warder had meanwhile simply returned to his shed. Most of the other prisoners went back to their heaps of rushes and committed themselves, sighingly, to sleep. Serm shuffled away, Trond beckoned, Jon-Joras followed.

Followed to a corner by a narrow, slitted window, with its own lamp, and—actually—a cleaner heap of rushes than were elsewhere, a crude table, rickety chair, jug of water, and a very worn blue riding cloak. Only the three of them shared it. “This is what’s called ‘Poets’ Corner,’ ” Trond said, with a gesture and a quirk of his mouth. “It don’t look like much—but compare it to the rest of this rat-trap: it’s palatial. And it’s ours by right of tradition.”

Old Serm nodded. “Used to be a flower in a pot and a little bird in a cage. Died, both of them.” He drew in his breath with a gusty noise.

“Sure, living and dying

Is sorrow and sighing—“

With an abrupt change of manner, he said, “Young outworlder, tomorrow you must see the Chairman. Insist on it. Do you hear? Insist on it!” Then, with groans and creaks, he settled down on his heap of reeds, took a corner of the cloak, and invited the two other occupants of Poets’ Corner to share the rest between them.

=====

Jon-Joras, when the sun had finally penetrated the prison-room, did insist on it. He insisted on it the next morning... and the next... and the next... It became a ritual.

“Want to see The Man With The Hairy Nose, do y’?” asked the warder, with a small smile. Long years of constant communication with criminals had give him a complete command of their argot.

“I am informed that it’s my right to petition the Puissant Chair for attention to grievance,” said Jon-Joras.

The warder grunted, scratched his naval. “Your right, hey?”

“And I insist upon it.”

Yawn. Stretch. Scratch again. The warder craned his neck to watch the progress of a nearby dice game. “Well...” after a long moment, “I’ll pass the word along, sib. I’ll pass the word along...”

And so, eventually, the word was passed back.

“You, there. Archie-bait,” said the warder one afternoon. “Strip down and wash your crummy rags and ribs. I’ll open the water-room for y’, there’s wood for fire and pots to boil the fleas in.”

“Good!” said Jon-Joras, peeling off his clothes and taking the little shovel of embers from the man. And—“What? *Soap*? Why-”

“Mustn’t smell bad when you’re up before The Man,” the warder said. So Jon-Joras heated water and boiled his clothes and enjoyed the luxury of soap for the first time in— how long?—as he scrubbed himself down in the dank and seldom-used water-room. He wrapped himself in the riding-cloak and waited for the garments to dry.

Serm said: “Tell him you’ll pay any fine within reason. That dragon-cod can’t even read his own name unless it’s written in gold ink.”

And Trond said: “Your line has to be, that you realize it’s been all a mistake, in fact, it’s kind of amusing, and you’re not mad at all. But High King Pung-Pickle, or whatever his name is, will be getting ready to tear the states apart, board by board, if you don’t show up—and soon.”

Serm said: “You must get word to our band. To the Poets.”

And Trond said: “You were lost in the woods and we offered to guide you back for a fee. That’s all. It’s a true word, isn’t it? So—that’s *all*. Hue? You never even heard of Hue.”

And at last the clothes were dry and Jon-Joras followed the guards who held his tether, out into the starlit, sweet-smelling night. A pony-wagon was waiting, its sides enveloped in black curtains. They did not bother to explain or apologize for binding his feet and gagging him. The conclusion came to Jon-Joras, not for the first time, that the exercise of civil rights in the City-State of Drogue left a good deal to be desired.

Facing them at the other end of the long hall was The Chair itself—so far, an unoccupied piece of furniture. It was, however, the most elaborate piece of furniture he had seen anywhere at anytime: high, enormous, carved profusely, polished, gilded, cushioned in velvet and damask. He thought of the noisome and verminous rushes on the hard, stinking, sodden floor of the prison room. A bitter taste was in his mouth.

The guards jerked him to a stop, removed his gag. He, familiar, after all, with the intensely sophisticated court of King Por-Paulo, watched with the interested eye of a connoisseur the ceremonies which accompanied the entrance of His Serene Supremacy, the Chairman, as the latter took his seat on The Chair. Roelorex III was a swift and slender man in his late thirties; tucking his purple-slipped feet under him, he made slight movements of head and hand. The guards nudged Jon-Joras.

Who identified himself as, a Private Man of his king, stated his reason for being here on Prime World... “Earth,” he corrected himself... and went on to say, “I address The Puissant Chair for attention to

grievances.”

The Puissant Chair, looking a little weary, a little cynical, invited him—by the smallest change of expression, to continue his address. He explained his being present at the impromptu dragon hunt, described that melancholy scene. The Chairman at once became intent, and more and more so as Jon-Joras proceeded with his description of the Kar-chee Castle and what went on therein. He had only hesitated an instant, ‘recalling Trond’s advice to say nothing of it; then decided that it was best to tell the whole truth.

Indeed, he spoke freely of everything... omitting only the matter of his duel to the death with Thorm. It did not seem to him to be pertinent, and, besides, he could not bring himself to dwell upon those still horrifying memories.

“The two men of the people called Poets agreed to guide me back to Peramis,” he said, concluding, “and therefore I went with them.”

“And therefore,” said the Chairman, speaking for the first time; “and therefore you traveled at night and concealed yourself during the day.”

“I—I never considered the implications of that,” Jon-Joras stammered. It was true; he never had. “It was night when we decided to leave, and it seemed natural to rest during the day... Conceal? I didn’t... I suppose I took it for granted that it was the local customary way—”

The Chairman, in a movement so swift—yet completely unhurried—that Jon-Joras scarcely observed the details of it, rose to his feet. Pointing his finger at Jon-Joras, he said, in a clear, quick voice, “You lie. You have consorted not only with thieves but with outlaws, and with rebels—the worst, the most dangerous kind of outlaws—at that. You have condemned yourself by the imprecations of your own mouth, and this is the verdict which we have reached in Our capacity as Chief Magistrate: that at a time to be decided upon you be taken to a place to be decided upon and there bound hand and foot and hanged by the heels and shot to death by archery.”

Dumbfounded, and too incredulous to feel either anger or fear, Jon-Joras watched the chairman walk out with quick, concise strides. He barely felt the gag forced back into his mouth. And then the guards led him away.

=====

Trond winced, grunted, shook his head. Serm was remorseful, full of self-reproach. “I should never have put that notion in your ear,” he moaned, “about asking to see the Nose. Who’d have thought it? It passes understanding— doesn’t it. Trond? *Never* heard of such a thing—arching an outworlder! Did you, Trond?”

“No! And I’m not going to hear about it now, either,” Trond said, vigorously. “Don’t you let your cullions crawl, young fellow—this is a time for desperate measures, and I’m going to take them, too!”

The warder looked at them, as they approached, with melancholy satisfaction. “Sometimes, don’t pay, to insist,” he observed.

Trond shrugged. “Well, like I tell him, no one lives forever, anyway. Right?”

“Right.”

“ ‘Don’t wiggle,’ I tell him; ‘hang still, give the archies a clear target, soon be over.’ Right?”

“That’s what I always tell ‘em. Right.”

“So, what we want to do, we want to give him a big good-by party—drinks, eats—the works.”

The warder slowly drooped his right eyelid and his lower lip in understanding and assent. Then he rubbed a thumb and a forefinger together. Trond slipped a ring from off one of his own fingers, placed it in his palm. Instantly, the warder said, “That bandy won’t bring much.” But he didn’t stop looking at it. A glint of light reflected in his eye. He didn’t stop looking at it.

“It’ll bring enough. What do you says, Wards? Sell it and keep half for yourself and buy booze and bites with the rest.”

He held out the palm. The warder took the band with restrained eagerness, sighed with hypocritical regret. “Too bad... too bad... a nice ring... a nice fellow... Sure. Sure. Glad to do what I can. *Glad* to. Never mind *my* cut. I won’t take a thing. Depend on me. I’ll see you get what you need.”

The ring vanished into a pocket inside his greasy old shirt. Trond thanked him, led Jon-Joras away. “There’s a rogue, if you like,” he muttered. “ ‘Won’t take a thing’! He won’t take more than two thirds of it, is what he means.”

Only now did the fear of death enter the younger man’s heart. He felt it chill and swell. “Listen,” he said, uncertainly, “I don’t want to have any parties, I want to—”

“Want to get out. Right.” Trond took his hand and patted it. “Have no fear, friend. Wards can’t dispose of that bandy in any regular jewels shop. One look at him, they’d call the guards. No... Only a fence will buy it from him, and there’s only one fence in Drogue that handles bandies of that value: Old Boke: Old Boke will have the whole story out of him before he pays him a penny.

“*And—*” he gave Jon-Joras’s cold and sweating hand a final pat-pat, “Old Boke will pass the word along where it will do the most good. The Poets have their friends in town. Have no fear, I tell you again. And sleep light tonight. You listening? *Sleep light...*”

=====

In fact, of course, Jon-Joras didn’t really sleep at all. As, one by one, the scant oils in the tiny slut-lamps of the prison room were used up and the smoldering wicks vanished into winking red little eyes in the darkness and then were gone, he sank into a kind of feverish phantasmagora. He felt ill and dizzy; the vertigo helped persuade him that he could feel what it was like to be upside down; the ankle-bands of his shoes became the bonds fastening his feet; and every rough rush penetrating his loosened clothes became the shaft of an arrow penetrating his frightened flesh.

Then, suddenly, the illusion changed. All, all had been a dream: the raid on the great, gaunt Kar-chee castle, the time spent with the nomad tribes, the duel with Thorm, the long trip down the great river, capture and imprisonment: all a dream. He was still in the Kar-chee castle and none of the rest had happened. But—and this he knew with frightening and absolute certainty—it was all *going* to happen, every bit and detail of it. And he could not prevent it, it had already begun, and the proof of this was that once again he smelled the smoke of burning torches.

With a stifled groan and a sigh, chiefly of relief—for even the uncertainty of life with Hue was better than lying under sentence of death—he raised his head in order to see the light of the flambeaux he was sure he smelled. He wondered, as he did so, if he must follow the predestined pattern of events indeed... or if there were not some possibility of escape. And then his mind became suddenly as wide-awake as his body.

There was a curious scuffling sound faintly over his head. A change in the rhythm of their breathing told him that both Trond and Serm were also now aware of something unusual going on. They rose cautiously in the darkness without speaking. Someone took Jon-Joras's arm, felt along it to the hand, guided the hand, unresisting, through the darkness. He felt rope... a stick of wood... more rope. Trond—it must be Trond, those sturdy arms—pushed him upwards. He seized hold of the rope ladder and began to climb.

The door from which the ladder depended had probably once been intended to open onto a corridor in an upper floor which had never been built. For uncounted years it had opened onto nothingness, onto air—except, of course, that it had never been opened at all. Along with the rest of the wall the door had once been whitewashed, along with the rest of the wall it had long since been covered with dust and dirt and soot. Jon-Joras, below, had never even noticed it.

The torch which he had smelled burned at the end of the corridor above. At first he did not know any of the faces belonging to those who held the other end of the rope-ladder. Gradually, in the darkness, as, first Serm, then Trond, mounted to join him, his eyes accustomed themselves to the dim light. And when one face turned, having carefully seen to the careful closing of the door behind it, he recognized it at once.

Henners!

VIII

Even in a darkness dispelled only by the sullen glare of the single torch, the halls and rooms through which they now soon passed had the naked and unresisting look of things long concealed. The bricked-up windows gazed blindly, sagging and dust-covered shards of furniture lay in limp tangles all about. Once, Jon-Joras stepped on the dry bones of a rat, and they crunched and snapped. He shuddered, pressed on ahead.

At length they left narrow confines behind them and came to a wide hold emptying on one side down a broad cascade of steps into a vast pool of darkness. Following a gesture by Henners, all advanced to the carved balustrade, paused to fling down the torch and extinguish it by a method as primitive as it was effectual (and easier on bare feet than stamping). Then, in utter blackness, felt their way down the board steps, each holding onto the shoulder of the man in front in a sort of shuffling lock-step.

The stairs seemed endless, and the floor they finally led onto, even more; and here and hereafter they hugged a wall. Once, by sudden, unspoken and common consent, they stopped and held their breaths. Far, far off, someone crossed at right angles to their own path, a slut-lamp held unsteadily in hand, and either moaned or sang... something... in an inhuman, crooning sort of voice which froze Jon-Joras's blood. Voice and light and sound died away at last. They moved on.

They moved on.

After endless black years (and the ground grew rough, and the ground grew damp) he saw, like a fabled wanderer ages uncountable before him, overhead, the beautiful stars.

=====

“But I would feel easier in my mind,” Jon-Joras explained, not for the first time, “if I were with my friends.”

The old man nodded, gently and carefully applied another coat of sticky liquid to the oddly-shaped wooden box. “I know... I know...” Absently, he wiped his fingers on his tangled beard. “But, as I have explained to you—I think—before—it makes much sense to divide you up. If the troopers get wind of

something and make a raid, why should they get all of you at once?

“No, no... Let them swoop down just once, and, *poof*,” he blew out a breath which scattered his long, untidy mustaches; “we scatter you again. See?”

Jon-Joras did not take as much encouragement as his host intended. “But what if I’m the one gets taker!? Eh? A lot of good your *poof* will do, then,” he said.

The old man pursed his hairy lips. “You won’t be,” he said. “None of you will.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Within wheels—” he plied his small brush with absorption; “—there are also sometimes wheels. So. The Chairman is supreme; true; may -he burn Like a moth fallen into a slut-lamp; but even if he is too strong to be gainsaid, he isn’t too strong to be envied. Do you believe, young outworldling, for one moment, that it was a criminal underground alone which managed your escape?”

Jon-Joras, who had indeed imagined that very thing, paused in his pacing up and down the crowded and rather pungent little loft (wood, paint, varnish, breakfast, dinner, supper), looked at the old man in surprise.

“Ha!” Enjoying and prolonging the moment, the old man ignored him, sighted down his work, murmured, “Ah, what a beauty fiddle this will be. No one in Drogue can make them like I make them, mmmmm, no...”

“Explain, please, sir. Explain.”

And the violin-maker explained that, while there existed at present no active movement to overthrow the Puissant Chair and replace its occupant with another, the ranks of the Gentlemen of Drogue were by no means without those who would like to see the Chair shaken. Each shake diminished the present Chairman’s influence, and even the Board of Syndics was not entirely averse to that.

“I name no names,” said the violin-maker; “for a good reason: I don’t know any. But I know this: Your friends’ friends, they wouldn’t have gotten, not one inch, not one foot, inside the building without certain persons of influence and authority had helped them: enough said.”

“But... How does helping us escape shake the Chair?”

