

The  
Star  
Kins

"What a paradox, what a fearful reproach, when the distinction of a few hundred miles—nay, as many feet or even inches!—can transform heinous crime to simple unqualified circumstance!"

. . . Hm. Balder Bashin, in the Ecclesiarchic Nunciamento of Year 1000 at Foresse, on the planet Krokinole.

"Law cannot reach where enforcement will not follow."  
. . . Popular aphorism.

Excerpts from "Smade of Smade's Planet," feature article in *Cosmopolis*, October, 1923:

Q: Do you ever get lonesome, Mr. Smade?

A: Not with three wives and eleven children.

Q: Whatever impelled you to settle here? A rather dismal world, on the whole, isn't it?

A: Beauty is in the eye of the beholder— I don't care to

run a vacation resort.

Q: What kind of people patronize the tavern?

A: People who want quiet and a chance to rest. Occasionally a traveler from inside the Pale or an explorer.

Q: I've heard that some of your clientele is pretty rough. In fact—not to mince words—it's the general belief that Smade's Tavern is frequented by

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the most notorious pirates and freebooters of the Beyond.

A: I suppose they occasionally need rest too.

Q: Don't you have difficulty with these people? Maintaining order, so to speak?

A: No. They know my rules. I say, "Gentlemen, please desist. Your differences are your own; they are fugitive. The harmonious atmosphere of the tavern is mine and I intend it to be permanent."

Q: So then they desist?

A: Usually.

Q: And if not?

A: I pitch them into the sea.

Smade was a reticent man. His origins and early life were known only to himself. In the year 1479 he acquired a cargo of fine timber, which, for a whole set of obscure reasons, he took to a small stony world in the middle Beyond. And there, with the help of ten indentured artisans and as many slaves, he built Smade's Tavern.

The site was a long narrow shelf of heath between the Smade Mountains and Sinade Ocean, precisely on the planet's equator. He built to a plan as old as construction itself, using stone for the walls, timber beams and plates of schist for the roof. Completed, the tavern clung to the landscape, as integral as an outcrop of rock: a long two-storied structure with a high gable, a double row of windows in front and rear, chimneys at either end venting smoke from fires of fossil moss. At the rear stood a group of cypress trees, their shape and foliage completely appropriate to the landscape.

Smade introduced other new features into the ecology: in a sheltered valley behind the tavern he planted fodder and garden truck; in another he kept a small herd of cattle and a flock of poultry. All did moderately well, but showed no disposition to overrun the planet.

Smade's dominion extended as far as he cared to claim—there was no other habitation on the planet—but he chose to assert control only over an area of perhaps three acres, within the bounds of a whitewashed stone fence. From occurrences beyond the fence Smade held aloof, unless he had reason to consider his own interests threatened—a contingency which had never arisen.

Smade's Planet was the single companion of Smade's Star, an

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undistinguished white dwarf in a relatively empty region of space. The native flora was sparse: lichen, moss, primitive vines and palodendron, pelagic algae which tintured the sea black. The fauna was even simpler: white worms in the seabottom muck; a few gelatinous creatures which gathered and ingested the black algae in a ludicrously inept fashion; an assortment of simple protozoa. Smade's alterations of the planet's ecology could hardly, therefore, be considered detrimental.

Smade himself was tall, broad, and stout, with bone-white skin and jet-black hair. His antecedents, as has been mentioned, were vague, and he never had been heard to reminisce; the tavern, however, was managed with the utmost decorum. The three wives lived in harmony, the children were handsome and well-mannered, Smade himself was unflinchingly polite. His rates were high, but his hospitality was generous, and he made no difficulties about collecting his bill. A sign hung above the bar: "Eat and drink without stint. He who can and does pay is a customer. He who cannot and does not pay is a guest of the establishment."

Smade's patrons were diverse: explorers, locators, Jarnell technicians, private agents in search of lost men or stolen treasure, more

rarely an IPCC representative—or "weasel," in the argot of the Beyond. Others were folk more dire, and these were of as many sorts as there were crimes to be named. Making a virtue of necessity, Smade presented the same face to all.

To Smade's Tavern in the July of 1524 came Kirth Gersen, representing himself as a locator. His boat was the standard model leased by the estate houses within the Oikumene, a thirty-foot cylinder equipped with no more than bare necessities: in the bow the monitor-autopilot duplex, a star-finder, chronometer, macroscope, and manual controls; midships the living quarters with air machine, organic reconverter, information bank, and storage; aft the energy block, the Jarnell intersplit, and further storage. The boat was as scarred and dented as any; Gersen's personal disguise was no more than well-worn clothes and natural taciturnity. Smade accepted him on his own terms.

"Will you stay awhile, Mr. Gersen?"

"Two or three days, perhaps. I have things to think over."

Smade nodded in profound understanding. "We're slack just now; just you and the Star King. You'll find all the quiet you need."

"I'll be pleased for that," said Gersen, which was quite true; his

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Just-completed affairs had left him with a set of unresolved qualms. He turned away, then halted and looked back as Smade's words penetrated his consciousness. "There's a Star King here, at the tavern—" i="

"He has presented himself so."

"I've never seen a Star King. Not that I know of."

Smade nodded politely to indicate that the gossip had reached to the allowable limits of particularity. He indicated the tavern clock: "Our local time; better set your watch. Supper at seven o'clock, just half an hour."

Gersen climbed stone stairs to his room, an austere cubicle containing bed, chair and table. He looked through the window, along the verge of heath between mountain and ocean. Two spacecraft occupied the landing field: his own and another ship, larger and heavier, evidently the property of the Star King.

Gersen washed in a hall bathroom, then returned to the downstairs hall, where he dined on the produce of Smade's own gardens and herd. Two other guests made their appearance. The first was the Star King, who strode to the far end of the room in a flutter of rich garments: an individual with skin dyed jet black, eyes like ebony cabochons as black as his skin. He was taller than average height, and carried himself with consummate arrogance. Lusterless as charcoal, the skin dye blurred the contrast of his features, made

his face a protean mask. His garments were dramatically fanciful:

breeches of orange silk, a loose scarlet robe with white sash, a loose striped gray and black coif which hung rakishly down the right side of his head. Gersen inspected him with open curiosity. This was the first Star King he had observed as such, though popular belief had hundreds moving incognito through the worlds of man: cosmic mysteries since the first human visit to Lambda Grus.

The second of the guests apparently had just arrived: a thin middle-aged man of indefinite racial background. Gersen had seen many like him, miscellaneous uncategorized vagabonds of the Beyond. He had short coarse white hair, a sallow undyed skin, an air of diffident uncertainty. He ate without appetite, looking back and forth between Gersen and the Star King in furtive speculation, but it seemed as if presently his most searching glances were directed toward Gersen. Gersen tried to avoid the increasingly insistent gaze; the least of his desires was involvement in the affairs of a stranger.

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After dinner, as Gersen sat watching the play of lightning over the ocean, the man sidled close, wincing and grimacing in sheer nervousness. He spoke in a voice which he tried to keep even, but which trembled nevertheless. "I assume that you are here from Brinktown?"

From childhood Gersen had concealed his emotions behind a careful, if somewhat saturnine, imperturbability; but the man's question, jangling upon his own alarms and tensions, startled him. He paused before replying, gave a mild assent. "As a matter of fact, I am."

"I expected to see someone else. But no matter. I've decided that I can't fulfill my obligation. Your Journey is pointless. That's all." He stood back, teeth showing in a humorless grin—obviously braced against an expected dire reaction.

Gersen smiled politely, shook his head— "You mistake me for someone else."

The other peered down in disbelief. "But you are here from Brinktown?"

"What of that?"

The man made a forlorn gesture. "No matter. I expected—but no matter." After a moment he said, "I noticed your ship—model 9B. You're a locator, then."

"Correct."

The man refused to be discouraged by Gersen's terseness. "You're on your way out? Or in?"

"Out." Then, deciding that it was as well to circumstantiate his

role, he added, "I can't say that I've had luck."

The other man's tension suddenly gave way. His shoulders sagged. "I own to the same line of business. As to luck—" He heaved a forlorn sigh, and Gersen smelled Smade's home-distilled whiskey. "If it's bad, no doubt I have myself to blame."

Gersen's suspicion was not completely lulled. The man's voice was well-modulated, his accent educated—in itself indicating nothing. He might be precisely as he represented himself: a locator in some sort of trouble at Brinktown. Or he might be otherwise: a situation entailing a set of hair-raising corollaries, Gersen would vastly have preferred the company of his own thoughts, but it was an act of elementary precaution to look more deeply into the matter. He drew a deep sigh and, feeling faintly sorry for himself, made a courteous, if wry, gesture.

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"Do you care to join me?"

"Thank you." The man seated himself gratefully, and with a new air of bravado seemed to dismiss all of his worries and apprehensions. "My name is Teehalt, Lugo Teehalt. Will you drink?" Without waiting for assent he signaled one of Smade's young daughters, a girl of nine or ten, wearing a modest white blouse and long black skirt. "I'll use whiskey, lass, and serve this gentleman whatever he decides for himself."

Teehalt appeared to derive strength either from the drink or from the prospect of conversation. His voice became firmer, his eyes clearer and brighter. "How long have you been out?"

"Four or five months," said Gersen, in his role of locator. "I've seen nothing but rock and mud and sulfar ... I don't know whether it's worth the toil."

Teehalt smiled, nodded slowly. "But still—isn't there always excitement? The star gleams and lights up its circlet of planets. And you ask yourself, will it be now? And time after time: the smoke and ammonia, the weird crystals, the winds of monoxide, the rains of acid. But you go on and on and on. Perhaps in the region ahead the elements coalesce into nobler forms. Of course it's the same slime and black trap and methane snow. And then suddenly: there it is. Utter beauty. ..."

Gersen sipped his whiskey without comment. Teehalt apparently was a gentleman, well-mannered and educated, sadly come down in the world.

Teehalt continued, half talking to himself. "Where the luck lies, that I don't know. I'm sure of nothing. Good luck looks to be bad luck, disappointment seems happier than success. . . . But then, bad luck I would never have recognized as good luck, and called it bad luck still, and who can confuse disappointment with success? Not I. So it's all one and life proceeds regardless."

Gersen began to relax. This sort of incoherence, at once engaging and suggestive of a deeper wisdom, could not be imagined among his enemies. Unless they hired a madman? Gersen made a cautious contribution: "Uncertainty hurts more than ignorance."

Teehalt inspected him with respect, as if the statement had been one of profound wisdom. "You can't believe that a man is the better for ignorance?"

"Cases vary," said Gersen, in as easy and light a manner as was natural to him. "It's clear that uncertainty breeds indecision, which

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is a dead halt. An ignorant man can act. As for right or wrong—each man to his own answer. There never has been a true consensus.)

sus.

Teehalt smiled sadly. "You espouse a very popular doctrine, ethical pragmatism, which always turns out to be the doctrine of self-interest. Still, I understand you where you speak of uncertainty, for I am an uncertain man." He shook his thin, sharp-featured head. "I know I'm in a bad way, but why should I not? I've had a peculiar experience." He finished the whiskey, leaned forward to gaze into Gersen's face. "You are perhaps more sensitive than first impression would suggest. Perhaps more agile. And possibly younger than you seem."

"I was born in 1490."

Teehalt made a sign which could mean anything, searched Gersen's face once more. "Can you understand me if I say that I have known overmuch beauty?"

"I probably could understand," said Gersen, "if you made yourself clear."

Teehalt blinked thoughtfully. "I will try." He considered. "As I have admitted to you, I am a locator. It is a poor trade—with apologies to you—for eventually it involves the degradation of beauty. Sometimes only to a small extent, which is what a person such as myself hopes for. Sometimes there is only small beauty to corrupt, and sometimes the beauty is incorruptible." He made a gesture of his hand toward the ocean. "The tavern harms nothing. The tavern allows the beauty of this terrible little planet to reveal itself." He leaned forward, licking his lips. "The name Malagate is known to you? Attel Malagate?"

For a second time Gersen was startled; for a second time the reaction failed to reach his face. After another slight pause, he asked casually, "Malagate the Woe, so-called?"

"Yes. Malagate the Woe. You are acquainted with him?" And Lugo Teehalt peered at Gersen through eyes which had suddenly

gone leaden, as if the mere act of naming the possibility had renewed his suspicion,

"Only by reputation," said Gersen, with a bleak twitch of a smile.

Teehalt leaned forward with great earnestness. "Whatever you may have heard, I assure you, it is flattery."

"But you don't know what I have heard."

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"I doubt if you have heard the worst. But nevertheless, and the astounding paradox. . . ." Teehalt closed his eyes. "I am locating for Attel Malagate. He owns my ship. I have taken his money."

"It is a difficult position."

"When I found out—what could I do?" Teehalt threw up his hands in an excited extravagant gesture, reflecting either emotional turmoil or the effects of Smade's whiskey. "I have asked myself this, over and over. I did not make this choice. I had my ship and my money, not from an estate house, but from an institution of dignity. I did not think of myself as a common locator. I was Lugo Teehalt, a man of parts, who had been appointed to the post of Chief Explorer for the institution, or some such folly—so I assured myself. But they sent me out in a 9B boat, and I could no longer delude myself. I was Lugo Teehalt, common locator."

"Where is your boat?" asked Gersen, idly curious. "There is only my own and the Star King's out on the landing field."

Teehalt pursed his lips in another onset of wariness. "I have good reason for caution." Teehalt glanced right and left. "Would it surprise you to learn that I expect to meet—" he hesitated, thought better of what he had planned to say, and sat silently a moment, looking into his empty glass. Gersen signaled, and young Araminta Smade brought whiskey on a white jade tray, upon which she herself had painted a red and blue floral border.

"But this is inconsequential," said Teehalt suddenly. "I bore you with my problems. . . ."

"Not at all," said Gersen, quite truthfully. "The affairs of Attel Malagate interest me."

"I can understand this," said Teehalt after another pause. "He is a peculiar combination of qualities."

"From whom did you have your boat?" Gersen asked ingenuously.

Teehalt shook his head. "I will not say. For all I know you may be Malagate's man. I hope not, for your own sake."

"Why should I be Malagate's man?"

"Circumstances suggest as much. But circumstances only. And in fact I know that you are not. He would not send someone here whom I have not met."

"You have a rendezvous, then."

"One I don't care to keep. But—I don't know what else to do."

"Return to the Oikumene."

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II

"What does Malagate care for that? He comes and goes as he pleases."

"Why should he concern himself with you? Locators are twenty to the dozen."

"I am unique," said Teehalt. "I am a locator who has found a prize too precious to sell."

Gersen was impressed in spite of himself.

"It is a world too beautiful for degradation," said Teehalt. "An innocent world, full of light and air and color. To give this world to Malagate, for his palaces and whirligigs and casinos—it would be like giving a child to a squad of Sarcov soldiers. Worse? Possibly worse."

"And Malagate knows of this?"

"It is my unfortunate habit to drink rashly and talk wildly."

"As you do now," suggested Gersen.

Teehalt smiled his wincing morose smile. "You could tell Malagate nothing he does not already know. The damage was done at Brinktown."

"Tell me more of this world. Is it inhabited?"

Teehalt smiled again, but made no answer. Gersen felt no resentment. Teehalt, beckoning to Araminta Smade, ordered Frazee, a heavy sour-sweet liquor reputed to include among its constituents a subtle hallucinizer. Gersen signified that he would drink no more.

Night had long settled over the planet. Lightning crashed back and forth; a sudden downpour began to drum on the roof.

Teehalt, lulled by the liquor, perhaps seeing visions among the flames, said, "You could never find this world. I am resolved that it shall not be violated."

"What of your contract?"

Teehalt made a contemptuous motion. "I would honor it for an ordinary world."

"The information is on the monitor filament," Gersen pointed out. "The property of your sponsor."

Teehalt was silent so long that Gersen wondered if he were awake. Finally Teehalt said, "I am afraid to die. Otherwise I would drop myself and boat and monitor and all into a star."

Gersen had no comment to make.

"I do not know what to do." Teehalt's voice became soft, as the drink soothed his brain, and showed him visions. "This is a remarkable world. Beautiful, yes. I wonder if the beauty does not

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conceal another quality which I can't fathom . . . just as a woman's beauty camouflages her more abstract virtues. Or vices. . . . In any event the world is beautiful and serene beyond words. There are mountains washed by rain. Over the valleys float clouds as soft and bright as snow. The sky is a deep dark sapphire blue. The air is sweet and cool—so fresh that it seems a lens. There are flowers, though not very many. They grow in little clumps, so that to find them is like coming on a treasure. But there are many trees, and most magnificent are the great kings, with gray bark, which seem to have lived forever.

"You asked if the world were inhabited. I am forced to answer yes, though the creatures who live there are—strange. I call them dryads. I saw only a few hundred, and they seem a race ages old. As old as the trees, as old as the mountains." Teehalt shut his eyes. "The day is twice the length of ours; the mornings are long and bright, the noons are quiet, the afternoons are golden—like honey. The dryads bathe in the river or stand in the dark forest. . . ." Teehalt's voice dwindled; he appeared to be half asleep.

Gersen prompted him. "Dryads?"

Teehalt stirred, raised in his chair. "It's as good a name as any. They're at least half plant. I made no real examination; I dared not. Why? I don't know. I was there—oh, I suppose two or three weeks. This is what I saw. . . ."

Teehalt landed the battered old 9B on a meadow beside a river. He waited while the analyzer made environmental tests, though a landscape so fair could not fail to be hospitable—or so thought Teehalt, who was scholar, poet, wastrel in equal parts. He was not wrong:

the atmosphere proved salubrious; allergen-sensitive cultures tested negative; microorganisms of air and soil quickly died upon contact with the standard antibiotic with which Teehalt now dosed himself. There seemed no reason why he should not immediately go forth upon this world, and he did so.

On the turf in front of the ship Teehalt stood entranced. The air was clear and clean and fresh, like the air of a spring dawn, and utterly silent, as if just after a bird call.

Teehalt wandered up the valley. Stopping to admire a grove of trees, he saw the dryads, who stood gathered in the shade. They were bipeds, with a peculiarly human torso and head structure, though it was clear that they resembled man in only the most su-

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perfcial style. Their skin was silver, brown, green, in sheens and splotches; the head showed no features other than purplish-green bruises, which seemed to be eye spots. From the shoulders rose members like arms, which branched into twigs and then leaves of dark and pale green, burnished red, bronze-orange, golden ocher. The dryads saw Teehalt and moved forward with almost human interest, then paused about fifty feet distant, swaying on supple limbs, the crests of colored leaves shimmering in the sunlight. They examined Teehalt and he examined them, in a mutual absence of fear, and Teehalt thought them the most entrancing creatures of his experience.

He remembered the days which followed as idyllic, utterly calm. There was a majesty, a clarity, a transcendental quality to the planet, which affected him with an almost religious awe, and presently he came to understand that he must leave shortly or succumb psychically, give himself completely to the world. The knowledge afflicted him with an almost unbearable sadness, for he knew that he would never return,

During this time he watched the dryads as they moved through the valley, idly curious as to their nature and habits. Were they intelligent? Teehalt never answered that question to his own satisfaction. They were wise, certainly—he made this particular distinction. Their metabolism puzzled him, and also the nature of their life cycle, though gradually he acquired at least a glimmer of enlightenment. He assumed, to begin with, that they derived a certain degree of energy from some sort of photosynthetic process.

Then one morning, as Teehalt contemplated a group of dryads standing immobile in the marshy meadow, a large winged hawklike creature swooped down, buffeted one of the dryads to the side. As it toppled Teehalt glimpsed two white shafts, or prongs, extending from the supple gray legs into the ground. The shafts at once retracted when the dryad fell. The hawk creature ignored the toppled dryad, but scratched and tore at the marsh and unearthed an enormous white grub. Teehalt watched with great interest. The dryad apparently had located the grub in its subterranean burrow and had pierced it with a sort of proboscis, presumably for the ingestion of

sustenance. Teehalt felt a small pang of shame and disillusionment. The dryads were evidently not quite as innocent and ethereal as he had thought them to be.

The hawk thing lumbered up from the pit, croaked, coughed,

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flapped away. Teehalt went curiously forward, stared down at the mangled worm. There was little to be seen but shreds of pallid flesh, yellow ooze and a hard black ball, the size of Teehalt's two fists. As he stared down, the dryads came slowly forward and Teehalt withdrew. From a distance he watched as they clustered about the torn worm, and it seemed to Teehalt that they mourned the mangled creature. But presently, with their supple lower limbs, they brought up the black pod and one of them carried it away high in its branches. Teehalt followed at a distance, watched in fascinated wonder as, close beside a grove of slender white-branched trees, the dryads buried the black pod.

In retrospect he wondered why he had attempted no communication with the dryads. Once or twice during the time of his stay he had toyed with the idea, then let the thought drift away—perhaps because he felt himself an intruder, a creature gross and unpleasant. The dryads in their turn treated him with what might be courteous disinterest.

Three days after the black pod had been buried Teehalt had occasion to return to the grove, and to his astonishment saw a pallid shoot rising from the ground above the pod. At the tip pale green leaves already were unfolding into the sunlight. Teehalt stood back, examined the grove with new interest: had each of these trees grown from a pod originated in the body of a subterranean grub? He examined the foliage, limbs, and bark and found nothing to suggest such an origin.

He looked across the valley, to the great dark-leaved giants:

surely the two varieties were similar? The giants were majestic, serene, with trunks rising two or three hundred feet to the first branching. The trees grown from the black pods were frail; their foliage was a more tender green, the limbs were more flexible, and branched close to the ground—but the species were clearly related. Leaf shape and structure were almost identical, as was the general appearance of the bark: supple, yet rough-textured, though the bark of the giants was darker and coarser. Teehalt's head swarmed with speculations.

Later the same day he climbed the mountain across the valley and, crossing the ridge, came down upon a glen with precipitous rocky walls. A stream rushed and splashed through mossy boulders and low fernlike plants, falling from pool to pool. Approaching the brink, Teehalt found himself on a level with the foliage of the giant

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trees, which here grew close beside the cliff. He noted dull green sacs, like fruit, growing among the leaves. Straining, risking a fall, Teehalt was able to pluck one of these sacs. He carried it down the mountainside and across the meadow<sup>^</sup> toward the boat.

He passed a group of dryads who, fixing their purple-green eye bruises on the sac, became rigid. Teehalt observed them with puzzlement. Now they approached, their gorgeous fans quivering and shimmering in agitation. Teehalt felt embarrassed and guilty; evidently by plucking the sac he had offended the dryads. Why or how he could not fathom, but he hastily sought the concealment of his ship, where he cut the sac. The husk was pithy and dry; down the center ran a stalk from which depended white pea-sized seeds, of great complexity. Teehalt inspected the seeds closely under a magnifier. They bore a remarkable resemblance to small underdeveloped beetles, or wasps. With tweezers and knife he opened one out on a sheet of paper, noting wings, thorax, mandibles: clearly an insect.

For a long while he sat contemplating the -insects which grew on a tree: a curious analogue, so Teehalt reflected, to the sapling which sprouted from a pod taken from the body of a worm.

Sunset colored the sky; the distant parts of the valley grew indistinct. Dusk came and evening, with the stars blurring large as lamps.

The long night passed. At dawn when Teehalt emerged from his boat he knew that the time of his departure was close at hand. How? Why? He had no answer. The compulsion nevertheless was real; he must leave, and he knew he would never return. As he considered the mother-of-pearl sky, the curve and swell of the hills, the groves and forests, the gentle river, his eyes went damp. The world was too beautiful to leave; far too beautiful to remain upon. It worked on something deep inside him, aroused a queer tumult which he could not understand. There was a constant force from somewhere to run from the ship, to discard his clothes, his weapons, to merge, to envelope and become enveloped, to immolate himself in an ecstasy of identification with beauty and grandeur . . . Today he must go. "If I'm here any longer," thought Teehalt. "I'll be carrying leaves over my head with the dryads."

He wandered up the valley, turning to watch the sun swell into the sky. He climbed to the ridge of the hill, looked east over a succession of rolling crests and valleys, rising gradually to a single

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great mountain. To west and south he caught the glimmer of water;

to the north spread green parkland, with a crumble of gray boulders like the ruins of an ancient city.

Returning into the valley, Teehalt passed below the giant trees.

Looking up, he noticed that all the pods had split, and now hung limp and withered. Even as he watched he heard a drone of wings. A hard heavy pellet struck his cheek, where it clung and bit.

In shock and pain Teehalt crushed the insect, or wasp. Looking aloft he saw others—a multitude, darting and veering. Hastily he returned to the ship and dressed in a coverall of tough film. His face and head were protected by transparent mesh. He was unreasonably angry. The wasp's attack had marred his last day in the valley, and in fact had caused him the first pain of his stay. It was too much to expect, he reflected bitterly, that paradise could exist without the serpent. And he dropped a can of compressed insect repellent into his pouch, though it might or might not be efficacious against these half-vegetable insects.

Leaving the ship, he marched up the valley, with the insect's bite paining him still. Approaching the forest he came upon a strange scene: a group of dryads surrounded by a buzzing swarm of wasps. Teehalt approached curiously. The dryads, he saw, were under attack, but lacked any efficient means of defense. As the wasps darted in to settle on the silver skin, the dryads flapped their branches, rubbed against each other, scraped with their legs, dislodging the insects as best they could.

Teehalt approached, filled with horrified anger. One of the dryads near him seemed to weaken; several of the insects gnawed through its skin, drawing gouts of ichor. The entire swarm suddenly condensed upon the unfortunate dryad, which tottered and fell, while the remaining dryads moved sedately away.

Teehalt, impelled to disgust and loathing, stepped forward, turned the can of repellent upon the nearly solid mass of wasps. It acted with dramatic effectiveness, the wasps turning white, withering, dropping to the ground; in a single minute the entire swarm was a scatter of small white husks. The dryad under attack also lay dead, having been almost instantly stripped of its flesh. The dryads who had escaped—were now returning, and, so Teehalt thought, in a state of anguish and even fury. Their branches quivered and flashed; they marched down upon him with every indication of antagonism. Teehalt took to his heels and returned to his ship.

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With binoculars he watched the dryads. They stood about their dead comrade in a state of anxiety and irresolution. Apparently—or at least it seemed so to Teehalt—their anguish was as much for the withered insects as the dead dryad.

They clustered over the fallen body. Teehalt could not observe exactly what they did, but presently they arose with a glossy black ball. He watched them carry it across the valley toward the grove of giant trees.

I have examined the native life forms of over two thousand planets. I have noted many examples of convergent evolu-

tion, but many more of divergence.

. . . Life, Volume II, by Unspiek, Baron Bodissey.

It is first of all essential that we understand exactly what we mean by the well-used term "convergent evolution." Especially we must not confuse statistical probability with some transcendental and utterly compelling force. Consider the class of all possible objects, the number of which is naturally very large: infinite, indeed, unless we impose an upper and lower limit of mass and certain other physical qualifications. Thus imposing and so qualifying, we find that still only an infinitesimal fraction of this class of objects can be considered life forms. . . . Before we have even started the investigation we have exercised a very stringent selection of objects which by their very definition will show basic similarities.

To particularize: There are a limited number of methods of locomotion. If we find a quadruped on Planet A, and a quadruped likewise on Planet B, does this imply convergent evolution? No. It merely implies evolution, or perhaps no more than the fact that a four-legged creature can effectively stand without toppling and walk without stumbling. In my opinion, therefore, the expression "convergent evolution" is tautological.

. . .Ibid.

THE STAR KING

From: "The Wages of Sin," by Stridenko: article in CosmopoUs, May, 1404:

Brinktown: what a city! Once the jumping-off place, the last outpost, the portal into infinity—now just another settlement of the North East Middle Beyond. But "just another"? Is this a fair description? Decidedly not. Brinktown must be seen to be believed, and even then the hard of belief depart incredulous. The houses are set far apart along shaded avenues; still they rise like watchtowers, thrusting up into and through the palms, virebols, scalmettos, and it is a mean house which does not soar above the treetops. The ground level is no more than an entry, a raised pavilion where the clothes must be changed, for local habit ordains the use of paper house capes and paper slippers. Then above: what an explosion of architectural conceits, what turrets and spires, belfries and cupolas! What elaborate magnificence, what inspired scrimshaw, what intricate, inventive, farcical, wonderful applications and misapplications of likely and unlikely materials! Where else can one find balustrades of tortoiseshell studded with gold-plated fish heads? Where else do ivory nymphs hang suspended by their hair from the roof gutters, their faces expressing only bland benediction? Where else can a man's success be gauged by the sumptuousness of the tombstone he designs for himself and erects in his front yard, complete with pan-

egyriical epitaph? And in fact where but in Brinktown is success such an ambiguous recommendation? Few indeed of the inhabitants dare show themselves within the Oikumene. The magistrates are assassins; the civil guard arsonists, extortioners and rapists; the elders of the council, bordello owners. But civic affairs proceed with a punctilio and gravity worthy of the Grand Sessions at Borugstone, or a coronation at the Tower of London. The Brinktown jail is one of the most ingenious ever propounded by civic authorities. It must be remembered that Brinktown occupies the surface of a volcanic butte, overlooking a trackless jungle of quagmire, thorn, eel-vine skiver tussock. A single road leads from city down to jungle; the prisoner is merely locked out of the city. Escape is at his option; he may flee

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as far through the jungle as he sees fit: the entire continent is at his disposal. But no prisoner ever ventures far from the gate; and, when his presence is required, it is only necessary to unlock the gate and call his name.

Teehalt sat looking into the fire. Gersen, vastly touched, wondered if he intended to say more.

At last Teehalt spoke. "So I left the planet. I could stay no longer. To live there a person must either forget himself, give way completely to the beauty, drown his identity in it—or else he must master it, break it, reduce it to a background for his own constructions. I could do neither, so I can never go back. . . . But the memory of the place haunts me."

"In spite of the wasps?"

Teehalt nodded somberly. "Yes indeed. I did wrong to interfere. There is a rhythm to the planet, an equilibrium which I blundered into and disturbed. I've speculated for days, but I still don't understand the process completely. Wasps are born as fruit of the tree; the worms yield the seed to one kind of tree—this much I know. I suspect that the dryads produce the seed to the great giants. The process of life becomes a great circle, or perhaps a series of incarnations, with the great trees as the end result.

"The dryads seem to tap the worms for part of their sustenance, the wasps devour the dryads. Where do the worms come from? Are the wasps their first phase? Flying larva, so to speak? Do the worms eventually metamorphose into dryads? I feel this must be the case—though I don't know. If so, the cycle is beautiful, in a fashion I can't find words to describe. Something ordained, stately, ancient-like the tides, or the rotation of the galaxy. If the pattern were disturbed, if one link were broken, the whole process would collapse. This would be a great crime."

"So therefore you don't want to reveal the location of the world to your sponsor whom you believe to be Malagate the Woe."

"I know to be Malagate," said Teehalt stiffly.

"How did you find out?"

Teehalt looked at him sidewise. "You are very interested in Malagate."

Gersen, wondering if, after all, he were so transparent, shrugged. "One hears many strange tales."

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"True. But I do not care to document them. And do you know why?"

"No."

"I have changed my thoughts about you. Now I suspect you of weaselry."

"If I were a weasel," said Gersen, smiling, "I'd hardly admit it. The IPCC has few friends Beyond."

"I am unconcerned," said Teehalt. "But I hope for better days if-when-I return home. I do not care to incur Malagate's animosity by identifying him to a weasel."

"If I were a weasel," said Gersen, "you have already compromised yourself. You know of truth drugs and hypnotic rays."

"Yes. I also know how to avoid them. But no matter; it's not important. You asked how I learned that Malagate was my sponsor. I have no objection to telling you this. It was through my own drunken prolixity. I put into Brinktown. In Sin-San's Tavern I spoke at length, much as I spoke to you tonight, to a dozen enthralled listeners. Yes, I held their attention." Teehalt laughed bitterly. "Presently I was called to the telephone. The man at the other end said his name was Hildemar Dasce. Do you know him?"

"No."

"Odd," said Teehalt, "since you are so interested in Attel Malagate. . . . But, in any event, Dasce spoke to me, told me to report to Smade's. He said I'd meet Malagate here."

"What?" demanded Gersen, unable to control the sharpness of his voice. "Here?"

"Here at Smade's. I asked, what's this to me? I had no dealings with Malagate and wished none. He convinced me otherwise. So I'm here. I am not a brave man." He made a small helpless gesture, picked up his empty glass, looked into it. "I don't know what to do. If I remain Beyond. . . ." Teehalt shrugged.

Gersen considered a moment. "Destroy the monitor filament."

Teehalt shook his head regretfully. "It's the surety I carry for my life. Indeed, I'd rather—" he stopped short. "Did you hear

anything?"

Gersen jerked around in his chair. No use denying his nervousness—at least, not to himself. "Rain. Thunder."

"I thought I heard tubes blowing." Teehalt rose to his feet, peered from the window. "Someone is coming."

Gersen also went to the window. "I see nothing."

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"A ship dropped down into the field," said Teehalt He thought for a moment " I here are, or w ere, only two ships there \ours and the Star King's "

"Where is your ship^"

"T set down in a valley to the north I want no one meddling with my monitor " He seemed to listen, then, looking into Gersen's eyes, he said, ""You are not a locator "

"No "

Teehalt nodded "Locators are, by and large, a vile lot You are not of the IPCC="

"Think of me as an explorer "

"Will you help me?"

The harsh precepts of Gersen's training contended with his impulses He muttered ungraciously, "Within limits—ver\ narrow limits "

Teehalt smiled thinly "What are these limits'""

"My own business is urgent I can't allow myself to be diverted "

Feehalt was neither disappointed nor resentful, he could expect no more from a stranger "Odd," he said once more, "that you do not know Hildemar Dasc—sometimes known as Beauty Dasce But he will come in presently "liou ask, how do I know^ Bv the logic of plain ordinary tear "

"You'll be sate so long as you stay inside the tavern," said Gersen shortly "Smade has his rules "

Teehalt nodded, politely acknowledging the discomfiture he had caused Gersen A minute passed The Star Kmg rose to his feet, his pink and red garment glowing in the firelight He walked slowly up the stairs, looking neither to right nor left

I eehalt followed him with his eyes "Impressive creature I understand that only the handsome ones are allowed to leave their planet "

"Sol have heard"

Teehatt sat looking into the tire Gersen started to speak, then restrained himself He felt exasperation with Teehalt, tor a clear and simple reason Teehalt had aroused his sympathy, 1 eehalt had entered his mind, I eehalt had burdened him with new troubles He also relt dissatisfaction with himself—tor reasons by no means so simple, in fact for no rational reason whatever Beyond argument, his own affairs were oi paramount importance, he could not

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permit himself to be diverted If emotion and sentiment could sway him so easily, where would such things stop?

The dissatisfaction, far from being appeased, grew more insistent There was a connection, too tenuous to be defined, with the world Teehalt had described, a sense of loss and longing, of some indefinable inadequacy Gersen made a sudden angry motion, swept all the irritating doubts and questions from his mind. They could only decrease his effectiveness

Five minutes passed Teehalt reached into his jacket, brought forth an envelope "Here are photographs you might be pleased to inspect at your leisure "

Gersen took them without comment

The door slid back Three dark shapes stood in the gap, looking into the room Smade roared from behind the bar, "Come in or stay out' Must I warm the whole cursed planet?"

Into the hall stepped the strangest human being of Gersen's experience "And there," said Teehalt with a sick titter, "you see Beauty Dasce."

Dasce was about six feet tall His torso was a tube, the same gauge from knee to shoulder His arms were thin and long, terminating in great bony wrists, enormous hands His head was also tall and round, with a ruff of red hair, and a chin seeming almost to rest on the clavicle Dasce had stained his neck and face bright red, excepting only his cheeks, which were balls of bright chalk-blue, like a pair of mildewed oranges At some stage of his career his nose had been cleft into a pair of cartilaginous prongs, and his eyelids had been cut away, to moisten his corneas he wore two nozzles connected to a tank of fluid which every few seconds discharged a film of mist into his eyes There was also a pair of shutters, now raised, which could be lowered to cover his eyes from the light, and which were painted to represent staring white and blue eyes similar to Dasce's own

The two men at his back by contrast appeared ordinary run-of-the-mill human beings both dark, hard, competent-seeming, with quick clever eyes

Dasce made a brusque signal to Smade, who stood impassively

watching from behind the bar "Three rooms, if you please We will eat presently "

"Very well"

"The name is Hildemar Dasce "

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"Very well, Mr. Dasce."

Dasce now sauntered across the room to where Teehalt and

Gersen sat. His glance shifted from one to the other. "Since we are fellow travelers, houseguests of Mr. Smade, let us introduce ourselves," he said politely. "My name is Hildemar Dasce. May I inquire yours?"

"I am Kirth Gersen."

"I am Keelen Tannas."

Dasce's lips, pale purple-gray against the red of his skin, moved in a smile. "To an amazing degree you resemble a certain Lugo

Teehalt whom I expected to find here."

"Think of me as you like," said Teehalt in a reedy voice. "I have spoken my name."

"But what a pity; I have business to transact with Lugo Teehalt!"

"It is pointless, then, to approach me."

"As you wish. Though I suspect that the business with Lugo Teehalt might interest Keelen Tannas. Will you step aside for a moment's private conversation?"

"No. I am not interested. My friend knows my name; it is Keelen Tannas."

"Your 'friend'?" Dasce turned his attention to Gersen. "Do you know this man well?"

"As well as I know anyone."

"And his name is Keelen Tannas?"

"If this is the name he offers you, I suggest that you accept it."

Without further remark Dasce turned away. He and his men

went to a table at the end of the hall, where they ate.

Teehalt spoke in a hollow voice. "He knows me well enough." Gersen felt a new spasm of irritation. Why should Teehalt feel impelled to embroil a stranger in his troubles, if his identity were already known?

Teehalt explained his act in the next breath. "Since I fight the hook, he thinks he has me trapped, and he amuses himself."

"What of Malagate? I thought you had come here to meet him."

"Better that I return to Alphanor and confront him there. I will return his money, but I will not lead him to the planet."

At the end of the hall Dasce and his two companions were

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served with platters from Smade's kitchen. Gersen watched them for a moment. "They seem unconcerned."

Teehalt sniffed. "They think that I will deal with Malagate, but not with them. ... I will try to escape. Dasce does not know that I landed over the hill. Perhaps he thinks that your ship is mine."

"Who are the other two men?"

"Assassins. They know me well enough, from the tavern at Brinktown. Tristano is an Earthman. He kills by touches of his hand. The other is a Sarkoy venefice. He can brew stuff to kill from sand and water. All three are madmen—but Dasce is the worst. He knows every horror there is to be known."

At this moment Dasce looked at his watch. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he rose, crossed the room, bent over Teehalt. In a husky whisper he said, "Attel Malagate waits you outside. He will see you now."

Teehalt stared at him with sagging jaw. Dasce swaggered back to his table.

Teehalt rubbed his face with quivering fingers, turned to Gersen. "I can still evade them if I can lose myself in the dark. When I run out the door, will you detain these three?"

"How do you suggest I do this?" asked Gersen sardonically.

Teehalt was silent a moment. "I don't know."

"Nor do I, with the best will in the world."

Teehalt gave a sad nod. "Very well, then. I will fend for myself. Good-bye, Mr. Gersen."

He rose to his feet, walked to the bar. Dasce slanted his eyes at him, but otherwise seemed uninterested. Beside the bar, Teehalt stood beyond the reach of his vision, whereupon he darted into the kitchen, out of sight. Smade looked after him with wonder, then returned to business.

Dasce and the two assassins stolidly continued their meal.

Gersen watched covertly. Why did they sit with such unconcern? Teehalt's ruse had been pitifully obvious. Gersen's skin began to prickle; he drummed his fingers on the table. In spite of his resolve, he rose to his feet, went to the doorway. Pushing open the timber panels, he stepped out on the veranda.

The night was dark, lit only by stars. The wind, for a wonder, was still; but the sea, swirling and flowing, sent up a muffled sad sound. . . . A short sharp scream, a whimper, from behind the tavern. Gersen abandoned his resolve and started forward. A grip like

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the pinch of steel seized his arm, tweaked nerves at the back of his elbow; another hand clamped at his neck. Gersen let himself fall, broke the grip. Suddenly all his doubts and exasperations were gone; he was a whole man. He rolled over, bounced to his feet, stood in a half crouch, shuffled slowly forward. Facing him with an easy smile stood Tnstano the Earthman.

"Careful, friend," said Tnstano in the clipped flat Earth accent. "Give me trouble and Smade pitches you into the sea "

Dasce came out the door, followed by the Sarcoy poisoner. Tnstano joined them and the three walked to the spaceport. Gersen remained on the terrace, breathing heavily, crawling internally with his frustrated need for action.

Ten minutes later two ships rose into the night. The first was a squat armored vessel, with weapons fore and aft. The second was a battered old locator's ship, Model 9B.

Gersen stared in wonder. The second ship was his own.

The ships disappeared, the sky once more was empty. Gersen returned into the tavern and sat before the fire. Presently he brought forth the envelope given him by Lugo Teehalt, opened it, and extracted three photographs, which he examined for the better part of an hour.

The fire burnt low, Smade took himself off to bed, leaving a son dozing behind the bar. Outside, the night rams began to thrash down, lightning crackled, the ocean groaned.

Gersen sat in deep thought. Presently from his pocket he brought a sheet of paper, which listed five names:

Attel Malagata (the Woe)

Howard Alan Treesong

Viole Falushe

Kokor Hekkus (the Killing Machine)

Lens Larque

From his pocket he brought a pencil, but still he deliberated. If he continually added names to his list he would never finish. Of course there was no real need to write; there was no real need for a list. Gersen knew the five names as well as he knew his own. He compromised. To the right and below the last name of the original list he appended a sixth: Hildemar Dasce. For a space he sat looking at the names, with two sides to his mind- the one so alive and

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passionate that the other, the cerebral detached observer, felt a trace of amusement.

The flames settled low; chunks of fossilized moss glowed scarlet; the sea sound was slower and lower in pitch. Gersen rose to his feet, climbed the stone stairs to his room.

During his life Gersen had known little other than a succession of strange beds; nevertheless sleep came slowly and he lay staring into the dark. Visions passed before him, from as early as he could remember. First there was a landscape which, as he recalled it, was wonderfully pleasant and bright. There were tawny mountains, a village painted in faded pastel colors along the banks of a wide tawny river.

But this picture, as always, was followed by another even more vivid: the same landscape littered with hacked and bleeding bodies. Men and women and children shuffled into the holds of five long ships under the weapons of two score men in strange grim costumes. With an old man who was his grandfather, Kirth Gersen watched, horrified, from across the river, concealed from the slavers by the bulk of an old barge. When the ships had lifted, they returned across the river to the silence of death. Then his grandfather told him, "Many fine things your father had planned for you. Learning and useful work and a life of satisfaction and peace. Do you recall this?"

"Yes, Grandfather."

"The learning you shall have. You will learn patience and resource, the ability of your hands and your mind. You will have useful work: the destruction of evil men. That work could be more useful. This is Beyond, you will find that your work is never done-

so therefore you may never know a life of peace. However, I guarantee you ample satisfaction, for I will teach you to crave the blood of these men more than the flesh of woman."

The old man had been as good as his word. Eventually they made their way to Earth, the ultimate repository of every sort of knowledge.

Young Kirth learned many things, from a succession of strange teachers which it would be tedious to detail. He killed his first man at the age of fourteen, a footpad who had the ill-luck to accost them in a back alley of Rotterdam. While his grandfather stood by, in the manner of an old fox teaching a cub to hunt, young Kirth,

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gasping and sobbing, broke first the ankle, then the neck of the astonished assailant.

From Earth they moved to Alphanor, capitol planet of the Rigel Concourse, and here Kirth Gersen gained more conventional knowledge. When he was nineteen his grandfather died, bequeathing him a comfortable sum of money and a letter which read:

My dear Kirth:

I have seldom told of my affection and high regard for you; I take this occasion to do so. You have come to mean more to me than ever did my own son. I will not say I am sorry that I have set your feet in the path they now must take, even though you will be denied many ordinary pleasures and luxuries. Have I been presumptuous in so shaping your life? I think not. For several years you have been self-motivated, and have showed no inclination to point yourself in any other direction. In any event, I can think of no more useful service for a man to perform than that which I have ordained for you. The Law of Man is bounded by the limits of the Oikumene. Good and evil, however, are ideas which encompass the universe; unluckily, beyond the Pale there are few to ensure the triumph of good over evil.

Actually the triumph consists of two processes: first evil must be extinguished, then good must be introduced to fill the gap. It is impossible that a man should be equally efficacious in both functions. Good and evil, in spite of a traditional fallacy, are not polarities, nor mirror images, nor is one merely the absence of the other. In order to minimize confusion, your work will be the destruction of evil men.

What is an evil man? The man is evil who coerces obedience to his private ends, destroys beauty, produces pain, extinguishes life. It must be remembered that killing evil men is not equivalent to expunging evil, which is a relationship between a situation and an individual. A poisonous spore will grow only in a nutrient soil. In this case the nu-

trient soil is Beyond, and since no human effort can alter the Beyond (which must always exist), you must devote your efforts to destroying the poisonous spores, which are evil men. It is a task of which you will never see the end.

Our sharpest and first motivation in this matter, agreed,

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is no more than a primitive ache for revenge. Five pirate captains destroyed certain lives and enslaved others who were precious to us. Revenge is not an ignoble motive, when it works to a productive end. The names of these five pirate captains I do not know. My best attempts have brought me no information. One man, an underling, I recognized: his name is Parsifal Pankarow, and he is no less baneful than the five captains, though his potentialities for harm are less. You must seek him Beyond and learn from him the names of the five.

Then you must kill the five, and it will do no harm if they suffer pain in the process, for they have brought an immeasurable amount of pain and grief to others.

There is still much for you to learn. I would advise you to join the Institute, except I fear that the disciplines of this body would not set well with you. Do as you think best. In my youth I thought to become a catechumen, but Destiny ruled otherwise. If I were friends with a Fellow I would send you to him for counsel—but I have no such friend. Perhaps you will be less constricted outside the Institute. Stringent conditions are imposed upon the catechumen through the first fourteen degrees.

In any event, I advise you to devote a time to the study of Sarkoy poisons and hand techniques, preferably on Sarkoy itself. There is room for improvement in your marksmanship and knifeplay, though you need fear few men at hand fighting. Your intuitive judgments are exact, your self-control, economy of action, and versatility are to be commended. But you still have much to learn. For the next ten years, study, train—and be cautious. There are many other capable men; do not rashly waste yourself against any such until you are more than ready. In short, do not make an overvirtue of courage or heroism. A goodly amount of caution—call it fear or even cowardice—is a highly desirable adjunct for a man such as yourself, whose one fault might be said to be a mystical, almost superstitious, faith in the success of your destiny. Do not be fooled: we are all mortal, as I now attest.

So, my grandson, I am dead. I have trained you to know good from evil. I feel only pride in my accomplishment,

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and hope that you will remember me with affection and

respect

Your loving grandfather,  
Rolf Marr Gersen

For eleven years Kirth Gersen obeyed the dictates of his grandfather, or exceeded them, meanwhile seeking both within the Oikumene and Beyond for Parsifal Pankarow, but fruitlessly

Few occupations offered more challenge, more hazard, more chilling rebuffs to incompetence than weaseling for the IPCC Gersen undertook two assignments, on Pharos and Blue Planet During the term of this latter, he submitted a preemptive requisition for information regarding Parsifal Pankarow, and felt himself well rewarded to learn that Parsifal Pankarow currently resided at Brinktown, where he was Ita Bugloss, operator of a prosperous import business

Gersen found Ira Bugloss, or Pankarow, to be a burly, hearty man, egg-bald, his skin dyed lemon-yellow, his mustachios wide, black and luxuriant

Brinktown occupied a plateau which stood like an island in a black-and-orange jungle Gersen scrutinized Pankarow's movements for two weeks, and learned his routine, which was that of a man without a care Then one evening he hired a cab, rendered the operator unconscious, and waited outside the Jodisei Conversation and Flower Arranging Club until Pankarow tired of sporting with the inmates and emerged into the humid Brinktown night Well pleased with himself, humming a tune he had only just learned, he staggered into the cab and was conveyed, not to his sumptuous home, but to a remote clearing in the jungle Here Gersen put questions which Pankarow had no wish to answer

Pankarow made an effort to hold his tongue, to no avail Finally five names were wrung from his memory "Now what will you do with me?" croaked the erstwhile Ira Bugloss

"I will kill you," said Gersen, pale and quivering after exercise he did not enjoy "I have made you my enemy, furthermore, you deserve to die a hundred times over."

"At one time, yes," cried the sweating Pankarow "Now I lead a blameless life, I'm sure no one"

Gersen wondered if every such occasion would cause him such nausea, misgivings and misery He responded in a voice held crisp

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and even by enormous effort "What you say perhaps is true, but your wealth stinks of pain And certainly you will make a report to the first agent of any of the five you meet "

"No. I swear not And my wealth—take it all."

"Where is your wealth?"

Pankarow tried to make conditions. "I will lead you to it "

Gersen shook his head sadly "Accept my excuses You are about to die It comes to all men, you had best feel that you are requiting the evil you have done—"

"Under my tombstone'" screamed Pankarow "Under the stone tombstone before my house'"

Gersen touched a tube to Pankarow's neck, which spat a Sarkoy poison into the skin "I will go to look," he said "You will sleep until you see me again " Gersen spoke no more than the truth Pankarow relaxed thankfully and was dead in seconds.

Gersen returned to Bnnktown, a deceptively placid settlement of tall ornate three-, four-, and five-story houses embowered among green, purple and black trees At twilight he sauntered along a quiet back lane to Pankarow's house The stone tombstone stood plain to see. a massive monument of marble spheres and cubes surmounted by a sculptured image of Parsifal Pankarow in a noble pose, head thrown back to the sky, arms outspread As Gersen stood appraising it a boy thirteen or fourteen years old stepped down from the porch and approached Gersen.

"Are you from my father3 Is he with the fat women?"

Gersen steeled his heart to the inevitable pangs, and put aside all thought of confiscating Pankarow's wealth "I bring a message from your father "

"Will you come m3" inquired the boy, tremulously anxious. "I'll call my mother "

"No Please don't I have no time Listen carefully Your father has been called away He is not sure when he can return Perhaps never "

The boy listened round-eyed "Did he—run away3"

Gersen nodded "Yes Some old enemies found him, and he does not dare show himself He said to tell you or your mother that money is hidden under the tombstone."

The boy stared at Gersen "Who are you3"

"A messenger, no more Tell your mother exactly what I have told you One more thing when you look beneath the tombstone,

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be careful. There may he a trap to guard the money Do you understand what I'm saying^"

"Yes A booby trap "

"That's right Be careful Get the help of someone you can

trust "

Gersen departed Bnnktown He thought of Smade's Planet, with its elemental quiet and isolation, precisely the antidote to his fretful conscience Where, he asked himself, as the locater boat skidded down a fracture in the continuum, did the balance lie? He had by no means reached the tipping point Parsifal Pankarow deserved the callous execution he had received But what of wife and son? They must bear the pain, but why? To protect the women and children of more deserving men from worse so Gersen reassured himself But the haunted dark look of the boy's eyes would not leave his memory

Destiny led him The first at Smade's Tavern engaged him with Malagata the Woe, the first name Parsifal Pankarow had blurted forth In his bed Gersen heaved a deep sigh Pankarow was dead, poor miserable Lugo Teehalt was probably dead All men must die, let there be an end to brooding He grinned into the dark, thinking of Malagata and Beauty Dasce examining the monitor of his ship To begin with they would be unable to open the monitor with their key—a formidable difficulty, even worse if they suspected thieproofing of explosive, poison gas or acid When after great travail they eventually extracted the filament, it would show blank Gersen's monitor was no more than window dressing, he had never bothered to activate it

Malagata would look questioningly at Beauty Dasce, who would mutter some sort of objurgation Perhaps then they would think to check the serial number of the ship, only to find that it was different from that issued to Lugo Teehalt And then swiftly back to Smade's Planet But Gersen would be gone

3

Question (put to Eale Maurmath, Chief Quaestor of Tn-Planetary Police System, during a roundtable television discussion broadcast from Conover, Cuthbert, Vega. May 16, 993)

I know your problems are tremendous, Quaestor Maurmath, in fact I don't really comprehend how you get on top of them. For instance, how can you possibly locate some one particular man, or trace his background, among ninety-odd inhabited planets and billions of people, of all varieties of political complexion, local habit, doctrines of belief?

Answer;

Usually we can't.

Message of Lord Jaiko Jaikoska, Chairman of the Executive Board, to the Valhalla General Legislative Assembly, Valhalla, Tau Gemini, August 9, 1028

I urge you not to endorse this sinister measure. Humanity many times has had sad experience ofsuperpow-

erful police forces .. As soon as (the police) slip out from under the firm thumb of a suspicious local tribune, they become arbitrary, merciless, a law unto themselves They think no more of justice, but only of establishing themselves as a privileged and envied elite. They mistake the attitude of natural caution and uncertainty of the civilian population as admiration and respect, and presently they start to swagger back and forth, jingling their weapons in megalomaniac euphoria. People thereupon become not masters, but ser-

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vants. Such a police force becomes merely an aggregate of uniformed criminals, the more baneful in that their position is unchallenged and sanctioned by law. The police mentality cannot regard a human being in terms other than as an item or object to be processed as expeditiously as possible. Public convenience or dignity means nothing; police prerogatives assume the status of divine law. Submissiveness is demanded. If a police officer kills a civilian, it is a regrettable circumstance: the officer was possibly overzealous. If a civilian kills a police officer all hell breaks loose. The police foam at the mouth. All other business comes to a standstill until the perpetrator of this most dastardly act is found out. Inevitably, when apprehended, he is beaten or otherwise tortured for his intolerable presumption. The police complain that they cannot function efficiently, that criminals escape them. Better a hundred unchecked criminals than the despotism of one unbridled police force. Again I warn you, do not endorse this measure. If you do, I shall surely veto it.

Excerpt from address of Richard Parnell, Commissioner of Public Weal, Northern Territory, Xion, Rigel Concourse, to the Association of Police Officers, Civil Guards and Crime Detection Agencies, at Parilia, Pilgham, Rigel, December 1, 1075;

... It is not enough to say that our problems are unique; they have become catastrophic. We are held responsible for the efficient conduct of our jobs, but are refused the necessary tools and powers to do man can murder and rob anywhere within the Oikumene, jump into a waiting spaceship and be light years away before his crime is discovered. If he passes beyond the Pale, our jurisdiction ends—at least officially, although all of us know of courageous officers who have put justice ahead of expediency and caution and have gone beyond the Pale to make their arrests. This of course they have a right to do, since every human law becomes invalid Beyond, but the risk is their

own.

More often the criminal who goes Beyond escapes scot free. When he chooses to return into the Oikumene he may

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have changed his appearance, his LOSI coordinates, and his fingerprints, and is safe unless he has the misfortune to be arrested for a new^ infraction in the community where he committed his original crime and was there genified.\*

Essentially, in this day of the Jarnell Intersplit, any criminal who takes a few elementary precautions can go unpunished.

This association many times has sought to establish a more satisfactory basis for crime detection and prevention. Our main problem is the diversity of local police organizations, with their totally disparate standards, goals, and range of problems, and the consequent chaos of information files and retrieval systems. An obvious solution exists, and the association's standing recommendation is the formation of a single official police system to maintain law and order throughout the Oikumene,

The advantages of such a system are obvious: standardization of procedure, use of new equipment and ideas, unified control, a central office for the filing, indexing, and cross-indexing of information, and, perhaps of highest importance, the creation and maintenance of an esprit, a pride of profession, to attract and hold men and women of the highest abilities.

As we all know, this centralized agency has been denied us, no matter how urgently we plead its virtues. The ostensible motive behind this refusal is known to us all, and I will not dignify it by mentioning it. I will say that police morale is sinking to an ever lower level and soon may vanish—unless something is done.

Today I wish to put before the convention a proposal for the "something.1' Our association is the private organization of a group of private individuals. It has no official status or connection with any governmental office whatever. In short, we are free to do what we please, enter into any kind of business we please, so long as we contravene no laws.

I propose that this association go into business, that we found a private crime-detection agency. The new company will be strictly a commercial proposition, financed by as-

\*The noun is gene-classification, thence to adjective gene-classified, abbreviated to seinfied.

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sociation money and by private subscription. Headquarters will be established at some central and convenient location, but there will be branches on every planet. Our staff will be recruited from among members of this association and any other qualified persons. They will be well paid, from fees and profits. Where will these fees and profits derive?

Primarily from local police organizations, who will use certain of the facilities of this new interplanetary agency, instead of expending large sums to maintain redundant facilities of the same sort. Since the proposed agency will be a private business organization subject to all local and interplanetary laws, the critics of our former schemes must be silenced.

. . . Eventually the Intel-world Police Coordination Company would automatically be called upon to handle all problems of crime detection and prevention other than those that are purely local, and even here the IPCC may function usefully. In due course the IPCC will certainly dwarf in scope all present and future official police groups. We will have our own laboratories, research programs, absolutely complete files, and an absolutely high-class staff—recruited, as I say, from members of the association, and others. Are there any questions?

Question from the floor: Is there any reason why police officers of a municipality or a state should not simultaneously be members of the IPCC staff?

Answer: This is a very important point. No, there is no reason. I see no conflict between the two agencies, and there is even reason to hope that local police officials will automatically wish to become affiliated with the IPCC. This would be to the advantage of the IPCC, the local police group, and the individual himself. In other words, the local police officer would have nothing to lose and everything to gain by referring cases to the IPCC and authorizing the subsequent fee if he himself were a staff member.

From Chapter III, *The IPCC: Men and Methods*, by Raoul Past:

. . . Nominally an intra-Oikumene organ, the IPCC has been forced by the dynamics of its basic rationale to operate

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Beyond. Here, where the only laws are local ordinances and taboos, the IPCC finds little cooperation: indeed, the very opposite. The IPCC operative is known as a weasel; his life is constantly balanced on a knife edge. The Central Agency shrouds in secrecy the exact number of "weasels," and also the percentage of casualties. The first figure is suspected to be low, through difficulties of recruitment; the second high, through both the exigencies of the work and the efforts of that most fantastic of human constructions, the Deweasel-mg Corps.

. . . The universe is infinite; worlds without end exist;

but certainly one must travel far to find a situation so par-

adoxical, whimsical, and grim as this: that the single disciplined organization of the Beyond exists only to extirpate the nominal forces of law and order.

Gersen awoke in the strange bed, the sky through the small square window only vaguely gray. He dressed and descended the stone steps to the hall, where he found one of Smade's sons, a dour dark lad of twelve, fanning the coals in the fireplace to life. He bade Gersen a gruff "Good morning," but seemed indisposed for further conversation. Gersen stepped outside to the terrace. Predawn mist concealed the ocean, rolling in sheets and curls across the heath—a dreary, monochromatic scene. The sense of isolation was suddenly oppressive. Gersen returned inside, went to warm himself at the new fire.

The boy was sweeping the hearth. "Killing last night," he told Gersen in gloomy satisfaction. "Little thin man got it— Right behind the moss shed."

"Is the body there?" Gersen asked.

"No. No body. They took it with them. Three bad ones, maybe four. Father is black mad; they did their dirt inside the fence."

Gersen grunted, displeased with every aspect of the situation. He asked for breakfast, which was presently forthcoming. As he ate, the dwarf sun lifted above the mountains, a brittle white wafer barely visible through the mist. An onshore wind came up, the mist dissipated; and when Gersen once more went outside the sky was clear, though fog wisps still blew in from the oily sea.

Gersen walked north along the shelf between ocean cliffs and

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mountains. Underfoot was a carpet of spongy gray moss, redolent with a musty resinous odor. The sunlight streamed over his head, out to sea, the black water giving back no glint or reflection. Pie went to the edge of the cliff, looked down two hundred feet to the rise and fall of the water. He tossed a stone, watched the splash, the ripples quickly absorbed in the larger motion. What would it be like, he wondered, to sail a boat on this ocean? Out across the horizons, with the whole world to explore: barren coasts, bleak headlands, tall stern islands, with no sight of human being or dwelling until the return to Smade's Tavern. Gersen turned away from the cliff, continued North. Fie passed the mouth of a valley fenced in against Smade's cattle. Teehalt certainly had not left his boat here. A quarter mile ahead a spur of the mountains humped down almost to the sea. In the shadow of the ridge Gersen found Teehalt's boat.

He made a quick inspection. The vessel was indeed a Model

9B, identical to his own. The gear and machinery seemed in good order. In a housing under the bow bulge hung the monitor which

had cost Teehalt his life.

Gersen returned to the tavern. His original plan, to spend several days, must be altered; Malagate might discover his mistake and return with Hildemar Dasce and the two assassins. They would wish to take Teehalt's monitor, and this Gersen was resolved they should not do, though he did not care to risk his life in the effort to keep it.

Returning to the tavern, he noted that the landing field was empty. The Star King had departed. This morning? Or during the night? Gersen had no idea. He settled his score and, moved by some obscure impulse, paid Lugo Teehalt's bill. Smade made no comment. He was clearly consumed by cold fury. His eyes showed white around the drab irises, his nostrils were distended, his chin jutted forward. The rage was not on Lugo Teehalt's behalf, Gersen realized; the murderer, whoever he might be—Dasce had mentioned Attel Malagate—had flouted Smade's law; he had disturbed the serenity of Smade's Tavern; he had wronged Smade. Gersen felt a twinge of sad amusement, which he took pains to conceal. Politely he inquired, "When did the Star King leave?" Smade merely glared silently back at him like an angry Black Angus bull.

Gersen gathered his small packet of belongings and departed the tavern, declining the twelve-year-old boy's proffer of assistance.

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Once more he walked north across the gray heath. Crossing the ridge, he looked back toward the tavern. Staunch and secure it stood, facing the black, wind-whipped sea—utterly alone. Gersen shook his head dubiously and turned away. "Everyone is the same," he told himself. "Anxious to arrive and, when they leave, wondering why they came."

A few minutes later he took Teehalt's boat aloft on its boosters, then pointed it back toward the Oikumene and cut in the oversplit—Smade's Planet dwindled astern and, with its white dwarf sun, presently became lost, a single spark among a million. Stars slid by like fireflies blown on a dark wind, the light reaching Gersen by back-splash or backcurl, wherein the Doppler effect played no role. Perspective was lost; the eye was fooled; stars moved astern, the near slipping across the far. Within hand reach? A hundred yards distant? Ten miles? The eye had no tool by which to judge.

Gersen set the star finder to the index of Rigel, engaged the autopilot, made himself as comfortable as the spartan facilities of the Model 9B permitted.

The visit to Smade's Tavern had served him well, though the occasion had been bought by Lugo Teehalt's death. Malagate wanted Lugo Teehalt's monitor; this was the premise which controlled the shape of the future. Malagate would be willing to enter negotiations, and, with equal certainty, he would act through an

agent. Although, thought Gersen, he had seen fit to kill Lugo Teehalt at first hand. . . . There was something puzzling here. Why need Lugo Teehalt die? Sheer malice on the part of Malagate? Not impossible. But Malagate had killed and ravaged so extensively that taking the life of one thin miserable man could provide him only paltry gratification.

More likely the motive was habit, sheer offhanded casual habit, To sever relations with a man who might be inconvenient, you killed him. . . . A third possibility: Had Teehalt penetrated the anonymity which Malagate, among all the Demon Princes, held of supreme importance? Gersen reviewed his conversation with Teehalt. For all his ravaged and woebegone appearance, Teehalt had used educated intonations. He had seen better days. Why had he turned to the disreputable profession of locating? The question, of course, had no real answer. Why did a man set himself in any specific direction? Why and how did a man, presumably born of ordinary parents, become Attel Malagate the Woe?

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Teehalt had hinted or implied that Malagate was somehow involved in the leasing of the locator ship. With this thought in mind, Gersen made a careful inspection of the ship. He found the traditional brass plate naming the place of manufacture; Liverstone on Fiame, a planet of the Rigel Concourse. The monitor likewise carried a bronze flake detailing its serial number and the manufacturer:

the Feritse Precision Instruments Company, at Sansontiana on Olliphane, also of the Concourse. But there was no indication of the owner, no evidence of registration.

It would be necessary, then, to trace ownership of the boat indirectly. Gersen set himself to consider the problem. Estate houses maintained two-thirds of all locator ships, their stock in trade consisting of worlds with specific attributes: planets highly mineralized, planets suitable for colonization by dissident groups, planets pleasant enough to serve as a millionaire's reserve, planets distinguished by a sufficiently interesting flora and fauna to attract curio dealers or biologists; most rarely, planets supporting intelligent or semi-intelligent life, of interest to sociologists, cultural taxonomists, linguists, and the like.

The estate houses were concentrated in the cosmopolitan centers of the Oikumene: three or four worlds of the Concourse, chief among them Alphanor; Vega's Cuthbert, Boniface, Aloysius; Noval;

Pi Cassiopeta's Copus and Orpo; Quantique; old Earth. The Concourse would be the logical starting place, if in fact Lugo Teehalt worked for an estate house. But this was by no means certain; in fact, as Gersen seemed to recall, Teehalt had implied otherwise. If so, the investigation was narrowed considerably. Next to the estate houses, universities and research institutes were the chief employers of locaters. And Gersen had a new thought. If Teehalt had been either a student or a faculty member at some specific lyceum, col-

lege or university, he would probably apply to this same institution for employment.

Gersen corrected his thinking: the conjecture was not necessarily probable. A proud man, with friends and associates who might remember him, would use his old school in this fashion only as a last resort. Was Lugo Teehalt proud? Not in this way, or so it seemed to Gersen. Teehalt had seemed a man who might easily turn to his old haven for security.

There was another obvious source of information: the Feritse Precision Instrument Company at Sansontiana, where the monitor

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would be registered in the name of its purchaser. And another reason for visiting the Feritse Precision Instrument Company: Gersen wanted to open the monitor and remove the filament. To this end he needed a key. Monitors were often tamperproofed with explosive capsules or corrosives; violent extraction of the filament seldom yielded useful information.

The officials of the Feritse Company might or might not prove accommodating, Sansontiana was a city of Braichis, one of Olliphane's nineteen independent nations, the Braichish were a headstrong, involute, altogether peculiar people. Concourse law, however, repudiated private claims beyond the Pale, and discouraged the use of explosive traps. Hence, in an ordinance detailing the equipment required aboard spacecraft: "The manufacturers of such devices (referring to monitors) are thereupon enjoined and required to furnish keys, switching devices, code sticks, number sequences or any other tool, appliance or information necessary to the safe opening of the instrument in question, without delay, complaint, error, exorbitant charge, or any behavior or act calculated to deter the petitioner from obtaining the key, coded device or information demanded, if and when the petitioner is able to demonstrate ownership of said instrument. Presentation of the serial plate originally or thereafter affixed by the manufacturer to the instrument shall be deemed sufficient and adequate evidence of ownership."

All well and good. Gersen could secure the key, but the company need not furnish information as to previous registration of the instrument. Especially if Artel Malagate should suspect that Gersen might come to Sansontiana with such a purpose in mind, and take steps to preclude the contingency.

The thought opened a set of new vistas. Gersen frowned. Had his temperament been other than careful and orderly, these various options and possibilities might not occur to him. He would be saved a great deal of difficulty, but he probably would die sooner. . . . He shook his head in resignation, reached for the star charts.

Not far off his line of fission was the star Cygnus T342, and its planet Euville where an unpleasant and psychotic population lived in five cities: Oni, Me, Che, Dun and Ve, each compulsively built in pentagonal patterns, from a central five-sided citadel. The

spaceport, on a remote island, was opprobriously named "Orifice." Everything Gersen needed could be found at the spaceport; he had

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no desire to visit the cities, especially since each required, in lieu of passport, the tattooing of a star on the forehead, a different color for each city. To visit all five cities the prospective tourist must display five stars; orange, black, mauve, yellow and green.

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From *New Discoveries in Space*, by Ralph Quarry:

... Sir Julian Hove apparently derived his attitudes from the late Renaissance explorers. Upon return to Earth, members of his crews imposed upon themselves (or had imposed) a strict rule of discretion and secrecy. Details nevertheless leaked out. Sir Julian Hove was, to use the most comprehensive term, a martinet. He was likewise a man utterly without humor. His eye was bleak, he spoke without moving his lips; his hair was combed day after day in photographically identical furrows. While he did not actually require that the personnel wear dinner jackets to meals, certain of his rules imposed an almost equivalent punctilio. . . . The use of first names was eschewed; salutes were exchanged at the beginning and termination of each watch, even though the personnel was by and large civilian. Technicians whose specialties were without scientific pertinence were forbidden to set foot on the fascinating new worlds:

an order which came close to fomenting mutiny, until Sir Julian's second in command, Howard Coke, prevailed upon Sir Julian to ameliorate this regulation.

The Rigel Concourse is Sir Julian's most noteworthy discovery: twenty-six magnificent planets, most of them not only habitable but salubrious, though only two display even quasi-intelligent autochthones. . . . Sir Julian, exercising his prerogatives, named the planets for boyhood heroes: Lord Kitchener, William Gladstone, Archbishop Rollo Gore, Edythe

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MacDevott, Rudyard Kipling, Thomas Carlyle, William Kirkcudbright^ Samuel B. Gorsham, Sir Robert Peel, and the like.

But Sir Julian was to be deprived of his privilege. He telegraphed ahead the news of his return to Maudley Space Station, together with a description of the Concourse and the names he had bestowed upon the members of this magnificent group. The list passed through the hands of an obscure young clerk, one Roger Pilgham, who rejected Sir Julian's nominations in disgust. To each of the twenty-six planets he assigned a letter of the alphabet and hurriedly

supplied new names: Alphanor, Barleycorn, Chrysanthe, Diogenes, Elfland, Flame, Goshen, Hardacres, Image, Jezebel, Krokinole, Lyonesse, Madagascar, Nowhere, Olliphane, Pilgham, Quinine, Raratonga, Somewhere, Tantomount, Unicorn, Valisande, Walpurgis, Xion, Ys and Zacaranda—the names derived from legend, myth, romance, his own whimsey. One of the worlds was accompanied by a satellite, described in the dispatch as "an eccentric, tumbling, odd-shaped fragment of chondritic pumice," and this Roger Pilgham named "Sir Julian."

The press received and published the list and Rigel's planets became so known, though Sir Julian's acquaintances wondered about the sudden extravagance of his imagination. And who, or what, was "Pilgham"? Sir Julian presumably would explain upon his arrival.

The clerk, Roger Pilgham, presently returns to the obscurity from which he sprang, and there is no record of his conduct or state of mind as Sir Julian's return became imminent. Did he feel apprehension? Uneasiness? Indifference? Beyond all doubt he had become resigned to the prospect of discharge from his position.

In due course Sir Julian made a triumphant return, and in due course used the phrase, "most impressive perhaps are the New Grampian Mountains on the North Continent of Lord Bulwer-Lytton." A member of the audience politely asked the whereabouts of Lord Bulwer-Lytton, and the substitution was revealed.

Sir Julian's reaction to the deed was one of extraordinary fury. The clerk prudently went into seclusion; SirJul-

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ian was encouraged to reintroduce his own nominations, but the damage had been done; Roger Pilgham's brash deed caught the fancy of the public, and Sir Julian's Cfrmmology gradually faded from memory.

From Popular Handbook of the Planets, 303rd Edition, published 1292:

Alphanor, a planet considered the administrative node and cultural center of the Rigel Concourse. It is eighth in orbital order.

#### Planetary Constants:

Diameter	9300 miles
Mass	102

Mean Day	29 hours, 16 minutes, 29.4 seconds
etc.	

General Remarks: Alphanor is a large bright sea world

with a generally bracing climate. Ocean occupies three-quarters of the total surface, including the polar ice floes. The land mass is divided into seven nearly contiguous continents: Phrygia, Umbria, Lusitania, Scythia, Etruria, Lydia and Lycia, in a configuration suggesting seven petals of a Bower. There are uncounted islands.

Autochthonous life is complex and vigorous. The flora has in no way yielded to terrestrial imports, which must be carefully tended and nurtured. The fauna is likewise complex, and on occasion actively savage; to cite the clever hyrcan major of upper Phrygia, and the invisible eel of the Thaumaturge Ocean.

The political structure of Alphanor is a pyramidal democracy—simple in theory, intricate in practice. The continents are divided into provinces, thence prefectures, districts and wards: these latter defined as population blocs of five thousand persons. Each ward committee sends a representative to the district council, which elects a delegate to the prefectural diet, which sends a member to the provincial congress, which does likewise for the continental parliament. Each parliament elects seven rectors to the

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Grand Council at Avente, in the Sea Province of Umbria, which thereupon chooses a chairman.

From Preface to Peoples of the Concourse, by Strick and Chernitz:

The Concourse populations are far from homogeneous. During the migrations from Earth racial groups tended to follow their own, and in the new environments, under the influence of interbreeding and new behavior patterns, such groups specialized even further. . . . The folk of Alphanor eneral are fair, brown-haired, of medium stature,

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though an hour's walk along the Grand Esplanade at Avente will show the observer every conceivable style of human being.

The Alphanor psychology is more difficult to express.

Every inhabited world is different in this regard; and though the differences are real and distinct enough, it is hard to present them accurately without discursiveness—especially since each planetwide generalization is compounded, vitiated, or contradicted by regional differences.

Rigel, dead ahead, was a bright blue-white point from which every other star seemed to flee. Gersen had little to do but contemplate his destination, fight restlessness and tension, speculate regarding Attel Malagate's probable intentions, and formulate his own set of responses. The first problem; Where to land? One hundred and eighty-three spaceports on twenty-two of the twenty-six worlds were convenient to his lawful use, as well as unlimited desert and wasteland, should he choose to risk arrest for violation of the quarantine laws.