“ ‘How?’ Tch! You get back to Peramis, you tell how the cruel Chairman arrests you on trumped-up charge, convicts you in fake trial held *in camera*, throws you in rotten prison, almost kills you— You—important outworlder! What, my guest, you think the Hunt Company will Like that? You think the Galactic Delegatic will Like it? Of *course* the Chair will shake. Tch!”

As for plans to get Jon-Joras back to Peramis, he, the old violin-maker, knew nothing.

The loft lay at the top of a teetering old tenement deep in the festering slums of Old Drogue. Below, illicit wine was made from wild grapes, and unlicensed tobacco cured and sold; there was an inn—*de facto*, not *de jure*—which kept no register of those who found cheap if uncertain slumber on the rag beds of its frousty floor; an entire establishment of ladies officially if not all actually young, who failing any gainful skills above a certain level, got their living by the use of such passive skills as lay beneath it; and a number of seamstresses and tailors who lacked time and place and perhaps inclination to weave the cloths they cut and sewed, depending instead on the activities of those who preferred not to vex the original owners with the tiresome bookkeeping inseparable from purchase.

Jon-Joras had been told something of all of this. It had perhaps not sunk in sufficiently. He was perhaps too centered on his own concerns and person. At any rate, it did not occur to him, in lifting up the tattered rag of a window-blind when clamor arose in house and street, and seeing the narrow and noisome way below crowded with black uniforms decorated in red and gold, that those who wore them were present for any reason other than to affect his own capture and semi-judicial murder.

He gave an exclamation of fear and, without even waiting to discuss the matter with the old violin-maker, ran from the loft and scurried up the ladder to the rooftop. The troopers, as it happened, were only engaging in a more-or-less quarterly round-up of unlicensed trulls, in hopes of bribes and free fornication. But when they observed someone fleeing across the roof and endangering life and legs by dropping heavily to the adjacent housetop, they immediately assumed that he was not merely taking exercise.

They pursued after him, he fought back, they kicked him and beat him and, as they considerably outnumbered him, in a very few minutes had him trussed up like a bird ready for the roasting-spit.

Meanwhile, the other inhabitants of the alley, faithful to tradition, had turned out for their own share in the sport, and from windows and rooftops showered the troopers with abuse, refuse, and, as they wanted up to it, more solid tokens of social criticism.

“Look at the poor barster, tied up like that!”

“Tried to help the poor girlies, I’s‘pose—”

“Leave him go, you—”

A rotten bulk of timber came hurtling down, followed by bricks, chunks of plaster ripped from decrepit walls, pots the tinkers had given up long ago, mugs, jugs, coping-stones, firewood—

“Get the crows! Get the woodpeckers! Get ‘em!”

The troops, half-leading, half-dragging their quarry, turned to head through another way. But the whole quarter was now aroused; it was astonishing how swiftly barricades had been erected—

“Take the kid! The kid! The kid! Take the kid!”

The heavy rain had begun to draw blood, black-red-gold troopers were down, now, on all sides of him. Jon-Joras felt the hands slip from his arms, started to stagger away, felt something hit his shoulder a sickening, numbing blow. Once again he seemed to hear the pounding of great, inhuman feet. . . once again the dark circle whirled, closed in, bore him away down a roaring tunnel. Then all sound as well as sight was gone, and he floated, cold, on the waves of an unknown sea.

=====

The down-river packetboat wallowed heavily in the main channel. Now and then the tattered and dirty sail gave a petulant slap and the sweating passengers took brief pleasure in the sudden breath of wind. But it never lasted long enough to bring much relief. A market woman sat on her crated jars of wild honey, voluminous thighs and skirts spread out for coolness as she ate soft fruit. A smeary-faced little girl tugged at her sleeveless arm.

“Mar, Mar,” the child screamed, companionably, “what for is that man got that thing on him, Mar?”

“‘That thing,’” the mother chuckled juicily at her daughter’s clever turn of phrase. “That’s what you call it a straight-jacket, dearyme. He’s a nut-head, the poor poke.”

“But what for is he got that *thing* on him, Mar?”

“I *told* you, dearyme: he’s a *nut-head*. Look what he’s got his head shaved all off, huh? Because what for, otherwise he’d pull out his hair and *eat* it.” She shoved her neighbor, another market woman whose head had dipped in a mid-day doze, waking her abruptly. “Look a nut-head,” the first honeywife said, gesturing with her dripping morsel.

The second looked, loose, toothless mouth agape with interest and concern. “Ah, tut, the poor poke,” she observed. “I suppose somebody, what, stole his spirit, huh?”

Her neighbor shrugged. “What can you do?” she asked, rhetorically. “Some people, what they’re like.”

The child looked and looked. Then she came to a decision. “He’s a nut-head,” she screamed. The two women laughed at this perceptive remark, urged each other to eat more fruit before it spoiled. There was no telling how long the trip would take, but it was not likely that they would be bored.

There was an old man with his left leg gone at the knee, who had used up all his conversation on his near neighbors, then used up his near neighbors by running through his conversation two or three times over again. As he sat alone on the cover of the cargo hatch his attention was caught by the shrill exchange between the honey-women and the child. He looked up brightly, hoping to catch their eyes and a fresh chance at conversation, but they never looked his way. It didn’t seem as if they were ever going to, so, after a while, he sighed, dragged up his crutches, stumped down towards a niche in the bulkhead which had once held a water-barrel and now held the lunatic and a young boy.

“Going downstream?” was his first, idiot question. The boy nodded. “Thought you weres,” said the gaffer. “I say to myself, ‘They’re going downstream,’ I say... I’m going downstream myself.”

No answer was returned to these confidences. “I’m going in that direction myself. I’m going to Peramy, you may have heard of such a place, Peramy? I’m going there. My grandson’s boy, he lives in Peramy, sells fish in the market there, he sends word to me, come down and help. What for? An old bate like me, with only one hind paw? What for is that I’ve got both forepaws,” he gaped and chuckled, “so I can sit on my stool and scrape the fish, the scales, you know, scrape the scales off of them...”

“What for...” he concluded, slightly discouraged at the lack of interest.

The brown waters gurgled slowly past the packet’s hull, the forest slid by on either side, league after league, all the same, all the same.

“Mighty hot,” the old man said. The lunatic groaned and mumbled. The old man’s eyes rolled a bit uneasily.

For the first time the young boy spoke, saying, “He won’t hurt you, granther.”

The old man leaped to his comment like a fish to a fly. “What for he’s like that, boy? Huh?”

Rather wearily, as though tired of giving the same reply so often, the boy said, “He slept outdoors one night in the black of the moon. So.”

Wide-eyed, but utterly believing, the old man gave a long, drawn out *Ooooo*; nodded rapidly. “Poor poke. He must’ve let his mouth open when he slept, what for some duty person stole his soul.” And he preceded to tell an interminable anecdote incorporating several others equally interminable, about people he knew or had heard of who had suffered the same outrage. The boy’s head drooped, snapped back up, drooped again. The old man droned on. He told the story of his life, including the loss of his leg (“An afternoon, hot as this one”) to a rogue dragon long, long ago.

The boy's sleepy eyes lit up and his lips parted. Then he closed them both again. And the old man droned on. And the lunatic drooled and moaned.

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There was some discussion at the land-stage in Peramis as to whether the boy had to pay head-tax for one person or two. A reference to the dirty, dog-eared book of regulations, however, soon provided the answer.

"No... Boy's right. Nut-heads and little kids, no head-taxes..." Absently, the official took the boy's money.

"*Estates* of nut-heads got to pay land-taxes," another official pointed out, unwilling to lose the argument absolutely.

"'Estates,' 'land,'" the first one said, testily. "Estates and lands got nothing to do with us... Honey, huh. How many jars you got, woman?"

They began to count and squabble. The boy and his keeper drifted away through the crowd and out into the streets.

Presently they wandered along a refuse-strewn alley backing on a row of cookshops, entered a gaping doorway. Time passed; not much. The boy emerged again, a man with him, arm in a sling, head covered with what might have been ill-trimmed hair... or... if one looked quite closely... a wig. The man's gaze was blank. Now and then he made a faint mewling sound.

The alley led into another which emptied onto a court, the doors and windows of its rotting tenements boarded shut. The boy studied the crude graffiti, scrawled in charcoal, mostly obscene; rapped softly on one, in an irregular rhythm.

Silence.

He rapped again. The man began to move away, was jerked back, whimpered.

There was a screech of seldom-used wooden hinges and a door opened, narrowly, boards and all, the entire frame moving in. After a second or so, it opened wider. Man and boy entered. The door closed behind him.

A bitter-faced woman said, in a harsh voice, "You've been long in coming." Then, looking at the man: "He's had black brew to drink." He looked at her, blankly. The boy nodded. "I'll make some white," the woman said.

In the sole clean room of the cluttered warren she set charcoal to burning in a small brick stove, put herbs into a pot, added something fine and powdered, and water, fanned the fire with a shingle.

"I can make something to eat," she said after a while.

"No."

The white brew boiled, was poured off, strained, diluted With tepid water in a mug. The woman put it to his lips, he drew his face away, she jerked his chin down and poured the drink into his mouth. Much ran out but his throat bobbed and he swallowed.

"Now we'll see," the woman said. They both looked at him, expectantly.

He winced, shuddered. His face, his limbs, his body, began to twitch. This soon stopped. The man looked around him, confused. He licked his lips, frowned at the silent woman with the bitter face. His head turned slowly. At sight of the boy he cried out, jumped, then gave a groan of pain. He subsided in his chair.

“How did I get here?” he muttered.

Then he asked, “Why are you dressed as a boy, Lora?”

IX

Now it was her turn to frown. Perhaps it was his use of her name—although there was no reason for him not to know it by now—or not to use it.

Her voice was low, restrained, husky. She gave her head the immemorially conventional toss, forgetful that her hair was now cropped short. “We picked you up when your shoulder was hurt,” she said. “And brought you here.”

“We?”

She hesitated. “I brought you here.”

“Using the riot for your own purpose...”

Her laugh was brief, scornful. “Who do you think began the riot? Or why?”

He considered this. His shoulder and arm were throbbing. “I can’t remember... anything...”

“You were drugged. It was easier to get you out that way. Everyone thought you were a lunatic.”

“Mmm... And now I’m here... Where *is* ‘here’? Peramis? At last. Well... What’s to prevent my talking freely?”

He blinked when she told him; nothing prevented it. He had in fact been brought here for that reason, not any other one. There was no longer any purpose in keeping, or trying to keep secret, the work at the Kar-chee castle. It was disrupted, it was known. Another training place would have to be set up in another location, there to teach the dragons how to kill their hunters. But this could not be done in a day and a night—indeed, it was impossible to say how long it would take.

And Hue’s purpose could not be delayed, whatever advantage so far gained dared not be lost—

“You tried to have me killed,” he interrupted her.

She waved this away with her hand. “That was before we realized that there was no point in silencing you. No, we almost made a mistake there. Now we want you to talk, tell everyone, let the whole Galaxy know what we’ve been doing, why we’ve been doing it. And why we intend to keep right on doing it until we win. Maybe it will help us. It’s clear it can’t hurt us any more.

“The only thing we ask you not to talk about is this place here. It’s useful to us, and we think you owe us that.”

For a moment he reflected. Then he nodded. “All right. But answer me this: Has your father anything to do with the dragons in the Bosky? No? Curious. Well. Take me as near to Company House as you can. I won’t say a word about your hide-out here.”

Nor did he. He wasn't even asked. Jetro Yi's effusive and almost incredulous pleasure at seeing Jon-Joras return soon vanished on hearing what he had to say.

"Then it's true? It *is* true! We've heard rumors, we were naturally, P.M., you understand, we were unwilling to credit them. But— Oh, that's horrible! That's unbelievable! But... I mean... actually training them to become rogues! That's worse than anything I could imagine!"

His rubbery features were distended, distorted by shock. He took him to his superior, the Hunt Company's Chief Agent in Peramis, one Wills H'vor. H'vor was a man of full flesh, he began to tremble, then to shake. Before Jon-Joras was quite finished, the Chief Agent's heavy face and pendulous cheeks, the slack muscles of his arms revealed by the sleeveless shirt, were wobbling and quivering. His teeth clattered. With a convulsive movement, he steadied himself enough to speak.

"We—we-we-we—we might have all been *killed!*" he burst out. Clearly, no conceivable detail of that dreadful death was escaping his imagination. "How can we be-be-be *sure?*" he cried. "From now on—?"

"Whether the dragons are honestly marked or not? And rogues or not? You can't," Jon-Joras said. "I suppose that's part of their purpose, the outlaw Doghunters, that is." He felt no desire, now, to go into the morals of the matter, to blame the raging hatred of the outlaws any more than the cold, indifferent oppression of the Gentlemen. His injured arm was giving him infinite pain, he felt sick and hungry and weak. "My king's hunt will have to be put off... canceled... or held elsewhere. It may *have* to be in The Bosky, Company Yi—still no? Well—" Jon-Joras shrugged, sighed.

"Please get me ConfedBase on the communicator," he said. "And then... then... I think I'd better see a physician..."

Wills H'vor waved a trembling fat flipper of a hand. Jetro Yi's instinctive and obsequious reaction lacked much of its usual fulsomeness, but he hastened to comply. Voices came and went behind the blind face of the comspeaker, Jon-Joras wearied of repeating himself over and over again only to be switched on to someone higher up—and then having to begin yet again. Finally—

"Delegate Anse on. *Who* is this?"

It might have been imagination, but it seemed to Jon-Joras that on his mentioning (for the tenth time, perhaps) the phrase, "... Private Man of King Por-Paulo of M.M. *beta*..." he heard the voice of the Galactic Delegate undergo a clear but subtle change. But he did not pause to question this, went on with what he had to say. He stumbled, repeated himself, but he kept on talking.

"All right... No more for just now," Anse's voice instructed, interrupting him. "We'll finish this up together. When. Mmmm. See... Today is Thirdday... You missed the ferry, won't be another till next Firday. I can't take the time off just now, or I'd come up by special. Should I send a special to bring you here?"

It was decided, finally, that Jon-Joras should rest, under medical care, until the regular weekly ferry trip the following Firday. There were special facilities at the Lodge; he should take advantage of them.

"Meanwhile," concluded Delegate Anse, "this information had best remain uncirculated. Does anyone else... Companymen Yi and H'vor? I'll get on to them. And you, P.M., take it smoothly. Heal well."

Under the ministrations of Physician Tu, graduate therapist of the famous schools of Planet Maimon, Jon-Joras's injuries soon ceased to vex him. In his quiet room at the far end of one wing of the Lodge, he lay on his couch looking out the transparent wall. Dark and green rose the wooded hills afar off, the great

river flowing silvery as it bent in the middle distance. Dimly, like a picture scroll slowly unwinding, images, images passed before his eyes.

The hall at Aelorix... the young archers at practice... the singing passengers flying to the impromptu dragon hunt... the incredible moments while the great bull-dragon failed to be diverted... the stumbling through the forest... barking dogs... musty tunnel... cyclopean and secret-keeping Kar-chee castle... training the rogue... blood spattering... midnight raid and smoke... free and open, life in the nomad camp... the heat of the fire and Thorm straining to place his knife... gliding down the broad moonlit river... the stinking prison room, the cold, impassive face of the Droque Chairman, the mob raging...

But gradually these images faded and were gone, were replaced by others: the central lawn at the Collegium, like blue-green velvet... a crowd of boys taunting one of their number, black-haired and white-faced and defiant...

Then, slowly, slowly, this too vanished. He continued to lie on his couch, increasingly tranquil, and the afternoon sank beneath the weight of night. Only when the great red sun hesitated on the horizon he arose. And it was then that the shot pierced the transparent wall and shattered the panel lamp no more than an inch or two over his head.

He gazed at it, more curious than disturbed. It was the second shot which convinced him that while he was visible he was in danger. Unbothered but obedient, he lay down on the thick, soft rug. The vibration of the floor reminded him of what his ears had failed to convince his mind: the thick, unceasing clamor of alarm bells.

The door burst open and many men rushed into his room.

Physician Tu insisted that the health of his patient was paramount; questions, he said, could wait. And over the protests of Senoeorix, Commander of the Peramisian force, he had Jon-Joras removed to a room within the lodge's central core. The wall was turned to opaque, guards posted, the sick man placed under drugs intended to counteract the shock of his attempted murder.

Senoeorix, claiming that the physician's interference made his task impossible, engaged in no search of the countryside. But the lodge staff responded to the claim, next day, of a free farmer whose name no one bothered to learn, that he had seen someone fleeing in the dusk a few leagues off at about the time of the attempt. They followed his directions. And there in the woods they found a huntgun and two spent capsules.

"Off hand," Physician Tu said, reflectively, "I'd say that there's a huntsman who doesn't like you."

Jon-Joras nodded equitably. "Affection cannot be forced," he said, the last word echoing in his drug-happy mind: *forced, forced, forced*. His lips moved, obedient to the echo.

The therapist threw him a sharp, appraising look. "I may have given you too much. I'm not certain I've ever treated anyone from your world with it before, and, while there appears to be no morphological difference, well... diet... environment... it's difficult to tell. I— Well." He dispelled his doubts with brisk directions. Go to bed. Eat your dinner when they bring it. Don't go out of your room. Don't go out.

Jon-Joras nodded with a dim smile. *Out. Out. Out.*

He went back to bed, ate his dinner, didn't go out. Nevertheless, as he lay back after the tray had gone, he had a definite impression that he was losing consciousness. It was not with the suddenness of shock nor the slower procession of a faint, but he was (slowly, slowly) fading away from the world of the senses.

The opaque wall showed a dim forest scene. If he looked carefully, he thought, he might see what was lurking behind the trees, before the scene ebbed away—might see the mysterious, slouching, chitinous Kar-chees themselves. *I will grasp the mil of this bed*, he thought, *with all my might, and hold on tightly, tightly; if I find my hands anywhere else I will know that I've been unconscious...*

It seemed, somehow, important that he should know. And so, he did know, when he found his hands clasped on the coverlet, that he had slipped away. It must have been then that the man had entered his room.

“Now, please, Big,” the man said, in a hoarse whisper; “don’t make no noises. Listen to what I got to tell ya, huh.”

Jon-Joras nodded. “Doghunter,” he said, pleased with himself at having made this out.

The man didn’t bother to affirm or deny his class. “They want to kill ya,” he said. “You know who I mean. The bigs. The gents. Before the king gets here. *Your—*”

“*My king?*” He struggled against the sweet mists of indifference to understand.

“King... King Paul? He gets here tomorrow. And I can tell you—they’re not going to wait. You stay here, you’ll be dead by then, huh.”

Jon-Joras swung his legs over the side, feeling the railings cold to his flesh. “I won’t wait,” he said. “I have to see him. I’ll go...”

He paused. *Go where?* Where would he be safe. The man in the darkness thumped his chest. “Go with me,” he offered. “We’ll see you safe. I won’t mention no name, but you know who I mean. Him: tall. Her: young. *With me.*”

Jon-Joras nodded. Hue and Lora. Naturally they’d want him kept safe—now. If he were to be killed before he could talk, tell of what he knew, they’d have to begin from scratch, find some other safe and far-off den to bring their dragons to and train them there. “I’ll go with you. Just lead me. Just lead.”

The corridors were filled with soft darkness here and there spotted with tiny small lights. A thin thread of very quiet music seeped from hidden speakers. The man was a big man, but he moved silently. It could have been no more than a pair of minutes before he had found a stairwell which led them soon to the cool and safety of the darkness without.

A long while afterwards he reached to grasp the man’s shoulder. “Someone’s behind us,” he whispered.

The man mumbled something, Jon-Joras could not clearly hear the words, but clearly he was neither surprised nor concerned. They kept on going. And by and by a door opened so suddenly that his eyes received the unexpected light almost like a blow. A voice inside was muttering, “— still say the Bosky would be—” It fell suddenly silent. His guide turned and took him by the hand to draw him in. Perhaps Jon-Joras’s light-struck eyes made him hesitate, perhaps they noted nonetheless a sudden change in the man’s expression. However it was, he hesitated, drew back. The hand on his wrist tightened, pulled.

There was not one person who had been behind them in the night, there were three. Jon-Joras not only went in, he went down. The door closed upon his astonished cries.

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“I should have killed you when you were on my own grounds,” Aelorix said. “And buried you beneath the dung of the deer-barn.” His mouth arched like a bow, down at the corners.

Feeling dazed, dull, stupid, Jon-Joras said, “But I saw your son die. He died in my arms. He—”

“He died, at least, with honor. Sooner or later one way or the other, every man meets his dragon. *His* was a dirty one—a rogue. A man-made rogue!” The aristocrat’s voice clicked in his throat, his face showed a disgust greater than grief or rage.

Protesting, bewildered, “But I had nothing to do with that,” Jon-Joras cried. “I might have been killed there myself. I don’t understand. I don’t understand!” His anguished gaze took in the rough-looking man who had brought him there and his rougher-looking fellows. “And I certainly don’t — You! You are not of the Gentlemen! Why are you doing this?”

The guide gave a short laugh. “Ah, you thought you was so clever, huh. ‘Doghunter,’ you said to me. That’s just one of your mistakes. I’m not a Doghunter, huh, any more than I’m a Gentleman. Maybe you don’t know everything about this place after all. So I’ll tell a few things, make it all clear. What’s it that the old nut-head who digs in ruins calls us? ‘Plebs’? So we’re plebs, huh. *But that don’t make us Dog-hunters!* Or what’s it they like to call themselves, ‘free farmers,’ we don’t want no farms, dig potatoes, all that. Nah...”

In small mood to appreciate the rude logic of what he heard, Jon-Joras listened nevertheless. It did make sense. Many of the plebs gave full approval to the Hunt system. They did so because of the employment it gave, the trade it brought, the color it afforded their otherwise drab days; they did so from simple habit, too, and also because they held themselves to be superior to the Doghunters—who opposed it. And because it allied them, thus, to the Gentlemen, whom they envied—and with whom, thus, they identified.

It was that complex. And that simple.

In vain Jon-Joras pointed out that to expose the outlaws’ program of mis-marking dragon-chicks and of training some of those thus disfigured to be rogues, must inevitably result—one way or another—in the destruction of the outlaws’ program. Uselessly he declared that he himself was taking no sides, that Hue’s people had captured him once and subsequently tried to have him murdered.

To the first plea Aelorix said only, grimly, “We know how to take care of that ourselves.” And to the second, “Too bad they didn’t succeed.” Adding, “But *we* will...”

Why? *Why?*

But the questions were based on the assumption that reason and fair-play prevailed, and in this situation neither did. The outlaws now wished their outlawry revealed and Jon-Joras had agreed to reveal it. Therefore he was doing their bidding. Therefore he was on their side. Therefore he had made himself the target of the full rage of the Gentlemen and their jackals.

More— When Aelorix said that he was not dependent on the Hunt Company, he spoke only in the most economic, limited sense. Every single Gentleman was dependent on the Company because the Hunt System was dependent on the outworld trade and the Gentlemen, as a class, were dependent on the System. Even such finite freedom as Aelorix himself possessed was the exception.

“Do you think I don’t know you for what you are?” he asked, scornfully. “Outworlders?—cowards—the lot of you. One hint of danger, you’d never show yourselves on Earth again. And then what? Grub in the dirt—*us?*—like Dog-hunters’ brats?”

Then, as he paused, over the sound of his heavy breathing, another sound came in from the night... low. Low, troubled, melancholy... the cry of a questing dragon. Almost for the first time there came to Jon-Joras’s mind, preoccupied as it was with his own fears and his troubles, some thought of dragon *qua*

dragon—poor beast! predestined to torture, agony, death for another species’ sport—when all it wanted was to find a mate, to couple as nature intended it, off there in the cool and ferny darkness.

The eyes of master and men swung in the direction of the cry, then; rested briefly, swung back to the prisoner; met each other. Whatever thoughts were theirs, pity was not one of them. The erstwhile guide began to grin.

“There it is,” he said.

Aelorix nodded. Jon-Joras felt his flesh prickle. “What—” he began.

“ ‘Sooner or later,’ ” Aelorix quoted himself, “ ‘one way or the other, every man meets his dragon.’ ”

“Hear it? That’s yours.”

X

Aelorix’s final words to his prisoner and former guest were never finished, but did not need to be. “Why *you* should live, and *he* be dead—” the man said; his face twisted with grief and hate and he turned away. It was the age-old cry of *Why me and not another?* and in his bitterness and his rage, fed from a hundred springs, somehow he blamed Jon-Joras for his own son’s death.

It was the time between dawn and earliest morning. Mostly the sky was gray, but the mist to eastwards had begun to show pink. All was quiet, all was cool, as they took him from the small house in the woods. The Gentleman himself said nothing more after that, but his lowborn thugs cursed and muttered and hawked and spat and complained of the chill. Dew still trickled and fell upon them, going down the barely visible path.

“Give it a blow, Big?” one of the men asked. Aelorix nodded. The man fumbled in a kit by his side, took out a small bottle, swore, put it back, fumbled again, this time came up with something made of wood and bark, and put it to his lips. His cheeks inflated. Had Jon-Joras not been watching he would never believed that what he now heard came from anything but the mouth of a dragon.

The soft sad notes faded away on the dim air. All listened, all were still. For a while, nothing. Then, from off to the right and a distance (to Jon-Joras, incalculable) came what almost seemed a deeper echo of the same cry. The men nodded.

“That’s him,” they said. “Hasn’t moved much in the night.” The man behind him poked Jon-Joras with the huntgun. “Get flapping,” he instructed.

They came by and by to an end of the woods and entered onto a wide and flat park-like place covered with waist high grass and here and there a low tree. Again they sounded the dragon-call, and again and again. And the dragon responded and the voice of the real dragon came nearer.

Halfway across the great clearing all stopped. “As far as we go,” one of the thugs said. He gave Jon-Joras one last, painful prod in the kidneys with the squat muzzle of the huntgun. “You better not move away from right here,” he warned, “until the drag comes in. You *do*, and—” He imitated the sound of the capsule being fired.

“*After* the drag comes in, why, you can move all you like. Maybe—if you’re lucky—if you move fast enough...” He shrugged.

Jon-Joras half-turned, watched them walking back at a brisk pace in the direction they’d come from.

Then he swung back to watch the woods ahead of him. His legs twitched, but he beat down the impulse to flee. After a long while, or so it seemed, the cow-call came again from behind him, was answered by the bull in the forest ahead.

A tree moved in the wind that blew from the west, from behind, then another. His heart swelled and his head snapped as he saw that the second moving thing was no tree. The long neck swung from side to side, the faceted eyes gleamed yellow and green. And then the body moved out into the open. The great mouth parted, sounded its immemorial question.

And then the utterly unexpected happened. A dragon call from behind... but not the submissive one of a cow-dragon as before. This was a bull, another bull, a defiant and challenging bull; instantly, along with it, came the strong and bitter reek of bull-scent. Jon-Joras felt his bowels turn. Trapped! Before and behind him! Trapped—

The visible dragon bellowed its vexation. And Jon-Joras saw it all.

There was no bull-dragon behind him, just as there was no cow-dragon behind him. The call came from the same source—a small instrument of bark and wood. And the odor of dragon-suint had come from the bottle in the same kit-bag. Trapped? Tricked! He and the dragon, both. Only— Only the dragon would not know that, could not know that. His tiny and now-troubled brain served chiefly as a clearinghouse for instinctual responses. Female dragon: Go to her. Male dragon: Will want her, too: Slay him.

The bull in the woods now left the woods behind him and began to cross down the clearing at a lumbering trot, shooting forth his bifurcated tongue, tasting the air... air in which Jon-Joras's own scent was mingled with that of the "other"... man-scent now inextricably identified in the brute mind with that of its sexual rival and enemy.

The dragon did not know the trick, but the man did.

And the man reasoned and the man remembered, the man remembered what Hue had told him in the Kar-chee castle—that the dull brain of the great beast was mastered by misdirection alone. Aelorix and his toadies now had none of the apparatus of the hunt except the single huntgun. They had no beaters, no musics, no archers, no banner-men. They were making up for all that now by using the artificial call-horn and the scent drawn from the musk-glands of some dead bull-dragon. These they had.

Jon-Joras had nothing but his mind.

Again the wind from behind brought the ugly reek and the male call. The dragon ahead paused for a slow second, a shiver of rage moving the powerful muscles beneath the green-black hide. His cheek-nodules began to puff with mindless rage. He bellowed, he hissed, he began to run. Run?

That was what they hoped Jon-Joras would do: panic. Run. *"Maybe, if you're lucky—if you move fast enough—"*

But no man could move fast enough against a frenzied dragon. Long before he would have a chance to make the dubious safety of the woods (and behind, the great engine of the pounding dragon-body crashing the trees aside like reeds), the dragon would have seen him running, would have known him by his scent for enemy, and would have run him down, seized him, worried him, torn and trampled him.

Thus, the trick. And, thus, the game.

But Jon-Joras wasn't playing according to those rules. His legs still twitched and trembled and he let

them. His arms, it was, that moved now, moved swiftly. Arms and upper body slipped out of the loose hospital shirt which was still his only garment; arms reached up to the low branches of the low tree, little more, really, than a large sapling, and tied the shirt to them by its sleeves. The innocent wind at once caught at it and it flapped and flew about and danced.

If the shining eyes saw it, facets flashing yellow, flashing green, Jon-Joras could not say for certain sure. But the dragon roared at the same second, and at that same second.

Jon-Joras stooped into the grass which had been as high as his naked breast and now closed over his naked head. He still did not run.