How intensely did Malagate want Teehalt's monitor? Would he arrange a watch at every spaceport? Theoretically, this could be done, by the suborning of port officials. The cheapest and perhaps most effective system would be to offer a resounding reward to the man who reported Gersen's arrival. Gersen of course might choose to set down at another star system. It would be difficult to mount guard over every space port of the Oikumene.

But it was by no means Gersen's purpose to go into hiding. In the next phase of proceedings he must necessarily expose himself.

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This next phase was the identification of Malagate. Two methods to this end suggested themselves: he could either trace the registry of the monitor, or await the approach of some member of Malagate's organization, and then try to trace the nerve of authority back to its source.

Malagate would take for granted Gersen's intent to investigate the monitor, and would presumably concentrate his vigilance at the Kindune spaceport, which served Sansontiana.

Nevertheless, for a series of indefinite reasons—little more than hunches—Gersen decided to land at the Grand Interplanetary Spaceport at Avente.

He approached Alphanor, coasted down into landing orbit, locked his autopilot into the official landing program, and once more sat back. The boat settled, bumped in a roar of expiring jets upon the scorched red earth. The jets died; there was silence. Automatically the pressure-equalizing valve began to hiss.

The port-officials approached in a slide car. Gersen answered questions, submitted to a brief medical inspection, received an entry permit. The officials departed; a mobile crane trundled up, lifted the boat, carried it to a bay in the storage line at one side of the field.

Gersen descended to the ground, feeling exposed and vulnerable. He started to detach the monitor, keeping a careful lookout in all directions.

Two men sauntered along the storage line, casually, or so it

seemed. Gersen recognized one of them instantly: the Sarkoy who had followed Hildemar Dasce into Smade's Tavern.

As they approached, Gersen gave them no overt heed, but they made no twitch or move that he did not observe. The Sarkoy wore a modest suit of dark gray with epaulettes embroidered with opals;

his companion, a thin sandy-hatred man with dancing white-gray eyes, wore a laborer's loose blue coverall.

The two stopped a few feet from Gersen, stood watching as if in casual interest. Gersen, after a glance, ignored them, though his skin crawled and his pulse pounded. The Sarkoy muttered something to his associate, came a little forward.

"I think we've met?" His voice was soft, sardonic.

"Your name evades me," said Gersen politely.

"I am Suthiro, Sivij Suthiro."

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Gersen examined him carefully, seeing a man of middle weight, with the curious flat head of the Sarkoy Steppeman,\* the face wider than high. Suthiro's eyes were soft dead olive-drab, the nose snub and dark of nostril, the mouth wide, thick-lipped—a face shaped by more than a thousand years of specialization and inbreeding. Gersen could not detect the "breath of death," an accomplishment forced upon indentured assassins, which shortened their lives, gave the skin a yellowish glaze, and caused the hair to stiffen. Suthiro's skin was untuned pallid ivory, his hair was a glossy black pelt, and he wore tattooed on his right cheek the small Maltese cross of the

Sarkoy hetman.

Gersen said, "My apologies, Scop Suthiro. I don't remember the occasion you mention."

"Ah." Suthiro's eyes widened at Gersen's use of the honorific. "You have visited Sarkovy. Dear green Sarkovy, its boundless steppes, its merry festivals!"

"Merry, so long as the harikap last. Then what will you torture?"

Suthiro, of a race inured to insult, took no offense. "We always have each other. ... I see you know my planet well."

"Fairly well. Perhaps you remember me from Sarkovy."

"No," said Suthiro wryly. "Elsewhere, and more recently." Gersen shook his head. "Impossible. I have just come in from

Beyond."

"Exactly. We met Beyond. At Smade's Tavern."

"Indeed."

"Yes. With certain others I came to meet my friend Lugo Teehalt. In the confusion and excitement Lugo left Smade's Planet in your spaceship. Surely you are aware of this?"

\*The Sarkoy were held in low esteem by other peoples of the Oikumene, by virtue of repugnant eating habits and gross and exhibitionistic sexual conduct. Also despised was the popular Sarkov sport known as harbite, or the baiting of a harikap, a large bristle-furred semi-intelligent biped of the north forests- The wretched creature, brought to a state of tension by hunger, would be thrust into a circle of men armed with pitchforks and torches, stimulated to wild activity by being set on fire, thrust deftly with pitchforks back into the center of the circle as it sought to escape,

Sarkovy, the single planet of Phi Ophiuchi, was a dim world of steppes, swamps, black forests, morasses. The Sarkoy lived in tall wooden houses behind timber palisades;

not even the largest of the towns was secure from the attack of bandits and nomads from the wastelands. By practice and tradition the Sarkoy were accomplished poisoners- A Master Venefice reportedly could kill a man merely by walking past him.

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Gersen laughed. "If Teehalt has either apologies or complaints, I'm sure he will seek me out."

"Exactly," said Suthiro. "Lugo Teehalt sent me to make adjustment. He begs forgiveness for his mistake, and wishes only that I recover his monitor."

Gersen shook his head. "You can't have it."

"No?" Suthiro moved closer. "Lugo offers a thousand SVU\* to indemnify you for his mistake."

"I accept with thanks. Give me the money."

"And the monitor?"

"I will return it when he comes for it."

The thin-faced man made an irritable clicking sound, but Suthiro grinned. "This is not exactly feasible. You will have the money, but we will not have the monitor."

"There is no reason why you should have the monitor. Lugo Teehalt is one principal in the matter; I will give him his monitor. I am the other principal in the matter; it is perfectly legitimate for you to give me the money. Unless, of course, you distrust my honesty."

"By no means, since we do not intend to put it to the test. We propose, in fact, to take the monitor at this moment."

"I think not," said Gersen. "I plan to take possession of the filament."

"This is out of the question!" said Suthiro gently.

"Try to stop me." Gersen returned to work, disengaged the seals from the monitor housing.

Suthiro watched placidly. He made a signal to the thin-faced man, who backed away and kept lookout. "I could stop you so suddenly you'd become a marble statue." He looked over his shoulder to the thin-faced man, who nodded. Suthiro exhibited a weapon he carried in his hand. "I can provide you a heart spasm, a brain hemorrhage, or a convulsion of the small intestine, whichever you prefer."

Gersen paused in his work, drew a deep sigh. "Your arguments are impressive. Pay me five thousand SVU."

"I need pay you nothing. But here is the thousand I mentioned." He tossed Gersen a packet of notes, then motioned to the thin-faced man, who came forward, took Gersen's tools, and ex-

\*SVU: Standard Value Unit of the Oikumene.

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pertly detached the monitor. Gersen counted the money, moved to the side. The two dropped the monitor into a bag and, without another word, departed. Gersen laughed quietly. This was the monitor he had bought and installed at Euville, at a cost of four hundred SVU. Teehalt's monitor was safe inside the ship.

Gersen returned into the ship, closed the ports. Time now was of the essence. Suthiro would require about ten minutes to communicate his success, either to Dasce or conceivably to Malagate himself. Messages would then go out to various other spaceports of the Concourse, calling off the alert. Malagate would not receive the monitor, if Gersen were in luck, for several hours, perhaps not for days, depending upon his whereabouts. There would be an additional delay while the deception was discovered, and then Mala-

gate's organization would once again be mobilized, the focus now upon the Feritse Precision Instrument Company at Sansontiana, on Olliphane.

By this time Gersen hoped to have been there and gone. Certainly he would have no time to spare. Without further delay he started the jets, rose into the blue Alphanor sky, pointed the boat toward Olliphane.

From Popular Handbook of the Planets:

Olliphane, nineteenth planet of the Rigel Concourse.  
Planetary Constants:

Diameter            6700 miles

Mass                0.9

etc.

General Remarks: Olliphane is the most dense of the Rigel planets, and orbits close at the outer edge of the Habitable Zone. It has been speculated that when the proto-planet of the Third Group disintegrated Olliphane received an unduly large share of core materials. In any event, until recent astronomic times, Olliphane was subject to intense plutonic activity, and even today boasts ninety-two active volcanoes.

Olliphane is highly mineralized. An imposing relief provides vast hydro-electric potential, furnishing cheaper energy than is possible from traditional sources. A diligent disciplined population, utilizing these advantages, has made Olliphane the most highly industrialized world of the Concourse, rivaled only by Tantamount, with its shipyards, and Lyonnesse, with its monumental Gnome Iron Works.

Olliphane is relatively cool and wet, with the population concentrated in the Equatorial Zone, notably around the shores of Lake Clare. Here the visitor will find the ten largest cities of the planet, led by Kindune, Sansontiana, and New Ossining.

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Olliphane is likewise nutritionally self-sufficient. Few other than natural foods are consumed, of which per capita consumption is highest in the Concourse, third highest among major worlds of the Oikumene. The alpine valleys surrounding the lake are devoted to dairying and the production of greenstuffs.

The Olphs are a mingled stock, derived primarily from a colony of Hyperborean Skaters. They are typically blond to brown of hair, large-boned, often inclined to corpulence, with fair undyed skins. They are respectful of orthodoxy,

sedate in personal lives, but notoriously enthusiastic during the public fetes and celebrations which serve as emotional release to an otherwise conventional and reserved folk.

A caste system, though without legal status, permeates every phase of the social structure. Prerogatives are carefully denned, jealously observed; the language has expanded and loosened to provide at least a dozen styles of address.

From "A Study of Inter-Class Accommodations," by Frerb Hankbert, in Journal of the Anthropicene, Vol.

Mcxm:

It is a remarkable experience for a visitor to watch a pair of Olphs, strange to each other, appraising each other for caste. The operation requires no more than an instant, and appears almost intuitive, for the persons concerned may well be wearing standard garments.

I have questioned many Olphs in this matter, and can still make no definite assertions. In the first place most Olphs blandly deny the existence of caste structure, and consider their society completely egalitarian. In the second place, the Olphs themselves are not quite sure how they divine the caste of a stranger. He either has more of the quality known as haute than oneself, or less.

I have theorized that rapid unconscious and almost undetectable eye movements are the key to the assessment of haute, with characteristic shifts or steadiness indicative of each caste. Hands and hand morions may play a similar function.

As might be expected, high officials of the bureaucracy

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enjoy the most exalted caste, and especially the Civic Tutelars, as the Olphs name their police.

Gersen landed at the Kmdune spaceport and, with Tcehalt's monitor in a suitcase, boarded a subway for Sansontiana. To the best of his knowledge no one had heeded his arrival, no one had followed him.

But now time was growing short. At any moment Malagate must realize he had been duped and would seek to re-establish contact. For the moment Gersen considered himself safe; nevertheless, he performed a few classic maneuvers to disengage himself from stick-tight\* or tracker. Finding nothing to disconcert him, he deposited the monitor in a public locker, at the subway interchange under the Rapunzel Hotel, retaining only the brass serial plate. Then, boarding an express car, he was delivered in fifteen minutes, to Sansontiana, eighty miles south. He consulted a directory, transferred to a local for the Ferristoun District, and presently was discharged into a station only a few hundred yards from the Feritse

Precision Instrument Company.

Ferristoun was a dismal district of industrial structures, warehouses, an occasional tavern; these latter cheerful little nooks, lavish with ornament, colored glass, carved wood, in emulation of the grand pleasure arcades along the lake shore.

The time was middle morning; rain had darkened the black cobblestone pavement. Six-wheel drays lumbered along the streets, the entire district sounded to a subdued hum of engines. As Gersen walked a short sharp bleat of whistle signaled a change of shift; the sidewalks at once became crowded with workers. They were pale people, blank and humorless of face, wearing warm well-made coveralls in one of three colors: gray, dark blue, or mustard yellow; a

"Stick-tight--these come in at least five varieties, suitable to various applications

The bervo-opticai--a spy cell supported on rotary wings, remotely guided h\ an operator

The automatic--a similar cell [o follow ,1 radioactive or monochromatic lag fixed to, ur smeared upon, a man or vehicle

The Gulp spy master--a semi-intelligent flying creature trained to follow any subject of interest, clever, cooperative, ichahle, hue relatively large and noticeable  
The M.inv spy bird--a smaller, less obnoxious creature, trained to perform similarly, less docile and intelligent, more aggressive  
The Manx sp\ bird modification--similar to the above, equipped with control devices

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contrasting belt, either black or white; black round-topped kaftans. All were standard issue, the government being an elaborate syndicalism, as thoroughgoing, careful and humorless as its constituency. Two further bleats of the whistle sounded; as if by magic the streets cleared, the workers ducking into buildings like cockroaches exposed to the light.

A moment later Gersen came to a stained concrete facade on which large bronze letters read FERITSE, and below, in the hooked Olph script; Precision Instruments. Again it had become necessary to expose himself to his enemies; the prospect was far from comfortable. Well, there was no help for it. A single small door led into the building. Gersen entered, to find himself in a long dim hallway, a concrete tunnel, which after a hundred feet brought him to the administration offices. He went to stand at a counter, and was approached by an elderly woman of pleasant appearance and manner. By local custom, she wore masculine garments while at work; a dark

blue suit with a black belt. Recognizing Gersen as an off-worlder, of unguessable caste, she bowed with unctuous courtesy and asked in a low reverent voice: "How, sir, may we serve you?"

Gersen tendered the brass plate. "I have lost the key to my monitor, and I want a duplicate."

The woman blinked. Her manner underwent an instant, if unconscious, change. She reached hesitantly for the plate, held it between thumb and forefinger as if it were tainted, looked over her shoulder.

"Well?" asked Gersen in a voice made suddenly harsh by tension. "Is there any difficulty?"

"There are new regulations," the woman muttered. "I have had instructions to. . . I must consult Director-Controller Masensen.

Excuse me, sir."

She went almost at a trot to a side door, disappeared. Gersen

waited, the subconscious perceptors in his brain ticking and prickling. He was more nervous than he cared to be; nervousness clouded the Judgment, affected the accuracy of observation. . . . The woman slowly returned to the counter, looking to right and left, evading Gersen's eyes. "Just a moment, sir. If you will wait. . . . There are records to be inspected; isn't this the way always? When a person wishes haste. . . ."

"Where is the serial plate?" asked Gersen.  
"Director-Controller Masensen has taken it into charge."

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"In that case, I'll speak to Director-Controller Masensen at once."

"I will inquire," said the woman.

"Please don't bother," said Gersen. Ignoring her startled squeak of protest, he let himself through a swinging door, passed ahead of her into the inner chamber. A portly thick-faced man in faddish Special Issue blue and dove gray sat at a desk talking into a telephone. He looked at the brass serial plate as he spoke. At the sight of Gersen his eyebrows rose, his mouth sagged in irritation and dismay. Quickly he laid down the telephone. There was an instant while his eyes nicked up and down Gersen's clothes before he shouted, "Who are you, sir? Why do you come into my room?"

Gersen reached across the desk, took possession of the serial plate. "Whom do you telephone in connection with this matter?"

Masensen became fiercely haughty. "None of your concern, whatsoever! Impudence! Here in my office!"

Gersen spoke in a soft even voice. "The Tutelars will be interested in your illegal actions. I am puzzled that you choose to defy the law."

Masensen sat back, in puff-cheeked alarm. The Tutelars, of a caste so elevated that the distinction between Masensen and his office clerk would seem insignificant, were not to be trifled with. They were no respecters of persons; they tended to believe the accusation rather than the protestation of innocence. They wore uniforms of a sumptuous thick pile which showed various sheens according to the light: plum, dark green, gold. Not so much arrogant as intensely serious, they conducted themselves to the full implications of their caste. On Olliphane penal torture was administered as a cheaper, if not more effective, deterrent than fines of imprisonment; the threat of a police accusation could therefore bring consternation to the most innocent.

Director-Controller Masensen cried out, "I have never defied the law! Do I refuse your request? No indeed."

"Then furnish my key immediately, as the law requires."

"Softly then," said Masensen. "We cannot go so fast. There are records to inspect. Don't forget, we have more important affairs than leaping to serve every raggle-taggle vagabond of a locator who marches into our room to insult us."

Gersen stared into the round pale face, which gave back hos-

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tility and defiance. "Very well," said Gersen. "I will go to complain before the Board of Tutelars."

"Now then, be reasonable!" blurted Masensen in heavy affability. "All things do not come at once."

"Where is my key? Do you still plan to defy the law?"

"Naturally, no such thing is possible. I will see to the matter. Come, be patient. Take a chair and compose yourself for just these few minutes."

"I do not care to wait."

"Go, then!" bellowed Masensen. "I have done exactly as the law requires!" His lips were pushing in and out; his face was pink with fury; he hammered the desk with his fists. The clerk, standing horrified in the doorway, emitted a low wail of terror. "Bring the Tutelars!" raged Masensen. "I will accuse you of molestation and threats! I will see you whipped!"

Gersen dared delay no longer. Furiously he turned, departed. He passed through the outer office and out into the concrete tunnel. He paused, turned a quick look behind him. The receptionist, fluttering in excitement, paid him no heed. Grinning like a wolf, Gersen walked up the hall, away from the entrance, and presently came to an arched opening giving upon the production chambers.

Standing to the side, inconspicuous in the shadow of a pilaster, he made a careful appraisal of the rooms, tracing the various production lines. Certain phases were under biomechanical control, others were performed by debtors, moral deviants, vagrants or drunks, leased by the dozen from the city. They sat chained to their benches, guarded by an old warden, and worked with apathetic efficiency. The room supervisor sat on an elevated platform, which could swing on a boom to any area of the room.

Gersen located the process where monitors were constructed, identified the area where locks were installed: an alcove two hundred feet along the wall, beside a cubicle where a clerical worker, perhaps a timekeeper, sat on a high chair.

He made a final survey of the room. No one had showed the slightest interest in him. The supervisor's attention was turned elsewhere. He walked quickly along the wall to the cubicle where the clerk sat: a harassed hollow-cheeked young-old man, with sardonic black eyebrows, a wrinkled sallow skin, a cynical hook of nose and curl of mouth: a man not necessarily a pessimist, but apparently one

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without optimism. Gersen stepped to the back of the cubicle, where there were shadows.

The clerk looked around in astonishment. "Well, sir? W-Tiat do you wish? This is not permitted; you must know that."

Gersen asked, "Would you care to earn a hundred SVU—very quickly?"

The clerk grimaced sadly. "Of course. W'Tio must I kill?"

"My wants are less demanding," said Gersen. He displayed the brass plate. "Get me the key for this instrument, and fifty SVU is yours." He placed five purple notes on the table. "Find out to whom the serial number is registered—fifty SVU more." He counted down the notes.

The clerk looked at the money, then turned a speculative glance over his shoulder, out across the shop. "WTiy not go to the front office? The Director—Controller usually handles such things."

"I have irritated Director—Controller Masensen," said Gersen. "He makes difficulties, and I am in a hurry."

"In other words, Director-Controller Masensen would not approve of my helping you."

"Which is why I offer you the hundred SVU to perform an entirely legal errand for me."

"Is it worth my job?"

"If I leave by the back way, no one need know. And Masensen will never know the difference."

The clerk considered. "Very well," he said. "I can do it. But I'll need another fifty SVU for the keymaker."

Gersen shrugged, brought forth an orange fifty SVU note. "I will appreciate haste."

The clerk laughed. "From my viewpoint, the sooner you are gone the better. I'll have to look through two sets of records. We're not too efficient here. Meanwhile keep to the back, out of sight." He noted the serial number, left the cubicle, disappeared behind a partition.

Time passed. Gersen noticed that the back wall was paneled with painted glass. Bending, he put his eye to a scratch and obtained a blurred view of the room behind the partition.

The clerk stood at an old-fashioned filing case, nipping cards. He found the file, made a set of notes. But now from a side door Masensen lumbered into the room. The clerk closed the file, walked away. Masensen stopped short, fired a question at the clerk, who

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responded with an indifferent word or two. Gersen paid silent tribute to his sang-froid. Masensen glared after him, then wheeled and

went to the files.

With one eye on Masensen's burly back, the clerk bent over the keymaker, whispered in his ear, departed. Masensen looked around suspiciously, but the clerk had left the room.

The machinist dropped a key blank into the machine, consulted a paper, punched a set of buttons to control the notches, twists, conductivities and magnetic nodes of the key.

Masensen rummaged through the files, extracted a card, marched from the room. The clerk at once returned. The machinist tossed him the key; the clerk came back to the cubicle. He handed the key to Gersen, took five purple notes from the table.

"And the registration?" asked Gersen.

"I can't help you. Masensen got to the files ahead of me and

removed the card."

Gersen glumly considered the key. His main purpose had been to learn the registered owner of the monitor. The key of course was better than nothing; the record filament was easier to hide than the monitor itself- But time was short; he dared delay no longer. "Keep the other fifty," he said. The money, after all, had come from Malagate. "Buy your children a present."

The clerk shook his head. "I accept pay only for what I achieve.

I need no gift."

"As you wish." Gersen returned the money to his pocket. "Tell me how to leave inconspicuously."

"You had better go the way you came," said the clerk. "If you try to go out the back way you will be stopped by the patrol." "Thank you," said Gersen. "You are not Olph?" "No. But I've lived here so long I've forgotten anything better." Gersen looked cautiously from the cubicle. The situation was as before. He slipped out, walked quickly along the wall to the arch, slipped through into the concrete tunnel. Passing the door which led into the administration offices, he looked through, saw Masensen pacing back and forth, evidently in a vicious mood. Gersen stepped past, hurried down the hall toward the outside door.

But now this door opened. A man entered, his features dark against the outside light. Gersen continued forward briskly, confidently, as if his business were the most legitimate in the world-

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The man approached; their eyes met. The newcomer stopped:

it was Tristano the Earthman.

"Luck!" declared Tristano in a voice of hushed pleasure. "Luck indeed."

Gersen made no reply. Slowly, carefully, he sought to sidle past, too nervous and tense to feel fear. Tristano took a step, blocked his way. Gersen halted, appraised him. Tristano was shorter than himself by an inch, but thick in the neck and shoulders, flat but rather wide at the hips: an attribute indicating agility and good muscular leverage. His head was small, almost hairless; his features were neat. The ears were surgically cropped, the nose flat, the area around the mouth thick with muscle. His expression was calm, with a serene secret half-smile twisting up the corners of his mouth. He seemed reckless rather than vicious: a man who would fee! neither hate nor pity, a man driven only by the need to fulfill the extremes of his capabilities. A highly dangerous man, thought Gersen. He said quietly, "Stand aside."

Tristano extended his left hand almost affably. "Whatever your name is, be wise. Come with me." Flicking and weaving the extended hand, he leaned forward. Gersen watched Tristano's eyes, ignoring the distracting left hand. With the right hand darted forth he knocked it aside, drove his fist into Tristano's face.

Tristano reeled back, as if in desperate pain, and Gersen pretended to be deceived. He rushed forward, arm cocked back to administer another blow, then halted abruptly as with incredible agility Tristano swung up his leg: a kick intended to cripple or kill. As the foot swung by, Gersen seized toe and heel, twisted hard. Tristano, relaxing instantly, turned in mid-air, pulled himself into a ball, used the momentum of his turn and fall to wrench the foot harmlessly from Gersen's grasp. He caught himself catlike on hands and feet, started to bounce away, but Gersen caught the back of Tristano's head, yanked Tristano's face down against his knee. Cartilage crushed, teeth broke.

Tristano fell back, now startled. For an instant he sat laxly asprawl. Gersen caught Tristano's leg and ankle in a lock, threw over his weight, and felt the bone snap. Tristano sucked in his breath. Snatching for his knife, he left his throat exposed; Gersen hacked backhand at the larynx. Tristano's throat was well-muscled, and he retained consciousness, but fell back, feebly waving his knife.

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Gersen kicked it away, but edged forward carefully, for Tristano might be equipped with one or a dozen secret built-in weapons.

"Leave me be," croaked Tristano. "Leave me be, go your way." He dragged himself to the wall.

Gersen cautiously reached forth, giving Tristano the option to counter. Tristano refused; Gersen made contact with the massive shoulders, gripped. Tristano suffered this. The two stared eye to eye—Tristano made a sudden grab for an armlock, simultaneously bringing up his good leg. Gersen avoided the armlock, seized the leg, prepared to break the other ankle. Behind him there was outcry, a flurry of movement. Director-Controller Masensen, face contorted, came running awkwardly down the hall. Behind him trotted two or three underlings.

"Stop this!" cried Masensen. "What do you do here, in this building?" lie fairly spat in Gersen's face, "You are a devil, a criminal of the worst sort! You insult me, you attack my customer! I will have the Tutelars attend to you!"

"By all means," panted Gersen, suddenly brimming with vindictiveness. "Call the Tutelars."

Masensen raised his eyebrows. "What? You have this insolence too?"

"No insolence is intended," said Gersen. "A good citizen assists the police in apprehending criminals."

"What do you mean?"

"There is a certain name which I need speak only once to the Tutelars. I need only hint that you and this person are in collusion. For proof? This man"— he looked down at the half-smiling, half-dazed Tristano—"do you know him?"

"No. Of course I do not know him."

"But you identified him as a customer."

"So I thought him."

"He is a notorious murderer."

"Waning, my agile friend," croaked Tristano. "No murderer I."

"Lugo Teehalt is not alive to contradict you."

Tristano essayed a grimace of outraged innocence. "W^e spoke, you and I, while the old man died."

"In this case, neither Dasce nor the Sarkoy killed Teehalt. Who came with you to Smade's Planet?"

"We came alone."

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Gersen stared in puzzlement. "I find this hard to believe. Hildemar Dasce told Teehalt that Malagate awaited him outside."

Tristano's response was a faint shrug.

Gersen stood looking down at him. "I respect the Tutelars and their scourges; I dare not kill you. But I can break more bones, and you will walk sideways like a crab. I can spread apart your eyes, and you will look in two different directions the rest of your life."

The lines bracketing Tristano's mouth became deep and melancholy. He slumped heavily back against the wall, uninterested, sodden with pain. He mumbled, "Since when is killing beyond the Pale called murder?"

"Who killed Teehalt?"

"I saw nothing. I stood with you, by the door."

"But the three of you came together to Smade's."

Tristano made no response. Gersen leaned forward, performed

a quick vicious act. Masensen made an inarticulate sound, stumbled away; then, halting as if caught by a wire, he slowly turned to stare. Tristano looked numbly at his dangling hand.-

"Who killed Teehalt?"

Tristano shook his head. "I will say no more. I would rather limp and squint than die of the Sarkoy's cluthe."

"I can infect you with cluthe."

"I will say no more."

Gersen leaned forward, but Masensen uttered a short quavering cry. "This is intolerable! I will not allow it! Must you give me nightmares? I do not sleep well."

Gersen examined him without friendliness. "You would do well not to interfere."

"I will call in the Tutelars. Your acts are grossly illegal; you have broken laws of the state."

Gersen laughed. "Call the Tutelars. We will learn who has broken laws and who will be punished."

Masensen rubbed his pallid cheeks. "Go then. Never return, and I will say no more."

"Not so fast," said Gersen, in high good spirits. "You are in serious difficulties. I came here on a legal errand; you telephone for a murderer, who attacks me. This conduct no one should ignore."

Masensen licked his lips. "You are making false charges; I will add this to my particulars." It was a poor effort. Gersen laughed. He went to Tristano, turned him over on his face, pulled the jacket

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down the broad back to constrict the arms, tied it in place with Tristano's sash. With his broken bones Tristano was now immobilized.

Gersen stepped down the hall, motioned to Masensen. "Let us go to your office."

Gersen led the way, with Masensen stumping reluctantly behind; once within the inner office, Masensen sank on nerveless legs into his chair.

"Now then," said Gersen, "call the Tutelars."

Masensen shook his head. "It-it is better to make no difficul-

ties. The Tutelars are sometimes unreasonable."

"In that case you must tell me what I want to know."

Masensen bowed his head. "Ask."

"Who did you telephone when I appeared?"

Masensen showed extreme agitation. "I cannot tell you," he said huskily. "Do you insist that I be killed?"

"The Tutelars will ask the same question, as well as many others."

Masensen looked in anguish to right, left, up at the ceiling. "A man," he said, "at the Grand Pomador Hotel. His name—Spock."

"I know better," said Gersen. "You are lying. I give you one more chance. Who did you call?"

Masensen shook his head desperately. "I do not lie."

"Have you seen the man?"

"Yes. He is tall. He has short pink hair, a long big head and no neck. His face is a peculiar red color, and he wears dark spectacles, and a nose guard—very unusual. He has no more feeling

than a fish."

Gersen nodded. Masensen was telling the truth. This would be Hildemar Dasce. He turned. "Now then, this is most important. I wish to know to whom the monitor is registered."

Masensen started to shake his head, then gave a fatalistic shrug and rose to his feet. "I will go for the record."

"No," said Gersen. "We will go together. And if we cannot find the record, I swear to you I will lodge the strongest possible charges."

Masensen rubbed his forehead wearily. "I remember now. The record is here." He brought forth a card from his desk. "Sea Province University, Avente, Alphanor. Beneficial Grant 291."

"No name?"

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"No. And there is no value to you in the key. The university uses a coder in each of its monitors. We have sold them several."

"Indeed." The use of a coder, to thwart the double-dealing of an unscrupulous locator, was common enough.

Masensen's voice became heavily ironic. "The university has evidently sold you a coded monitor without the descrambling strip. If I were you I would complain to the Avente authorities."

Gersen considered the implications of the information. They were far-reaching indeed, if one certain condition were met.

"Why did you telephone the man Spock? Did he offer you money?"

Masensen nodded miserably. "Money. And—he made threats. An indiscretion in my past—" he made a vague gesture.

"Tell me, did Spock realize that the monitor was coded?"

"Certainly. I mentioned this to him, but he was already aware of it."

Gersen nodded. The condition had been met. Attel Malagate must necessarily have access to the descrambling strip at the Sea Province University.

He reflected for a moment. Information was accumulating. Malagate himself had killed Teehalt, if Hildemar Dasce were to be believed. Tristano indirectly had verified this; he had conveyed more information than he meant to. He had also confused the situation. If Dasce, the Sarkoy poisoner, and Tristano had come together, with no fourth person, how was the presence of Malagate to be explained? Had he arrived simultaneously in another ship? Possible, but unlikely. . . .

Masensen was staring at him anxiously, miserably.

"I'm going now," said Gersen. "Do you plan to tell this Spock that I was here?"

Masensen nodded, all his bluster departed. "I must."

"But you will wait one hour."

Masensen made no protest. He might or might not respect Gersen's wishes—most likely not. But there was no help for this. Gersen turned, departed the office, leaving Masensen utterly deflated.

Walking down the hall Gersen overtook Tristano, who somehow had managed to squirm and writhe himself erect. Now he hopped down the hall, one foot dragging at a queer angle. He looked over his shoulder at Gersen, still wearing the quiet half

smile, though the muscles around his mouth were tight. Gersen stopped to consider the man. It would be wise and desirable to kill

him, except for the possibility of police interference. So, contenting himself with a polite nod, and stepping past Tristano, he went his way.

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Preface to Men of the Oikumene,  
by Jan Holberk Vaenz LXII:

There is a stifling quality to this age which has been observed, remarked on and lamented by a number of the contemporary anthropologists: an oddity, for never before have such variegated opportunities and possible channels of life existed. It is profitable to consider this situation, for it will recur many times in the pages to follow.

The most important fact of human life is the infinity of space: the bounds which can never be reached, the worlds without number still unseen—in short, the Beyond. It is my belief that the awareness of these awesome possibilities has somehow clotted at the core of human consciousness, and has diminished or dampened human enterprise,

An instant qualification is necessary. Men of enterprise indeed exist, though sadly enough most of them work Beyond, and their enterprise is not entirely constructive. (The statement is not completely ironical: many of the most noxious forms of life exert some sort of useful side effect.)

But, in general, ambition is turned inward, rather than out toward the obvious goals. Why? Does infinity, as an object of experience instead of a mathematical abstraction, daunt the human mind? Are we complacent and secure, knowing that the riches of the galaxy are always there for the taking? Is contemporary life already sated by too rich a diet or novelty? Is it conceivable that the Institute wields more control over the human psyche than we suspect? Or

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is there current a feeling of frustration and staleness, the conviction that all glory—has been won, that all the meaningful goals have been achieved?

Undoubtedly there is no single answer. But several points are noteworthy. First (to be mentioned without comment) is the peculiar situation where the most influential and effective systems of the day are the private, or at best semipublic, associations: the IPCC, the Institute, the Jarnell Corporation.

Second is the decline of the general level of education. The extremes are certainly farther apart; the savants of the Institute on the one hand, and, say, the serfs of a Tertullian estate on the other. If we consider the condition of men

beyond the Pale, the polarity is even more pronounced. There are obvious sources to the decline. Pioneers settling in strange and often hostile environments have sheer survival for their first concern. Possibly even more daunting is the unmanageable mass of accumulated knowledge. The trend toward specialization began with modern times, but after the breakout into space, and the consequent new amplitude of information, specialization has become even more narrowly focused.

It is perhaps pertinent to consider the manner of man who has become the new specialist. He lives in a materialistic age, where comparatively small interest is given to absolutes. He is a man of charm, wit, sophistication, but no profundity. His ideals are not abstract. His field of endeavor, if he is a scholar, may be mathematics or one of the physical sciences; but it is a hundred times more likely to be a phase of what loosely are called humanistic studies:

history, sociology, comparatives, symbology, esthetics, anthropology, the varieties of experience, penology, education, communication, administration and coercion, not to mention the morass of psychology already trampled by generations of incompetents, and the still unexplored wilderness of psionics.

There are also those who, like the author, ensconce

themselves on a thunderous crag of omniscience, and with protestations of humility which are either unconvincing or totally absent, assume the obligation of appraisal, commen-

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dation, derogation or denunciation of their contemporaries. Still, by and large it is an easier job than digging a ditch.

From Ten Explorers: A Study of a Type,  
by Oscar Anderson:

Every world has its distinctive psychic aroma: this is a matter attested to by each of the ten explorers. Isack Canaday is willing to wager that if he were blindfolded and taken to any planet of the Oikumene or the immediate Beyond, he would correctly identify this planet immediately upon removal of the blindfold. How does he perform such a feat? At first glance it seems incomprehensible. Canaday himself professes not to know the source of his knowledge. "I Just raise my nose, I look around the sky, I take a couple jumps—and it comes to me."

Canaday's explanation is of course arch and consciously quaint. Our senses are undoubtedly much more acute than we suspect. The composition of the air, the color of the light and the sky, the curvature and proximity of the horizon, the tension of gravity: these are presumably interpreted

in our brains to produce an individuality, exactly as the sight of eyes, a nose, hair, a mouth, ears, creates the look of a face.

All of this without mention of flora and fauna, the artifices of autochthone or man, the possibly distinctive look of sun or suns. . . .

From Life, Volume III,  
by Unspiek, Baron Bodissey:

As a society matures, the struggle for survival imperceptibly graduates and changes emphasis, and becomes what can only be termed the quest for pleasure. This is a large statement, possibly of no startling novelty. Nevertheless, as a generality, it affords a rich resonance of implications. The author suggests as a lively topic for a dissertation a survey of various environment-survival situations and the special types of pleasure goals deriving therefrom. It seems probable, from a moment's reflection, that every particular

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scarcity or compulsion or danger generates a corresponding psychic tension demanding a particular gratification.

Gersen returned to the subway terminal at Sansontiana. He reconnected the monitor, immediately made a trial of the key. To his gratification the lock moved smoothly, the case slid open.

There was neither explosive nor acid present. He extracted the little cylinder containing the filament, weighed it in his hand. Then he stepped into a post-office booth and mailed the cylinder to himself at the Hotel Credenza, Avente, Alphanor. He rode the subway back to Kindune and the spaceport, and with no untoward incident took his ship aloft.

The blue crescent of Alphanor presently bulged across the sky, with Rigel dazzling beyond. When the seven continents began to emerge from the dark, Gersen engaged his autopilot into the Avente landing program, and so was guided down to the spaceport. The crane lifted the boat, earned it to a storage bay; Gersen emerged, made a cautious reconnaissance. Finding no evidence of his enemies, he proceeded down the ranks of stored spacecraft to the terminal building. Here he breakfasted and considered his plans. They were, he decided, completely straightforward, deriving from a progression of logical steps in which he could see no flaw:

a. Lugo Teehalt's monitor was registered to the Sea Province University.

b. The information on the monitor filament was coded, accessible only upon application of the decoding, or descrambling,

strip

c. The decoding strip was in possession of the Sea Province

University at Avente.

d.

1. According to Lugo Teehalt, Attel Malagate had been his original sponsor (a fact he had apparently understood for the first time at Brmktown. Indiscretions by Hildemar Dasce^ Everything considered, Malagate probably still regarded his incognito secure).

2 Malagate vigorously sought possession of the monitor and its filament, and hence must have access to the decoding strip.

e. Gersen's course of action would therefore be-

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1. Identify the persons who had access to the decoding strip.

2. Learn which of these fulfilled a set of conditions consistent with the identity and activities of Malagate. Which, for example, had been gone long enough for a visit to Smade's Planet^

A straightforward and logical line of attack indeed. But, Gersen reflected, the implementation of his logic might not be quite so easy. He dare not arouse Malagate's apprehensions. To a certain extent, possession of Teehalt's filament provided security; however, if Malagate felt a personal threat, he would find little difficulty, and no qualms, in arranging an assassination. To this moment, Malagate had no reason to fear exposure, and it would be foolhardy to convince him otherwise. The initiative, for the present, was Gersen's;

there was no occasion for breakneck haste. . . . His attention became distracted. In a booth nearby sat a pair of pretty girls who evidently had come to the terminal to welcome a friend, or to see one off- Gersen contemplated them wistfully, aware, not for the first time, of an empty area in his life, and feeling a dissatisfaction not unlike the indefinable emotion he had known at Smade's Planet. Frivolity . . . the two girls evidently had very little else on their minds. One had dyed her hair forest green and toned her skin a delicate lettuce green. The other wore a wig of lavender metal shavings with dead-white skin toning; an elaborate cloche of silver leaves and tendrils clung to her forehead, clasped her cheeks.

Gersen drew a deep breath. Undoubtedly he had lived a grim, cheerless existence. Thinking back across the years, scenes came crowding into his mind, all of which were variations on a single theme: other children occupied with irresponsible pleasure, while he, a rather thin boy with a grave face, watched from a distance. He had felt only interest and wonder at the easy gaiety--so he recalled--never relating the scenes to himself. His grandfather had

seen to that. . . .

One of the girls at the nearby booth had noticed his attention;

she whispered to her friend. Both glanced across the aisle, then ostentatiously ignored him. Gersen smiled ruefully. He felt no confidence in his dealings with women; he had known few intimately. He frowned, turned the two a wary side glance. Not impossibly, Malagate had sent these girls to beguile him. Ridiculous. Why two; i

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They rose and departed the restaurant, each turning on him one swift covert glance.

Gersen watched their retreat, resisting the sudden urge to run after them, to introduce himself, to make them his friends. . . . Ridiculous again, doubly ridiculous. What would he say? He pictured the two pretty faces at first puzzled, then embarrassed, while he stood making lame efforts to ingratiate himself. The girls were gone. Just as well, thought Gersen, half amused, half angry with himself. Still, why deceive himself? Living the life of half a man was difficult, a source of dissatisfaction. The circumstances of his life had given him small command of the social graces.

Still, what of that? He knew his mission in life, and he was superbly prepared to fulfill this mission. He had no doubts, no uncertainties; his goals were exactly defined. A sudden idea disturbed the flow of his self-reassurances: Where would he be without this clear purpose? If he were less artificially motivated, he might not show so well in comparison with the easy men around him, with their pleasant manners and fluent talk. . . . Turning the thought over, back and forth, Gersen began to feel spiritually deficient. No phase of his life had occurred by his own free choice. He felt no slightest tremor in his dedication: this was not the point at issue. But, he thought, a man's goals should not be imposed upon him until he knew enough of the world to make his own survey, to weigh his own decisions. He had not been given this option. The decision had been made, he had accepted it. . . . After all, what matter? More to the point, what would he do when and if he succeeded in his aims? The chances were small, of course. But—assuming the death of five men—what then would he do with his life? Once or twice before he had reached this point in his reflections; warned by some subconscious signal, he had never gone beyond it. Nor did he do so now. His breakfast was finished; the girls, who had prompted him to his brooding, had taken themselves off. Evidently they were not agents of Malagate the Woe.

Gersen sat a few minutes longer considering the best approach to his problem, and again decided upon simple directness.

He went to a communication booth and was connected to the Information Bureau at the Sea Province University in the suburb of Remo, ten miles south.

The telescreen flickered first with the university seal, then a conventional reception presentation, printed with the words, Please

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speak clearly. Simultaneously a recorded voice asked, "How may we serve you?"

Gersen spoke to the still unseen receptionist. "I want information regarding the university's exploration program. Which department is directly concerned?"

The screen clarified through a decorative cross-hatching to show the gold-toned face of a young woman with blonde hair in flamboyant puffs at each ear. "That depends on the type of exploration."

"It would be connected with Beneficial Grant 291."

"Just a moment, sir, and I'll inquire." The scene retreated behind the cross-hatching.

Presently the girl's face reappeared. "I'll connect you with the Department of Galactic Morphology, sir."

Gersen looked into another pale receptionist face. This young woman had arch piquant features toned nacreous silver, and wore her hair in a dark nimbus of ten thousand tiny varnished spikes. "Galactic Morph."

"I want to inquire about Beneficial Grant 291," said Gersen.

The girl considered for a moment. "You mean the grant itself, sir?"

"The grant, how it operates, who administers it." The arch young face pursed its mouth dubiously. "There's not

much I can tell you, sir. It's the fund which finances our exploration program."

"I'm particularly interested in a locater named Lugo Teehalt, who worked under the grant."

She shook her head. "I wouldn't know anything about him. Mr. Detteras could tell you, but he's not available for appointments today."

"Mr. Detteras hires the locators?"

The girl twisted her eyebrows, squinted; she had a mobile expression, a wide mouth with a merry upward twitch at the corners. Gersen watched her in fascination. "I don't know too much about things like that, sir. We have our part in the Master Exploration

Program, of course. That's not under Grant 291, though. Mr. Det-  
teras is Director of Exploration; he could tell you whatever you  
wanted to know."

"Is there anyone else in the department who might sponsor a  
locator on Grant 291 ?"

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The girl looked speculatively sidewise at Gersen, wondering as  
to the nature of his interest. "Are you a police official?" she asked  
timidly.

Gersen laughed. "No, I'm a friend of Mr. Teehalt's, trying to  
finish up some business for him."

"Oh. Well, there's Mr. Kelle who is Chairman of the Research  
Planning Committee. And Mr. Warweave, the Honorary Provost,  
who made the donation for Grant 291. Mr. Kelle is gone for the  
morning; his daughter is marrying tomorrow and he's very busy."

"What about Mr. Warweave? Can I see him?"

"Well—" the girl pursed her lips, bent her head over an ap-  
pointment panel. "He's busy until three, and then he keeps an open  
hour, for students or persons without appointments."

"That would suit me very well."

"If you'd care to leave your name," said the girl demurely, "I'll  
put it at the head of the list. Then you won't have to wait, in case  
there are lots of others."

Gersen was startled by her solicitude. He searched her face,  
and was further surprised to find her smiling at him. "That's very  
kind of you. My name is Kirth Gersen."

He watched her write. She seemed in no hurry to terminate  
the conversation. He asked, "What does an Honorary Provost do?

What are his duties?"

She shrugged— "I don't know, really. He comes and goes. I think  
he does just what he wants. Anyone who is rich does just what he  
wants. Wait till I'm rich."

"One more thing," Gersen said. "Are you familiar with the  
routine of the department?"

"Why yes, I should say so." The girl laughed. "In so far as

there is a routine."

"The recording filament of the monitor in a locator boat is coded. You're aware of this?"

"So I have been told." The girl was definitely speaking to Gerssen as an individual, rather than a face on a screen. Gerssen thought her deliciously pretty, in spite of her rather extravagant hair style. Definitely he had been in space too long. He kept his voice even with an effort. "WTio unscrambles the filaments? WT-io is in charge of the code?"

Again the girl was doubtful. "Mr. Detteras for one. Perhaps Mr. Kelle."

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"Can you find out definitely?"

The girl hesitated, examining Gerssen's face. It was always wise to refuse to answer questions whose motives she could not fathom;

still—where could be the harm? The man who inquired seemed interesting: wistful and sad, so she thought, and a trifle mysterious;

and definitely not unattractive, in a hardbitten fashion. "I can ask Mr. Detteras' secretary," she said brightly. "Will you wait?"

The screen dimmed, and a minute or two later brightened again. The girl smiled back at Gerssen, "I was right. Mr. Detteras, Mr. Kelle, and Mr. Warweave—these are the only people who have access to the decoding strip."

"I see. Mr. Detteras is Director of Exploration, Mr. Kelle is Chairman of the Research Planning Committee, and Mr. Warweave is—what?"

"Honorary Provost. They gave him the title when he endowed the department with Grant 291. He's a very wealthy man, and very interested in space exploration. He frequently goes Beyond. . . . Have you ever been Beyond?"

"I've just returned."

She leaned forward, her face alive with interest. "Is it really as wild and dangerous as everyone says?"

Gerssen threw caution to the winds, with a bravado that startled even himself. "Come out with me and see for yourself."

The girl did not appear unduly perturbed. But she shook her

head. "I'd be alarmed. I've been taught never to trust strange men from the Beyond. You might be a slaver and sell me."

"Such things have happened," said Gersen dampened. "You're probably safer where you are."

"Still," she said coquettishly, "who wants to be safe?"

Gersen hesitated, started to speak, stopped short. The girl watched him with an expression of bland innocence. Well, why not? he asked himself. His grandfather had been old and parched. . . .

"In that case—if you're willing to risk it—perhaps you'd spend the evening with me."

"For what purpose?" The girl was suddenly demure. "Slavery?"

"No. Just—the usual. Whatever you'd like to do."

"This is very abrupt. After all, I haven't even seen you face to face."

"Yes, you're right," said Gersen once more abashed. "I'm not very gallant."

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"And still, what could be the harm? I'm impulsive myself, or so I've been told."

"I suppose it depends on circumstances."

"You're just in from Beyond," the girl said magnanimously. "So I guess you can be excused."

"Then you'll do it?"

She pretended to consider. "Very well. I'll take a chance. Where will I meet you?"

"I'll be out at three o'clock to see Mr. Warweave; we can make arrangements then."

"I'm off duty at four. . . . You're sure you're not a slaver?"

"I'm not even a pirate."

"Rather an unenterprising sort, I'd say. . . . But I'm just as pleased, until I know you a little better."

A wide sandy beach extended a hundred miles south of Avente, around the entire concavity of Ard Hook. As far as Remo, and a few miles beyond, villas built of glaring white coquina lined the crest of the sandy bluffs which overlooked the ocean.

Gersen hired a car, a small surface slider, and skidded south over the broad white turnpike,, the inevitable dust puffing up behind him. For a space the road followed the shore. Sand dazzled under the brilliant Rigel light; blue water under a collar of white foam sparkled and rolled calmly7 up and down the sand, creating a sound invariable on every wwld in every galaxy where surf meets shore. The road presently climbed the bluffs; to the left spread sand dunes overgrown with black and purple iron bush, punctuated by tall white balloon flower, the inflated pod floating at the end of a long stem. Other white villas looked forth from groves of cool green deodars, native feathertree, hybrid palm.

Ahead the ground rose, and the sandy bluffs became a range of low hills, presenting a steep face to the ocean. Remo occupied the flat land at the foot of one of these hills. A pair of piers terminating in high-domed casinos reached forth to create a harbor filled with small boats. The university occupied the crest of the hill: a series of low, flat-rooted structures connected by arcades.

Gersen -arrived at the campus parking area, lowered the slide car, alighted. A slideway took him through a commemorative arch into a wide mall, where he inquired directions from a student.

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"The College of Galactic Morphology? Into the next quad, sir; the building at the far corner."

Ruefully pondering the respectful "sir" from a man no more than seven years his junior, Gersen walked to the end of the mall, threading a many-voiced, many-costumed multitude of students. He crossed the quadrangle, approached the building at the far corner. At the portal he paused, aware of an emotion strangely like diffidence, or shyness, which had gradually been asserting itself during the entire trip out to the university. He jeered at himself. Was he a schoolboy, that the prospect of an evening with a strange girl should give him tremors? And more remarkable, the emotion seemed to take precedence over the basic goal ot his existence! He shrugged, irritated and amused together, then entered the foyer.

At a desk a girl looked up, with an uncertainty Gersen identified as equivalent to his own. She was smaller and more slender than he had thought her to be, but by no means less appealing. "Mr. Gersen?"

Gersen put on what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "It occurs to me that I don't know your name."

She relaxed a trifle. "Pallis Atwrode."

"That takes care of the formalities," said Gersen. "I hope that our arrangement is still working?"

She nodded. "Unless you've changed your mind."

"No."

"I act far bolder than I actually am," said Pallis Atwrode. She gave an embarrassed laugh. "I've simply decided to ignore my upbringing. My mother is a blue-stockings. Perhaps it's time I began to overcompensate."

"You begin to alarm me," said Gersen. "I'm not very bold either, and if I have to cope with overcompensation—"

"Not really formidable overcompensation. I won't become intoxicated, or pick a fight, or—" She stopped.

"Or?"

"Oh—just -or.' "

Gersen looked at his watch. "I'd better see Mr. Warweave."

"His offices are down that corridor. And Mr. Gersen—"

Gersen looked down into the upturned face. "Yes?"

"Today I told you something which it seems I shouldn't have. About the code. It's supposed to be secret. Would you please not mention it to Mr. Warweave? I'd get in trouble."

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"I'll say nothing about it "

"Thank you."

He turned, went off down the corridor she had indicated. The floor was resilient black and gray tesserae, the walls and ceiling were plastered white, devoid of decoration or relief except for the various doors and identifiers—these in various muted tones of maroon, mauve, dark green, indigo

Three doors along the corridor Gersen came upon a free-floating identifier of luminous blue letters, which read. GYLE WARWEAVE, and below PROVOST

He paused, struck by the incongruity of Malagata the Woe in such surroundings. Was there a break in his chain of reasoning? The monitor was coded, registered to the university. Hildemar Dasce, Malagata's lieutenant, had sought possession of the filament, which was useless without the decoder. Gyle Warweave, Detteras and Kelle were the three men who had access to the decoder, one of the three must be Malagata. So then which, Warweave, Detteras or Kelle? Conjecture without facts was useless, he must deal with events as they occurred. He stepped forward, the door slipped aside, quick as a camera shutter, the identifier broke into individual letters which scattered like frightened fish, to regroup after he had

passed

In the outer office a tall thin middle-aged woman with keen unsympathetic gray eyes stood listening to an obviously unhappy young man, shaking her head slowly, continually, as he spoke

"I'm sorry," she said finally, in a clear brittle voice, "these arrangements are all made on a formal basis of student achievement. I can't allow you to bother the provost with your complaints "

"What is he there for, then?" shouted the young man. "He had open office hours, why can't he listen to my side of the story?"

The woman shook her head "I'm sorry." She turned away

"Are you Mr Gersen?" she asked

Gersen came forward.

"Mr Warweave is expecting you, please go through that door "

Gersen went as directed Gyle Warweave, sitting at a desk, rose to his feet as Gersen entered a tall handsome man, strong and fit looking, of an age not immediately obvious—perhaps ten or fifteen years older than Gersen His hair was a cushion of black curls shaped close to his skull, his skin dyed a conservative pale amber His face was emphatically marked, the eyes narrow, deep-set, black

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and brooding, the nose and chin harsh He saluted Gersen with a measured courtesy "Mr Gersen, sit down, if you will I'm glad to make your acquaintance."

"Thank you " Gersen looked about him. The room was larger than the usual office, the desk occupying an unconventional position by the left of the door, with the greater part of room beyond Tall windows at the right overlooked the quadrangle, the opposite wall was papered with hundreds of maps Mercator projections of many worlds The center of the room was empty, giving it the semblance of a conference chamber from which the table had been removed. At the far end, on a pedestal of polished wood, stood a construction of stone and metal spires, the provenance of which Gersen was ignorant He seated himself, returned his attention to the man behind the desk

Gyle Warweave hardly conformed to Gersen's picture of the typical university administrator This of course would well be true, thought Gersen, if Warweave were Malagata Contradicting the evidence of his conservative skin dye, Warweave wore a rich bright-blue suit with a white sash, white leather greaves, pale blue sandals garments which might be affected by a young buck of the Sailmaker Beach district, north of Avente. Gersen groped at an elusive familiarity, a tantalizing wisp of recollection, which fled completely from view.

Warweave inspected Gersen with a similar frank curiosity, in which there was a trace of condescension Gersen definitely was no

dandy He wore the neutral garments of a person either uninterested in current modes or unaware of them His skin was undyed (walking along the streets of Avente, Gersen had felt almost undressed), his thick dark hair was cropped into an undistinguished ruff

Warweave waited with attentive politeness Gersen said, "I'm here, Mr. Warweave, in connection with a rather complex matter My motives are beside the point, so I'll ask you to listen without troubling about them "

Warweave nodded "Rather difficult, but I'll try "  
"First of all, are you acquainted with Mr Lugo Teehalt?"  
"No, I am not " The answer was immediate and decisive  
"May I ask who has the responsibility for the university's space exploration program?"

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Warweave considered. "Do you refer to major expeditions, shotgun surveys, or what in particular?"

"Whatever program makes use of locators in leased boats."  
"Hm," said Warweave. He turned a quizzical look toward

Gersen. "By any chance, are you a locator in search of a post? If so-

Gersen smiled politely. "No, I'm not after a job."

Warweave smiled in his turn, a quick humorless grimace. "No, of course not. I'm inept in my judgments. For instance, your voice tells me very little. You're not a native of the Concourse. If you were of a different physiognomy I'd place you from Mizar's Third."

"During most of my youth I lived on Earth."

"Indeed?" Warweave raised his eyebrows in manufactured astonishment. "Out here, you know, we think of Earthmen in terms of stereotypes: cultists, mystics, hypercivilized eptcenes, sinister old men in Institute black, decadent aristocrats.. .."

"I claim no particular niche," said Gersen. "Incidentally, you puzzle me no less than I puzzle you."

Warweave put on an expression of rueful whimsey. "Very well, Mr. Gersen. You were asking about our policy in connection with locators. First of all, we cooperate with a number of other institutions in the Master Space Exploration Program. Secondly, there is a small fund which may be drawn upon to expedite some special project."

"That is Beneficial Grant 291?"

Warweave inclined his head in curt assent.

"Very odd," said Gersen.

"Odd? How so?"

"Lugo Teehalt was a locator. The monitor in his boat was chartered to Sea Province University, under Grant 291."

Warweave pursed his lips. "It's quite possible that Mr. Teehalt might be working for one of the department heads on some special project."

"The monitor was coded. That should narrow the possibilities."

Warweave pierced Gersen with a hard glance of black eyes. "If I knew what you wanted to learn, I could answer more to the point."

There was nothing to lose by telling at least part of the truth, thought Gersen. If Gyle Warweave were Malagate, he would know

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what had happened. If he were not, no harm could be done. "The name Attel Malagate is familiar to you?"

"Malagate the Woe? One of the so-called Demon Princes."

"Lugo Teehalt located a world of apparently idyllic conditions—a world literally beyond value, more Earthlike than Earth. Malagate learned of the discovery, how I don't know. In any event, at least four of Malagate's men hunted Teehalt to Smade's Tavern.

"Teehalt arrived )ust after I did. He landed in a hidden valley and walked to the tavern. During the evening Malagate's men arrived. Teehalt tried to escape, but they caught him in the dark, killed him. Then they took off in my ship, apparently assuming that it was Teehalt's. Both were the same, old Model 9B." Gersen laughed. "When they checked my monitor they had a sorry surprise.

"The next day I left in Teehalt's boat. Naturally I took possession of his monitor. I plan to sell the filament for as much as the market will bear."

Warweave nodded briskly, moved a sheet of paper on his desk an inch to the right. Gersen watched him, studying the immaculate hands, the glossy fingernails. Looking up, he caught the stare of Warweave's gaze, less affable than his tone of voice. "And from whom do you propose to collect?"

Gersen shrugged. "I'll give Teehalt's sponsor the first opportunity. As I mentioned, the filament is coded, and is valueless without the decoding strip."

Warweave leaned back in his chair. "Offhand I don't know who might have contracted with this man Teehalt. Whoever it is naturally would not buy a pig in a poke."

"Naturally not." Gersen placed a photograph on the desk. Warweave glanced at it, dropped it into a projection slot—A screen on the far wall burst into color. Teehalt had taken the picture from a rise of ground to one side of a valley. On either hand hills rolled back, over, away and beyond—the rounded tips could be seen receding into the distance. Groves of tall dark trees stood to the side of the valley; a river wandered through the meadows, the banks lined with rushes. At the far side of the meadow, almost in the shade of the forest, stood what appeared to be a bank of flowering shrubs. The sun could not be seen, but the sunlight was golden-white, warm, languid, and the time was evidently noon.

Warweave studied the picture at length, then made a gruff non-

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committal sound. Gersen provided another photograph; the screen shifted to display the view down the valley: the river meandering and twisting, finally disappearing into the far distance. Trees standing tall at either side formed a sort of aisle, diminishing until all faded into haze.

Warweave heaved a sigh. "Beyond question a beautiful world. A hospitable world. What of atmosphere and biogens?"

"Completely compatible, according to Teehalt."

"If it is as you say—undiscovered, uninhabited—an independent locater could name his own price. Still, not being born yesterday, I wonder, could not this photograph have been made elsewhere? Even on Earth, where the vegetation is similar to this?"

For answer, Gersen brought forth a third photograph. Warweave dropped it into the slot. The screen depicted, as if from a distance of twenty feet, one of the objects which in the first photograph had appeared as a flowering shrub. It was revealed as a perambulatory being, semihumanoid, graceful. Slender gray legs supported a gray, silver, blue, green torso; purple-green eyes looked forth from a perfect ovoid head, which was otherwise featureless. From the shoulders, armlike members reached three feet into the air, branching and webbing, to support the peacock's tail fan of fronds.

"The creature, whatever it is—"

"Teehalt called it a dryad."

"—certainly it is unique. I've never seen its like before. If the picture is not faked—and I do not believe that it is—then the planet is what you claim it to be."

"I claim nothing. Teehalt made the claims. It is a world—so he told me—so beautiful that he could neither bear to stay nor bear to leave."

"And you have Teehalt's filament in your possession."  
"Yes. I want to sell it. The market is presumably limited to those persons who have access to the decoding strip. Of these, the man who sponsored Lugo Teehalt's operation should have the first option."

Warweave gave Gersen a long steady inspection. "A quixotic attitude, which puzzles me. You do not seem a quixotic man."  
"Why not Judge from deeds rather than impressions?"  
Warweave merely raised his eyebrows in something like disdain. Then he said, "Conceivably I could make you an offer for the

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filament: say two thousand SVU now, another ten thousand after inspection of the world. Possibly a trifle more."

"Naturally I will take the best price I can get," said Gersen.  
"But I would like to interview Mr. Kelle and Mr. Detteras first. One of them must be Teehalt's sponsor. If neither is interested in the filament, then—"

Warweave interrupted sharply. "Why do you specify these two men?"

"Other than yourself, they are the only persons who have access to the decoding strips."

"May I ask how you are aware of this?"

Remembering Pallis Atwrode's request, Gersen felt a pang of guilt. "I asked a young man in the quadrangle. Apparently it's common knowledge."

"Altogether too much loose talk," said Warweave, his mouth in a hard angry line.

Gersen wanted to inquire how Warweave had spent the previous month, but the occasion was clearly inopportune. It could not be a wise question, if posed directly: if Warweave were Malagate, his suspicion would instantly be reinforced.

Warweave now tapped fingers on his desk, rose to his feet. "If you will give me half an hour I will ask Mr. Detteras and Mr. Kelle to step into my office, and you can make your inquiry. Will that be satisfactory?"

"No."

"No?" barked Warweave. "Why not?"

Gersen also rose to his feet. "Since the matter does not concern you, I would prefer to interview Mr. Kelle and Mr. Detteras alone, on my own terms."

"This is at your option," said Warweave coldly. He considered a moment. "What you are after, I can't guess. I put little faith in your candor. But I will make a bargain with you."

Gersen waited.

"Kelle and Detteras are busy men," said Warweave. "They are not as accessible as I am. I will arrange that you see them at once—today, if you like. Possibly one or the other will admit to an arrangement with Lugo Teehalt. In any case, after your interview with Kelle and Detteras, you will report to me what offers, if any, they have made, and so give me the opportunity of meeting or exceeding the offer."

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"In other words," said Gersen, "you'd keep this world for your private use?"

"Why not? The filament is no longer the property of the university. You have taken possession of it. And, if the truth be known, my money has gone to endow Grant 291."

"That's reasonable enough."

"You agree to my bargain, then?"

"Yes. So long as you understand that the first refusal goes to Teehalt's sponsor."

Warweave's eyelids drooped, he inspected Gersen with a rather cynical twist of the lips. "I wonder why you insist on this."

"Perhaps I am a quixotic man after all, Mr. Warweave."

Warweave swung about, spoke into the desk screen, listened, turned back to Gersen. "Very well. Mr. Kelle will see you first, then Mr. Detteras. After that you will report back to me."

"I agree."

"Good. You will find Kelle's office at the opposite end of the building."

Gersen went out into the corridor past Warweave's glint-eyed secretary, returned to the foyer. Pallis Atwrode looked up with an eager expectancy. Gersen found very appealing. "Did you learn what

you wanted to5"

"No. He's sending me to see Kelle and Detteras."

"Today5"

"Right now."

She looked at him with new interest "You'd be surprised at the people both Mr Kelle and Mr Detteras have refused to see today."

Gersen grinned. "I don't know how long I'll be .. If you're off duty at four--"

"I'll wait," said Palhs Atwrode, and then she laughed "I mean, you won't be very much longer than four, and I'd have to walk home, and explain where I live—it's )ust easier waiting "

"I'll be as fast as I can," said Gersen.

Deeming the unsubstantiated dogma of a locali/ed religious cult to be an undignified and unsuitable base on which to erect the chronology of galactic man, the members of this convention hereby declare that time shall now be reckoned from the year 2000 A D (Old System), which becomes the year 0 The revolution ofFarth about Sol remains the standard annual unit

Declaration at the Oikumemcal Convention for the Standardization of Units and Meters

"Everything of which we are conscious has for us a deeper meaning still, a final meaning And the one and only means ot rendering this incomprehensible comprehensible must be a kind of metaphysics which regards everything whatsoever as having significance as a symbol."

Oswald Speng-ler

"Who are our basic enemies^ This is a secret, unknown even to those basic enemies "

Xaviar Skolcamp, Over-Centennul Fellow ot the Institute, indulgently, in response to a )ournahst's too-searching question

Kagge Kelle was a small, compact man with a large, solid, well-arranged head His skin was only faintly dyed, to a waxv bisque pallor, he wore a severe costume of dark brown and purple His eyes were clear and remote, his nose short and blunt, his mouth prim, held firmly as if in compensation for its overfullness

Kelle seemed to make a virtue of inscrutability. He greeted Gersen with austere courtesy, listened to his story without comment, saw the photographs without perceptible show of interest. Choosing his words with care, he said, "I am sorry that I cannot help you. I did not sponsor Mr. Teehalt's expedition. I know nothing about this man."

"In that case, will you allow me the use of the decoding strip?"

Kelle sat motionless for a moment. Then he said in an even voice, "Unfortunately, this is contrary to the rules of the department. I would encounter not a little criticism. Still. . ." He picked up the photographs, examined them once more. "This is beyond question a world of interesting characteristics. What is its name?"

"I don't have that information, Mr. Kelle."

"I cannot conceive why you seek Teehalt's sponsor. Are you a representative of the IPCC?"

"I am a private individual, though naturally I can't demonstrate this."

Kelle was skeptical. "Everyone works to his own interests. If I understood what you were trying to achieve, I could possibly act with more flexibility."

"That is more or less what Mr. Warweave told me," said Gersen.

Kelle turned on him a sharp look. "Neither Warweave nor myself are what might be called innocent men." He thought for a moment, then said grudgingly, "On behalf of the department, I can go so far as to make you an offer for the filament—though, as you tell the story, it actually is the property of the department to begin with."

Gersen nodded in full agreement. "That is exactly the point I am trying to establish. Does the filament actually belong to the university, or can I feel free to do as I like with it? If I could find Lugo Teehalt's sponsor—or determine whether the sponsor actually exists—then any number of new possibilities would appear."

Kelle was not to be moved by Gersen's ingenuousness. "It is an extraordinary situation . . . As I say, I might be able to make you an attractive offer for the filament—even as a private party, if that would expedite matters. Although I would naturally insist on a prior inspection of the planet."

"You know my qualms in the matter, Mr. Kelle."

Kelle's response was only a small incredulous smile. Once more

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he studied the photographs. "These—er, dryads, I must say they are creatures of considerable interest. . . . Well, I can help you to this extent. I will consult university records for information regarding Lugo Teehalt. But in exchange, I would like you to assure me an opportunity to consider the purchase of this world, in the event that you do not find the so-called 'sponsor.' "

Gersen could not restrain a mild gibe. "You gave me to understand that you weren't particularly interested."

"Your assumptions are of no consequence," said Kelle evenly. "This should not injure your sensibilities, for you clearly are not concerned as to my opinion of you. You approach me as if I were mentally deficient, with a tale which would not impress a child."

Gersen shrugged. "The 'tale,' as it stands, is substantially accurate. Naturally I haven't told you everything I know."

Kelle smiled again, rather more generously. "Well, let's see what the records have to tell us." He spoke into the microphone. "Confidential Information. Authority of Kagge Kelle."

The nonhuman voice of the information bank responded. "Confidential Information, ready."

"The file on Lugo Teehalt." He spelled out the name.

There was a series of subdued mutterings, a quiet eerie whistling. The voice spoke once more, reading off the information it had gathered. "Lugo Teehalt: his file. Contents: Application for admission, verification and appended comment. April 3, 1480."

"Pass," said Kelle.

"Application for admission to advanced regimen, verification and appended comment. July 2, 1485."

"Pass."

"Thesis for degree in College of Symbology: title: 'The Meaningful Elements in the Eye Motion of the Tunkers of Mizar Six.' December 20, 1489."

"Pass."

"Application for post as associate instructor, verification and comment. March 15. 1490."

"Discharge of Lugo Teehalt, associate instructor, for conduct prejudicial to morale of student corpus. October 19, 1492."

"Pass."

"Contract between Lugo Teehalt and Department of Galactic Morphology, January 6, 1521."

Gersen exhaled a small sigh at the relaxation of tension of whose existence he had barely been aware. It was definite:

Lugo Teehalt had been employed as locator by someone within the department.

"Quote in resume," Kelle ordered.

"Lugo Teehalt and Department of Galactic Morphology agree and covenant to the following: Department will furnish Teehalt a suitable space vessel, provisioned, equipped, found in typical and useful manner, in order that Teehalt shall conduct, as agent of department, assiduous exploration of certain areas of galaxy. Department advances Teehalt sum of five thousand SVU and guarantees a bonus of graduated values for degrees of successful exploration. Teehalt agrees to devote best efforts to successful pursuit of exploration, to preserve results of said exploration secure and secret from all persons, groups, and agencies other than those authorized by Department. Signatures: Lugo Teehalt for Lugo Teehalt; Ominah Bazerman for department.

"No further information."

"Mmf," said Kagge Kelle. He spoke to the screen. "Ominah Bazerman."

A click, a voice spoke. "Ominah Bazerman, Chief Clerk."

"Kelle speaking. Two years ago a certain Lugo Teehalt was despatched as a locator. You signed his contract. Do you remember the circumstances?"

There was a moment's silence. "No, Mr. Kelle, I can't say that I do. The contract probably came to me in a set of other papers."

"You don't remember who would have initiated this contract, who sponsored this particular exploration?"

"No, sir. It must have been either yourself, or Mr. Detteras, or perhaps Mr. Warweave. No one else would order out such an exploration."

"I see. Thank you." Kelle turned to Gersen, his eyes mild, almost bovine. "And there you have it. If it wasn't Warweave, it must be Detteras. As a matter of fact Detteras is former Dean of the College of Symbology. Perhaps he and Teehalt were acquaint-

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tances. ...

Rundle Detteras, Director of Exploration, seemed a man completely at his ease—at peace with himself, his job, the world at large. When Gersen entered his office, Detteras held up his hand in easy

salute. He was a large man, surprisingly ugly for this age when a pointed nose or an overloose mouth could be repaired in a matter of hours. He had made no attempt to camouflage his ugliness; indeed, it seemed as if his rather harsh blue-green skin dye, almost the color of verdigris, accentuated the coarseness of his features, the rather gauche brusqueness of his motions. His head was the shape of a gourd; the heavy chin rested on his breast with no perceptible intervention of neck, the hair was a bristle dyed the color of wet moss. From knee to shoulder he seemed of uniform thickness, with a torso like a log. He wore the quasimilitary uniform of a Baron of the Order of Archangels: black boots, loose scarlet breeches, and a splendid blouse striped green, blue and scarlet, with gold epaulettes and filigreed breast plates. Rundle Detteras was of sufficient presence to command both the uniform and his odd physiognomy; a man with the slightest dubiety or self-consciousness would instantly have seemed eccentric.

"Well, well, Mr. Gersen," said Detteras, "is it too early for a taste of arrack?"

"I'm out of bed."

Detteras stared in brief puzzlement, then laughed heartily. "Excellent! This is when I usually hoist the hospitality flag. Tint, tang, or white?"

"White, please."

Detteras poured from the tall slender flask. He raised his glass:

"Detteras au pouvoir!" and drank with gusto. "First of the day, like a visit home to mother." He poured himself a second tot, settled back, turned upon Gersen a glance of leisurely appraisal, Gersen asked himself, which one: Warweave? Kelle? Detteras? One of these exteriors hid the ferocious soul of Attel Malagate the Woe. Warweave? Kelle? Detteras? Gersen had inclined toward Warweave; now he was once more dubious. Detteras had undeniable force, a rude, harsh-textured energy, almost palpable.

Detteras apparently felt no urgency about coming to grips with Gersen's business, for all the reputed press of his affairs. It was not unlikely that he and Warweave had been in communication, and possibly Kelle likewise. "A never-ending puzzle," said Detteras, rather pompously. "The modes of why and how men differ."

If Detteras were in no hurry, thought Gersen, neither was he. "No doubt you're right," he said, "although I don't understand the immediate relevance."

Detteras laughed; a heavy booming sound. "Quite as it should be; I would be surprised if you professed otherwise." He held up his hand to forestall Gersen's response. "Presumption on my part? No. Hear me out. You are a somber man, a pragmatic man. You carry a heavy load of secrets and dark resolves."

Gersen sipped suspiciously at the arrack. The verbal pyrotechnics might be intended as a distraction, a device to diminish his wariness. He concentrated on the arrack, senses keen for the faintest off flavor. Detteras had poured both drinks from the same flask; he had offered Gersen a choice of three distillations; he had taken up glasses without seeming calculation. There existed, nonetheless, enormous scope for ruse, which no normal vigilance could prevent. . . . The drink was innocent, so Gersen's tongue and nasal passages, trained on Sarkovy, assured him. He focused his attention upon Detteras and the previous remark.

"Your opinions regarding me are exaggerated."  
Detteras grinned, a great gap-lipped grimace. "But nevertheless essentially accurate?"  
"Possibly."

Detteras nodded complacently, as if Gersen had given him the most emphatic of corroborations. "It is a skill, or habit of observation, born of long years of study. I formerly specialized in Symbolology, until I decided that I'd cropped the pasture as short as my teeth were long, and as far as my tether would reach. So here I am in Galactic Morphology. A less complicated field, descriptive rather than analytic, objective rather than humanistic. Still, I occasionally find application for my previous field. Now is a case in point. You come into my office, an utter stranger. I assess your overt symbolic presentation: skin color; shape, condition, color of your hair; features, clothes, your general style. You will say, this is common practice. I reply, true. Everyone eats, but a skilled taster is rare. I read these symbols with minute exactitude, and they provide me with information about your personality. I, on the other hand, deny similar knowledge to you. How? I bedizen myself with random and contradictory symbols, I am in constant camouflage, behind which the real Rundle Detteras watches, as calm and cool as an impresario at the hundredth performance of a glittering carnival extravaganza."

Gersen smiled. "My nature might be as flamboyant as your symbols, and I might dissemble it for reasons similar to your own—whatever they are. A second point: your presentation, if it can be

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believed, illuminated you almost as clearly as the set of your natural symbols. Third—why bother in the first place?"

Detteras seemed much amused. "Aha! You show me for the fraud and charlatan I am! Still, I cannot avoid the conviction that your symbols tell me more about you than mine do about me."

Gersen leaned back in his seat. "To little practical effect."

"Not so fast," exclaimed Detteras. "You occupy yourself exclusively with positivity! Consider negativity for a moment. Some people fret regarding the cryptic mannerisms of their colleagues. You protest that the symbols tell you nothing of importance; you dismiss them. These others worry because they cannot integrate a proliferation of information." Gersen started to demur; Detteras held up his hand. "Consider the Tunkers of Mizar Six. You are acquainted with them? A religious sect."

"I heard them mentioned a few minutes ago."

"As I say," Detteras continued, "they are a religious group:

ascetic, austere, devout to an astonishing extreme. The men and women dress identically, shave their heads, use a language of eight hundred and twelve words, eat identical meals at identical hours—all this to protect themselves from the perplexity of wondering about each other's motivations. True. This is the basic purpose of the Tunker mode. And not too far from Mizar is Sirene, where for a similar reason men wear highly conventionalized masks, from birth to death. Their faces are their dearest secrets." He proffered the arrack flask. Gersen held out his glass.