He walked. Knees trembling, body sweating, he folded his arms upon his swift and fearful heart and walked away into the grass at right angles to the dragon's path. He did not look up even when the earth shook and the noise grew nearer, grew louder. Dependent on the meagerness of the animal's mind, hopeful of its not swerving from its path, trusting to its being for the moment intent upon the telltale shirt, Jon-Joras walked on.

To the men hiding in the woods it might have seemed that he had fainted after tying the shirt to the tree. Would they realize why he had tied it there? Or suspect in which direction he had gone if he had not fainted? Likely they would imagine that, if he were not now huddled at the foot of the tree, he would be surely taking the shortest way out of the clearing—the one he was, in fact, now taking.

In which case, they might well divide their numbers and, by circling around, try to head him off. They could not move fast, for they would not dare to expose themselves in the clearing, and it would be slow going in the woods.

The sun was now high enough for him to feel its rays on the side exposed to it. Without lifting his head or shoulders or increasing his pace, he began to turn, turned, and walked in towards the sun. He could not see, he could feel the dragon as it passed, bellowing, to his left. He kept on walking.

It had not noticed him! *It had not noticed him!*

That it had noticed the shirt was almost certain, for it had paused in its rushing and he could hear the snapping of the tree and (so he thought) the ripping and the tearing of the cloth.

He kept on walking, the sun warmed his naked shoulders, and presently the sun ceased to do so and the grass fell away from him and underneath it was mossy and overhead it was shady. Slowly and cautiously, but still stooping, he turned around. He saw that he had entered the forest... and safety.

Farther off a dragon called and sounded, but he could not tell if it were real or false.

Once he had been lost in the woods after a dragon had been busy in a clearing, and he was worse off now than then in that he was now naked. But in everything else he was, he reflected, hopefully, better off. For one thing, he was only a foot-journey away from the town instead of a flight-journey. For another, should he find himself again among Doghunters, he could count on aid instead of capture.

But most of all he was better off now because he had already had the experience. And he was where he now was—and *how* he now was—not because he had fled in numbness from a scene in no way of his own making, but because he had brought himself out of danger into safety. He was mother-naked and alone, there was a wild beast to one side of him and men who sought his life to another. But—he found to his astonished and his marveling delight—he was no longer afraid.

The clean sweet smell of the woods was all around him. A tiny gray creature for which he had no name

paused on its way up the side of a leaning tree and regarded him curiously.

“When in doubt,” Jon-Joras said aloud, “do as the natives do.”

He followed the gray one up the tree and looked all around him.

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The trees here on Prime World—at least, in this particular area of Prime World—were not as tall as he had seen elsewhere. On Dondonoluc, for one example, or on its mirror-twin-world, Tiran-lou, with their incredible depths of top-soil, the mastadonic trees towered several hundred feet high. But, as though in keeping with the foliage, if Prime World’s trees were not tall, neither were Prime World’s buildings. How far he might be from the nearest settlement, Jon-Joras did not know. The oozy green gum of this one, rank and odorous but by no means offensive, ebbed out onto his flesh as he pressed against the bole and craned, and mingled with the hair. A breeze met his inquiring face, a little wind rich with the smell of sap and earth and plants. But all he could see, whichever way he looked, were more trees, and yet trees.

Not altogether realizing what he was doing (and, afterwards, somewhat surprised that he had in any way thought of doing it), Jon-Joras let his eyes go out of focus. The trees blurred, trunks and crowns and branches. And, in the corner of his eye, something which had not been there before... or which had not appeared to be there before... took shape... a wide, shallow concave arc... a tall, abrupt and flaring fin...

Slowly and carefully, as though fearful that the new shapes had newly materialized from the ambient ether and might, if he were incautious, take fright and vanish away again, he turned his head so that he might see clearly where they were and mark their location. He did, and they stayed where they were and then he climbed down the tree.

Despite his having taken a careful sight on it he still had a hard time finding the flyer. There were not many around, that he had seen; this depleted world could afford, neither materials nor fuel, and the cost of importing made it impossible there should be many. He had seen them, silver and gold and several other colors; no where on Prime World had he seen another one camouflaged. In fact, nowhere did he know of this being done at all... except, of course, on the so-called War Worlds, which did not form part of Confederation.

But he found the flyer at last.

The door was open, as though someone on guard had just slipped out, but if there had actually been someone on guard, and where or what he slipped out to, Jon-Joras never learned. It is only in fiction that all loose ends are always neatly tied up. A tiny nameless creature with stripes along its little back looked up with bright, blank eyes to see the naked man flitting from tree to tree all around the clearing and then dash across it and up and into something for which the small creature had no familiar image. It blinked, instantly forgot, and scurried on, looting for nuts.

There were many things on Jon-Joras’s mind, but one of them was a firm resolution that first things had now to come first. He padded quickly to the controls and he took the flyer up and up until he saw nothing but a green blur beneath him. Then he put her on *Hover* and locked her so. Then he sat down to consider things.

There was food and drink in the proper compartment and the greedy way he ate informed him that, for one thing, he had been quite hungry, and that, for another, he seemed now to be all better. He thought about this as he gobbled and gulped and picked at something which proved to be a bolus of sticky tree-sap entangled in the hair of his leg. This, in turn, reminded him that he was still naked. He stood up

and patted his stomach and stretched and gave vent to an enormous and enormously satisfying eructation. Then he started rummaging around. He found clothes and those items which weren't clean were clean enough to suit him now. He had a dim recollection of the fastidious Jon-Joras of M.M. *beta*-world who shifted himself from head to foot three times a day and tossed the discarded items in the incinerator; but he did not pause even to smile. He suddenly had something else on his mind. The under-tunic stayed for a moment just where it was on his arms about to slip over his shaven head. For in that moment everything stayed where it was. Then he lowered his arms and slipped the under-tunic off and held it in his hands, staring, staring at it. Then he brought his face close to, next to it. He did not really think that he was mistaken, but he thought that he might perhaps... just possibly... perhaps... be. So, slowly, one by one, he picked up the other articles of clothing and one, by one, he smelt them.

They smelled, every one of them, faintly, faintly, but definitely perceptively, of that ancient musty odor of the Kar-chee Castle.

But it had burned—had it not? It had. And he had seen it burning. Had... whomever these clothes belonged to... had he been there then or since, it was inconceivable that his clothes should not be smelling of smoke. *Reeking* of smoke. But it reeked of nothing, had merely the normal smells of man and of flyer fuel and (not, hardly normal, this—) the alien and shadowy scent of the old ruin's ill-frequented lower passageways. Therefore—

Therefore the man who had worn these clothes there had worn them there and had been himself there *before* it had burned. And not too very long ago, either, or they would not still retain the scent.

Which made no sense at all.

Hue might not be there now, in the black basalt shell of a ruin, but he... and his people... had been there, steadily, for at least some period of years before. And Aelorix... and *his* people... were Hue's enemies. Jon-Joras stopped here and carefully considered all his thoughts. For one thing, what made him so certain that this flyer belonged to or had at least been used by Aelorix? Its mere proximity?

Once again he explored the small cabin, this time not looking for anything in particular and therefore looking for everything in particular. The chart-cabinet, the gear-locker, the food compartment, the spaces under the seats, the boot—all yielded nothing in the way of information. Certainly, it was not certain that Aelorix or any of his men had been the ones who brought the flyer here into the woods. But, if not them, who then? Who else had reason to camouflage the craft and secrete it here, so far from anything? He had no answer, and yet he would not accept that there should be no answer. So once again he began looking slowly through everything. And this time he found something.

It was only a small something which might turn out to be a nothing. The pile of charts was neatly stacked, perhaps a trifle too neatly. For the regularity of the pile disclosed one tiny irregularity which he would have failed to notice if the charts had been shuffled up in a disorderly manner—and this was the fact that one corner of one chart protruded just the slightest from the neat arrangement of the rest. As if the stack above it had been removed very carefully and then the one chart extracted and subsequently replaced with an elaborate care which had not quite come off. Was it so? Jon-Joras lifted up the charts above and removed this single one.

It was a map of The Bosky.

Or, to be precise, of one sector of it.

There were no notes or markings, no arrows, no circles-nothing of that sort. But he looked at the chart carefully, very carefully, scrutinizing it very closely, and it did seem to him that on one portion of it the paper was just a trifle smudged, as though it had been often traced by ascertaining fingers. Fingers intent

on indicating the terminus of a secret route, perhaps... If one paid visits to The Bosky it certainly made sense to go there by air; it certainly wasn't safe to go there by land if one could believe the stories. But... still unanswered... why should anyone want to go to The Bosky at all? That is—not to settle there or to pass through it in order to settle elsewhere, but to go there to one particular place and then return? And just once, either. The Bosky...

What did he know about it? It was the terra incognita, the land unknown, the land without people, and it lay beyond the farthest boundary of the land claimed by Sartor, Hathis, Peramis and Drogue. The land where hunts could not be held. No-man's-land. Where, according to old Ma'am Anna, queen of the Northern Horde of nomads, the dragons were fiercer than elsewhere—so fierce that they needn't be provoked into charging—so fierce that, time after time, they had prevented human penetration of the area by either herdsmen or farmers. Dragons with which Hue, so his daughter said, had nothing to do. That was The Bosky. And it was also the place where the unknown crew (unless the crew was, after all, composed of Aelorix and his gang) of the mysterious flyer had gone, and gone again and again, on their even more mysterious errand.

Thus, the strange Bosky, and was it the strangest thing of all on this strange planet believed by most of humankind to be their own ancestral world? With all its peculiar features, known and unknown, hidden and revealed: no. Not stranger, certainly, than the whole antique structure of Prime World society. Certainly not stranger than the brutal-sophisticated customs of the Hunts. Gentlemen-Huntsmen hating their dragon-prey, Doghunters hating dragons even more than the Gentlemen did and simultaneously hating the Gentlemen and being hated by them; this was strange enough, but this was not all. Nomads hating nobody and trusting nobody, working against the Doghunters who were working against the Gentlemen, but sure that they the Nomads were in all this working only for their own selves and opposing the Doghunters because in doing so they were also opposing the Gentlemen. And the band of thieves whose code of battle was perhaps more brutal than that of the Hunts they ignored and scorned, delighting—it seemed so—equally in the most elaborate forms of poetry and in murderous wrestling matches which ended or which were supposed to end in an elaborate and attenuated form of ritual cannibalism. The urban mobs and the rural sycophants. The dragons roused to fury in the woods and the dragons goaded to frenzy in the pit. The beautiful, involved, involuted, convoluted, contrived and bloody ballet of the dragon hunt, which brought to Prime World the wealth and questing zealotry of men from a score of hundreds of other worlds... though Prime World grew no richer, its aristocrats deepening into moral decay, its poor either flinging themselves in murderous fury against the adamant wall of their oppressors' scorn or taking the slow road to sudden death in distant fields or submitting to the yoke in ignorance or in silence... or kissing the bloody hand and fawning at the bloody boot.

Jon-Joras sighed, shook his head. What was behind it all? Was anything? Was there a pattern? There did seem to be hints and shadows and he wanted to know and he had to know if there was more. The ancient saying of ancient Charles Ford or Fort, curious chronicler of curious occurrences in the history of pre-Expansion Prime World, arose in his mind. *One measures a circle beginning anywhere...*

He got to his feet and went to the controls, took the craft off *Hover*, placed the chart on its scan-sight alongside the drive-seat, and set himself a course for The Bosky.

Below, far, far below were the waters of the Gulf, the land lying to the south of it, and—beyond the land—partly obscured by a mass of cloud like fleecy smoke, were the yonder waters of the Bay. Behind him lay the Main Sea, before him the Main Continent. The original, or at least the natural contours of the Gulf floor lay revealed to him like some great relief map: shelves and shallows and banks and basins and deeps. And, flashing over and through and across all, like some jagged submarine lightning-bolt, was the deep-scored trench which the Kar-chee had made—one of thousands and of hundreds of thousands such in this one body of water alone. Like an ill-healed scar it showed there, and told its tale of how,

floating down upon the planet from their lairs around the Ring Stars and finding a world whose land had been almost scraped bare of metals in making multitudes of ships to fling its children out across the galaxy, the invaders had delved into the seas themselves for metals of their own.

He wondered what ores they had sucked up from the hidden treasures of the sands there, beneath the water. Black sands, they looked to be, and had probably been rich in rare earths and heavy metals such as zircon, rutile, ilmenite and others. He wondered—

The flyer's speaker broke into voice.

It was a meaningless jumble of phonemes to him. Helplessly, he looked at the decoding cams under the speaker. But unless he knew the combination, he might press on them forever without result. The voice, having made its unintelligible announcement calmly, paused. Then it repeated it a second and then a third time, calmly. Then it waited. It spoke again in its broken syllables, and it seemed to Jon-Joras that there was now a touch of impatience... a fifth time... annoyance... pause... a sixth time... concern...

The voice barked its scrambled syllables at him now, abruptly ceased, abruptly spoke in plain speech, softly, so softly, that Jon-Joras jumped.

"Who has this boat up?" He made no answer. He could hear the man's troubled breath. "Listen, now— Put the controls onto *Receive* and lock her so. We'll guide her back and in. Do you understand? Or you'll be in trouble. Answer. Answer.

"Answer—"

But Jon-Joras said nothing. And then, softer yet, sickening in its implications, the voice said, slowly, "*Oh... you... karching... thief—*" and clicked off on the closing fricative.

And the thief looked behind him in dismay, as if he expected pursuit to burst immediately from the nearest cloud. He laughed at himself, but not for long. What should he do now? Put her on *All Speed*? If he did, he would leave a trail along the sky. Head for clouds and hope to hide the trail? The clouds were too far away, and not where he wanted to go, anyway. He put her into a diagonal descent as fast as she'd go without making marks, and leveled off at about a hundred feet above the water, and locked her so. Then he swiveled the seat around and looked up and waited.

He had not much long to wait.

The pursuers seemed to come bursting out of the fabric of the firmament, their trails thick and heavy and angry. He shot down at forty-five degrees, surged forward against his safety-belt as she hit the surface and watched the sudden surge of frothy water close over the dome and bubble like a dying whale. He put her onto full descent; descend far she could not, of course not, but if it were only hold here where she was as she was— And if the seams and shell proved leak-proof— And if they, the ones so way up high, did not see him— He looked at the chronometer and tried to calculate how long it would take for them to pass over and be gone.

The small craft surged slowly back and forth and slowly up and down. A dull, grinding nausea which seemed to go down to the very marrow of his spine began to afflict him. Finally, he could not go on standing it, tried to surface slowly, shot up like a cork in a spume, fell back and wallowed and rocked again. Hastily, he looked up, but through the moisture running down the dome he could see nothing. And when, finally, he could, he saw only the fading trails of vapor, vanishing into the Gulf.