Detteras continued. "The practice here on Alphanor is more complicated. We gird ourselves for offense and defense, or sheer playfulness, with a thousand ambiguous symbols. The business of living is enormously complicated; artificial tensions are established; uncertainty and suspicion become normality."

"And in the process," suggested Gersen, "sensitivities are developed unknown to either the Tunkers or the Sirenese."

Detteras held up his hand. "Again, not so fast. I know a great deal about both these peoples; insensitivity is a word which cannot be applied to either. The Sirenese will detect the most remote nuance of uneasiness when a man masks himself above his status. And, the Tunkers—I know less of them, but I believe that their personal differentiations are as refined and varied as our own, if not more so. I quote an analogous esthetic doctrine: the tighter the discipline of an art form, the more subjective the criteria of taste. In another

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category, becoming ever more didactic, consider the Star Kings—nonmen driven by their psyches to literally superhuman excellences. They must enter the field cold, as it were, without even the human racial unconscious as a matrix for their symbolic education. Returning to Alphanor, it must be remembered that the folk thrust an enormous amount of perfectly valid information at each other, as well as ambiguities."

"Confusing," said Gersen dryly, "if one allows himself to be distracted."

Detteras laughed quietly, evidently well pleased with himself.

"You've led a different life than I have, Mr. Gersen. On Alphanor the issues aren't life and death; everyone is fairly sophisticated. It's easier than not to accept people at their own valuation. Indeed, it's often impractical not to do so." He looked sidelong at Gersen.

"Why do you smile?"

"It dawns upon me that the dossier on Kirth Gersen, requested from the IPCC, is slow in arriving. In the meantime, you find it impractical to accept me at my own valuation. Or even your own."

Detterras laughed in his turn. "You do both me and the IPCC an injustice. The dossier came promptly, several minutes before your arrival." He pointed to a photostat sheet on his desk. "I ordered the dossier, incidentally, in my role as a responsible officer of the Institution. I think I can make a case for my caution."

"What did you learn?" asked Gersen. "I haven't seen the dossier recently."

"It's marvelously blank." He picked up the paper. "You were born in 1490: where? Not on one of the major worlds. At the age of ten you registered into Galileo Spaceport on Earth, in the company of your grandfather, whose antecedents perhaps we should likewise check. You attended the usual schools, were accepted by the Institute as a catechumen, reached the eleventh phase at the age of twenty-four (quite respectable progress), when you withdrew. From now on there is no record, suggesting that either you remained permanently on Earth, or departed illegally, without registration. Since you now sit before me, the latter seems to have been the case. Remarkable," said Detterras, "that a person could live to your age in a society as complex as the Oikumene with no small impingement upon the official record! Long years of silence while you were occupied where? How? To what purpose, and to what effect?" He glanced questioningly at Gersen.

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"If it's not there," said Gersen, "I don't want it there."

"Naturally. There is very little more." He tossed down the dossier. "Now you are anxious to make your inquiries. I will anticipate you. I knew Lugo Teehalt, far back indeed, in my undergraduate days. He involved himself in some sort of unsavory mess and dropped from sight. A year or so ago he came to me, asking for a locator's contract."

Gersen stared at him, fascinated. So here was Malagate! "And you sent him out?"

"I chose not to do so. I did not want him dependent upon me for the rest of his life. I was willing to help him, but not on a personal basis. I told him to apply either to the Honorary Provost, Gyle War-weave, or the Chairman of the Research Planning Committee, Kagge Kelle; to mention my name, that very likely they could assist him. This was the last I heard of him."

Gersen took a deep breath. Detterras spoke with the assurance

of truth. But which of them had not? Detteras at least had confirmed that one of the three—either himself, Warweave or Kelle—was lying.

Which?

Today he had seen Artel Malagate, looked into his eyes, listened to his voice. . . . He was suddenly uneasy. Why was Detteras so relaxed? Presumably a busy man, how could he spare so much time? Gersen abruptly sat up in his chair. "I will get to the point of my call upon you." He told the story he had already related to Warweave and Kelle, while Detteras listened with a faint smile playing over his coarse mouth. Gersen displayed the photographs and Detteras looked at them negligently.

"A beautiful world," said Detteras. "If I were wealthy I would ask you to sell it to me to be my personal estate. I am not wealthy. On the contrary. In any event, you seem not so much anxious to sell your rights to this world as you do to locate poor old Teehalt's sponsor."

Gersen was somewhat taken aback. "I'll sell to the sponsor for a reasonable price."

Detteras smiled skeptically. "Sorry. I can't admit to a falsehood. Warweave or Kelle is your man."

"They deny it."

"Strange. So then?"

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"The filament is useless to me in its present condition. Will you furnish me the decoding strip?"

"I'm afraid that's out of the question."

"I thought as much. So I must sell to one or the other of you, or to the university. Or destroy the filament."

"Hm." Detteras judiciously nodded his head. "This demands careful thought. If your demands were not excessive, I'd be interested. . . . Or perhaps the three of us, in concert, could come to some agreement with you. Hm. . . . Let me speak to Warweave and Kelle. And then, if you can, come back tomorrow, say at ten. I might have a definite proposition to put before you."

Gersen rose to his feet. "Very well. Tomorrow at ten."

"Yes, we are a reactionary, secretive, pessimistic organization. We have agents everywhere. We know a thousand tricks to discourage research, sabotage experiments, distort data. Even in the Institute's own laboratories we proceed with deliberation and discretion.

"But now let me answer some of the questions and accusations we often hear. Do the members of the Institute enjoy wealth, privilege, power, freedom from the law? Honesty compels the answer: Yes, in varying degree, depending upon phase, achievement.

"Then the Institute is an inbred, restricted, centripetal group? By no means. We consider ourselves an intellectual elite, certainly. Why should we not? Membership is open to anyone, although few of our catechumens achieve even so far as the fifth phase.

"Our policy? Simple enough. Space drive has given a terrible weapon to any megalomaniacs who happen to occur in our midst. There is other knowledge which, if equally free, could ensure them tyrannical power. We therefore control the dissemination of knowledge.

"We are scathed as 'self-anointed divinities'; we are accused of pedantry, conspiracy, condescension, smugness, arrogance, obstinate self-righteousness; these are the mildest of the objurgations we hear. We are accused of intolerable paternalism, and in the same breath reproached for disengagement from ordinary human affairs. Why do we not use our lore to lighten toil, alleviate pain, prolong life? Why do

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we stand aloof? Why do we not transform the human estate into a Utopia a task well within our power?

tk the answer is simple—perhaps deceptively so We feel these are false boons, that peace and satiety are akin to death For all its rawness and cruel excess, we envy archaic humanity its ardent experience We hold that gain after toil, triumph after adversity, achievement to a goal long sought, is a greater beneficence than prebendary nutrient from the teat of an indulgent government "

From the television address by Madian Carbuke,

Centennial (Hundredth Phase Fellow) of the Institute,

December 2, 1502

Conversation between two Centennials of the Institute, in connection with a third not present

"I would gladly come to your house for a chat, if I did not suspect that Ramus were likewise invited "

"But what is so wrong with Ramus? He often amuses

me

"He is a fungus, a flatulence, a pompous old toad,  
and he irritates me vastly "

Question occasionally put to Fellows of the Institute:

Are Star Kings included among the fellowship?  
The customary answer We certainly hope not

Motto of the Institute A little knowledge is a dangerous  
thing, a great deal of knowledge is disaster, which detractors  
of the Institute scornfully paraphrase to- Somebody else's ig-  
norance is bliss

Pallis Atwood lived with two other girls in a seaside apartment  
tower to the south of Remo. Gersen waited in the lobby while she  
ran up to change clothes and retint her skin

He went out on the deck overlooking the ocean, leaned against  
the rail. Great blazing Rigel hung low over the ocean, laying a  
molten road from shore to horizon. Near at hand in the harbor,  
enclosed by twin piers, a hundred boats were moored: power yachts,  
sailing catamarans, glass-hulled submarines, a shoal of jet-powered

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aquaplanes, to be ridden at maniacal speed over, through, and  
across the waves

Gersen's mood was complex, and puzzled even himself. There  
was the heart-bumping anticipation of an evening with a pretty girl,  
a sensation he had not known for years. There was the melancholy  
normally induced by sunset—and now the sunset was beautiful in-  
deed, the sky glowed mauve and green-blue around a green bank  
of persimmon-orange clouds stranded with magenta. It was not the  
beauty which brought on melancholy, mused Gersen, but rather  
the quiet halcyon light and its fading. And there was another  
melancholy—different yet somehow similar—which came to Ger-  
sen as he watched the debonair folk about him. They were all  
graceful and easy, untouched by the toil and pain and terror that  
existed on remote worlds. Gersen envied them their detachment,  
their social skills. Still, would he change places with any of them?  
Hardly.

Pallis Atwood came to join him by the rail. She had tinted  
herself a beautiful soft olive-green, with a subtle patina of gold, she  
now wore her hair in a loose dark curly cap. She laughed at Ger-  
sen's obvious approval.

"I feel like a wharf rat," said Gersen. "I should have changed  
into new clothes."

"Please don't worry," she said. "It's completely unimportant.  
Now what shall we do?"

"You'll have to make suggestions "

"Very well\ Let's go into Avente and sit on the esplanade I never tire of watching people walk past Then we can decide what's next "

Gersen acceded; they walked to the slide car and drove north, Paths chattering with ingenuous candor about herself, her job, her opinions, plans and hopes She was, so Gersen learned, a native of Singhal Island, on the planet Ys Her parents were prosperous, owning the only cold-storage warehouse of the Lantango Peninsula When they retired to the Palmetto Islands, her oldest brother took control of the warehouse and likewise the family home The brother next older had wished to marry her, this form of union being countenanced on Ys, which had been settled originally by a group of Reformed Rationalists The brother was stout, red-faced, arrogant, without a trade other than driving the warehouse van, and the prospect held no charm for Pallis

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At this point Pallis hesitated and her candor seemed to slip gears, for she changed the subject. Gersen guessed at the dramatic confrontations, fierce reproaches and countering accusations which had taken place. Pallis had now lived in Avente for two years and, though sometimes homesick for the sights and sounds of Ys, she felt herself happy and lucky. Gersen, who had never known anyone

so artless, was charmed by her talk.

They parked the slider, walked out along the esplanade, selected a table in front of one of the numerous cafes, and sat watching the crowds stroll by. Beyond spread the dark ocean, with the sky now plum and indigo-gray, with only the faintest tinge of lemon to mark

the passage of Rigel.

The night was warm; folk from all the worlds of the Oikumene sauntered past. The waiter brought goblets of punch. Gersen sipped and his tensions began to relax. Neither spoke for a period; then Pallis suddenly turned to face him. "You're so silent, so guarded;

is it because you're in from Beyond?"

Gersen had no ready reply. Finally he gave a rueful laugh. "I hoped you'd think me easy and suave, like everyone else. . . ."

"Oh come now," said Pallis teasingly. "Nobody's like everyone else."

"I'm not altogether sure," said Gersen. "I suppose it's a matter of relativity: how near you are. Even bacteria have individuality, if

they're examined closely enough."

"So now I'm a bacterium," said Pallis.

"Well, I'm another, and I'm probably boring you."

"No, no! Of course not! I'm enjoying myself."

"So am I. Too much. It's—enervating."

Pallis scented a compliment. "How do you mean?"

"I can't allow myself the luxury of emotional commitments—even if I should like to."

"You're much, much, much too sober for a young man."

"I'm not young anymore."

She made a gay gesture. "But you admit you're sober!"

"I suppose so. But be careful, don't push me too far."

"A woman likes to think herself a temptress."

Again Gersen had no response. He studied Pallis across the table; for the moment she seemed content to watch the passersby. What a gay, warm-hearted creature, he thought, without a trace of malice or acerbity.

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Pallis turned her attention back to him. "You're really such a quiet man," she told him. "Everyone else I know refuses to stop talking, and I listen to continual floods of nonsense. I'm sure you know hundreds of interesting things, and you refuse to tell me any of them."

Gersen grinned. "They're probably less interesting than you think."

"Still, I'd like to make sure. So tell me about the Beyond. Is life really so dangerous?"

"Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It depends on whom you meet, and why."

"But—perhaps you'd rather I didn't ask—what do you do? You're not a pirate or a slaver?"

"Do I look like a pirate? Or a slaver?"

"You know that I don't know what a pirate or a slaver look like! But I'm curious. Are you a—well, criminal? Not that it's necessarily a disgrace," she added hastily. "Affairs which are perfectly acceptable on one planet are absolutely taboo'on another. For instance, I told one of my friends that all my life I'd planned to marry

my oldest brother—and her hair uncurled!"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," said Gersen, "but I'm not a criminal. . . . I don't fit into any category." He considered. There could be no indiscretion in telling her what he had told Warweave, Kelle and Detteras. "I've come to Avente for a particular purpose, naturally—"

"Let's have dinner," said Pallis, "and you can tell me while we eat."

"Where shall we go?"

"There's an exciting new restaurant, only just opened. Everyone's talking about it and I've never been there." She jumped to her feet, took his hand with an easy intimacy, pulled him upright. He caught her under the arms, bent forward, but his daring waned;

he laughed and released her. She said archly, "You're more impulsive than you look."

Gersen grinned, half shamefacedly. "Well, where is the exciting new restaurant?"

"Not far. We can walk. It's rather expensive, but I plan to pay half the account."

"That's not necessary," said Gersen. "Money is no particular

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problem to a pirate. If I run short, I'll rob someone. You, perhaps. . . ."

"It's hardly worth the trouble. Come along, then." She took

his hand, and they walked north along the esplanade like any of the thousand other couples abroad this fine Alphanor evening.

She led him to a kiosk circled by large luminous green letters reading NAUTILUS. An escalator dropped them two hundred feet into a tall octagonal lobby paneled with rattan screens. A major-domo escorted them along a glass-vaulted tunnel, out upon the floor of the sea. Dining rooms of various sizes opened off the passage, into one of which they were conducted, and seated at a table close beside the sloping glass dome. The sea lay beyond, with beacons illuminating the sand, rocks, seaweed, coral, the passing submarine creatures.

"Now," said Pallis, leaning forward, "tell me about the Beyond.

And don't worry about alarming me, because I love an occasional shudder. Or better, tell me about yourself."

"Smade's Tavern on Smade's Planet is a good place to start," said Gersen. "You've been there?"

"Of course not. But I've heard it mentioned."  
"It's a small, barely habitable planet out in the middle of nowhere; all mountains, wind, thunderstorms, an ocean black as ink. The tavern is the only building on the planet. Sometimes it's crowded, sometimes there'll be no one but Smade and his family for weeks on end. When I arrived the only other guest was a Star King."

"A Star King? I thought they were always disguised as men."

"It's not a matter of disguise," said Gersen. "They are men. Almost."

"I never have understood about the Star Kings. Just what are they?"

Gersen shrugged. "You'll get a different answer every time you

ask. The general speculation goes like this. A million years ago, more or less, the planet Lambda Grus III, or 'Ghnarumen'—you have to cough through your nose to get it even approximately right—was inhabited by a rather frightening assortment of creatures. Among them was a small amphibious biped without any particular tools for survival except awareness and an ability to hide in the mud. He probably looked a little like a lizard, or a hairless seal. . . . The species faced extinction half a dozen times, but a few

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always managed to hang on, and somehow scavenge an existence among creatures who were more savage, more cunning, more agile, better swimmers, better climbers, even better scavengers than themselves. The proto-Star Kings had only physical advantages:

self-consciousness, competitiveness, a desire to stay alive by any means whatever."

"They sound rather like the proto-humans on ancient Earth," said Pallis.

"No one knows for sure: at least no men. What the Star Kings know they're not telling. . . . These bipeds differed from proto-man in several respects: first, they are biologically much more flexible, able to transmit acquired characteristics. Second, they are not bisexual. There is cross-fertilization by means of spores emitted on the breath, but each individual is male and female at once, and the young develop as pods in the armpits. Perhaps from this lack of sexual differentiation the Star Kings have no natural physical vanity.

Their basic drive is the urge to outdo, to outfunction, to outsurvive. The biological flexibility coupled to a rudimentary intelligence provided the means to implement their ambitions; they consciously began to breed themselves into a creature which could outperform their less resourceful competitors.

"This is all speculation, of course, and what follows is speculation on an even more tenuous basis. But just let's assume that some race able to traverse space visited Earth. It might have been the people which left ruins on the Fomalhaut planets, or the Hexadeltas, or whoever carved Monument Cliff on Xi Puppis X.

"We assume that such a space-traveling people came by Earth a hundred thousand years ago. Assume that they captured a tribe of Mousterian Neanderthals, and for some reason conveyed them to Ghnarumen, world of the proto-Star Kings. Here is a challenging situation for both parties. The men are far more dangerous opponents to the Star Kings than the now-defeated natural enemies. The men are intelligent, patient, crafty, ruthless, aggressive. Under pressure of the environment the men themselves evolve into a different type: more agile, faster of body and mind than their Neanderthal predecessors.

"The proto-Star Kings suffer setbacks, but they have their hereditary patience, as well as important weapons: the competitive urge, the biological flexibility. Men have proved superior to them-

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selves; to compete with men they shape themselves into human semblance.

"The war continues, and the Star Kings admit, very guardedly, that certain of their myths describe these wars.

"Another assumption now becomes necessary. About fifty thousand years ago the space travelers return, and convey the evolved Earthmen back to Earth, and perhaps a few Star Kings: who knows? And so the Cro-Magnons appear in Europe.

"On their own planet the Star Kings are at last more manlike than men, and prevail: the true men are destroyed, the Star Kings are supreme and remain so until five hundred years ago. The men of Earth discover the intersplit. When they chance upon 'Ghnarumen' they are astonished to find creatures exactly resembling themselves: the Star Kings."

"It sounds far-fetched," said Pallis dubiously.

"Not as far-fetched as convergent evolution. It is a fact that Star Kings exist: a race not antagonistic, but not friendly either. Men are not allowed to visit 'Ghnarumen'—or however the name is pronounced. The Star Kings tell us only as much about themselves as they care to, and they send observers—spies, if you like—

everywhere throughout the Oikumene. There are probably a dozen Star Kings in Avente right now."

Pallis grimaced. "How can you tell them from men?"

"Sometimes even a doctor can't, after they finish disguising and faking themselves. There are differences, of course. They have no genital organs; their pubic region is blank. Their protoplasm, blood, hormones have a different composition. Their breath has a distinctive odor. But the spies, or whatever they are, are altered so that even an X-ray shows the same as that of a man."

"How did you know the—the creature at Smade's Tavern was a Star King?"

"Smade told me."

"How did Smade know?"

Gersen shook his head. "I never thought to ask."

He sat silent, preoccupied with a new notion. There had been three guests at Smade's Tavern: himself, Teehalt, and the Star King. If Tristano were to be believed—and why not?—he had arrived in company only with Dasce and Suthiro. If Uasce's statement to Teehalt were to be credited, Attel Malagate must be reckoned

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Teehalt's murderer. Gersen had certainly heard Teehak's scream while Suthiro, Dasce and Tristano stood within his range of vision.

Unless Smade were Malagate, unless another ship had surreptitiously arrived—which were both unlikely—then Malagate and the Star King must be one. Thinking back, Gersen recalled that the Star King had left the dining hall in ample time to allow a conference outside with Dasce. . . .

Pallis Atwrode lightly touched his cheek. "You were telling me of Smade's Tavern."

"Yes," said Gersen. "So I was." He looked at her speculatively. She must certainly know a great deal about the comings and goings of Warweave, Kelle and Detteras. Pallis, misunderstanding the nature of his gaze, flushed prettily under her pale-green skin toning. Gersen laughed uneasily. "Back to Smade's Tavern." He described the events of the evening.

Pallis listened with interest, almost forgetting to eat. "So now you have Lugo Teehalt's filament and the university has the decoder."

"Correct. And neither one is valuable without the other."

They finished dinner; Gersen, with no credit account on Alphanor, paid the bill in cash. They returned to the surface. "Now what would you like?"

"I don't care," said Pallis. "Let's go back along the esplanade to a table, for a while, anyway."

The night was now dark: the moonless black-velvet night of Alphanor. The facade of every building at the back of the esplanade glowed faintly, blue or green or pink; the pavement gave off a silver effulgence; the balustrade emitted a pleasant, almost unseen amber-beige radiance; everywhere was soft shadowless light, rich with muted ghost color. Up in the dark sky stars floated, big, vague, pale. A waiter brought coffee and liqueur; they settled back to watch the passing crowds.

Pallis said in a reflective voice, "You're not telling me everything."

"Of course not," said Gersen. "In fact. . . ." He paused, grappling with a disturbing new thought. Attel Malagate might mistake the nature of his interest in Pallis—especially if Malagate were a Star King, sexless, unable to understand the male-female relationship. "In fact," said Gersen in a bleak voice, "I really have no right involving you in my troubles."

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"I don't feel involved," said Pallis, stretching her arms lazily. "And if I were, what of it? This is Avente on Alphanor, a civilized city on a civilized planet."

Gersen gave a sardonic chuckle. "I told you that others were interested in my planet. Well—these others are pirates and slavers as depraved as your romantic heart could desire. . . . Have you ever heard of Attel Malagate?"

"Malagate the Woe? Yes."

Gersen resisted the temptation of telling her that she took messages and ran errands daily for Malagate. "It's almost certain," he said, "that stick-tights are watching us. Now. This very minute. And the other end of the circuit is possibly Malagate himself."

Pallis moved uneasily, scanned the sky. "Do you mean that Malagate is watching me? That's a creepy feeling."

Gersen looked to right, to left, then stared. Two tables away sat Suthiro, the Sarkoy venefice. Gersen felt a sinking at the pit of his stomach. Meeting Gersen's eye, Suthiro nodded politely, smiled. He rose to his feet, sauntered to the table.

"Good evening, Mr. Gersen."

"Good evening," said Gersen.

"May I join you?"

"I'd prefer not."

Suthiro laughed softly, seated himself, inclined his fox face toward Pallis. "And this young lady—do you plan to introduce me?"

"You already know who she is."

"But she does not know me."

Gersen turned to Pallis. "Here you see Scop Suthiro, Master Venence of Sarkovy. You expressed an interest in evil men; here you have as completely evil a man as you're likely to meet."

Suthiro laughed in easy glee. "Mr. Gersen judiciously uses the word 'likely.' Certain of my friends surpass me as grandly as I surpass you. I hope indeed that you do not meet them. Hildemar Dasce, for instance, who boasts of his ability to paralyze dogs with a glance."

Pallis' voice was troubled: "I'd just as soon not meet him." She stared at Suthiro in fascination. "You really—admit that you're evil?"

Suthiro laughed once more, a subtle muffled sound. "I am a man; I am a Sarkoy."

Gersen said, "I've just been describing our encounter at

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Smade's Tavern to Miss Atwrode. Tell me something: Who killed

Lugo Teehalt?"

Suthiro seemed surprised. "Who else but Malagate? We three sat within. Does it make any difference? It might as easily have been myself or Beauty or Tristano. . . . Tristano, by the way, is quite ill. He suffered a dreadful accident, but hopes to see you on his recovery."

"He can consider himself lucky," said Gersen.

"He is ashamed," said Suthiro. "He thinks himself skillful. I

have told him he is not so skillful as I. Now perhaps he will believe it.

"Speaking of skill," said Gersen, "can you do the paper trick?"

Suthiro cocked his head sidewise. "Yes, of course. Where did you learn of the paper trick?"

"At Kalvaing."

"And what wrought you at Kalvaing?"

"A visit with Coudirou the venefice."

Suthiro pursed his heavy red lips. He wore a yellow skin tone;

his brown pelt was glossy and smooth with oil. "Coudirou is as wise as any—but as for the paper trick. . . ." Gersen handed him a napkin. Suthiro suspended it from left thumb and forefinger, stroked it lightly with his right hand. It fell to the table in five ribbons.

"Well done," said Gersen, and to Pallis: "His fingernails are hardened, sharp as razors. Naturally he would waste no poison on the paper, but each of his fingers is like the head of a serpent."

Suthiro made complacent acquiescence.

Gersen turned back to him. "WTiere is your friend Fancy Dasce?"

"Not too far distant."

"Red face and all?"

Suthiro shook his head sadly at Dasce's poor taste in skin toning. "A very able, a very strange man. Have you ever wondered about his face?"

"WTien I could bear to look at it."

"You are not my friend, you tricked me beautifully; nevertheless, I will warn you: never cross Fancy Dasce. Twenty years ago he was thwarted in some small escapade. It was a matter of collecting money from an obstinate man. Hildemar by chance found himself at a disadvantage. He was knocked down and strapped hand and foot. So his creditor had the poor taste to cleave poor Hilde-

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mar's nose, and cut off his eyelids. . . . Hildemar eventually escaped and now is known as Beauty- Dasce, or Fancy Dasce."

"How awful," muttered Pallis.

"Exactly." Suthiro's voice became contemptuous. "A year later Hildemar allowed himself the luxury of capturing this man. He conveyed him to a private place, where he lives to this day. And occasionally Hildemar, remembering the outrage which cost him his features, returns to this private place to remonstrate with the man."

Pallis turned glazed eyes at Gersen. "These people are your friends?"

"No. We are associated only through Lugo Teehalt." Suthiro

was looking along the esplanade. Gersen asked idly, "You and Dasce and Tristano work together and train together as a team?" "Often, though I for one prefer a singular scope."

"And Lugo Teehalt had the misfortune to blunder upon you at Brinktown."

"He died quickly. Godogma takes all men. Is this misfortune?"

"One never likes to hasten Godogma."

"True." Suthiro inspected his strong agile hands. "Agreed." He looked toward Pallis. "On Sarkovy we have a thousand popular aphorisms to this effect."

"Who is Godogma?"

"The Great God of Destiny, who carries a flower and a flail, and walks on wheels."

Gersen put on an air of studious concentration. "I will ask you a question. You need not answer; in fact perhaps you do not know. But I am puzzled: Why should Malagate, a Star King, so vehemently desire this particular world?"

Suthiro shrugged. "That is a matter with which I have never concerned myself. Apparently the world is valuable. I am paid. I kill only when I must or when it profits me--so you see," he told Pallis parenthetically, "I am not really so evil a man, am I now? Presently I will return to Sarkovy and live out my days roaming the Gorobundur Steppe. Ah, now! There is the life! When I think of those times to come, I wonder why I sit here now, beside this odious wetness." He grimaced toward the sea, and rose to his feet. "It is a presumption to advise you, but why not be sensible? You can never defeat Malagate; therefore relinquish the filament."

Gersen thought for a moment, then said, "I will also presume,

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in the same spirit which prompts you. My advice is this: Kill Hil-demar Dasce the next moment you see him, or even before."

Suthiro knit his furry brown eyebrows in puzzlement, glanced for the most fleeting instant upward.

Gersen continued. "There is a stick-tight watching us, although I have not located it. Its microphone probably registers our conversation. Until you told me, I had no idea that the Star King at Smade's Tavern was Malagate. I am interested. I do not think this

is common knowledge."

"Quiet!" hissed Suthiro, eyes blazing with sudden red wrath.

Gersen lowered his voice. "Hildemar Dasce quite possibly will be asked to punish you. If you wish to forestall Godogma, if you wish to take your wagon across Gorobundur Steppe—kill Dasce and go."

Suthiro hissed something below his breath, jerked up his hand as if to throw, then backed away, turned, melted into the crowd.

Pallis relaxed, slumped into her chair. In an uncertain voice she said, "I'm not as adventurous as I supposed myself."

"I'm sorry," said Gersen, genuinely contrite. "I should never have asked you out."

"No, no. I just can't accustom myself to that kind of talk, here on the esplanade, in peaceful Avente. But I suppose I'm actually enjoying it. If you're not a criminal, who or what are you?"

"Kirth Gersen."

"You must work for the IPCC."

"No."

"Then you must be on the Institute's Special Committee."

"I'm just Kirth Gersen, private individual." He rose to his feet. "Let's walk for a bit."

They went north along the esplanade. To the left lay dark sea;

to the right the edifices glowing in various soft colors; and beyond, the skyline of Avente: luminous spires against the black Alphanor night.

Pallis presently took Gersen's arm. "Tell me, what if Malagate is a Star King? What does that mean?"

"I've been wondering myself." Indeed, Gersen had been trying to remember the look of the Star King. Had it been Warweave? Kelle? Or Detteras? The lusterless black skin tone had blurred the features; the striped coif had covered the hair. Gersen had an impression that the Star King had been taller than Kelle, but not quite

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so tall as Warweave. But would even the black skin tone have camouflaged Detteras' rude rough features?

Pallis was speaking: "Will they really kill that man?"

Gersen glanced up to see if he could locate the stick-tight, without success. "I don't know. He's useful. Incidentally. ..." Gersen

hesitated, wondering anew as to the ethics of involving Pallis in the sordid affair, if only remotely.

"Incidentally what?"

"Nothing." For fear of the stick-right's microphone Gersen dare not inquire as to the movements of Kelle, Detteras and Warweave; Malagate so far had no reason to suspect his interest.

Pallis said in an injured voice, "I still don't understand how all of this affects you."

Once more Gersen chose to be discreet. The stick-tight might hear; Pallis Atwrote herself might be an agent of Malagate's, though Gersen considered this unlikely. So he said, "Not at all--except in the abstract."

"But any of these people"--she nodded at the passersby--"they might be Star Kings. How could we separate them from men?"

"It's hard. On their home planet--I won't attempt to pronounce it--they come in many approximations to man. Those who travel the known worlds as observers--spies, if you prefer, although I can't imagine what they hope to learn--they're almost exact facsimiles of true men."

Pallis suddenly seemed subdued. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again, and finally gave a gay fling other hands. "Let's forget about them. Nightmares. You have me seeing Star Kings everywhere. Even at the university. ..."

Gersen looked down into her upturned face. "Do you know what I'd like to do?"

She smiled provocatively. "No. What?"

"First I'd like to shake off the stick-tight, which is no great problem. And then. . . ."

"And then?"

"I'd like to go somewhere quiet, where we could be alone."

She looked away. "I don't mind. There's a place down the coast. Les Sirenes, it's called. I've never been there." She laughed in embarrassment. "But I've heard people talking."

Gersen took her arm. "First to shake off the stick-tight. . . ."

Pallis entered into the maneuvers with childlike abandon.

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Looking into the merry face, Gersen wondered about his resolve to avoid emotional involvements. If they went to Les Sirenes, if the

night brought them to closer intimacy, what then? Gersen thrust aside his qualms. He could cope with problems as they arose.

The stick-tight, if it had existed, was confounded and lost; they returned to the parking area. There was little light; the ranked round shapes glimmered with silky dull highlights.

They came to the slide car; Gersen hesitated, then put his arms around the swaying girl, kissed her upturned face.

Behind him was the loom of movement; ahead a furtive shifting. Gersen turned, in time to look into a horrid bloodred face with poisonous blue cheeks. Hildemar Dasce's arm descended; a great weight curled over Gersen's head; lightning exploded inside his skull. He tottered and fell to his knees. Dasce leaned over him. Gersen tried to dodge. The world reeled and toppled; he saw Suthiro grinning like a sick hyena, with his hand to the girl's neck. Dasce struck again, and the world went dim, Gersen had time for an instant of bitter self-reproach, before another thunderous buffet extinguished his consciousness.

Excerpt from "When Is a Man Not a Man," by Podd Hachinsky, article in Cosmopolis, June, 1500;

... As men have traveled from star to star they have encountered many forms of life, intelligent and nonintelligent (to emphasize a perfectly arbitrary and possibly anthropomorphic parameter). No more than half a dozen of these life forms merit the adjective "humanoid." Of these half dozen, a single species closely resembles man: the Star Kings of Ghnarumen.

Ever since our initial astounded contact with the race, the question has recurred: Are they of the family of man—the "bifurcate, bibrachiate, monocephaloid, polygamite/" as Tallier Chantron waggishly puts it—or are they not? The answer, of course, depends on definitions.

One point can instantly be settled: the Star Kings are not homo sapiens. But if what is meant is a creature which can talk a human language, walk into a haberdashery and dress himself off a rack, play an excellent game of tennis, or fight a bout of chess, attend the regal functions of Stockholm or the lawn fetes of Strylvania without occasioning a lift of autocratic eyebrow—then that creature is a man.

Man or not man, the typical Star King is a courteous, even-tempered fellow, even if suspicious and humorless. Do him a favor and he will thank you, but feel no obligation;

injure him and he will explode in tigerish fury and kill you—if he is in a situation where human law cannot restrain him. If such action will cause legal trouble, he will instantly

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dismiss the injury and hold no grudge. He is ruthless but

not cruel, and is puzzled by such perverse human manifestations as sadism, masochism, religious fervor, flagellation, suicide. On the other hand, he will demonstrate a whole battery of peculiar habits and attitudes no less inexplicable from our point of view, arising from the twists and quirks of his own psyche.

To say that his origin is in dispute is like a remark to the effect that Croesus was well off. At least a dozen theories to explain the remarkable similarity between Star King and Man exist: none completely convincing. If the Star Kings themselves know, they will admit nothing. Since they bar all anthropological and archaeological research teams from their planet, we are afforded neither verification nor refutation of any of these theories. /

On human planets they punctiliously model their conduct after the best human examples, but their innate behavior patterns are unique to the race. Perhaps to oversimplify, one can say that their dominant trait is a passion to excel, to outdo a competitor at his own game. Since man is the dominant creature of the Oikumene, the Star Kings accept him as a cynosure, a champion to be challenged and outdone, and so they strive to outdo man in every aspect of the human capacity. If this ambition (at which they are often successful) seems unreal and artificial to us, no less so does our sexual drive seem to them; for the Star Kings are parthenogenetic, reproducing in a manner which is beyond the scope of this article to describe. Knowing nothing of vanity, setting no store by either beauty or ugliness, they strive for physical perfection only to score points in their semi-amicable contest with true men....

What of their achievements? They are fine builders, daring engineers, excellent technicians. They are a pragmatic race, not particularly apt at mathematics or the speculative sciences. It is hard to conceive of their giving birth to a Jarnell, who discovered the space splitter by sheer accident. Their cities are impressive sights, rising from the flatlands like a growth of metallic crystals. Each adult Star King builds for himself a spire or tower. The more fervent

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his ambition and the more exalted his rank, the higher and more splendid his tower (which he seems to enjoy only as a monument). Upon his demise the tower may be temporarily occupied by some junior individual during the period in which he accumulates sufficient wealth to build his own tower. Inspirational as the cities seem from a distance, they lack the most obvious municipal utilities, and the areas between the towers are unpaved, dusty, littered. Factories, industrial plants, and the like are housed in low utilitarian domes and manned by the least aggressive and least evolved

of the species—for the race is by no means homogeneous. It is as if every human gathering included Proconsuls, Pithecanthropi, sinanthropus giganticus, Neanderthals, Magdalentans, Solutreans, Grimaldi, Cro-Magnon, and all the races of Modern Man.

At midnight a group of young folk came laughing and singing into the parking area. They had dined with unaccustomed amplitude at The Halls; they had visited Llanfelfair, Lost Star Inn, Haluce, the Casino Plageale; they were intoxicated, but as much by exuberance as by the wines, smokes, perfusions, subliminal whirligigs, chants, voltes and other exaltments purveyed by the houses which they had visited. The youth who stumbled over Gersen's body uttered first a jocular malediction, then an exclamation of shocked concern. The group gathered; one ran to his vehicle, pressed the emergency call button; two minutes later a police craft dropped down from the sky, and shortly afterward an ambulance.

Gersen was conveyed to a hospital, where he was treated for concussion and shock with appropriate irradiation, massage and vitalizing medicines. He presently returned to consciousness, and for a moment lay thinking. Then he gave a sudden lurch and tried to rise from the bed. The attending interns cautioned him, but Gersen, paying no heed, struggled erect and stood swaying. "My clothes!" he croaked. "Give me my clothes!" "They're safe in the closet, sir. Relax, recline, if you please. Here is the police officer, who will take your evidence."

Gersen lay back, sick with apprehension. The police investigator approached: a keen-faced young man wearing the yellow-brown jacket and black breeches of the Sea Province Constabulary.

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He addressed himself to Gersen politely, seated himself, opened the flap of the recorder lens.

"Now, sir, what happened?"

"I was out for the evening with a young woman, Miss Pallis Atwrode of Remo. When we came back to the car, I was slugged, and I don't know what happened to Miss Atwrode. The last thing I remember, she was struggling to escape from one of the men."

"There were how many?"

"Two. I recognized them. Their names are Hildemar Dasce and a man I know only as Suthiro, a Sarkoy. Both are notorious men Beyond."

"I see. The young lady's name and address?"

"Pallis Atwrode, Merioneth Apartments, Remo."

"We'll check at once to make sure she hasn't arrived home. Now, Mr. Gersen, let's go over this again."

In a dull voice Gersen gave a detailed account of the attack, described Hildemar Dasce and Suthiro. As he spoke, a report came in from Constabulary Control: Pallis Atwrode had not returned to her apartment. Roads, airways and space terminals were under observation. The IPCC had been called into the case.

"Now, sir," said the investigator in a neutral voice, "may I inquire your business?"

"I am a locater."

"What is the nature of your association with these two men?"

"None. I saw them at work once before, on Smade's Planet. Apparently they regard me as an enemy. I believe that they are part of Attel Malagate's organization."

"Very strange that they should commit an actionable offense so brazenly. In fact, why did they not kill you?"

"I don't know." Gersen once more staggered to his feet. The investigator watched with professional attentiveness. "What are your plans, Mr. Gersen?"

"I want to find Pallis Atwrode."

"Understandable, sir. But best that you do not interfere. The police are more effective than a single man. We should have news for you at any time."

"I don't think so," said Gersen. "By now they're in space."

The investigator, rising to his feet, made tacit admission that such was the case. "We will naturally keep you informed." He bowed, departed.

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Gersen immediately dressed, with the disapproving help of an orderly. His knees were weak; his head floated in a kind of generalized all-embracing pain; there was a faint singing in his ears from the drugs.

An elevator dropped him directly to a subway station; Gersen stood on an exchange platform, straining to formulate a coherent plan of action. A phrase kept repeating itself compulsively, like an inchworm traversing the inner surface of his skull: Poor Pallis, poor Pallis.

With no better plan in mind, he stepped into a capsule and sent himself to a station under the Esplanade. He emerged, but instead of going to the car, took a seat in a brasserie and drank coffee. "By now she's in space," he told himself once more. "And it's my fault."

My fault." Because he should have foreseen this sort of outcome. Pallis Atwrode knew Warweave, Kelle and Detteras well; she saw them daily, heard whatever gossip there was to be heard. Malagate the Star King, Malagate the Woe, was one of three men, and Pallis Atwrode evidently had knowledge which, coupled to Suthiro's indiscretions, made Malagate's incognito insecure. Hence she must be removed. Killed? Sold into slavery? Taken by Dasce for his personal use? Poor Pallis, poor Pallis!

Gersen looked out over the ocean. A rim of lavender was forming at the horizon, presaging dawn. The stars were fading.

"I've got to face up to it," Gersen told himself. "It's my responsibility, if she is harmed—but no. I'll kill Hildemar Dasce in any event. . . ." Suthiro, treacherous, fox-faced Suthiro was already as good as dead. And there was Malagate himself, the architect of the entire evil construction. As a Star King he somehow seemed less hateful: a dire beast, which might be expunged without emo-

tion.

Surfeited with hate and grief and misery, Gersen went to the car in the now empty parking area. There was the spot where Dasce had stood. There, where he had lain unconscious—what a wretched careless fool! How the spirit of his grandfather must writhe in shame!

He started the car, returned to his hotel. There were no messages.

Dawn had come to Avente. Rigel threw wide horizontal fans of light between the distant Catiline Hills and a darkling bank of

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clouds. Gersen set the alarm dial, dosed himself with a two-hour soporific, threw himself down on the bed.

He awoke to gloom and depression even more intense than before. Time had passed; whatever had been in store for Pallis Atwrode was now fact. Gersen ordered coffee; he could not bring himself to eat—

He considered what he must do. The IPCC? He would be forced to tell everything he knew. Could the IPCC act more efficiently if he laid his information before them? He could tell them that he suspected an administrator of the Sea Province University to be one of the so-called Demon Princes. What then? The IPCC, an elite police force, with the vices and virtues characteristic of such an organization, might or might not be trustworthy. Star Kings had possibly infiltrated the group: in that case Malagate would certainly be warned. And how could the information help rescue Pallis Atwrode? Hildemar Dasce was the kidnaper; Gersen had reported

this, and no information could be more explicit.

Another possibility: the exchange of Teehalt's world for Pallis Atwrode. . . . Gersen would gladly accept the trade—but whom to trade with? He still could not identify Malagate. The IPCC no doubt would have means to detect him. Then what? The exchange would no longer be conceivable. There might be a quiet execution—though the IPCC generally acted only upon the formal request of some authorized governmental agency. And in the meantime, what of Pallis Atwrode? She would be lost—a small delightful spark of life extinguished, forgotten.

But if Gersen knew Malagate's identity he would have vastly more leverage. He could make his offer with assurance. The logic of the situation seemed to be that Gersen proceed as before. But how slow! Think of Pallis, poor Pallis! Nevertheless, Hildemar Dasce had gone Beyond, and no effort of Gersen or of the IPCC could avail against this hard fact. Artel Malagate alone had the power to order his return. If Pallis Atwrode still lived.

The situation had not changed. As before, his first urgency was: identify Malagate. Then: bargain, or extort.

With his course of action once more clear, Gersen's spirits lifted. More accurately, his resolve and dedication burned at a fervent new heat. Hate gave him a heady, almost drunken, sense of omnipotence. No one, nothing, could withstand emotion so intense!

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The hour of his appointment with Detteras, Warweave and Kelle was approaching. Gersen dressed, descended to the garage, slid his car out upon the avenue and headed south.

Arriving at the university, he parked, rode the slideway to the mall, crossed the quadrangle to the College of Galactic Morphology. Hoping against hope, with a sudden quick jerking of the heart, he looked toward the reception desk. A different girl was on duty. He asked politely, "Where is Miss Atwrode this morning?"

"I don't know, sir. She hasn't arrived. Perhaps she's not feeling well."

Perhaps indeed, thought Gersen. He mentioned his appointment and proceeded to the office of Rundle Detteras.

Warweave and Kelle were there before him. The three undoubtedly had reached a common decision, a common course of action. Gersen looked from face to face, Detteras to Warweave to Kelle. One of these creatures was human only in similitude. At Smade's Tavern he had glimpsed him, and he tried to think back, to visualize, to remember. No image came. Black-dyed skin and

exotic costume were a disguise beyond his penetration. Furtively he assessed each. Which? Warweave: aquiline, cold-eyed, arrogant? Kelle: precise, humorless, austere? Or Detteras, whose geniality now seemed insincere and counterfeit?

He could not decide. He forced himself into a pose of studious courtesy, and made his primary gambit. "Let's simplify the whole matter," said Gersen. "I'll pay you—by this I naturally mean the college—for the decoding strip. I imagine the college could use a thousand SVU. In any event, that's the offer I wish to make."

His adversaries, each in his own style, seemed taken aback. Warweave raised his brows, Kelle stared fixedly, Detteras put on a puzzled half smile.

Warweave said, "But we understood that you intended to sell what you conceived to be your interest in this matter."

"I don't mind selling," said Gersen. "If you'll offer me enough."

"And how much is enough?"

"A million SVU, perhaps two, or perhaps three, if you'll go that high."

Kelle snorted. Detteras shook his big ugly head.

"Fees of that sort are not paid to locaters," said Warweave.

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"Has it been established which of you sent out Teehalt?" asked Gersen.

"What does it matter?" asked Warweave. "Your interest in the affair—money—has become clear enough." He looked from Kelle to Detteras. "Whoever it is has either forgotten or does not care to disclose himself. Doubtless that is the way the situation will re-

main.

Detteras said, "It's certainly inconsequential. Come now, Mr. Gersen, we have decided to make you a joint offer—certainly not as grandiose as the figure you name—"

"How much?"

"Possibly as much as 5,000 SVU."

"Ridiculous. This is an exceptional world."

"You do not know this," Warweave pointed out. "You have not been there; or so you claim."

"More to the point," said Kelle dryly, "neither have we."

"You have seen the photographs," said Gersen.

"Exactly," said Kelle. "We have seen no -more. Photographs can be faked without difficulty. I for one do not propose to pay out a large sum on the strength of three photographs."

"Understandable," said Gersen. "But for my part I don't intend to make a move without a guarantee. Don't forget I have suffered a loss, and this is my opportunity to make it good."

"Be reasonable!" Detteras urged bluffly. "Without the decoder, the filament is just another spool of wire."

"Not completely. Fourier analysis eventually can break the code."

"In theory. It is a long expensive process."

"Not as expensive as giving the filament away for next to nothing"

The discussion continued for an hour, Gersen gritting his teeth in impatience. A price of 100,000 SVU, to be deposited in escrow, was eventually arranged; the sale conditional upon a list of provisos relating to the physical characteristics of the world in question.

Agreement having been reached, telescreen contact with the Bureau of Deeds and Contracts at Avente was made. The four men identified themselves formally, represented their interests; the contract was read into the records.

A second call, to the Bank of Alphanor, established the escrow account.

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The three administrators now sat back and inspected Gersen, who in his turn looked from one to the other. "So much is settled. Which of you goes with me to inspect this world?"

The three exchanged glances. "I'll go," said Wat-weave. "I'll be very much interested to go."

"I was about to volunteer my own services," said Detteras.

"In that case," said Kelle, "I might as well come along too. I'm very much overdue for a change."

Gersen seethed in frustration. He had expected Malagat—whoever he might be—to volunteer his services; in fact, to assert them. Gersen could then take this individual aside and offer a new set of conditions: the filament for Pallis Atwode. What, after all, was the world to him? His single goal was Malagat's identity, and

after that his life.

But now this plan had gone by the boards. If all three went out to Teehalt's planet, the identification of Malagate must depend upon new circumstances. Meanwhile the fate of Palhs Atwrode bore no thinking about.

Gersen made a last-ditch protest. "My boat is small for four. Better if only one went out with me."

"No difficulty there," Detteras stated. "We will go out in the departmental ship. Plenty of room aboard."

"Another matter," said Gersen gruffly. 'T have urgent business I must see to in the near future. I am sorry to inconvenience you, but I insist that we leave today "

There was vigorous and general protest: all three declared themselves tied up for at least a week by engagements, appointments, and commitments.

Gersen put on a show of temper. "Gentlemen, you have wasted enough of my time. We leave today, or I'll take the filament elsewhere—or destroy it." He watched the three faces, hoping to surprise Malagate in dismay. Warweave gave him a glance of metallic dislike; Kelle examined him as if he were an insubordinate child;

Detteras shook his head ruefully. There was a moment of silence. W^ho would be the first to agree, no matter how reluctantly, to the conditions31

Warweave said in a colorless voice, "I consider that you are taking a very arbitrary and high-handed position."

"Confound it," grumbled Detteras, "I can't simply ditch everything in five minutes."

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"One of you should be able to tear yourself loose," Gersen suggested hopefully. "We can make a preliminary survey—sufficient so I can take my money and be off about my business."

"Humph," grunted Detteras

Kelle said slowly, "I suppose that I would be able to go out."

W^arweave nodded "My engagements, with considerable inconvenience, can be postponed "

Detteras threw his hands into the air, turned to the screen, called his secretary. "Cancel all my appointments Urgent business is taking me out of town."

"For how long, sir3"

"I don't know," said Detteras, with a hard glance for Gersen.

"Indefinitely"

Gersen continued his inspection of the three men. Detteras alone had displayed irritation. Kelle obviously regarded the trip as an unexpected outing, Warweave maintained a cool detachment.

So much for that particular ploy, thought Gersen. He went to stand by the door. "We'll meet at the spaceport, agreed? At—let us say—seven o'clock. I will bring the filament; one of you must bring the decoding strip."

The three acquiesced, and Gersen departed.

Returning to Avente, Gersen pondered the future. What challenges would he face from these three men, one of whom was Attel Malagate? It would be foolhardy not to make preparations, to arrange safeguards; this was the training imposed upon him by his grandfather, a methodical man, who had labored diligently to discipline Gersen's innate tendency to rely upon improvisation.

At the hotel Gersen examined his belongings, and made certain selections, then packed and checked out. After painstaking precautions against stick-tights and human trackers, he went to a branch office of the Amalgamated Distribution Service, another of the monster semipublic utility companies with agencies throughout the Oikumene. In a booth he consulted catalogues which offered him a choice of a million products produced by thousands of fabricators. Making his choice, he punched the requisite buttons, went to the service counter.

There was a wait of three minutes, while automatic machinery ranged the shelves of the enormous underground warehouse, then the mechanism Gersen had ordered appeared on a belt. He examined it, paid the clerk, departed, and rode the subway to the space-

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port. He inquired the location of the university ship from an attendant, who took him out on a terrace and pointed down the long line of spacecraft large and small, each in its bay.

"Notice, sir, the red and yellow yacht with side platform? Well, count down three. First the CD 16, then the old Parabola, and then the green and blue ship with the big observation dome. That's the job. She's going out today, eh?"

"Yes. About seven. How did you know?"

"One of the crew is already aboard, I had to let him on."

"I see." Gersen went down to the field, walked along the way which led past the ranked spacecraft. From the shadow of the ship in the next bay, he inspected the university ship. The contours were distinctive, as was the rather elaborate emblem at the bow. Recollection stirred at the back of his mind: somewhere before he had seen this ship. Where? At Smade's Planet on the landing field between mountains and black ocean. It was the ship used by the Star

King.

The shape of a man passed in front of one of the observation windows. When he moved out of sight Gersen crossed the space between the two ships.

Cautiously he tried the outer entry port; it eased ajar. He stepped into the transition chamber, peered through the panel into the ship's main saloon. Suthiro the Sarkoy worked at an object which he apparently had attached to the underside of a shelf.

Inside Gersen something more ferocious than gladness—a peculiar exaltation of hate—swelled and burst, suffusing his enure body. He tried the inner portal; it was locked from within. There was, however, an emergency disengagement which would unlock the door if pressure were equalized between cabin and outer atmosphere. Gersen touched the emergency switch. There was an audible click. Within the ship, all was silent. Not daring to glance through the panel, Gersen pressed his ear to the port. Useless: no sound could pass through the laminated structure. He waited a minute, then carefully eased himself up to look into the cabin once

more.

Suthiro had heard nothing. He had gone forward, and now appeared to be adjusting the padding around a stanchion. His heavy flat-skulled head was bent forward, his lips were pursed out.

Gersen slid back the port and stepped into the cabin, a projac pointed at the big square buckle of Suthiro's steppe-rider harness.

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"Skop Suthiro," said Gersen. "This is a pleasure for which I had not dared hope."

Suthiro's dog-brown eyes opened and shut; he grinned broadly. "I was waiting for your arrival."

"Indeed. And why?"

"I wanted to continue our discussion of last night."

"We were speaking of Godogma, the long-legged walker with wheels on his feet. Plainly he has wheeled across the path of your life, and you will never drive your wagon over the Gorobundur."

Suthiro became very still, his eyes measuring Gersen.

"What happened to the girl?" asked Gersen gently.

Suthiro considered, then rejected the feasibility of feigning innocence. "She was taken by Fancy Dasce."

"With your connivance. Where is she now?"

Suthiro shrugged. "He had orders to kill her. Why, I don't

know. I am told very little. Dasce will not kill her. Not till he has the full use of her. He is a khet.^ Suthiro sneered the epithet, a metaphor linking Dasce to the obscenely fecund Sarkovy mink.

"He has left Alphanor?"

"Certainly." Suthiro seemed surprised at Gersen's naivete. "Probably for his little planet." He made a fretful uncomfortable motion, which brought him an imperceptible four inches closer to Gersen.

"Where is this planet?"

"Ha! Do you think he would tell me? Or anyone else?"

"In that case—but I must ask you to stand back."

"Pah," whispered Suthiro in a childish display of petulance. "I can poison you any time I choose."

Gersen allowed a faint smile to cross his lips. "I have already poisoned you."

Suthiro raised his eyebrows. "When? You have never closed with me."

"Last night. I touched you when I handed you paper. Look at the back of your right hand."

Suthiro stared in slow horror at the red weal. "Cluthe!"

Gersen nodded. "Cluthe."

"But—why should you do this to me?"

"You merit such an end."

Suthiro launched himself like a leopard; the projector in Gersen's hand discharged a stalk of blue-white energy. Suthiro fell to

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the deck, lay staring up at Gersen. "Better plasma than cluthe," he whispered huskily.

"You'll die by cluthe," said Gersen.

Suthiro shook his head. "Not while I carry my poisons."

"Godogma calls you. So now speak truth. Do you hate Hilde-mar Dasce?"

"I hate Dasce indeed." Suthiro seemed surprised, as if there

were anyone who did not hate Dasce.

"I would kill Dasce."

"Most people would do no less."

"Where is his planet?"

"Beyond. I know no more."

"When are you to see him next?"

"Never. I am dying, and Dasce is bound for a deeper hell than mine."

"If you lived?"

"Never. I was to return to Sarkovy."

"Who knows of this planet?"

"Malagate . . . perhaps."

"Is there no one else? Tristano?"

"No. Dasce tells little. The world is airless." Suthiro carefully hunched himself together. "Already the skin begins to itch."

"Listen, Suthiro. You hate Dasce. Yes? And you hate me, for I have poisoned you. Think! You, a Sarkoy, poisoned by me, and so easily."

Suthiro muttered, "I hate you indeed."

"Tell me how to find Dasce, then. One of us must kill the other. The death will be your doing."

Suthiro rocked his furry head in desolation. "But I cannot tell you what I do not know."

"What has he said of his world? Does he talk?"

"He boasts: Dasce is a vile braggart. His world is harsh; only a man like himself could master this world. He lives in the crater of a dead volcano."

"What of the sun?"

Suthiro hunched himself together. "It is dim. Yes. It must be red. They asked Dasce about his face—in a tavern. Why had he dyed himself red? To match his sun, said Dasce, which was the same color, and not much larger.

"A red dwarf," mused Gersen.

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"So it might be."

"Think! What else? Which direction? Which constellation? Which sector?"

"He says nothing. And now—I do not care. I think only of Godogma. Go away so that I may kill myself decently."

Gersen surveyed the huddled form without emotion. "What are you doing here in the ship?"

Suthiro looked at his hand curiously, then rubbed his chest. "I feel it moving." He examined Gersen. "Well, then, since you would look on my death: watch." He put hands to his neck, convulsed his knuckles. The brown eyes stared. "In thirty seconds now."

"Who would know of Dasce's planet? Has he friends?"

"Friends?" Suthiro, even in his last seconds, took occasion to sneer.

"Where does he lodge in Avente?"

"North of Sailmaker Beach. In an old hut on Melnoy Heights."

"Who is Malagate? What is his name?"

Suthiro spoke in a whisper. "A Star King has no name."

"What name does he use on Alphanor?"

The thick lips opened and closed. Words rattled in the pale throat. "You killed me. Should Dasce fail, let Malagate kill you." The eyelids Jerked, quivered. Suthiro lay back, seemed to stiffen, made no further movement.

Gersen looked down at the body. He walked around behind it, studied it. The Sarkoy were notoriously treacherous and revengeful. With his toe he attempted to turn the body over on its face. Quick as the strike of a serpent the arm flashed around, poison prongs ready. Gersen jerked back; the projac ejected a second dazzling line of energy. This time Suthiro the Sarkoy lay truly dead.

Gersen searched the corpse. In the pouch he found a sum of money, w<sup>h</sup>ich he tucked into his own wallet. There was a kit of poisons, which Gersen examined, then, unable to comprehend Suthiro's cryptic nomenclature, discarded; also a device no larger than his thumb, intended to project crystalline needles of poison or virus on a Jet of compressed air: a man could be infected from a distance of fifty feet and know nothing save a faint tingle. Suthiro carried a projac similar to his own, three stilettos, a packet of fruit lozenges, undoubtedly lethal.

Gersen dropped the weapons back into Suthiro's pouch, dragged the body to a waste ejection locker, and crammed it away

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out of sight. Once in space, the touch of a button would dispose of Sivij Suthiro the Sarkoy. Next he looked to discover what Suthiro, while alive, had so earnestly been trying to achieve. Under the shelf

he found a small toggle switch controlling a set of wires which led to a concealed relay, which in turn activated the valves on four reservoirs of gas at various secret spots around the cabin. Death gas or anaesthetic? He detached one of the reservoirs and found a label printed in the crabbed Sarkoy syllabary: Tironvirasko's Instantaneous Narcoleptic, an odorless sleep inducent with minimal post redacts. It seemed that Malagate, no less methodical than Gersen, was taking his own precautions.

Gersen took each of the four reservoirs to the entry port, released their contents, replaced them where he had found them. He left Suthiro's switch in place, but changed its function.

This accomplished, Gersen brought out his own device: the timer he had purchased at Amalgamated, and a grenade from his armament.

After a moment's reflection, he secured it inside the reactor housing, where it would do maximum damage, and yet be convenient in case of need.

He glanced at his watch: one o'clock. Time was growing short. Far too short to accomplish all that must be done. He departed, locking the ship behind him and, returning to the terminal, took the subway for Sailmaker Beach.

At a stand beside the station Gersen selected a self-service cab—a single-seat scooter, gyroscopically balanced, with a transparent canopy. Two SVU in the slot gave him possession for an hour. Stepping aboard, he drove north through the noisy streets of Sailmaker Beach.

The district had a unique flavor. Avente, a suave cosmopolitan city, was almost indistinguishable from fifty other polities of the Oikumene. Sailmaker Beach resembled no other locale in the known universe. The buildings were low, thick-walled, constructed for the most part of crushed coquina concrete, white or color-washed; in the blazing light of Rigel even pastels seemed intense. For some reason lavender and pale blue, along with white, were the most popular tints. The district was home to scores of off-world nationalities, each forming an enclave, each with its characteristic food shops, restaurants, specialty houses. Though widely disparate of origin, habit and physiognomy, the inhabitants of the district

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were uniformly voluble, half suspicious, half naive, contemptuous of outsiders, equally contemptuous of each other. They earned their living from tourists, as domestic servants or day laborers, as proprietors of small shops and craft studios, as entertainers or musicians in the innumerable taverns, bistros, bordellos, restaurants.

At the north rose Melnoy Heights, and here the architecture changed to tall narrow apartment buildings, of almost Gothic elongation, each seeming to peer over the other's shoulder, across Sailmaker Beach to the more conventional districts. In Melnoy Heights Hildemar Dasce reputedly had lodgings. As methodically as short-

ness of time and anxiety allowed, Gersen sought information regarding him.

There was no Hildemar Dasce listed in the Melnoy Heights Directory—nor had Gersen expected to find one. Dasce undoubtedly would desire privacy, the pose of normality.

Gersen began to visit the taverns, describing the tall man with the split nose, the red skin, the chalk-blue cheeks. He soon encountered folk who had noticed Dasce, but not until the fourth tavern did he find anyone who had spoken with him.

"You must mean Beauty," said the bartender, a stubby orange-skinned man, with russet hair arranged in fine glossy festoons and curls. Gersen stared in fascination at the chain carved from turquoise which looped from a hole in his left nostril to a hole in the lobe of his left ear. "Beauty comes in often to drink. A spaceman, he claims himself, but as to this I can't be certain. I have often declared myself a great lover. All of us lie, as much or more than necessary. 'What is truth?' asks Pons Pilarus, in the fable, and I answer: 'A commodity as cheap as air which we hide as if it were as precious as yewl stone,' " The bartender was disposed to further philosophy; Gersen hauled him back to the issue at hand. "Where does Beauty Dasce house himself?"

"Up the hill, up back." The bartender made a vague gesture. "I can tell you no more, because I know no more."

Gersen rode his scooter up the steep lanes and switchbacks of Melnoy Heights. Inquiry at another tavern, a tiresome series of questions at various shops, lobbies and street corners, finally resulted in explicit directions to Dasce's lodgings. Riding a little unpaved road which left the area of tall apartments, Gersen circled a steep rocky hillside, where gangs of children scrambled like goats. At the end of the road stood an isolated rectangular cottage, rudely,

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if substantially, constructed. It commanded a magnificent view over the ocean; over Sailmaker Beach; the Grand Esplanade, dwindling far to the south; and, only just perceptible through the haze, the apartment towers of Remo.

Gersen approached the cottage with care, though it exuded the indefinable but unmistakable feeling of vacancy. He walked around peering through the windows, seeing nothing of interest. After a quick glance to right and left, he broke in the sash of an inconspicuous window, and cautiously, in the event that Dasce had set out mantraps, climbed into the cottage.

The house was strong with the feel of Dasce's habitancy: a faintly acrid odor, together with an aura more subtle than odor, of crudeness, dark, pompous, magnificent strength. There were four rooms, encompassing the usual functions. Gersen made a quick

general investigation, then concentrated his attention upon the parlor. The ceiling was scrolled plaster, painted pale yellow. The floor was covered by a carpet of greenish-yellow fiber, the walls were a checkerboard of maroon and dark brown hardwood tiles. At the far end Dasce had placed a desk and a heavy chair. The wall over the desk was hung with dozens of photographs: Dasce in all poses, against every variety of background.

There was Dasce in startling close-up, revealing every pore of his skin, the split cartilage of his nose, the lidless blue eyes. There was Dasce in the costume of a Bernal flame fighter—varnished black plates and horns and cusps and prongs, like a titanic stag beetle. There was Dasce in a palanquin of yellow rattan, hung with persimmon silk, borne on the shoulders of six black-haired maidens. The angle of the wall displayed a set of photographs of a man who was not Dasce. Apparently they had been taken over a period of years. The first showed the face of a man thirty years old: a sturdy, confident, bulldog face, serene, even complacent. The face had changed alarmingly in the second of the photographs. The cheeks were sunken, the eyes started from their sockets, the nerves at the temples showed in an intricate mesh. In each succeeding photograph the face became ever more haggard... . Gersen glanced along a row of books: pornography of a childishly obscene nature, weapon manuals, an index to Sarkoy poisons, a late edition of Handbook to the Planets, an index to Dasce's microbook library, a Star Directory.

The desk itself was extremely handsome: side panels of dark

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wood carved to represent griffins and winged serpents in a jungle;

the surface an exquisite inlay of opals polished flat. Gersen checked the drawers and pigeonholes. They were barren of information—completely empty, in fact. Gersen stood back, a tide of grim despair rising within him. He looked at his watch. In four hours he must meet Detteras, Warweave and Kelle at the spaceport. He stood in the center of the room, carefully scrutinized every article. Somewhere there must be a link with Dasce's secret planet; how to recognize it?

He went to the bookshelf, took down the Star Directory^ examined the lay of the binding. If Dasce's red dwarf were listed he certainly must have located it in the directory. If he had done so several times, there might be a crease, a smear, a discoloration. No such mark was visible. Gersen held the book by its two covers, let it hang. A third through the book the pages separated a hairbreadth. Gersen carefully opened the book at this spot, looked down the listing. Each star—and on this page there were two hundred—was described under eleven headings: index number, constellation placement as viewed from Earth, star type, planetary information, mass, vector of velocity, diameter, density, location coordinates, distance from the center of the Oikumene, remarks.

Twenty-three red dwarfs were listed. Eight of these were double. Eleven hung solitary in space, forlorn feeble sparks. Four were accompanied by planets, eight planets in all. These four Gersen scrutinized with especial care. Reluctantly he was forced to conclude that none of these planets could conceivably be considered habitable. Five of the planets were too hot, one was completely awash in liquid methane, two were too massive to allow human toleration of the gravity. Gersen's mouth drooped in disappointment. Nothing. Still, the page at one time had been earnestly consulted; there must be information here which Dasce needed or valued. Gersen tore the page from the book.

The front door opened; Gersen whirled. In the opening stood a middle-aged man no larger than a boy often. His head was round;

his eyes brimmed with curiosity, flicking over Gersen, around the room. He had large features, long pointed ears, a heavy protuberant mouth: a Highland Imp from the Highlands of Krokinole, one of the more specialized races of the Concourse.

He came forward, fearlessly swaggering. "Who are you, that's

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in Mr. Spock's house? Looking through Mr. Spock's things? A burglar, I think."

Gersen replaced the book, and the Imp said, "That's one of his precious volumes, that bit of stuff. Not likely he wants your fingers all over it. I'd better go for the constable."

"Come back here," said Gersen. "Who are you?"

"I'm the by-your-leave caretaker, that's who I am. Also this is my land and my house and my freehold. Mr. Spock is the man I let to, and why should I give every burglar north of Swansea leave to pillage and loot?"

"Mr. Spock is a criminal," said Gersen.

"And if he is, it's proof then that there's no honor among thieves."

"I'm no thief," said Gersen mildly. "The IPCC is after your tenant, Mr. Spock."

The Imp bent his big head forward. "Be you IPCC? Show me your blazer."

On the assumption that a Krokinole Imp would not recognize an IPCC blazer when he saw one, Gersen displayed a transparent tablet, with his photograph under a gold seven-pointed star. He touched it to his forehead and it glowed into light, a factitious display which impressed the Imp. He instantly became effusive in his

cordiality.

"Never did think that Mr. Spock was up to good. He'll come to a bad end, mark my words! What's he done now?"

"Kidnap. Murder."

"Bad deeds, both. I'll have to caution Mr. Spock."

"He is a wicked man. How long has he lived here?"

"Donkey's years."

"You know him well, then?"

"Well indeed. Who drinks with him when everyone else turns their heads as if Mr. Spock smelt poorly? Me. I drink with him, and frequently. It's no treat to look like Mr. Spock, and I have my compassion."

"So you're Spock's friend."

The big features twisted and moved in successive displays of tolerance, crafty speculation, virtuous indignation. "I? Certainly not. Do I look the sort who consorts with criminals?"

"But—let us say—you have heard Spock talking."

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"That I have, and oh, the tales he tells!" The Imp's eyes rolled ludicrously upward. "Do I believe him? No."

"Has he ever spoken of a secret world where he has a hide-away?"

"Again and again. He calls it Thumbnail Gulch. Why? He always shakes his head when he's asked. A tight-mouthed man, Mr. Spock, for all his loose braggadocio."

"What more has he said of his world?"

The Imp shrugged. "The sun's blood-red, hardly enough to keep him warm."

"And where is this world?"

"Aha! That's where he's sly. No word of this will he speak. Many's the time I've wondered, thinking that suppose poor Mr. Spock took sick on this lonesome world—who'd know to tell his friends?"

Gersen smiled grimly. "And this argument never induced him to confide in you?"

"Never. Why do you wish to know?"

"He's kidnaped an innocent young woman and taken her to this world."

"The rogue. What a raffish creature." The Imp shook his head in distress, from which a certain measure of wistful envy was not absent. "I'll never let my land and house to him again."

"Think. What has Spock said regarding the world?"

The Imp screwed up his eyes. "Thumbnail Gulch. The world is bigger than the sun. Astonishing, no?"

"If the sun is a red dwarf, not too astonishing."

"Volcanos. There are live volcanos on this world."

"Volcanos? That's odd. A red dwarf's planet shouldn't have volcanos. It's too old."

"Old or young, the volcanos thrive. Mr. Spock lives in a dead crater, and he sees a whole line of volcanos smoking up along the horizon."

"What else?"

"Nought."

"How long does it take to get to his planet?"

"That I can't say."

"You've never met any of his friends?"

"Tosspots at the tavern, no more. But yes. One. Less than a year ago—an Earthman, a heavy cruel man."

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"Tristano?"

"I know nothing of his name. Mr. Spock had just returned from a business trip Beyond, to a planet called New Hope. Do you know it?"

"I've never been there."

"Nor I, though I've wandered far. But the very day of his return, while we sit in Gelperino's Saloon, the Earthman comes in. 'Where have you been?' he asks. 'Ten days I've been here, and we left New Hope together.' Mr. Spock gives him his haughty look. 'If you must know, I looked in on my little hideaway for half a day. I have obligations there, you know!' And the Earthman said no more."

Gersen thought a moment and suddenly was in a hurry to leave.  
"What more do you know?"

"Nothing more."

Gersen made a last survey of the house, under the inquisitive scrutiny of the Imp, then departed, ignoring the Imp's sudden harsh demands for damages when he discovered the broken window sash. Hastily, now, Gersen rode down through the winding avenues, across Sailmaker Beach, back into central Avente. He went to an office of the Universal Technical Consultative Service, and gained the attention of an operator.

"Set up this problem," said Gersen. "TWX) ships leave the planet New Hope. One proceeds directly here, to Avente. The other goes to a red dwarf star, spends half a day, then comes to Avente, arriving ten days later. I want a list of the red dwarf stars which this second ship might have visited."

The operator considered. "There is obviously an ellipsoid shell here, the foci being New Hope and Alphanor. We must take into account the accelerations and decelerations, the probable coast periods and landing times. There will necessarily be a locus of most probability, and areas of diminishing probability."

"Set up the problem so that the machine lists these stars in order of probability."

"To what limits?"

"Oh—one chance in fifty. Include also the constants of these stars as given in the directory."

"Very well, sir. The fee will be 25 SVU."

Gersen brought forth money; the operator translated the problem into precise language, spoke into a microphone. Thirty seconds

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later a sheet of paper dropped from a slot. The operator glanced at it, signed his name, handed it without a word to Gersen.

Forty-three stars were listed. Gersen compared the list with the page he had torn from Dasce's Directory. A single star occurred on both lists. Gersen frowned in puzzlement. The star was a member of a binary, without planets. The couple was. . . Naturally! thought Gersen, illumination flooding his mind. How else could volcanos exist on the companion of a red dwarf? Dasce's world was not a planet, but a dark star: a dead surface, perhaps still faintly warm. Gersen had heard of such worlds. Usually they were too dense, too massive for human occupancy, but if a small star in the course of two or three billion years happened to sweep up enough detritus to build a thick shell of light material, the surface gravity might well

be reduced to a tolerable level.

At ten minutes to seven, Kelle, Warweave and Detteras appeared at the spaceport, wearing spacemen's harness, their skins washed the blue-brown tone which originally, in popular credence, was thought to protect the human organism from certain mysterious Jarnell effluviae, and which by usage had become a normal adjunct to the space traveler's accoutrements. They halted in the middle of the lobby, looked about, spied Gersen, turned to face him as he approached.

Gersen surveyed them with a dour smile. "We seem to be ready, all of us. I thank you gentlemen for your promptness."

"Achieved, necessarily, at great inconvenience to all of us," stated Kelle.

"In due course the reason for haste will become clear," said Gersen. "Your luggage?"

"On its way to the ship," said Detteras.

"Then we will leave. We have clearance?"

"Everything has been arranged," said Warweave.

The group proceeded from the lobby and walked around to the docking area, toward which a crane was already trundling.

The luggage, four large cases and as many smaller packets, was stacked beside the ship. Warweave unlocked the entry ports; Gersen and Kelle passed the cases into the cabin. Detteras made a bluff attempt to assert command. "We have four compartments aboard. I'll take forward starboard; Kelle, you'll have starboard aft; War-

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weave, port forward; Gersen, port aft. We might as well move our luggage out of the cabin."

"One moment," said Gersen. "There is a situation that we must resolve before we proceed any further."

Detteras' big face creased in a scowl. "What sort of situation?"

"We are two parties of interest here—at least two parties. Neither trusts the other. We are going Beyond, past the edge of law. All of us, recognizing this fact, have brought weapons. I propose that we lock all weapons in the security cabinet; that we open the luggage and, if necessary, strip ourselves naked, to assure each other that all the weapons have been declared. Since you are three to my one, if any advantage lies to either side, it is to yours."

"A highly undignified process," grumbled Detteras.

Kelle, more equable now than Gersen could have believed, said, "Come now, Rundle. Gersen is merely verbalizing reality. In short,

I agree with him. The more so since I carry no weapons."

Warweave made a careless gesture. "Search me, search my luggage; but let's get under way."

Detteras shook his head, opened his case, withdrew a projac of great power, tossed it upon the table. "I have my doubts about the wisdom of this. I have nothing against Mr. Gersen personally—but suppose he takes us to a far planet where he has accomplices waiting, who capture us and hold us for ransom? Stranger crimes have occurred."

Gersen laughed. "If you consider this a real danger you need only remain here. I don't care whether one goes or all go."

"What of your own weapons?" asked Warweave dryly.

Gersen brought forth his projac, a pair of stilettos, a dagger, four grenades the size of walnuts.

"My word," said Detteras. "You maintain quite an armament."

"I occasionally have need for it," said Gersen. "Now, the luggage. . . ." The accumulated arms were placed in a cabinet which was secured with four locks, each man retaining a key to one of the locks.

The crane trundled up to the ship; the boom swung around. Hooks engaged in trammels; the ship jerked, hung free, was carried out on the field.

Detteras went to the main console and touched a button, which flashed a row of green lights. "Everything ready to go," he said. "Tanks full, machinery in order."

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Kelle cleared his throat and brought forth a handsomely mounted wooden case bound in red leather. "This is one of the departmental rationalizers. You have Mr. Teehalt's filament, I assume?"

"Yes," said Gersen. "I have the filament with me. But there is no hurry. Before we engage the monitor we must reach zero base point, which is far distant."

"Very well," said Detteras. "What are the coordinates?"

Gersen brought forward a slip of paper. "If you will allow me," he said politely, "I will make the settings on the autopilot."

With ill grace Detteras rose to his feet. "It seems to me that there is no longer reason for distrust. We have stripped ourselves of our weapons; all the issues have been settled. So let us all relax and behave amicably."

"With pleasure," said Gersen.

The ship was lowered to the launching pad, the crane disengaged and rolled away. The group settled themselves into takeoff seats; Detteras started the automatic launching-sequence. There was a Jar, a sense of acceleration, and Alphanor retreated below.