And now at last he came to the end of that more-than-peninsula and not-quite-subcontinent where it joined the main landmass. He looked at the chart a moment, magnified in the sight-scan, then looked

again below. Those rounded hummocks (from above they seemed little more than that) must be the Sixteen Hills; those sudden sparkles of light, the sun reflecting on the Sweet and Bitter Lakes. And there, there, shadowy and sere, was the abrupt descent of the Great Dry Valley. All the landmarks.

Beyond lay The Bosky.

He dropped lower. He looked up and around again. And still no signs of recurrent pursuit. The speaker was, as it had remained, silent. Whom had it been? Who *were* they? Again, Aelorex? Or—his mind raced and tumbled about a bit—the Chairman of Droque? Was there perhaps some force on Prime World of which he had never heard? After all, there was a lot more to it than this part which lay behind him and which was about all that he had ever known. Were there not thriving cities, so it was said, on that great archipelago which formerly formed part of Australia and ringed round that shallow sea once called Lake Eyre? It was possible that the flyers might have come from down there. But bound upon what mystic errands which required them to camouflage their craft, hide in woods, speak in code, and pursue him as though he were himself a rogue dragon—? He could conceive of nothing, in answer. And turned again to chart and to controls.

Meanwhile, let him pursue some answers to some previous questions. And follow his course to the nameless, numberless hill which seemed to have been the locus or focus of the unknown fingers whose tracery had left, faintly, the only clue there was. He went lower. He went lower. And there he saw where it was and what it was. His breath hissed in between his teeth. His decision was immediate, neither to stop nor even—there—to slow down. He went on as though he had not seen it at all. He had certain qualms as to whether or not it had seen him, though. But these did not preoccupy him long.

They came down on him like stooping falcons while he was still thinking of what he had seen. *Them*, he had not seen. The warning he had was cast by shadows and was a matter of seconds, but it was enough, and he did what the weaker birds do (if they can) when the falcon stoops: He hid in the thickets.

Not precisely, of course. What he did, precisely, was to dart down into a glade of great-boled trees with low and widespreading branches; he simultaneously turned obliquely and shoved her speed as low as it would go and still keep him aloft. She wobbled and wavered, but she bore it wonderfully, and he floated in between the sunshine and the shadow, between the branches and the ground, turning round and round the tree-trunks as close to them as he could in a sinuous figure-of-eight movement.

But the nigh pursuer was not as fluent of flight as a falcon. One convulsive effort he made to break—then he crashed. The off one did manage to break, escaping by the breadth of a cry. Up and up he went, hovered and darted and swooped. Time and time again he made as though to dash down into the glade, but his flyer was three times the size of the one Jon-Joras was in, and so, every time, he withdrew. But even while Jon-Joras played at his little game in safety below—in and out, in and out, around, around, around—at every tiny clearing and across every beam of light, he saw the great, dark, heavy, hovering shadow.

Once, skimming round the bole of a vine-encrusted tree, Jon-Joras caught a glimpse of the smoke and fire of the wrecked plane. Then, turning and twisting, he saw the end of the glade up ahead, and the rough and broken ground which ran for a good wide way until ended abruptly by the gaunt escarpment of a tumbled cliff. He made to go back the way he had come and keep up the game until his fuel ran out or until the other's fuel ran out or until... until... he scarcely knew what, until.

The idea came to him more suddenly than its execution followed. It might work, it might not work, it was infinitely risky, foolhardy, it was all those things—but he could not go on flitting up and down the glade like a butterfly.

So he took his flyer deeper and deeper back into the thickest of the glade, slower and slower, and lower and lower. He put the controls on *Circle*, and locked her so. Then he stepped to the door and stepped out. It was just a short jump. Slowly and ponderously, like a fat woman who has had just a shade too much to eat and drink, the flyer went wobbling around and around. He turned and looked back after a minute. But, so well had she been painted, he could no longer see her at all.

He paused a moment to calculate his bearings by the angle of a pencil-thin sunbeam. Then he slipped away through and into the woods. Later, looking back again, he saw the other craft still patrolling.

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The trail, when he came upon it, puzzled him. There should by right be no trail here, in fact, how could there be, when there were no people? There were no people, but other things lived in the forests here beside birds (and, for that matter, dragons) and had to move about. Often he saw the rough patches of rougher hair upon the sides of the tree, two or three times he saw the small neat heaps of dung, and once he saw (but passed along as though he did not see) the twin spotted fawns lying so securely in the shady covert of the glen.

But of dragon he saw none. Nor did he hear any.

“Dragon? Dragon? Are you a dragon-chick?” he stooped to ask and to pick up a tiny, delicate orange lizard. It pattered cleanly and delicately along his hand and paused at the cushion of his upturned palm and looked at him so bravely, gravely, carefully he put it down upon the mossy rocks a foot or two in and off the trail where (he hoped) not even the dark hoof of a deer would menace it. He moved on.

Finally, as the sun commenced its decline, he saw what he had come to see, though of course by no means at first knowing that it was *this* that was here, had been here, waiting for him all alone. He had the notion of his having come full-circle, and of the thing there saying to him that he should Look—See?—You cannot escape. Not from me.

Not from us. Not from them. It was though he saw now as a whole the same place he’d seen before as a collection of fragments. But still all he saw was now an outside, looming and staring and gathering in its black stiff folds about it, head and snout thrust forward darkly from the green over-mantle—

A Kar-chee castle ...

And what was in it?

More men like monomaniac Hue and all his crew? More dragons being tormented into murderous patterns of behavior? More plots and plans to overthrow the status quo? He crouched and stared and thought that all the sweet waters of the Earth must be stained with blood; he saw them welling and spreading like a great scarlet stain across all the face of this aged and afflicted world.

But from within the black basalt walls came neither signs nor sounds nor movement.

His own movements, as he backed off, lips bared, were —though he did not know it, did not have the image, even, in his subliminal memory—for all the world like those of a dog in the presence of something known to be deadly and dangerous but otherwise all unknown. And, like a dog, he began to circle about the thing of menace. And it was while so doing that he observed for the first time a dragon.

With its green-black, black-green, green and black skin, its deep-set and faceted eyes flashing yellow and green and blue and red, long neck and huge body, it looked no different than any other dragon. In form and body, no different, that is. But immediately and immensely and frighteningly obviously it looked

very different than any dragon he had ever seen, and the difference lay in its manner. It did not move in a mindless rush capable of being instantly diverted by a waving flag or the sound of a horn. And neither did it move in the relentless fashion of one intent upon its prey and knowing just what and just where that prey was. Least of all did it move along like some great, grazing pea-brained cow.

The word (it came to him in a moment that seemed to chill his skin) the word for this dragon was *alert*. And the other word for it (the echo after the shot) was *intelligent*.

It came slowly along, slowly and carefully, head turning from side to side, tongue tasting the air. Now and then it paused and it raised its head, slowly and deliberately, gathering in the details of sight and sound and scent at all levels. Then it proceeded in its careful, one might almost say its measured, pace. Then, too, in a third terrifying flash of understanding, Jon-Joras understood what now in retrospect seemed blazingly obvious to him: that the paths which he had been treading through the forest were too wide by far to have been made entirely by the narrow slots of deer's hooves. He had been walking, careless—almost—and certainly all unknowing, in the dragons' walk! He had been treading in the dragons' tracks! And now he had at once to retreat and to vanish, otherwise this careful questing beast of a dragon would certainly, soon, be treading in his, Jon-Joras's, tracks—!

But even as his tendons tensed to move him back and away, the dragon, as though in obedient command to his, the man's own fears, turned aside and moved away and in another moment was hidden in the woods and in the towering thicket. Jon-Joras did not relax, gratefully or gracefully; he slumped and almost fell over his own sweating legs. He had come here in response to a stupid bravado, and now he was trapped—at least twice-trapped. The patrolling flyer kept him captive here in one way. And now, it would seem, the patrolling dragon might (if he were not exceedingly careful) keep him captive in another. If it didn't kill him first. The strange thing (*the* strange thing? and was all else commonplace?) was that the dragon had not looked fierce. Its fear and its terror came from other attributes entirely. This beast might not charge him upright upon its hind legs... neither, though, was it likely to be diverted by a rag of a shirt fluttering in the breeze, or some other trick of the sort.

Time enough some other time to wonder why this one dragon was so different. Time now all but screamed aloud to be used to go as far and as fast away from here as might be possible. He would head back as silent-swift as ever he could to the general area where he had left the stolen flyer. The patrolling vessel might have gone away. Or its pilot might have landed it and come out himself to investigate. Or Jon-Joras might simply regain the one he'd used before and continue a terrain-hugging, tree-hiding tactic until some better notion or occasion offered itself.

Then he looked up and saw that, although he had moved and the dragon had moved, the dragon was in front of him once again. He crouched. He slunk off to the left. The dragon, moving slowly and without undue concern, moved in the same direction. He moved more quickly. So did the dragon. And now, from a great distance, overlaid with a multitude of memories, he heard the voice of Aelorix speaking to him at the estate, back when all was well and all was amity and peace. *They were the Kar-chee's dogs... They hunted us...* Was that what this one was doing now? Hunting him? With deliberate speed and awful majesty? No... No... Not quite, not quite. Jon-Joras crept here and crept over there, crawled, dodged, twisted, retreated, retreated... The dragon followed, followed, followed. But actually it was not at all that Jon-Joras was going where he wanted and the dragon merely following.

Actually, Jon-Joras was going where the dragon wanted him to go, the way the dragon wanted him to go. He wasn't being hunted. He was being herded.

And so, through the great, crouching, vine-heavy gate of the castle, Jon-Joras walked with slouching shoulders and with hanging head, and the dragon walked watchfully behind him.

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The dragon had ceased to be a surprise and, when he saw it at last, the Kar-chee really came as no surprise. It was not just that he had smelled it, the scent not faint and old and musty as it had been in the other, in the abandoned castle, but strong and fresh. But scent and, subsequently, sight, were but confirmations of what logic—without either—had already revealed. For if the dragons had been the Kar-chee's dogs and if here and if now a dragon was acting like a dog, then—

It was the man who was the surprise.

—then there had to be Kar-chee to direct them.

But he did not expect to see the man and the Kar-chee together; he did not expect to see the man at all. Any man at all.

One picture only had he ever seen, and then the carved figure in the frieze, dusty and webby and observed from a bad angle; but there wasn't and couldn't be a second's question or doubt. The dull black and ten-foot tall form, the comparatively tiny head, the huge anterior arms bent so that the hands or paws were folded loosely together upwards, the upper body slanted and canted forward, seemingly under the weight of its limbs: unmistakably, the Kar-chee.

The man was colorless, ageless, dirty, face and figure loose where one would think to find them tight, tight where they should have been loose. He sagged, blinked, mumbled his mouth and smacked his lips and he said nothing. In his hands, hands held up hieratically as a Pharaoh's with crook and flail, he the man held some curious arrangement of fans or fronds and sticks.

The dragon composed itself for rest and observation on the mossy, grassy terrace, ran its tongue out once more, hissed a bit and made a slight coughing, barking, grunting sound.

The Kar-chee snapped its head up and began to move itself in an odd way and made an odd sort of rustling, clicking noise. And the man, in turn, cocked *his* head and looked away and the Kar-chee stopped and the man looked at Jon-Joras, and, in a curious sing-song voice he said, "Oh, mmmm, message, mmmm, so, It appears that he this man has not come here-place in, mmm, a proper, an authorized, mmm, orderly fashion, purpose, mmm." Click, click, rustle, rustle, click-clack. "Does-has he the man a correct mmm intent, mmm in coming here-place, so, or is it mere, mmm, intrusion; what reply is conveyed? Mmm, so."

Jon-Joras, astonished, allowed his mouth to fall open, said nothing. The Kar-chee clicked and rustled and the interpreter, allowing his dull and uninterested eyes to slide over the newcomer, said, "Communicate with, mmm, he the man and obtain, mmm, mmm, the reply. So." The voice changed a trifle in tone and timbre and the empty eyes appeared to try to concentrate. "Why did he the— No. Why did you come?"

Thinking rapidly and fearfully for what might be an acceptable answer, even a lie which—if not too outrageous—might be carried off—Jon-Joras said, "The overlords have sent me."

The interpreter clicked and rustled his stick and his fan or frond. The Kar-chee rustled and clicked, and Jon-Joras stared at its gaunt, chitinous body.

" 'What overlords?'"

"The overlords of all the stars of men."

" 'Why approached in furtive manner?' "

“Desired not to be seen by the other men who sometimes approach.”

“ ‘Why desired not?’ ”

“Lest they prevent the consultation.”

“ ‘Purpose of consultation?’ ”

Here it was, and Jon-Joras could think of nothing safe to put forward. So he decided to leave this to the other, and so he said, “To discuss and discover what it is that the Kar-chee most want, with a view to adjusting matters.”

Silence fell. After a moment the Kar-chee clicked, then stopped, then rustled, and stopped. The interpreter coughed a bit and cleared his throat. Then the Kar-chee “spoke” rapidly and abruptly turned and made off in its eerie, stalking, waddling gait. The interpreter spat on the ground and rubbed his spittle into it with his foot. He glanced up, grimaced, shrugged, seemed to hang and dangle on invisible wires which, if cut, would let him collapse into a huddle of puppet-cloth.

“What did he- What did it- What did the Kar-chee say?”

“Mmm? Say? Said to give you food, take care of what you, mmm, will want... What will you want?” the old man asked, almost querulously. And added, “Come, then. Come. Come on.”

The rank odor of the Kar-chee was thicker down below, but it was largely replaced in the old man’s quarters, away off in a distant chamber down long and dusty echoing empty corridors, by the at least equally rank odor of the old man himself and his quite indifferent housekeeping. New clothes were piled in a niche in the wall and old clothes mouldered on a heap in the corner and one nasty garment hung over the sill of the high slit-window as though the effort of tossing it there precluded any attempt to correct the poor aim and shove it on through. The old man sat down on his frowsty bed and coughed and rumbled and spat. Then he stared blankly at his sudden guest, a long while. From time to time a flicker of something passed over his dehumanized face and it twitched and made movements as though it were about to express interest or another emotion. But before ever this was done, the face sagged into the same blankness as before. Was he drugged, perhaps, Jon-Joras wondered.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

This did produce reaction; after all, the old man’s function was to serve as a channel for questions and answers to pass through and to re-pass through; he had to employ his own mouth and tongue and vocal cords for one of these passages, and his mind, no matter how mechanically, for both. “What’s...” the question seemed to sink into the sands of stupor and there be lost, but after a moment it welled up again, a bit diminished: “... *name?*” Blear eyes looked up, slack mouth pursed and twisted, lips blubbered in a short, abrupt sound which might have retained the ghost of scorn or pain or laughter: the scornful, painful laughter which ends in a little bubble of blood, seen or unseen: the hands fluttered in the briefest, slightest gesture of pushing things away; then fell back and down.

There was a not-quite-mutter, a more-than-whisper, which might have been, “Never mind...”

“Well, but... Where do you come from?”

No. Not drugs. The old man’s mind had simply rusted away. Who could say how long he had been here, a prisoner? A prisoner-at-large, but still a prisoner. He licked his thin lips with a bluish tongue, stirred on his dusty couch and looked about him. “Food,” he said. Sighed. Pointed. There was a small pile of camp-rations, and empty and part-empty containers lay where they had fallen or had been dropped,

adding the rotten-sweet tainted smell of garbage to the other ill smells of the room. “Food,” he said again.

Jon-Joras got up and helped himself, paused with a bit of something almost at his mouth. “They bring it here for you?” he asked. And, answering his own question, said, “Yes. They bring you the food and the clothes, too. The other men who come here—the ones who approach in a proper order. Who are they? Who are they? And what is this all ab—”

Now the old man leaped up and scuttled across the dirty floor and sort of crouched before him, looking up and breathing into his face a fetid breath and now his face was distorted with feeling and he grasped Jon-Joras’s arms and he said to him in a whisper like a scream, “Oluc? Oluc? You know Dondon-oluc?”

Remembrance sprang into the young man’s mind and must have instantly been reflected on his face, for the old one tightened his timid grip and made anguished little noises.

“Dondon-oluc and Tiran-lou,” said Jon-Joras. “And the huge old trees—”

“And Lou! And Lou!” the old man cried, in a jerky voice. “Oluc and Lou, ah! And the trees, the trees! The trees...”

He fell into a heap of smeared and smattered clothes that cried and twitched and made dreadful, sobbing noises. Jon-Joras was torn between pity and dismay and hope, and then the old man scuttled backwards away from him and rose to a slouch and stared at him with his awful crumpled face askew and then turned and ran, tottering, out of his nasty room and down the dim, black corridors and whimpered and flapped his wrinkled, dirty hands.

Jon-Joras stared after him. Run after him? No, no, he might get lost, and he had no desire to get lost here in this place where the Kar-chee scent was forever strong, forever fresh. Was the old interpreter off to reveal something to his alien masters? It seemed not likely. Likelier only that he had been all unsettled by having some of the rust and dust of decades fall in scales and flakes from his poor withered mind and memory. The young man put the bit of food into his mouth and looked out the tall slit-window. Outside, downside, between the castle and the woods, the dragon patrolled. Alert, watchful, and with deliberate leisure.

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“I’m afraid, I’m afraid,” the old man said. “I’m so afraid.” He spoke in halting, stifled tones, again his face so close to Jon-Joras’s.

“Of what, Old Man?”

“I could be punished. Back there. Ah, back home. Why I came away. Ran. Left me here. Didn’t dare, don’t dare. Afraid,” he wept.

“Confederation has a twenty-five year statute of limitations,” Jon-Joras reminded him. “And Dondon-oluc and Tiran-lou, both, are confederate-worlds. Surely it must be longer than that, you’ve been here?”

Bit by bit and scale by scale by flake, he was trying to do a work of repair. Vast holes had been hopelessly eaten away. The Old Man was either determined to have no name or had simply lost that intensely important part of his *persona*. Nor would he, or, perhaps, nor could he, describe how or when he had come here or who had taken him here—the *who* being certainly those still supplying, the those in contact with the Kar-chee. It seemed obvious, though, that whoever they were they had taken advantage of his fugitive status. An interpreter was certainly always needed here, the Kar-chee being incapable of

articulate human speech. There had been an interpreter here, of course, when the Old Man hail first arrived. “The Poor Woman,” he called her. However awful this life-in-death must be to a man, how much more so must it have been to her!—whoever she was or had been. Poor woman, indeed. For some while at any rate they had been some company for each other, she teaching him to understand the Kar-chee “speech” and to reproduce it; and then she had died.

Longer than twenty-five years that he’d been here? Closer, probably, to fifty!

“Afraid all changed, on Oluc. Oh, terrible—!”

“I was there just two years ago. It didn’t seem to be a place of the sort which changes fast. And the soil was still as thick and rich and the trees were still gigantic.” He reached into his memory for such names as he could recall, trees, rivers, towns... the Old Man made dreadful attempts to smile.

“Afraid of them, still, always. Here.”

“The Kar-chee?”

“Of them, too. But most afraid of this?” And again the dreadful terror-whisper. “Suppose they go? The Kar-chee. *And take me with them!*”

Enough, indeed, to make the mind of any man, even if young and even if strong and sound, freeze with fear: the Kar-chee departing at long and ancient last for their lairs around the Ring Stars, black and cold and devoid of man and the things which stood between man and madness: this was indeed just cause for fear, to be taken along and to tarry there forever.

Slowly, simply, repetitiously, firmly, Jon-Joras told the Old Man that he was in close contact with the Confederation Delegate on Prime World, that he was also the Private Man of an important outworld ruler. That, whoever had brought him, the Old Man, here and kept him here, it was not Confederation. And therefore it and they by definition were of lesser power and hence unable to withstand the wishes and directives of Confederation... once Confederation knew.

“So the thing that must be done is this: I must get to ConfedBase or at least make contact with Delegate Anse, if I can get away from here in time to meet him when he comes to Peramis. In either case, you see, *I must get out of here.*”

It was not to be done, it could not be done. The guardian dragons would not allow him to make an escape. They would tear him in pieces. “But,” Jon-Joras protested to the protesting Old Man, “the dragons here obey the Kar-chee, so—”

Now he was to see the other side of the mirror, and its image was at first to be as obscure as its obverse; for the interpreter knew only of the dragons “here” and of none other. “The dragons,” he said, shaking his head, “*are* the Kar-chee...”

Jon-Joras stared. “But that’s what Hue said!”

“‘Hue’?”

“Old Man, I don’t understand. I saw a dragon. I saw a Kar-chee. *They were not the same.* How can you say that they are?” Explanations, though, were not forthcoming. Merely he repeated, They were the same. So another question was asked. “What is the set-up between the Kar-chee—and these other men? The other men do something for the Kar-chee, that is, they do something for you. They bring you food and clothing. *But what do the Kar-chee do for the other men?*”

They kept guard. They let no other men through. They—the Kar-chee who were also dragons—destroyed any others who attempted to enter this territory. Why? Ah. Mmm. The muttered, fragmented pieces of comment scarcely deserved to be called information. But here and there and finally some pieces fell into place. The Old Man was terrified to approach the Kar-chee unsummoned. He had never done so, dared not do so now. Did not even know where, in the maze below his level, it laired. But his will-power, positive or negative, had so long ago fallen into complete desuetude that he could not resist Jon-Joras's mild but insistent pressures.

They came out blinking into the sunlight and went to the rampart. The dragon presently came into view, glanced at them, paced onward. With hands which trembled at first, but soon fell into habitual and pacifying actions, the Old Man fell to rattling and clicking and rustling his artificial but quite intelligible reproduction of the Kar-chee language. And the dragon paused and looked and it was plain that the dragon listened.

And then, up from where? No matter. Up from wherever it had been, the Kar-chee came.

'Message. If he the man inquires if we the Kar-chee desire to depart, then he the man understands that we the Kar-chee desire to depart and his the man's question is no proper question.'

'Always they the proper men offer future-when to depart we the Kar-chee to the proper place of we the Kar-chee but never from first-when to present-when have they the proper men done so.'

" 'If the message of he the man is properly communicated and properly understood, is it that he the man declares that the proper men are not the proper men, but that he the man and his fellows are the proper proper men and that the never-kept promise will in present-when be kept? These the before-when declared being the Overlords? ' "

And Jon-Joras reiterated that those selected by all the worlds and stars of men to run their common affairs were indeed, through him, offering to return the Kar-chee to their Ring Star lairs; and this to be done as near to immediately as could be managed. "Only," he said, firmly, and reassuringly, "that this man who communicates messages is not to depart with the Kar-chee but is to remain here with us his fellows." And he emphasized this with gestures and at length he put his arm around the Old Man's trembling shoulders, and added, "For when the Kar-chee are in their own and proper places they need never and will never communicate with men again, and so will have no need of him."

The Kar-chee's dull eyes showed nothing. And then, in an abrupt and shocking change of pronoun and of phrase, it said, "I must consult with my other self. Await."

There was a silence, and a long silence. The Kar-chee above did not move and the dragon below did not move. The Old Man trembled and trembled. The dragon hissed. The Kar-chee lifted its tiny head. Overhead a flyer shot into view. Jon-Joras started, stared.

" 'He the man is at this present-when to go below and there remain.' "

Jon-Joras moved as quickly as his legs would let him, and as he ran he called out, "Don't tell them anything and don't worry. Don't worry!"

He made his way towards the Old Man's room, but recollection of its dirt and disorder dissuaded him, so he went to wandering in an off-corridor. A wink of light caught his eye as he passed one of the chambers, and he turned to look. It was a mirror, of the quaint hour-glass shape once so popular... how long ago? On his own distant and orderly world, the *beta*-planet of Moussorgsky Minor, perhaps more than a century ago. Allowing for the lag in time and transport and fashion... here?... who could say how less long ago. Fashionable, yes. But only among women. He entered the room.

Dust had almost deprived the old mirror of reflective capacity, and dust cloaked and choked everything in here. Yet, despite and underneath the dust, things were all arranged in order. A bed was neatly made. Clothes hung in orderly rows. An antique desk still bore a scripter set with all as it had been left, well-readied to use. It came to Jon-Joras with a shock and pang of pity that here had been the room of the previous interpreter, “the Poor Woman.” He opened the scripter, slowly, delicately, with even a slight touch of fear.

it should make no difference to me how things will go here, for well or ill, but as this unfortunate young man must probably remain here for his own forever, it's well that he has learned as much as I can teach him. And now there is no more reason I should delay Death, that importunate suitor, any longer. He does but carry me across this dim horizon, and I hope it will be brighter there.

He had no time to reflect on this. Somewhere up above someone was calling his name. It sounded vaguely familiar, and a wild surge of hope brought him almost to the door—Delegate Anse?—Delegate Anse's voice would not sound familiar, he had heard it only twice and was sure this wasn't it—Por-Paulo? It was not *that* voice at all, the thought made a wave of longing for his still-absent king sweep over him, but it was not his voice—a prickle of unease slowed him up and kept him inside. Who had been in the flyer and knew that he was Jon-Joras and knew that he was here? Aelorix? It was not the Gentleman's voice, but it might still be that of one of his associates. But why did it sound so familiar?

Perhaps, though, whoever it was did not know that he was here at all. He might be guessing, trying... trapping. Well. If friend he was, then some delay would little matter. And if he were no friend...

Jon-Joras flitted through the back of the room and into the next one and thence to the next. The voice seemed to be rather nearer, but he was sure it was still in the main corridor. His intention was to get behind it and have a look at whomever it belonged to.

“Jon-Joras?”

“Jon-Jo-o-o-r-as...”

“Jon-Jor-as ... ?”

If it were a friend, why did he not announce and identify himself?

He was about to peer with considerable caution out into the corridor, when a voice, and not that voice, said, close by and with disgust, “It sure stinks in here.” Jon-Joras hugged the webby wall.

“ ‘Money never stinks,’ ” a second voice quoted.

“Freaky vermin,” the first one commented, unappeased. And then, “I always hate coming here... Where is that son of a karche's egg?”

The voices ebbed away. Now Jon-Joras did peer out. The two men met the third one, presumably the first one, the one who had been calling, at the turn of the corridor. They shook their heads. There seemed, certainly, something familiar about his stance and movement, as there had been about his voice. But he was friend to these other two, and they were no friends to Jon-Joras. Friends do not come seeking friends with drawn weapons in their hands. And besides—I *always hate coming here*, one had said. So. These were the “proper men,” the men whose coming was regular and by arrangement, and who had been coming here for decades. At least for decades. Who had provided at least two wretched devils of interpreters. Had allied themselves with the alien Kar-chees and with their murderous dragons. Who?

I must consult with my other self. What of that, for a conundrum?

Nothing of that, for now. For now there was only the matter of keeping out of the way. Had the Kar-chee, after consulting with its “other self,” decided not to trust Jon-Joras? Decided to turn the matter over to the familiar, the “proper men”? Certainly it did seem so.

He came to another slit-window and looked out. There was no one and nothing to be seen. From the slant rays of the declining sun it appeared that he was now on the other side of the castle from where the Kar-chee (was there only one Kar-chee? Did not its curious reference to the “other self” plainly indicate there was at least one other?) and its domestic dragon were. Jon-Joras sighed. Let him but once get off this troubled world, he would take good care never to return to it. Now, how wide was this window?

It was wide enough.

There were foot-holds enough, too, and a conveniently canting, slanting tree. He made his way to the ground with no more difficulty than that provided by the constant fear of death, and then he crept into the underbrush like a lizard. He had gotten a good ways off and had raised himself from all fours to that same crouching or rather, stooped, walk, which had stood him in such good stead so early this morning, when a shout came from behind him and a tussock beside him exploded into a gout of dust and earth.

They had seen him.

XI

They kept on coming after him.

And, after them, came the dragon.

It was probably futile to try to escape them on foot.

They were fresh, he was weary. They were armed, he was not. And even if he could outrun them, there was still the dragon to contend with... not the chicken-witted wittold of the settled regions, but the murderously intelligent great beast of The Bosky. Various old bywords went rushing through his mind. *If you can't go across, you must go around. If you can't go across, you must go across.* No, not those. He tried to bring his buttocks even lower than they were, and dragged himself, face first, through something nasty. *If you can't go across, you must go up.* Probably there was no such byword at all. Or hadn't been... till now.

He went up and he went up the far side of the twisted old tree. Something had built a nest or a den there once, and it still smelled rotten. Not matter. Such things had ceased to count long ago. He pulled his legs up after him and used the stinging twig-work as a blind to peer through. The men had not seen him, yet. Neither, apparently, had the dragon. It came running along as he had never before seen dragons run: lightly, and on all fours, but as though it ran on its toes and not upon the pads of its feet at all. It made no sound. It made no sound at all that Jon-Joras could hear.

But the men below had heard something. Or had felt or scented or sensed something. One of them whirled around and cried out. The others on the instant did the same. They scattered. And Jon-Joras in the tree realized a few sudden things. For one, the dragon was not hunting him. For another, the dragon was not hunting for or with the men. And for a third and last, it was hunting *against* them. It was clear that they knew it, too.

This hunt was short-lived, for the weapons the men were carrying were not the local model hunt-guns.