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From the chapter "Malagate the Woe," in the book *The Demon Princes*, by Caril Carphen, published by Elucidarian Press, New Wexford, Aloysius, Vega:

... In our cursory summary we have seen how each Demon Prince is unique and highly individuated, each displaying his characteristic style.

This is all the more remarkable in that the basic variety of possible crimes is limited and can be numbered on the fingers. There is crime for gain: extortion, robbery (which includes piracy and raids on settled communities), swindling in its infinite guises. There is slavery, with its various manifestations: procuring, selling, and using slaves. Murder, coercion, and torture are merely adjuncts to these activities. The personal depravities are equally limited, and can be classified under sexual debauchery, sadism, violent acts prompted by pique, vmdictiveness, revenge, or vandalism.

Doubtless the catalogue is incomplete, perhaps even illogical, but this is beside the point. I merely wish to display the basic paucity, in order to illustrate this point: that each of the Demon Princes, in inflicting one or another atrocity, impresses the act with his own style and seems to create a new crime.

In the previous chapters we have examined the maniacal Kokor Hekkus and his theories of absolute frightfulness; the devious Viole Falushe, voluptuary, sybarite, and amateur of kinaesthetics.

Completely distinctive is Artel Malagate, the Woe, in

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style and mannerism. Rather than enlarging himself, projecting a macroscopic delineation of his person and deeds, to mesmerize his victims and intimidate his enemies, Malagate prefers the possibly equally chilling device of silence, invisibility, dispassionate impersonality. There is no reliable description of Malagate. Certainly Malagate is a cognomen, derived from a folk epic of old Quantique. He acts with implacable viciousness, although his cruelties are never wanton, and, if he maintains a pleasure palace after the style of Viole Falushe or Howard Alan Treesong, it is a well-guarded secret.

Malagate's activities are primarily extortion and slavery. In the Conclave of 1500 at Smade's Planet, where five Demon Princes and a score of lesser operators met to define and circumscribe their activities, Malagate was allotted that sector of the Beyond centered on Ferrier's Cluster. It includes over a hundred settlements, towns and vicinities, upon all of which Malagate levies assessments. He rarely encounters protest or complaint, for he need merely cite the example of Mount Pleasant, a town of 5,000 persons which declined to meet his demands. In the year 1499 Malagate invited four other princes to join him. The junta swept down upon the town, captured and enslaved the entire population.

On the planet Grabhorne he maintains a plantation of about ten thousand square miles, with a slave population estimated at twenty thousand. Here are carefully tilled farms, and factories which build exquisite furniture, musical instruments and electronic mechanisms. The slaves are not overtly ill treated, but working hours are long, the dormitories are drab, social opportunities are restricted. Punishment is a term in the mines, which few survive.

Attel Malagate's attention is usually wide and dispassionate, but he sometimes focuses upon some individual. The planet Caro lies in an area which none of the Demon Princes claim. Mayor Janous Paragiglia of the city Desde espoused and advocated a militia and space navy sufficient to protect Caro, and to seek out and destroy Malagate or any other of the Demon Princes who dared to attack Caro. Malagate kidnaped Janous Paragiglia and tortured him for

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thirty-nine days, telecasting the entire process to the cities of Caro, to all the planets in his own sector, and, in one of his rare acts of bravado, to the Rigel Concourse.

As mentioned, his personal appetites are unknown. A rumor frequently encountered runs to the effect that Malagate enjoys engaging in personal gladiatorial duels with able-bodied enemies, with swords for weapons. Malagate is said to exhibit superhuman strength and dexterity, and seems to derive satisfaction from slowly hewing his opponent to bits.

Like certain other Demon Princes, Malagate maintains a discrete and respectable identity within the Oikumene and, if whispers are correct, occupies a prestigious position on one of the major worlds. . . .

Alphanor became a misty pale disk, mingled with the stars. Within the ship the four men settled into an uneasy accommodation. Kelle and Warweave startled a quiet conversation. Detteras stared forward into star-spattered emptiness. Gersen lounged to the side,

watching the three men.

One of them—not completely a man, or better, a simulated man—was Malagate the Woe. Which?

Gersen thought he knew.

There was still no certainty in his mind; his conjecture was based on indications, probabilities, suppositions. Malagate, for his part, must still feel secure in his incognito. He had no reason to suspect Gersen's objective; he must still consider Gersen no more than an acquisitive locater out to drive as hard a bargain as he could. So much the better, thought Gersen, if it would help him to a sure identification. He wanted two things only: the freedom of Pallis Atwrode, and the death of Malagate. And, of course, of Hildemar Dasce. If Pallis Atwrode were dead—so much the worse for Dasce.

Surreptitiously Gersen watched his suspect. Was this man Malagate? Frustrating to be so close to his goal. Malagate, of course, had his own plans. Behind the human skull worked thought patterns incommensurable to his own, moving toward a goal still obscure.

Gersen could define at least three areas of uncertainty in the situation. First, did Malagate still carry weapons or have access to weapons previously concealed aboard the ship? A possibility, al-

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though he might be relying entirely on the hidden tanks of anaesthetic gas.

Second, were either or both of the other men his accomplices? Again a possibility, but distinctly less strong.

Third, and a less simple set of circumstances: What would happen when the ship reached Dasce's dead star? Here again variables piled on variables. Did Malagate know of Dasce's hideaway? If so, would he recognize it on sight? The answers here were both Probably yes.

The question then would be, how to surprise and either capture or kill Hildemar Dasce without hindrance from Malagate.

Gersen reached a decision. Detteras had urged the need for amicability. One thing was sure: amicability would be sternly tested before long.

Time passed; a wary routine was established. Gersen chose a propitious time and gave the body of Suthiro to space. The ship slid effortlessly past shining stars, at astounding speed, by means only vaguely comprehensible to the men who controlled it.

The pale of human civilization and law came to an end; at some precise instant the ship passed Beyond and struck up and out toward the dwindling fringes of the galaxy. Gersen kept steady if discreet surveillance over his three shipmates, wondering who would first show concern, anxiety, or suspicion as to the immediate destination.

This person was Kelle, though any of the three might have been muttering together out of Gersen's hearing. "Where the devil are we headed?" Kelle inquired peevishly. "This is no area to attract a locator; we're practically in intergalactic space."

Gersen took up a relaxed position. "I have not been altogether candid with you three gentlemen."

Three faces turned swiftly, three pairs of eyes bored in at him.

"What do you mean?" grated Detteras,

"It is not a serious matter. I have been compelled to make a detour. After I perform a certain errand, we will proceed with our original plans." He raised his hand as Detteras took a deep breath. "It serves no purpose to admonish me; the situation is unavoidable."

Warweave spoke in an icy voice: "What is this 'situation'?"

"I'll be glad to explain, and I'm sure all of you will appreciate my predicament. First of all, I seem to have made an enemy of a well-known criminal. He is known as Malagate the Woe." Gersen glanced from face to face. "Doubtless you all have heard of him;

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he is one of the Demon Princes. The day before we left one of his lieutenants, a creature named Hildemar Dasce, kidnaped a young woman I happen to be interested in and conveyed her to a private world. I feel obligated to this young woman; she is suffering through no fault other own, but merely from Malagate's desire to punish or intimidate me. I believe I have located Dasce's planet; I plan to rescue this young woman, and I hope for your cooperation."

Detteras spoke in a voice thick with rage. "Why could you not have told us of your plans before we left? You insisted on leaving, you forced us to break our engagements at great inconvenience—"

Gersen said mildly, "You have some cause for resentment, but, since my own time is limited, I thought it best to combine the two projects." He grinned as Detteras' neck swelled in new fury. "With luck, this business will not take long, and we will be on our way without delay."

Kelle said meditatively, "The kidnaper has conveyed the young woman to a world in this vicinity?"

"I think so. I hope so."

"And you expect our help in rescuing this young woman?"

"Only in a passive sense. I merely ask that you don't interfere with my plans."

"Suppose that the kidnaper resents your intrusion. Suppose that

he kills you."

"The possibility exists. But I have the advantage of surprise. He must feel completely secure, and probably I will have no great trouble overpowering him."

"Overpowering him?" inquired Wanveave, delicately sardonic.  
"Overpowering or killing him."

At this moment the Jarnell kicked out, the ship whined down into ordinary velocities. Ahead glowed a dim red star. If it were double, its companion was yet invisible.

Gersen said, "As I say, surprise is my most important asset, so therefore I must ask that none of you through inadvertence or malice use the radio." Gersen already had disabled the radio, but he saw no reason to put Malagate on his guard. "I'll explain my plans so that there can be no misunderstanding. First, I'll bring the ship close enough to inspect the surface of the planet, but far enough out to avoid radar detection. If my theories are correct and I locate Dasce's habitation, I'll go to the far side of the world, approach the

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surface, and land as close to Dasce's dwelling as feasible. Then I'll take the platform flyer and do what must be done. The three of you need only wait till I return; then we shall be once more on our way to Teehalt's planet. I know I can count on your cooperation, because I naturally shall take the monitor filament with me and hide it somewhere before I confront Hildemar Dasce. If I am killed, the filament will be lost. Naturally I will need the weapons which are now in the security locker, but I see no reason for objection on your part."

No one spoke. Gersen, looking from one to another, studying most intently the face of his suspect, laughed inwardly. Malagate was posed with a maddening dilemma. If he should interfere and by some means warn Dasce, then Gersen might well be killed and Malagate's hopes of acquiring Teehalt's planet dashed. Would he trade Dasce for the planet? Gersen was certain of his decision; Malagate was notoriously callous.

Detteras heaved a deep sigh. "Gersen, you're a subtle man. You've put us in a position where, for motives of sweet reason, we are forced to do your bidding,"

"I assure you that my motives are irreproachable."

"Yes, yes, the damsel in distress. All very well; we ourselves would be criminals to deny her the chance of rescue. My exasperation is not at your goals—if you have told us the truth—but at your lack of candor."

With nothing to lose, Gersen became humble. "Yes, perhaps I should have explained more carefully. But I am accustomed to working by myself. In any event, the situation is now as I have described it. Do I have the cooperation of you all?"

"Humph," said Wanveave. "We have little choice, as you are perfectly well aware."

"Mr. Kelle?" asked Gersen.

Kelle inclined his head.

"Mr. Detteras?"

"As Wanveave points out, we have no choice."

"In that case I will proceed with my plans. The world on which we are to land, incidentally, is a dead star rather than a planet."

"Does not excessive gravity make habitation inconvenient?" asked Kelle.

"We'll know very shortly."

Wanveave turned away, went to look out at the red dwarf. The

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dark companion had now become visible, a large brown-gray disk, three times the diameter of Alphanor, mottled and reticulated in black and umber. Gersen was pleased to find surrounding space rich in detritus; the radar screen indicated dozens of minuscule planets and moonlets in orbits about each star. He could approach the dead star boldly with small fear of detection. A momentary shift into mtersplit braked the ship, another brought it to a state of lazy drifting a quarter-million miles above the now looming mass.

The surface seemed dim and featureless, with vast areas covered by what looked like oceans of chocolate-colored dust. The outline of the world was sharp and stark against the black of space, indicating a sparse atmosphere. Gersen went to the macroscope, inspected the surface. The world's relief leapt into perspective, though the terrain still was hardly rugged. Chains of volcanic mountains netted the surface, there was a mesh of rifts and crevasses, a number of ancient isolated plutonic buttes, hundreds of volcanos, some active, others dead or quiescent.

Gersen set crossbars on a short sharp peak at the demarcation between day and night, the object seemed not to move, nor to alter its position in relation to the line of darkness: apparently the world held a constant face to its companion. In such case, Dasce's dwelling would almost certainly be on the bright face, probably near the equator, at the longitude directly under the sun. He scrutinized the region carefully, under high magnification. The area was large;

there were dozens of volcanic craters, large and small.

Gersen searched for an hour. Wanveave, Kelle and Detteras stood watching him with varying degrees of impatience and sardonic dislike.

Gersen reviewed his logic; it seemed to hang together. The red dwarf had been listed on a well-used page in Dasce's Directory, it was found within the requisite ellipsoidal shell; it had a dark star companion. This must be the star And, by every likelihood, Dasce's crater must be located somewhere within the warm sunlit area below.

An odd formation attracted his attention, a square plateau, with five mountain ranges radiating like the fingers of a hand. A phrase of the Melnoy Heights Imp occurred to him. "Thumbnail Gulch." At fullest magnification Gersen examined the area corresponding to the thumbnail. Certainly there was a small crater here. Certainly it seemed to show a slightly different color, a slightly different tex-

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ture than the others. And there where the sunlight struck glancingly on the inside wall, a glint^ And below, the faint shine of white3

Gersen reduced the magnification, studied the surrounding terrain. Even though Dasce might not detect approaching ships at planetary distances, his radar might w^rn him of ships approaching for a landing. If he dropped down on the far side of the world and then slanted in behind the hon/on, to land behind the plateau which formed the palm of the hand, he might well be able to surprise Dasce.

He fed the necessary information into the course computer, engaged the autopilot. The ship veered and began its descent.

Kelle, unable to contain his curiosity, asked, "Well? Have you found what you were looking for?"

"I think so," said Gersen. "I can't be certain."

"If you are careless enough to be killed," said Kelle, "you put us to enormous inconvenience "

Gersen nodded. "This is essentially what I meant to convey to you a short while ago. I am sure that you'll help me, at least passively."

"We have already agreed to this."

The dark star loomed below and the ship landed on a shelf of naked brown stone a quarter mile from a heave of low black hills. The stone was the texture of brick; the surrounding plain displayed a surface resembling dried brown mud.

Overhead the red dwarf bulked large; the ship cast a dense black shadow. A thin wind blew small curls of dust across the plain, sifting a greenish-blue powder into long herringbone drifts.

Detteras said thoughtfully, "You know-, I think it only fair that you leave the filament here. Why victimize us?"

"I don't plan to be killed, Mr. Detteras."

"Your plans might go awry."

"If so, your troubles will seem very trivial in comparison to mine. May I have my weapons?"

The locker was opened; the three watched warily while Gersen armed himself. He looked from face to face. In the mind of one of these men feverish plots were hatching. Would he act as Gersen anticipated—which was to say, not act? Here was a chance Gersen must take. Suppose he were wrong, suppose this were not Dasce's planet and Malagate knew it; suppose Malagate, through some intuition, suspected Gersen's goal. He might be ready to sacrifice his

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hopes of acquiring Teehalt's world in order to maroon Gersen out here on this dark star. There was a precaution Gersen could take;

it would be foolish for him not to do so. He stepped back into the engine room and detached a small but vital component from the energy reactor, one which could be refabricated, if necessary, with ingenuity and patience. He tucked it into his pouch, along with the filament. Warweave, standing in the doorway, observed the act but made no comment.

Gersen dressed himself in an airtight suit, left the ship. Opening the forward hatch, he winched down the little platform flyer, loaded aboard a spare airtight suit and spare tanks of oxygen, and without further ceremony set out for Thumbnail Gulch, skimming low to the ground, the thin atmosphere keening over the windshield.

The landscape was odd even to one accustomed to the terrain of strange planets: a dark spongy surface in varying shades of maroon, brown and gray, marred here and there by volcanic cones and low wallowing black hills. This might be true star stuff—clinker remaining after the fires had died—or it might be sediment swept up from space. Most likely both. Gersen wondered, did the awareness that he was traversing the surface of a dead star contribute to the sense of weirdness and unreality? The thin atmosphere allowed absolute clarity of vision; the horizons were far, the panorama seemed endless. And overhead there was the glowering sphere of the red dwarf, rilling an eighth of the sky.

The ground shouldered up to become the plateau which comprised the palm of the hand; a titanic flow of lava. Gersen swerved to the right. Far ahead he could see a line of black hills lying across the landscape like the back of a monstrous petrified triceratops. This was the "thumb" at the end of which rose Dasce's volcano. Gersen flew low to the ground, taking advantage of all possible cover, swerving in and out, close to the wall of the plateau, and so approached the line of jagged black peaks.

Slowly, cautiously, he eased up the tumbled slope, Jets muffled by the thin air to no more than a mutter. Dasce might have installed detectors along these slopes—but, on second thought, it seemed hardly likely. He would consider the effort superfluous. Why attack by land when a torpedo from space would be easier?

Gersen gained the ridge. There, two miles ahead, was the volcano which he hoped would be Dasce's hideaway. Off to the side, down on the plain which continued on and on indefinitely, was the

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most welcome sight of Gersen's experience, a sight which brought tears of sheer savage heart-rending joy to his eyes: a small spaceboat. His hypothesis had been correct: here was Thumbnail Gulch in all certainty; here would be found Hildemar Dasce. And Pallis Atwrode?

Gersen landed the platform and continued on foot, taking advantage of all possible cover, avoiding approaches where detectors would be most likely, even though caution seemed no more than a formality. Destiny could not bring him this far only to deal him failure! He mounted the slopes: mingled basalt, obsidian and tuff. Reaching the lip of the crater, he peered over—out on a webbed dome constructed of thin cables and transparent film, held distended by air pressure. The crater was not large: fifty yards in diameter and almost perfectly cylindrical, the walls being formed of striated volcanic glass.

At the bottom of the crater Dasce had made a careless attempt at landscaping. There were a pond of brackish water, a clump of palm trees, a tangle of rank vines. Gersen looked an implacable god, a god of vengeance.

In the center of the crater was a cage, and in the cage sat a naked man: tall, haggard, his face a ghastly wreck, his body crooked, marked with a hundred welts. Gersen remembered Suthiro's explanation of how Dasce lost his eyelids. Looking again, he remembered the photographs in Dasce's parlor: this man was the subject of the photographs.

Gersen looked elsewhere. Directly below was a pavilion of black cloth, a series of connected tents. There was no sign of Hildemar Dasce. Entrance to the crater was apparently by way of a tunnel leading through the wall of the volcano.

Gersen moved carefully around the lip, looked down over the slope. The porous brown-black plain extended limitlessly off in three directions. Nearby rested the spaceboat, seeming no larger than a toy in the clarity of the atmosphere, on the endlessness of the plain.

Gersen turned his attention back to the dome. With a knife he cut a small slit in the film, then settled himself to watch.

Ten minutes passed before the pressure drop activated a warning signal. Out from one of the tents charged Hildemar Dasce.

Gersen saw him with savage delight. He wore loose white pantaloons and no more. His torso, stained a faded purple, was ribbed

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with muscle. He stared up with lidless eyes, the blue cheeks blooming from the vermilion face.

Dasce marched across the crater floor. The prisoner within the cage followed him attentively with his gaze.

Dasce vanished from sight. Gersen hid in a crevice, Dasce presently emerged on the plain in an airtight suit, carrying a case. He mounted the crater wall with strong easy strides, passing close by

Gersen.

Dasce put down the case, brought forth a projector, swept a beam of radiation over the surface of the dome. The escaping air, evidently dosed with a fluorescent agent, glowed yellow. Dasce went to the cut and bent over it, and Gersen felt his instant suspicion. He straightened up and looked all around. Gersen crouched

back out of sight.

When he looked once more, Dasce was at work mending the rip with cement and a new strip of film. The entire operation required but a minute. Then Dasce replaced the unused material and the projector into the case, straightened up. He made another careful scrutiny of rim, slope and plain; then, suspicion blunted, he

started back down the slope.

Gersen rose from his hiding place and followed, not fifty feet

behind.

Dasce, jumping from rock to rock down the slope, failed to

look back—until Gersen dislodged a rock which bounded ahead and past. Dasce stopped, turned sharply. Gersen was out of sight behind a jut of rock, grinning in a kind of mad glee.

Dasce proceeded. Gersen followed close behind. At the base of the slope a sound, a vibration, alarmed Dasce. Once more he turned to look up-slope—directly at the figure leaping down on him. Gersen laughed to see the loose pale mouth open in startlement, and then he struck. Dasce toppled, rolled, bounded to his feet, started to run awkwardly for the airlock; Gersen fired at the back of one of the rangy thighs. Dasce fell.

Gersen seized him by the ankles, dragged him into the airlock, slammed the outer door. Dasce struggled and kicked, the red and blue face hideously contorted. Gersen pointed the projac, but Dasce merely tried to kick it from his grasp. Gersen fired again, numbing

Dasce's other leg. Dasce lay still, glaring like a boar at bay. With a roll of tape brought hopefully for such a purpose, Gersen lashed Dasce's ankles- Then warily he seized the right arm, bent it back

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and around. Dasce was forced over on his face. Presently, after a struggle, his arms were taped behind his back. The lock mechanism automatically had filled the space with air; Gersen now removed the vitrine globe from Dasce's head.

"W<sup>^</sup>e renew our acquaintance," said Gersen in a voice of hushed, reverent joy.

Dasce said nothing.

Gersen dragged him out into the floor of the crater. The prisoner jumped to his feet, pressed himself to the bars of the cage, stared at Gersen as if he were an archangel with wings, trumpet and aureole.

Gersen assured himself as to the security of Dasce's bonds, ran over to the tent, projac ready for an unexpected servitor or comrade-in-arms of Dasce's. The prisoner looked after him with astounded, unbelieving- eyes.

Pallis Atwrode lay huddled under a limp dirty sheet, face to the wall. There was no one else. Gersen touched her on the shoulder, and fascinatedly watched her flesh crawl. His-exultation became mingled with horror, to produce a queer stomach-twisting emotion such as he had never before even imagined. "Pallis," he said, "Pallis-it's Kirth Gersen." The words reached her, muffled by the globe which Gersen still wore; she only crouched and huddled more tightly. Gerson rolled her over; she lay with her eyes shut- Her face, once so gay and impudent and charming, was bleak and austere. "Pallis," called Gersen, "open your eyes. It's Kirth Gersen! You're safe!"

She shook her head slightly, held her eyes tight shut.

Gersen turned away. At the door to the tent he looked back. Her eyes were wide open, staring in wonder, but she instantly closed them again.

Gersen left her, investigated the entire crater, reassured himself that no one else was present, and returned to Dasce.

"Nice place you've got here, Dasce," said Gersen in a conversational tone. "A little hard to find when your friends want to drop in.

"How did you find me?" said Dasce in a guttural voice. "No one knows of this place."

"Except your boss."

"He doesn't know."

"How do you think I found out?"

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Dasce was silent. Gersen went to the cage, unbarred the door, motioned to the prisoner, wondering whether the man's mind had also failed him. "Come out."

The prisoner limped haltingly forward. "Who are you?"

"No matter. You are free."

"Free?" The man worked his loose jaws over the word, turned to look toward Dasce. He spoke in a reverent voice. "What of—  
himr

"I shall kill him presently."

The man said softly, "This must be a dream."

Gersen returned to Pallis, She was sitting on the bed, the sheet clutched around her. Her eyes were open. She looked at Gersen, rose to her feet, fainted. Gersen lifted her, carried her out to the crater floor. The erstwhile captive stood looking at Dasce from a respectful distance. Gersen spoke to him. "What is your name?"

The man looked momentarily bewildered. He knit his brows as if trying to remember. "I am Robin Rampold," he said at last in a soft hushed voice. "And you—you are his enemy?"

"I am his executioner. His nemesis."

"It is a marvel!" breathed Rampold. "After so long that I cannot remember the beginning. . . ." Tears began to course down his cheeks. He looked at the cage, walked over to it, studied it, then looked back at Gersen. "I know this place well. Each crack, each crevice, each fleck and crystal of the metal." His voice faded. Suddenly he asked, "What is the year?"

"1524."

Rampold seemed to become smaller. "I did not know it was so long; I have forgotten so much." He looked up toward the dome. "There is no day or night here—nothing but the red sun. When he is gone, there are no events. . . . Seventeen years I have stood in that cage. And now I am out." He walked over to Dasce, stood looking down at him. Gersen followed. Rampold said, "Long, long ago we were two different people. I taught him a lesson. I made him suffer. The memory is all that has kept me alive."

Dasce laughed a harsh cackle. "I have sought to repay you." He glanced up toward Gersen. "Best kill me while you can, or I will do the same to you."

Gersen stood reflecting. Dasce must die. There would be no compunction when the time came. But behind the red forehead was knowledge which Gersen needed. How to extract this knowledge?

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Torture? Gersen suspected that Dasce would laugh while being torn limb from limb. Trickery? Subtlety? He looked speculatively down into the coarse red and blue face. Dasce did not flinch.

Gersen turned to Rampold. "Can you navigate Dasce's space-boat?"

Rampold sadly shook his head.

"Then I suppose you must come with me."

Rampold spoke in a tremulous voice. "What of—/ww?"

"Eventually I'll kill him."

Rampold said in a low voice, "Give him to me."

"No." Gersen returned to the inspection of Dasce. Somehow he must be made to reveal the identity of Malagate. A direct question would be worse than useless. "Dasce," he asked, "why did you bring Pallis Atwrode out here?"

"She was too beautiful to kill," said Dasce easily.

"And why should you kill her?"

"I enjoy killing beautiful women."

Gersen grinned. Dasce possibly hoped to provoke him. "You may or may not live to regret your sins."

"Who sent you here?" asked Dasce.

"Someone who knew."

Dasce slowly shook his head. "There is only one, and he never sent you."

So much for that ploy, thought Gersen. Dasce would not easily be deceived. Well then. He would take Dasce aboard the ship. The situation was certain to produce some sort of reaction.

Now a new problem. He did not dare leave Robin Rampold alone with Dasce, not even for long enough to fetch the platform. Rampold might kill Dasce. Or Dasce might command Rampold to release him. After seventeen years of degradation, Rampold might be sufficiently under Dasce's influence to obey. And Pallis Atwrode—what of her?

He turned to find her standing in the doorway, the sheet clutched around her, watching him with a wide troubled gaze. He approached her and she shrank back. Gersen was uncertain whether or not she recognized him. "Pallis—it's Kirth Gersen."

She nodded somberly. "I know." She looked at the prone form of Hildemar Dasce. "You've tied him up," she said in a voice of troubled wonder.

"That's the least of his worries."

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She looked at him wanly Gersen found himself unable to fathom her thoughts. "You're—you're not his friend?"

Gersen felt an entirely new type of sickness. "No I'm not his friend Of course not. Did he say so?"

"He said . . . he said . . ." She turned to stare in perplexity at Dasce

"Don't believe anything he told you " He looked into her face, wondering as to the extent of her confusion and shock "Are you—all right?"

She refused to meet his eyes Gersen said gently, "I'm taking you back to Avente You're safe now " She nodded stonily If she would only evince some emotion' Relief—tears—even reproaches'

Gersen sighed, turned away The problem still remained how to convey all of them to the platform He dared leave neither Pallas nor Rampold alone with Dasce, he had enjoyed domination over them both too long

Gersen replaced the vitrme globe over Dasce's head and dragged him through the tunnel, out upon the plain, where the two within could not see him.

Jets roaring at full power, the overloaded platform lurched sluggishly around the plateau, blowing up a fan of dust which settled with startling rapidity in the thin atmosphere. Ahead stood the spaceship, minute against the sweep of the vast horizon Gersen landed close beside the entrance port. Hand weapon within easy reach, he climbed the accommodation ladder Inside, Attel Malagate had watched his approach, had seen the cargo Malagate could not know what Dasce had told Gersen. He must be taut with indecision Dasce, who would recognize the ship, must suspect but could not be sure that Malagate was aboard.

The airlock thudded shut, the pumps throbbed, the inner door swung open Gersen stepped forward Kelle, Detteras, Warweave sat at various quarters of the room. They looked at him without

friendliness. No one made a move

Gersen unfastened the head globe "I'm back "

"So we see," said Detteras.

"I've been successful," said Gersen "I've got a captive with me Hildemar Dasce A word of warning to you This man is a brutal murderer He is desperate. I intend to hold him under rigid conditions I ask that none of you interfere or have anything to do with

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this man The other two persons are a man Dasce has kept penned in a cage for seventeen years, and a young woman whom Dasce recently kidnaped and whose mind may have suffered in consequence She shall use my cabin I shall keep Dasce in the cargo hold The other man, Robin Rampold, will no doubt be happy for the use of a settee "

"This voyage becomes stranger by the hour," said Warweave

Detteras rose impatiently to his feet "Why do you bring this man Dasce aboard? I'm surprised you haven't killed him "

"Consider me squeamish, if you like "

Detteras gave a bark of sour laughter "Let us proceed, we are anxious to get this trip over as fast as possible "

Gersen sent Rampold into the ship with Pallis Atwrode, then slid the platform under the winch, lifted the platform with Dasce aboard into the cargo hold, where he removed Dasce's head globe Dasce glared at him wordlessly

"You may see someone aboard you recognize," said Gersen "He doesn't want his identity made known to his two colleagues, as it would interfere with his plans You will be wise to keep a still tongue in your head "

Dasce said nothing. Gersen secured him with exceeding care At the center of a long cable he made a loop which he knotted and clamped tightly around Dasce's neck I he ends of the cable he made fast at opposite sides of the hold, stretching the cable taut Dasce was now constricted in the middle of the hold, the cable extending past him to right and left, the ends ten feet out of his reach to either side Even with hands free Dasce could not work himself loose Gersen now cut the tapes binding Dasce's arms and legs Dasce instantly struck out Gersen dodged aside, clubbed Dasce with the butt of his weapon Dasce reeled over senseless Gersen slipped off Dasce's airsuit, searched the pockets of the white pantaloons, found nothing He made a final check of the bonds, then returned to the main saloon, bolting the hatch behind him

Rampold had divested himself of his airsuit and sat quietly in a corner Detteras and Kelle had done the same for Pallis Atwrode, and had helped her into spare clothing She sat now to the side of

the cabin drinking coffee, her face wan and pinched, her eyes dark and musing Kelle cast a glance of disapprobation toward Gersen "This is Miss Atwrode—the receptionist at the department WT-iat in the name of heaven is your connection with her^"

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"The answer is perfectly simple," said Gersen. "I met her the first day I visited the university, and asked her out for the evening. For reasons of sheer spite or malice, or so I suppose, Hildemar Dasce struck me down and kidnaped her. I felt it was my duty to rescue her, and I've done so."

Kelle smiled thinly. "I suppose we can't fault you for this."

Warweave spoke in the driest of voices— "Presumably we will now make for our original destination."

"That is certainly my intention."

"I suggest then that we proceed."

"Yes," grumbled Detteras. "The sooner we put a term to this fantastic voyage the better."

The dark star and its feeble red companion became one with space. In the hold Hildemar Dasce, recovering consciousness, swore in a low vile mutter, testing his bonds with insensate ferocity. He tore and twisted at the clamps till the skin peeled from his fingers, he plucked at the metal strands in the cable till his fingernails broke. Then he tried a new procedure. Thrusting against the floor, lunging from side to side, he tried to pull the cable loose from where it was fastened at the walls: first to the right, then to the left. He succeeded only in bruising his neck. Assured that he was in fact helpless, though hands and feet were free, he relaxed, panting. His mind seethed with emotion. How had Gersen located the dark star? No one alive knew the location but himself. And Malagate. Dasce reviewed the occasions on which he had circumvented, cheated, or failed Malagate, and wondered if one of these occasions might not have come home to roost.

In the saloon, Gersen sat brooding on a settee. The three men from the university—one of whom was not a man—stood together far forward. There was Kelle: suave, fastidious, compact in physique, Warweave: ectomorphic, saturnine; Detteras: large-bodied, restless, moody. Gersen eyed his suspect, probing his every act, word, and gesture for corroboration, for some sign to provide the absolute assurance he needed. Pallis Atwrode sat quietly nearby, lost in reverie. From time to time her face twitched, her fingers clenched into her palms. There would be no qualms about the killing of Hildemar Dasce. Robin Rampold stood listlessly at the microfilm library, looking at the index, stroking his long bony chin.

He turned, glanced toward Gersen, sidled across the room wolf-

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ishly. In a voice so polite as to seem servile he asked, "He-is he alive?"

"For the moment."

Rampold hesitated, opened his mouth, closed it again. Finally he asked diffidently, "What do you plan for him?"

"I don't know," said Gersen. "I want to make use of him."

Rampold became very earnest. He spoke in a low voice, as if afraid that the other occupants of the saloon would hear. "Why not put him into my charge? Then you would be relieved of the effort of guarding and tending him."

"No," said Gersen, "I think not."

Rampold's face became even more haggard and desperate. "But-I must."

"You must?"

Rampold nodded. "You cannot understand. For seventeen years he has been—" He could not find words. Finally he said, "He has been the center of my existence. He has been like a personal god. He has provided food and drink and pain. Once he brought me a kitten—a beautiful black kitten. He watched as I touched it, smiling as if benign. This time I thwarted him. I killed the little creature, at once. Because I knew his plan. He wanted to wait until I came to love it, then he would kill it—torture it where I could watch. . . Of course he made me pay."

Gersen drew a deep breath. "He has too much power over you. I can't trust you with him."

Tears began to form in Rampold's eyes. He spoke in a series of disjointed sentences. "It is strange. I feel grief now. What I feel for him I cannot put into words. It goes to an extreme and beyond and becomes almost tenderness. Substances can be so sweet that they taste bitter, so sour that they taste salt. . . Yes, I would care for him with great pains. I would devote the rest of my life to him." He held out his hands "Give him to me I have nothing, or I would repay you."

Gersen could only shake his head. "We will talk of this later."

Rampold nodded heavily, returned across the room. Gersen looked forward to where Detteras, Kelle and Warweave continued a desultory conversation. Apparently they were agreed, tacitly or otherwise, on a policy of disinterest toward the new passengers. Gersen smiled grimly. He who was Malagata would not care to confront Hildemar Dasce. Dasce's temperament was not a subtle

one; he was as likely as not to blurt out some damaging disclosure. Malagate would certainly try for a few quiet words of warning and reassurance, or conceivably an opportunity to murder Dasce discreetly.

The situation was unstable; sooner or later it was bound to collapse into more truthful relationships. Gersen toyed with the idea of precipitating the climax, perhaps by bringing Dasce into the saloon or taking Kelle, Detteras and Warweave into the cargo hold. ... He decided to bide his time. He still carried his weapons; the three from the university, apparently assured of his good intentions, had not required that he restore them to the locker. Amazing, thought Gersen: even now Malagate could have no cause to suspect that Gersen stalked him. He would be less wary than he might be, and, using the pretext of curiosity, might well seek to look in on Dasce.

Vigilance, thought Gersen. It occurred to him that Robin Rampold would be a useful ally in this situation. No matter what distortions and sublimations seventeen years had produced, he would be no less alert than Gersen himself in any matter relating to Hil-demar Dasce.

Gersen rose to his feet and went aft, through the engine room, into the cargo hold. Dasce, making no pretense of stoic resignation, glared at him. Gersen noted Dasce's bleeding fingers and, putting his projac on a shelf to void the possibility of Dasce's wresting it away from him, stepped close to check Dasce's bonds. Dasce kicked savagely. Gersen hacked him behind the ear with the side of his hand, and Dasce fell back. Gersen assured himself as to the clamps which constricted the cable around Dasce's neck, then moved back, out of his reach.

"It seems," said Gersen, "that troubles are catching up with you."

Dasce spat at him. Gersen jumped back. "You're in a poor case for such offensiveness."

"Fah! What more can you do to me? Do you think I fear death? I live only out of hate."

"Rampold has asked that I give you into his care."

Dasce sneered. "He fears me until he reeks and crawls. He is soft as honey- It was no longer gratifying to hurt him."

"I wonder how long it will take to make the same sort of man out of you."

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Dasce spat once more. Then he said, "Tell me how you found my star."

"I had information."

"From whom?"

"What difference does it make?" said Gersen. He thought to insert an idea into Dasce's mind. "You'll never have the opportunity of paying him off."

Dasce pulled back his mouth in a hideous grin. "Who is aboard this ship?"

Gersen made no reply. Standing back in the shadows, he watched Dasce. He must suspect, to the point of certainty, that Malagate was aboard. Dasce could be no less uncertain than Malagate himself.

Gersen framed and discarded a half-dozen questions calculated to trick Malagate's name from Dasce. The best were either too clumsy or too subtle; the worst would apprise Dasce that Gersen wanted information, and so put him on his guard,

Dasce tried to wheedle. "Come! As you say, I am helpless, at your mercy. I am interested in learning who betrayed me."

"Who do you think it might be?"

Dasce grinned ingenuously. "I have a number of enemies. For instance, the Sarkoy. Was it he?"

"The Sarkoy is dead."

"Dead!"

"He helped you kidnap the young woman. I poisoned him."

"Fah," spat Dasce. "Women are everywhere. Why become excited? Release me. I have wealth and I will pay you half if you tell me who betrayed me."

"It was not Suthiro the Sarkoy."

"Tristano? Surely not Tristano. How could he know?"

"When I met Tristano he had little to say."

"Who then?"

Gersen said. "Very well, I'll tell you; why not? One of the administrators at the Sea Province University gave me the information."

Dasce rubbed his hand over his mouth, looked sidewise at Gersen in suspicion and doubt. "Why should he do so?" he muttered. "I can't understand any of this."

Gersen had hoped to surprise an exclamation from Dasce. He asked, "Do you know to whom I refer?"

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But Dasce only looked at him blankly. Gersen picked up his projac, left the hold.

Returning to the saloon, he found conditions as before. He signaled Robin Rampold back into the engine room. "You asked that Dasce might be put into your charge."

Rampold eyed him in tremulous excitement. "Yes!"

"I cannot do this—but I need your help in guarding him."

"Of course!"

"Dasce is tricky. You must never enter the cargo hold."

Rampold winced in disappointment.

"Equally important, you must not allow anyone else near the cargo hold. These men are Dasce's enemies. They might kill him."

"No, no!" exclaimed Rampold. "Dasce must not die!"

Gersen had a new thought. Malagate had ordained the death of Pallis Atwrode for fear that unwittingly she might reveal his identity. In her present state she posed no threat; nevertheless, she might recover. Malagate might well wish to destroy her, if he could do so without risk. Gersen said, "Also, you must try to guard Pallis Atwrode, and make sure that no one disturbs her."

Rampold was less interested. "I will do what you ask."

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From "The Avatar's Apprentice," in Scroll from the Ninth Dimension:

Intelligence? asked Marmaduke at one of the permitted intervals, as he attended the EMINENCE upon the Parapet—What is intelligence?

Why, responded the EMINENCE, it is no more than a human occupation; an activity which men put their brains to, as a frog kicks his legs to swim; it is a standard which men in their egotism use to measure other and perhaps nobler races, who are thereby dumfounded.

Do you mean, REVEREND GRAY, that no living creature other than man can share the quality of intelligence?

But ha! And why should I not ask, what is LIFE, what is LIVING, but a disease of the primordial slime, a purulence in the original candid mud, which culminates through cycles and degrees, by distillations and sediments, in the hu-

man manifestation?

But, REVEREND, it is known that other worlds demonstrate this fact of LIFE. I allude to the jewels of Olam, as well as the folk of the Chthonian Bog.

Witling, how have you glanced off the exact stroke of the ESSENCE.

REVEREND, I crave your indulgence.

The way along the Parapet is not to the forward-footed.

REVEREND CRAY, I pray that my direction be denuded.

Eight tones of the gong have sounded. Be content for the nonce, and fetch the morning wine.

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The filament from Lugo Teehalt's monitor fed impulses into the computer, which digested the information, combined it with the equations describing the ship's previous position, and despatched instructions to the autopilot which swerved the ship off and away, on a course roughly parallel to the line between Alphanor and Smade's Planet. Time passed. Life within the ship fell into a routine. Gersen, assisted by Robin Rampold, guarded the cargo hold, though Gersen forbade Rampold entry into the hold itself. For the first few days Hildemar Dasce evinced a brassy jocularly, alternating with earnest threats of vengeance at the hands of an agent he refused to identify.

"Ask Rampold what he thinks," said Dasce, leering from his bright blue hoodless eyes. "Do you want this happening to you?"

"No," said Gersen. "I don't think it's going to happen."

Occasionally Dasce demanded that Gersen answer his questions. "Where are you taking me?" he would ask. "Back to Alphanor?"

"No."

"Where, then?"

"You'll see."

"Answer me, or by"—here Dasce swore obscene oaths—"I'll do you worse than you've ever imagined!"

"It's a chance we have to take," said Gersen.

"We?" asked Dasce softly. "Who is 'we'?"

"Don't you know?"

"Why doesn't he come in here? Tell him I want to talk to him."

"Any time he wants he can come in."

At which Dasce fell silent. Goad, prod, pry as he might, Gersen never could induce Dasce to utter a name. Nor did any of the three from the university show interest in Dasce. As for Pallis Atwode, her detachment at first was profound. For hours she sat, looking out at the passing stars. She ate, slowly, hesitantly, without hunger,

she slept for hours on end, curled into as tight a ball as possible. Then gradually she returned to the present, and at times became something like the carefree Pallis Atwrode of old.

The overcrowded confines of the ship made it impossible for Gersen to talk to her in private, which, in his estimation, was as well. The situation, with Dasce in the hold and Artel Malagate in the forward cabin, was already strained to an almost unbearable degree of tautness.

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More time passed. The ship traversed new regions, and regions after regions where no man had passed but one. Lugo Teehalt. To all sides hung stars by the thousand, by the million, streaming, swarming, flowing, glaring, glittering, shirting silently one across the other, and the other across another still-worlds of infinite variety, populated by who knows whom, each drawing the eye, fixing the imagination, evoking wonder, each world an urge, a temptation, a mystery, each a promise of unseen sights, unknown knowledge, unsensed beauty.

Eventually a warm golden-white star showed dead ahead. The monitor panel blinked alternately green, red, green, red. The autopilot choked down the energy output, the split began to collapse, the ship set up a weird subsound as eddies and disturbances and backdrafts of a substance which could only be called space sucked at the ship's fabric.

The split collapsed with a slight shock, the ship slid serenely, like a boat drifting on a pond. The golden-white sun hung close at hand, controlling three planets. One was orange, small and near, a fuming cinder. Another swung in a far orbit, a gloomy, dismal world, the color of tears. The third, sparkling green and blue and white, revolved close below the ship.

Gersen, Warweave, Detteras and Kelle, antagonisms temporarily set aside, bent over the macroscope. The world was clearly beautiful, with a thick moist atmosphere, ample oceans, a varied topography.

Gersen was the first to stand away from the screen. The time had come to hone his vigilance to its sharpest edge. Warweave stood back next. "I'm completely satisfied. The planet is nonpareil. Mr. Gersen has not deceived us."

Kelle looked at him in surprise. "You think it unnecessary to land?"

"I think it unnecessary. But I am willing to land." He moved across the cabin, stood near the shelf to which was affixed Suthiro's switch. Gersen tensed. Is it to be Warweave? But Warweave passed on. Gersen released his pent breath. Of course the time was not yet. To profit from the gas, Malagate must somehow protect himself from its influence.

Kelle said, "I certainly believe that we should land, at least to

make biometrics In spite of its appearance the world may be completely unfriendly "

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Detteras said doubtfully, "It's rather awkward, with captives and invalids and passengers. The sooner back to Alphanor the better."

Kelle snapped in a voice as sharp as any Gersen had heard him use. "You talk like a jackass. All this way, merely to turn tail and run home? Obviously we must land, if only to walk out on the

planet for five minutes!"

"Yes," said Uetteras glumly. "No doubt you're right."

"Very well," said Warweave. "Down we go."

Gersen wordlessly swung the autopilot toggle over into the landing program. The horizons extended, the landscape became distinct: green parkland, low rolling hills, a chain of lakes to the north, a range of snow-clad crags to the south. The ship settled to the ground; the roar of exhaled energy ceased. There was now solidity underfoot, utter quiet except for the ticking of the automatic environment analyser, which presently flashed three green lights:

the optimum verdict.

There was a short wait for pressure equalization. Gersen and the three men from the university donned exterior clothing, rubbed allergen inhibitor on face, hands and neck, adjusted inhalators

against bacteria and spores.

Pallis Atwrode looked from the observation ports in innocent wonder; Robin Rampold sidled uneasily along the back bulkhead like a lean old gray rat, making tentative motions, as if he wished to alight but did not dare leave the security of the saloon.

Air from outside flooded the boat, smelling fresh, damp, clean. Gersen went to the port, swung it open, made a polite if ironic

gesture. "Gentlemen—your planet."

Warweave was the first to step down to the ground, with Detteras close behind, then Kelle. Gersen followed more slowly.

The monitor had brought them to a spot hardly a hundred yards from Lugo Teehalt's landing. Gersen thought the landscape even more entrancing than the photographs had suggested. The air was cool, scented with a vaguely herbaceous freshness. Across the valley, beyond a stand of tall dark trees, the hills rose, massive yet gentle, marked by outcrops of worn gray rock, the hollows holding copses of soft foliage. Beyond rose a single great billowing cloud

castle, bright in the noon sunlight.

Across the meadow, on the far side of the river, Gersen saw what appeared to be a growth of flowering plants, and knew them to be the dryads. They stood at the edge of the forest, swaying on

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supple gray limbs, their movements easy and graceful. Magnificent creatures, thought Gersen, beyond a doubt—but somehow they were a—well, a discordant element. A perverse notion—but there it was. On their own planet they seemed out of place' Exotic elements in a scene as dear and beloved as—as what? Earth? Gersen felt no conscious emotional attachment for Earth. Still, the world most nearly like this was Earth—or, more accurately, those occasional areas of Earth which somehow had evaded the artifices and modifications wrought by generations of man. This world was fresh, natural, unmodified. Except for the dryads—a jarring note—this might be Old Earth, Earth of the Golden Age, the Earth of natural man. . . .

Gersen felt a small exhilarating shock of enlightenment. Here resided the basic charm of the world: its near-identity to the environment in which man had evolved. Old Earth must have known many such smiling valleys; the feel of such landscapes permeated the entire fabric of the human psyche. Other worlds of the Oikumene might be pleasant and comfortable, but none were Old Earth;

none of them were Home. . . . For a fact, mused Gersen, here is where I would like to build a cottage, with an old-fashioned garden, an orchard in the meadow, a rowboat tied to the riverbank. Dreams, idle yearning for the unattainable . . . but dreams and yearning which necessarily must affect every man. Gersen blinked at the impact of a new thought. Suddenly attentive, he watched the others.

Warweave stood by the riverbank frowning down into the water. Now he turned and shot a suspicious glance toward Gersen.

Kelle, beside a clump of ferns as high as his shoulder, looked first up to the head of the valley with its great white spire of cumulus, then down toward the far open parkland. The forest at either side of the valley formed an aisle, continuing till it melted and blurred into haze.

Detteras paced slowly along the meadow, hands behind his back. Now he bent, scooped up a handful of sod, worked it between his fingers, let the soil sift and fall. He turned to stare at the dryads. Kelle did the same.

The dryads, gliding slowly on supple legs, moved out of the shadows, toward the pool. Their fronds shone blue and magenta, copper-russet, gold-ocher. Intelligent beings?

Gersen turned once more to watch the three men. Kelle scowled faintly. Warweave inspected the dryads with obvious ad-

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miration. Deteras suddenly put his hands to his mouth and shrilled an ear-piercing whistle, to which the dryads seemed oblivious.

There was a sound from the ship; Gersen turned to see Pallis Atwrode descending the ladder. She raised her hands in the sunlight, drew a deep breath. "What a beautiful valley," she murmured. "Kirth, what a beautiful valley." She wandered slowly away, pausing now and then to look around her in delight.

Gersen, on sudden thought, turned and ran back up the ladder into the ship. Rampold—where was Rampold? Gersen hastened back to the cargo hold. Rampold had already entered. Gersen advanced cautiously, listened.

Dasce's voice came gruff, hoarse, full of a detestable exultation. "Rampold, do as I say. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Hildemar."

"Go to the bulkhead, unloose the cable. Hurry now."

Gersen moved to where he could look unobserved into the hold. Rampold stood not four feet from Dasce, staring down into the red face.

"Do you hear me? Hurry, or I will cause you such grief, you will bewail the day you were born."

Rampold laughed softly, quietly. "Hildemar, I have asked Kirth Gersen for you. I told him I would cherish you like a son, I would feed you the most nutritious foods, the most invigorating drink. . . I do not think he will give you to me, so I must gulp down just a taste of the joy I have promised myself for seventeen years. I am now about to beat you to death. This is the first opportunity—"

Gersen stepped forward. "Sorry, Rampold, to interrupt."

Rampold uttered an inarticulate cry of utter desolation, turned, ran from the hold. Gersen followed him. In the engine room he made a careful adjustment of his projac, thrust it into a holster, returned to the cargo hold. Dasce bared his teeth like a wild animal.

"Rampold has no patience." He went to the bulkhead, began to unfasten the cable.

"What are you going to do?" Dasce demanded.

"The orders are that you shall be executed."

Dasce stared. "What orders?"

"You fool," said Gersen. "Can't you guess what's happened?"

I'm taking your old position." One side of the cable fell free. Gersén crossed the room. "Don't move unless you want me to break your leg." He unfastened the other end of the cable. "Now stand

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up. Walk slowly forward and down the ladder. Don't make a single wrong move or I'll shoot you."

Dasce rose slowly to his feet. Gersén motioned with his projac. "Move."

Dasce said, "Where are we?"

"Never mind where we are. Move."

Dasce slowly turned and, trailing the two long ends of the cable, went forward—through the engine room, into the saloon, to the exit port. Here he hesitated, looked back over his shoulder. "Keep going," said Gersén.

Dasce descended the ladder. Gersén, following close, slipped on the trailing cable. He jumped to the ground and fell heavily, flat on his face. Dasce gave a wild raucous cry of exultation, leaped on him, seized the projac, sprang back.

Gersén slowly rose to his feet, backed away.

"Stop there," called Dasce. "Oho, but I have you now." He glanced around. Fifty feet to one side stood W<sup>^</sup>arweave and Detteras, and slightly behind them Kelle. Pressed against the hull was Rampold. Dasce nourished the projac. "All of you, stand together while I decide what to do. Old Rampold, it's time he was dead. And Gersén, naturally, in the belly." He looked to where the three from the university stood. "And you"—he said to one of the men—"you played me false."

Gersén said, "You won't do yourself much good, Dasce."

"Oho, I won't? I hold the weapon. There's three here who are going to die. You, old Rampold, and Malagate."

"There's only a single charge in the gun. You may get one of us, but the others will get you."

Dasce turned a quick look at the charge indicator. He laughed harshly. "So be it. Who wants to die? Or rather, who do I want to kill?" He looked from face to face. "Old Rampold—I've had my pleasure from him. Gersén. Yes, I'd like to kill you. With a red-hot iron in your ear. And Malagate. You sly dog. You betrayed me. What your game is I don't know. Why you brought me here I don't know. But you're the one I'm going to kill." He raised the weapon, pointed, squeezed the trigger. Energy darted from the gun—but not the blazing blue bolt. Only a weak pale sizzle. It struck Warweave, knocked him to the ground. Gersén charged Dasce. Instead

of fighting, Dasce hurled the weapon at Gersen's head, turned and

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ran up the valley. Gersen picked up the projac, snapped it open, inserted a fresh power pack.

He walked slowly forward to where Warweave was picking himself up from the ground. Detteras barked at Gersen, "You must be a moron, allowing such a man to take your gun."

Kelle spoke in a puzzled voice. "But why shoot Gyle Warweave? Is he a maniac?"

Gersen said, "I suggest we go back into the ship, where Mr. Warweave can rest. There was only a small charge in the gun, but no doubt it hurt."

Detteras grunted, turned toward the ship. Kelle took Warweave's arm, but Warweave shook him off and lurched up the accommodation ladder, followed by Detteras and Kelle, and finally

Gersen.

Gersen asked Warweave, "Are you feeling better now?"

"Yes," said Warweave in a cold voice. "But I agree with Detteras. You displayed the utmost folly."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Gersen. "I carefully arranged the whole affair."

Detteras gaped at him stupidly. "Purposely?"

"I shorted out the projac, I arranged that Dasce could seize it, I informed him that there was a single charge left—so that he could verify my own conviction regarding the identity of Attel Malagate."

"Attel Malagate?" Kelle and Detteras stared blankly at Gersen. Warweave watched him narrow-eyed.

"Malagate the Woe. I've watched Mr. Warweave for a long time, feeling that he should more properly be known as Malagate."

"This is lunacy," gasped Detteras. "Are you serious?"

"Certainly I'm serious. It had to be either you, Warweave, or Kelle. I picked Warweave."

"Indeed," said Warweave. "May I ask why?"

"Of course. First of all I dismissed Detteras. He is an ugly man. Star Kings are more careful with their physiognomy."

"Star Kings?" blurted Detteras. "Who? Warweave? What non-sense!

"Detteras likewise is a good eater, while Star Kings eat human food with disgust. As for Mr. Kelle, I also thought him an unlikely candidate. He is short and round-again not the physiognomy characteristic of a Star King."

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Warweave's face twisted in a glacial smile. "You imply that a good appearance guarantees depravity of character?"

"No. I imply that Star Kings seldom leave their planet unless they can compete successfully against true men. Now, two other points. Kelle is married and has bred at least one daughter. Secondly, Kelle and Detteras have legitimate careers at the university'. You are Honorary Provost and I remember something to the effect that a large endowment brought you the job."

"This is insanity," declared Detteras. "Warweave as Malagate the Woe. And a Star King to boot!"

"It's a fact," said Gersen.

"And what do you propose to do?"

"Kill him."

Detteras stared, then lunged forward, roaring in triumph as he grappled Gersen, only to grunt as Gersen twisted, swung an elbow, struck with the butt of the projac. Detteras reeled back.

"I want the cooperation of you and Mr. Kelle," said Gersen.

"Cooperate with a lunatic? Never!"

"Warweave is frequently absent from the university for long periods. Am I right? And one of these periods was only recently. Right?"

Detteras set his jaw. "I'll say nothing about that."

"This is true enough," said Kelle uneasily. He glanced sidewise at Warweave, then back to Gersen. "I assume you have strong reasons for your accusation."

"Certainly."

"I'd like to hear some of these reasons."

"They make a long story. It's enough to say that I tracked

Malagate to the Sea Province University and narrowed the possibilities to you three. I suspected Warweave almost from the first, but I never was certain until the three of you stepped out on this planet,"

"This is sheer farce," sighed Warweave wearily.

"This planet is like Earth—an Earth that no man alive has ever known; an Earth which hasn't existed for ten thousand years. Kelle and Detteras were entranced. Kelle drank in the view, Detteras reverently felt the soil. Warweave went to look into the water. Star Kings evolved from amphibious lizards who lived in wet holes. The dryads appeared. Warweave admired them, seemed to consider them ornamental. To Kelle and Detteras—and to myself—they are

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intruders. Detteras whistled at them, Kelle scowled. We men don't want fantastic creatures on a world so dear to us. But all this is theorizing. After I managed to capture Hildemar Dasce I went to great lengths to convince him that Malagate was his betrayer. When I gave him the chance he identified Warweave—with the pro)ac."

Warweave shook his head pityingly. "I deny all your allegations." He looked to Kelle. "Do you believe me?"

Kelle pursed his lips. "Confound it, Gyle, I've come to regard Gersen as a competent man. I don't believe him to be either irresponsible or a lunatic."

Warweave turned to Detteras. "Rundle, what of you?"

Detteras rolled up his eyes. "I am a rational man; I can't have blind faith—in you, in Gersen or in anyone else. Gersen has made a case and, astonishing as it is, the facts seem to bear him out. Can you demonstrate to the contrary?"

Warweave considered. "I believe so." He strolled to the shelf below which Suthiro had installed the switch. The inhalator he had worn outside dangled from his hand. "Yes," said Warweave, "I believe I can make a convincing case for myself." He pressed the inhalator to his face, touched the switch. At the forward console the air-pollution alarm sounded, a raucous loud clanging.

"If you turn back the switch," Gersen called out, "the noise will stop."

Warweave numbly reached below the shelf, reversed the switch.

Gersen turned to Kelle and Detteras. "Warweave is as surprised as you. He thought that the switch controlled the gas reservoirs which you will find under the settees; hence his use of the inhalator. I emptied the tanks and changed the leads of the switch."

Kelle looked under the settee, brought forth the canister. He looked at Warweave. "Well, Gyle?"

Warweave tossed aside the inhalator, turned his back in disgust.

Detteras suddenly roared, "Warweave! Let's have the truth!"

Warweave spoke over his shoulder. "You've heard the truth from Gersen."

"You are Malagate!" said Detteras in a hushed voice.

"Yes." Warweave wheeled about, drew himself up to his full height. His black eyes glared back and forth. "And I am a Star King, superior to men!"

"A man has defeated you," said Kelle

Warweave's eyes burnt even brighter. He turned to consider

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Gersen. "I am curious. Ever since your encounter with Lugo Teehalt you have sought Malagate. Why?"

"Malagate is one of the Demon Princes. I hope to destroy each of them."

"So what is your intention in regard to me?"

"I plan to kill you."

Warweave thought for a moment. "You are an ambitious man," he said in a neutral voice. "There are not many like you."

"There were not many survivors of the raid on Mount Pleasant. My grandfather was one. I was another."

"Indeed," said Warweave. "The Mount Pleasant raid. So long ago."

"This is a peculiar voyage," said Kelle, whose attitude had become one of wary detachment. "At least we have achieved our ostensible purpose. The planet exists; it is as Mr. Gersen described it, and the money in escrow becomes his property."

"Not until we return to Alphanor," growled Detteras.

Gersen spoke to Warweave. "You have taken great pains to secure this world for yourself. I wonder why."

Warweave shrugged noncommittally.

"A man might want to live here, or build himself a palace," suggested Gersen. "A Star King wants none of these things."

Warweave said presently, "You make a common mistake. Men are after all quite parochial. You forget that individual differences exist among folk other than yourselves. Some perhaps are denied the freedom of their own worlds. They become 'renegade': neither

man nor their own kind. The folk of Ghnarumen"—he easily used the name which sounded like a cough—"are quite as orderly as the most law-abiding folk of the Oikumene. In short, the career of Malagate is not one which the folk of Ghnarumen would care to emulate. They may be right, they may be wrong. It is my prerogative to organize my own style of life. As you know, the Star Kings are strongly competitive. This world, to men, is beautiful. I find it pleasant enough. I plan to bring here folk of my race, to nurture them on a world more beautiful than Earth, to father a world and a people superior to both men and the people of Ghnarumen. This was my hope, which you will not understand, for there can be no such understanding between your race and mine."

Detteras said between clenched teeth, "But you took advantage of our liberality to dishonor us. If Gersen doesn't kill you, I will."

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"Neither of you will kill Malagate the Star King." Two steps took him to the exit port. Detteras lunged after him, frustrating Gersen's attempt to use his pro)ac. Warweave turned, lashed out with his foot, kicked Detteras in the stomach, )umped to the ground, ran off down the slope

Gersen stepped to the exit port, aimed, sent a bolt of energy unsuccessfully after the bounding figure. He descended the ladder, gave chase. Warweave reached the meadow, hesitated at the edge of the river, looked back at Gersen, continued down the valley. Gersen kept to the upper slopes where the ground was hard, and began to gain on Warweave, who had come to a marshy area. Warweave once more went to the nverbank, hesitated. If he plunged in, before he gained the opposite shore Gersen would be upon him. He looked back over his shoulder, and his face was no longer that of a man; Gersen wondered how he could have been fooled even for an instant. Warweave turned, uttered a cry m a slurred guttural language, went to his knees, disappeared.

Gersen, reaching the spot, found a hole in the nverbank almost two feet across. He bent, peered in, but saw nothing. Detteras and Kelle ran up, panting. "Where is he?"

Gersen pointed to the burrow. "According to Lugo Teehalt, large white grubs live under the marsh."

"Hmf," said Detteras. "His ancestors evolved in the swamps, in )ust such holes He probably couldn't want a better haven."

Kelle said dubiously, "He'll have to come out—to eat, to drink."

"I'm not so sure. The Star Kings dislike human food; men find the Star King diet equally repellent. We cultivate plants and domesticate animals, they do similarly for worms and insects, such things as that. Warweave should do quite well on what he finds underground."

Gersen looked up the valley where Hildemar Dasce had fled.  
"I've lost them both. I was willing to sacrifice Dasce to get Malagate—but both . . ."

The three stood on the riverbank. A breeze rippled the surface of the water, moved the branches of the great dark trees which grew at the base of the hills. A tribe of dryads wandering along the opposite shore turned their purple-green eye smudges on the men.

Gersen said, "Perhaps it's just as bad, leaving them together on this planet, as killing them."

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"Worse," said Detteras devoutly. "Worse by far "

They returned slowly to the ship. Pallis Atwode, sitting on the turf, rose to her feet as Gersen approached. She seemed not so much oblivious to the events of the past few minutes as uninterested, unconcerned. She came over to him, took his arm, smiled up into his face. Her own face was once again vital and fresh.

"Kirth, I like it here, don't you?"

"Yes, Pallis, very much."

"Imagine!" said Pallis in a hushed voice. "A pretty house up there on the hill. Old Sir Morton Hodenfroe had a beautiful house up along Blackstone Edge. Wouldn't that be nice, Kirth? I wonder. . . ."

"First we must return to Alphanor, Pallis. Then we'll talk about coming back."

"Very well, Kirth." She hesitated, then put her arms up to his shoulders, wistfully searched his face. "Do you still. . . are you still—interested in me? After what happened?"

"Of course." Gersen's eyes felt moist. "What fault was it of yours?"

"None. . . . But at home, in Lantango, men are very jealous."

Gersen could think of nothing to say. He kissed her forehead, patted her shoulders.

Detteras said gruffly, "Well, Gersen, you've made use of Kelle and myself in a most cavalier fashion. I can't say that I enjoyed it, but I can't bring myself to resent it, either."

Robin Rampold approached slowly, keeping to the shadow of the ship. "Hildemar ran away," he said mournfully. "Now he will make over the mountains to town and I will never see him again."

"He can make over the mountains," said Gersen, "but he won't find any towns."

"I have been watching up along the hillside, and through the forest," said Rampold. "I think he is somewhere nearby."

"Very likely," said Gersen.

"It is distressing," said Rampold. "It is enough to sadden a man."

Gersen laughed. "You would prefer to be back in the cage?"

"No, of course not. But then I had my dreams. Of what I would do when I won free. Seventeen years of hopes and dreams. But now I am free and Hildemar is beyond my reach." He moved disconsolately away.

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After a pause Kelle said, "As a scientist I find this planet a place of fascination As a man I find it entrancing As Kagge Kelle, erstwhile colleague of Gyle Warweave—I find it extremely depressing. I am prepared to leave at any time "

"Yes," said Detteras in a gruff voice "Why not^"

Gersen looked up the valley to where Hildemar Dasce, wearing only soiled white pantaloons, lurked in the forest like a raging, desperate beast He looked down the valley, far down over the hazy plain, then back to the swampy meadow, under which crawled Malagate the Woe He looked down into the face of Pallis Atwrode

She took a deep breath "I can't believe this is real "

"It's real But it's also a dream "

"All the rest seems a dream too. A terrible dream "

"It's over now As if it had never happened "

"I've been.. " She hesitated, frowned "I don't remember too much "

"Just as well."

Pallis pointed across the meadow "Look, Kirth, what are those beautiful creatures^"

"Dryads "

"What are they doing out there3"

"I don't know Looking for something to eat, I suppose Lugo Teehalt says they suck up nourishment from big grubs which burrow under the meadow Or perhaps they lay eggs in the soil "

The dryads, wandering up the shore, nourished their gorgeous fronds, swaying slowly like branches in the wind On the swamp they moved more slowly, a step at a time One of them stopped, stood stock still Under its foot showed a glint of white, as the concealed proboscis plunged down into the soft ground A few seconds passed The ground heaved, erupted the dryad toppled over backward Up from a crater staggered Warweave, the proboscis still thrust through his back His face was stained with dirt, his eyes stared from his head, from his mouth issued a series of appalling cries He shook himself, fell to his knees, rolled over, disengaged himself from the fluttering dryad, jumped erect, ran crazily up the hillside His steps flagged He fell to his knees, clutched at the ground, kicked and lay still

^Tye Warweave was buried on the hillside. The group returned to [he ship Robin Rampold now diffidently approached Gersen "I

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the ship Robin Rampold now  
have made up my mind to stay here "

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In one part of his brain Gersen was shocked and astonished In another part there was only confirmation of a previous expectation "So," said Gersen heavily, "you expect to live on this planet with Hildemar Dasce "

"Yes "

"Do you know what will happen5 He will make you his slave. Or he will kill you for the food which I shall be bound to leave you "

Rampold's face was bleak and drawn "It may be as you say But I cannot leave Hildemar Dasce "

"Think," said Gersen "You will be here alone He will be more savage than ever before."

"I hope that you will leave me certain articles a weapon, a shovel, a few tools to build a shelter, some food "

"And what will you do when the food runs out3"

"I will look for natural food seeds, fish, nuts, roots. These may be poisonous, but I will test them carefully And what else is left for me2"

Gersen shook his head. "Far better that you return with us to Alphanor Hildemar Dasce will take revenge on you "

Robin Rampold said, "It is a chance I must take "

"As you wish "

The ship lifted from the meadow, leaving Rampold standing beside his meager stack of supplies

The horizons spread out, the planet became a green and blue ball and fell astern Gersen turned to Kelle and Detteras "Well, gentlemen, you have visited Teehalt's planet "

"Yes," said Kelle tonelessly "By a roundabout method you have fulfilled the terms of your agreement, the money is yours "

Gersen shook his head "I don't want the money. I suggest that we keep the existence of this planet secret, to preserve it from what could only be desecration "

"Very well," said Kelle "I'm agreed "

"I agree," said Detteras, "provided that I may return another time, under more relaxing circumstances "

"One further condition," said Gersen "A third of the funds in escrow were deposited by Attel Malagate I suggest that they be transferred to Miss Atwrode's account, as some measure of compensation for the wrongs done her at Malagate's orders "

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Neither Kelle nor Detteras made objection. Pallis protested half-heartedly, then acquiesced, and presently became very cheerful.

And astern the yellow-white star became one with the multitude, and presently vanished.

A year later Kirth Gersen returned alone to Teehalt's planet in his old Model 9B spaceboat.

Hanging in space, he examined the valley by macroscope, but discovered no signs of life. There was now a projac on the planet and it might well be in the hands of Hildemar Dasce. He waited till nightfall and landed the boat on a shelf in the mountains above the river valley.

The long quiet night came to an end. At dawn Gersen started down the valley, keeping always to the shelter of the trees.

From far off he heard the sound of an ax. With great care he approached the sound.

On the edge of the forest Robin Rampold chopped at a fallen tree. Gersen stealthily moved closer. Rampold's face had filled out. He looked bronzed and strong and fit. Gersen called his name. Rampold looked up, startled, searched the dark shadows. "Who is there?"

"Kirth Gersen."

"Come forth, come forth. No need to steal up so furtively."

Gersen moved to the edge of the forest, looked carefully all around. "I feared I might find Hildemar Dasce."

"Ah," said Rampold. "No need to worry about Hildemar."

"He is dead?"

"No. He is quite alive, in a little pen I built for him. With your permission, I will not take you to see him, as the pen is in a private spot, well hidden from any who might visit the planet."

"I see," said Gersen. "You defeated Dasce, then."

"Of course. Did you ever doubt it? I have much more resource than he. I dug a pit during the night, built a deadfall. In the morning Hildemar Dasce swaggered forth, hoping to confiscate my stores. He fell into it, and I took him captive. Already he has become a changed man." He looked closely into Gersen's face. "You do not approve?"

Gersen shrugged. "I came to take you back to the Oikumene."

"No," said Rampold. "Never fear for me. I will live out my days here, with Hildemar Dasce. It is a beautiful planet. I have

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found sufficient food to maintain us, and daily I demonstrate to Hildemar Dasce the tricks and conceits he taught me long ago."

They wandered down the valley to the previous landing place.

"The life cycle here is strange," said Rampold. "Each form changes into another, endlessly. Only the trees are permanent."

"So I learned from the man who first found the planet."

"Come, I'll show you Warweave's grave." Rampold led the way up the slope, to a copse of slender white-timbered trees. To the side grew a seedling, rather different from the rest. The trunk was veined with purple, the leaves were dark-green and leathery. Rampold pointed. "There rests Gyle Warweave."

Gersen looked for a moment, then turned away. He gazed up and down the valley. It was as beautiful and placid and quiet as before. "Well, then," said Gersen, "I will once more depart. I may never return. Are you sure you wish to stay?"

"Absolutely." Rampold looked up at the sun. "But I am late. Hildemar will be expecting me. A pity to disappoint him. I will bid you farewell now." He bowed and departed, crossing the valley and disappearing into the forest.

Gersen once more looked up and down the valley. This world

was no longer innocent; it had known evil. A sense of tarnish lay across the panorama. Gersen sighed, turned, stood looking down at Warweave's grave. He bent, seized the seedling, pulled it from the soil, broke it, cast it aside. Then he turned and walked up the valley toward his spaceboat.

The

Killins  
Machine

From "How the Planets Trade," by Ignace Wodleckt:

Cosmopolis, September, 1509:

In all commercial communities, the prevalence or absence of counterfeit money, spurious bills of exchange, forged notes-of-hand, or any of a dozen other artifices to augment the value of blank paper is a matter of great concern. Across the Oikumene, precise duplication and reproducing machines are readily available; and only meticulous safeguards preclude the chronic debasement of our currency. These safeguards are three: first, the single negotiable currency is the Standard Value Unit, or SVU, notes for which, in various denominations, are issued only by the Bank of Sol, the Bank of Rigel, and the Bank of Vega. Second, each genuine note is characterized by a 'quality of authenticity.' Third, the three banks make widely available the so-called fake-meter. This is a pocket device that, when a counterfeit note is passed through a slot, sounds a warning buzzer. As all small boys know, attempts to disassemble the fake-meter are futile; as soon as the case is damaged, it destroys itself.

Regarding the 'quality of authenticity' there is naturally a good deal of speculation. Apparently in certain key areas, a particular molecular configuration is introduced, resulting in a standard reactance of some nature: electrical capacity? magnetic permeability? photo-absorption or reflectance? isotopic variation? radioactive doping? a combination of

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some or all of these qualities? Only a handful of persons know and they won't tell.

Gersen first encountered Kokor Hekkus at the age of nine. Crouching behind an old barge, he watched slaughter, pillage, enslavement. This was the historic Mount Pleasant Massacre, notable for the unprecedented cooperation of the five so-called Demon Princes. Kirth Gersen and his grandfather survived; five names became as familiar to Gersen as his own: Attel Malagate, Vtole Falushe, Lens Larque, Howard Alan Treesong, Kokor Hekkus. Each had his distinctive quality. Malagate was insensate and grim, Viole Falushe gloried in sybaritical refinements, Lens Larque was a megalomaniac, Howard Alan Treesong a chaoticist. Kokor Hekkus was the most mercurial, fantastic, and inaccessible, the most daring and

inventive. A few folk had reported their impressions: uniformly they found him affable, restless, unpredictable, and infected with what might have seemed utter madness, except for his demonstrable control and strength. As to his appearance, all had different opinions. He was, by popular repute, immortal.

Gersen's second encounter with Kokor Hekkus occurred in the course of a routine mission Beyond, and was indecisive—or so it seemed at the time. In early April of 1525, Ben Zaum, an official of the IPCC,\* arranged a clandestine interview with Gersen and proposed a stint of "weaseling"—that is to say, an IPCC investigation Beyond. Gersen's own affairs had come to a standstill; he was bored and restless, and so agreed at least to listen to the proposition.

The job, as Zaum explained it, was simplicity itself. The IPCC had been commissioned to locate a certain fugitive: "Call him 'Mr. Hoskins,' " said Zaum. So urgently required was Mr. Hoskins that at least thirty operatives were being despatched to various sectors of the Beyond. Gersen's job would be to survey the inhabited localities of a certain planet: "Call it 'Bad World,' " said Zaum, with a knowing grin. Gersen must either locate Mr. Hoskins or establish as a definite certainty<sup>7</sup> that he had not set foot on Bad World.

Gersen reflected a moment. Zaum, who reveled in mystifica-

\*IPCC—Intemworld Police Coordination Company in theory, a private organization providing the police systems of the Oikumene specialized consultation, a central information file, criminological laboratories, in practice, a supergovernmental agency occasionally functioning as a law in itself

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tion, on this occasion seemed to be outdoing himself. Patiently Gersen began to chip away at the exposed part of the iceberg, hoping to float new areas into view. "Wliy only thirty weasels? To do the Job right, you'd need a thousand."

Zaum's wise expression gave him the semblance of a large blond owl. "We've been able to narrow the area of search. I can say this much, Bad World is one of the likelier spots—which is why I want you to take it on. I can't overemphasize how important all this is."

Gersen decided he didn't want the job. Zaum had determined—or was under orders—to maintain as much reticence as possible. Working in the dark irritated Gersen, distracted him, and so reduced his effectiveness—which meant that he might not return from the Beyond. Gersen wondered how to turn down the job without alienating Ben Zaum and so drying up a pipeline into the IPCC. "What if I found Mr. Hoskins?" he asked.

"You have four options, which I'll name in order of decreasing

desirability. Bring him to Alphanor alive. Bring him to Alphanor dead. Infect him with one of your horrible Sarkoy mind-drugs. Kill him outright."

"I'm no assassin."

"This is more than simple assassination! This is—confound it, I'm not permitted to explain in detail. But it's truly urgent, I assure you of this!"

"I don't disbelieve you," said Gersen. "Still, I won't—in fact, I can't—kill without knowing why. You'd better get someone else."

Under normal circumstances, Zaum would have terminated the interview, but he persisted. Gersen thereby was given to understand that either qualified weasels were hard to come by or that Zaum regarded his services highly.

"If money is any object," said Zaum, "I think I can arrange—"

"I think I'll pass this one up."

Zaum made a half-serious display of beating his forehead with his fists. "Gersen—you're one of the few men whose competence I'm sure of. This is a murderously delicate operation—if, of course, Mr. Hoskins visits Bad World, which I myself think is likely. I'll tell you this much: Kokor Hekkus is involved. If he and this Mr. Hoskins make contact—" He flung up his hands.