They had not come loaded for dragon; at least, he knew of no reason why they should have. And in any event this one was not marked and was not even running erect so that they might guess at where its vital spot, where the fatal shot, might be and might be placed. So far as Jon-Joras knew, they had only come loaded for Jon-Joras, and his body rattled in a sudden spasm of fear when he saw one of them level the thick and snub death-weapon and blow the dragon's head into a mash of blood and brain and bone and pulp that flew all about. And then, then, oh, how horrible! to see the dying dragon, the dragon that should have been dead, still stumbling along, and groping and clutching for its prey while all the while fountains of blood spurted from its broken arteries and torrents of blood poured from its severed veins. It was as though the headless body still remembered what its eyes had seen and still knew where to go and what to do.

Pounding, now, pawing the stained grasses, it came on, came onward, still came on, while the man it approached scrambled backwards and stumbled backwards as though not daring to turn his head; and the other two retreated, took their stances again, and blew great chasms and abysses into it. Off in the woods another dragon called, briefly, abruptly, cut off in mid-cry. Were all the dragons of The Bosky being massacred? "... in the egg, and out..."? as, even now, this one, its spine exposed and smashed, fell at last to the ground, which shook to receive it. A short moment more the fore-limbs tore at the bloody turf and tried to pull the bleeding mountain of flesh further. There was a spasm, a flurry, and the ravaged hulk lay still.

The three, shaking their heads, came cautiously together and surveyed their kill. And the other dragon, walking fully erect—*walking* fully erect!—and again with that curious stride upon the tips of its toes—passed beneath Jon-Joras as he clung to the tree and peered in numbed more-than-fright through the soiled integuments of the abandoned nest. Beneath him, beyond him, nodules swollen in silent rage, and then it bellowed the rage that made the forest quake as it fell upon them. And ripped and tore. One died where he stood, one fired upwards and vanished into the giant, trap-like mouth even as the limb his shot had shattered dangled and spurted blood; and one fled, shrilling as he ran, and was almost immediately followed down and dragged and torn and trampled. And so ended the last dragon hunt that Jon-Joras was ever to see.

What happened next was less terrifying, but no less amazing. For the great beast, pushing aside the corpse at its feet, with one of its forepaws seized hold of a branch and transferred it to the wounded limb which grasped it convulsively but held it firm. Then it rooted out another. Then, turning around and around, and looking up and looking down and looking all about it, it began that beating together, that clicking and rustling, which could only have been a deliberate attempt at imitating the methods of the Old Man interpreter. It was capable of no other meaning than a desire to locate Jon-Joras. And a desire to indicate that its desire was not hostile.

Quaking and trembling, he came down from the tree. The faceted eyes flashed at him. It moved off, he followed, it turned and saw that he followed, and so it turned no more until at last they reached the castle. But he had not followed until, forcing his quivering stomach into obedience, he turned over one of the mangled bodies on the bloody forest floor. Only one, but that one was enough. Jetro Yi. No wonder his voice, his manner, had seemed familiar. Flunky Jetro. He would bow and scrape no more.

Thus far, the door onto the mysteries had opened. But up there in the castle, it had swung shut in a manner forbidding it should or could ever be opened in any near time again. The Old Man, his poor grimy forehead battered and blue where, presumably, the butt of a gun had struck it, lay face upwards and mouth open. He had been afraid and he had been rightfully afraid, but Jon-Joras was very glad that he did not seem to be afraid any longer. It was simply too bad that his release had been so long in coming.

The Kar-chee looked at him with huge dull eyes. It seemed, somehow, to be crooked. Jon-Joras looked more closely and saw that it, too, was hurt. The three “proper men,” with Jetro Yi one of them, had done a fine day’s work. It was possible to reconstruct it, almost as though the gaunt, hurt creature was able to tell him of it. They had appeared and spoken to the castle’s keeper. They knew that Jon-Joras must be here, or—perhaps—they had only guessed that he might. Perhaps the timorous Old Man had somehow given it away.

They had demanded him, the one who stole their flyer, had caused the death of the crew of the other, the crashed flyer. Of course it was not that alone or even mostly that which brought them after him. But—

Almost certainly the Kar-chee had confronted them with their perpetually broken promise. Had, likely enough, demanded that it be immediately fulfilled. Had refused to surrender someone else who had promised that promise to fulfil. Blows were struck. They left the castle looking still for Jon-Joras and certainly it had never been their intention to allow him to escape. He had a quick, over-vivid picture of his own head struck by the same shot which had killed the first dragon out there in the woods. The first dragon, the first and second dragons. Like minor players in an archaic play-drama. . . but their roles had not been minor, but their roles had been and still were things of the mystery. He thought that, finally, finally, he was beginning to understand. But with the Old Man dead (and perhaps, with his ruined mind, even if he had not been dead), he could never be fully sure that he had understood or ever would, entirely.

As for the Kar-chee—and he found it not hard to pity it now, wounded and alone, despite all that its kind had done so long ago to this the home of all man’s race—it understood this much, at any rate: that only in and through Jon-Joras it had hopes of survival and escape. Therefore it had sent the dragon, not only to save him, but to bring him back.

Therefore *it had sent its other self!*

The flyer in which Jetro Yi and his two fellows had come was in the clearing where it had landed and which smelled of the stale fuel of its many prior comings. Perhaps forewarned against leaving it alone by Jon-Joras’s theft of the other one that morning, they’d left a man on armed guard. But he was dead now, too, and from the shape (or shapelessness) of him, it would have been neither grace nor favor to him if he were still alive. Jon-Joras, infinitely weary, glad of the excuse given him by the slow and limping Kar-chee, slowed his own walk. It was almost dark when they reached the craft. He put its lights on and the two of them entered. Fortunately it was a larger craft than the one he’d made off with this morning, but even so the alien had to crouch, looking not less fearful because he was huddled instead of erect. But there was no longer, so it seemed, fear between them. And Jon-Joras made a wry smile at the thought that perhaps the Kar-chee was even now reminding itself that the fact that Jon-Joras had a bad smell did not mean that Jon-Joras was therefore bad!

He settled into the drive-seat with a grateful groan of relief. He took the craft up and then he radioed in to ConfedBase, down on the underside of the Earth in a small continent which the Kar-chees had raised up around what had once been the Andaman Islands, and had ConfedBase connect him to Delegate Anse.

“How are you? Where are you? How have you been? Why did you go away from the hospital?” the questions came pouring out.

Jon-Joras said, “I’m in a stolen flyer up at 30,000 feet. I am very tired, but otherwise well. One group of men tried to kill me early this morning. Another group of them—or maybe just another group—tried to kill me late this afternoon. I have a Kar-chee with me, and—”

“You have a what?” Anse interrupted, in a low voice.

“A Kar-chee, he’s injured, but I don’t know how much or how seriously. Where should we meet you? Sir? Delegate? Are you—”

“I’m here, yes. I’m just thinking. I’m afraid that you’re still quite ill. The best thing would be for you to put down in the nearest place you can. Would that be Peramis?”

Jon-Joras later found it easier to see things as Anse had seen them, but at that exact moment he saw nothing incredible in his own report. He did not make things any better by shouting that nothing would persuade him to go anywhere near any of the four city-states or, for that matter, anywhere near any place where dragon hunts were conducted. “Think fast,” he wound up. “They may be monitoring this call right now. They may try to bring me down.”

“Oh, dear,” said Anse. “Oh, oh, oh... Hold on. Hold on.”

Later, too, Jon-Joras realized that the anxiety was not at all occasioned by belief, but entirely by disbelief. At the moment, though, he found it somewhat gratifying. Anse came back in a moment, asked him how his fuel was, gave him a course to set, and informed him that a special fast-flyer was being sent out and would pick him up in as little time as possible and bring him down to ConfedBase. And this it did. That is, it did not so much pick him up as scoop him up. Then it went down a great ways and leveled out to allow him to transfer. Part of the crew were Prime Worlders, and promptly went into something approaching hysteria when they saw the Kar-chee. But the others had seen enough of aliens even more uncanny-looking than the Kar-chee, and, moreover, had no backlog of almost hereditary fear and hatred concerning Prime World’s former conquerors. They even made educated guesses as to what it would eat and drink, and although it did not do much of either, it did enough of both to relieve Jon-Joras’s mind. He reproached himself for not having thought of this, and was engaged in formulating a useless and incomprehensible apology when he fell asleep sitting up.

The sun was shining when he awoke, and, not reflecting that it was in the nature of things sun-time at ConfedBase when it was night-time on the other side of the world, he thought he had had a good night’s rest. He nodded amiably at the immense avenues of gorgeous flowering trees through which they passed, and, his memory of having seen them at the time of his arrival here on Prime World becoming confused with his seeing them now, he passed into a state where he was not very far from dreaming, and thought of what he recalled having been through as being but singularly vivid visions seen along the roads of sleep. He was in fact thoroughly asleep in a very few minutes, and so he remained for hours yet to come. At one point or at several points he heard familiar voices and this comforted him and it was of no matter to him at the moment if they were dream-voices or real-voices or what they were.

“I was certain that he was feverish or hallucinating or something of that sort—result, you know, Confidential Chief, of his previous illness.”

“Were you?” said the other voice, the voice which pleased him most to hear, although the voice itself seemed not pleased at all.

There was a short pause; the first voice said, “You know that we have little investigatory apparatus here. There has never been any need for it. I saw him briefly when he came through here to make arrangements for you and he said nothing of your special status then—”

“He didn’t know anything about it. Go on—”

“I heard nothing further from him. Then your communication arrived, and I wondered that I’d heard nothing. I sent word out and was told of his being missing after attending an impromptu hunt which had evidently been attacked by a rogue dragon. So many had been killed... I offered a reward... But still nothing turned up. Then came his radio message and his, well, rather wild-sounding story. The physician

said he was certainly ill. Then he vanished, as you know, from the physician's care. And when he said that he had been attacked twice yesterday and had stolen a flyer and had a Kar-chee on board with him— Now, would you not, in my place, have thought—”

And the second voice said, “I am not in your place, Delegate. Nor are you in mine.” Then it asked, “What do you think of his story now? Of all of it, I mean?”

“A living Kar-chee? Here? After all these centuries? A living dodo or dinosaur would be less of a marvel. Much less. If that much of his story is true—and it obviously is!— then all the rest of it could be true, too. And what it all means, is more than I can guess. —You?”

“Me? I have neither need to nor intention of guessing. When my boy wakes up he will tell me. He looks so thin and worn. And so young, so young, so very young...”

The voices fell away. And the young, young, very young man slept on and on. Now it seemed to him that he was aware that he was sleeping and this was pleasant. Somewhere outside was danger. Inside all was safe. The Kar-chee was at the head of his bed and the dragon was at the foot of it and Por-Paulo sat beside it, on the right, the side of honor, which was proper. For he was the proper man, the *proper* proper man. It was a pity that no one could tell this to the Kar-chee. But perhaps he knew it anyway.

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“In a way, old Ma'am Anna was right,” Jon-Joras explained over a long and leisurely breakfast, after having slept the clock around. “Because, in a way, the dragons *did* turn into Kar-chees. And, in another way, Hue was also right. Because, in a way, the dragons *were* Kar-chee. Neither was altogether right nor altogether wrong. I think that the truth—as nearly as we can arrive at it—lies somewhere in between. And I think that it goes a long way towards explaining the whole history and mystique of the dragon hunts. Where to start?”

Well-rested, well-washed, well- and cleanly-clothed once again, in slow contented process of becoming well-fed, and two exceedingly important older men listening intently to his every spoken word—Jon-Joras had reason to be as well-pleased with his present situation as, indeed, he was. He had surprises to spring... but then, surprises had been sprung on him as well. And on an empty stomach, too.

Delegate Anse, a small, thin and precise man whose pale hair was cut in the tonsure customary to his native continent, had registered a very mild note of complaint on one of these latter matters. “I don't recall your telling me,” he had said, “that besides being the private man of Elected King Por-Paulo, you were also his free-born son.”

“He didn't know it, Delegate,” Por-Paulo said. He was a big man, grayhaired, prominent of nose and jaw. “I very much wanted to marry his mother, but she had—and has her own ideas on this, as on many subjects. She not only refused me, she chose to reserve the information. And according to our hegemonial laws I could not reveal it myself. But—” his eyes, uplifted for a brief, gleaming instant, “they don't apply here...”

Unspoken but understood was the intimation that this was at the least one of the reasons for his sending Jon-Joras to Prime World. And following after him. And Jon-Joras had only repeated, bewildered, but never in the least displeased, “I didn't know. I didn't know. I always wondered. But I didn't know...”

The delegate dismissed the matter, as far as he himself was concerned, with a brisk nod, and, “He being free-born, the Nepotism Acts do not apply...” then continued, “You seem to have really done a quite good job, Private Man. I commend you for it—and I commend you, Confidential Chief, for your choice.”

Por-Paulo nodded rather absently, and continued to regard his natural son with the affection he had previously been unable to express openly in his closely, intensely regulated native hegemony. For Jon-Joras, however, it had been another by no means unpleasant shock. *Confidential Chief!* Not only was Por-Paulo his father—and it might be years before he could fully adjust to this: in the past, though father had been inhibited, son had been totally ignorant—but he was one of the one hundred “shadow rulers” of the Confederation, chosen by lot from among the thousands of paramount executives!

Jon-Joras hoped, and rather expected that he would be able to digest both surprises as well as his breakfast. “Where to begin?” he repeated, now. “I wish the Old Man were still alive. Then we’d be able to speak to the Kar-chee, and check my guesses against its own knowledge.”

Anse said, “It might just be possible. It seems to me that Dr. Cannatin has arrived. Let’s have him in.”

The egg-round, egg-bald archaeologist was not in the best of humors at having been abruptly removed from his dig and flown down to ConfedBase. “Three pot-shards and half a glass medicine-bottle may not seem like much to you,” he protested, “considering the time I’ve spent. But I can assure you of the value and significance of the—”

“I have no doubt—” Anse had begun.

“Not that the medicine-bottle is of a particularly rare type,” Cannatin swept on along. “No, on the contrary, it’s found with sufficient frequency to justify dating other artifacts by its presence in a given stratum. We are, however, still not certain what the name of the medicine was. Hrospard Uu—you’ve of course read his monumental *Tentative Glottochronology of the Ichthyopophagous Peoples of Alghol—*”

“Dr. Cannatin, we—”

“—Uu claims it was called *colacola*. Dr. Pix, the labial surd chap, on the other hand, insists that *cococo* is the proper form. I should like an explanation of why I was bundled up and hustled down here, if you please. Well?”

His annoyance vanished quickly enough on hearing the explanation. For, like all archaeologists of his time, Cannatin was also a linguist. And, as Delegate Anse, who had examined his records on his arrival on Prime World, knew, the scholar had at one time done excavations on the non-affiliated world of Laralpersis, Off in the Lace Pattern.

“Wasn’t there—isn’t there—” Anse asked, “a colony of Kar-chee in that place?”