Gersen maintained his attitude of disinterest, but now all was changed. "Is Mr. Hoskins a criminal?"

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Zaum's bland brow creased in discomfiture. "I can't go into details."

"In that case, how do you expect me to identify him?"

"You'll get photographs and physical characteristics; this should suffice. The job is perfectly simple. Find the man: kill him, confuse him, or bring him back to Alphanor."

Gersen shrugged. "Very well. But since I'm indispensable I want more money."

Zaum made a peevish complaint or two. "Now as to definite arrangements: when can you leave?"

"Tomorrow."

"You still keep your spacecraft?"

"If you call the Model 9B Locater a spacecraft."

"It gets you there and back, and it's suitably inconspicuous. Where is it docked?"

"At Avente Spaceport, Area C, Bay 10."

Zaum made a note. "Tomorrow go to your spaceship, make departure. The ship will be provisioned and fueled- The monitor will be coded to Bad World. You will find a folder with information regarding Mr. Hoskins in your Star Directory. You need only personal effects—weapons and the like."

"How long am I to search Bad World?"

Zaum heaved a deep sigh. "I wish I could tell you. I wish I knew what was going on. ... If you don't find him within a month after arrival, it's probably too late. If we only knew for sure where he was going, what were his motivations. . . ."

"I gather he's not a known criminal then."

"No. He's lived a long, useful life. Then he was approached by a man named Seuman Otwal, who we suspect to be an agent of Kokor Hekkus. Mr. Hoskins, according to his wife, thereupon seemed to go to pieces."

"Extortion? Blackmail?"

"In these circumstances—impossible."

Gersen was able to elicit no more information.

Arriving at Avente Spaceport somewhat before noon of the following day, Gersen found matters as Zaum had stated. Boarding the spartan little spacecraft, he went first to the Star Directory, where he found a manila envelope containing photographs, plus a printed description. Mr. Hoskins was shown in various costumes, headgear, and skin-toning. He appeared a man in his late maturity,

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with a big loose body, affable large eyes, a wide mouth with heavy teeth, a small rapacious nose. Mr. Hoskins was an Earthman: so much was clear from his clothes and skin-toning, which were generally similar but different in detail to those of Alphanor. Gersen put the folder aside, reluctantly decided against a visit to Earth, where he probably could identify Mr. Hoskins. Such a detour would take too much time—and undoubtedly get him into the IPCC's blackbook. He made a final check of the boat, called Port Control for departure processing.

Half an hour later, Alphanor was a shining orb astern. Gersen engaged the monitor, and watched as the nose of the boat swept across the sky, finally to point in a direction sixty degrees off the baseline between Rigel and Sol.

The Jarnell Coverdrive now seized the ship, or, more accurately, created conditions where a few pounds of thrust caused near-instantaneity of transfer.

Time passed. Random photons curling and seeping through the Jarnell laminae entered the ship, to allow the outside universe to be seen: stars by the hundreds and thousands, drifting past like sparks on the wind. Gersen kept a careful astrogational record, fixing on Sol, Canopus, and Rigel. Presently the ship crossed the separation between the Oikumene and the Beyond, and now law, order, civilization had no formal existence. Projecting the line of travel, Gersen finally was able to identify Bad World: Carina LO-461 IV in the Star Directory, Bissom's End in the terminology of Beyond. Henry Bissom was seven-hundred-years dead; the world, or at least the region surrounding the principal town Skouse, was now the preserve of the Windle family. Bad World was no misnomer, thought Gersen; in fact, should he put down at Skouse without good reason—offhand he could think of none—he would without fail be picked up by the local platoon of the Deweaseling Corps.\* He would be rigorously questioned. After which, if he were lucky, he would be allowed ten minutes to leave the planet. If weaseling were suspected, he would be killed. Gersen thought harsh thoughts concerning Ben Zaum and his overelaborate secrecy. Had he known his destination, he might conceivably have set up some kind of cover.

The single inter-world organization of Beyond, existing only to identify and destroy undercover agents of the IPCC

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Ahead a greenish-yellow star of no great luminosity clung to the crosshairs, waxing brighter and larger. Presently the intersplit kicked off; ether collapsing in upon the ship sighed and shuddered through all the atoms of ship and Gersen himself: a sound to set the teeth on edge, but which perhaps wasn't even real.

The old Model 9B coasted through space. Nearby hung Bissom's End—Bad World. It was a smallish planet, cold at the poles, with a chain of low mountains forming a cincture of the equator, like a weld joining the two hemispheres. To north and south ran belts of sea, shallowing somewhere near 50 degrees latitude to bays and jungles, beyond which were swamps and morasses all the way to the permafrost.

On a windy plateau sat the town Skouse, an irregular huddle of dingy stone buildings. Gersen was puzzled. Why would Mr. Hoskins want to come to Bissom's End? Far more pleasant refuges existed—Brinktown was almost gay. . . . But he was taking too much for granted: Mr. Hoskins might never come near Bissom's End, with the whole mission a mare's nest; indeed, Zaum had emphasized as much.

Gersen examined the planet under the macroscope, finding little of interest. The equatorial mountains were dusty and barren, the oceans were gray and mottled with the shadows of low scudding clouds. He turned his attention back to Skouse, a town of perhaps three or four thousand population. Nearby was a scorched field bordered by sheds and warehouses; evidently the spaceport. Nowhere were luxurious mansions or castles to be seen, and Gersen

remembered that the Windles inhabited caves in the mountains behind the town. A hundred miles to east and west, evidences of habitation finally dwindled to wilderness. There was a single other town, beside a dock extending into the North Ocean. Nearby was a metal-processing plant, so Gersen deduced from slag tailings and several large buildings. Elsewhere the planet showed no signs of human occupation.

If he could not visit Skouse overtly, he must do so surreptitiously. He picked out an isolated ravine, waited till evening shadows crossed the area, then settled as swiftly as possible.

He spent an hour adjusting to the atmosphere, then stepped out into the night. The air was cool; like that of almost every planet it had a distinctive tang, to which the nostrils quickly become dulled: in this case a bitter chemical exhalation mixed with some-

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thing like burnt spice, the one apparently derived from the soil, the other from the native vegetation.

Gersen invested himself with various tools of the weasel trade, winched down his platform flyer, set forth to the west.

The first night Gersen reconnoitered Skouse. The streets were unpaved and aimless; there was a commissary, several warehouses, a garage, three churches, two temples, and a tramway with spindly tracks leading down toward the ocean. He located the inn; a square three-story structure built of stone, fiber panels, and timber. Skouse was a dull town, exuding a sense of boredom, sluggishness, and ignorance; Gersen assumed the population to have little more status than serfdom.

He concentrated his attention on the inn, where Mr. Hoskins, if he were present, would almost certainly take up residence. He was unable to find a window to look through; the stone walls resisted his eavesdrop microphone. And he dared not speak to any of the patrons who at various times during the night staggered out and away through the twisting streets of Skouse.

The second night he had no better success. However, across from the inn, he found a vacated structure: apparently at one time a machine-shop or fabricating plant, but now given over to dust and small white insects unnervingly like minuscule monkeys. Here Gersen ensconced himself and through the entirety of the greenish-yellow day kept watch upon the inn. The life of the town moved past him; dour men and stolid women wearing dark jackets, loose flapping trousers of brown or maroon, black hats with upturned brims, went about their affairs. They spoke in a broad flat dialect that Gersen could never hope to imitate; so died a tentative plan to secure native-style garments and enter the inn. In the late afternoon, strangers came into town: spacemen by their costumes, from a ship that apparently had only Just landed. Gersen fought off drowsiness with an antisleep pill. As soon as the sun descended,

bringing a mud-colored twilight, he left his hiding place and hurried through the dim streets to the spaceport. Sure enough, a large cargo-ship had put in and was now discharging bales and crates from its hold. Even as Gersen watched, three members of the crew left the ship, crossed the floodlit fore-area, showed passes to the guard at the wicket, and turned down the road toward town.

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Gersen joined them. He gave them "Good evening," which they returned with civility, and inquired the name of their ship. "The Ivan Garfang^ he was told, "out of Chalcedon." "Chalcedon, Earth?"

"The same."

The youngest of the group asked, "What kind of a town is

Skouse? Any fun to be had?"

"None," said Gersen. "There's an inn, and very little else. It's a dull town and I'm anxious to depart. Are you carrying passengers?"

"Aye, we've one aboard, and room for four more. Five, should Mr. Hosey disembark, as I believe is his plan. Though for what purpose he comes here—" the youth shook his head in incomprehension.

So, thought Gersen, it was to be as easy as that. Who could

Mr. Hosey be but Mr. Hoskins? And now, where did Kokor Hekkus fit into the picture? He led the three spacemen to the inn and entered with them, by all appearances their shipmate and, so, secure against deweaseler suspicion.

Gersen cemented the association by calling for a round of drinks. There was nothing to be had but beer, which was thin and sour, and a white pungent arrack.

The interior of the inn was cheerful enough, with the traditional bar, and fire blazing in the fireplace. A barmaid wearing a limp red smock and straw slippers served the drinks. The youngest of the spacemen, who called himself Carlo, made overtures, to which the maid responded with a look of uncomprehending confusion.

"Leave her alone," advised the oldest of the spacemen whose name was Bude. "She's not all there." He tapped his forehead significantly.

"All the way we come, to the back of Beyond," grumbled Carlo,

"and the first woman we spy is a half-wit."

"Leave her for Mr. Hosey," suggested Haivy, the remaining

spaceman. "If he disembarks, he'll have a long, dull time of it."

"Some sort of scientist?" asked Gersen. "Or a journalist? They sometimes choose to visit odd places."

"Devil knows what he is," said Carlo. "He hasn't spoken more than two words the entire trip."

The conversation changed. Gersen would have liked to talk

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more of Mr. Hosey, but dared not ask questions, which Beyond almost always implied a sinister aftermath.

A number of locals had entered the inn, and stood before the fire drinking pints of beer at a gulp, and talking in their flat voices. Gersen took the bartender aside and inquired regarding accommodation.

The bartender shook his head. "It's been so long since we've housed anyone that our beds are all stale. You'll do better back on your ship."

Gersen looked across the room to Carlo, Bude, and Halvy. They showed no disposition for imminent departure. He turned back to the bartender. "Is there someone to run an errand to the ship for me?"

"There's a boy in the back who might oblige."

"I'll speak to him."

The boy was duly summoned: a blank-faced youth, the son of the bartender. Gersen tipped him liberally and made him repeat three times the message he wished delivered. "I'm to ask for Mr. Hosey and say he's wanted at the inn immediately."

"Correct. Be quick now, and there may be more money for you. Remember, give the message to none but Mr. Hosey himself."

The boy departed. Gersen waited a moment, then sauntered from the inn, and followed the boy to the spaceport, keeping well to the rear.

The boy was known to the guard at the spaceport, and after a word or two was allowed onto the field- Gersen approached as close as he dared, and standing in the shadow of a tall bush watched and waited.

Several minutes passed. The boy emerged from the ship- alone. Gersen grunted in disappointment. When the boy came out into the road, Gersen accosted him. Startled, the boy yelped and sprang away.

"Come back here," said Gersen. "Did you see Mr. Hosey?"

"Yes sir, so I did."

Gersen brought out a photograph of Mr. Hoskins, flashed a light. "This gentleman here?"

The boy squinted. "Yes sir. The very same."

"And what did he say?"

The boy glanced sidewise, whites of his eyes gleaming. "He asked if I knew Billy Windle."

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"Billy Windle, eh?"

"Yes sir. And of course I don't. Billy Windle's a hormagaunt. He said to tell you, if you were Billy Windle, to come to the ship. I said no, you were a spaceman. And he said he'd deal with none but Billy Windle himself and in person."

"I see. And what's a hormagaunt?"

"That's what we call them here. Maybe on your world you've a different name. They're the folk who soak up other folk's lives and then go off to live on Thamber."

"Billy Windle lives on Thamber?"

The boy nodded earnestly. "It's a real world, never think different. I know, because the hormagaunts live there."

Gersen smiled. "As well as dragons and fairies and ogres and Underlings."

The boy said dolefully, "You don't believe me."

Gersen brought forth more money. "Return to Mr. Hosey. Tell him that Billy Windle waits for him in the road, and bring him out here to me."

The boy's eyes rolled in awe. "Are you Billy Windle?"

"Never mind who I am. Go give Mr. Hosey the message."

The boy returned to the ship. Five minutes later, he came down the gangramp followed by Mr. Hosey—who was quite definitely Mr. Hoskms. They set forth across the field.

But now^ floating down through the dark sky came a whirling disk of red and blue lights, which swooped and settled to the ground. It was a sumptuous flying car. decorated in the most elaborate fashion, with colored lumes, golden scrolls, and fluttering

fronds of green and gold. The rider was a slim, long-legged man with muscular shoulders, as flamboyantly dressed as his boat. His face was tinted black-brown; his features were flexible, regular, youthful; he wore a tight turban of white cloth with a pair of roquish tassels hanging by his right ear. He was charged with nervous vitality; jumping to the ground, he seemed to bounce.

The boy and Mr. Hoskins had halted; the newcomer walked swiftly across the field. He spoke to Mr. Hoskins, who seemed surprised and gestured questioningly toward the road. This must be Billy Windle, thought Gersen, gritting his teeth in frustration. Billy Windle glanced toward the road, then made an inquiry of Mr. Hoskins, who reluctantly seemed to assent, and tapped his pouch. But in the same motion he produced a weapon, which he displayed to

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Billy Windle in a nervous truculent fashion, as if to emphasize that he trusted no one. Billy Windle merely laughed.

Where did Kokor Hekkus enter the picture? Was Billy Windle one of his agents? There was a simple and direct way to find out. The guard at the gate was watching the confrontation with fascinated attention. He did not hear Gersen come up behind him; he felt nothing as Gersen struck him a deft blow, which instantly induced unconsciousness. Gersen donned the guard's cap and cape, marched officiously toward Billy Windle and Mr. Hoskins. They were engaged in a transfer: each held an envelope. Billy Windle glanced toward Gersen, waved him back toward the gate, but Gersen continued to approach, trying to appear obsequious. "Back to your post, guard," snapped Billy Windle. "Leave us to our affairs." There was something inexpressibly dire in the poise of his head.

"Pardon me, sir," said Gersen. He jumped forward, clubbed at Billy Windle's gorgeous headgear with his projac. As Billy Windle staggered and fell, Gersen raked Mr. Hoskins' arm with a low-charge jolt, jarring loose his weapon.

Mr. Hoskins cried out in pain and astonishment. Gersen scooped up Billy Windle's envelope, reached for that which Mr. Hoskins held. Mr. Hoskins staggered back, then as Gersen raised his projac, halted.

Gersen shoved him toward Billy Windle's air-car. "Quick. Get aboard. Or I'll punish you."

Mr. Hoskins' legs were rubbery; lurching and tottering, he moved at a shambling trot to the air-car. As he climbed aboard, he tried to stuff the envelope into his shirt; Gersen reached, snatched;

the envelope tore; there was a brief struggle and Gersen held half the envelope, with the other half somewhere on the ground under the boat. Billy Windle was staggering to his feet. Gersen could delay no longer. The air-car controls were standard; he thrust the lift-arm far across. Billy Windle shouted something Gersen could

not hear, then, as the air-car slanted up, brought forth his projec, fired. The bolt sang past Gersen's ear, cut diagonally across Mr. Hoskins' head. Gersen fired back as the air-car swung across the sky, but the range was long and he merely kicked up a blaze of lambent dust.

High above Skouse, he swerved, flew west, settled beside his spaceboat. He carried the corpse of Mr. Hoskins aboard, and abandoning the bedizened air-car, took the Model 9B into space. He

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engaged the intersplit and now was safe: no known human effort could intercept him. Mission accomplished in a workmanlike fashion, without undue exertion: Mr. Moslems killed and en route to Alphanor, as per instructions. In short, sheer routine. Gersen should have been pleased, but this was not the case. He had learned nothing, succeeded with nothing; nothing except the paltry business for which he had been sent to Bissom's End. Kokor Hekkus had been involved in the affair; with Mr. Hoskins dead, Gersen would never know why or how.

The corpse was a problem. Gersen dragged it into the rear locker, shut the door on it.

He brought forth the envelope he had taken from Billy Windle, opened it. Within was a sheet of pink paper on which someone had written in florid purple ink. The message was titled: How to become a hormagaunt. Gersen raised his eyebrows: Jest? Somehow he did not think so. Gersen read the instructions with a small frisson of horror tickling at his neck. They were unpleasant.

Aging is pursuivant to a condition in which the ichors of youth have been exhausted: so much is inherently obvious. The hormagaunt will desire to replenish himself with these invaluable elixirs from the most obvious source: the persons of those who are young. The process is expensive unless one has access to a sufficient number of such persons, and in this case he proceeds in the following fashion:

Instructions followed:

From the bodies of living children, the hormagaunt must procure certain glands and organs, prepare extracts, from which a waxy nodule might ultimately be derived. This nodule implanted in the hormagaunt's pineal gland forfends age.

Gersen put the letter aside, and inspected the fragment he had wrenched from Mr. Hoskins. It read:

-crimps, or more properly, bands of density. These apparently occur at random, though in practice they are so casual as to be imperceptible. The critical spacing is in

terms of the square root of the first eleven primes. The occurrence of six or more such crimps at any of the designated locations will validate—

Gersen found the reference incomprehensible, but vastly intriguing:

what had Mr. Hoskins known so valuable that it might be traded on an even basis for the secret of perpetual youth?

He examined again the horrid directions for becoming a hor-magaunt, and wondered if they were sound. Then he destroyed both sets of instructions.

At Avente Spaceport, he called Ben Zaum byvisiphone. "I'm back."

Zaum raised his eyebrows. "So soon?"

"There was no reason to delay."

Thirty minutes later Zaum and Gersen met in the vestibule to the spaceport's waiting room. "Where is Mr. Hoskins?" Along with the delicate emphasis on the Hoskins, he gave Gersen a look of narrow inquiry.

"You'll need a hearse. He's been dead for some time. Since before I left Bad World—as you identified it."

"Did he—what were the circumstances?"

"He and a man called Billy Windle had struck some sort of a bargain, but they could not come to terms. Windle seemed very disappointed and killed Mr. Hoskins. I managed to recover the body."

Zaum gave Gersen a glance of mild suspicion. "Did any papers change hands? In other words, did Windle derive any information from Hoskins?"

"No."

"You're sure of this?"

"Absolutely."

Zaum was still not completely at ease. "This is all you have to report?"

"Isn't it enough? You have Mr. Hoskins, which is what you wanted."

Zaum licked his lips, glanced at Gersen from the corners of his eyes. "You found no papers on his body?"

"No. And I want to ask you a question."

Zaum heaved a deep dissatisfied sigh. "Very well. If possible, I'll answer."

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"You mentioned Kolcor Hekkus. How does he come into the matter?"

Zaum deliberated a moment, scratching his chin. "Kokor Hekkus is a man of many identities. One of them is, or so we have been informed, Billy Windle."

Gersen nodded sadly. "I feared as much. . . . I missed my opportunity. It may never come again. . . . Do you know what a hormagaunt is?"

"A what?"

"A hormagaunt. It seems to be an immortal creature who lives on Thamber."

In a measured voice Zaum said, "I don't know what a hormagaunt is and all I know about Thamber is 'set your course by the old Dog Star till faring past the verge extreme, dead ahead shines Thamber's gleam'-however the song goes."

"You forgot the line after 'old Dog Star': 'A point to the north of Achernar.' "

"No matter," said Zaum. "I never found the Land of Oz either." He sighed lugubriously. "I suspect that you're not telling me the whole story. But--"

"But what?"

"Be discreet."

"Oh indeed."

"And be sure that if you thwarted Kokor Hekkus in one of his schemes you will meet him again. He never repays a favor and never forgets a wrong."

From Introduction to The Demon Princes, by Caril Carphen (Elucidarian Press, New Wexford, Aloysius,

Vega):

It may well be asked how, from so many thieves, kidnapers, pirates, slavers, and assassins within- and beyond the Pale, one can isolate five individuals and identify them as 'Demon Princes.' The author, while conceding to a certain degree of arbitrariness, can nevertheless in good conscience define the criteria that in his mind establish the Five as

arch-fiends and overlords of evil.

First: the Demon Princes are typified by grandeur. Consider the manner in which Kokor Hekkus gained his cognomen 'The Killing Machine,' or Attel Malagate's 'plantation' on Grabhorne Planet (a civilization of his own definition), or Lens Larque's astounding monument to himself, or Vtole Falushe's Palace of Love. Certainly these are not the works of ordinary men, nor the results of ordinary vices (though Viole Falushe is said to be physically vain, and in certain exploits of Kokor Hekkus there is the quaintly horrid quality of a small boy's experiments with an insect).

Second: these men are constructive geniuses, motivated not by malice, perversity, greed, or misanthropy, but by violent inner purposes, which are for the most part shrouded and obscure. Why does Howard Alan Treesong glory in chaos? What are the goals of the inscrutable Attel Malagate, or that fascinating flamboyant Kokor Hekkus?

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Third: each of the Demon Princes is a mystery; each insists on anonymity and facelessness. Even to close associates these men are unknown; each is friendless, loveless (we can safely discount the self-indulgences of the sybaritical Viole Falushe).

Fourth: and obverse to the aforementioned, is a quality best to be described as absolute pride, absolute self-sufficiency. Each considers the relationship between himself and the balance of humanity as no more than a confrontation of equals.

Fifth: and ample in itself, I cite the historic conclave of 1500 at Smade's Tavern (to be discussed in Chapter One) where the five acknowledged themselves, grudgingly perhaps, as peers, and denned their various areas of interest. Ipsi dixunt!

Such was Gersen's second encounter with Kokor Hekkus. The aftermath was a period of depression, during which Gersen spent long mornings and afternoons on the Avente Esplanade, gazing out over the Thaumaturge Ocean. For a period, he had considered a return to Bissom's End—but the project seemed rash and almost certainly pointless: Kokor Hekkus would not stay long at Bissom's End. Gersen must somehow make a new contact.

This was a resolve easier to form than to implement. Hair-raising anecdotes by the dozen circulated regarding Kokor Hekkus, but specific information was rare. The reference to Thamber was new, but Gersen gave it small consideration: it could hardly be more than the fantasy of an imaginative boy.

Time passed—a week, two weeks. Kokor Hekkus received mention in the news as the presumptive kidnaper of a Copus, Pi Cas-

siopeia VIII, mercantilist. Gersen was mildly surprised; the Demon Princes seldom kidnaped for ransom.

Two days later came news of another kidnaping, the scene on this occasion being the Hakluz Mountains of Orpo, Pi Cassiopeia VII; the victim a wealthy packer of sour-spore. Again Kokor Hekkus was reputedly involved: indeed only the possible participation of Kokor I lekkus made the not uncommon crimes noteworthy.

Gersen's third encounter with Kokor Hekkus arose directly, if deviously, as a result of the kidnapings; and indeed the kidnapings

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themselves followed as a reverse or backhanded consequence to Gersen's success at Skouse.

The chain of events was expedited by chance. One midmorning Gersen sat on a bench halfway along the Esplanade; an elderly man, with the pale blue skin-toning, black jacket, and beige trousers of middle-class gentility, took a seat on the other end of the bench. Some minutes later he muttered an expletive, threw aside his newspaper, and looking toward Gersen expressed indignation in regard to the lawlessness of the times. "Another kidnaping, another innocent person whisked off to Interchange! Why cannot these crimes be halted? What is the constabulary about? They warn persons of means to caution. What a sorry condition!"

Gersen expressed whole-hearted agreement, but said that he knew no effective solution to the problem other than making illegal the private ownership of spacecraft.

"Wily not?" demanded the old man. "I possess no spaceship, nor do I feel the need to do so. At best they are instruments of frivolity and ostentation; at worst they facilitate the commission of crime, and especially kidnaping. Look you—" he tapped the newspaper—"ten kidnapings, all made possible by the spaceship!"

"Ten?" asked Gersen in surprise. "So many?"

"Ten in the last two weeks, all persons of extreme wealth and worth. The ransoms go Beyond, to enrich rascals; it is money dissipated in space, a loss to us all!" He went on to remark that moral values had deteriorated since his youth; that respect for law and order had reached an all-time nadir; that only the most inept or unlucky criminal suffered for his acts. To exemplify his convictions, he cited a man he had seen only the day previously, a man whom he recognized as an associate of the notorious Kokor Hekkus, who almost certainly was responsible for at least one of the kidnapings.

Gersen expressed shock and surprise. Was the old man sure of his facts?

"Yes indeed! There is no doubt whatever! I never forget a face, even though, as in this case, it has been eighteen years."

Gersen's interest began to wane; the old man continued re-

ardless. Certainly, thought Gersen—or almost certainly—this old man could not be a plant by Kokor Hekkus.

"—at Pontefract on Aloystus, where I served as Chief Notator of the Inquisition. He appeared before the Guldounerie, and, as I

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recall, displayed a remarkably insolent attitude, considering the gravity of the charges "

"And what were these?" Gersen asked

"Disbursion with intent to suborn ransackment, illicit possession of antiquities, and revilery His arrogance was justified, for he evaded all punishment save admonition It was evident that Kokor Hekkus had intimidated the panel "

"And you saw this man yesterday?"

"Beyond question He passed me on the Route Shdeway, proceeding north toward Sailmaker Beach. If by sheer chance I notice this single unregenerate, calculate the number of those I fail to observe' "

"A serious situation," Gersen declared. "This man should be placed under observation You do not remember his name?"

"No What if I did? By all odds it is neither the name he used then nor the name he uses now."

"He has a distinctive appearance?"

The old man frowned "Not notably His ears are rather large, as is his nose. His eyes are round and close together He is not so old as I However I have heard that the folk of the Fomalhaut planet mature late, owing to the nature of their food, which clabbers the bile "

"Ah He was a Sandusker "

"He asserted as much, in an extraordinary fashion I can only describe as vainglory "

Gersen laughed politely. "You have a remarkable memory You think then that this Sandusk criminal lives in Sailmaker Beach?"

"Why not? It is where such unorthodox folk tend to collect "

"True enough " After a few further remarks, Gersen rose to his feet and took his leave

The Route Slideway ran north, paralleling the Esplanade, then curved through the LoSasso Tunnel to terminate at Mansh Square

in Sailmaker Beach Gersen was moderately well acquainted with the area, standing in the square and looking up toward Melnoy Heights, he could almost see the house where Hildemar Dasce at one time had resided And Gersen's thoughts for a moment became tinged with melancholy . He brought himself back to the matter at hand Tracing down a nameless Sandusker It was a problem rather different from that of locating Beauty Dasce, who once seen could never be forgotten

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Surrounding the square were low thick-walled structures ofcoquina concrete, color-washed white, lavender, pale-blue, pink In the Rigel-hght they glowed as if incandescent, emitting tones and overtones of color, the windows and doorways by contrast showing the most intense and utter of blacks Along one side of the square ran an arcade housing shops and booths catering principally to tourists Sailmaker Beach with its enclaves of off-world peoples, each with its typical shops and restaurants, was like nowhere else in the Oikumene, with the possible exception of one or two districts on Earth At a kiosk, Gersen bought a Guide to Sailmaker Beach It contained no mention of a Sandusker quarter He returned to the kiosk The proprietress was a short, fat, in fact almost globular, woman with skin tinted chalk-green perhaps a Krokmoles Imp.

Gersen asked, "Where do the Sanduskers quarter themselves?"

The woman considered "Not many Sanduskers that I know of Down the foot ofArd Street you'll find a few Been requested there because the wind blows the smell of the victuals out to sea "

"Where is their food-shop?"

"Should you call it food I call it rubbish You're not a Sandusker? No. I see not It's there on Ard Street. Turn down through there—see the two crypt-men in the black cloaks? Right past where they stand that's Ard Street Hold your nose "

Gersen returned the Guide to Sailmaker Beach, which at once was placed back in stock Gersen crossed the square, stepped around the two pale men in long black cloaks, and entered Ard Street: an alley rather than a street, running on a slight downhill slant all the way to the water In the first block were tea houses and curtained game-rooms exuding a rather pleasant odor of incense Then Ard Street passed through a drab section infested by small sloe-eyed children wearing long gold ear chains, red and green shirts to the navel, and little else Then approaching the waterfront, Ard Street widened, to become a small court at the sea wall Gersen suddenly understood the pertinence of the advice given him by the fat woman of the kiosk The air of Ard Court smelled richly indeed, with a heavy sweet-sour organic reek that distended the nostrils. Gersen grimaced and went to the shop from which the odors seemed to emanate Taking a deep breath and bowing his head, he entered To right and left were wooden tubs, containing pastes, liquids, and submerged solids, overhead hung rows of withered blue-green ob-

jects the size of a man's fist At the rear, behind a counter stacked

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with limp pink sausages stood a clown-faced youth of twenty, wearing a patterned black and brown smock, a black velvet headkerchief. He leaned upon the counter without spirit or vitality, and without expression watched Gersen sidle past the tubs.

"You're a Sandusker?" asked Gersen.

"What else?" This was spoken in a tone Gersen could not identify, a complex mood of many discords: sad pride, whimsical malice, insolent humility. The youth asked, "You wish to eat?"

Gersen shook his head. "I am not of your religion."

"Ha ho!" said the youth. "You know Sandusk then?"

"Only at second-hand."

The youth smiled. "You must not believe that old foolish story, that we Sanduskers are religious fanatics who eat vile food rather than flagellate ourselves. It is quite incorrect. Come now. Are you a fair man?"

Gersen considered. "Not unusually so."

The youth went to one of the tubs, dipped up a wad of glistening black-cruled maroon paste. "Taste! Judge for yourself! Use your mouth rather than your nose!"

Gersen gave a fatalistic shrug, tasted. The inside of his mouth seemed first to tingle, then expand. His tongue coiled back in his throat.

"Well?" asked the youth.

"If anything," said Gersen at last, "it tastes worse than it smells."

The youth sighed. "Such is the general consensus."

Gersen rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. "Do you know all the Sanduskers of the neighborhood?"

"I do."

"I seek a tall man with eyes slightly crossed, who has lost a finger, with hair leaving the rear of his head like a comet's tail."

The youth smiled placidly. "His name?"

"I do not know."

"That would seem to be Powel Darling. He has returned to Sandusk."

"I see. Well, no matter. The money will revert to the provincial treasury."

"Sad. What money is this?"

"A bequest to two Sanduskers who obliged an eccentric old

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woman. The other is no longer conveniently at hand, or so I am told."

"And who is the other?"

"I am told that he departed Alphanor last month."

"Indeed?" The youth seemed to ruminare. "Who could it be?"

"Again I do not know his name. A man of late middle age with large ears, a large nose, and eyes closely spaced."

"That might be Dolver Cound. But he is still here."

"W^hat! Are you certain?"

"Oh yes. Go to the sea-wall, knock at the second door to the left."

"Thank you."

"It is customary to pay for delicacies consumed on the premises."

Gersen parted with a coin, and left the shop. The air in Ard Court seemed almost fresh.

The sea-wall ran perpendicular to Ard Street; twenty feet below the ocean, translucent and shot like a star sapphire with Rigel-rays, eased up and down. Gersen turned left and halted at the second door: the entrance to a narrow-fronted cottage of the usual lumpy coquina concrete.

Gersen rapped at the door. From within came a halting step. The door slowly opened; Dolver Cound looked forth; a man somewhat older and heavier than Gersen had expected, with a round flushed face and cyanotic lips. "Yes?"

Gersen stepped forward. "I'll come in, if I may." Cound uttered a dismal bleat of protest, but gave way. Gersen looked around the room. They were alone. The furnishings were dingy; a worn purple and red rug covered the floor, and on the cooker steamed Dolver

Cound's noon meal. Gersen's nostrils twitched involuntarily.

Cound, recovering his poise, took a deep breath and thrust out his chest. "What is the meaning of this intrusion? What or whom do you seek?"

Gersen gave him a look of hard contempt. "Dolver Cound— for eighteen years you have evaded the punishment due your crimes."

"What's this?"

Gersen brought forth an identification tablet, similar to an IPCC blazer, with his photograph under a translucent seven-

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pointed star. He touched it to his forehead; the star flashed into light. Dolver Cound watched in loose-mouthed fascination.

"I am a member of the Executive Arm of the New Dispensation at Pontefract, Alovsius, Vega Third. Eighteen years ago you encountered a faulty trial before the Guldouncrie. I now declare you under restraint. You must return for a new hearing."

Cound stammered excitedly, and finally in a high-pitched voice cried, "You have no jurisdiction, no authority! Further I am not the man you seek!"

"No? Who must I apprehend? Kokor Hekkus?"

Cound licked his purple lips, glanced toward the door. "Go. Never return. I want nothing to do with you."

"What of Kokor Hekkus?"

"Speak no such names to me!"

"It is either you or he who must settle the score. At the moment he is unavailable. You must come. I give you ten minutes to pack."

"Ridiculous! Nonsense! Sheer balderdash!"

Gersen shifted his proJac into plain sight, fixed Cound with a hard stare. Cound, suddenly bluff and hearty, said, "Come now! Let us consider a moment, to learn where you have made your mistake. Sit! This is our custom! Wi\\ you drink?"

"Sandusk brew? Thank you: no."

"I can serve less tasty stuff: Sea Province arrack!"

Gersen nodded. "Very well."

Cound went to a shelf, took down a bottle, a tray, a pair of

glasses, poured drinks. Gersen stretched, yawned as if inattentive. Cound very slowly brought forward the tray, took one of the glasses. Gersen took the other, scrutinized the clear liquid, seeking the faint roil which would indicate the presence of another liquid, or grains of undissolved powder. Cound watched slyly. He would take suspicion for granted, thought Gersen, and would expect a change of glasses.

"Drink!" said Cound and raised his glass. Gersen watched him with interest. Cound put down the glass untouched.

"Do you not care to drink?" Gersen took his glass, mingled the two drinks, returned the glass to Cound. "Drink first."

"Never before a guest. I would feel shame."

"I cannot drink before my host. But no matter; we will both drink during the trip to Pontefract. Since you do not care to pack, let us be off."

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Cound's face crumpled and sagged with woe. "I will go nowhere with you. You cannot force me. I am an old man; not in the best of health. Have you no pity?"

"It's either you or Kokor Hekkus; these are my instructions."

Cound looked toward the door. "Do not speak that name!" he said in an agonized croak.

"Tell me what you know of him."

"Never."

"Then come. Bid Rigel farewell; your sun henceforth will be Vega."

"I did nothing! Do you know no reason?"

"Tell me what you know of Kokor Hekkus. We would prefer him to you."

Cound drew a deep breath, closed his eyes. "So be it," he said at last. "If I tell you all I know, must I still return to Aloysius?"

"I promise nothing."

Cound sighed. "What I know is little enough. . . ." For two hours he asserted the casual quality of his association with Kokor Hekkus: "I was falsely accused; even the Guldounerie panel came to realize this!"

"All surviving members of this panel are under punitive restraint: we are taking a cumulative vengeance. Come now: the truth!

I am far from satisfied!"

Cound eventually slumped into a chair and declared himself ready to talk. First however he professed a need for certain notes and memoranda. He went to fetch papers from a drawer, but brought forth a weapon. Gersen, waiting with projac ready, blasted it from his hand. Cound turned slowly, eyes round and wet. He swung his numb arm, staggered to a seat, and now spoke without further evasion. Indeed, he became verbose, almost explosive with information, as if inhibition had been completely dissolved. Yes, eighteen years ago he had assisted Kokor Hekkus in certain operations on Aloysius and elsewhere. Kokor Hekkus had been anxious to obtain certain antiquities. On Aloysius they had raided Creary Castle, Bodelsey Abbey, and the Houl Museum. During the latter operation, Cound had been apprehended by the Sons of Justice; but Kokor Hekkus made certain arrangements, and the Guldounerie panel dismissed Cound with an admonition. Thereupon his association with Kokor Hekkus became less active, dissolving ten years ago.

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Gersen pressed for details. Cound waved his arms helplessly. "What is his appearance? He is a man, like us all. There is nothing about him to describe. He is of average size, of good physique, of unknown age. His voice is soft, though when he is angry, it comes as if he were talking through a tube from a far world. He is a strange man: polite when it pleases him, more often indifferent. He is fascinated by beautiful objects, by antiquity, and by intricate machines. You know how he derived his name?"

"This is a story I have never heard."

"It means 'Killing Machine' in the language of a secret world far out Beyond. This world had been settled in ancient days, then lost and forgotten until Kokor Hekkus rediscovered it. To punish the folk of an enemy town, he built a giant metal executioner, which split bodies in half with an ax. As dreadful as the ax was the scream the metal ogre emitted with ever)' stroke. And thereafter Kokor Hekkus was so known. . . . This is all I know."

"A pity you cannot tell me how to locate him," said Gersen. "Either you or he must answer to the authorities at Pontefract."

Cound sat back, limp as a broken bladder. "I have told all," he mumbled. "What can be served by visiting vengeance upon me? Will the antiques be restored?"

"Justice must be satisfied. Unless you can deliver Kokor Hekkus into my hands, you must pay for your Joint misdeeds."

"How can I provide Kokor Hekkus?" asked Cound in the dreariest of voices. "I hesitate even to speak his name."

"Who are his associates?"

"I don't know. It has been years since last I saw him. In those

days—" Cound paused.

' "Well?"

Cound licked his blue lips. "It could be of no interest to the Pontefract authorities."

"HI be the judge of that."

Cound heaved a deep sigh. "I cannot tell you."

"Why not?"

Cound made a small, hopeless gesture. "I do not want to be killed in some horrible fashion."

"What do you think awaits you at Pontefract?"

"No! I cannot talk further."

"You have been able to conquer these apprehensions during the last hour."

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"Everything I told you is a matter of public knowledge," said Cound ingenuously.

Gersen smiled, and rose to his feet. "Come."

Cound made no move. Finally he said in a low voice, "I knew three men who worked with Kokor Hekkus. There was Ermin Strank, Rob Castilltgan, and a man they called Hombaro. Strank was native to the Concourse, which planet I do not know. Castilligan was from Vega's Boniface. I know nothing about Hombaro."

"Have you seen them recently?"

"Certainly not."

"You have photographs?"

Cound would admit to none, and sat watching in limp resentment as Gersen moved here and there around the room, investigating the obvious spots where Cound might keep mementos. After a moment or two Cound said spitefully, "If you knew anything of Sandusk, you would expect no photographs. We face the future, not the past."

Gersen desisted from his search. Cound was squinting at him reflectively; during Gersen's search he had taken time to think. "May I ask, what is your rank?"

"Special agent."

"You are no Aloysian. Where is your throat-hole?"

"No matter."

"If you go around asking questions about Kokor Hekkus, eventually he will find out about it."

"Tell him yourself, if you have a mind to."

Cound uttered a short bark of a laugh. "No, no, my lad. Even if I knew where to complain, I would not. I want no more acquaintance with terror."

Gersen said thoughtfully, "I shall now take all your money, and throw your vile food into the sea."

"What?" Cound's face once more became lachrymose.

Gersen went to the door. "You're a miserable lump of absolutely nothing: not even worth the effort of punishing. I go now. Consider yourself fortunate."

Gersen departed the house, returned up Ard Street to Marish Square, rode the slideway south to Avente. He was by no means happy with the results of his day's work. There was further knowl-

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edge in Dolver Cound, had he either craft or cruelty sufficient to extract it. What had he learned?

Kokor Hekkus had been so named by the folk of a secret planet.

Ten years ago, three men named Ermin Strank, Hombaro, and Rob Castilligan had served Kokor Hekkus.

Kokor Hekkus was fascinated by intricate machines; he cherished beauty; he valued the works of antiquity.

Gersen had lodgings on a high floor of the Credenze Hotel. On the day following his interview with Dolver Cound, he arose before Rigel had cleared the Catiline Hills, stained his skin the currently fashionable grayed-buff, dressed in somber dark green, departed the hotel by a side entrance. In the subway system, he voided all possibility of tracker or stick-tight, then took himself to Cort Tower Station. An elevator lifted him to the foyer, where he transferred to a small one-man capsule. As the door slid shut, a voice inquired his name and destination. Gersen supplied the information and added his IPCC Clearance Code. There were no further questions;

the car lofted him thirty floors high, moved him laterally, discharged him into the office of Ben Zaum. This was a two-room suite beside the tower's transparent west wall, with an all-inclusive view south over the city and down the coast to Remo. Shelves along another wall held a variety of trophies, curios, weapons, and world-globes. By the evidence of his office, Zaum was a man high in the IPCC organization; how high Gersen did not precisely know: the

title "Mandator, Umbria Division" might mean much or little.

Zaum greeted Gersen with cautious cordiality. "You're here looking for work, I take it. How do you spend all your money? Women? Hardly a month ago you were paid fifteen thousand SVU—"

"I need no money. To be candid, I want information."

"Free? Or do you want to commission us?"

"What's information regarding Kokor Hekkus worth?"

Zaum's wide blue eyes narrowed innnitesimally- "To us or from ?"

us

"In both directions."

Zaum reflected. "He's currently on the red list.. . . Officially

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we don't even know whether he's alive or dead, unless someone gives us a commission."

Standard whimsy once more, which Gersen acknowledged with a polite smile. "Yesterday I learned the derivation of his name."

Zaum nodded offhandedly. "I've heard the tale. Rather grisly. Might well be fact. Incidentally, to keep you from going stale"—he opened a drawer—"the deweasellers tripped up a man on Palo, and turned him over to Kokor Hekkus. He was returned to us in a condition I won't describe. Kokor Hekkus also sent a message." Zaum read from a slip of paper. " 'A weasel performed an unpar-donable act at Skouse. The creature you have herewith is fortunate in comparison with the weasel of Skouse. If he is a brooding man, let him come Beyond and announce himself. I swear that the next twenty weasels captured will thereupon go free.' "

Gersen gave a sickly grin. "He is angry."

"Extremely angry, extremely vindictive." Zaum hesitated a moment. "I wonder—well, if he would keep his promise?"

Gersen raised his eyebrows. "You suggest that I turn myself over to Kokor Hekkus?"

"Not precisely, not exactly—well, think of it like this: it would be one man's life for twenty, and weasels are hard to come by—"

"Only the inept are deweaseled," said Gersen. "Your organi-zation is the sounder for their loss." He reflected a moment. "But your suggestion has a certain merit. Why not identify yourself as

the man who planned the operation, and ask if he will spare fifty men for the two of us?"

Zaum winced. "You can't be serious. What is your interest in Kokor Hekkus?"

"That of an altruistic citizen."

Zaum arranged and rearranged several old striped bits of bronze on his desk. "I'm another. What's your information?"

There was nothing to be gained by evasiveness, which Zaum would be certain to sense. "Yesterday I heard three names—men who worked for Kokor Hekkus ten years ago. They may or may not be in your files."

"What are the names?"

"Ermin Strank. Rob Castilligan. Hombaro."

"Race? World? Nationality?"

<t! don't know."

Zaum yawned, stretched, looked out across Avente. The day

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was sunny but full of wind; far out over the Thaumaturge Ocean hung great tumbles of cumulus. After a moment of placid reflection, Zaum swung back around to his desk. "I've nothing much better to do at the moment."

He touched various pads at the console beside his desk. The wall opposite vibrated with a million flickers of white light, then flashed to impart a message:

KRMIN STRANK

Item 1 of 5 entries

with a coded set of physical characteristics below. To the left appeared a photograph with a list of aliases; to the right was a resume of Ermin Strank's (Item 1) life and wvks. A native of Quantique, sixth planet of Alphard the Lonely, a specialist in smuggling contraband drugs into the Wakwana Islands, Ermin Strank (Item 1) had never left his native planet. "The wrong Strank," said Gersen.

Ermin Strank (Item 2) appeared. Superimposed in dim pink was the information: Deceased, and the date March 10, 1')15.

Ermin Strank (Item 3) had his habitat far across the Oikumene, on Vadilov, single planet of Sabik, or Eta Ophiuchi. He was currently active as a receiver of stolen goods. Like Ermin Strank (Item 1) he had never traveled far from his native world, except for two years at Durban on Earth in the apparently legitimate capacity of

warehouse-worker.

Ermin Strank (Item 4) was a short spindly knob-headed man of early middle age, red-haired, of truculent mien, incarcerated at Kilarney, Vega System's penal satellite, where he had spent the previous six years.

"That's the man," said Gersen.

Zaum nodded briskly. "An associate of Kokor Hekkus, you say?"

"So I understand."

Zaum touched pads on his console. Ermin Strank's (Item 4) resume was augmented by the notation: Reportedly associate of Kokor Hekkus.

Zaum looked questioningly at Gersen. "Anything more on Strank?"

"I think not."

Next on the screen appeared a succession of Hombaros, the

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most likely of which had disappeared from view eight years previously and was presumed dead,

The files boasted eight Rob Castilligans. The Rob Castilligan who had robbed Creary Castle, Bodelsey Abbey and Houl Museum, among other premises, was deary Item 2. There was a recent notation to the resume that brought Gersen to attention: five days previously, in the Garreu Province of Scythia, halfway around Alphanor, he had been arrested for complicity in a kidnaping.

"A versatile fellow, this Castilligan," remarked Zaum. "You're interested in the kidnaping?"

Gersen acknowledged as much; Zaum brought details to the screen. Seized had been the two children of Duschane Audmar, a Ninety-fourth Degree fellow of the Institute, reputedly of great wealth. They had been sailing on a lake with their tutor. A surface glider swooped across the water, halting beside the boat. The children were taken, the tutor escaped by diving from the boat and swimming away under water. He had summoned the constabulary, which had acted with great efficiency. Rob Castilligan had been apprehended almost immediately, but two other men had won free with the children. The father, Duschane Audmar, had remained aloof, taking no interest in the affair. The children presumably would be taken to Interchange, where they might be recovered upon "rescission" of their "fees" (to use the special Jargon of Interchange).

Zaum's interest was now fully aroused. He sat back, inspected Gersen with open curiosity. "I take it that you're acting for Aud-

mar?"

Gersen shook his head. "A fellow of the Institute? You should know better."

Zaum shrugged. "He's only Ninety-fourth Degree. He might be waiting for a few more degrees before he goes divine."

"If he were Sixty or Seventy, perhaps. Ninety-four is pretty high."

Zaum had thought to detect evasiveness in Gersen. "Then you're not interested in this kidnaping?"

"I'm interested. But this is the first I've heard of it."

Zaum's lips pursed swiftly in and out. "The question comes to mind, of course... ."

He was speculating, so Gersen realized, upon the possible in-

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volvement of Kokor Hekkus in the matter. He turned to the console pads. "Let's see what Castilligan has to say."

There was a delay of five minutes while Zaum spoke to various members of the Garreu Province Constabulary, another two minutes while Castilligan was brought forward and placed before the screen. He was a dapper, handsome man, with a smooth easy-natured face, sleek black hair varnished against his scalp. His skin-tone had been washed off; his skin was a marmoreal white. His manner was polite, even cordial, as if he were an honored guest rather than prisoner at the Garreu Carcery. Zaum introduced himself, Gersen remained to the side, beyond the scope of the out-lens. Castilligan seemed amused at the attention he was receiving.

"Zaum of the Ipsys. All on account of poor little me." He spoke with the engaging lilt of a Boniface Bogtrotter. "Well then, what can I do for you, beyond baring my life's secrets?"

"That will suffice," said Zaum drily. "How did you happen to be caught?"

"Folly. I should have departed Alphanor with the others. But I chose to remain. The Beyond bores me. I'm a man with a taste for the niceties."

"You'll be quite nicely taken care of."

Castilligan shook his head, with detached and impersonal regret. "Yes, it's a shame. I could apply for modification, except that I enjoy myself the way I am, vices and all. I'd be a tiresome fellow modified."

"Your option, of course," said Zaum. "Still, it's not too bad, if you happen to enjoy the open air."

"No," said Castilligan earnestly. "I've thought it all out, and it's too much like death. Dear engaging Rob Castilligan disappears and with him all joie de vivre, all the light of the world; then in stumps tiresome honest Robert Meachum Castilligan, dull as dish-water, who wouldn't steal meat for his starving grandmother. With any luck I'll be back from the satellite in five years or perhaps less."

"Evidently you plan to cooperate with the authorities?"

Castilligan winced impudently. "As little as I decently can, and still get my gold star."

"Who were your confederates in the Audmar kidnaping?"

"Come, sir. You can't expect a man to tattle on his cronies. Have you never heard of honor among thieves?"

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"Don't talk about honor," said Zaum. "You're no better than the rest of us."

Castilligan admitted as much. "In fact, I have already bared my soul to the constabulary."

"The names of your confederates?"

"August Wey, Pyger Symzy."

"Kokor Hekkus did not participate directly?"

Castilligan's mouth indented suddenly at the corners. Once more he essayed whimsy. "Now then—why ever should you mention a name like that? We're talking reality."

"I thought I heard you mention gold stars for your record."

"Indeed I did!" declared Castilligan. "But not a gold wreath for my gravestone."

"Suppose," said Zaum casually, "that through your assistance we laid our hands on Kokor Hekkus. Can you imagine the lovely gold star? You'd be elected Honorary Director of the IPCC."

Castilligan blinked sidelong, chewed thoughtfully on his tongue. "You have a commission against Kokor- Hekkus?"

"Even if we don't, we could hold him for the highest bidder and earn a fortune. There's fifty-five planets wanting the color of Kokor Hekkus' insides."

Castilligan bared white teeth in a sudden dazzling grin. "Well, truth to tell, I've nothing to hide, because nothing I know could offend Kokor Hekkus. He is as you know, and I can't change the picture."

"Where is he now?"

"Beyond, or so I should think."

"He worked with you on the Audmar kidnaping?"

"He did not, unless he called himself another name. In truth, I've never seen Kokor Hekkus as a man. It's always been 'Rob, do this' and 'Rob, do that' by one or another stealthy means. It's a secretive creature, this Kokor Hekkus."

"In the old days, you plundered museums and the like. WTiy?"

"Because I was paid to do so. He wanted antiquities, and nothing would do but that daring Rob must rob the sources. Long ago, of course. My salad days, so to speak."

"WTiat of these other kidnapings? How many have you worked on?"

Castilligan made a delicate face. "I don't care to say. It might prejudice my record."

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"Very well. How many do you know of?"

"Recently, about fourteen. By recently I mean in the last month."

^Fourteen!^

Castilligan smiled his gay smile. "Yes, it's a going concern. I've asked myself why and wherefore, but"—he shrugged—"who am I to read the mind of Kokor Hekkus? No doubt he, like everyone else, needs money."

Zaum turned Gersen a side-glance, stopped the audio pickup. Gersen said, "What else does he know concerning Kokor Hekkus?"

Zaum relayed the question. The prisoner put on a fretful face. "You play damnably fast and loose with my health. Suppose I told you enough that Kokor Hekkus were inconvenienced—be sure I know nothing of the sort, but assume so—do you think His Horrors would feel kindly toward me? He would learn the dark side to my soul, he would ply me with fears and terrors and all the very ills I dread the most. A man must have some regard for his skin; if he does not, who will?"

"Needless to say, what you tell us will not be communicated to Kokor Hekkus," said Zaum smoothly.

"Bah! So you say. A man sits beside you this very instant; I saw you look at him. For all either of us can say, it is Kokor Hekkus himself who shares your office."

"You don't seriously believe this,"

Again Castilligan's mood changed. "No. I do not. Kokor Hekkus is Beyond, or so I believe, spending the vast sums he has earned this last month or two."

"Spending how? For what?"

"As to that, I can't say. Kokor Hekkus is old—some say three hundred years, some four hundred—but he maintains a young man's energy. There is no lack of enthusiasm to the man."

After a short pause, Zaum asked: "If you are not acquainted with Kokor Hekkus—how can you know of this?"

"I have heard him speak. I have heard him plan. I have heard him curse. He is changeable, fickle, elusive as a Bernal flame-maiden. He is completely generous, completely cruel—in both cases because he knows no one's mind but his own. He is a terrible enemy, not a bad master. I talk of him like this because it can do him no harm and may help me. But I would never risk offending him. He invents new and special terrors for this very purpose. Yet,

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should I serve him well, he will build me a castle and make me Robert, Baron Castilligan."

"And where will he perform this romantic fantasy?" sneered Zaum.

"Beyond."

"Beyond," grumbled Zaum. "Always Beyond. Sornedaywe will sweep past the Pale and make an end to Beyond."

"You will never succeed. There will always be a Beyond."

"Never mind. What else do you know of Kokor Hekkus?"

"I know he will be kidnaping other rich men's sons and daughters. He has said as much; he needs a vast sum of money and needs it at once."

3

From Chapter I, "The Astro-physical Background," in Peoples of the Concourse, by Streck and Chernitz:

It is Rigel, that magnificent star among stars, whose prodigious luminosity and spacious Zone of Habitability has afforded the Concourse its existence. Impossible not to marvel at the sheer grandeur of the system! Think of it! Twenty-six salubrious worlds swinging in stately thousand-year orbits around the dazzling white sun, at a mean radius of thirteen billion miles, not to mention the six oft-ignored planets of the incandescent Inner Belt, and Blue Compan-

ion, a fortieth of a light-year to the side!

But the very circumstances that make the Concourse what it is provide one of the galaxy's most tantalizing mysteries. Rigel is deemed by most authorities a young star, ranging in age from a few million to a billion years. How then to explain the Concourse, which when Sir Julian Hove arrived, already displayed twenty-six mature biological complexes? By the time-scale of terrestrial evolution, Concourse life is several billion years old—assuming such life to be autochthonous.

But is such an assumption warranted? While the flora and fauna of each planet differ markedly, there are at the same time a number of suggestive similarities—almost as if Concourse life, long, long ago, had a common origin.

There are as many theories to the situation as theorists. The dean of modern cosmologists, A. N. der Poulson, has ingeniously proposed a situation where Rigel, Blue Com-

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panion, and planets condensed from a gas already rich in hydrocarbons, thereby giving life a headstart, so to speak. Others, indulging in fanciful nights, have wondered if the planets of the Concourse were not conveyed hither and established in these optimum orbits by a now-dead race of vast scientific achievement. The regularity and spacing of the orbits, the near-uniform size of the Concourse planets, as contrasted with the disparities of the Inner Worlds, give such speculations a measure of plausibility. Why? When? How? Who? The Hexadelts? Who carved Monument Cliff on Xi Puppis X? Who left the incomprehensible mechanism in Mystery Grotto of Earth's Moon? Fascinating riddles yet to be answered. . . .

Xaviar Skolcamp, Over-Centennial Fellow of the Institute, in a discursive mood, discusses Institute attitudes with a journalist:

"Humanity is old, civilization new: the mesh of cogs is by no means smooth—and this is as it should be. Never should a man enter a building of glass or metal, or a spaceship, or a submarine, without a small shock of astonishment;

never should he avoid an act of passion without a small sense of effort. . . . We of the Institute receive an intensive historical inculcation; we know the men of the past, and we have projected dozens of possible future variations, which, without exception, are repulsive. Man, as he exists now, with all his faults and vices, a thousand gloriously irrational compromises between two thousand sterile absolutes—is optimal. Or so it seems to us who are men."

Farmer hauled before constabulary court after attack upon the person of Bose Coggindell, Fellow of the Institute,

54th Degree, in self-justification:

"These chaps have it easy. They lean back in their chairs and say, 'Suffer, you'll love it. Do it the hard way. Sweat.' They'd like me to hitch my wife to a plow, the way it used to be done. So I showed him what I thought of what he calls 'detachment.' "

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Justice (after fining farmer 75 SVU):

"A detached attitude toward the problems of others is not illegal."

Of the seven Alphanor continents, Scythia was the largest, the most sparsely populated, and in the opinion of the folk of Umbria, Lusitania and Lycia, the most bucolic. Garreu Province, fronting the Mystic Ocean and backed up into the Morgan Mountains, was the most isolated region of Scythia.

To Taube, a drowsy sun-struck village on the shores of Jermin Bay, came Gersen in the bi-weekly air-ship from the provincial capital Marquari. In the whole town, he found but a single vehicle to be rented: an ancient glide-car with rumbling bearings and a tendency to slew sideways downslope. Gersen inquired directions, climbed aboard the car, and set forth along the inland road. Up a long slope he climbed, with the shimmering Rigel-light drowning the landscape in brilliance.

For a space, the road wound back and forth through vineyards, orchards of gnarled fruit trees, patches of blue-green kale and artichoke, thickets of native berries. Here and there were farm cottages, each with its parasol roof absorbing Rigel energy. The road swung up over a low ridge; Gersen halted to take his bearings. To the south spread the ocean, the foreland sloping up from the bay, the spatter of dun and pink and white that was Taube. In the blaze of light, all the colors of the landscape were unreal pastels, shimmering and dancing. Ahead the road swung over to a level area, where Gersen saw the villa of Duschane Audmar, Ninety-fourth Degree Fellow of the Institute. It was a rambling structure of stone and sun-bleached timber, shaded by a pair of enormous oaks and a native ginkgo.

Gersen walked up the driveway, lifted and let fall a huge bronze knocker in the shape of a lion's paw. After a long wait the door was opened by a handsome young woman wearing a peasant smock.

"I have come to speak to Duschane Audmar," said Gersen.

The woman surveyed him thoughtfully. "May I inquire your business?"

"I'll have to take that up with Lord Audmar himself."

She shook her head slowly. "I don't think he'll see you. There have been domestic difficulties and Duschane Audmar is not re-

ceiving."

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"My visit concerns these difficulties."

The woman's expression changed to sudden wild hope. "The children? They have been returned? Oh tell me!"

"I'm sorry—but not to my knowledge." Gersen took a notebook from his pocket, tore off a leaf, wrote: Kirth Gersen, 11th Degree, to discuss Kokor Hekkns. "Take that to him."

The woman read the note, without a word departed within.

Presently she was back. "Come." Gersen followed her along a dim hall to a vaulted room with bare white plaster walls. Here sat Audmar with a pad of white paper, a quill pen, a cut-glass bottle of mulberry-colored ink. The paper was blank except for a single line in the looping heavily shaded cursive affected by high fellows of the Institute. Audmar was a rather short man, square-shouldered, firm-fleshed. He had crisp well-shaped features: a small straight nose, narrow black eyes glittering like oil, a compressed mouth over a cleft chin. He greeted Gersen evenly, put aside paper, pen and ink. "Where did you come into Eleven?"

"At Amsterdam, on Earth."

"That would be under Carmand's control."

"No. It was von Bleek, just previous to Carmand."

"Hmm. You were young. Why did you not proceed? After Eleven, there is no great difficulty until the Twenty-seventh."

"I could not submerge my personal goals to those of the Institute."

"And as to these goals?"

Gersen shrugged. "They are uncomplicated, primitive enough to satisfy a Centennial, but centripetal."\*

Audmar's eyebrows rose into skeptical arcs, but he dropped the subject. "Why do you wish to discuss Kokor Hekkus?"

"It is a subject in which we both are interested."

Audmar nodded curtly. "An interesting man, agreed."

"Last week he kidnaped your children."

Audmar sat silently for thirty seconds. It was clear that he had not known the identity of the kidnaper. "What is the basis for this statement?"

"I have had an admission from the man who was captured: Rob

Castilligan, now in the carcery."

"Centripetal tending toward centralization or codification, by extension, tending to a kind of fussy officiousness Institute )argon

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"Your status is official?"

"No I have no status "

"Continue."

"Presumably you desire the safe return of the children "

Audmar smiled thinly "Presumption "

Gersen ignored the ambiguity "Have you received notice of how to effect their safe return?"

"By ransom. The message came two days ago "

"Will you pay it?"

"No " Audmar's voice was soft and easy

Gersen had expected nothing else Centennials and near-Centennials were forced to maintain impassivity to any and all external pressures Should Duschane Audmar ransom his children, he would thereby admit to pliability, he would thus lay himself and the Institute open to exterior persuasion The policy was well-known, for the tenth time Gersen wondered why Duschane Audmar had been molested Had he on some earlier occasion revealed flexibility? Had the kidnapers merely blundered?

Gersen asked, "You knew that Kokor Hekkus was involved?"

"No "

"Now that you know, will you take steps against him?"

Audmar gave a small petulant shrug, as if Gersen should realize that punitive measures were as flagrant an instability as paying ransom

"To be completely candid," said Gersen, "I have reason to regard Kokor Hekkus as an enemy I am not restricted as you are, I can implement my feelings "

In Audmar's eyes appeared a quick gleam of something like envy, but he only gave his head a polite inclination

"I come to you for information," said Gersen, "and, I hope, whatever cooperation you see fit to provide "

"This will be very little, or none," said Audmar

"Still, you are human and you must love your children Certainly you do not wish to see them sold into slavery, as they will be"

Audmar smiled, a bitter tremulous smile "I am human, Kirth Gersen, probably more savage and primitive in my humanity than yourself But I am a Ninety-fourth, I have too much strength, I must be careful how I apply it Hence—" He made a gesture indicating a whole complex of ideas

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"Stasis3" suggested Gersen

Audmar forbore to answer the question He said calmly, "Regarding Kokor Hekkus I know nothing—or at least no more than what is common knowledge "

"Currently," said Gersen, "he seems the most active of the Demon Princes He creates vast misery "

"He is a vile creature "

"Do you know why Kokor Hekkus took your children3"

"I presume to obtain money "

"How much ransom does he ask3"

"A hundred million SVU "

Gersen, startled, had nothing to say Audmar smiled grimly "Not that my little Daro and Wix aren't worth as much and a great deal more "

"You could pay this much3"

"If I chose. Money is no problem " Audmar turned back toward the pad and the quill pen, Gersen sensed that his patience was wearing thin "In this last month," said Gersen, "Kokor Hekkus has kidnaped at least twenty persons, perhaps more This was the last reckoning made by the IPCC before I left Avente The victims are all people of great wealth and power "

"Kokor Hekkus becomes rash," said Audmar indifferently

"Exactly What are his purposes3 Why, suddenly, does he need such vast sums of money3"

Audmar's interest was aroused Then, sensing the direction of the argument, he darted Gersen a sudden sharp glance

Gersen said, "Kokor Hekkus seems to have some large project in mind. I don't think he plans to retire "

"Not after two hundred and eighty-two years "

It occurred to Gersen that Audmar knew rather more concerning Kokor Hekkus than he pretended "It seems that Kokor Hekkus has expenses of two billion SVU—assuming that all the ransoms run as high as the one assessed against you Why does he need the money? Is he building a fleet of warships? Is he reconstructing a planet? Is he founding a university?"

Audmar heaved a deep wistful sigh "You believe he has some large and possibly dystrophic end in view?"

"Why else would he suddenly require so much money?"

Audmar frowned, shook his head fretfully "It would be a shame

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to thwart Kokor Hekkus. But from my point of view, and also Institute policy. . ." His voice dwindled to nothing.

"They are at Interchange?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you are unfamiliar with Interchange procedure. First travel time is calculated, to which fifteen days is added; during this period only the so-called party of primary interest may rescind the fee After this time elapses, anyone who wishes may do so. If I had a hundred million SVU, I could do so."

Audmar studied him a moment. "Why should you wish to do

"I want to know why Kokor Hekkus needs so much money. I want to learn many things about Kokor Hekkus."

"Your motives, I take it, are not dispassionate curiosity?"

"My motives are beside the point. What I can do is this. If I were to come into possession of a hundred million SVU, plus my expenses, I would proceed to Interchange and, as a free agent, take custody of your children. Incidentally, how old are they?"

"Daro is nine, Wix is seven."

"Meanwhile I would try to ascertain Kokor Hekkus' motives, his goals, and his current whereabouts."

"And then?"

"After learning as much as possible, I would bring you your children and if you were interested, report to you what I had learned."

Audmar's face was utterly expressionless. "What is your current address?"

"I am at the Hotel Credenze, in Avente."

Audmar rose to his feet. "Very well. You are an Eleventh. You know what must be done. Find why Kokor Hekkus needs this large sum of money. He is an inventive and imaginative man—a constant source of wonder. The Institute finds him remarkable and regards certain by-products of his evil rewarding. I can say no more."

Gersen left the room without further ado. In the quiet main hall, he found the woman who had admitted him. She turned him a glance of searching inquiry. Gersen asked, "You are the mother of the children?"

She made no direct answer. "Are they—are they well?"

"I would think so. Will you give me photographs?"

She went to a shelf. The boy was smiling, the girl was grave.

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The woman could not trust herself to speak aloud, and so spoke in a half-whisper. "What will happen to them?"

Gersen suddenly realized that she took him to be a representative of the kidnapers. Hovi did one disclaim such an imputation before it had been spoken. He said awkwardly, "I know very little of the matter; that is, I'm not personally involved. But I hope that somehow. . . ." The only words he could think of were either meaningless or overly explicit.

She went on. "I know how it is, that we must detach ourselves. . . . But it seems hardly fair to the little ones. If there were something I could do. . . ."

"I don't like to raise your hopes," said Gersen, "but perhaps your children will be returned."

She said simply, "I will be grateful."

Gersen went from the cool dim house, out into the sudden blaze of the garden. The afternoon was quiet; when he started the old slide-car, the rumble of the engine seemed intrusively loud. Gersen was glad to put the house of Duschane Audmar behind him. For all its magnificent prospect, for all the charm of its design, it was a house of silence and sternly repressed emotion, where anger and grief must be borne in secret. "That is why I never went into Twelfth," Gersen told himself.

Three days later, a package was delivered to Gersen at the Credenze Hotel. Opening it he found within eighteen packets of fresh Bank of Rigel notes, totaling one hundred and one million SVU. Gersen tested them with his fake-meter: all were genuine.

Gersen immediately checked out of his hotel, rode by subway to the spaceport, where his battered old 9B Locator awaited him.

An hour later, he had departed Rigel and was in space

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From *The Moral Essence of Civilization*, by Calvin V. Calvert:

In a sense the explosion of man across the galaxy must be considered a regression of civilization. On Earth, after many thousand years of effort, men had developed a consensus as to what constituted good and evil. When men departed Earth, they left behind this consensus as well. . . .

From *Human Institutions*, by Prade (Textbook, tenth and eleventh grades):

Interchange is another of the strange accommodations necessary to the functioning of what we have termed "the total mechanism." It is a fact that kidnaping for ransom is a common crime, owing to the ease by which escape via spaceship can be effected. In the past, the system for paying ransom often broke down, owing to the hatreds and suspicions inevitably generated, and many boys and girls were never returned to their homes. Hence the necessity for Interchange, which is to be found on Sasani, a planet in the near Beyond, and functions as a broker between kidnaper and those paying ransom. Interchange guarantees good faith in the transaction. The kidnaper receives his money minus the Interchange fee; the victim is restored safely to his home. . . . Interchange is officially denounced but practically tolerated; since it is believed that conditions would

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be far worse in its absence. Occasionally certain groups discuss the feasibility of commissioning the IPCC to stage a raid upon Interchange; somehow nothing ever comes of it.

Interchange was a cluster of buildings at the base of a rocky hillock in the Da'ar-Rizm, a desert of the planet Sasani, Aquila GB 1201;

IV, to use the geocentric nomenclature still favored by the Star Directory. At one time in the far past, an intelligent race had peopled at least the two north continents of Sasani, for here were to be found the crumble of monumental castles and keeps.

Private spacecraft were banned from the Da'ar-Rizm, and a ring of cannon emplacement enforced the structure. Persons employing the facilities of Interchange were required to land at Nichae on the shore of the shallow Calopsid Sea, board an airship for Sul Arsam—no more than a station in the desert—then ride a jolting surface car across twenty miles of desert to Interchange.

When Gersen arrived at Sul Arsam, a cold drizzle was dampening the desert soil, and even as he walked from airstrip to depot, vivid patches of lichen appeared. Halfway along the path, a small humming object struck his cheek and immediately set to work tear-

ing at his skin. Gersen cursed, slapped, brushed it away. He noticed his fellow-passengers similarly engaged, and also discerned a sly smile on the face of the depot attendant, who wore what appeared to be an ultra-sonic bug-repeller.

With five other passengers, Gersen waited in the depot: no more than a long shed with screened sides. The drizzle became a brief drenching downpour, then halted and suddenly sunlight struck down at the desert, raising wisps of vapor. The lichen erupted spores in little pink spurts.

The shuttle-bus appeared, a lumbering crude contraption on four big wheels. It parked an almost purposefully inconvenient two hundred feet from the depot; flapping hands and running to avoid the insects, Gersen and the other five took themselves aboard.

For half an hour, the bus bumped and jerked across the barrens;

then in the distance appeared Interchange: low concrete structures around a tumble of crumbling red sandstone. A grove of feathery yellow, brown, and red trees covered the top of the hill, where three or four cottages were visible.

The bus rumbled into a compound, halted; the passengers alighted and were directed by yellow arrows into a reception room.

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Behind a counter, making entries in a manual, sat a small sallow clerk with white hair carefully waxed up around a gray skull-cap, the front of which displayed the Interchange emblem: a pair of clasped hands. Waving the group to seats, he continued with his work. Finally, closing the manual with a snap, he looked up, pointed a finger.

"You, sir. I will attend to you, if you will come forward."

The individual selected was a saturnine black-haired man wearing the tight black jacket and white breeches of Bernal. The clerk brought forward a form: "Your name?"

"Rank Olguin 92, File Mettier 6."

"You wish to redeem whom?"

"Rank Sett 44, File Mettier 7."

"The fee to be rescinded?"

"Twelve thousand five hundred SVU."

"You are agent, principal, or noncommitted?"

"I am agent."

"Very well. Produce the fee, if you please."

The money was brought forward; the clerk counted it with great care, passed it through the slot of a fake-meter, and so convinced himself of its authenticity. He wrote a receipt, requested a counter-receipt, which the Bernalese refused to supply until the redeemed individual was brought before him. The clerk sat back at this display of waywardness, inspected the Bernalese narrowly. "You fail to comprehend, sir. The watchword at Interchange is integrity. The fact that I allow you to produce your money is sufficient guarantee that the guest whose fee you are rescinding is at hand, and in good condition. By your hesitancy and suspicion, you not only asperse our reputation but also tarnish the luster of your own quality."

The Bernalese shrugged, unimpressed by the clerk's peroration. Nevertheless he signed the counter-receipt. The clerk nodded stiffly, touched a button, and an attendant in a red jacket came to conduct the Bernalese to a waiting room.

The clerk shook his head disparagingly, pointed arbitrarily at another of the visitors: this a stocky scowling man with dark-buff skin-tone, wearing the more or less standardized spaceman's garb, such as Gersen's own, which gave no clue as to his place of origin.

The clerk was not impressed by his truculent mien. "Name?"

"None of your affair."

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The clerk once again leaned back in his chair. "Eh now? What's this? I require your name, sir."

"Call me Mr. Inconnu."

The clerk glared. "This organization operates without guile or circumvention and appreciates a similar attitude in our business associates. Very well, then, Mr. 'Inconnu.'" With a flourish the clerk wrote. "Who is the guest whose fees you are rescinding?"

"I'm ransoming a prisoner!" roared the stocky man. "Here's your cursed loot, let's have my nephew back!"

The clerk pursed his lips in prim disapproval. "I will expedite this affair, because such is our policy. Your nephew is who?"

"Cader, Lord Satterbus. Bring him forth and be quick about it."

The clerk half-lowered his eyelids, summoned an attendant. "Lord Satterbus, Suite 14, for this gentleman, please." He made an airy flourish, as if dispelling a bad odor, and pointed. "You, sir. I will deal with you next."

The third man was slender and diffident; he wore satin-green

skin-tone, the embroidered jacket, the ruffled gaiters currently fashionable at Mountain Wilds on Image, one of the Concourse planets. He wanted to conduct his business in a confidential fashion, for he leaned over the clerk and spoke in a low-pitched mutter—a mannerism the clerk would have none of. Drawing himself back, he exclaimed, "Won't you speak up, sir, I can hardly hear what you say."

The man's diffidence was of no great durability. He lost his temper. "There is no reason why this discreditable dealing must be so public! You should provide booths for those of us with sensibility!"

"Now then, sir," declared the clerk, "you mistake us. You must not expect to slink in here as if you were visiting a brothel. Our service is of the highest respectability. We act as an escrow institution, completely impartial, representing all interests, in trust and probity. So now, sir, speak your business openly."

The man flushed, his skin-toning becoming a muddy gray. "In that case, since you are so open and sincere, tell me this: who owns this business? Who gets the profits?"

"This subject is not at all relevant to our present business," responded the clerk.

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"Neither is my name and address. Come now, speak up, since you brim with so much veracity!"

"It is ample to know that this is a corporate body, owned and managed by several groups."

"Bah!"

Eventually the man paid his money and was taken away. Gersen was selected next. He gave his name, declared himself uncommitted: in other words, an independent entrepreneur who might choose to "rescind the fee"—the usage seemed a special euphemism of Interchange—of a guest who had overstayed the fifteen-day period of prime redemption, presumably in order to ask a high ransom and thus turn a profit. The clerk nodded curtly. "These are our current 'availables.'" He gave Gersen a sheet listing several dozen names with the corresponding rescission fees. Gersen ran his eye down the list. Near the top he saw:

Audmar, Daro; 9, male  
Wix; 7, female

Rescission: SVU 100,000,000.

A few spaces below he found:

Cromarty, Bella; 15, female

Rescission: SVU 100,000,000.

and further:

Darbassin, Oleg; 4, male

Rescission: SVU 100,000,000.

and then:

Eperje-Tokav, Alusz Iphigenia; 20, female

Rescission: SVU 10,000,000,000.