Cannatin nodded, then at once shook his head. “Kar-chee-like,” he corrected. “Smaller. Gray. Not the same. Similar. I did some work among— Why do you ask? Dare I hope that at last I’m to be allowed to try my hand on Kar-chee sites? I’ve always wanted to, but there were always obstructions put in my way. Nothing can really be done here, as I’m sure you know, without the cooperation of the Hunt Company. And the Hunt Company, for some reason. . . Well, I suppose they’re not interested in anything but hunting. Eh?”

He was incredulous when they told him that a living Kar-chee was present there at ConfedBase, that the physicians were doing their best to treat its injuries, and that anything he knew or could surmise about its morphology or habits or language—in short, anything about it—based on his knowledge of a kindred species, would probably be of considerable help.

“In-cred-ible!” he exclaimed. “Wonderful! Yes. Yes, yes, of course. I do know something of the subject. We used a little mechanical device to communicate with them, electronic, similar—or, at least, not grossly

dissimilar—to the ancient telegraph instrument. And not utterly, remote, either, to various drum-systems of reproducing certain languages. I'm sure I could rig one up with a little help. Mind you, it's no magical-telepathic gadget, it won't teach me their talkee-talkie. But... on the basis of what I know about a presumably cognate type of language, plus what we all know, all we linguists, I mean, on the question of general communications between intelligent species: I should be able to manage something. It will be fine fun to try, and, meanwhile, well, my pot-shards and medicine-bottles will stay and wait for me. Nobody else wants them.

"Take me to your Kar-chee," he wound up. "And," to Jon-Joras, "I'll be sure to mention you, with full credits, young man, in the paper I mean to write about this."

Jon-Joras, mouth full of marmalade, gestured to him to stay a second more. Hastily swallowed. Asked, "Did the ones on Laralpersis give the appearance of living in symbiosis with another form of life?"

Cannatin frowned. "Hadn't thought of it in those terms," he said, after a moment. "Symbiosis, commensality... There was a fuzzy little nothing of a creature that all the Kishchefs seemed fond of—in fact, we were told it was as much as our life was worth to tamper with one of those fuzz-balls. Why? Well, I'll ask you later. Duty, duty."

It fit in, it all fit in. *I must consult with my other self*. In the past, among men, the possession by one entity of more than one ego had been regarded with, generally, fear and terror. They had spoken of demoniac indwelling, of satanic possession, multiple personality. Victims had been exorcized, lobotomized, mulcted, hospitalized, incarcerated— If the Kar-chees, and their cognates, the Kish-chefs, had ever in an earlier stage or age of their species, undergone similar experiences, could not be said. What could be said, though —and Jon-Joras said it clearly—was this:

"There seems to me to be three things certain. One, is that every member of this species has at least two egos... selves... personalities. Maybe some have more, I don't know, the only one I spoke to mentioned only one other self. Two, that they solved the problem, if indeed it ever was a problem to them, by finding another life-form to serve as host to the other personality. This other life-form was, had to be, one whose own intelligence—or should I say, intelligence-ego?—was sufficiently feeble to present no obstacle. In the case of the Kish-chefs, this 'mount' was what he calls the 'fuzzy balls of nothing.' And this brings us to number three: The 'mount' used by the Kar-chee was the creature we call *the dragon*.

"No wonder it seemed 'that the dragons were the Kar-chee's dogs.' The Kar-chee could be in one place and one of his selves in the Kar-chee body in that place; meanwhile, the other self was in the dragon body, hunting down the comparatively feeble human. As long as the dragon body was being 'mounted' by a Kar-chee ego, it was capable of acting intelligently. The moment it ceased to be occupied, or, as I've been saying, 'mounted', by a Kar-chee ego, it had nothing in charge of it but its own low-grade, feeble intelligence. Which wasn't interested in humans, generally speaking. See how all the fragments fit together. Before the era of the Kar-chee: no dragons. After the Kar-chee reign: lots of dragons. And a tradition which absolutely associated the dragons with the Kar-chee but which, through ignorance, was utterly confused as to what that relationship was.

"I see no other possibility but that the Kar-chee did bring the dragons with them. And in their campaign of conquest they fought the humans here in both their sets of bodies. But the ones which the humans saw the most of was the dragon set. The Kar-chee sets would have been mostly inside the walls of their outposts—the castles, as we call them—planning, directing, moving land and sea. All that. With no humans around to observe. The humans were all outside, being pursued by the dragons. So some of them thought that the dragons were a sort of were-Kar-chee, or vice-versa, changing their shapes back and forth. And some of them... and I take this to be a later tradition... fused their memories and assumed that the dragon-shape was the only shape. The dragons, then, to them, *were* the Kar-chee!

And of course, in a way they were, only in a mental rather than a physical way, don't you see?"

It seemed odd that they were not bothered by the fact that the Kar-chee had certainly been at least the equal of humanity in intelligence, while the dragons had the intellectual ability of a barnyard fowl. But this was beside the point. Which was, that the human race on Prime World had waged war upon a hideous and hated enemy which had (although not exclusively) the form of the dragon. And right down to the present day, the human race on Prime World was still waging war upon that enemy! It was a war which had never ceased, stylized, ritualized, former 'enemy' reduced to an animal, goaded into battle, preserved chiefly that it might be destroyed: but war, nonetheless. Revenge, it could be called revenge. Racial sadism, it could be called that, too. And it would be equally correct to call it a symbolic re-enactment of the liberation of Prime World. But in the end it still returned to the same point.

War.

The dragon hunt was war.

"It does," Delegate Anse said, reflectively, running his thin hands over his thin, pale hair, when Jon-Joras stopped; "it does seem to make sense. Much sense."

Por-Paulo thrust out his chin, as he did when he was displeased, and pushed his lower lip out after it. "Well..." he said. "I suppose it could be argued that it serves a useful purpose and function of sorts. There are plenty of parallels. I believe that even up to the First Expansion Period here on Prime World there were such ritual combats. 'Combats' I say. They weren't really. They never are, these sort of things. It's always fixed, always rigged. The beast is always doomed. It's better to face the fact honestly and not pretty it up with a lot of lies about blowing off steam and reducing tensions and getting rid of this and that, acting out anxieties, moment of truth. Piddle. There's an ancient word, I don't know what language it is. *Bazazz*. All those arguments are a lot of bazazz. Unless you're wiping out vermin or hunting for meat to eat, the man who kills animals does so because he likes to kill. And people who like to watch do so because they like to see things being killed.

"I hunt. But I know my own motives. And I know what keeps the Hunt Company in business. And, speaking of which—"

"Yes—" said Anse.

"Yes—" said Jon-Joras. "The Hunt Company as business. Which it is by definition. But whereas, in places like Gare or Sundi, it fits its purposes into the local scene without interfering, here it has in effect taken over the whole continent and frozen it solid and made everything and everyone else fit into *its* purpose. The Gentlemen as a caste are ideally suited for that, they make admirable instruments. They want to live without creative toil, and the Hunt Company is delighted to help them do so. So decorative! It means nothing that most of the population has been turned into helotry and that some of them—Hue, I mean, and his followers—have even been driven into functioning insanity as a revulsion against the Hunt System and the Gentlemen caste. Hang them up by the heels and shoot them full of arrows... *that's* decorative, too for that matter.

"Of course not all the Gentlemen are deliberately base. But I've seen what absolute devotion to the principle can do to a man of the caliber of Aelorix. I've seen what it can do in the way of corrupting official justice, and I almost died of it. But it never was quite clear to me that the Hunt Company wasn't just riding the wave, that it was in fact *creating* the wave. I did wonder that Jetro Yi always put me off whenever I wanted to come over into The Bosky, but I thought he was just worrying about perhaps losing a commission on one single hunt, or perhaps that he had caught a kind of superstitious fear of the place as a result of all the stories told about it."

Delegate Anse was unhappy, and Delegate Anse had good cause to be. This had been going on under his eyes and he had never seen it. Others, elsewhere, had suspected something of it—wherefore Jon-Joras arriving in all innocence to make arrangements for Por-Paulo's hunt; Por-Paulo all the while acting on behalf of the Confidential Chiefs and their suspicions—but Anse had had no suspicions. It was well enough to say that this had all been going on for a long, long time before he had arrived to take up his residence on ConfedBase. This was true, and it was also true that in adhering to the policy of “non-interference in local ways, rules, and customs” he had only been carrying out Confederation practice. The truth is not always an absolute defense. Anse had been ignorant of what had been going on, and he ought not to have been ignorant. It is one thing to avoid gross interference and it was another thing entirely not even to know that something was going on which he might (and, then, might not) have been justified in not interfering with.

Anse had a problem. But in this particular respect it was all Anse's problem.

“Companies have become corrupt before,” Por-Paulo said, in a sort of growl. “The temptation is always there, and when the place it operates in is both distant and primitive, the temptation is even greater. I don't know if we can stick the whole Hunt outfit with responsibility for this rotten local scene. It may really be that the rest of it knows nothing about the local branch working hand and glove with the Kar-chee in keeping people out of The Bosky. Not much doubt as to why they were doing it, I suppose?”

Anse, still musing over his personal problem, had nothing to say. But Jon-Joras had. “Not much doubt in my mind,” he said. “If The Bosky had been wide open, the plebs— Doghunters or Free Farmers, call them what you like— the poor; there—they'd have abandoned the city-states in large numbers. And rightly so. Now, of course, the Gentlemen don't want that. Nor does the Hunt Company. They want the rotten, picturesque pattern preserved, never mind at what terrible cost to the majority of the population. They want the Gentlemen on their estates and the archers and the bannermen and the musics and the beaters and the whole archaic and hypocritical rest of it. And they want it cheap, too. Package deals for rich officials and executives. They couldn't have it at the price they want, which is the current price—the current price as paid by the Hunt Company, that is; if they raise their mark-up, that's the Hunt Company's business—but they couldn't have it at the present price if the population dropped because of a migration into The Bosky. Sooner or later, those who'd be left would realize that there are no longer a hundred men eager and waiting and ready to step into their shoes. And they'd set a better sort of price on themselves and their services. They might even say, The Hell with it! and dispense with offering their services altogether.”

He pushed away his breakfast. His appetite was dulled, and he thought of the gray-haired “chick-boys” and the old “marky” with his fingers eaten into twisted stumps from decades of smearing acid into X-marks so that rich men could murder dragons and go and boast of it; this thought did nothing to restore his appetite. “I don't know how long this blockade of The Bosky has been going on. I don't know who it was who first got in touch with the Kar-chee and started it going. Or if there were more Kar-chee then and this is the last, or—well, any of that. It brings up a thousand questions. Was there a colony of them left behind? Do they live long, very, very long? I don't know. Maybe with Dr. Cannatin working on the communications, we'll be able to find out. Ohh, and—I did promise, while the Old Man was still alive (and there's another strike against the Hunt Company, another black, black mark: giving those interpreters over to a life-long exile and a living death there. Locked up with beings so alien that gradually they became all but de-humanized. Why! This last one, Old Man, I mean, he had been brought all the way from Dondon-oluc! So someone there must have known about what was going on here...)

“But, as I say, I did promise that the Kar-chee would be taken back to the Kar-chee worlds, to the Ring Stars. I hope that my promise will be kept, sir?”

Por-Paulo shifted in his seat and nodded. Then he blew out his cheeks. “I don’t at the moment know how, boy. And its dragon, too? But I’m sure that it can be done. And so it will. Because— What—?”

“Oh,” said Jon-Joras, “the thought just came to me. It’s that the Hunt Company is the biggest rogue dragon of them all. What’s to be done about that?”

He had some notions, and he expressed them, about annulling its charters and disqualifying its officials. Por-Paulo grunted, muttered something about *baby* and *bath-water*. The best thing, he thought, was to do nothing and allow nothing to be done. Just let the word get around that the dragons in The Bosky were harmless, and nature—human nature—would take its course. “You just stated rather clearly what it was that the Hunt Company didn’t want to happen. Well, then. We’ve drawn their teeth. The mere fact that we *know* and that they’ll know that we know will see to that. And all those things will just go ahead and happen. And we’ll just let them. The Company and their gentlemanly allies will hurt. All right. Let them. They’ll adjust. It won’t happen overnight.”

The flower-scented, salt-scented breeze came in through the screens. Jon-Joras moved and stretched. He had a quick picture of sandy beeches and surfy waters and perhaps, probably, why not? female company. But first. “And meanwhile, sir? What of all those mismarked dragons wandering around? And all the trained rogues? Are we to allow the hunts to go on when they might turn into massacres? In a way, I suppose, we could say, if any over-ripe Commissioners get smeared all over Belroze Wood that it serves them right. Eh?”

His father pulled his nose and pulled his chin and said *Mmph* a few times. “Well, what do you suggest, damn it?” he demanded, after a while.

Promptly, Jon-Joras said, “That we not do nothing. That we do *something*. A ten-year moratorium, at least, on hunting. That will not only allow the marked and mis-marked dragons to die off, it will let the Company and the Gentlemen do their hurting *now*. That way the pain will fall on those who deserve it and not on their children and successors. In fact, I’m not sure that it might not be a bad idea to send trained crews to comb the woods and blow the heads off everything over hatchling size. That way would make *sure*. And I certainly wouldn’t let the movement into The Bosky and beyond go on haphazardly. What’s to stop some Gentleman who’s shrewd enough to see the handwriting on the wall from moving in there himself? With his servants and his little private army, I mean, and carving himself out another little feudal empire and getting ready to start the whole thing all over again?”

Again Por-Paulo grunted and fingered his face. And now Delegate Anse unexpectedly had something to say. Confederation, he suggested, could do more than continue its passive role. This was after all, *Prime World*, the birthworld of mankind. Confederation had many debts to pay here, and this was an excellent place to begin. “We have ample experience in helping settlements get started in proper fashion,” he pointed out. “We needn’t let this one go higgledy-pig-geldy, root-hog-or-die, and devil-take-the-hindmost. We can help those who want to move to help themselves in the most efficient fashion. And the same goes for those who want to stay. In fact, I rather think we’d better. There must be lots of the Hue sort around... men whose sufferings have unhinged them to the point where they’d rather burn the house down than see it cleaned up. I rather think we’d all rather see it cleaned up.”

The answer of Por-Paulo to this was oblique. “But I want to have a personal talk with Gentleman Aelorix,” he said. “And as for that puissant poop, the Chairman of Drogue...” He thrust out his chin and his lip and he growled. Then he turned to Jon-Joras. “Finish your breakfast,” he said.

Jon-Joras pushed the tray away. “I don’t want any more,” he said.

ROGUE DRAGON

Jon-Joras had come to Earth simply to oversee arrangements for a dragon hunt to amuse his king. These hunts were as much pageantry as sport—the dragons, brought to Earth centuries before as pets of an alien race, were powerful but slow-witted.

But suddenly the dragons had become dangerous—quick, deceptive, a menace to the nobles who hunted them. And Jon-Joras found himself caught in the middle of an uprising that could shake the powers that ruled the star-worlds.