Gersen read the figures, blinked. A typographical error? Ten billion SVU? An unheard-of ransom, an impossible sum! A hundred million was unprecedented, though here on this list—he glanced down—were seven or eight guests with fees established at SVU 100,000,000. An enormous amount of money but still only a hun-

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dredth of ten billion. Something very strange here. Who could be expected to pay ten billion SVU? It was a figure beyond the budgets of most planets, let alone individuals. Gersen inspected the list further. After the eight guests valued at SVU 100,000,000, there was only one other valued at more than SVU 100,000. This was:

Patch, Myron; 56, male

Rescission: SVU 427,685.

The clerk who, while Gersen consulted the list, had busied himself with another customer, now returned. "Do any of our 'availables' meet your immediate needs?"

"Naturally I want to make a personal inspection," said Gersen, "but from sheer curiosity, is the figure 'SVU 10,000,000,000' correct, or is it a misprint?"

"It is correct, sir. At Interchange we dare make no mistakes."  
"If I may ask, who sponsors this young lady? On whose behalf do you act?"

The clerk bridled. "As you must know, unless specifically authorized to do so, we must reserve this information."

"I see. Well, what about the Audmar item for a hundred million, the Cromarty, the Darbassin, the Floy, the Helariope, and the others? WTio sponsors them?"

"We have not been authorized to release this information."  
Gersen nodded. "Very well. I'll take a look around."

"One more matter, sir. In connection with the Eperje-Tokay item, we cannot allow mere gratification of curiosity. Before you may even inspect this 'available,' you must make a deposit of ten thousand SVU, said sum to apply to the rescission fee."

"I'm not interested to that extent," said Gersen.

"As you wish." The clerk summoned an attendant, who led Gersen from the reception room, along a corridor that presently opened into a courtyard. Here the attendant paused. "Which items in particular would you like to inspect?"

Gersen considered the man. From his flat intonations he was an Earthman, or possibly native to one of the worlds Beyond. He was about Gersen's own age, or perhaps younger, with hulking stooped shoulders, an affable, heavy-featured face toned pale yellow. A cap with the Interchange emblem sat on top a luxuriant crop

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of waw yellow hair that swooped behind the ears and hack in a drake's tail.

Gersen said in a thoughtful voice, "As you know I'm uncommitted."

"Yes, sir."

"I have a few SVU to invest where it will do the most good. You must know what I mean."

The attendant was not quite sure; still he nodded sagely.

"You can help me considerably," said Gersen. "I'm sure you know more concerning the individual items than you tell the usual customer. If you direct me along the road to profit, then it is only fair that I share with you."

The attendant was clearly intrigued by the direction of Gersen's thinking. "This all seems eminently sensible—provided of course that company rules are observed. These are strict, and the penalties are correspondingly rigorous."

"There is no question of anything not completely aboveboard." Gersen brought forth a pair of hundred-SVU notes. "There will be several more, depending on how much information you can provide."

"I can talk for hours; many strange events have occurred at Interchange. But let us proceed. If I understand you rightly, you wish to inspect each of the guests who are currently available?"

"Correct."

"Very well. In this direction are the Class E cubicles, for guests whose friends and loved ones are unable to rescind them, and who now—to speak frankly—merely await a slaver's offer. Accommodations range upward to the so-called Imperial Gardens on top of the hill. Guests must keep to their quarters during the morning inspection hours, hut during the afternoon are allowed recreation of choice, and in the evening there is the social period. Some of our guests find the experience relaxing and own to a sense of grat-

itude toward their sponsors."

Guided by the now verbose attendant, Gersen examined the miserable specimens in the Class E cubicles, then those in Classes D and C. Before each cubicle hung a placard, with information regarding the inmate's name, status,, and rescission fee. The attendant, who was named Armand Koshiel, pointed out various bargains, possible profit-makers and long-shot speculations: "—totally incredible. Look at him, oldest son of Tywald Fitzbittick, the

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richest quarryman of Boniface. What's forty thousand SVU to him? He'd go a hundred thousand without demur. If I had the sum, I'd buy the fellow myself. It's absolute certainty!"

"Why has not Tywald Fitzbittick rescinded the youth for forty thousand?"

Koshiel shook his head in perplexity. "He's a busy man; perhaps the thrust of business has distracted him. But sooner or later, mark my words, he'll be here, and money will flow like water."

"Very likely."

Koshiel pointed out several other guests in similar circumstances and expressed puzzlement when Gersen remained detached and noncommittal. "I tell you, too much deliberation sometimes leads to disappointment. For instance, there, that very cubicle housed a handsome young woman whose father was dilatory. The sponsor lowered the rescission fee to nine thousand SVU and yesterday a noncommitted buyer—I believe a Sardanipolitan—arranged redemption. And—would you believe it—just as the papers were signed, the father arrived, but was perforce disappointed, since the buyer declared himself satisfied— An unpleasant scene ensued."

Gersen agreed that procrastination sometimes resulted in in-

convenience.

"In my opinion," declared Koshiel, "the Oikumene Conference should appropriate a sum ample to meet all rescission expenses. Why not? Most of the guests are residents of the Oikumene. Such an arrangement would facilitate the entire program, and there would be considerably less unpleasantness and deprivation,"

Gersen suggested that kidnapers might thereby be encouraged, and Koshiel admitted the possibility. "On the other hand, the situation now existing has aspects that puzzle me."

"Indeed?"

"You are acquainted with the Trans-Galactic Insurance and Guaranty Company? They have offices in many of the large cities."

"I have heard the name."

"They specialize in kidnap insurance; in fact I believe they sell perhaps 60 or 70 percent of all such insurance, for the principal reason that their rates are low. Why are their rates low? Because their clients are seldom kidnaped, while the clients of their competitors inevitably find their way to Interchange. I have frequently speculated that either TransGalactic owns Interchange, or Inter-

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change owns TransGalactic. An indiscreet thought, perhaps, but there it is."

"Indiscreet, perhaps, but interesting. . . . And why not? The two enterprises certainly seem to dovetail."

"Exactly my way of thinking... . Yes, many odd events occur at Interchange."

They came to a Class B apartment, which housed Daro and Wix Audmar. "Now here's a jolly little couple," said Armand Koshiel. "The rescission, of course, is far too high: these two are worth perhaps twenty or thirty thousand, depending on your taste. Their time of prime rescission is up, they are 'available,' but naturally no one in his right mind would pay so restrictive a fee."

Gersen watched the two children through the one-way window. They sat listlessly; Daro reading, Wix jerking at a loop of string. They were much alike, slender, dark-haired, with the luminous gray eyes of their father.

Gersen turned away. "Odd. Why should anyone post so high a rescission fee? And I notice several other guests with similarly high redemptions. What is the story here?"

Koshiel licked his lips, blinked, looked furtively over his shoulder. "I should not impart this information since it concerns the identity of a sponsor, but I am sure this particular sponsor is quite indifferent. He is the famous Kokor Hekkus."

Gersen feigned surprise. "What? Kokor Hekkus the Killing Machine?"

"The same. He has always given us a certain amount of business, but at the moment it seems that he dominates the entire enterprise. In the last two months, he has brought twenty-six items to Interchange, and all—save one—he values at a hundred million SVU. And in most cases he collects. These children are sponsored by Kokor Hekkus."

"But why?" marveled Gersen. "Does he have some grand project in mind?"

Koshiel grinned a cryptic grin. "Yes indeed. Yes, yes, indeed."

'And thereby hangs a tale,' as the monkey said while describing the cat's rear-quarters." Again Koshiel glanced furtively to all sides. "You may know something of Kokor Hekkus—"

"Who doesn't?"

"—among his characteristics is devotion to the aesthetic ideal. It seems that Kokor Hekkus has fallen madly in love with a girl

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who—I assure you—is the loveliest vision of the universe. She is nonpareil!"

"How do you know this?"

"Patience. This girl, far from returning the affection of Kokor Hekkus, finds herself appalled and nauseated by the thought of him. Where can she flee? How can she hide herself? The galaxy is too small. Kokor Hekkus is indefatigable; he will seek her no matter where she takes herself. There is no haven for this delightful creature—save one. Interchange. Not even Kokor Hekkus dares to violate the rules of Interchange. First, he would never be allowed the use of its facilities; second, the Interchange management would spare no effort in punishing him. Kokor Hekkus perhaps scorns peril, but he is not rash. So this girl acts as her own sponsor. She establishes her rescission fee at ten billion SVU; indeed, she wished to set it higher, at a thousand billion, but this was not allowed.

"So now! We have this ludicrous circumstance, the girl serene and secure in the Imperial Gardens at Interchange, while Kokor Hekkus sweats and reeks in the extremity of passion. And indeed, he will not be denied. He lacks the cash; somewhere he must find ten billion SVU."

"I begin to understand," said Gersen.

"Kokor Hekkus is by no means baffled," Koshiel declared with verve. "He fights fire with fire. The girl has used the appointments of Interchange to thwart him; he will use the same to gain his will. Ten billion is a large number, but it is only a hundred times a hundred million. So now Kokor Hekkus ranges the Oikumene, kidnapping the loved ones of the hundred wealthiest folk alive! On the day that the hundredth pays the hundred million, Kokor Hekkus will claim the person of AJusz Iphigenia Eperje-Tokay, for she is 'available.' "

"A highly romantic individual, this Kokor Hekkus—in every sense of the word," said Gersen.

Koshiel did not notice the siccant quality to Gersen's remark.

"Indeed! Think of it! She must wait, day after day, watching the figure of ten billion become smaller and smaller. Already he has collected for twenty of the guests he has sponsored; every day sees the arrival of more. And meanwhile the girl can do nothing; she is

caught in her own trap."

"Hmfmf. A sorry situation—at least from the standpoint of the young lady. Her home is where?"

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Koshiel shook his head. "As to thdt, I hear onl\ rumor—indeed the source of all mv information The rumor in this case is beyond the belief of sensible men like ourselves She is said to have declared herself a native ofNever-Never land the planet rhamber'"

"Thamber3" Gersen was indeed surprised Thamber, the world of myth, of witches and sea-serpents, gallant knights, and magic forests, was the locale of children's fairy' tales. Also, he recalled with a sudden tingle, the home ofhormagaunts'

"Thamber indeed'" exclaimed Koshie! with a laugh and an expressive gesture "It now occurs to me that if you have ten billion SVU and vast courage, here would be an excellent speculation' Kokor Hekkus, if he must kidnap the scions of another hundred wealthy folk, would certainly pay your price'"

"Just my luck to rescind this nonpareil, then have her sicken and die on my hands. Kokor Hekkus and I would both be bereft'"

As they spoke, they had been wandering along the row of Class B and Class A apartments Koshiel paused, pointed in at a middle-aged man who seemed to be drawing a diagram in a notebook.

"Here," said Koshiel, "is Myron Patch, another guest sponsored by Kokor Hekkus At a rescission of 427,685 SVU, highly overpriced, if you ask me. Unlike the girl from Thamber'" He gave Gersen a lascivious wink and nudge of the elbow.

Gersen frowned in at Myron Patch—an undistinguished fellow of medium stature, plump, with an easy good-natured countenance The rescission fee aroused his interest Why 427,685 precisely5 Behind the figure, behind the enforced visit of Myron Patch to Interchange was a story He asked Koshiel, "Can I talk to this man?"

"Certainly, he is 'available.' If you think you can mulct Kokor Hekkus of a sum in extent of—what is it3 427,68> SVU, a ridiculous figure—by all means go to it."

"The apartments are naturally equipped with spy-cells and microphones^"

"No," said Koshiel, "and for a very good reason- there is nothing to be gained by listening "

"Nevertheless," said Gersen, "we will take precautions Let me speak to the man."

Koshiel touched the button that, by ringing a small chime, apprised the guest in question that his attention was required Myron

Patch looked up, came slowly to the front of the apartment Koshiel inserted a key into a socket, a panel snapped aside, Myron Patch

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looked forth at Gersen, at first with hope, and then perplexity. Gersen took Koshiel by the shoulders, moved him close to the panel, turned him so that he faced into the apartment. "Now sing. loudly."

Koshiel grinned foolishly. "I know only lullabies from my youth."

"Sing lullabies then, but loudly and with legato "

Koshiel began to yelp a discordant song. Gersen motioned to the even more perplexed Patch. "Stand close."

Patch pressed his face close to the panel. Gersen asked, "Why are you here?"

Patch's mouth drooped. "It's a long story."

"Tell me in as few words as possible."

Patch sighed mournfully. "I am an engineer and manufacturer. I undertook a complicated job for a certain man—a criminal, I now know him to be. We disagreed; he seized my person and brought me here. The ransom represents the money under dispute."

Koshiel started a new song. Gersen asked, "The criminal is Kokor Hekkus?"

Myron Patch nodded dolefully.

"Do you know him personally?"

Patch said something that Gersen could not understand for the fervor of Koshiel's lullaby. Patch repeated: "I said I know his agent, who comes often to Krokmoles,"

"Can you make contact with the agent?"

"On Krokmoles, yes Not here,"

"Very well. I will rescind your fee." Gersen tapped Koshiel's shoulder. "You may stop. We return to the office."

"You are finished? There are others to see: bargainers, true bargainers!"

Gersen hesitated. "Can I see the woman whom Kokor Hekkus is pursuing?"

Koshiel shook his head. "Not unless you pay ten thousand SVU for the privilege— In essence she refuses to see anyone: even em-

ployees like myself, who would be happy to relieve her tedium and relax her understandable tensions."

"Very well then." Gersen produced another three hundred SVU, which Koshiel, bedazzled and dreamy after so much talk of millions and billions, pocketed with a murmur of unenthusiastic thanks. "We return to the office."

From Popular Handbook to the Planets, 303rd Edition

(1292);

Krokinole: third largest planet of the Rigel

Concourse, fourteenth in orbital order.

Planetary Constants:

Diameter: 9,450 miles

Mass: 1.23

Mean day: 22 hours, 16 minutes, 48.9

seconds, etc.

General Remarks: Sometimes considered the most beautiful of all the Concourse planets, Krokinole may with justice claim to be the most diverse, both geographically and ethnically. There are two large continents: Borkland and Sankland; six smaller continents: Cumberland, Layland, Gardena, Mergenthaler, Hopland, and Skakerland.

Each of these boasts dozens of natural marvels. At random may be mentioned the Crystal Pinnacles of Bize Parish, the Card River Falls of Dinker Parish, both in Cumberland; the 1 lole through the World of North State, Sankland; the Undersea Forest off the coast of Iksemand, Skakerland; Mount Jovah in the Highlands of Gardena, the tallest mountain (42,102 feet above sea level) of all the Concourse.

The flora and fauna are complex and highly developed. The near-extinct Super-beasts, once masters of the planet, display more than a rudimentary intelligence, as evidenced by their unique semaphore communicatory system (to call

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it a "language" is to commit semantic mayhem), their boats, baskets, ornamental knots, and committee organization.

The human population of Krokinole is as varied as the topography; again the diversity can only be indicated. Skakerland was first settled by a schismatic cult of the Skakers who went to Olliphane; in the Highlands of Gardena dwell the remarkable Imps. Cumberland is home to the talented and industrious Whitelocks; while the Druid Banquers wander the tundras of North Hopland. Other races are the Arcadians, Batthalese, Singhels, Oporto Fishermen, Jansenists,

Ancient Alans, and many more. . . .

Returning from Sasani aboard Gersen's Model 9B Locater, Myron Patch explained in greater detail his dealings with Kokor Hekkus, and indeed elaborated upon the whole course of his life. Originally a native of Earth, Patch had been a victim of the Texahoma Riots, and considered himself lucky to escape with his life. He arrived on Krokinole penniless, accepted work as a barnacle-scraper for the Card Estuary Docking Company, presently established a small machine shop at Pacris, the Whitelock capital. Prospering and expanding, in the course of eighteen years, Patch had become owner and manager of the Patch Engineering Works, the largest such enterprise of Cumberland. He had also achieved a reputation for versatility and ingenuity, to such a degree that when Seuman Otwal brought him a set of bizarre specifications, Patch was intrigued but not surprised.

Seuman Otwal, as Patch described him, was a man somewhat younger than himself, with a strikingly ugly face distinguished by a long down-curving nose that almost seemed to meet a sharp up-tilted chin.

Seuman Otwal had attempted no subterfuge. He identified himself as an agent of Kokor Hekkus, and had appeared content when Patch declared himself willing to work for the devil himself, provided his money passed silently through the fake-meter.

With the relationship established on a realistic footing Otwal produced his plans. He wanted Patch to design and construct a walking fort in the semblance of a monster centipede, seventy-six feet long and twelve feet high. The mechanism was to consist of eighteen segments, each equipped with a pair of legs. The fort, as Seuman Otwal termed it, must be able to move at a speed of at

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least forty miles per hour on synchronized, smoothly operating legs. It must be able to spurt liquid fire from its tongue, exude noxious gas, and tire energy beams through ports in its head. Patch declared himself capable of contriving the mechanism, and, with natural interest, inquired its purpose. Seuman Otwal at first seemed displeased, then explained Kokor Hekkus' fascination with intricate and macabre machines. Kokor Hekkus, Otwal went on to say, had recently been victimized by an obstreperous group of savages, and the fort "would speak to them in a language they understood."

Warming to his subject, Otwal favored Patch with a lengthy disquisition on his subject of terror. According to Otwal, terror was of two varieties: the instinctive and the conditioned. To produce a maximum effect, both types should be excited simultaneously; either alone was capable of being contained. Kokor Hekkus' method was to identify and analyze these factors; then, in his application, he selected and intensified the factors of maximum potency.

"One cannot frighten a fish with talk of drowning!" declared Seuman Otwal.

The exposition continued for half an hour, with Patch becoming increasingly uncomfortable. After Otwal had departed, he wrestled long and hard with his conscience over the morality of building the mechanical horror.

Here Gersen inquired, "Did you ever suspect that Seuman Otwal might be Kokor Hekkus himself?"

"Oh indeed, until one day Kokor Hekkus himself stepped into the shop. He did not resemble Seuman Otwal in the least."

"Describe him, if you will."

Patch frowned. "This is difficult. He has no remarkable characteristics. He is about your stature, he is agile and nervous, his head is neither large nor small, his features are regular and well-spaced. He wears somber skin-tone and garments in the style of the Whitelock elders. His manner is subdued, almost over-courteous, but it is not convincing nor is it intended to convince. All the while, as he speaks softly and listens attentively, his eyes gleam, and one knows he is thinking of the strange sights he has seen and the odd deeds he has done."

There was an interruption now from the two children, who wished to have Rigel pointed out to them. Gersen indicated the white blaze dead ahead, then returned to Patch who continued with the description of his mental turmoil. He had suffered, so he de-

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dared, the mil range of qualms, misgivings and apprehensions, but at last decided to be guided by two considerations: first, he had already compromised himself, especially since money had been advanced to him, to the sum of SVU 427,685; and second, if he did not build the machine, there were a dozen other shops that would do so. So work progressed, even though Patch was uneasily aware that he assisted in the creation of an evil device.

Gersen listened without comment, and in fact felt no great disapprobation. Patch seemed an inoffensive individual who had the misfortune to lack an automatic morality.

Construction continued; the fort neared completion. Kokor Hekkus now made his appearance, for the purpose of inspection. Much to Patch's dismay he declared himself profoundly dissatisfied- He derided the leg action, which he characterized as awkward and obviously nonorganic. In his opinion, the fort "would not deceive a child!" Patch, at first appalled, gradually recovered his wits. He brought forward the specifications and demonstrated that he had performed to the letter of his instructions. Nowhere and at no time had he been supplied unambiguous information regarding leg motion. Kokor Hekkus was unmoved. He declared the object totally unacceptable and demanded that Patch make suitable changes. Patch angrily disavowed responsibility: he would gladly make changes but he must ask more money. Kokor Hekkus drew back in outrage. He made a harsh cutting gesture with his hand to signify that Patch had gone too far. Patch, he declared, had not fulfilled

his contract, which was thereby void; he demanded return of all moneys advanced: namely SVU 427,685. Patch refused, whereupon Kokor Hekkus bowed and departed—

Patch armed himself but to no avail; four days later he was set upon by three men, beaten in a thorough but disinterested manner, hustled into a spaceboat, conveyed to Interchange where his ransom was set at SVU 427,685. Patch had neither friends, relatives, nor business associates; owing to certain debts incurred in the process of expansion, forced sale of his engineering shop would bring no more than SVU 200,000. He had given up hope of redemption, and had resigned himself to slavery. Then Gersen had appeared. Patch hesitantly inquired Gersen's motives. He felt boundless gratitude, he recognized Gersen's generosity, but surely there was more to the situation than this.

Gersen felt no impulse to confide in Patch. "Assume," he said,

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"that I am acquainted with the Patch Engineering and Construction Company, that I consider the ransom as constituting payment for a 51 percent interest in the organization."

Patch rather forlornly declared himself satisfied with the arrangement. "Do you wish formal acknowledgment of partnership?"

"You might write a memorandum to the effect. Essentially I want control over company policy for an indefinite period, not to exceed five years. As to profits I have no immediate need of money and you may apply all such to repayment of the sum advanced."

Patch was not too pleased with the scheme, but had no basis for argument. A sudden thought came to him, and he rubbed his face nervously. "By any chance, do you intend to have further dealings with Kokor Hekkus?"

"Since you ask—yes."

Patch licked his lips, "Allow me at once to register a 49 percent negative vote. If, in your mind, there is even a 2 percent misgiving, the negative votes will defeat this reckless ambition."

Gersen grinned. "All 51 percent cries out in favor of recovering from Kokor Hekkus money illegally extorted from company funds."

Patch bowed his head. "So be it."

Rigel flared across the sky. Gersen located Alphanor; Daro and Wix became effervescent with excitement. Gersen watched them wryly. As soon as they returned to the dim old house in the sun-struck hills above Taube, they would rush to the arms of their father and mother; the kidnaping, the imprisonment, the voyage home would become vague, Gersen would be forgotten. . . . Gersen mused upon the vagaries of fate that had molded him into a—ruefully he supplied the word—a monomaniac. What if, by some fantastic set of circumstances, he succeeded in avenging the Mount Pleasant cataclysm upon all five of the Demon Princes—what then?

Would he be able to retire, to buy country land, to woo and wed, to breed children? Or would the role of nemesis have become such an ingrained element in his nature that never could he draw back, never could he know of evil men without wanting to take their lives? It was all too possible. And, sadly, the impetus would come not from indignation or moral outrage, but from reflex, a passionless reaction; and the only satisfaction to be derived would be that of fulfilling a minor physiological need, such as belching or scratching an itch.

As always, such reflections drove Gersen into a fit of melan-

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choly, and during the remainder of the voyage, he was even more terse and gruff than ever. The children inspected him wonderingly though without fear, for they had learned at least to trust him.

Down to Alphanor, down to the continent Scythia, down to the antiquated Garreu Province spaceport at Marquari. Here Gersen communicated by visiphone with Duschane Audmar, whose face was vaguely haggard; Gersen guessed that he had given much introspection to Gersen's mission. He inquired briefly as to the health of his children and accepted Gersen's reassurance with a curt nod.

There was no air-service between Marquari and Taube, and spaceships were proscribed except at the spaceports. Gersen herded the eager children aboard the coast dispatch-ship, a broad-beamed vessel with cargo below and passengers above, which required a day and a night to make the five-hundred-mile run down the coast to Taube. Here he hired the ancient glide-car and rumbled up the long slope to the manse of Duschane Audmar. The children jumped from the car and ran pell-mell, without a backward glance for Gersen, into the arms of their mother, who stood, waiting in the open doorway. Her face worked with the effort to hold back tears, and Gersen was conscious of an emptiness within himself, for he had come to feel affection for the children. He entered the house, and now, secure in their home, Daro and Wix ran up, hugged and kissed him.

Audmar came forth, conducted him to the austere room where they had first spoken. Gersen made his accounting,

"Kokor Hekkus needs ten billion SVU. He hopes to raise this amount by extorting a hundred million from a hundred of the wealthiest folk of the Oikumene. He has attained perhaps a third of his goal, and money is rapidly coming in. He desires the money in order to ransom a young woman who to evade him has taken refuge at Interchange under a rescission fee often billion SVU."

"Hmfmf," said Audmar. "This woman must be extravagantly attractive for Kokor Hekkus to value her at this figure."

"So it would seem—although any object valued at this figure must be inherently desirable," said Gersen. "I would have inspected the woman, but she, functioning as her own sponsor, charges ten thousand SVU a look, presumably in order to discourage the cu-

riosity of such as myself."

Duschane Audmar nodded. "The information may or may not be worth a hundred million SVU to the Institute, from which the

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money naturally comes My children are hack with me, I am of course grateful for this, but I fear that I have allowed my emotions to interfere with rm. reason, I fear that I have compromised myself"

Gersen made no comment I Iis private opinion was to the same effect Still, the Institute had only itself to blame, should it choose, it undoubtedly could destroy Kokor Hekkus "A second matter of interest The young woman's name is Alusz Iphigenia Eper)e-Tokay She is native to the planet Thamber, or so she claims "

"Thamber'" Audmar at last was interested "Is this a serious avowal or facetiousness^"

"I believe that she makes a serious claim to this effect "

"Interesting Even if all cockalorum " lie looked sidewise at Gersen "You have something else to tell me^"

"You gave me a certain amount of expense money I used part of it in a manner I considered pertinent which is to say, I bought a controlling interest in the Patch Engineering and Construction Company of Patns on Krokmoles "

Audmar nodded graciously "It was the obvious thing to do "

"The opportunity occurred at Interchange Myron Patch was sponsored by Kokor Hekkus, with a rescission of 427,685 SVU The figure interested me, I made inquiry, and when Patch stated that he was able to establish contact with Kokor Hekkus, I re-deemed him, taking the partnership as security "

Audmar rose to his feet, walked to the door, returned with a tray containing cordials

"I find," said Gersen, "that Myron Patch has been building a mechanical monster for Kokor Hekkus a walking fort in the shape of a centipede of eighteen segments "

Audmar sipped his cordial, held the glass aloft, eyed the rose and violet glintings. "You need not account for the money," he said "It has paid for a few items of interesting information, and as an incidental concomitant brought two pleasant children back to their home " He finished his cordial, set the glass down with a click Gersen, understanding more from what was left unsaid than what was said, rose to his feet, took his leave.

Patns, capital of the Cumberland \ssociated Parishes, rambled and sprawled for miles along the Card River Estuary, with residential suburbs along the shores of Ock Eake There were many thousand-year-old structures in the Old Quarter three- and four-story build-

mgs of rough black brick, narrow fronted, with tall narrow windows and high pitched gables. Upnver, in seven-hundred-year-old New Town, stood the famous River Arches eleven monumental river-straddling structures of a type unknown elsewhere m the human universe Eight-hundred-feet high they stood truncated triangles with two-hundred-foot arches carved from the base Each was identical save for color, each housed shops, studios, service areas in the legs, with apartments for the urban elite above Between the arches of New Town and the black brick structures of Old Quarter spread a dingy industrial area, and here was Myron Patch's shop In mingled eagerness, irresolution, pride, anxiety, and wounded dignity, he escorted Gersen to the main entrance It was a more imposing operation than Gersen had expected, occupying an area two-hundred-feet long by a hundred-feet wide, with parts and material storage above Patch was depressed to find the shop locked and silent "It would seem that in a time of stress, one's employees would pitch in, keep the wheels rolling, so to speak, or even make some attempt to rescind the fees of their employer. Over a hundred men and women derived their livelihood from me, and not one so much as made inquiry from the Interchange representative'"

"Presumably they were all occupied m seeking new employment," Gersen suggested-

"Be that as it may, I am not gratified " Patch flung the doors wide, ushered Gersen into the cavernous interior, pointed to the section that had been walled off from the main plant "Seuman Otwal insisted on absolute secrecy," Patch explained. "I used only trusted employees, and then, at Otwal's insistence, I put them through a hypnotic process m which I ordered them to forget everything they saw in Workshop B after they passed through the door Also," he said musingly, "while they were in the hypnotic condition I added the suggestion that they work with greater zeal and accuracy, that they feel neither thirst, hunger, loquacity, nor fatigue during the working hours, and I must say that for a space I have never seen such an admirable set of workers I was about to extend the plan to the entire working force when I was kidnaped, indeed my first thought was that I had encountered bravos from the Fabricators' Protective Guild " He led Gersen across the shop, past various forges, cutters, molds, welding ngs, and lathes, to a door placarded with the universal symbol for KEEP OUT a red

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palm-print. Patch ran his finders over the code buttons to the lock. "Since you are a partner, there can be no secrets from you."

"Precisely," said Gersen.

The door slid aside, the two passed through an anteroom into Workshop B. There was the walking fort. Patch's habit of mild understatement had not prepared Gersen for the ferocious aspect

of the device. The head was equipped with six scythe-like mandibles and a collar of long barbed prongs. The eye was a single faceted band; the ingestion orifice was a conical maw at the top of the head with a pair of jointed arms at each side. Behind were the eighteen segments, each suspended from a pair of high-rising jointed legs, these encased in a rugose yellow skin. At the far stern was a nubbin like a second head, equipped with an eye and another set of barbed prongs. The torso had not yet been finished and still exhibited a metallic sheen.

"What do you think of it?" asked Patch anxiously, as if hoping for vindication or endorsement.

"Highly impressive," said Gersen, and Patch seemed satisfied. "I'd like to know what he wants it for."

"Watch." Patch mounted the head of the object, using the prongs as a ladder. He stepped into the maw and disappeared. Gersen was alone in the room with the seventy-six-foot engine of fright. It could spew poison from its prongs, dart fire from its eyes. A sweep of the mandible could slash through a tree-trunk. Gersen looked right and left, then retired into the anteroom. Patch seemed a good fellow, sincerely grateful, but why put temptation in his way?

He positioned himself in the anteroom where he could not be seen from the head, and watched. Patch had started the energy system: the object insensibly had come alive. The head gave a shake, the prongs rattled, the mandibles clicked. From vents at the side of the head came a wild wailing scream; Gersen stood quivering. The scream died. Now the object moved, the legs of alternate segments rising and swinging ahead while the others thrust back.

Backward and forward moved the device, the jointed legs working smoothly if a trifle stiffly. Now the metal centipede halted, pranced sidewise; a step, two steps, three steps. Then the near side of legs seemed to collapse; the object toppled, fell with a clanging thud against the wall. Gersen would have been crushed had he remained in the shop. Unavoidable, doubtless—a flaw in the machinery, a clumsiness on the part of the operator. . . . From the topside

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maw scrambled Patch, round face pale and clammy, eyes big with consternation. Gersen, watching from the anteroom, would have sworn that his concern was real, that Patch was horrified by the thought of what he might see. Patch jumped to the floor, peered back and forth under the hulk. "Gersen! Gersen!"

"Behind you," said Gersen. Patch jumped around, and if the relief on his face were not genuine, then, Gersen thought, the miming-pads had lost a great performer.

Patch gasped his thankfulness that Gersen was safe. The phasing mechanism for the starboard bank of legs had failed; it was a deficiency that he had not previously recognised. Not that it made

any great difference one way or the other, since now the object must be scrapped.

He led the way back into the main shop, locked the door behind them. "Tomorrow," he said, "it's back to work. I don't know what has happened to my old customers, but I always satisfied them in the past and perhaps they will bring their business back to us."

Gersen stood looking across to Workshop B. "Exactly what faults did Kokor Hekkus find unacceptable?"

Patch made a wry face. "The leg action. He said it did not produce the effect he desired. The motion was too stiff and rigid. Only a soft supple looping motion would serve. I pointed out the difficulties and the expense of such a system; indeed I doubt if a durable mechanism could be worked out, considering the mass of the fort and the terrain to be traversed, which I understand is extremely rugged."

"My idea is this," said Gersen. "Kokor Hekkus extracted almost half a million SVU from us. I want to get that money back."

Patch smiled a sad tremulous smile. "We should be wiser to ignore him. We do not need his class of trade. Let bygones be bygones, that is the wise course. Come! Into the office. We will go over the accounts."

"No," said Gersen. "I plan to leave these matters entirely in your hands. In the matter of the walking fort, however, I feel that we must regain our money. And we can do it in a safe, legitimate fashion."

"How?" Patch asked dubiously.

"We must modify the fort so that it functions to suit Kokor Hekkus. Then we will sell it to him for the full original price."

"Possibly. But there are difficulties. He may not now require

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the fort. Or he may not have the money. Or—even more likely—we won't be able to modify the device to suit him."

Gersen reflected. "Somewhere I've seen a means to overcome the difficulty. . . . Across the Oikumene is Vanello, something of a resort world for the region back of Scorpio. At one of the religious festivals, a platform supported by a long flexible stem raises a priestess dressed in flower petals. Another similar platform raises a table supporting certain symbolic objects—as I recall, a book, a beaker, and a human skull. No matter. The priestess performs rites while the stems twine about each other. I learned that the stems are built up of several dozen smaller tubes, each containing a magnetic slurry: iron powder in a viscous liquid. Reacting to fields from internal windings, these tubes selectively contract with great force. By proper circuitry any contortion of the tubes is possible. It seems to me that this system might be applied to the legs of the walking

fort."

Patch scratched his small round chin. "If what you say is correct, I am inclined to agree."

"First we will want to consult Seuman Otwal to assure ourselves that Kokor Hekkus still needs the fort."

Patch heaved a deep sigh, raised his arms, let them flap down to his sides. "So be it—though I would rather deal with adders."

But when Patch called the hotel that Seuman Otwal was wont to patronize, he found that Mr. Otwal was not currently in residence, and the date of his return was indefinite.

Patch heard the news with vast relief. Only at Gersen's prompting did he leave his name and the request that Mr. Otwal call as soon as possible.

The hotel clerk's face vanished; Patch became cheerful once again. "After all we have no need for their filthy money, derived from the most vicious crimes imaginable! Perhaps we can sell the monster as a curio, or even mount seats on the back and advertise it as an eccentric charabanc. Have no fear, Kirth Gersen! Your money is secure!"

"I'm not interested in the money," said Gersen. "I want Kokor Hekkus."

Patch evidently considered this an odd or even perverse inclination. "For what purpose?"

"I want to kill him/" said Gersen, then regretted his lapse from taciturnity.

From "Kokor Hekkus the Killing Machine," Chapter IV of *The Demon Prmces*, by Caril Carphen (Elusidarian Press, New Wexford, Aloysius, Vega):

If Malagate the Woe can be characterized by the single word "grim" and Howard Alan Treesong .by "incomprehensible," then Lens Larque, Viole Falushe, and Kokor Hekkus all lay claim to the word "fantastic." Which one exceeds the other two in "fantasy"? It is an amusing if profitless speculation. Consider Viole Falushe's Palace of Love, Lens Larque's monument, the vast and incredible outrages Kokor Hekkus has visited upon humanity: such extravagances are impossible to comprehend, let alone compare. It is fair to say, however, that Kokor Hekkus has captured the popular imagination with his grotesque and eerie humor. Let us listen to what he has to say in an abstract from the famous telephoned address, *The Theory and Practice of Terror*, to the students of Cervantes University:

". . . to produce the maximum effect, one must identify and intensify those basic dreads already existing within the subject. It is a mistake to regard the fear of death as the

most extreme fear. I find a dozen other types to be more poignant, such as:

"The fear of inability to protect a cherished dependent.

"The fear of disesteem.

"The fear of noisome contact.

"The fear of being made afraid.

"My goal is to produce a 'nightmare' quality of fright,

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and to maintain it over an appreciable duration. A nightmare is the result of the under-mind exploring its most sensitive areas, and so serves as an index for the operator. Once an apparently sensitive area is located, the operator to the best of his ingenuity employs means to emphasize, to dramatize this fear, then augment it by orders of magnitude. If the subject fears heights, the operator takes him to the base of a tall cliff, attaches him to a slender, obviously fragile or frayed cord, and slowly raises him up the face of the cliff, not too far and not too close to the face. Scale must be emphasized, together with the tantalizing but infeasible possibility of clinging to the vertical surface. The lifting mechanism should be arranged to falter and jerk. To intensify claustrophobic dread, the subject is conveyed into a pit or excavation, inserted head-foremost into a narrow and constricted runnel that slants downward, and occasionally changes direction by sharp and cramping angles. Whereupon the pit or excavation is filled and subject must proceed ahead, for the most part in a downward direction."

Seuman Otwal made no appearance during the first month, nor yet the second. During this time. Patch called his employees back to work, solicited business, and presently the Patch Engineering and Construction Company was once more in full clangorous swing.

Gersen took upon himself the modification of the walking fort. He communicated with the local office of the UTCS,\* mentioned the annual Floration Rite at Vanello, described the sinuous supports to the forty-five sepalic platforms, and minutes later received a portfolio of tables, graphs, schematics, and material specifications. He took these to Patch, who scrutinized them, nodded sagely, said, "Ah, yes. . . . Ah yes. . . . Ah yes. . . ." After which he heaved a dolorous sigh. "And so at vast expense, we perfect this ridiculous hurlothrumbo to find that neither Seuman Otwal nor Kokor Hekkus nor anyone else will pay for it—what then?"

"We'll sue," said Gersen.

Patch snorted, returned to a study of the data Gersen had set before him. Finally he said grudgingly, "The system is clearly feasible, and will definitely be more flexible than the jointed legs.

'Universal Technical Consultative Service.

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However the design of the phasing nodes, the coupling to the modulators, and the modulators themselves are far beyond my capabilities. . . . There is a highly competent group of cybernetic engineers—as I see it, this is basically a cybernetic problem—a hundred yards up the street, and I suggest that we contract the whole matter over to them."

"As you wish."

Two months later, Seuman Otwal had not appeared. After vehement protest, Patch communicated once more with the Halkshire Hotel, but Seuman Otwal had not been seen. Gersen began to feel spasms of uneasiness and cast about for another means to make contact with Kokor Hekkus. The fort itself—so he reasoned—by its very nature should provide information. He went to the files and brought forth the entire set of plans, specifications, and correspondence, spread all before him.

Nowhere appeared any categorical identification of the planet on which the metal monster was intended to function.

Gersen began all over again, seeking this time for some indirect indication to Planet X, for information implicit in other data.

There was no mention of air-conditioning equipment; evidently the atmosphere was standard or near-standard.

In the specifications, a section read:

The vehicle must, under full load, be able to traverse slopes of up to 40° (assuming adequate footing) at a speed not less than ten miles per hour; to negotiate easily and certainly broken ground, such as a field of irregularly-shaped rock fragments up to six feet in diameter; to pass across crevasses, gaps, or ditches up to twenty feet wide.

Elsewhere a notation stated:

Energy requirements have been calculated on the basis of 75 percent thermodynamic efficiency with an over-performance factor of 100 percent.

Gersen set to work with slide-rule, calculator, and integrator. He knew the mass of the fort, he knew the energy required to propel the vehicle up a 40° slope at a speed of ten miles an hour. From

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this information and the over-performance factor, he could calculate the surface gravity of Planet X—which came to a value of 0.84 standard, implying a diameter of between 7,000 and 8,000 miles.

So far, so good, but hardly definitive information Again Gersen studied the specifications They were extremely exact, and allowed no elasticity, with fourteen color sketches depicting the fort from all sides The object was to be enameled in various shades of black, dark brown, pink, and chalk-blue Even the enamels and pigments were specified by means of graphs showing wavelength plotted against reflectance One variable had not been indicated, mused Gersen the color of the impinging light Thoughtfully, he called in the plant's color engineer, and requested a set of plaques enameled in accordance with the graph

While he waited Gersen investigated another idea The specifications were so exact as to suggest similarity or identity to an actual living creature The creature would be awesome indeed, but this was consistent with the philosophy of Kokor Hekkus. He prepared a precis detailing the characteristics of the fort, which he submitted to the UTCS Twelve minutes later, he received a report to the effect that no creature of these taxonomic indexes could be located in the standard references, bestiaries, monographs, or exploration notices Many worlds hosted creatures with points of similarity: this was a matter of common knowledge- The planet Idora, Sadal Suud XI, exhibited a segmented water-worm, ranging to thirty feet in length, on Earth were various miniature species, the Krokmole Highlands was home to the noxious roof-runner There was, stated the report, a curiously apt reference in an old volume of children's tales Legends of Old Thamber-here Gersen bent suddenly over the sheet The excerpt read

Easing and squeezing, gliding and sliding, walking and stalking down the mountain it comes on thirty-six supple hooks' Dreadful and dire is the creature in its unhurried haste, as long as the length of twelve dead victims'

"Now we are lost," cried Princess Sozanella, "Shall we succumb to the monster or give ourselves to the horrid Taddo trolls?"

"Hope' Hold to hope'" Dantinet whispered. "For this is the ancient foe of the trolls' It turns its black face away, to look upon the Taddo' It rears to show its blue belly, the

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color of putridity The trolls whimper and scream, but too late' And the monster tosses them into its maw Now we hasten away, through the glooms and passages, for once the Dread has performed a benefit'"

Gersen slowly put down the report Thamber' Another reference to the world of myth' Xavar Mankinello, the color engineer, came in with tabs enameled to Kokor Hekkus' specifications Gersen, with as much impatience as he ever allowed himself, arranged them beside the depicted fort There was an obvious difference Mankinello bent anxiously over the desk "There's been no mistake, I took great pains "

Gersen studied the tiles "Assuming that this is so, what color light will bring the tiles to the same colors as the sketch^"

Mankinello considered "The tiles are unquestionably cooler than the sketch Let's step into the lab "

In the laboratory, Mankinello put the tiles under a color generator "Presumably you're interested in standard incandescence "

"Standard starlight I suppose that's close to the same thing "

"Somewhat different, due to the stellar atmospheres But I can easily code for the stellar progression Let's start with about 4,0000 " He turned a wheel, flicked a switch, checked with a comparator "Close " He turned the wheel "There it is 4,350°." He glanced through a port. "See for yourself"

Gersen peered through the opening The tiles were now identical to the colors of the sketch "Color temperature 4,350° Class K?"

"I'll tell you exactly " Mankinello consulted a reference. "Class G8"

Gersen took sketch, tiles, returned to the room he had pre-empted for his office. Facts were accumulating. The planet in question attended a G8 star, and was characterized by a gravity of 0.84G. References to the legendary world Thamber had occurred with peculiar frequency Gersen called UTCS, requested a search for references to the location-hypothetical, fictional, mythical, hysterical, or otherwise-of the lost world Thamber Half an hour later, a folder was delivered to him with several dozen extracts There was little of interest, the most circumstantial information being contained in a traditional bit of school-yard doggerel

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Set a course from the old Dog Star  
A point to the north of Achernar;

Sleight your ship to the verge extreme  
And dead ahead shines Thamber's gleam.

The information contained in the first two lines might be applied, but thereafter the directions were meaningless. There was no more information to be derived from a study of the fort. Gersen decided that he had come to a dead end. Somewhere in space hung a world where Kokor Hekkus planned to take a metal monster. This world might be home to Alusz Iphigenia Eperje-Tokay who valued herself at ten billion SVU. This world might be the Thamber of myth. But there was no way of knowing,

Myron Patch appeared in the doorway. His round face was taut and accusing. For a moment he looked at Gersen, then said in a portentous voice, "Seuman Otwal is here."

From the Preface to A Concise History of the Oikumene,  
by Albert B. Hall:

Human evolution . . . has never gone in a smooth flow,  
but always in a cyclical pulse, which, as history is scanned,  
seems almost convulsive. The tribes mingle and merge to  
form a race, then comes a time of expulsion, of migration,  
isolation, differentiation into new tribes.

For more than a thousand years, this latter process has  
been on the ascendant, as the human race has swept across  
space. Isolation, special conditions, inbreeding have created  
dozens of new racial subtypes. But now there is stasis in the  
Oikumene, with many comings and goings, and it seems  
that perhaps the pendulum is about to swing back.

But only in the Oikumene! Folk still fare beyond, ever  
outward. Never has isolation been more easy, never has  
personal freedom been so cheap!

The eventualities? Anyone's guess is good. The Oiku-  
mene may be forced to expand. Other Oikumenes may  
come into existence. Conceivably men may collide with the  
realm of another race, for there is abundant evidence that  
other space-traveling peoples have gone before us, how and  
why to disappear no one can say.

"Where is Seuman Otwal?" Gersen asked. "Here in the shop?"

"No. Here in Patris. He wonders why I left the message."  
Patch's expression became more accusing than ever. "I didn't know

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what to say... . Humiliating to deal politely with a man who has  
wronged you... . Swallowing ashes. ..."

"What did you say?"

Patch made a helpless gesture. "What could I say? Except the  
truth. That we had worked out a means to alter the fort."

<' -W'e'?"

"The reference naturally was to the Patch Engineering and  
Construction Company."

"Did he seem interested?"

Patch gave a grudging nod. "He claims to have new instructions  
from his superiors. He will be here shortly."

Gersen sat thinking. Seuman Otwal might or might be one of  
Kokor Hekkus' various identities; Kokor Hekkus might or might  
not be aware that the weasel of Skouse was Kirth Gersen. He rose  
to his feet. "WTien Seuman Otwal comes, receive him in your office.

Introduce me as—as Howard Wall, plant manager, or chief engineer, something of the sort. Don't be surprised by anything I say—or," he added by way of afterthought, "by any change in my appearance."

Patch gave a stiff assent and turned away. Gersen went to the main washroom, where a dispenser offered a selection of skin-tonings. Selecting an exotic duo-tone—purplish-maroon with green luster—he changed his color, and parting his hair in the middle, combed it down over his cheeks in the style of the WTiitelock connoisseur. He had no change of clothes to complete the transformation, and so donned a white laboratory smock. Still dissatisfied, he clipped on a pair of gold filigree elf-shells over his ears, together with a gold nasal ridge that had been forgotten by one of the more foppish of the engineers. Bedizened and fashionable, Gersen now failed to recognize himself in the mirror.

He crossed the corridor to Patch's suite. The receptionist gave him a wondering look; Gersen walked past her and into Patch's office. Patch, looking up in startlement, hastily concealed the weapon he had been inspecting. He rose to his feet, puffed out his cheeks. "Yes sir? What is your wish?"

"I am Howard Wall," said Gersen.

" 'Howard Wall'?" Patch frowned heavily. "Do I know you? The name is somehow familiar."

"It should be," said Gersen. "I just mentioned it ten minutes ago."

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"Oh. Gersen. Yes indeed." Patch cleared his throat. "You gave me quite a start." He resumed his seat. "Why the elaborate regalia?"

"For Seuman Otwal. He doesn't know me, and I don't want him to."

Patch's face became dour. "I dislike catering to the trade of suspected criminals; it reflects upon the good name of Patch, and this is our most valuable asset."

Gersen ignored the obvious rejoinder. "Don't forget: I am Howard W^all, your production manager."

"WTiatever you like," replied Patch with dignity.

Five minutes later, the receptionist announced Seuman Otwal. Gersen went to the door, slid it open. Seuman Otwal came jauntily forward. His skin was strikingly two-toned russet and black; he had a high-bridged hooked nose, a long sharp jaw and prow-like chin, he wore tall pointed ear-shells of jet and nacre, which gave his head a narrow jutting bony look. Gersen tried to project upon him the

image of the man he had confronted on Bisson's End. Was there similarity? Conceivably. Otwal seemed of generally similar physique, but the facial indexes of the two were at variance. Gersen had heard reports of malleable flesh, but here was something more than wadded cheeks or a splayed nose. . . . Seuman Otwal glanced inquisitively at Gersen, then at Patch who had risen uncertainly to his feet. "My general manager," said Patch. "Howard Wall."

Otwal nodded politely. "Your custom must be increasing."

"I was forced to it," grumbled Patch. "Somebody had to look after the business when I was away. I have you to thank for it."

Otwal made an airy gesture. "A matter to be forgotten. My employer has his foibles; he is by no means unfair, though he wants fair value for his generous remuneration. Mr. Wall knows whom I represent?"

"Certainly. He understands the need for discretion."

Gersen nodded with the proper degree of solemnity.

Seuman Otwal gave a slight shrug. "Very well, Mr. Patch. I accept this. So now?"

Patch jerked his thumb toward Gersen, with rather less suavity than Gersen liked, and spoke with heavy irony: "Mr. Wall understands the nature of our previous difficulties and has some new ideas."

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Otwal seemed not to notice Patch's lack of enthusiasm. "I shall be glad to listen."

"First a question," said Gersen. "Is the party you represent still interested in the device as specified in the original contract?"

"Such conceivably might be the case," said Otwal, "if our requirements are satisfied. My employer was appalled by the awkward motion of the first version. The legs moved stiffly, with an angular scissor-like effect."

"This was the only difficulty?" inquired Gersen.

"It was certainly the most important one. Presumably the object is built to the well-known quality standards of Patch Engineering."

"Indeed it is!" declared Patch.

"The difficulty then no longer exists," said Gersen. "Mr. Patch and I have devised a system by which any required motion can be programed and enforced upon the legs."

"If so, and if the system meets our standards of reliability, then this is good news indeed."

"We had best consider the matter of recompense," said Gersen. "Here I speak for Mr. Patch, of course. He wants the full sum of the original contract, plus the cost of modifications and the normal percentage of profit."

Otwal considered a moment. "Minus, of course, those developmental funds already advanced. SVU 427,685,1 believe to be the

i\*

sum.

Patch began to sputter. Otwal could not restrain a faint smile.

"There have been additional expenses," said Gersen. "To a total of SVU 437,685. This must be included in the total reckoning." Otwal started to protest, but Gersen held up his hand. "We do not care to argue this point. We are prepared to deliver the mechanism, but we insist upon payment, which is as I stated it. Of course, if your principal wishes to make further representations, we shall be glad to listen to him in person."

Otwal gave a cool laugh. "No matter: I agree. My principal is anxious to take delivery."

"Still—and no denigration intended—we would prefer to deal with your principal, in order to minimize all misunderstanding."

"Impossible. He is involved elsewhere. But why be concerned over trifles? I have full power to act on his behalf."

Patch began to make restless movements; his prerogatives were ruthlessly being accroached by this so-called partner, whose only

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contribution to Patch Engineering and Construction was the rescission at Interchange. Gersen kept one eye on Patch and one on Otwal; neither was predictable.

"We accept this," Gersen told Otwal. "Now we need another installment of developmental money—approximately half a million SVU."

"Impossible!" snapped Otwal. "My principal is engaged in an enterprise where he must concentrate all his resources."

Patch began to fume. "You pay me, then you—"

Gersen said hastily, "Assume that the device is completed and ready for delivery: how can we feel confident of collecting our money?"

"You have my personal reassurance," said Otwal.

"Bah!" barked Patch. "That is not enough! You cheated me before, you'd do it again if you had the chance."

Otwal looked pained and turned to Gersen. "If we fail to meet our obligations—a ridiculous speculation—you need only withhold delivery. How simple it all is."

"What would we do then with a thirty-six-legged fort?" asked Gersen. "No. We must insist on one-third payment now, another third upon approval of the leg action, and the final third upon delivery."

"I think they ought to pay punitive damages," muttered Patch. "Ten thousand isn't enough. It should be a hundred thousand. Two hundred thousand. My discomfort, my anxiety, my—"

Wrangling continued. Otwal demanded details as to the new leg action; Gersen replied in diffuse terms: "We use flexible members shaped precisely to specifications. They are actuated by hydraulic tubes of a special variety, controlled by electrical modulations of infinite range."

Otwal finally gave in. "We could easily take our business to another concern—but time is of the essence. When will you guarantee delivery? There must be a penalty clause in the new contract:

we have already been far too lenient."

Again disputation ensued, and at one point Patch rose to his feet, leaned forward over his desk to shake his fist; Otwal disdainfully drew back apace.

The matter finally was adjusted. Otwal insisted upon seeing the half-completed fort, and, grumbling, Patch led the way with Gersen bringing up the rear. As he walked, Gersen studied Otwal's form:

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a man with the light sure tread of a panther, broad in the shoulder, narrow of hip—very like Billy Windle, but also like millions of other active and muscular men.

Otwal was surprised to find technicians already hard at work. He turned to Gersen with a rueful grin. "You anticipated my agreement?"

"Certainly—after driving the hardest bargain possible."

Otwal laughed. "An accurate appraisal of the situation. You are a clever man, Mr. Wall. Have you ever been Beyond?"

"Never. I am orthodox and unadventurous."

"Strange," said Seuman Otwal. "There is a certain air, almost an emanation, that clings to those who have worked Beyond. I thought I sensed it in you. Of course I am often wrong in my suppositions." He turned back to the fort. "Well, everything seems to be correct, except of course for the surface finish."

"To satisfy our curiosity," said Gersen, "perhaps you can describe its ultimate purpose."

"Certainly. My principal spends a good deal of time on a remote planet beset with barbarians. When he wishes to go abroad, they harass him severely. He wants security and this the fort will provide."

"Then the fort is purely defensive in nature?"

"Of course. My principal is a much-maligned man. I find him quite reasonable. He is daring, enterprising, even reckless, and certainly the most imaginative man alive—but in all aspects reasonable."

Gersen nodded thoughtfully. "I understand that he makes an imaginative use of the force of terror."

"Far better the fear of an act," Otwal stated, "than the brutal act itself. Do you not agree?"

"Possibly. But it occurs to me that a man so obsessed with the abstract notion of terror must suffer inordinate terrors on his own account."

Otwal seemed startled. "I had not considered this," he said. "I think that I agree. An emphatic man lives a hundred lives; he senses joys, sorrows, triumphs, despairs and, yes, terrors, beyond the horizon of the common man. He exults greatly, he suffers greatly, he fears greatly, but never would he arrange matters differently."

"What would you consider his supreme fear?"

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"It is no secret; death. He fears nothing else—and in fact has taken extravagant steps to avoid it."

"You speak with great authority," mused Gersen. "You know KokorHekkuswell?"

"As well as anyone. And of course I am an imaginative man in my own right."

"I also," declared Patch, "still I do not conduct my financial business through Interchange."

Seuman Otwal laughed quietly. "A sad episode that I suggest we consign to the past, and forget forever."

"Easy for you to say," Patch complained. "You weren't locked up away from your business for over two months."

They returned to the office where Otwal, rather gloomily, so it seemed, signed a bank voucher on a numbered account for the sum of half a million SVU; then, once more gracious, departed. Gersen immediately took the money to the local branch of the Bank

of Rigel, where the check was verified and the money credited to the account of Patch Construction.

When he returned to the shop, he found Patch in a belligerent mood. Patch wanted Gersen to take the advance from Otwal and relinquish his partnership, but Gersen refused to agree. Patch muttered darkly about agreements negotiated under duress, and spoke of closing the shop until the law set matters straight. Gersen laughed at him. "You can't close the shop. I own a controlling interest."

"I didn't realize I was dealing with thugs and bandits," blurted Patch. "I didn't realize that the good name of Patch Construction would be tainted. Monsters' Murderers! Terrorists! Thieves! Robbers! What have I let myself in for?"

"Eventually you'll have your shop back," Gersen consoled him. "And don't forget—there'll be a handsome profit for Patch Construction."

"Unless I get snatched off to Interchange again," said Patch bleakly. "I expect nothing better."

Gersen uttered a soft quiet curse, and Patch looked in wonder to see Gersen evince an overt sign of emotion. "What's the trouble?"

"Something I neglected, something I never considered."

"And what is that?"

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"I might have put a stick-tight on Seuman Otwal—or followed him."

"Why bother? He stays at the Halkshire Hotel. Seek him there."

"Yes, of course." Gersen went to the visiphone, was connected with the Halkshire front desk. He was informed that Mr. Otwal was not in residence at the moment, but that a message would eventually reach him. Gersen turned back to Patch. "Suspicious rascal. He probably would have ducked my stick-tight"

Patch was now studying Gersen with a new and intent expression. "I knew it all along."

"What?"

"You're an Ipsy agent."

Gersen laughed, shook his head. "I'm just ordinary Kirth Gersen "

"How," asked Patch with a shrewd grin, "can you get the use of a stick-tight operation if you're not police or Ipsy?"

"No great problem, if you know the right people. Let's get on with our monster."

On the following day, Seuman Otwal called by visiphone to state that he was leaving the planet. He would return in perhaps two months, when he hoped to see substantial progress.

On the day following, there was sensational news. In the course of one night, five of the wealthiest families of Cumberland had suffered the kidnaping of one or more of their members. "Such was Seuman Otwal's business on Krolonole," Gersen told Patch.

The fort progressed with satisfactory rapidity—a fact that pleased Patch but troubled Gersen. Either Seuman Otwal was Kokor Hekkus or he was not. If not, how could he be forced to reveal Kokor Hekkus' whereabouts? Gersen's best hope was that Kokor Hekkus, in his own guise, might once more visit the shop. If not, Gersen toyed with the idea of a secret capsule aboard the fort in which to stow away, but rejected the idea—the fort was far too small... Might he arrange to accompany the fort as instructor or expert? If the fort were truly bound for Thamber, he might find himself effectually exiled for life, or enslaved.

An idea on a different level occurred to him, which during the next few days he took steps to implement. The control pulses from the fort's cycling mechanism ran through a dorsal duct, branching

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off right and left to the relays in each segment. Where the duct passed back across the head, Gersen introduced a cutoff switch, activated by cells on either side of the head. If the gas within these cells were ionized—say by the impact of a weak projec beam—electricity flowing across the cell would open the switch, rendering the fort immobile for at least ten minutes.

Meanwhile the surface enamels had been applied. The engines and circuits were checked and adjusted, the leg action tested under various types of cycles and then the fort was adjudged complete. In the dim hours of early morning, it was shrouded under canvas, walked out into the street, to be grappled by a freight copter and conveyed to a wild area at the south of the Bize Parish Barrens for field trials. Patch proudly sat at the controls, Gersen rode beside him. The fort rambled smoothly over rough ground and shrubs, climbed hills without faltering. Certain maladjustments made themselves known, and were taken note of. A few minutes before noon, the fort breasted a low ridge and scuttled down into the camp of a Natural Life Association party. A hundred nature lovers looked up from their noon meal, emitted simultaneous gasps of horror and fled screaming over the hills. "Another success," said Gersen. "We can now with candor guarantee fnghtfulness to Kokor Hekkus."

Patch halted the fort, turned it about, drove it back over the ridge. At twilight it was once again draped in canvas, and carried back to the shop.

Almost as if Seuman Otwal were clairvoyant, he called on the following day to request a progress report Patch assured him that all went well; that if he so chose he could undertake a test of the fort on the following day. Otwal agreed and once again the fort was shrouded, trundled out into the predawn stillness, and conveyed into the badlands behind the Crystal Pinnacles, with Otwal following in a small nondescript air-car.

Gersen, wearing his maroon duo-tone and fashionable accouterments, took the controls, and once again the fort ran smartly up and down the foothills.

Weaponry, by the terms of the contract, had not been installed, however the gas sacs and odoriferous glands had been loaded with smoke-gas and colored water; they spouted and sprayed with precision and accuracy Otwal alighted, stood while the fort trundled back and forth, then returned to the head compartment and took over the controls. He said very little but his attitude indicated ap-

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proval. Patch, likewise silent, was clearly congratulating himself that the entire odious adventure would soon be at an end.

At dusk, the fort once more was conveyed back to Patris. Otwal, Patch, and Gersen gathered in Patch's office. Otwal walked back and forth as if in deep thought. "The fort seems to perform well enough," he said, "but to be perfectly frank, I consider the price somewhat high. I shall recommend to my principal that he inspect the mechanism only if the price is reduced to a reasonable and rational figure."

Patch reeled back and went red in the face. "What!" he roared. "Do you dare stand here and say that? After all our suffering, all we've been through to produce the damnable thing?"

Seuman Otwal inspected Patch coldly. "It serves nothing to rant. I have explained my—"

"The answer is no! Out of here! Don't come back till you bring every cursed coin we have owing!" Patch marched forward. "Get out, or I'll throw you out! Nothing could give me more pleasure. In fact—" he seized Otwal by the shoulder and hustled him about. Otwal swayed, smiled serenely toward Gersen, as if in amusement for the playful ferocity of a kitten. Patch tugged again; Otwal moved slightly; Patch was flung across the room, to strike his head against his desk and lie blinking. Otwal turned to Gersen. "What of you? Do you care to try your luck?"

Gersen shook his head. "I only want to wind up the contract. Bring your principal for his final inspection, then if he is satisfied, take delivery. Under no circumstances will we reduce our price; in fact, we now must start to charge interest upon the amount owing."

Seuman Otwal laughed, glanced at Patch who was slowly raising himself to a sitting position. "You take a strong position. Under the circumstances I might do the same. Very well; I am forced to

agree. When can the fort be delivered?"

"According to the terms of our contract, we must pack it in foam, crate it, and convey it to the spaceport—a matter of three days after final acceptance and payment."

Seuman Otwal bowed. "Very well. I will try to make contact with my principal, after which I will render the requisite notification." '

"I believe," said Gersen, "that a second payment is now due." Patch was rubbing his head, staring in virulent hate toward Seuman Otwal.

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"Wliy bother?" said Seuman Otwal carelessly. "Let us handle these tiresome financial matters later."

Gersen refused to agree. "What good is a contract if the terms are not intended to be binding?" Patch struggled to his feet, moved with an air of purpose around behind his desk. Gersen stepped quickly past, removed the projac from the half-open drawer.

Otwal laughed negligently. "You just saved his life."

"I saved our second payment," said Gersen, "because I would have been forced to kill you as well."

"No matter, no matter. Let us not talk of death, horrid to consider nonbeing! You want your money: tiresome people. Another half million, I presume?"

"Correct. And a final payment of—Gersen consulted notes—ofSVU 681,490, which will settle accounts in full with Patch Construction."

Otwal walked slowly back and forth. "I will have to make arrangements— . . . Three days to crate and foam,, you say?"

"That seems a reasonable period."

"It is too long. Here is how we shall simplify. Cover the fort with the tarpaulin; at midnight walk it out into the street. A freight-carrier will grapple to it, and take it to our cargo ship, which is by chance convenient."

"There is one difficulty," said Gersen. "The banks will be closed, and your check cannot be certified."

"I will bring the money in cash, all of it: second and third payments together."

Essentially Gersen cared not a whit for the money; but suddenly it seemed important not to let Seuman Otwal hoodwink Patch Construction a second time. He forced himself to consider the situation from a larger perspective. He asked cautiously, "What of your prin-

cipal?"

Seuman Otwal made an impatient gesture. "I will take my chances with him. He is occupied elsewhere and has given me full competence. Come; what do you say?"

Gersen smiled sourly. Was this hawk-faced man Kokor Hek-kus—or not? Sometimes it seemed indubitably yes, and the next moment as certainly no. Gersen temporized. "One more matter—that of service. Do you expect us to provide a technical expert?"

"If it becomes necessary, you will be notified. But after all, our

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own technical staff is at hand, and indeed is responsible for the design I foresee no need for any such expert "

Patch lurched upright in his chair "Get out," he muttered thickly. "Get out, both of you Murderers, thugs. You too, Wall, or Gersen, or whatever your name is I don't know what your game is, but get out "

Gersen turned him a casual glance, then ignored him. Seuman Otwal seemed amused. Gersen said, "If you want to take delivery at midnight, pay into our bank account the full sum due us We want no cash, to be fake-metered and carried around until the banks open You and your principal of course are men of probity, but knaves and scoundrels are known to exist As soon as the deposit is verified, you can take delivery of the fort."

Seuman Otwal considered gravely Then he acquiesced "It shall be as you wish " He turned a serpent's flick of a glance at his watch. "There is time Which is your bank?"

"Bank of Rigel, Patns Old-Town Main "

"In half an hour, more or less, you may make inquiry At midnight I will arrange to take delivery "

Gersen, remembering, perhaps belatedly, his ostensible role, turned to Patch. "Does the arrangement meet your approval, Mr Patch?"

Patch growled something indistinguishable that Gersen and Seuman Otwal graciously assumed to be assent, Seuman Otwal bowed and departed Gersen turned to consider Patch, Patch glared back Gersen controlled an impulse to rake him over the coals, and seated himself "We must make plans."

"What is the needs for plans now? As soon as the money reaches the bank, I intend to buy you out of Patch Construction if it takes every last cent, and then be damned to you "

"You show very little gratitude," said Gersen "But for me you'd still be sitting in a cell at Interchange "

Patch nodded bitterly "You rescinded my fee—for purposes of your own I have no idea what these purposes are, but they have nothing to do with me As soon as the money reaches the bank, I'll buy you out, I'll pay any additional sum you require—within reason—and I'll say good-bye to you with the utmost joy "

"As you wish," said Gersen "I do not care to stay where I am not wanted \s to the additional sum—make the total an even half million "

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Patch puffed out his cheeks "That will be eminently satisfactory "

Half an hour later, Patch called the area branch of the Bank of Rigel, inserted his account tab into the credit card slot Yes, he was told, the sum of SVU 1,181,490 had been deposited to his account,

"In that case," said Patch, "please open an account in the name of Kirth Gersen"—he spelled the name—"and deposit to this account the sum of SVU 500,000 "

The transaction was performed, both Patch and Gersen affixing signatures and thumbprints to tabs Patch then turned to Gersen. "You will now write me a receipt and destroy the partnership agreement."

Gersen did as requested "Now," said Patch, "you will be good enough to leave the premises and never return "

"Whatever you say," replied Gersen courteously. "The association has been stimulating I wish you and Patch Construction prosperity, and I offer you a final word of advice after the fort has been delivered, try not to be kidnaped again ""

"Have no fears on that score " Patch grinned wolfishly "I'm not an inventor and an engineer for nothing. I have devised a protective harness that will blow the hands and face off anyone who touches me, let the kidnapers beware!"

Favorite dictum of Raffles, the amateur cracksman:

Money lost, little lost.  
Honor lost, much lost.  
Pluck lost, all lost.

The night of a Concourse planet was seldom completely dark. For those worlds appropriately placed in orbit, Blue Companion served as a small intense moon: the night sky of all the worlds sparkled with at least several sister planets.

Krokinole saw Blue Companion only as an evening star—a state of affairs that would persist for yet another hundred years or so, due to the vast circumference of the orbits of all the Concourse

planets and the consequent sluggish annual motion; in the case of Krokinole 1642 years.

Krokinole midnight was as dark as any of the Concourse. Patris, still influenced by the old time Whitelock Injunctionary Procedures, had little to offer in the way of night life; what small nocturnal revelry there was centered in New Town at the riverside restaurants. Old City was dark and damp from the estuary mist, with Patch Construction a bright island.

Half an hour before midnight, Gersen came quietly along the empty streets. Blue Companion had long departed the sky; street illumination consisted of a dim globe at far intervals, surrounded by a golden halo of mist. The air smelled of damp brick, the estuary docks, the mud flats across the estuary: a subtle moldering reek unique to Patris Old Town. Opposite Patch Construction stood a row of the tall high-gabled buildings, each with a deeply recessed

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areaway filled with shadow. From one to another of these dark alcoves Gersen slipped, approaching the oblong of light projected from the open doors of Workshop B. He came as close as he thought practical, leaned back against the moldering brick, eased the various clips and straps supporting his weapons and set himself to wait. He wore black, with black skin-tone, black eye-shells to conceal the gleam of his eyes; standing quiet he was part of the misty night; a sinister shape.

Time passed. Inside the shop, the forward end of the canvas-swathed fort could be seen, and, from time to time, a technician. On one occasion. Patch's burly form appeared in the opening as he stepped out to peer up into the sky.

Gersen checked the time: five minutes to midnight. He fitted a pair of night-glasses to his forehead, slipped them down over his eyes, and instantly the street seemed bright, though with unreal shadows and tones, the chiaroscuro sometimes reversed, sometimes not. The glare from the shop was compensated by a mutachrome filter, appearing as a dark blotch. Gersen scanned the sky, but saw nothing.

At a minute before midnight, Patch again stepped out into the street. Two heavy projects ostentatiously hung in holsters at his waist and at his throat was clasped a microphone undoubtedly tuned to the police emergency band. Gersen grinned: Patch was taking no chances— After a suspicious look around the sky, Patch returned within. A minute passed; a long dismal hoot from the Mermiana monument, the female colossus standing knee deep in the sea, signified midnight. High in the sky appeared the shape of a freight-carrier. It settled, then halted in mid-air. Gersen squinted up through the night-glasses, tentatively brought around his grenade rifle. The carrier was presumably manned by men in the service of Kokor Hekkus; the galaxy would profit by their deaths. . . . But where was Kokor Hekkus? And Gersen cursed the uncertainty that restrained him from pulling the trigger.

A small air-car appeared. It swooped and, ignoring the traffic laws of Patris, settled into the street, landing less than a hundred feet from Gersen's hiding place. He pressed far back into the shadows, flipped up the night-glasses, which now would only hinder and confuse him.

Two men alighted from the air-car. Gersen grunted in disappointment. Neither was Seuman Otwal; neither could possibly be

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Kokor Hekkus. Both were short, compact, dark-skinned; both wore tight dark garments and tight black hoods. They walked with quick steps to the shop, peered into the interior and one made an imperious gesture. Gersen lowered his night-glasses, glanced up to the freight-carrier. It remained as before. Gersen raised the night-glasses, returned to the two men from the air-car. Patch came forward, marching with a swagger of unconvincing truculence. He halted and spoke; the two nodded curtly, and one said a few words into a microphone.

Patch turned, gestured; the fort walked out into the street, the canvas bulging and jerking to the motion of the legs. Down from the sky came the freight-carrier. Gersen watched with the certainty that here the chain of events that had started on the Avente Esplanade was to dwindle and die.

Patch stepped back into the shop, one hand on each of his guns. The two men in black ignored him; down now- from the air-ship came a strong-back from which depended ten cables. The two men clambered up to the top of the fort, shackled the cables to eyebolts along the dorsal ridge. They jumped to the ground, gave a wave;

the fort was lofted away through the night. The two men went quickly to their car without a backward glance for Patch, who stood bristling and glaring defiance at their backs. The air-car swept off into the dark; Patch and his shop were left, curiously forlorn and bereft.

The doors to Workshop B closed; the street was dark and vacant. Gersen shifted from his cramped position. He felt defeated and angry. Why, at least, had he not shot down the air-ship and the fort? Kokor Hekkus might well have been aboard. Even if such were not the case, the destruction of the fort would have infuriated him, goaded him to some kind of action.

Gersen knew very well why he had not destroyed the fort. Indecision had cramped his finger. He ached for the final confrontation. Kokor Hekkus must know why he died and who killed him. To shoot him down in the dark was good, but not good enough.

How and where to win another opportunity? Perhaps through Seuman Otwal and the Halkshire Hotel. Gersen stepped out into the street. Three dark shapes sprang back in startlement; one gave a hoarse order, and a beam of intense white light flooded forth to blind Gersen. He snatched for his weapons; one of the shapes scrambled forward, knocked down his arm; another swung a long

length of black cable; it coiled around Gersen's body almost as if alive, to constrict his right arm and his thighs. There came another coiling length of cable, snapping around his legs; Gersen tottered, fell. His heavy weapons were kicked to the side, his knife and projac snatched away.

The man holding the light advanced, turned it down at Gersen. He chuckled. "Good enough. This one's the partner with the money."

It was the cool easy voice of Seuman Otwal. Gersen said, "You're wrong. Patch bought me out."

"Excellent. . . . Then you have money."

The light moved closer. "Search him, with care. This man might well be dangerous."

Cautious fingers probed Gersen's person, found and removed a throwing dagger, a prickle-sac half-full of anodyne, several other devices that obviously puzzled the searchers. One said in a voice of respectful wonder: "This one's a walking arsenal. I'd not like to face him alone."

"Yes," said Seuman Otwal thoughtfully. "A strange sort to be frowsting it as an artisan. A strange sort, indeed. . . . Well, no matter. The universe is full of strange sorts, as well we know. He is now our guest, and we need not delay for Patch."

Down eased an air-boat. Gersen was hoisted into the hold; the craft slid off and away through the Krokinole night.

Seuman Otwal presently looked into the hold. "You're a strange man, Mr. Wall, or whatever your name is. You decked yourself out with a variety of weapons, almost as if you knew how to use them;

you concealed yourself with such stealthy patience that we, who are also stealthy and patient, had no inkling of your nearness; and then without a look over your shoulder, you swagger out into the middle of the street."

"It was a poor move," Gersen agreed.

"The initial folly was your partnership with Patch—and this is useless to deny as we have informed ourselves—when it should have been apparent that never would the bumptious Patch be paid for the fort. He was forced to disgorge at Interchange; now it is your turn. If you can tender us our SVU 1,681,490 at once, we will quickly finalize the matter; if you choose not to do so—then I fear you must make a space journey."

"I don't have that much money," said Gersen. "Let me explain the circumstances—"

"No, I cannot reason with you; I have far to go and much to do. If you have no money, then you must act through the usual channels."

"Interchange?" asked Gersen with a wintry smile.

"Interchange. I wish you good fortune, Mr. Wall, or whatever your name; dealing with you has been a pleasure." Seuman Otwal departed, and Gersen saw no more of him. He was transferred to another ship, where he found himself in the company of three children, two young women, three older women, and a middle-aged man, presumably members of various wealthy Concourse families. Time passed, how long Gersen could not know. He ate and slept many times, but at last the ship became still; there was the familiar but always unsettling wait as atmospheres equalized, then the passengers were led out upon the soil of Sasani, ushered into a bus, and conveyed across the desert to Interchange.

In a small auditorium, one of the Interchange functionaries gave them a briefing. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are glad to have you with us, and we hope that during your stay you will try to rest, relax, and enjoy yourselves. The facilities of Interchange are those of a sanitarium; we allow a certain degree of social intercourse, so long as decorum and courtesy is maintained. We encourage the enjoyment of your special hobbies and certain sports, such as swimming, chess, kalingo, tennis, the use of musical instruments, and the chromatil. There are no facilities for hiking, gliding, bird-watching, marathon-running, or exploration of the fascinating Sasani wilderness. We offer six classes of accommodation ranging from hyper-luxurious Class AA to the standard E, which is plain but by no means uncomfortable. The cuisine is of eight standard categories, corresponding to the principal gastronomic habits of the Oikumene peoples. For persons who are habituated to other more specialized diets, there is a special service at extra charge. We natter ourselves that anyone can eat, if not with relish, at least with nourishment, at Interchange.

"Our regulations are somewhat more firm than those of the average pleasure resort, and I must warn you that surreptitious and solitary ventures across the desert can only lead to inconvenience. In the first place, there are numerous carnivorous insects. Secondly, there is neither food nor water. Thirdly, the autochthonous inhab-

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itants of Sasani, who leave their burrows only at night, are anthropophages. Fourthly, we are required to protect the interests of our clients, and the obstreperous individual (fortunately rare) soon finds himself deprived of all privileges.

"I will now distribute forms among you. Please indicate your choice of accommodation and cuisine. You will notice a list of regulations. Please read these carefully. You will find the personnel

courteous, if somewhat remote. They are well paid, so please do not attempt to press gratuities upon anyone. We regard this tendency with suspicion, and inquire carefully into the motives of those who offer such inducements.

"Tomorrow you will be provided with means of communication with those who might be expected to rescind your fees. That is all, and thank you."

Gersen examined the form, and selected Class B accommodations, which allowed him full use of the institution's recreational activities, as well as a modicum of privacy. He had eaten the food of all the Oikumene—including Sandusk, he thought wryly, recalling the shopkeeper of Ard Street—and indeed was not overfastidious. He checked the category "classic," the cuisine of Alphanor, West Earth, and perhaps a third of the population of the Oikumene.

He read the "Regulations," none of which were surprising or ominous except Item 19: "Those persons who are in residence after their period of prime rescission and who thereupon fall into the 'Available' category, must keep to their apartments during the morning period in order to allow inspection by noncommitted visitors who might be interested in paying rescission fees."

In due course, Gersen was taken to his apartment, which seemed comfortable enough. The parlor contained a desk, a table, several chairs, a green and black rug, a shelf stacked with periodicals. The walls were mauve spattered with orange, the ceiling a foxy russet. The bathroom included the usual facilities, with walls, floor, and ceiling finished in seal-brown tile. The bed was narrow and austere padded, the infra-radiator suspended obtrusively from the ceiling as in old-fashioned country inns.

Gersen bathed, dressed in the fresh garments provided, lay down on his bed, and considered the possible directions of the future. First, it was necessary to rid himself of the depression and self-deprecation that had been his mood since Seuman Otwal's

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white light had first flashed into his face. He had all too long considered himself invulnerable, protected by destiny—merely because of the force of his motivations. It was perhaps his single superstition: the solipsistic conviction that, one after another, those five individuals who had destroyed Mount Pleasant must die at his hands. Persuaded by his faith, Gersen had neglected the common-sense act of killing Seuman Otwal—and had suffered the consequences.

He must rearrange his patterns of thinking. He had been complacent, doctrinaire, didactic in his approach. He had conducted himself as if the success of his ambitions were preordained; as if he were endowed with supernatural capacities. All quite wrong, Gersen told himself. Seuman Otwal had taken him with ridiculous ease. Seuman Otwal held him so cheap that he had not even bothered to question him, but had flung him into a hold with the rest of his

bag. And Gersen's self-esteem was further mortified. He had not previously appreciated the full extent of his vanity. Very well then, he told himself: if absolute resourcefulness, absolute indomitability were the basic elements of his nature, it was now time to put these attributes to work.

Less angry—indeed, half-amused with his own earnestness—he took stock of the situation. Tomorrow, if he so chose, he could notify Patch of his predicament. There was nothing to be gained by this. Gersen himself had the half-million paid him by Patch—originally money supplied by Duschane Audmar—and perhaps another seventy or eighty thousand from the money left him by his grandfather. His rescission fee was a million SVU more than this:

a sum far beyond his ability to raise.

If Kokor Hekkus, or Seuman Otwal—the same man?—could be convinced that he and Patch had parted company, they might try to re-kidnap Patch and lower Gersen's fee to the money he had received from the sale of his partnership. But Patch, if he were wise, would take himself out of circulation. Gersen might be held at Interchange for months, or years. Eventually Interchange fees would begin to eat into the sponsor's profit; the rescission fee would drop. As soon as it reached half a million Gersen could buy his own way out—unless an independent purchaser considered him worth more:

an unlikely circumstance.

In effect, Gersen was confined at Interchange for an indefinite period.

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What of escape? Gersen had never heard of escape from Interchange. If a person managed to elude the vigilance of the guards and the careful system of alarms, tattletales, and trigger-beams, where could he go? The desert was fatal by day, even more so by night. Automatic weapons barred helpful spacecraft from the area. No one departed Interchange except through death or the rescission of their fees. It occurred to Gersen to wonder about Alusz Iphigenia Eperje-Tokay, the girl from Thamber. Her fee was ten billion SVU, a fantastic sum: how close had Kokor Hekkus come to paying it? How gratifying to rescind Alusz Iphigenia out from under the very nose of Kokor Hekkus! A visionary dream, when he could not rescind his own comparatively modest fee.

A gong sounded, to announce the evening meal. Gersen went to his designated dining area along a blank-walled walk topped with the tight interlacement of glass bands that characterized the avenues and walkways of Interchange. The dining room was a high-ceilinged room painted austerely gray. The guests ate at small individual tables and were served from carts passing back and forth. There was a penal-colony atmosphere to the dining room that was more or less absent from the rest of Interchange; Gersen could not define its source, unless it was the isolation of the diners, the lack of gossip or banter between the tables. The food was synthetic, of poor color, not too well prepared, in quantities not too generous.

Even Gersen, who took no great interest in food, found the meal unappetizing. If this was Class B cuisine, he wondered what Class E was like. Perhaps not much different.

After dinner came the so-called social hour, in a large compound domed against the dusty Sasani night wind. Here the entire guest population of Interchange collected after the evening meal, from boredom and curiosity: who had come, who had gone? At the central kiosk, Gersen signed a chit for beer, carried the paper container to a bench, seated himself. Perhaps two hundred other people were in view: folk of all ages and races, some walking, a few playing chess, a few conversing, others like himself drinking morosely on the benches. There was no great gregariousness; everyone displayed near-identical expressions: flat dislike for Interchange and everything connected with it, including their fellow guests. Even the children seemed infected by the general gloom, though they showed a greater disposition to clot into groups. Perhaps twenty young women were in evidence, even more aloof, injured, and in-

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dignant than the rest. Gersen inspected them with curiosity: which was Alusz Iphigenia? If Kokor Hekkus were mad to possess her, she must necessarily be extraordinarily beautiful; none here seemed to fulfill the requirements. Nearby, a tall girl with striking red hair gazed broodingly at her long fingers, each joint of which was banded with a black metal sleeve identifying her as an Eginand of Copus. Beyond, a small dark-skinned girl sipped wine; she seemed winsome and appealing, but not one who would think to value herself at ten billion SVU.

There were others, but all seemed too old or too young, or of no particular beauty—such as the young woman at the other end of his bench who might just conceivably fit the requirements. Her skin was pale, tinged with dusky ivory; she had clear gray eyes and regular features; her hair was tawny blonde: in short she was not unattractive but hardly in the ten billion SVU class. Gersen would not have considered her a second time had it not been for a certain insolent poise to her head, a certain cool intelligence of gaze. . . . But no, for all her clear eyes and regular features, she was too ordinary, too unexceptional. . . . The attendant who had served Gersen on his previous visit crossed the compound, looking neither right nor left. What was his name? Armand Koshiel. And Gersen became more morose than before. . . . The social period ended; the guests wandered away to their various suites, apartments, and rooms.

The morning meal—tea, muffins, and compote—was served directly in the apartment, after which Gersen was summoned to the central administration building, where he found himself in the company of several of the persons with whom he had come to Interchange.

Presently his name was called. He entered the office of a harried-looking clerk, who gave him a perfunctory salute, and delivered a well-rehearsed speech: "Mr. Wall, seat yourself, if you will. From your point of view your presence here is a misfortune; from ours,

you are a guest to be treated with courtesy and dignity. We are anxious to improve the light in which we are regarded; we will take all practical means to that end. Now you are here sponsored by Mr. Kokor Hekkus. His demand is for the sum of SVU 1,681,490, and I now inquire how you propose to secure this sum." He waited expectantly.

"I wish I knew," said Gersen. "It is totally unrealistic."

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The official nodded. "Many of our guests find their fees excessive. As you know, we have no control over the fees demanded; we can only advise the sponsor to moderation, and the guest to a cooperative attitude. Now then—can you raise this sum?"

"No."

"What of your family?"

"Nonexistent."

"Friends?"

"I have no friends."

"Business associates?"

"None."

The clerk sighed. "Then you must remain here until one of these events occurs: the sponsor may lower his demands to a feasible sum. Fifteen days after the date your associates have first had opportunity to appear in your behalf you go on an 'available' basis, and the sponsorship fee may be paid by anyone, who then receives you into custody. After a certain period, unless board and room bills are regularly met, we may be forced to release custody to a noncommitted visitor for the extent of these bills. So then?"

"I can't meet the figure. I have no one to notify."

"We will state as much to your sponsor. Do you care to name the maximum figure you can pay?"

"About half a million," said Gersen reluctantly.

"I will so inform your sponsor. In the meantime, Mr. Wall, I trust that you find your visit not too unpleasant."

"Thank you."

Gersen was conducted back to his apartment, and presently released to the dining room for lunch.

During the afternoon, the recreational facilities of Interchange were made free to him. There were minor sports, crafts, games; he could exercise at a gymnasium, swim in a pool. Or he could remain

in his apartment. Visiting the apartment or room of another guest was forbidden.

Several days passed. Gersen became tense and charged with the need for activity. There was no scope to release this pressure except in exercise at the gymnasium. He pondered escape. It seemed impossible; there was no place to start.

During the social hour of the third day, Gersen, turning away from the kiosk with beer, came face to face with Armand Koshiel, whose schedule apparently brought him through the compound at

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about this time Koshiel murmured a polite apology, stepped aside, then turned a puzzled glance backward

Gersen grinned ruefully "Conditions have altered since our last meeting "

"So I see," said Koshiel "I remember you well It's Mr Gasson3 Mr Gnsson7"

"Wall," said Gersen "Howard Wall "

"Of course Mr Wall " Koshiel shook his head in bemused wonder "Isn't it strange the way fate works? But now, sir, I must be off We aren't allowed to chat with the guests "

"Tell me something Plow close to ten billion SVU has Kokor Hekkus achieved?"

"He progresses, he approaches, so I understand All of us here are interested, it's the largest fee ever to be rescinded "

Gersen felt an irrational pang of anger—or perhaps jealousy "Does the woman come down to the compound?"

"I have seen her here on occasion " Koshiel made tentative efforts to sidle away

"What does she look like?"

Koshiel knit his brows, glanced furtively over his shoulder "She's by no means what you might expect Not a clever jolly type, if you know what I mean Please excuse me, Mr Wall, I must be off, or face reprimand "

Gersen went to his usual bench, seething with a new set of dissatisfactions this unknown woman, by all logical processes, should mean nothing to him. Such was not the case Gersen puzzled over himself and his motives How and why had he become fascinated? Because of Alusz Iphigenia's self-appraised value often billion SVU? The fact that Kokor Hekkus, in all his egotism and arrogance, was about to possess her? (The thought awoke a peculiar

fury in him) Because of her asserted origin, mythical Thamber  
Because of the stirrings of his own sternly repressed romanticism  
Whatever the cause, Gersen scrutinized the compound seeking the  
beautiful girl who might be Alusz Iphigema of Thamber She def-  
initely was not the small dark girl, nor the red-haired Egmand from  
Gopus The tawny-blond girl with the withdrawn manner was not  
in evidence, but she hardly qualified though, Gersen reflected, her  
eyes were an exceedingly lucent grey and no exception could be  
taken to her figure, which was rather slight and delicate, but per-

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fectly proportioned The gong sounded, he returned to his apart-  
ment disappointed and roiling with uneasiness

The next day passed, Gersen waited impatiently for the social  
period It finally arrived, a new woman was present She was lithe  
and supple, with long legs, a long patrician face, a dazzling roll of  
bright white hair, intricately coiffed Gersen inspected her carefully  
No, he decided with a feeling of relief this could not be Alusz  
Iphigema of Thamber, this woman was too intricate, too artificial  
She might well value herself at ten billion SVU, and Gersen was  
almost willing that Kokor Hekkus should pay such an amount and  
take possession The tawny-blond girl did not appear Gersen re-  
turned to his apartment in disgust and vexation While he was pent  
and helpless, Kokor Hekkus was easing in upon his quarry To  
distract himself, Gersen read old magazines until midnight.

The following day was like those previous they began to merge,  
lose identity At lunch there were two new members to his group  
Gersen overheard a comment that identified the newcomers as Fy-  
chus Hasselberg, First Chairman of the Jarne Corporation, and  
Skerde Vorek, Director of Forestlands, both of Earth, both mil-  
lionaires several hundred times over Two steps closer to the goal,  
thought Gersen sourly

During the afternoon he exercised in the gymnasium At dinner  
the food seemed more than ordinarily tasteless Gersen went to the  
"social hour" in a surly mood He provided himself a mug of musty  
Sasani wine, and seated himself in expectation of another dreary  
evening. Half an hour passed, then at the entrance to the compound  
appeared the tawny-blond girl Tonight she seemed even more  
abstracted than on the former occasion Gersen watched her in-  
tently actually, he thought, she was really not plain Her features  
were so perfect, so perfectly placed as to make her face seem un-  
remarkable-but certainly she was not plain He watched her pro-  
cure a mug of tea at the central kiosk, then she came to sit on a  
bench not far from Gersen He studied her with great interest, his  
pulse moving rather swiftly Why he asked himself in irritation  
Why did this young woman, at best conventional^ attractive, affect  
him to such an extent?

He rose, walked to where she sat "May I join you?" he asked

"If you care to," she said after fust sufficient hesitation to in-

dicate that she'd rather sit quietly by herself Her voice had a pleasant archaic swing, and Gersen tried to place her accent "Excuse

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me for being curious," he said, "but are you Alusz Iphigenia Eperje-Tokay?"

"I am Alusz Iphigenia Eperje-Tokay," she said, correcting his pronunciation.

Gersen drew a deep breath. His instinct had been correct! From close at hand, and looking into her face, her quiet good looks seemed somewhat less quiet. She might almost be termed handsome. It was her eyes, he thought, that gave life to her face. Beauty? Sufficient to urge Kokor Hekkus to such flamboyant exertions? It seemed unlikely. "And your home is on the planet Thamber?" She turned him another brief incurious look. "Yes," "Do you know that to most people Thamber is an imaginary world, a place of legend and ballad?"

"So I have learned, to my surprise. I assure you it is far from imaginary." She sipped her tea, gave Gersen another swift glance. Her eyes, large, clear, candid, were her best feature, and these were undoubtedly beautiful. But now, a subtle shift in her position indicated disinterest in further conversation.

"I wouldn't bother you," said Gersen stiffly, "except for the fact that your fiance Kokor Hekkus has brought me here, and I regard him as my enemy."

Alusz Iphigenia reflected a moment. "You act unwisely in regarding him as an enemy."

"Suppose he rescinds your fee, what then?" She shrugged. "It is a matter I do not care to discuss." Gersen thought, yes, she is beyond doubt handsome; even more than handsome: when she spoke, even when she thought, her features took on a luminosity, a vitality that transfigured even ordinary features.

Gersen was at a loss for a means to continue the conversation.

Finally he asked, "Do you know Kokor Hekkus well?"

"Not well. He keeps for the most part to Misk, the Land Beyond the Mountains. My home is Draszane in Gentilly."

"How were you able to come here? Do many spaceships come

to Thamber?"

"No." She turned him a sudden sharp glance. "Who are you?"

Are you one of his spies?"

Gersen shook his head. Looking into her face, he thought with amazement. Did I ever think this girl plain? She is beautiful, inexpressibly so. He said, "If I were free, I could help you."

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She laughed, rather cruelly. "How can you help me, when you can't even help yourself?" And Gersen felt an unfamiliar red flush seep across his face. He rose to his feet. "Good night."

Alusz Iphigenia said nothing; Gersen stalked off to his apartment. He showered and threw himself on his bed. Suppose he communicated with Duschane Audmar? Pointless; Audmar would not even bother to send him a refusal. Myron Patch? More than pointless. Ben Zaum? He might be able to raise five or ten thousand SVU, no more. . . . Gersen picked up one of the old magazines, flicked through the pages. . . . A face looked forth, one which he seemed to recognize. Gersen glanced down at the caption. The name, Daeniel Trembath, was unknown to him. . . . Strange. Gersen flipped the page. The face was extremely like that of—of whom? Gersen turned back to the face. He had known this man as "Mr. Hoskins"; he had brought back his corpse from Bissom's End. Gersen read the caption in full:

Daeniel Trembath, Arch-Director of the Bank of Rigel, now retiring. Fifty-one years his Excellency the Director has served the great bank and the peoples of the Concourse;

last week he announced his retirement. What are his future plans? "I will rest. I have worked hard and long; perhaps too hard and too long. Now I will take time to enjoy the aspects of life denied me by my responsibilities."

Gersen looked at the date of the magazine. It was Cosmopolis for January, 1525. Three months later Trembath disappeared: a week or so afterwards he was dead, by the act of Billy Windle—who might be Kokor Hekkus—on an unpleasant little world Beyond. Gersen, now wide awake, thought back across the months. Why would the retired Arch-Director of the great Bank of Rigel travel so remotely, so secretly to deal with the man who called himself Billy Windle? Trembath had wanted perpetual youth: what did he have to offer in exchange? By the very nature of his career, it could be nothing but money. The meeting at Skouse had occurred immediately after Alusz Iphigenia had taken sanctuary at Interchange; the concatenation of places, events, and personalities was intriguing. Kokor Hekkus wanted money—ten billion SVU. Daeniel Trembath, Arch-Director (retired) of the Bank of Rigel, was the very symbol of money—and also conservative respectabil-

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ity. Why had the IPCC wanted his return, dead or alive? Surely Trembath had not stolen ten billion SVU? Gersen remembered the fragment of paper he had taken from Mr. Hoskins at Skouse. He strove to recall the words, now suddenly so pregnant with possibility:

—crimps, or more properly, bands of density. These apparently occur at random, though in practice they are so casual as to be imperceptible. The critical spacing is in terms of the square root of the first eleven primes. The occurrence of six or more such crimps at any of the designated locations will validate—

The conclusions to be drawn were staggering. There was likewise an aspect to the situation that was the very soul of tragicomedy. Gersen jumped to his feet, paced back and forth across his apartment. If circumstances were as he suspected, how could he take advantage of his knowledge?

He thought for an hour, formulating and discarding various schemes. The crafts and hobby shop seemed the key to the situation. The activities encouraged would be simple and easily supervised: wood-carving, puppetry, embroidery, shawl-weaving, water-colors, glass-melting. Possibly photography. . . . The morning passed with a dismal slowness. Gersen sat sprawled in the most comfortable of his chairs. A delightful variation to his scheme occurred to him; he laughed aloud. . . . Immediately after lunch, he visited the hobby room. It was more or less as he had expected: a large room equipped with looms, pots of modeling clay, paints, beads, wire, various other paraphernalia. The attendant in charge was a corpulent man of early middle-age, bald, with small doll-like features in a round face. He answered Gersen's questions with a reasonable degree of patience. No; there were no facilities for photographic work. Several years ago an effort had been made in this direction, but the project had been abandoned: the equipment required too much maintenance, had occupied too much of his time. Gersen put forward a delicately phrased proposal; He, Gersen, was almost certain to be a guest for a month or perhaps two; prior to his coming he had been experimenting with certain novel art-forms involving photography, and he wished to continue his activities—

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to such an extent that he would be willing to purchase the necessary equipment.

The attendant considered, with a wet pursing of the mouth. The project seemed to entail a great deal of trouble—for Gersen, for himself, for everyone involved. In theory, of course, it was conceivable, but—he gave an eloquent shrug of the shoulders. Gersen uttered a reassuring laugh: any extra attention on the attendant's part—what was his name? Funian Lubby—would be adequately, or even, Gersen amended cautiously, generously rewarded. Lubby

sighed heavily. Interchange policy dictated full cooperation with the guests, within understandable limits. If Mr. Wall insisted, Lubby could only do as he required. As to the remuneration Mr. Wall had suggested, it was against Interchange policy, but Mr. Wall must be the judge of what was right. How soon could Lubby provide the proper equipment? asked Gersen. If Mr. Wall provided a list and the necessary funds, an order could be placed at Sagbad, the largest nearby trade center: delivery could be expected tomorrow at the earliest; more likely the day following.

Excellent, said Gersen. He seated himself, wrote out a list. It was long, and included a number of items intended to obscure Gersen's primary purpose. Lubby pursed his lips hugely, in surprise and automatic disapprobation. Gersen said hurriedly, "I realize that this makes enormous inconvenience for you: is a hundred SVU sufficient compensation for your extra effort?"

"You understand," said Lubby sternly, "that regulations forbid the transfer of funds between guests and personnel. In a case of this sort, the money involved is merely a means of providing the craft shop with sorely needed equipment—since I presume you will leave these items here on your departure?"

Gersen did not wish to seem too eager. "I suppose so. Some of them at least—those that duplicate my own equipment at home." All in all, he was highly encouraged. That Lubby could speak so openly indicated that the craft shop was not under remote surveillance. "What do you think this material and equipment will cost?" he inquired.

Lubby appraised the list. "Megaphot camera . . . Chago enlarger and printer. . . Ball microscope. Expensive items all. . . . Tanglemat duplicator. . . . What would you be needing that for?"

"I prepare kaleidoscopic permutations of natural objects," said

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Gersen. "Sometimes twenty or thirty copies of a single print are needed, and I find the duplicator convenient."

"It will cost a fortune," grumbled Funian Lubby, "but if you're willing to pay for it—"

"Yes, if I must," said Gersen. "I dislike spending money, but I like two months away from my hobby even less."

"Understandable." Lubby glanced down the list. "This is an impressive list of chemicals. I hope," he said with a sardonic twist of the lips, "that you are not planning to blow up the institution, and thus destroy my livelihood."

Gersen laughed at the joke. "I'm sure you are sufficiently knowledgeable to forestall anything of this nature. No, there are no explosives, corrosives, or noxious substances here: only inks,

dyes, photosensitives, and the like."

"So I see. I am by no means uninformed in these matters. I am an accredited Scientific Academician of Boomaraw College on Lorgan, and in fact have done research on the flatfish of the Neuster Ocean, until my appointment was canceled—another regressive trick of the Institute, of that I am sure."

"Yes, a sad situation," Gersen agreed. "A person wonders where it will end. Do they want to make cavemen of us all?"

"Who knows what the wretched malcontents hope for? I have heard that they are slowly acquiring control of the Jarnel Corporation, that when they finally secure their 51 percent—then pfai! no more spaceships, no more travel. What will that do to us? Where will that leave me? Without a job, if I am so unfortunate as still to be alive. No, I spit on those people."

Gersen had been inspecting the craft room. "WTiere can I work to be the least obtrusive? Preferably in some corner where I can throw up a screen to keep out the light. Naturally any effort on your part I am willing to pay for: indeed if there were a disused storeroom, or something of the sort. . . ."

"Yes." Funian Lubby heaved himself to his feet. "Let us look. The old sculpting studio is no longer in use; guests nowadays care nothing for serious work."

The studio was octagonal, the walls were native wood varnished a sour brown; the floor was stained yellow brick, the ceiling rose to a skylight through which came a grayish, almost mauve, illumination. "I'll block out the light," said Gersen. "Otherwise the room is quite suitable." To test the degree of freedom from surveillance

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he said, "Now I understand that the rules forbid the exchange of money between guests and personnel, still rules are made to be broken, and it is not fair that you should go to extra exertion without reimbursement. You agree?"

"I think you have expressed my point of view exactly."

"Good. What goes on in this old studio then concerns no one but you and me. While I am not a wealthy man, I am not parsimonious, and I am willing to pay for my pleasures." He brought forth his checkbook, wrote a draft for 3,000 SVU upon the Bank of Rigel. "This should pay for all the items of my list and leave enough to compensate you."

Lubby puffed out his cheeks. "That should do very nicely. I will give your order special attention, and who knows? the equipment may be here tomorrow."

Gersen went away well satisfied. His hopes might be based on

a set of false premises—but checking and rechecking, he felt secure. How could it be otherwise?

But he needed one more item, the most important of all. This job he dared not entrust to Funian Lubby, except as a last resort. He made out another draft for twenty thousand SVU, tucked it into his pocket.

That night, Alusz Iphigenia made no appearance at the social hour. Gersen did not care. He walked slowly back and forth, watching, waiting, and then just as he was about to give up hope, Armand Koshiel appeared, taking a short cut through the compound. Gersen approached him as casually as possible. "I am going to walk past the waste-paper bin," he said. "I will drop a scrap of paper. Come behind me, pick it up. You will find a draft for twenty thousand SVU. Get me a ten thousand SVU note on the Bank of Rigel. Keep the remaining ten thousand." Without waiting for a reply he turned away, sauntered toward the kiosk. From the corner of his eye he saw Koshiel give a slight shrug, then continue the way he was going.

At the kiosk, Gersen bought a sack of sweets. Pausing at the waste-paper bin he tossed aside the sack into which he had tucked the bank draft, and crossing to a bench seated himself.

The crumpled bit of paper beside the bin looked large, white, and conspicuous. Here came Koshiel back across the compound. He went to the kiosk, spoke a jocular word to the attendant, selected a bag of sweets for himself, tossed the paper toward the bin.

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He bent after it, picked up Gersen's bag, seemed to drop them both into the bin, and walked away.

Gersen went to his apartment, nerves tingling. His scheme had been set into motion. Too much optimism would be foolish, but so far all went well. A hidden monitor might have observed Koshiel pick up the bank draft, Funian Lubby might impose too much supervision upon him, or so much new equipment might attract the attention of persons less genial than Lubby. Still—so far, so good.

The following day he looked briefly into the crafts room. Lubby was occupied with a pair of children who in their boredom had turned to mask-making. The equipment would not be delivered until the morrow, said Lubby, and Gersen departed.

The evening social hour passed with neither Koshiel nor Alusz Iphigema making an appearance. On the following day, when Gersen returned to his apartment after breakfast he found an envelope on his desk containing a green and pink SVU 10,000 bank note. Gersen tested it with his fake-meter, which, with a few other personal effects, he had been allowed to keep. The meter gave a satisfactory acknowledgment. So far, so good. Gersen dared make no further experiments; he might even then be under scrutiny. So far,

so good. But his equipment still had not arrived, and Funian Lubby seemed in a bad mood, Gersen returned to his apartment seething with impatience. Never had a day passed so slowly, though fortunately the Sasani day was only twenty-one hours long.

On the afternoon following, Funian Lubby indicated a set of cartons with an affable wave of his fat hand. "There you are, Mr. Wall. A fine set of equipment, and you can go about your prisms or kaleidoscopes, whatever it is you do, with all your might."

"Thank you, Mr. Lubby, I'm very pleased," said Gersen. He earned the cartons into the old sculpting studio, and with Lubby assisting and crooning in pleasure, unpacked them.

"I'm anxious to see your work," said Lubby. "One can always learn, and this is a creative technique I have never observed before."

"It's a very detailed process," said Gersen. "Some people even find it tedious, but I enjoy slow careful work. The first step, I think, is to close off the skylight and light-seal the door."

With Lubby steadying the ladder, Gersen stapled opaque cloth across the skylight, then prepared a sign that read "Photographic Darkroom—Knock before Entering," and attached it to the door.

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"Now," he said, "I'm ready to begin." He considered. "I think I'll start with a simple reiteration in green and pink."

With Lubby watching with vast interest, Gersen solemnly photographed a pin, enlarged it ten diameters, prepared a master copy from which he printed thirty copies in green and thirty in pink on the autolith.

"What next?" asked Lubby.

"Now we come to the painstaking part of the job. Each of these pins must be carefully cut from the background. When, with pins and pin-shaped holes, I create the reiteration, if you desire, you may do the cutting while I formulate the correct color of ink."

Lubby looked dubiously at the stack of prints. "All these are to be cut out?"

"Yes, very carefully."

Lubby unenthusiastically set to work. Gersen watched closely, giving advice and stressing the need for absolute accuracy. When, borrowing Lubby's slide-rule, he calculated the square root of the first eleven prime numbers, values ranging from 1 to 479, Lubby meanwhile had cut out three pins, making a single small mistake. Gersen complained aggrievedly. Lubby put down the scissors. "This is extremely interesting, but I fear I must look to other matters."

As soon as he had gone, Gersen compared the 10,000 SVU bank note with the pink and green pins, adjusted the colors, added a mordant and a catalyst, and printed further pins

He glanced into the outer studio, Lubby was busy with the children Gersen took the note to the microscope, and—as so many of thousands had done before him—examined it with an eye to discovering the secret of its authenticity Like the thousands before him, he discovered no such quality Now—the key experiment, upon which the success of the entire project depended He selected paper of density and weight similar to the bank note, cut a rectangle to the size of the note Precisely five by two and quarter inches He passed the paper through the fake-meter the alarm-light glowed Now Gersen laid off points along the length of the paper rectangle corresponding to the square roots he had computed Next he laid a straight-edge across the paper and at each pair of points scored a cross mark with the point of a nail—thus, so he hoped "crimping" and "compressing" the fibers With trembling fingers he lifted the fake-meter The door opened, into the room came Funian

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Lubby. With one motion Gersen slid fake-meter, bank note, and paper rectangle into his pocket, with another, he picked up scissors and prints, simulated intent creativity Lubby was disappointed to find that with so much equipment so little had been produced He expressed himself to this effect, Gersen explained that he had been recalculating certain aesthetic laws a tedious process If Lubby so desired, he could expedite the process by cutting out more pins, very carefully Lubby declared himself unable to be of further assistance. Gersen cut out a few of the pins while Lubby watched, arranged them with extreme care on the tabletop Lubby looked over the pink and green test panels that Gersen had set under a lamp "Are these the only two colors you will use?"

"At least for this present composition," said Gersen "Pink and green, though they might seem somewhat obvious or even naive, are for my purposes absolutely essential "

Lubby grunted. "They appear particularly bland: even faded." "True," said Gersen. "I have added certain agents to the pigments, it appears that the light tends to bleach them "

Lubby presently returned to the main room Gersen brought forth his fake-meter, passed the paper rectangle into the slot. No red light, but rather the heart-warming buzz of authenticity, the most musical sound of Gersen's existence

He looked at his watch the period was almost at an end There was no time for further work

At the social hour, Alusz Iphigema made an appearance, to stand aloofly at the back of the compound Gersen made no attempt to approach her, and, so far as he could tell, she seemed indifferent

to his existence . He had thought her plain' He had considered her features uninteresting' They were perfect, she was the most entrancing thing he had ever seen Ten billion SVU3 A pittance' He could almost applaud Kokor Hekkus' discrimination Gerssen could hardly wait to return to the craft shop

But the following afternoon found Funian Lubby at his most tiresome There were no other hobbyists present, and for two hours Lubby sat gaping with eyes protuberant and fascinated as Gerssen cut paper pins, arranged and rearranged them with frowning concentration, his whole soul aching with the wish that Lubby depart

The day was wasted Gerssen left the shop seething with suppressed fury

The following day he fared better. Lubby was busy. Gerssen

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photographed the bank note with serial number masked, printed two hundred copies with carefully prepared inks The day after, on the pretext of exposing large areas of photo-sensitive paper, he locked the door Then, contriving a jig, he crimped the new notes, and using a to\ printing press, printed new serial numbers The notes looked about the same as the genuine, they had a somewhat different feel—but what matter<sup>3</sup> They satisfied the fake-meter

As Gerssen ate dinner he pondered his final problem how to rescind his fees without arousing suspicion If he merely presented himself at the office, the question would be raised as to how the money had come into his possession He could think of no practical or feasible means to have a parcel delivered to him Certainly he could not trust Koshiel with so much money

He decided that he needed more information During the social hour, he went to the office of the assistant ordmator, a weasel-faced man wearing the dark blue Interchange uniform as if it were a privilege Gerssen put on a face of worry "I have something of a problem," he told the ordinator "It has been reported to me that an old friend is coming here tomorrow to rescind one of the guests Can it be arranged that I look into the bureau when the bus arrives from the spaceport^"

The ordmator frowned. " I his is a somewhat irregular request "

"I realize this," said Gerssen, "houever Interchange policy is to facilitate the rescission of fees, and such is the case here "

"Very well," said the ordinator "Be here at this office tomorrow immediately after the morning meal, and I will arrange the matter "

Gerssen went to the compound, paced back and forth, drank quantities of wine to quiet his nerves The night passed, he choked down a few bites of breakfast, hurried to the office of the ordinator,

who pretended to have forgotten the arrangement. Gersen patiently restated his case

"Oh, very well," said the ordinator "I suppose we can't expect every rescission to work through the proper channels " He conducted Gersen to an antechamber or the reception room Here they waited

'l he archaic old bus arrived, discharged eight passengers They filed into the reception room

"WelP" asked the ordmator "Is one of- these your friend^"

"Yes indeed," said Gersen "That short man with the blue skin-

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tone. I'll just speak a word or two to him and arrange my rescission." Before the ordinator could object, Gersen went out into the reception room, approached the man he had designated. "Excuse me; aren't you Myron Patch of Patris?"

"No sir. I am no such individual."

"My mistake." Gersen returned to the ordinator, carrying an envelope. "Everything is well. He has brought my money. I am a free man."

The ordinator grunted. The event seemed rather peculiar—but weren't peculiar events part of life? "Your friend came to rescind you and someone else also?"

"Yes. He is a member of the Institute and doesn't care to display too much cordiality."

The ordinator grunted again. All was explained—at least, all seemed to be explained. "Very well," he said, "if you have your money, go rescind yourself- I'll say a word to the clerk, since the process is somewhat irregular."

When the bus departed Interchange, Gersen was aboard. At Nichae he hired an air-car and was taken to the city Sagbad.

Five days later, wearing black skin-tone, black and brown tunic with black breeches, Gersen returned to Interchange aboard the antique bus. He went into the now-familiar office, submitted to the officiousness of the clerk. "And whom do you wish to rescind?"

"Alusz Iphigenia Eperje-Tokay."

The clerk's eyebrows rose. "You, sir, are Kokor Hekkus?" He spoke with awe.

"No."

The clerk made nervous movements. "The fee is large. Ten billion SVU."

Gersen opened the flat black case he was carrying, withdrew packets of bank notes in 100,000 SVU denominations: the largest in circulation. "Here is the money."

"Yes, ves. . . . But--well, I must inform you that Kokor Hekkus has already deposited with us over nine billion SVU."

"Here is ten billion. Count it."

The clerk made a flustered sound. "You are within your rights. The guest is admittedly 'available.' " With trembling fingers he touched the money. "I will need help to count so much money."

Counting and fake-metering the money occupied six men four

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hours. The clerk signed a receipt with a nervous flourish. "Very well, sir; here you are. I will send for the guest whose fees you have rescinded. She will be here at once." And he muttered under his breath: "Kokor Hekkus will not enjoy this. Someone will suffer."

Ten minutes later Alusz Iphigenia arrived at the office. Her face was strained and wild; her eyes were bright with fear. She stared at Gersen without recognizing him; then went to the door as if to run out across the desert. Gersen restrained her. "Calm yourself," he told her. "I am not Kokor Hekkus; I have no designs upon you:

consider yourself safe."

She looked at him incredulously, looked again, and now Gersen thought she recognized him.

"There is another matter," said the clerk. He addressed Alusz Iphigenia. "Since you are acting in the peculiar capacity of your own sponsor, the money, minus our 12 1/2 percent fee, is yours."

Alusz Iphigenia stared at him apparently without comprehension. "I suggest," said Gersen, "that you prepare a bank draft, so that she need not carry around so much negotiable currency."

There was a flurry of consultation, a shrugging of shoulders, a flutter of hands; finally the bank draft was drawn upon the Planetary Bank of Sasani at Sagbad, in the sum of SVU 8,749,993,581: ten billion minus 12 Vi percent, minus charges of SVU 6,419 for special AA accommodation.

Gersen scrutinized the document with suspicion. "Presumably this is a valid draft? You have funds to cover?"

"Naturally," declared the official. "Indeed, Kokor Hekkus has deposited to our account a sum appreciably in excess of this amount."

"Very well," said Gersen, "this is acceptable." He turned to Alusz Iphigenia. "Come. The bus is waiting."

Still she hesitated, looking right and left as if again contemplating flight across the Da'ar-Rizm. But now one of the flying black insects struck her, clung to her arm; she brushed it off with a cry of fear.

"Come," said Gersen once again. "You can have either Kokor Hekkus, the insects, or me; and I will neither violate you or eat you alive."

Without further protest, she followed him to the bus. It lurched, roared, rumbled: Interchange became a white and gray tumble dimly glimpsed through the dust.

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They sat side by side in the lurching bus. Then Alusz turned a puzzled sidelong glance at Gersen. "Who are you?"

"No friend of Kokor Hekkus."

"What are—what are you going to do with me?"

"Nothing discreditable."

"Where are we going then? You don't understand the nature of Kokor Hekkus; he will track us to the corners of the galaxy."

Gersen had no comment to make; the conversation came to an end. In truth Gersen felt none too secure; they were still vulnerable to interception. But the journey across the barrens passed without incident.

The bus bounced into Sul Arsam; they boarded the waiting airship and presently came down at the Nichae spaceport. To the side stood the sleek new Armintor Starskip Gersen had bought in Sagbad. Alusz Iphigenia hesitated before she went aboard, then gave a fatalistic shrug.

In Sagbad, there was a further delay at the Planetary Bank. Interchange provided a hesitant and worried verification, sensing something incorrect, yet at a loss to discover where. The chairman of the Planetary Bank reluctantly told Gersen, "Through a set of extraordinary circumstances, we have the sum in our vaults, representing a set of large deposits from Interchange. They are in notes of various denominations—"

"No matter; we will accept your count," said Gersen.

The money, Kokor Hekkus' laboriously accumulated hoard, was packed into four cases, carried out into the hired air-car.

Now the Head Cashier came running out into the area. "A communication from Interchange! For Mr. Wall!"

Gersen controlled his impulse to flee. He returned into the bank. On the visiphone screen appeared the face of the Director; behind stood a man Gersen did not recognize.

"Mr. Wall," said the Director, "there have been difficulties: this is Achill Gogan, representing Kokor Hekkus. He earnestly desires that you wait at Sagbad until he is able to confer with you."

"Certainly," said Gersen. "He may look for us at the Alamut Hotel."

Gersen departed the bank, entered the air-car where Alusz Iphigenia waited despondently with the money. "To the spaceport," he told the pilot.

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Twenty minutes later Sasani lay behind them; engaging the intersplit, Gersen finally felt secure. The relief was intoxicating. He sat down on a settee and began to laugh. Alusz Iphigenia, across the cabin, watched with guarded interest. "Why do you laugh?"

"Because of how we were rescinded."

" 'We'?"

So she had not recognized him after all. Gersen came slowly across the cabin, and she moved back a distrustful half-inch. "One evening I spoke to you in the compound," said Gersen.

She studied him. "Now I remember you. The quiet man who sits in the shadows. How did you find so much money?"

"I printed it myself—and this is what amuses me."

She stared at him in bewilderment. "But they tested it! They accepted it!"

"Exactly. But here is the greatest joke of all: there is bleach in the ink. In a week they will have nothing. The money I paid Kokor Hekkus will be blank paper; the ten billion SVU will be blank paper. I have swindled Kokor Hekkus! I have swindled Interchange! Look: there is Kokor Hekkus' money!"

Alusz Iphigenia considered him dispassionately, then turned to look back toward Sasani. She smiled: a pensive smile. "Kokor Hekkus will be angry. No man alive has such extravagant emotions as Kokor Hekkus." She gave Gersen a look of something like wonder. "He would spend ten billion to gain me—because I chose to make this my price. And after he bought me"—she shuddered—"he would derive ten billion SVU worth of use from me, by one means or another. WTien he gets you what he will do—is unthinkable."

"Unless I kill him first."

"You will find it difficult. Sion Trumble is the cleverest war chief of Thamber, and he has failed."

Gersen went to the galley, brought back a bottle of wine with two goblets. Alusz Iphigenia first made a negative motion, then thought better of it, and accepted the goblet. Gersen asked, "Do you know why I rescinded you?"

"No." But she fidgeted uncomfortably and a slow pink flush came into her face. Never, thought Gersen, had she seemed more beautiful. "Because you can guide me to Thamber, where I will find Kokor Hekkus and kill him."

The pink flush slowly subsided. She tasted the wine, gazed re-

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nectively into the goblet "I do not want to return to Thamber. I desperately fear Kokor Hekkus. He will now be insane with anger "

"Nevertheless, that is where we must go."

She shook her head pensively "I cannot help you Where Thamber lies I do not know."

The captured revolutionary Tedoro exhorts his fellow prisoners

Allow nothing' Yield not so much as a quarter-inch' Eat the food they give you, concede no more' Who are they but villains<sup>3</sup> Shame them' Defy them' Hesitation is a crack in the steel, do you want them to bend you this way and that and snap you in two<sup>5</sup> Give nothing, yield nothing' If the commandant permits that you may sit, prefer to stand' If he gives you lined paper on which to write, write across the lines'

Gersen stared at Alusz Iphigema incredulously Then he jumped up to the control deck, disengaged the mtersplit- The fabric of the ship exuded its almost human sigh of shock, the skin seemed to twitch along their bodies.

Motors dead, the Armintor Starskip drifted free in space. Aquila GB 1202 shone far astern, teetering at the edge of the psychological distinction between sun and star.

Gersen went into the head, showered away the black skin-tone, dressed in his usual space-garb shorts, sandals, a light singlet He returned to the saloon to find Alusz Iphigema sitting where he had left her, gazing at the floor

Gersen said nothing, but seated himself on the bench opposite, thoughtfully sipped his wine Finally she spoke "Wliy did you turn off the engines<sup>3</sup>"

"There is no point traveling at random Since we have no destination we might as well remain here,"

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She shrugged, scowled. "Keep the money; take me to Earth. I have no wish to hang foolishly out here in space."

Gersen shook his head. "I rescinded your fee at great risk to myself—primarily to learn the whereabouts of Thamber. Secondly, I find you attractive as a woman. I agree with Kokor Hekkus you are worth ten billion SVU "

Alusz Iphigenia said angrily, "You do not believe me' It is a fact: I could not return to Thamber if it were the dearest wish of mv life'"

"How did you leave2"

"Sion Trumble captured a small spaceboat in a raid on Omad Island, which is Kokor Hekkus' spaceport. I read the Operator's Manual, and it seemed simple enough. When Kokor Hekkus threatened war on Gentilly unless my father gave me to him, I had two choices. I could kill myself or I could leave Thamber. I left. In the ship there was a Handbook of the Planets. It mentioned Sasam and described Interchange as the only locality m the human universe safe from criminals."

She turned a scathing glance toward Gersen. "This is inaccurate. Interchange apparently is fair game for counterfeiters."

Gersen acknowledged the fact with a grin and by refilling his wine glass. He hesitated before drinking it the bottle had been left alone in the cabin while he showered— not inconceivably the woman had poisoned it. He put the glass aside. "And who is Sion Trumble?"

"The Prince of Vadrus, on the western border of Misk. We were to have been betrothed.. . . He is a brave warrior, and has done many noteworthy deeds."

"I see." Gersen ruminated. "Don't you know the way you came, from Thamber to Sasam2"

"I set the astrogation dials for Sasam, and left Thamber behind. I know only this and no more. Kokor Hekkus is the only man of Thamber to own a spaceship."

"What is the name of your sun3"

"Just'Sun.'"

"Is it somewhat orange7"

"Yes. How did you know2"

"Deduction. WTiat does the night sky look like2 Are there any

unusual objects in the sky? Any nearby double or triple stars?"

"No. Nothing unusual."

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"Have there been any recent novae nearby?"

"What are 'novae'?"

"Stars suddenly exploding to give off great amounts of light."

"No, nothing like that."

"What of the Milky Way? Do you see it as a band around the sky, as a cloud, or how?"

"A ribbon of light streams across the night sky during winter:  
is that what you mean?"

"Yes. Apparently you're out toward the fringes."

"That may be." Alusz Iphigenia was unenthusiastic.

"What about tradition?" asked Gersen. "Are there old tales of Earth, or any of the other worlds?"

"Nothing very definite. ... A few legends, a few old songs." She regarded him with an expression that seemed faintly derisive. "How is it that your Star Directory and your Handbook to the Planets can't tell you what you want to know?"

"Thamber is a lost world. Whoever ruled Thamber in the ancient days kept the secret well. There's no information now—except a nursery rhyme:

Set a course from the old Dog Star  
A point to the north of Achernar;

Sleight your ship to the verge extreme  
And dead ahead shines Thamber's gleam."

Alusz Iphigenia smiled faintly. "I know that too: all of it."

"AlP? There's more?"

"Indeed. You've left out the middle. It goes:

Set a course from the old Dog Star  
A point to the north of Achernar;

Fare until, on the starboard beam,  
Six red suns toward a blue sun stream.

Sleight your ship to where afar

A cluster hangs like a scimitar.

Under the hilt to the verge extreme

And dead ahead shines Thamber's gleam."

"Well, well," said Gersen. He rose to his feet, jumped up to the control deck, set dials, threw power back into the Jarnell System.

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"Where are we going?" asked Alusz Iphigenia.

"Sinus—the Dog Star."

"You take the rhyme seriously?"

"I've heard no other directions; I've got to take it seriously or do nothing whatever."

"Hmm." Alusz Iphigenia sipped the wine. "In that case, since I've told you all I know, you will put me down at Sinus or perhaps Earth?"

"No."

"But—I know no more than I've told you!"

"You know the look of Thamber's constellations. Your rhyme, if it ever gave accurate directions, is a thousand years old or more. Sinus and Achernar have both shifted. We might arrive somewhere near Thamber—hopefully within ten or twenty light years. Then we'd have to use the old trick of lost star-travelers: they scan the sky until in some quarter they find a familiar constellation. There will only be one, and this in miniature, for it will be directly behind their home planet. All other constellations will be distorted; and even this constellation will have intervening stars superimposed upon it: notably the home sun. Nevertheless—there is always the one familiar constellation to search for, and if you find it, you head for it, and presently, when it grows to its familiar size, your home world is close at hand."

"What if you can't find a familiar constellation?"

"You can still find your way home. You must fly up or down, normal to the plane of the galaxy, until you can see the whole spread of it, and then there are landmarks to be found. This requires much time, much energy, much wear and strain upon the Jarnell. If anything goes wrong—then you are lost indeed, for there is nothing more to do and you float in space looking down on the home galaxy spreading below like a carpet until your energy fails and then you die." Gersen shrugged. "I have never been lost." He raised his glass of wine, eyed it warily, then went to the galley and brought out a new bottle. "Tell me of Thamber."

Alusz Iphigenia spoke for two hours while Gersen leaned back on

the settee sipping wine. It was a pleasant experience, watching and listening; for a period the realities of his existence were far away. . . . Alusz Iphigenia mentioned Aglabat, the city behind a wall of dark brown stone, and Gersen roused himself. Enervation was a

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danger. His stay at Interchange had done him no good. He had become pliable, easily distracted. . . . Nevertheless he relaxed again, sipping wine, listening to Alusz Iphigenia. . . .

Thamber was a wonderful world. No one knew when the first man had arrived; the time was lost in the past. There were various continents, subcontinents, peninsulas, and a great archipelago of tropical islands. Alusz Iphigenia was native to Uraszane in Gentilly, a principality on the western shore of the smallest continent. To the east was Vadrus, ruled by Sion Trumble, and beyond the Land of Misk. The remainder of the continent, except for a number of feuding states on the east coast, was wilderness inhabited by barbarians. Similar conditions prevailed on the other continents. Alusz Iphigenia mentioned a score of peoples, each of distinctive character. Certain of these produced great music and pageants of heart-stopping grandeur; others were fetishists and murderers ruled by ogres. In the mountains lived bandit chieftains and arrogant lordlings, each secure in his castle. Everywhere were wizards and warlocks, capable of the most astounding feats, and one weird area to the north of the largest continent was ruled by fiends and demons. The native flora and fauna were complex, rich and beautiful, and sometimes dangerous; there were sea-monsters, scaled wolves of the tundra, the horrid dnazd of the mountains to the north of Misk.

Technology and the ways of modern living were unknown on Thamber. Even the Brown Bersaglers of Kokor Hekkus carried only voulgues and daggers, while the knights of Misk were armed with swords and crossbows. Between Misk and Vadrus there was intermittent strife, with Gentilly usually allied with Vadrus. Sion Trumble was a man of heroic valor, but he never had been able to overcome the Brown Bersaglers. In a tremendous battle, he had repelled the barbarians of the Skar Sakau, who had thereupon turned their full fury to the south, upon the Land of Misk, where they had been raiding villages, destroying outposts, and spreading devastation.

Gersen listened with wonder. The romantic legends regarding Thamber had not been exaggerated; if anything they were understated. He said as much to Alusz Iphigenia, who shrugged. "Thamber is a world of romantic deeds, certainly. The castles have great halls where the bards sing and pavilions where maidens dance to the music of lutes, but below are dungeons and torture chambers. The knights are a magnificent sight in their armor and their flags,

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and then in the snows of Skava Steppe their legs are hacked off by the Skodolak nomads, and they lie helpless until the wolves tear them to pieces. The witches brew philters and the wizards send up the smoke of dreams, and also infect their enemies with blights. . . . Two hundred years ago the great heroes lived. Tyier Trumble conquered Vadrus and built the city Carrai where Sion Trumble now rules. Jadask Dousko found Misk a land of herdsmen and Aglabat a fishing village. In ten years he had created the first Brown Corps, and there has been war ever since." She sighed. "In Draszane life is relatively calm; we have four ancient colleges, hundreds of bibliothèques. Gentilly is a peaceful old country, but Misk and Vadrus somehow are different. Sion Trumble wants me for his queen—but would there ever be peace and happiness? Or would he always be fighting Skodolaks or the Tadousko-Oi or the Sea-Helms? And always Kokor Hekkus, who now will be implacable. . . ."

Gersen was silent.

Alusz Iphigenia went on. "At Interchange I read books—of Earth and the Concourse and Aloysius. I know how you live. And at first I wondered why Kokor Hekkus stayed so long at Aglabat, why he fought with swords when he could fit out the Brown Bersaglers with energy weapons. But there is no mystery'. He needs emotion as other men need food. He craves excitement and horror and hate and lust. He finds it in the Land of Misk. But someday he will dare too much and Sion Trumble will kill him." She laughed sadly. "Or someday Sion Trumble will attempt a particularly ludicrous act of valor and Kokor Hekkus will kill him—which will be a pity."

"Hmfm," said Gersen. "You are fond of this Sion Trumble?"

"Yes. He is kind and generous and brave. He would not think to rob even Interchange."

Gersen grinned sourly. "I'm more the Kokor Hekkus type. . . . What of the rest of the planet?"

"Everywhere it is different. In Birzul, the Godmus keeps a harem often thousand concubines. Every day he enlists ten maidens and discharges ten, or if he happens to be in a bad humor drowns them. In Calastang, the Divine Eye rides through the city carried on a vermilion altar forty yards long and forty yards high. The Lathcar Gentry keep racing-men—slave runners especially bred and trained for the Lath Race Meets. The Tadousko-Oi build their villages on the highest crags and steepest cliffs, and throw down

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the crippled and infirm. They are Thamber's fiercest warriors, the Tadousko-Oi, and they have leagued themselves to raze the walls of Aglabat. And they will succeed, because the Brown Bersaglers cannot withstand them."

"Have you ever seen Kokor Hekkus close at hand?"

"Yes."

"What does he look like?"

"Give me paper and pen; I will show you."

Gersen brought her writing materials. She made tentative marks, then worked more swiftly. Line joined line, areas became defined: a face looked forth from the paper. It was an intelligent alert face; under a tall square forehead the eyes were wide and inquiring. The hair was rich, dark, lustrous; the nose was short and straight, the mouth rather small. Alusz Iphigenia sketched in the torso, the legs, to depict a man somewhat over average height, with broad shoulders, a narrow waist, long legs. The body might well have been that of both Billy Windle and Seuman Otwal; the face in no way resembled the keen jutting countenance of Seuman Otwal, and Gersen had never distinctly seen Billy Windle.

Alusz Iphigenia watched him as he studied the picture, and gave a shudder. "I can't understand cruelty—killing—hate. You are almost as frightening as Kokor Hekkus."

Gersen put the sketch aside. "When I was small, my home was destroyed, and all my kin—except for my grandfather. Even then I knew the course of my life was arranged. I knew that I would one day kill the five men who had conducted the raid. This has been my life, I have no other. I am not evil; I am beyond good and evil—like the killing machine Kokor Hekkus built."

"And I am unlucky enough to be useful to you," said Alusz Iphigenia.

Gersen grinned. "You probably will prefer being useful to me than to Kokor Hekkus, since all I ask is that you guide me to Thamber."

"You are gallant," said Alusz Iphigenia, and Gersen could not decide whether her remark carried a barb or not.

Sirius burnt white ahead, with off to the side the yellow-white star that had nurtured the human race. Alusz Iphigenia contemplated it wistfully, turned to Gersen as if to plead with him, then thought better of it and held her tongue.

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Gersen pointed to Achernar, at the source of the River Rndanus "A point  $11 \frac{1}{4}^\circ$  north is the plane of galactic north containing the Sinus-Achernar line But the rhyme must be a thousand years old, perhaps longer—so first we take ourselves to the position of Sinus a thousand years ago Not too difficult Then we calculate Achernar's apparent position of a thousand years ago—again not too difficult Using these two new points, then we angle north  $11 \frac{1}{4}^\circ$  and hope for the best And since I've already made the computations " lie carefully adjusted the verniers, Sinus swung grandly away to the side

Presently the Jarnell snapped out, the Starskip drifted in unfractured ether Gersen turned the bow toward the point Achernar had occupied a thousand years before, then swung up  $1VA^\circ$  in a plane parallel to the north-south galactic axis "Here goes " He engaged the mterspht, the Starskip and its contents, deprived of inertia and Einstemian constrictions, slid with near-mstantaneity along the generated fracture "Now we must watch for six red stars They may or may not be streaming toward a blue star, they may or may not be on the starboard beam, unless the rhyme intends that the dorsal-ventral plane of the ship lie parallel to the north-south galactic axis "

Time went by Near stars slid across stars more distant, which in turn slid across the even farther specks of light behind.

Gersen became edgy He expressed doubt that Alus/ Iphigema had remembered the rhyme correctly She replied with a shrug indicating small concern one way or the other, and presently offered the con)ecture that Gersen had made a mistake in his computations

"How long was your trip to Interchange^" He had asked her this before, but always she had given him a vague answer, as now she did again "I slept a great deal 'lime seemed to go swiftly "

Gersen began to suspect that the rhyme had taken them on a wild goose chase, that 1 hamber lay in a different quarter of the galaxy, and that Alus/ Iphigema knew this fact \ery well.

Alusz Iphigema was aware of his dubiousness, and it was with a note of vindication that she pointed ahead to six beautihil red giants strung out in a down-curving line toward a great blue star.

Gersen's only comment was a grudging, "Well, they seem to be on our starboard beam, so rhyme and calculations both aren't

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too far off." He disengaged the Jarnell; the Starskip drifted. "Now a cluster shaped like a scimitar, probably a naked-eye ob)ect."

"There." Alusz Iphigema pointed. "Thamber is nearby."

"How do you know^"

"The cluster like the scimitar. In Gentilly we call it the God-Boat. Though from here it looks different."

Gersen turned the ship toward the "hilt"; once again he cut in the mterspht; the boat slipped forward. Directly through the cluster they flew, with stars all around, and then came out into a region only sparsely populated. "It's a fact," said Gersen, "We're at the edge of the galaxy: the 'verge extreme.' Somewhere, dead ahead, should be chamber's gleam.' "

Dead ahead lay a sparse scatter of stars,

"The sun is G8-orange," said Gersen. "Which is the orange sun3 . . . There. That one."

The orange star appeared something to the side and below. Gersen cut off the mterspht. He ad)usted the macroscope, which revealed a single planet. He raised the magnification, continents and seas swam into focus. "Thamber," said Alusz Iphigenia Eper)e-Tokay.

10

There is a human quality that cannot be precisely named:

possibly the most nohle of all human qualities. It includes but is larger than candor, generosity, comprehension, niceness of distinction, intensity, steadiness of purpose, total commitment. It is participation in all human perceptions, recollection of all human history. It is characteristic of every great creative genius and can never be learned: learning in this regard is bathos—the dissection of a butterfly, a spectroscope turned to the sunset, the psychoanalysis of a laughing girl. The attempt to learn is self-destructive; when erudition comes in, poetry departs. How common the man of intellect who cannot feel! How trifling are his judgments against those of the peasant who derives his strength, like Antaeus, from the emotional sediment of the race! Essentially the tastes and preferences of the intellectual elite, derived from learning, are false, doctrinaire, artificial, shrill, shallow, uncertain, eclectic, jejune, and insincere.

. . . Life, Volume IV, by Unspiek, Baron Bodissey

The critics discuss Baron Bodissey's Life:

A monumental work if you like monuments. . . . One is irresistibly put in mind of the Laocoon group, with the good baron contorted against the coils of common sense, and the more earnest of his readers likewise endeavoring to disengage themselves.

. . . Panct'etic Review, St. Stephen, Boniface

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Ponderously the great machine ingests its bales of lore; grinding, groaning, shuddering, it brings forth its product: small puffs of acrid vari-colored vapor.

. . . Excahbur, Patris, Krokinole

Six volumes of rhodomontade and piffle.

. . . Academia, London, Earth

Egregious, ranting, boorish, unacceptable—

. . . The Rigellian, Avente, Alphanor

Sneers jealously at the careers of better men. . . Impossible not to feel honest anger.

. . . Galactic Quarterly, Baltimore, Earth

Tempting to picture Baron Bodissey at work in the Arcadian habitat he promulgates, surrounded by admiring goatherds.

. . . El Orchide, Serle, Quantique

It was morning over the continent Despaz. Alusz Iphigenia pointed out the geographical divisions. "To the south, the long strip under the Skar Sakau Mountains, along the seacoast—that is the Land of Mtsk. Aglabat is hard to see; it is brown and merges with the landscape, but it is there, where the coast curves inland." She pointed.

"And where is your home?"

"To the west. First is Vadrus over that arm of mountains. You can see the city Carrai: a patch of white and gray. Then there are more mountains and Gentilly lies beyond. There, where the sunlight is just touching—Gendilly." She turned away from the microscope. "But naturally you will never go there. Nor to Carrai."

"Why not?"

"Because neither my father nor Sion Trumble would allow me to be your slave."

Without comment, Gersen bent over the microscope, studied the landscape for the better part of an hour, while the planet rolled over into the sunlight.

"A number of things are clear," he said at last, "and a number of things aren't so clear. For instance, how I can approach Kokor

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Hekkus without being killed? He undoubtedly has radar and quite possibly sky-bolts to protect his city. We must land somewhere beyond the range of detection devices, and the most convenient spot seems to be beyond those mountains."

"And after you land—what then?"

"In order to kill Kokor Hekkus, first I find him. To find him, I'll have to look for him."

"What of me?" complained Alusz Iphigenia woefully. "I left Thamber to escape Kokor Hekkus; now you bring me back. After

you are killed, which is certain, what then? Must I return to Interchange?"

"It seems that our interests coincide," said Gersen. "We both want Kokor Hekkus dead. Neither wants him aware of our presence on Thamber. We will stay together."

He turned the Starskip down toward Thamber, standing well to the north of the mountains called the Skar Sakau. After careful inspection of the terrain, he found an isolated col under a great peak and there he landed. To right and left stood other wind-lashed peaks, laced with glaciers; below and to the south spread a jumble of ridges, chasms, precipices: as wild a region as any Gersen had known, While waiting for air pressure to equalize, he lowered the little air-car from its pod, armed himself with his various weapons, wrapped himself in a cape, as did Alusz Iphigenia. He opened the port, Jumped down upon the soil of Thamber. The sun was bright;

the air was cold; the wind mercifully was still. Alusz Iphigenia joined him, to stand looking around with an air of repressed exhilaration, as if in spite of her fears she was happy to be home. She turned to Gersen and spoke impulsively. "You're not an evil man, in spite of what you say about yourself. You've treated me kindly—more kindly than I could have expected. Why not give over this fantastic scheme of yours? Kokor Hekkus is secure behind the walls of Aglabat, not even Sion Trumble can threaten him. What can you do? To kill him you must bring him forth, you must defeat all his cruel ruses. And never forget that in all the universe he most wishes to meet you."

"I'm aware of this," said Gersen.

"And you still persist? You must be a lunatic or a sorcerer."

"No."

"Then you have made plans?"

"How can I make plans when I have no facts? That's what we're

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going out for now. See this box?" He nudged a black metal case with his toe. "I can sit at a distance of ten miles and send a spy-cell into Aglabat, to learn whatever I need to know."

Alusz Iphigenia had no rebuttal to make. Gersen appraised the Starskip, the surrounding mountains; surely no wandering barbarians would come so high or so far. Divining his thoughts, Alusz Iphigenia said, "They keep to the south of the Skar, where their flocks find sustenance, where the granaries of Misk are near at hand. If we fly south, we will see their villages. They are the most ferocious fighters alive, using only daggers and bare hands."

Gersen packed the black case aboard the air-boat, which, unlike the flying platform carried by his old Model 9B, was equipped with a transparent dome and comfortable seats. Alusz Iphigenia stepped

aboard, Gersen joined her, closed down the dome. The boat rose, skidded off down the col, then south through the soaring juts and crags. Never had Gersen seen such awesome scenery. Cliffs rose sheer from crevasse-like valleys in which wound a dim metal tendril of a river, visible only because the orange sun hung at noon. Chasm opened into chasm; winds roaring through collided and buffeted the air-car. Occasionally a waterfall plunged from the lip of a crag, to fray and wave like a wisp of white silk.

Crag after crag, ridge after ridge slipped behind, and the lay of the valleys was to the south. Far below, forests and meadows could be seen, and presently Alusz Iphigenia pointed to what seemed a complicated crumble of rock pasted to an almost sheer crag. "A village of the Tadousko-Oi. They'll think us a magic bird."

"So long as they don't shoot us down."

"They use only boulders to roll upon their enemies and bows and catapults for their hunting." Gersen nevertheless gave the village a wide berth, swinging across toward the opposite cliff wall, the surface of which seemed curiously humped and pocked. Only when within a hundred yards did he realize he was approaching another village, clinging with incredible precariousness to the barren rock. He glimpsed a few dark figures; on a roof a man aimed a weapon. Gersen cursed, swerved; but a short sharp metal dart spat through the fore-part of the air-boat, which gave a jerk, a lurch, then sagged.

Alusz Iphigenia cried out, Gersen hissed between his teeth. Not two hours on Thamber and already faced with disaster! "The front

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lift-vanes are gone," he said, trying to speak calmly. "We're in no danger, don't be frightened We'll return to the ship."

But this was obviously impossible the air-boat hung at an alarming angle, suspended on the center and rear vanes alone

"We'll have to land," said Gersen "I may be able to repair the damage... I thought you said these people had no weapons."

"It must have been a cross-bow captured from Kokor Hekkus. I can think of no other explanation. . . . I'm truly sorry."

"It's no fault of yours." Gersen gave his full attention to the plunging air-boat, trying to hold it on a manageable slant as they settled into the valley. At the last instant, he cut off the rear jets, pushed the propulsion hard over, and for an instant held the craft on an even keel, and so they came down easily on a gravel terrace fifty feet above the river.

Gersen stiffly alighted, went to inspect the damage. His heart sank.

"How bad is it?" asked Alusz Iphigema anxiously.

"Very bad. I might be able to get us back to the ship, by sliding the center vane forward, or something similar. . . . Well, to work." He brought out such tools as the standard equipment afforded, and set to work. An hour passed. Noon sunlight left the valley, blue shadows collected, with them came a dank chill smelling of snow and wet stone. Alusz Iphigema tugged at Gersen's arm. "Quick! Hide! The Tadousko-Oi."

Startled, Gersen let himself be dragged into a cleft among the rocks. A moment later he saw one of the strangest sights of his lifetime. Down the valley came twenty or thirty large centipedes, each mounted by five men. The centipedes, Gersen noted, were similar to the fort built by Patch Construction, but much smaller. They ran smoothly over the stones, almost flowing. The riders were an ill-favored lot—massively muscled men whose maroon skins were burnished like old leather. Their eyes were stony and staring, their mouths harsh, their noses heavy and hooked. They wore clumsy garments of black leather, helmets of crude iron and black leather; each carried a lance, an ax, and a heavy dagger.

At the sight of the disabled air-car, the band drew up in surprise. "At least they weren't sent out to pick us up," whispered Gersen.

Alusz Iphigema said nothing. They were pressed close together.

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in the cleft: even in the extremity of the circumstances he felt a tingling at the contact.

The Tadousko-Oi had surrounded the air-car. A number alighted, and conversed in a harsh mumble. They began to look up and down the valley. It was only a matter of seconds before one of them would investigate the cleft.

Gersen whispered to Alusz Iphigema, "Stay here. I'll distract them." He stepped forward, stood with thumbs hooked in his weapon harness. For a moment the warriors stood staring, then one who wore a helmet more complicated than the others came slowly forward. He spoke: harsh grumbling words apparently derived from the ancient universal tongue, but incomprehensible to Gersen. The slate-colored eyes of the chief—this seemed to be his rank—flicked past Gersen in new surprise. Alusz Iphigenia had come forward. She spoke in a rough approximation of the Tadousko-Oi language;

the chief replied. The remaining warriors sat motionless, Gersen had never seen a tableau more sinister.

Alusz Iphigenia spoke to Gersen. "I have told him that we are enemies of Kokor Hekkus, that we come from a far world to kill him. The hetman says that they are embarked on a raid, that they are to join with other bands, and that they plan to attack Aglabat."

Gersen appraised the hetman once more. "Ask him if he can provide transportation back to our ship. I'll pay him well."

Alusz Iphigenia spoke; the hetman gave a grunt of grim humor. He spoke; Alusz Iphigenia translated.

"He refuses. All the company are intent on this great raid. He says that if we like we can join the raiding party. I told him that you preferred to repair the air-boat."

The hetman spoke: Gersen caught the word "dnazd" used several times. Alusz Iphigenia turned—after a curious hesitation—to Gersen. "He says that we can't survive the night here, that the dnazd will kill us."

"What is the 'dnazd'?"

"A great beast. This place is called the Valley of the Dnazd."

The hetman spoke again in his dull grumbling voice, Gersen's ear, accustomed to extracting meaning from the thousand and one dialects and variants of the universal tongue, began to penetrate the hoarseness and glottal overtones. The hetman, for all the ominous sound to his voice, did not seem hostile. Gersen gathered that it was below the dignity of a war party such as this to prey upon

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helpless wanderers. "You say you are enemies of Kokor Hekkus," seemed to be the essence of his words "In that case the man will be anxious to join the war party—if, that is to say, he is a fighting man, as he may be in spite of his unhealthy pallor."

Alusz Iphigenia translated. "He says that this is a war party. Your pale skin gives him the impression that you are sick. He says that if we wish to come, it will be in a menial capacity. There will be much work and much danger "

"Hmm. Is that what he says?"

"Words to that effect."

It was apparent that Alusz Iphigenia had no wish to join the war party. Gersen said, "Ask the hetman if there is any means by which we can return to the ship."

Alusz Iphigenia asked the question; the hetman seemed sardonically amused. "If you can escape the dnazd, if you can find your way over two hundred miles of mountains without food and shel-

ter.

Alusz Iphigenia translated in a hollow voice. "He says he can't help us: we can try if we like." She looked at the air-boat. "Can we repair this?"

"I don't think so Not unless I find tools. We had better go with these people—at least until something better offers."

Alusz Iphigenia reluctantly translated Gersen's words. The chieftain gave an uninterested assent; he motioned, one of the mounts that carried only four warriors approached, Gersen climbed up on the pad that served as saddle, pulled Alusz Iphigenia up into his lap. This was the closest contact he had ever made with her, it seemed amazing that he had restrained himself so long. She seemed to be thinking similar thoughts, and gave him a pensive look. For a space she held herself as rigid as possible, then gradually relaxed.

The centipedes ran smooth as oil down the valley moved the war party along an almost invisible trail that led up and down, over boulders, through gaps, cracks, and crevices. Occasionally when the valley walls closed tight together, with the Thamber sky a strip of dark blue ribbon and the water a rushing black syrup, the procession ascended the cliffs. The warriors kept utter silence, the centipede-mounts made no sound, there was nothing to be heard but sigh of wind and sound of water. Gersen became ever more conscious of the warm body leaning against him. He reminded himself wistfully that indulgences of this sort were not for him, that his life was

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predestined to grief and doom—but his cells and nerves and instincts protested, and his arms tightened around Alusz Iphigenia. She looked around; he saw that her face was abstracted, melancholy, that her eyes were bright with something like tears. WTly in the world is she melancholy^ Gersen wondered. The circumstances were unfortunate, vexatious, but still short of desperate; if anything the Tadousko-Oi had treated them with courtesy. . . A halt interrupted his thoughts. The hetman was consulting a group of lieutenants; their attention was fixed high above, upon a crag where Gersen made out another of the dull crumbles he now knew for a village.

Alusz Iphigenia shifted in his arms. "This is an enemy village," she told him. "The Tadousko-Oi feud among themselves."

The hetman gave a signal, three scouts dismounted, ran ahead, testing the path. A hundred yards ahead, they croaked out in guttural alarm, sprang back, as a slab of rock crashed across the trail.

The warriors stirred no muscle. The scouts continued along the trail, disappeared. Half an hour later they returned.

The hetman signaled. One after another the mounts surged forward. From far above, objects like gray peas appeared, falling with odd slowness, almost floating. But size and speed were illusory;

the objects were boulders that smashed to splinters along the trail. The warriors, showing no concern, avoided the fall by speeding, slowing, darting ahead, halting. WTien Gersen and Alusz Iphigenia were carried past, the fall of boulders had halted.

Beyond the village the valley broadened to a crescent-shaped meadow with a feathery forest along the river. Mere, the lead mount stopped short, and for the first time a grumble of words passed down the line: "Dnazd."

But the nazd was not in evidence. The party, crouching low on their mounts, timorously continued across the meadow.

The day had gone dark. High above, a few wisps of cirrus burned bronze in the dying sunlight. The party presently entered a cleft in the rocks—hardly more than a crevice—along which the mounts could squeeze only by folding their legs back. At times Gersen might have touched the walls to either side. The crack widened, became a circular area floored with sand. All alighted; the mounts were taken to the side, shackled together. Certain warriors dipped leather buckets in a nearby pool, fed the mounts buckets of water and what looked to be powdered blood. Others made small

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fires, hung pots on tripods, and began to boil up a rank-smelling stew.

The hetman and his lieutenants sat together, conferring in undertones. The hetman glanced toward Gersen and Alusz Iphigenia, made a movement; two of the warriors set up a kind of tent of black cloth. Alusz Iphigenia exhaled a soft sigh, turned her eyes to the ground.

The stew was cooked; each warrior took an iron bowl from inside his helmet, dipped it into the pot, careless to steam and boiling stew. Having no bowls, Gersen and Alusz Iphigenia sat patiently, while the warriors ate with fingers and slabs of hard bread. The first to finish polished his bowl with sand, brought it politely to Gersen, who accepted with thanks, dipped into the stew, brought the bowl to Alusz Iphigenia, an act which evoked an amused rumble of comment. Another bowl was forthcoming and now Gersen ate. The stew was not unpleasant, though salty and seasoned with an odd peppery spice; the bread was hard, and tasted like burning weeds. The warriors squatted around the fires without laughing or horseplay.

The hetman rose, went to the tent. Gersen looked about for a place for himself and Alusz Iphigenia. It would be a chilly night, for they had only their cloaks. The Tadousko-Oi, who had even less, evidently planned to lay themselves down before the fire. . . . The warriors were looking at Alusz Iphigenia in a puzzled manner. Gersen looked at her also. She sat staring into the fire, arms wrapped around knees: nothing to excite perplexity. In the opening to the tent the hetman appeared, frowning impatiently. He beckoned to Alusz Iphigenia.

Gersen slowly rose to his feet. Alusz Iphigenia, without lifting her eyes from the fire, said in a soft voice: "To the Tadousko-Oi, women are a lower species. . . . They keep their women in common, and the highest ranking warrior sleeps with what is available—first."

Gersen looked toward the hetman. "Explain that this is not our

custom."

Alusz Iphigenia looked slowly up at him. "We can do nothing; we are—"

"Tell him."

Alusz Iphigenia turned to the hetman, spoke Gersen's words. The warriors sitting around the fire became still. The hetman

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seemed startled, and came two paces forward. He spoke: "In your own land, you are obliged to observe your own customs; but this is the Skar Sakau, and here our ways must hold. Is this pale man the highest ranking warrior present? No, of course not. Therefore, you, the pale woman must come to my tent. This is the way of the Skar Sakau."

Gersen did not wait for the translation. "Tell him that I am an extremely high-ranked warrior in my own land; that if you sleep with anyone it shall be with me."

To this the hetman responded, not discourteously. "Again, this is the Skar Sakau. I am the hetman, no man can resist me; it is beyond dispute that I outrank the pale man. So come, woman, let there be an end to this undignified parley."

Gersen said, "Tell him that I am more highly ranked—that I am a Space-Admiral, a Ruler, a Lord—anything that he will understand."

She shook her head, rose to her feet. "I had best obey."

"Tell him."

"You will be killed," said Alusz Iphigenia.

"Tell him."

Alusz Iphigenia spoke. The chieftain came another two steps forward, pointed to a burly young warrior. "Outrank this man, trounce him thoroughly to emphasize his lowly condition."

The warrior doffed his upper harness. The hetman spoke, "The pale man carries coward's weapons. Let him know that he must fight as a man, either with dagger or his hands. He must remove his fire-flashers."

Gersen's hand trembled toward his projac. But warriors nearby would instantly have overpowered him. Slowly he handed his weapons to Alusz Iphigenia, removed his jacket and singlet. His opponent carried a heavy double-edged dagger; Gersen thereupon brought forth his own slim-bladed weapon.

An area of sand between three fires was cleared; warriors of the

Tadousko-Oi squatted about in a circle, liver-colored faces grave, dispassionate, almost insect-like.

Gersen stepped forward, assessed his opponent. He was taller than himself, with hard muscles and quick motions. He twitched the heavy dagger as if it were a feather. Gersen held his blade loosely. The young warrior moved his dagger in a hypnotic circle, steel glimmering in the firelight.

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Gersen made a sudden hard motion. His blade flashed through the air, cut through the warrior's wrist, pinned it to his shoulder. The dagger fell from limp fingers; he stared in numb wonder at his helpless hand. Gersen stepped close, picked up the dropped weapon, ducked a kick, struck the warrior over the ear with the flat of the blade. The warrior tottered; Gersen struck him again; the man fell to the ground in a daze.

Gersen recovered his dagger, politely placed the young warrior's weapon into its scabbard, returned to Alusz Iphigenia, and began to dress himself in the clothes he had removed.

For the first time there was a murmur among the spectators:

neither applause, nor disapproval: merely a mild wonder, with a hint of dissatisfaction.

All looked to the hetman, who now marched forward. He spoke in a loud voice, in a careful sing-song rhythm: "Pale man, you have defeated this young warrior. I cannot fault the unconventional method employed, though we of the Tadousko-Oi hold it the way of a weakling to stake all on a single cast. Moreover, nothing has been proved, other than the fact that you outrank the young warrior. You must fight again." He searched among the faces, but Gersen spoke. "Tell the hetman," he instructed Alusz Iphigenia, "that my differences, in connection to where you shall spend the night, are solely with him, and it is he with whom I choose to fight."

Alusz Iphigenia repeated the message in a low voice, and now the audience sat stunned. The hetman was obviously surprised. "Does he so choose? Does he not realize I am champion, the master of all men I have so far faced? Explain to him that I am hetman, that since he is not of the clan, such a fight must be to the death."

Alusz Iphigenia explained; Gersen said, "Inform the hetman that I have no wish to prove my high rank; that I much prefer sleeping to fighting, so long as he does not insist on your company."

Alusz Iphigenia spoke; the hetman removed his shirt. Then he spoke. "We shall settle the question of rank quickly, for there may not be two leaders to a war party. To avoid a coward's cast, we will fight with bare hands."

Gersen appraised him: tall he stood, heavy but agile, with dark

flesh that seemed as hard as horn. He glanced down at Alusz Iphigenia who looked up at him fascinated, then slowly he stepped forward. Beside the knotted dark body his own seemed pallid and elastic. To test the hetman Gersen aimed an apparently random

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blow toward his head; instantly a hard hand seized his wrist, a foot lashed out. Gersen disengaged his wrist with a jerk; he could have seized the foot and flung the hetman over, but instead allowed the toe barely to graze his hip. And he swung another left-handed blow that landed, almost as if by accident, on the hetman's neck. It felt like a tree trunk.

The hetman hopped forward, both feet at a time, in a peculiarly disconcerting manner, both arms wide. Gersen punched at the out-thrust face. He struck the left eye, but was caught up in an arm lock, of a sort he had never experienced before, which in seconds would snap his ulna. Gersen relaxed his knees, then sprang around in a kind of mad somersault, kicking the hetman in the face and wrenching his arm free. The hetman was less confident when Gersen faced him next. He slowly raised both arms; Gersen struck at the left eye. Again the hetman's foot lashed out, Gersen refrained from seizing the ankle; again it grazed his hip. The hetman's eye was swollen. As he sprang back after the kick, Gersen took advantage of an instant's respite to scrape a hollow into the sand with his foot. The hetman circled him. Gersen moved away, feinted; his wrist was seized; a great hand hacked at the back of his neck. Gersen dived instantly forward, put his shoulder to the hetman's rock-hard belly; the blow slid off his shoulder. Gersen thrust forward; the hetman pulled up a knee battering Gersen's chest. Gersen caught the knee, shifted his position, caught the ankle, twisted; the hetman was forced to fall to protect his knee; Gersen kicked him in the right eye, jumped away from the sweep of the massive red arm. He stood panting and sobbing, his chest aching; but the hetman's right eye was closing. Gersen bent, carefully enlarged the hollow in the sand. Glaring like a boar, the hetman watched him, then, apparently casting caution aside, he rushed forward: Gersen moved aside; on occasion he had exercised the same feigned recklessness. He jabbed at the hetman's left eye, but a dazzling fast blow of the hetman's left hand crushed his wrist, causing intense pain and leaving his left hand limp. This was a serious loss, but the hetman's right eye was shut and his left eye was swollen. Ignoring the pain, Gersen flapped his now useless left hand into the red face; again the left hand swung up to hack; but Gersen caught the left wrist in his right hand, kicked behind the left knee, butted into the hetman's neck, and the hetman let himself sag, still perfectly controlled and coordinated. Grunting, hissing between his teeth, Gersen hacked into the momentarily ex-

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posed neck; the hetman, purple in the face, slashed out back-handed; Gersen, who now was beginning to lose his agility, caught the blow on his right forearm. It was like the impact of a sledgehammer; left and right hands both were useless. The two men stood back, both sweating and gasping. Both of the hetman's eyes were almost shut; Gersen strove to conceal the futility of his hands; it

would be fatal to display weakness. Summoning his last resources he crouched, began to stalk the hetman: his arms held as if ready to strike. The hetman roared out, made his two-footed jump; Gerssen lurched to meet him, drove his right elbow into the black contusion of the hetman's neck. The hetman's arms surrounded Gerssen, he began banging the side of his head against Gerssen's temple. Gerssen sagged low, butted at the hetman's chin, kicked at his knees. Both toppled, the hetman trying to swing Gerssen under. Gerssen acceded to the impulse, augmented it, landed on top, clenched in the wet maroon arms. He butted at the chin, at the nose; the hetman tried to counter with snapping teeth, heaving and lurching to roll to the top, which Gerssen prevented with outspread legs. He butted, the teeth scarred his forehead. He butted at the nose, it broke. He butted again, battered down at the chin, again the teeth lacerated his forehead—but the hetman could take no more. He loosened his grip that he might place a forearm under Gerssen's neck, but Gerssen had been waiting. He Jerked himself free, sat upon the hetman's abdomen, then with his last energy brought his head down against the bridge of the hetman's nose.

The hetman choked, relaxed, dazed by pain, fatigue, the blows to neck and head. Gerssen staggered to his feet, arms dangling. He looked down at the great maroon body. Never had he fought so terrible an antagonist. Was the hetman dead? Lesser blows had killed lesser men.

Gerssen stumbled to where Alusz Iphigenia sat sobbing. In a slurred voice he said, "Tell the warriors to care for their hetman. He is a great fighter, and the enemy of my enemy."

Alusz Iphigenia spoke. P'rom the onlookers came a dismal rumble. Several warriors went to look down at the unconscious hetman, then glanced toward Gerssen. He stood swaying. Fires flickered crazily, faces were a nightmare blur. He gasped for air, and looking high glimpsed a cluster of stars shaped like a scimitar. . . .

Alusz Iphigenia had risen to her feet. "Come," she said, and led him to the tent. None barred their way.

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From "Smell Your Best," by Rudi Thumm, article in *Cosmopo/is*, January, 1521:

Here is an excerpt from the catalog of *AEMISTHES*:

Perfumes, Redolences, Essences, Pamfile, Zaccare, Quantique. Each category is further amplified in the body of the catalog, with the nature and quality of the constituents exactly, even redolently, defined.

Section I: Odors for Personal Use.

Beguilements:

: For the sorcelment

of a strange

maiden

; To induce a new

gallant

; To announce a

triumph

: To stupefy a noisy

child

: To welcome a lover

: To hint at revulsion

At festivals:

. Promenades

: Revels

: Tarantellas

In Solitude:

At gatherings:

: Small societies

: Occasions of  
dignified  
circumstance

: While discussing  
family secrets

: At the god-yell

-morning

-evening

-rogue

-unpremeditated

et cetera

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Section II: Ceremonial

Private occasions:

: For the house

-various essences

: For the lich-way  
: For the ancient tree  
: At water tasting

-morning

-twilight

: At occasions of grief  
: At occasions of

remorse

: To celebrate a

murder

Public occasions:

: To lave the feet of

the Zatcoon

: To cast upon an

imminent

battlefield

: To facilitate flight

: To scent the wind

: To welcome good

fortune

et cetera

What you should learn from the foregoing is plain:

when you visit Zaccare, don't wear perfume—you may find yourself involved in circumstances you didn't bargain for. The people of this fantastic and beautiful land are as sensitive to odors as the Sirenese are to music, and an apparently insignificant daub of scent affords an astonishing amount of information. As can be seen, every occasion requires its correct perfume, and a mistake will seem utterly ludicrous to the folk of Zaccare. Unless advised by a local, go scentless. Better neutrality than gaucherie!

Perfume manufacture is big business in Zaccare. At Pamfile, a hundred firms have their headquarters. From all over the Oikumene, oils, extracts, and essences are imported, with as many more collected in the nearby Talalangi Forest.

Here are samples of Zaccare fragrances:

(scented tabs attached to page of magazine).

Before dawn the warriors stirred, blew the coals ablaze, set their

stew a-simmer. The hetman, his head a mass of bruises, sat with his back to a rock, looking dourly across the area. No one spoke to him, nor he to anyone. From the tent came Gersen, followed by Alusz Iphigenia. She had bound his left wrist, massaged his right

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arm; aside from a thousand bruises, aches, and the sprain of his left wrist, he was not in bad condition. He walked to where the hetman sat, and essayed to speak in the harsh dialect of the Skar Sakau. "You tought'well."

"You fought better," mumbled the hetman. "Never since boyhood have I been beaten. I called you a coward. I was wrong. You did not kill me; by this token you become a clan-fellow, and hetman. What are your orders?"

"Suppose I ordered the party to conduct us to our ship?"

"You would not be obeyed. The men would ride off. I was as you are now—war leader. Beyond this I had only such authority as I was willing to enforce. And no more have you."

"In that case," said Gersen, "we will consider the events of last night no more than friendly exercise. You are hetman, we are your guests. WTien it suits us we shall part company."

The hetman lurched to his feet. "If these are your wishes, so be it. We proceed against our enemy Kokor Hekkus, Ruler of Misk."

The party presently was ready to proceed. A scout went to reconnoiter the valley, but returned hurriedly. "Dnazd!"

"Dnazd!" went the subdued rumble of voices.

An hour passed; the sky brightened. The scout went forth again, returned to signal that all was clear. Out into the winding valley moved the procession, and away.

At noon the valley widened and, as the war party rounded a bend, the notch made by the rocky slopes revealed a far view over a sunny green land.

Ten minutes later they came to a spot where sixty or seventy other centipedes stood tethered with warriors squatting nearby. The hetman rode forward, conferred with others of similar rank;

without delay the entire troop moved off down the valley. An hour before sunset, they came down out of the foothills into a rolling savannah. Here grazed herds of small black ruminants, tended by men and boys riding taller animals of the same general type. At the sight of the Tadousko-Oi they fled incontinently, then finding no pursuit, halted to stare in wonder.

Gradually the land became more populated. First there were a

few huts, then round low-walled houses with tall conical roofs, then villages; everywhere there was flight; none dared face the Tadousko-Oi.

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At sunset the city Aglabat appeared, rising from a level green plain Battlemented walls of brown stone surrounded the city, which seemed a compact mass of tall round towers At the center, from the tallest tower of all, flew a brown and black pennon

"Kokor Hekkus is m residence," said Alusz Iphigenia "When he is gone, no pennon flies "

Over green sward as neat and green as the turf of a park, the warriors approached the city

Alusz Iphigenia was disturbed "Best that we part company with the Tadousko-Oi before they invest the town "

"Why^" asked Gersen

"Do you think Kokor Hekkus is to be caught nappmg? At any minute the Brown Bersaglers will sally forth. There will be a terrible battle, we may well be killed, or worse, captured, without once coming anywhere near Kokor Hekkus "

Gersen could not quarrel with her remarks, but by some peculiar circumstance he had attached himself to the war band To leave now—especially when he shared the views of Alusz Iphigenia as to the probable destruction of the Tadousko-Oi—seemed like treachery Still, he had not come to Thamber for chrvalric gestures

With the city two miles distant, the party halted Gersen approached the hetman "WTiat are your battle-plans^"

"We besiege the city Sooner or later Kokor Hekkus must send forth his army Before, when this occurred, we were too few and were forced to flee We still are few, but not too few We will destroy the Brown Bersaglers, we will grind the knights into dust, we will drag Kokor Hekkus across the plain to his death, then we will possess ourselves of the riches of Aglabat "

The plan had the virtue of simplicity, thought Gersen "Suppose the army does not come forth3"

"Sooner or later it must, unless they prefer to starve."

The sun went down into a purple sky lights shone from the towers of Aglabat Tonight no one offered discourtesy to Alusz Iphigenia, like the night before they occupied the black, tent

The sense of her nearness finally destroyed Gersen's self-control, he took her by the shoulders, looked into the dimness of her face, kissed her, and she seemed to respond But did she? Her expression could not be seen through the dark He kissed her again, and felt moisture on her face: she was weeping Angrily he stood

back 'Why are you crying?'

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"Pent-up emotions, probably "

"Because I kissed you?'

"Of course"

Suddenly everything was unsatisfactory She was in his power, sub)ect to his orders He did not want her submission, he wanted her ardor "Suppose circumstances were different," he said "Suppose we were in Draszane, suppose that you had no worries Suppose I came to you—like this—and kissed you What would you do="

"I will never see Draszane again," she said sullenly "I have many worries I am your slave. Do as you like "

Gersen sat down on the floor of the tent "Very well I will go to sleep "

The following day the Fadousko-Oi moved closer to the city, camping a mile in front of its main gate On the walls, soldiers could be seen moving back and forth At noon the gates opened, out marched six regiments of pike-men wearing brown uniforms with black armor and black helmets. The Tadousko-Oi gave a hoarse whoop, sprang to their mounts Gersen and Alusz Iphigenia watched the battle from the camp It was savage and bloody, waged without quarter. The Bersaglers fought bravely but without the wild ferocity of the mountain men, presently the remnants retreated through the gates, leaving a field strewn with dead

The following day was eventless The brown and black pennon flew from the spire of the citadel Gersen asked Alusz Iphigenia, "Where does Kokor Hekkus keep his spaceship^"

"On an island to the south He has an air-car like yours to fly back and forth Until Sion Trumble attacked the island and captured the spaceship I thought Kokor Hekkus a great wizard "

Gersen was more dissatisfied than ever It was clear that under no circumstances could he make contact with Kokor Hekkus Should the Tadousko-Oi succeed in storming the city, Kokor Hekkus would escape in his air-car It was essential that they return to the Starskip Then he would take up a position where he could see but not be seen, where he could intercept the air-car that must eventually leave Aglabat, no matter what the outcome of the battle

He told Alusz Iphigenia of his decision, she approved "We need only fare to Carrai Sion Trumble will escort you north of the Skar Sakau, and matters will be as you wish "

"What of you--"

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She looked away toward the north. "Sion Trumble has long desired me for his bride. He has professed his love. I am willing."

Gersen made a contemptuous sound. Noble Sion Trumble had professed his love! Gallant Sion Trumble! Gersen went to speak to the hetinan. "There were casualties in the battle, and I notice that now there are extra mounts. If you could spare me one of these, I will try to return to my spaceship."

"It shall be as you wish. Select the mount of your choice."

"The most docile and easily managed of the group will serve."

Toward evening the mount was brought to the tent; at dawn Gersen and Alusz Iphigenia would depart for Carrai.

During the night workmen from the city stole forth to erect an enclosure a hundred feet on a side, shrouded with brown cloth to a height of twenty feet. The Tadousko-Oi were furious at the insolence. They mounted their centipedes and sallied forth, cautiously however, because the enclosure had not been set out for nothing.

Indeed it had not. When the ranks of the centipede mounts had drawn close the brown cloth bulged: out ran an enormous centipede with thirty-six legs, eyes flashing fire.

The Tadousko-Oi recoiled, swung about in confusion. "Dnazd!" came the cry. "Dnazd!"

"No dnazd," Gersen told Alusz Iphigenia. "That is the product of Patch Engineering and Construction. And it is time we were on our way." They mounted the waiting centipede, sent it scurrying off to the north-west. On the sward before the city the fort ran back and forth, while the Tadousko-Oi scuttled frantically, finally fleeing in complete disorder. In pursuit came the fort, running with a fluid ease that gave Gersen rueful pleasure. Alusz Iphigenia was not yet convinced. "Are you sure the thing is metal?"

"Absolutely."

Certain of the Tadousko-Oi came the way Gersen and Alusz Iphigenia had traveled, and the fort followed, darting bolts of purple-white fire. With every flash, a centipede shriveled and five men died; presently no more were left except that ridden by Gersen and Alusz Iphigenia, a half-mile in advance. They made frantically for the foothills, the fort swerved to cut them off. Up a swell of high ground, Gersen urged the mount, around a knob of rock; here he jumped to the ground, lifted down Alusz Iphigenia. The centipede raced away. Gersen scrambled up to a hiding-place behind an outcrop of moss-covered sandstone, with Alusz Iphigenia crawling af-

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ter. She looked at him, started to speak; then said nothing. She was

dirty and scratched and disheveled; her garments were soiled, her eyes were wide, the pupils dark with fear. Gersen had no time for reassurances. He brought forth his projac, waited.

There came a whir, a thud of thirty-six racing feet; over the rise scrambled the fort, to pause and search the landscape for its prey.

Gersen fleetingly wondered if long ago in Patch's Workshop B he had subconsciously envisioned just this sort of confrontation. He set the projac at low power, took careful aim at a spot along the fort's dorsal ridge, pulled the trigger. In the cutoff cell a relay threw a switch. The legs became limber, the segmented body sagged to the ground. Presently the hatch opened; members of the crew alighted, to walk about the fort in obvious puzzlement. Gersen counted them: nine, out of a crew of eleven. Two had remained inside. All wore brown coveralls, all carried themselves in an indefinable manner that was not of Thamber. There were two who might be Seuman Otwal, or Billy Windle, or Kokor Hekkus: from distance of fifty yards, Gersen could not be sure of their faces. One turned: his neck was too long: definitely not the man Gersen sought. The other? But he had gone back into the fort. The ionization began to dissipate, the legs were recovering their strength. . . . "Listen!" Alusz Iphigenia breathed into Gersen's ear.

Gersen could hear nothing. "Listen!" she said again. Now Gersen heard a soft click-click click-click—a sound of vast menace. It seemed to come from behind them. Down the mountainside came the creature that the fort duplicated: a true dnazd. Gersen found it hard to understand how anyone could be deceived by the metal structure. If the Tadousko-Oi had been fooled by the fort, not so the dnazd. It came scuttling forward, stopped short, apparently from curiosity and amazement. The crew had scrambled aboard and clamped the hatch. The legs were still limp; from the eye came only a weak spatter of fire, to strike the dnazd on its rear segment. It reared high, emitted a wild whistling scream, flung itself on the fort. Both toppled to the ground, both rolled and clambered—Mandibles chewed at the metal hull, poison-tipped prongs stabbed and scratched. Within, the crew tumbled and rolled until someone managed to set in motion the automatic righting sequence. Power back to normal, the fort scrambled to its feet. Once again the dnazd flung itself high to hurtle down at the metal segments. Fire spat from the

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eye; the dnazd lost the use of a leg. Again the eye took aim A central segment was blasted, and the dnazd sagged, legs thrashing at the ground. The fort moved back; fire flared from both sides of the eyes; the dnazd became a mound of reeking flesh

Gersen inched forward Once more he turned his projac on the cutoff cell. As before, the fort swayed to the ground. Presently the hatch opened, the crew limped down the ladder to the ground. Gersen counted —nine—ten—eleven. All had come forth. They conferred, then went to inspect the dead dnazd When they turned about, Gersen stood nearby, his projac trained on them.

"Face away from me," said Gersen. "Stand in a line with hands in the air. I'll kill whoever gives me trouble."

There was indecision, tentative swaying and tensing as each man calculated his chances of becoming a hero. Each decided they were poor. Gersen underscored the fact with a flash of energy that scorched the ground at their feet. Grudgingly, faces contorted into masks of hate, they turned their backs. Alusz Iphigenia came to join Gersen, "Look inside," he said. "Make sure all are out."

She returned after a moment to report the fort empty.

"Now," said Gersen to the eleven men. "You must do exactly as I say, if you value your lives. The first man to the right back up six steps." He was sullenly obeyed. Gersen took his weapon, a small but vicious projac of a design Gersen had never seen before. "Lie down, flat on your face, put your arms to the small of your back."

One by one the eleven moved back, lay flat, were disarmed and bound with straps from their own garments.

One by one Gersen turned the men over so that they lay on their backs; one by one he searched their faces. None were Seuman Ocwal.

"Which of you is Kokor Hekkus?" he asked.

There was a pause, then the man who had carried the projac spoke "He is at Aglabat."

Gersen turned to Alusz Iphigenia "You know Kokor Hekkus: do any of these men resemble him?"

Alusz Iphigenia looked searchingly at the man who had spoken. "His face is different—but his manner, his way of carrying himself is the same."

Gersen considered the man's features. They appeared genuine, without the subtle demarcations or change of texture that indicated falseness; nor did he wear a mask. But the eyes were they the eyes

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of Seuman OtwaP There was an indefinable similarity, a sense of cynical wisdom. Gersen said no more. He looked over the remainder of the crew, then returned to the man who had spoken. "What is your name?"

"Franz Paderbush." The voice was soft, almost obsequious.

"You are native to where?"

"I am Knight Junior of the Castle Pader, at the east of Misk. . . . Do you not believe me?"

"Not with any conviction "

"You need only come to Castle Paderbush," said the captive with a rather unsuitable flippancy of manner, "and the Knight Senior, my father, will vouch for me a dozen times over."

"Possibly true," said Gersen. "Still, you resemble Billy Windle of Skouse and also a certain Seuman Otwal whom I last met near Krokmoles. You others," he said, "get to your feet, start walking."

"WTiere3" asked one.

"Wherever you choose "

"With our arms bound the savages will kill us," grumbled another

"Find a ditch and hide till nightfall "

The ten disconsolately departed. Gersen made another search of Paderbush, but found no more weapons. "Now, Knight Junior, to your feet and into the fort."

Paderbush obeyed with a nimble willingness that Gersen found disquieting. He tied the Knight Junior securely to a bench, then clamped the port, and went to the familiar controls.

"You know how to operate this horror?" asked Alusz Iphigenia.

"I helped build it."

She gave him a thoughtful, puzzled look, then turned to inspect Franz Paderbush, who favored her with a witless smirk

Gersen worked the controls, the legs responded, the fort ran off to the north

"Where are you going?" asked Alusz Iphigenia after a moment.

"To the spaceship, naturally "

"Through the Skar Sakau?"

"Through, or around."

"You must be mad."

Gersen was dampened. "In the fort we should be able to make it."

"You know nothing of the trails They are difficult and often

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lead to pitfalls. The Tadousko-Oi will roll down boulders. The chasms are infested by dnazd. If you avoid these, there are crevasses, precipices, crags. We have no food."

"What you say is true. But—"

"Turn west to Carrai. Sion Trumble will honor you, and guide you north around the Skar."

Gersen, unable to refute the arguments, with poor grace swung the fort around, descended into the valley.

They came into a pleasant rolling country. The Skar Sakau dwindled and faded into the blue haze. All through the warm summer afternoon the fort ran west, past small farms and granges, with stone barns and stone cottages with tall roofs, and occasional villages. At the sight of the fort the inhabitants stood glassy-eyed, transfixed with terror. They were an ordinary-seeming folk, fair-skinned with dark hair: the women wearing voluminous skirts and tight patterned bodices; the men, puffed knee-length bloomers, bright shirts, and embroidered jackets. From time to time, a manor house could be seen at the back of a park; occasionally there was a castle perched high on a bluff. Certain of these manors and castles appeared to be falling into ruins. "Ghosts," Alusz Iphigenia explained. "This is ancient country, well haunted!"

Gersen, glancing toward Franz Paderbush, surprised a quiet smile on his face. Several times he had noted a similar smile on the face of Seuman Otwal—but these were neither the features nor the flesh of Seuman Otwal.

The sun sank and twilight fell across the countryside. Gersen halted the fort at the edge of a lonely water-meadow. Rations intended for the crew constituted an evening meal, after which Paderbush was confined in the stern lazaret.

Gersen and Alusz Iphigenia went outside and watched fireflies. Overhead hung the constellations of Thamber: plentiful to the south, sparse to the north where intergalactic space began. A night-creature sang in a nearby forest, the air was soft with the bosky odor of vegetation. Gersen could think of nothing to say. Finally he heaved a sigh, took her hand, which she made no effort to withdraw.

For hours they sat with their backs to the fort. Fireflies flickered across the meadow. From a distant village, a sad-voiced bell tolled the passage of the hours. At last Gersen spread his cloak and they slept in the soft grass.

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At dawn they once more set forth to the west. The country changed; the landscape rolled up into forested hills and valleys, then became mountains shrouded with tall conifer-like trees. The habitations became fewer, more primitive; the manor houses disappeared; only the castles remained to brood over valley and river. On one occasion, the silently running fort came upon a band of armed men parading drunkenly down the middle of the road. They wore ragged garments and carried bows and arrows.

"Outlaws," said Alusz Iphigenia. "The Scum of Misk and Vad—"

rus.

A pair of stone keeps guarded the border; the fort ran past; behind, bugles blared hurried calls-to-arms.

An hour later the fort came out upon a view over rolling country to north and west. Alusz Iphigenia pointed: "There is Vadrus. See, behind the dark forest, the patch of white? That is the city Carrai. Gentilly is yet to the west, but I am well known at Carrai. Sion Trumble has often extended hospitality to my family, for in Gentilly I am princess."

"So now you will become his bride."

Alusz Iphigenia looked ahead toward Carrai in regret and sadness, as at some bittersweet recollection. "No. I am no longer a child. All does not seem so easy. Before there was Sion Trumble—and Kokor Hekkus. Sion Trumble is a warrior and no doubt is as brutal in battle as any. But to the folk of Vadrus he makes an attempt at justice. Kokor Hekkus of course is the definition of evil. Before I would have taken Sion Trumble. Now I want neither. I have had too much excitement. ... Indeed," she said wistfully, "I fear that I have learned too much since leaving Thamber, and I have lost my youth."

Gersen turned. He caught sight of the prisoner. "And why are you amused?"

"I recall a similar disillusionment of my youth," said Franz Paderbush.

"Do you care to relate the circumstances?"

"No. It is only just barely relevant to the conversation."

"How long have you served Kokor Hekkus?"

"All my life. He rules Misk, he is my master."

"Perhaps you can tell us something of his plans?"

"I fear not. I doubt if he has many, and these he keeps to

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himself He is a remarkable man I imagine that he will resent the loss of his tort "

Gersen laughed "Far less than the other harms I have dealt him \s at Skouse, when I thwarted his bargain with Daemel Trembath As at Interchange, when I stole his princess and paid him off with blank paper " \s Gersen spoke he studied the eyes of Paderbush, was it his imagination or did the pupils dilate slightly^ The uncertainly was exasperating, especially when it seemed so pointless and ungrounded Billy Windle, Seuman Otwal, Franz Paderbush none resembled the other save in physical proportion and in a cer-

tain indefinable style. None, according to Alusz Iphigema, could be Kokor Helckus The fort slid down from the mountains, passed through a region of orchards and vines, then a well-watered meadow land dotted with crofts and villages, then it came out on a low headland to overlook Carrai—a city far different from Aglabat. Instead of grim brown walls, here were wide avenues, marble colonnades, villas surrounded by trees, palaces in formal gardens as splendid as any of Earth If there were slums or hovels, they were remote from the main thoroughfares

At the entrance to the city, a great marble arch supported a ball of rock crystal Here stood a platoon of guards in purple and green uniforms At the approach of the fort, a lieutenant bawled orders, the guards marched forward, pallid but determined, seated their pikes, and awaited death

Fifty yards from the gate, Gersen halted the fort, opened the hatch, leapt to the ground The soldiers went limp in astonishment Alusz Iphigema came forward, the lieutenant seemed to recognize her in spite of her disheveled appearance "Is it Princess Iphigenia of Dras/ane, who steps forth from the gullet of the dnazd?"

"The beast belies appearances," said Alusz Iphigenia "It is Kokor Helckus' mechanical toy that we have taken from him Where is Lord Sion Trumble, is he in residence?"

"No, Princess, he is to the north, but his Chancellor only this moment has entered Carrai, and stands nearby I will send for him "

A tall white-bearded nobleman in black and purple velvet presently appeared He came gravely forward, made a gesture of respect Alusz Iphigenia greeted him with relief, as if here at last was someone in whom she could repose confidence She introduced him to Gersen "The Baron Fndel Thobalt", then she inquired for Sion Trumble Baron Thobalt responded in a voice from which irony

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was not absent Sion Trumble had sallied forth on a raid against the Grodnedsa corsairs of the North Promeneous Sea He was expected back in the not-too-distant future Meanwhile the princess should regard the city as her own this would be Sion Trumble's desire

Alusz Iphigenia turned to Gersen, a new grace and radiance shining from her face "I cannot repay you for your services to me, nor would I try—after all, I suppose you did not regard them as such Still I offer you the hospitality that I now command whatever your desire you need only announce it "

Gersen replied that it had been his pleasure to serve her, any obligation on her part she had more than canceled by guiding him to Thamber. "But I'll still take advantage of your offer I want Paderbush confined where he'll be absolutely secure until I decide what to do with him "

"We will be lodged at the State Palace; in the crypts are suitable

dungeons " She spoke to the lieutenant of the guards, and the unfortunate Paderbush was hustled away

Returning to the fort, Gersen disconnected various cables and connections, thereby disabling the mechanism Meanwhile a carriage had appeared, a tall ornate vehicle on golden wheels Gersen joined Alusz Iphigema and Baron Thobalt in the forward compartment, with a feeling of guilt for his soiled garments he seated himself on soft red velvet and white fur

The carriage proceeded along the boulevard, men in rich costumes and tall peaked hats, women in white gowns of many flounces turned to watch

Ahead lay the State Palace of Sion Trumble This was a square building at the back of a great garden, the design of which, like the other palaces of Carrai, was at once ornate and pleasantly naive there were six tall towers encircled by spiral staircases, a dome of glass pentagons held in a web of bronze, terraces with balusters in the shape of nymphs At a marble ramp the carriage halted, here waited an extremely tall, extremely thin old man in black and gray robes. He carried a mace terminating in an emerald ellipsoid, apparently an insignia of office. He greeted Alusz Iphigema with measured respect. Baron Thobalt presented him to Gersen "Uther Caymon, Seneschal of the State Palace."

The seneschal bowed, at the same time casting a critical eye up and down Gersen's stained garments, then flicked his mace Foot-

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men appeared, escorted Alusz Iphigema and Gersen into the palace Across a long salon hung with crystal they walked, on a carpet woven in patterns of lavender, rose, and pale green They parted in a circular vestibule, each to a side corridor Gersen was taken to a suite of rooms opening on a walled garden, with blossoming trees surrounding a fountain After the hardships of the journey, the sudden luxury was unreal

Gersen bathed in a warm pool, and a barber appeared to shave him. From a wardrobe a valet brought fresh garments loose dark green trousers gathered at the ankle, a dark blue shirt embroidered in white, green leather slippers with eccentric curled toes, the rakish peaked cap that seemed an essential part of the masculine attire

In the garden a table had been set with fruit, cakes, and wine Gersen ate, drank, and wondered why, amid surroundings such as this, Sion Trumble could bring himself to raid corsairs or indulge in any hardships whatever

He left the apartment and wandered through the palace, finding everywhere furnishings, rugs, and hangings of exquisite craftsmanship objects of varying styles evidently brought from all the regions of Thamber

In a drawing room, he came upon the Baron Thobalt who greeted him with somber courtesy After a moment or two of pon-

dering, Thobalt inquired as to the nature of the outside universe  
"—from which, so I understand, you have come "

Gersen admitted as much. He described the Oikumene, its various worlds and their organizations, the Beyond and its disorganization, the planet Earth from which had issued all humanity. He spoke of Thamber and the legend that it had become, to which the Baron replied that the remainder of humanity was no less a myth to the folk of Thamber. With a trace of melancholy he asked, "No doubt you intend to return to your native environment?"

"In due course," Gersen said cautiously

"You will then explain that Thamber is after all no myth?"

"I haven't considered the matter," said Gersen "What is your own feeling? Perhaps you prefer isolation "

Thobalt shook his head "I am thankful that I need not make this decision. Before today, only a single individual claimed to have visited the worlds of the stars, and this was Kokor Hekkus—but he is denounced everywhere as a hormagaunt—a man without a soul, and not to be trusted "

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"You are acquainted with Kokor Hekkus?"

"I have seen him across the field of war "

Gersen forbore to ask if the Baron had noted a similarity with the man Paderbush. Thinking of Paderbush, now a prisoner in the crypts, he felt a twinge of conscience if the man were not Kokor Hekkus, his only offense was participation in a counterattack upon the Tadousko-Oi.

Gersen signaled a footman "Take me to the crypts where my prisoner is confined "

"A moment, Sir Knight, I will inform the seneschal, he alone carries keys to the crypts "

The seneschal presently appeared, considered Gersen's request, then rather grudgingly, or so it seemed, took Gersen to a great door of carved wood, unlocked it to reveal a second iron door, which opened upon a flight of stone steps. These led down a long single flight, into an area paved with granite flags, illuminated by slits communicating with the outside daylight. To one side, iron-barred doors led into cells, only one of which was occupied. The seneschal gestured "There is your prisoner. If you wish to kill him, be kind enough to use the chamber beyond, where the necessary equipment is at hand "

"I plan nothing like that. I only wanted to assure myself that he suffered nothing ill."

"This is not Aglabat, there is nothing of that sort here "

Gersen went to look through the bars, Paderbush, leaning back in a chair, surveyed him with contemptuous mockery. The cell was dry and airy, on a table were the remnants of an apparently adequate meal

"You are satisfied?" asked the seneschal.

Gersen turned away with a nod. "A week or two of meditation can do him no great harm. Allow him to see no one but myself."

"As you wish." The seneschal conducted Gersen back to the drawing-room, where now Alusz Iphigenia had joined the Baron. Present were also other ladies and knights of the palace. Alusz Iphigenia looked at Gersen with something like surprise. "I have known you only as a spaceman," she told him. "I am surprised to see you a gentleman of Vadrus."

Gersen grinned. "I haven't changed, in spite of the finery. But you—" he could not find words to express what he wanted to say.

Alusz Iphigenia said rather hurriedly, "I have had word that

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Sion Trumble returns. He will be with us at this evening's banquet."

Gersen felt an emptiness. He strove to deny it to himself in spite of his clothes; he was no gentleman, of Vadrus or elsewhere, he was Kirth Gersen, survivor of the Mount Pleasant massacre, doomed to a lifetime of dark deeds. He said lightly, "This is what makes you happy—the nearness of your betrothed?"

She shook her head. "He is hardly that, as you well know. I am happy because—but no! I am not happy. I am all at odds with myself!" She gave her hands an excited nutter. "Look! All this is mine, should I want it? I can enjoy all the best of Thamber! But—do I want it? And then there is Kokor Hekkus, who is unpredictable. But somehow I do not think of him. . . Is it that I prefer the life of a vagabond—that I have seen enough of the worlds beyond Thamber to tantalize me?"

Gersen had nothing to say. She sighed, looked at him from the corner of her eye. "But I have small choice. I am here now and here I must stay. Next week I return to Draszane—and you will be gone. . . . You will, won't you?"

Gersen gave the matter sober thought. "Where and how I go depends on how best I can return to the spaceship."

"And then?"

"And then—I continue with what I came to do."

She sighed. "It seems a bleak prospect. Back to the Skar Sakau. . . . The crags and chasms once more. Then Aglabat. How will you

find your way through the walls^ And it you are captured—" she grimaced. "When I first heard of the crypts under Aglabat I did not sleep for months, I was afraid to sleep, for fear of the Aglabat crypts."

An attendant in pale green livery passed by with a tray; Alusz Iphigema took two goblets, gave one to Gersen "And if you were killed or captured—how could I leave Thamber, if I were of a mind to do so?"

Gersen laughed uncomfortably "If I thought of these matters, I would fear them. I would be less effective for my fear and hence more likely to suffer capture or death. If you wed Sion Trumble, it appears that you will have the same problems."

Alusz Iphigenia shrugged her slender bare shoulders—she wore the white flounced sleeveless gown characteristic of the city. "He is handsome, gentle, just, gallant—and perhaps too good for me. I

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suddenly find myself thinking thoughts and wishing wishes I never knew before." She looked around the room, listened a moment to the murmur of conversation, then turned back to Gersen. "I find it hard to express myself—but in a period when men and women fly space almost instantly, when a hundred worlds associate themselves in an Oikumene, when anything seems possible to human reason, this remote little planet with its extremes of virtue and viciousness seems unthinkable."

Gersen, who knew the worlds Beyond and the worlds of the Oikumene much more intimately than Alusz Iphigema, could not share her feelings. "It depends," he said, "on how you regard humanity: its past, its present, and what you hope for the future. Most people of the Oikumene might agree with you. The Institute"—he laughed hollowly—"probably would prefer more of Thamber in the daily life of the Oikumene."

"I know nothing of the Institute," said Alusz Iphigenia. "Are they evil men, or criminals?"

"No," said Gersen. "They are philosophers. . . ."

Alusz Iphigema sighed, almost absently, reached forth to take his hand. "There is so much I don't know." A herald marched into the room, followed by pages with long clarions. The herald cried, "Sion Trumble, Grand Prince of Vadrus, enters his palace!"

The room became quiet. A distant measured clanking could be heard in the hall. The pages raised their clarions, blew a fanfare. Into the room strode Sion Trumble, wearing stained armor, a morion dented and smeared with blood. He removed the morion, revealing a mass of blond ringlets, a close-cropped blond beard, a fine straight nose, and the bluest of blue eyes. He raised his arm in salute to all, then marched to Alusz Iphigenia, bowed over her hand. "My princess—you have chosen to return."

Alusz Iphigenia giggled. Sion Trumble looked at her in surprise. "The truth of the matter," said Alusz Iphigema, "is that this gentleman allowed me no choice."

Sion Trumble turned to inspect Gersen. He and Sion Trumble would never be friends, thought Gersen. Noble, gallant, gentle, and just though Sion Grumble might be, he likewise was almost certainly humorless, self-righteous, and obstinate.

"I have been informed of your coming," Sion Trumble told Gersen. "I noted the dreadful mechanism in which you came. We shall have much to discuss. But now, please excuse me. I go to

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relieve myself of my armor." He turned, departed the room. The murmur of conversation began again.

Alusz Iphigenia had no more to say, and became almost pensive. An hour later, the company moved to the banquet hall. At an elevated table sat Sion Trumble in robes of scarlet and white flanked by nobles of the realm. Below ranged other folk in strict order of precedence. Gersen found himself near the outer door, and he noted that Alusz Iphigcna, for all her ostensible standing as the betrothed of Sion Trumble, still gave way to at least six ladies of presumably more elevated rank.

The banquet was long and splendid; the wines were strong. Gersen ate and drank sparingly, answered questions with courtesy, unsuccessfully tried to make himself inconspicuous, for it appeared that every eye was on him.

Sion Trumble ate scantily and drank less. Halfway through the meal he rose, and pleading fatigue, excused himself from the company.

Somewhat later a page came behind Gersen to whisper in his ear; "My lord, at your convenience, the prince wishes to speak with you."

Gersen rose to his feet; the page led him to the circular vestibule, along a corridor, through a door into a small drawing-room paneled in green wood. Here sat Sion Trumble, now wearing a loose gown of pale blue silk. He motioned Gersen to a chair nearby, indicated a tabouret on which stood goblets and flasks. "Be at ease," he said. "You are a man of a far world; please ignore our incomprehensible protocol. We will talk as one man to another, with complete candor. Tell me—why are you here?"

Gersen could see no reason to tell other than the truth. "I came to kill Kokor Hekkus."

Sion Trumble raised his eyebrows. "Alone? How will you storm his walls? How will you defeat the Brown Bersaglers?"

"I don't know."

Sion Trumble looked into the fire that burned in a nearby grate. "As of the moment, truce exists between Misk and Vadrus. There might well have been war when the Princess Iphigenia chose to cast her lot with me, but now it seems that she will have neither of us." He frowned into the fire, gripped the chair handles. "I will provide no provocation."

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"Can you help me in any way whatever?" Gersen thought that he might as well learn the worst.

"Conceivably. What is your quarrel with Kokor Hekkus?"

Gersen described the raid on Mount Pleasant. "Five men destroyed my home, killed all my kin, enslaved my friends. I hope to bring retribution to these five. Malagate is dead. Kokor Hekkus will be next."

Sion Trumble frowned and nodded. "You have undertaken what seems a formidable task. Specifically what do you want of me?"

"First, your help and guidance in returning to my spaceship, which I left to the north of the Skar Sakau."

"This I will provide, to the best of my ability. To the north of the Skar are principalities hostile to me, and the Tadousko-Oi are implacable."

"There is another aspect to the affair," said Gersen. He hesitated, suddenly aware of another startling possibility that till now he had not recognized. He continued slowly. "When I took the fort from Kokor Hekkus, I took also a prisoner who I thought might be Kokor Hekkus himself. Princess Iphigenia thinks not; but I am uncertain. It seemed unlikely then, and does so now, that Kokor Hekkus could resist the first trial of his new toy. . . . And something about this prisoner reminds me of another man who might also be Kokor Hekkus."

"I can deal with your uncertainty," said Sion Trumble. "In the palace is Baron Eri Castiglianu, once intimately leagued with Kokor Hekkus and now his direct enemy. If anyone will know Kokor Hekkus, the Baron Castiglianu is the man, and tomorrow you may make the test."

"I will be happy to hear his opinion."

Sion Trumble came to a decision. "I cannot help you to any large extent; for I do not visit war or hardship upon my people without good cause. So long as Kokor Hekkus keeps to Aglabat I will not provoke him."

He made a sign: the audience was over. Gersen rose to his feet, left the room. In the antechamber he found the seneschal who conducted him to his apartments. Gersen went out into the garden, looked up at the sky, found the scimitar-shaped cluster: the "God-

Boat," and thought of what he must do, and was almost appalled. Yet—what otherwise? Why had he come to Thamber?

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He went to bed and slept well Sunlight streaming into his room awakened him He bathed, dressed in the most somber of the garments to he found in his wardrobe, ate a breakfast of fruit, pastry, and tea Clouds rolled in from the west and there was rain in his garden Gersen watched the drops splash in the pool, and considered the various factors to the situation Always he returned to the same idea the identity of Paderbush must be established by one means or another

A page entered to announce the attendance of Baron Eri Castiglianu He was a gaunt man of middle age, stern of demeanor, scarred along both his cheeks "I have been ordered by Prince Sion Trumble to place my special knowledge at your disposal," he said "This I shall be pleased to do "

"You are aware of what I require3"

"Not clearly "

"I want you to look closely at a man and tell me whether or not he is Kokor Hekkus "

The baron grimaced "And what then3"

"You can do this3"

"Assuredly. Notice these scars they were wrought by the orders of Kokor Hekkus I hung three days on a rod through my cheeks, living only through hate "

"Come then, let us inspect this man "

"He is here?"

"He is confined below, in the crypts."

The page brought the seneschal, who unlocked the double doors of timber and metal Into the crypt the three descended. Paderbush stood in the cell, hands on bars, legs apart, staring forth into the outer chamber Gersen pointed "This is the man "

The baron advanced, inspected Paderbush closely

"Well3" asked Gersen

"No," said the baron after a moment "This is not Kokor Hekkus At least—no, I am sure not . Although the eyes look at me with evil wisdom No, he is a stranger I have never met him at Aglabat or elsewhere "

"Very well then, it appears I have been wrong " Gersen turned to the seneschal "Open the door "

"You intend to release the man?"

"Not completely. But he need no longer be confined in a dungeon."

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The seneschal unlocked the door. "Come forth," said Gersen. "It appears that I have done you an injustice."

Paderbush slowly stepped from the cell, he had not been expecting release, and he moved warily.

Gersen took him by the wrist, using a grip that could instantly be transposed into an arm-lock. "Come along, back up the stairs."

"Where do you take this man?" the seneschal inquired petulantly.

"Prince Sion Trumble and I will jointly make a decision," said Gersen. To Baron Eri Castighanu he said, "My thanks for your cooperation, you have been helpful."

Baron Castighanu hesitated. "This man may be a villain in any case, he may seek to overpower you."

Gersen displayed the projac he carried in his left hand. "I am prepared for anything."

The baron bowed, walked swiftly away, relieved to be discharged of his obligation. Gersen took Paderbush to his apartments, closed the door upon the seneschal.

Gersen seated himself in a leisurely manner, Paderbush stood in the center of the room and finally asked, "What do you plan with me now?"

"I am still puzzled," said Gersen. "Possibly you are the man you say you are; in which case I know nothing to your discredit, other than the fact that you serve Kokor Hekkus. Still, I would not have you pent in a dungeon for hypothetical crimes. You are soiled, will you bathe?"

"No."

"You prefer sweat and grime? Perhaps you would change your clothes?"

"No."

Gersen shrugged. "As you wish."

Paderbush folded his arms, glared down at Gersen. "What do you restrain me here?"

Gersen considered. "I suspect that your life is in danger. I mean

to protect you "

"I am well able to protect myself."

"Nevertheless, please seat yourself in that chair yonder " Gers-  
sen pointed with the tip of his pro)ac "You stand like a wild beast  
about to pounce, and this makes me uneasy."

Paderbush gave him a cold grin, seated himself "I have done

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you no harm," he said presently. "But you have humiliated me,  
thrown me into a dungeon, and now you ply me with hints and  
innuendos. I tell you, Kokor Hekkus is not a man to overlook pur-  
poseful wrongs done to his underlings. If you wish to spare your  
host much embarrassment I suggest that you discharge me from  
custody, that I may return to Aglabat."

"You know Kokor Hekkus well?" Gers-  
sen asked in a tone of  
easy conversation.

"Certainly. He is a man like a Khasferug eagle. His eyes glitter  
with intelligence. His joy and his anger are both like fire, and sweep  
all before them. His imagination is as broad as the sky, everyone  
wonders regarding the thoughts that form and pass behind his  
brow, and from what source they are derived."

"Interesting," said Gers-  
sen. "I am eager to meet him—as I shall  
soon do."

Paderbush was incredulous. "You are to meet Kokor Hekkus?"

Gers-  
sen nodded. "You and I will return to Aglabat in the fort—  
after a week or two of rest here at Carrai."

"I prefer to leave at this moment."

"Impossible. I want no notice of my arrival; I wish to surprise  
Kokor Hekkus."

Paderbush sneered. "You are a fool. You are more than a fool.  
How can you surprise Kokor Hekkus? He knows more of your  
movements than you do yourself."

12

From "The Avatar's Apprentice," in Scroll from the  
Ninth Dimension:

There was no cessation to the haze that extended right  
and left in gelid layers, and up was as good as down. There  
was a sense of comings and goings, of invisible fluttering  
messages: all quite beyond Marmaduke's apprehension. He  
began to suspect that somehow the Doctrine of Temporal  
Stasis had effected a transposition of percepts. Why else, he  
wondered, as he groped through the mauve suffusion,

should the word "lachrymose" occur to him again and again and again?

He found himself at the edge of a bulging limpid window, beyond which danced anamorphic visions. Looking up he spied a fringe of curving rods; below he found a pink curving shelf, in which were embedded more of these rods. To the side a lumpy porous object thrust forth like a prodigious nose: and he now saw the object to be a nose in all verity, a most extraordinary object. Marmaduke altered the trend of his musings. The central problem, so it seemed, was to learn from whose eye he looked forth. Much, after all, would depend upon his viewpoint.

The morning passed. Paderbush at times seemed to doze in the chair, at times seemed vividly alert, on the verge of a sudden attack upon Gersen. After one of these tense periods Gersen said, "I urge you to patience. First, as you know, I carry a weapon"—he held

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the projec up into Paderbush's view—"and second, even without it you could do nothing against me."

"Are you so sure?" Paderbush asked with weary insolence. "We are of a size; let us try a fall or two, and see who is the better man."

"Thank you; not on this occasion. WTly should we exert ourselves? Presently we will have our noon meal, so let us relax."

"As you wish."

At the door sounded a tap-tap-tap. Gcrsen went to stand by the thick panel. "Who is there?"

"It is Uther Caymon, seneschal," came the muffled voice. "Open the door, if you please."

Gersen did so; the seneschal stepped forward. "The Prince wishes to see you in his chambers at once. He has heard the opinion of the Baron Eri Castiglianu and he begs that the prisoner be given his freedom; he wishes to provide Kokor Hekkus no pretext for contentiousness."

"I definitely intend to relinquish all control over this man, in due course," said Gersen. "But now he has agreed to accept the hospitality of Sion Trumble for possibly two weeks."

"That is generous of him," observed the seneschal drily, "inasmuch as the Grand Prince has been so remiss as to forget to proffer this same hospitality. Will you accompany me to the apartments of Prince Sion Trumble?"

Gersen rose to his feet. "With pleasure. What will I do with our guest? I dare not leave him, nor do I care to go everywhere

arm in arm with him."

"Return him to the dungeon," said the seneschal crossly. "This is hospitality adequate for his sort."

"The Grand Prince would not agree to this," declared Gersen. "He has only just requested that I release the man."

The seneschal blinked. "That is so."

"Please convey my apologies, and ask if he will condescend to meet me here."

The seneschal made a gruff noise, threw up his hands in a helpless gesture, threw a baleful side-glance toward Paderbush and left the room.

Gersen and Paderbush sat facing each other. "Tell me," said Gersen, "are you acquainted with a man named Seurnan Otwal?"

"I have heard his name mentioned."

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"He is an associate of Kokor Hekkus. You and he have certain mannerisms in common."

"That may well be true—perhaps because of our association with Kokor Hekkus. . . . What are these mannerisms?"

"An attitude of the head, a certain set of gesticulations, what I might call a psychic aura. Very strange indeed."

Paderbush nodded solemnly, but said no more. A few minutes later Alusz Iphigenia came to the door, and was admitted. She glanced in surprise from Gersen to Paderbush. "Why is this man here?"

"He thinks the solitude of the dungeon unjust, since his offenses number only a dozen or so murders."

Paderbush grinned wolfishly. "I am Paderbush, Knight Junior of Castle Pader; none of my line have shunned taking a life or two, at the risk of his own."

Alusz Iphigenia turned away, addressed herself to Gersen.

"Carrai is not so gay as before. Something has changed, something is lacking: perhaps it is in me. . . . I want to return to Draszane, to my home."

"I thought that a great gala was being planned in your honor."

Alusz Iphigenia shrugged. "Perhaps it has already been forgotten. Sion Trumble is angry with me—or at least is not so gallant as before." She gave Gersen a quick side-glance. "Perhaps he is jealous,"

" 'Jealous'? Why should he be jealous?"

"After all, you and I spent much time alone. This is enough to arouse suspicion—and jealousy."

"Ridiculous," said Gersen.

Alusz Iphigenia raised her eyebrows. "Am I so ill-favored? Is the mere suggestion of such a relationship so absurd?"

"Not at all," said Gersen. "To the contrary. But we must not let Sion Trumble suffer such a misconception." He summoned a page, sent him to request audience with Sion Trumble.

The page presently returned, to announce that the prince was seeing no one.

"Return," said Gersen. "Convey to Sion Trumble this message. Say that tomorrow I must depart. If necessary I will ride the fort north of the Skar Sakau and somehow find my spaceship. Also, inform the prince that Princess Iphigenia plans to accompany me. Inquire now if he will see us."

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Alusz Iphigenia turned to Gersen. "You really mean to take me?"

"If you care to return to the Oikurnene."

"But what of Kokor Hekkus^ I thought—"

"A detail "

"Then you're not serious," said Alusz Iphigenid sadly.

"Yes Will you come with rne^"

She hesitated, then nodded "Yes. Why not? Your life is real. My life—all of Thamber—none of it is real. It is animated myth, archaic scenes from a diorama. It stifles me."

"Very well. We will leave very soon "

Alusz Iphigema looked at Paderbush "What of him?" she asked dubiously. "Will you free him, or leave him for Sion Trumble?"

"No He comes with us."

Alus/ Iphigenia turned a puzzled glance at Gersen. "With-us?"

"Yes. For a brief period "

Paderbush rose to his feet, stretched his arms. "This conversation bores me. I will never go with you "

"Oh? Not even so far as Aglabat, to meet Kokor Hekkus?"

"I go to Aglabat alone—and now." He sprang through the apartment, fled across the garden, bounded up and over the wall. He was gone.

Alusz Iphigcma ran to look across the garden, then turned to Gersen "Gall the attendants! He can't get far, these gardens are all part of the inner courtyard. Hurry!"

Gersen seemed in no desperate haste Alusz Iphigema tugged at his arm. "Do you wish him to escape?"

"No," said Gersen, with sudden energy. "He must not escape. We will inform Sion Trumble, who will best know how to recapture him. Come."

In the corridor Gersen ordered the page, "'I take us quickly to Sion Trumble's apartments, on the run!"

The page led them along a corridor, to the circular vestibule, down another red-carpeted hall to a broad white door. Here stood two guards in white uniforms with black iron morions.

"Open!" said Gersen. "We must see Sion Trumble at once."

"No, my lord. We have orders from the seneschal to admit no

i>

one.

Gersen aimed his profac at the lock. There was a blaze of fire

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and smoke, the guards cried out in protest. Gersen said, "Stand back, guard the hall; for the safety of Vadrus!"

The guards hesitated, half-dazed. Gersen thrust open the door, entered with Alusz Iphigema

They stood in an entry, with white marble statues looking down from alcoves. Gersen peered along one hall, through an archway, walked up to a closed door, listened. From beyond came the sound of movement. He tried the door. It was locked. He used his profac, burst the door open, charged into the room.

Sion Trumble, half-clad, leapt around in startlement. He opened his mouth, bawled something incomprehensible. Alusz Iphigema gasped "He's wearing the clothes of Paderbush!"

This was true on a frame hung Sion Trumble's green and blue robes; he had been divesting the stained garments worn by Paderbush. Now he reached for his sword, Gersen hacked at his wrist, struck it from his hand. Sion Trumble reached to a shelf where reposed a hand-weapon, Gersen destroyed it with a blast of his

projac.

Sion Trumble turned slowly, sprang at Gersen like a wild beast. Gersen laughed aloud, stooped, caught his shoulder in Sion Trumble's belly, grabbed the instantly raised knee, tossed him through the air. He caught at the blond curly hair, and as Sion Trumble struggled and surged, pulled. Off came the blond hair, off came the entire face, leaving Gersen holding a warm rubbery sac by the hair, the fine straight nose tilted askew, the mouth lolled open. The man on the floor had no face. The scalp, the face muscles showed pink and red through a film of transparent tissue. The eyes glared lidless under a bare forehead, above a black nostril gap. The lipless mouth grimaced, white with its suddenly conspicuous teeth.

"WTw-what is rhat^" asked Alusz Iphigema in a hushed voice.

"That," said Gersen, "is a hormagaunt. It is Kokor Hekkus. Or Billy Windle. Or Seuman Otwal. Or Paderbush. Or a dozen others. And now his time has come. Kokor Hekkus—recall the raid on Mount Pleasant? I have come to bring you retribution."

Kokor Hekkus rose slowly to his feet, death's head of a face staring.

"Once you told me that \ou feared only death," said Gersen.  
"Now you are to die "

Kokor Hekkus made a gasping sound

Gersen said, "You have lived the most evil ot lives. I should kill

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you with the utmost terror and pain—but it is sufficient that you die." He pointed his projac. Kokor Hekkus gave a wild hoarse sound, flung forward with arms and legs wide, to be met by a gush of fire.

The following day Seneschal Uther Caymon was hanged at the public gallows: the accessory, creature, companion, and confidant of Kokor Hekkus. Standing on a tall jointed ladder he yelled down to the awed crowd, "Fools! Fools! Do you realize how long you have been gulled and milked, and bled? Of your gold, of your warriors, of your beautiful women? For two hundred years! I am this old, Kokor Hekkus was older! Against the Brown Bersaglers he sent your best and they died in futility; to his bed came your beautiful girls; some returned to their homes, others did not. You will cry when you hear of how they fared! At last he died, at last I die, but fools! fools!—"

The executioner had broken the ladder. The crowd stared hollow-eyed at the jerking figure.

Alusz Iphigenia and Gersen walked in the garden at the palace of Baron Endel Thobalt. She still was pale with horror. "How did you know? You knew—but how?"

"First I suspected from Sion Trumble's hands. He had the wit to carry himself differently from Paderbush, but his hands were the same: long-fingered, a smooth glossy skin, thin thumbs with long nails. I saw these hands, but was deceived—until once more I saw Paderbush at close range. Sion Trumble disclosed himself further. He was aware that you had decided not to wed him: he told me so. But only three people knew: you, me, and Paderbush, for only in the fort did you make up your mind. When I heard Sion Trumble make this statement then I looked at his hands, and I knew."

"What an evil thing. I wonder what planet bore him, who were his parents. . . ."

"He was a man blessed and cursed with his imagination. A single life was insufficient for him; he must drink at every spring, know every experience, live to all extremes. On Thamber he found a world to his temperament. In his various entities he created his own epics. When he tired of Thamber, he returned to the other worlds of man—less amenable to his will, but nonetheless amusing. He is dead."

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"And now more than ever I must leave Thamber," said Alusz Iphigenia.

"There is nothing to keep us. Tomorrow we shall leave."

"WT-iy tomorrow? Let us leave now. I think—I am sure—that I can take us to the spaceship. The way north around the Skar is not hard; the landmarks are known."

"There is no need to stay," said Gersen. "Let us go."

A small group of Carrai noblemen gathered in the late afternoon light. Baron Endel Thobalt spoke with sudden anxiety: "You will send back ships from the Oikumene?"

Gersen nodded. "I have agreed to do so, and I will."

Alusz Iphigenia, heaving a small sigh, looked around the landscape. "Someday—I don't know when—I will come back to Thamber too."

"Remember," Gersen told the baron, "that if ships from the Oikumene arrive your old ways will not last! There will be grumbling and nostalgia and dissatisfaction. Perhaps you prefer Thamber as it is now?"

"I can speak only for myself," said Endel Thobalt. "I say that we must rejoin humanity, no matter what the cost."

He was echoed by his fellows.

"As you wish," said Gersen. Alusz Iphigenia climbed within, Gersen followed, clamped the hatch, went to the console, looked down at the bronze plague:

Patch Engineering and Construction Company

Patris, Krokinole

"Good old Patch," said Gersen. "I'll have to send him a report on how his machine worked—presuming that it carries us back to the spaceship."

Alusz Iphigenia, standing beside him, pressed her head lightly against his shoulder. Looking down into the shining dusty-golden hair, Gersen remembered how first he had seen her at Interchange, how first he had thought her unremarkable. He laughed quietly. Alusz Iphigenia looked up. "W<sup>^</sup>hy do you laugh?"

"Someday you'll know. But not right now."

Smiling at some private recollection other own, Alusz Iphigenia said no more.

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Gersen thrust the GO lever ahead. Thirty-six legs rose and fell;

eighteen segments moved forward. The fort slid off to the north-west, where the long light of the afternoon sun glinted on the white peaks of the Skar Sakau.

From Popular Handbook to the Planets, 348th edition. 1525:

SARKOVY: Single planet of Phi Ophiuchi. Planetary constants: diameter—9,600 miles; sidereal day—37.2 hours; mass—1.40; G—.98 . . .

Sarkovy is moist and cloudy; with an axis normal to the orbital plane it knows no seasons.

The surface lacks physiographical contrast. The characteristic features of the landscape are the steppes:

Hopman Steppe, Gorobundur Steppe, the Great Black Steppe, and others... . From the abundant flora the notorious Sarkoy venefices leach and distill the poisons for which they are famous.

The population is largely nomadic, though certain tribes, generically known as Night Hobs, live among the forests. (For detailed information regarding the rather appalling customs of the Sarkoy, consult the Encyclopedia of Sociology and The Sexual Habits of the Sarkoy, by BA. Edgar.)

The Sarkoy pantheon is ruled by Godogma, who carries a flower and a flail and walks on wheels. Everywhere along the Sarkoy steppes may be found tall poles with wheels on high, in praise of Godogma, the striding, wheeling God of Fate.

THE DEMON PRINCES

News feature in Rigelhan Journal, Avente, Alphanor

Paing, Godoland, Sarkovy July 12

As if Claris Adam were to be destroyed for beguiling William Wales

As if the Abbatram of Pamfile were to be liquefied for smelling too strongly

As if Deacon Fitzbah of Shaker City were to be immolated for an excess of zeal

Today from Sarkovy comes news that Master Venefice Kakarsis Asm must "cooperate with the guild" for selling poison

Circumstances, of course, are not all that simple. Asm's customer, no ordinary murderer, was Viole Falushe, one of the Demon Princes. The essence of the crime was neither "trafficking with a notorious criminal" nor "betrayal of guild secrets," but rather "selling fixed-price poisons at a discount."

Kakarsis Asm must die

How? How else?

The longer Alusz Iphigema traveled in the company of Kirth Gersen, the less certain she became that she understood his personality. His moods perplexed her, his behavior was a source of misgiving. His modesty and self-effacement—were they inversion, brooding cynicism? His careful politeness—could it be no more than a sinister camouflage? Such questions entered her mind with increasing frequency no matter how staunchly she rejected them.

On one occasion—the date was July 22, 1526—they sat on the Avente Esplanada in front of the Grand Rotunda. Gersen sought to explain the seeming contradictions of his character. "There's really no mystery. I've been trained to a certain function. It's all I know. To justify the training, to fulfill my life, I exercise the function. It's as simple as that."

Alusz Iphigenia knew the general outlines of Gersen's past. The five Demon Princes joining for the historic raid on Mount Pleasant had destroyed or enslaved five thousand men and women. Among the handful of survivors were Rolf Gersen and his young grandson. Alusz Iphigema realized that such an experience must alter anyone's life, still, she herself had known tragedy and terror. "I am not changed," she told Gersen earnestly. "I feel neither rage nor hate."

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"My grandfather felt the rage and hate," said Gersen in rather

a flippant tone of voice "So far as I'm concerned the hate is abstract "

'\lus/ Iphigema became e\cn more disturbed "Are you then just a mechanism? This is rindtessness, to be the instrument of someone else's hate'"

Crersen grinned "That's not quite accurate \\\ grandfather trained me, or rather had me trained, and I am grateful to him. Without the training I would be dead "

"He must ha\e been a terrible man, so to warp a child's mind'"

"He was a dedicated man," said Gersen "He loved me and assumed I shared his dedication I did and I do "

"But what of the future? Is revenge all you want from life?"

" 'Revenge'? I don't think so I have only one life to live and I know what I hope to achieve "

"But why not try to achieve the same goals through a lawful agency? Isn't this a better way?"

"There isn't any lawful agency Only the IPCC\*, which isn't altogether effective "

" Then why not bring the issues before the people of the Concourse, and the other important worlds? You have the energy, you have more than enough mono) Isn't this better than killing men with your own hands?"

Gersen had no rational counterarguments "These aren't my talents," he told her "I work alone at what I do best"

"But you could learn'"

Gersen shook his head "If I involve myself with words and harangues, I trap myself, I become futile "

Alus/ Iphigema rose to her feet She walked to the balustrade, looked out across the rhaumatarge Ocean Gersen studied the clear profile, the proud stance, as if he had never seen them before The time was approaching when he must lose her, and everything that was eas) and fresh and uncomplicated would leave his life The breeze shifted her bright hair, she was looking down into the blue water, watching the shifting glints and planes of Rigel light Gersen sighed, picked up a newspaper and morosely scanned the frontpage

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COSMOLOGISI KILIFD

Hyrcan Major Attacks Camping Party  
Gersen glanced at the text

Trovenei, Phrygia, July 21 Johan Scrub, advocate of the star-capture theory which assigns the original parentage of the Concourse Worlds to Blue Companion, yesterday was set upon by an adult hyrcan major, and almost instantly killed Dr Strub and several members of his family were exploring the Midas Mountains of upper Phrygia and unwittingly crossed the elving-platform of a king beast Before others in his party were able to destroy the eight-foot ogre, Dr Strub had suffered fatal blows

Dr. Strub is chiefly noted for his efforts to prove that Blue Companion and the twenty-six worlds of the Concourse were originally an independent system which wandered into the gravitational domain of Rigel Such a circumstance would explain the disparity in the ages of the Concourse worlds and Rigel, a comparatively young star

Gersen looked up Alusz Iphigenia had not moved He read on

COSMOPOLIS MAGAZINE ABOUT TO BE SOLD

Famous Old Journal Faces Extinction  
Directors Make Last-ditch Efforts at Salvage

London, England, Earth, June 25 The ancient firm of Radian Publishing Company today sought a stopgap loan to meet the chronic annual deficit incurred in the publication of Cosmopohs, the 792-year-old magazine devoted to the life and affairs of the civilized universe Sherman Zugweil, Chairman of Radian's Board of Directors, admitted a crisis to be at hand, but announced himself confident of coping with it and keeping the doughty old journal in circulation another eight hundred years

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Alusz Iphtgenu had shifted her position Elbows on the balustrade, chin resting in her hands, she studied the hon/on Contemplating the soft contours, Gersen felt himself softening He now was a man of almost unlimited wealth, the\ could live a life of wonderful ease and pleasure Gersen considered a long minute, then shrugged and looked back to the newspaper

S^RKO\^ POISON-VUSIER TO DIF

C.UILU RULES \IOL\IFD

Pang, Godoland, Sarkovy, July 12 As if Claris Adam were to be destroyed

Alus/ Iphigenia glanced over her shoulder Gersen was reading the newspaper in complete absorption She swung around in outrage. Here was sang-froid indeed While she wrestled with doubts and conflicts, Gersen read a newspaper an act of conspicuous insensitivity'

Gersen looked up, smiled. His mood had changed. He had comeah\e Alusz Iphigenia's fury ebbed Gersen was a man beyond her understanding, whether he were vastly more subtle than she or vastly more elemental, she would never know

Gersen had risen to his feet "We're going on a trip Across space, toward Ophiuchus Are you ready?"

"Ready? You mean now?"

"Yes Now Why not?"

"No reason Yes, I'm ready In two hours "

"I'll call the spaceport "

The Distis Spaceship Corporation produced nineteen models, ranging from a version of the 9B to the splendid Distis Imperatrix, with a black and gold hull. With funds derived from his epic looting of Interchange\* Gersen had purchased a Pharaon, a spacious craft equipped with such niceties as an automatic atmospheric control which during the course of a voyage gradually altered air pressure and composition to match that of the destination.

Rigel and the Concourse receded. Ahead lay star-spangled darkness. Alusz Iphigenia studied the Star Directory with a puzzled frown. "Ophiuchus isn't a star. It's a sector. Where are we going?"

"The sun is Phi Ophiuchi," said Gersen, and after a barely perceptible pause, "the planet is Sarkovy."

"Sarkovy?" Alusz Iphigenia looked up quickly. "Isn't that where the poisons come from?"

Gersen gave a curt nod. "The Sarkoy are poisoners, no doubt about it."

Alusz Iphigenia looked dubiously out the forward port. Gersen's haste to leave Alphanor had puzzled her. She had credited a sudden determination to alter his way of life; now she was not so sure. She opened Handbook to the Planets, read the article on Sarkovy. Gersen stood by the pharmaceutical cabinet, compounding a conditioner against possibly noxious serums, proteins, viruses and bacilli of Sarkovy.

'Interchange an institution of the planet Sasani in the near-Beyond, functioning as a detention depot and broker between kidnapers and those who sought to pay

ransom.

Gersen had swindled Interchange of ten billion SVU (Standard Value Units).

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Alusz Iphigenia asked, "Why are you going to this planet? It seems an evil place."

"I want to talk to someone," said Gersen in a measured voice. He handed her a cup. "Drink this; you'll avoid itches and scabs."

Wordlessly Alusz Iphigenia drank the mixture.

There were no formalities at Sarkovy; Gersen landed at Paing Space-port, as close as possible to the depot, a timber structure roofed with varnished reeds. A clerk registered them as visitors, and they were immediately set upon by a dozen men wearing dark brown gowns with bristling fur collars and cuffs. Each protested himself the foremost guide and sponsor of the region.

"What do you wish, my sir, my lady? A visit to the village? I am a hetman—"

"If it's the sport of harbite you seek, I know of three excellent beasts in furious condition."

"Poisons by the dram or pound; I guarantee freshness and precision. Trust me for your poisons!"

Gersen looked from face to face. Several of the men were tattooed on the cheek with a dark blue Maltese cross; one wore two such tattoos. "Your name?"

"I am Edelrod. I know the lore of Sarkovy, marvelous tales. I can make your visit a joy, a period of edification—"

Gersen said, "I see you are a venefice of the undermaster category."

"True." Edelrod seemed a trifle crestfallen. "You have visited our world before?"

"For a brief period."

"You come to replenish your chest? Rest assured, sir, I can guide you to fascinating bargains, absolute novelties."

Gersen took Edelrod aside. "You are acquainted with Master Kakarsis Asrn?"

"I know him. He is condemned to cooperation."

"He is not dead then?"

"He dies tomorrow night."

"Good," said Gersen. "I will hire you then, provided that your

rates are not exorbitant."

"I lend my knowledge, my friendship, my protection: all for fifty SVU per day."

"Agreed. Well then, our first need is conveyance to the inn."

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"At once" Edelrod summoned a dilapidated carryall, they bumped and jounced through Pamg to the Poison Inn, a three-stoned structure with walls of poles, a twelve-coned roof sheathed with green glass tiles. There was a barbaric grandeur to the great lobby. Rugs woven in bold patterns of black, white and scarlet covered the floor, along the wall were pilasters carved to represent attenuated hankap with gaunt sagging faces, vines with green leaves and purple flowers hung from the roof beams. Windows thirty feet high overlooked Gorobundur Steppe, with a black-green swamp to the west, a dark forest to the east. Meals were to be taken in a vast dining room furnished with tables, chairs and buffets of a dense black wood. To Alusz Iphigenia's relief, the kitchen appeared to be operated by outworlders, and they were offered a choice of six cuisines. Alusz Iphigema nevertheless distrusted the food. For all we know it's seasoned with some horrid drug."

Gersen made light of her qualms. "They wouldn't waste good poison on us. I can't guarantee much else. This is nomad-style bread, the little black things are reed-berries, and this is some sort of stew or goulash." He tasted it. "I've eaten worse."

Alusz Iphigema glumly ate the reed-berries, which had a dank smoky flavor. "How long do you plan to remain here?" she asked politely.

"Two days or so, provided all goes well."

"Your business of course is your own affair, but I feel a certain curiosity—"

"There's no mystery. I want information from a man who may not live long."

"I see." But it was plain that Alusz Iphigenia felt no great interest in Gersen's plans, and she remained in the lobby while Gersen sought out Edelrod.

"I would like to speak with Kakarsis Asm. Can this be arranged?"

Edelrod pulled thoughtfully at his long nose. "A ticklish matter. He must cooperate with the guild, such men are guarded carefully, for obvious reasons. Of course I can try to make arrangements. Expense a critical factor."

"Naturally I expect to pay no more than fifty SVU into the guild treasury, another fifty to the Guild-master and perhaps twenty or thirty to you."

Edelrod pursed his lips He was a plump man of uncertain age

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with a pelt of soft, heavy black hair "Your largesse is not of the regal variety The people of Sarkovy respect reckless liberality above all other virtues "

"If I understand the signs correctly," said Gersen, "I have surprised you by the money I seem willing to spend The amounts I mentioned are the top limit If you can't arrange matters at these rates I will inquire of someone else "

"I can only do my best," said Edelrod despondently "Please wait in the lobby, I will make inquiries."

Gersen went to sit beside Alusz Iphigenia, who pointedly asked no questions .. Edelrod presently returned with a )ubilant expression "I have set affairs in motion The cost will be very little more than the figures you suggested " And he snapped his fingers exultantly

"I have had second thoughts," said Gersen "I don't care to speak to Master Asm "

Edelrod became agitated "But it is feasible I have approached the Guild-master'"

"Perhaps on another occasion "

Edelrod made a sour grimace "Foregoing all personal gain, I might arrange matters for some trifling sum—two hundred SVU or thereabout"

"The information is of no great value I am leaving tomorrow for Kadaing, where my old friend Master Venefice Coudirou can settle everything for me "

Edelrod raised his eyebrows and allowed his eyes to bulge "Why then, this alters all' You should have mentioned your connection with Coudirou I believe the Guild-master will accept substantially less than his previous demand "

"You know my top figure," said Gersen.

"Very well," sighed Edelrod "The interview may be conducted later this afternoon In the meantime what are your wishes^ Would you care to explore the countryside5 The weather is fine, the woods are ablaze with flowers, sultnes, pop-barks, there is a well-drained path "

Alusz Iphigenia, who had been restless, rose to her feet Edelrod led them along a path which crossed a brackish river and plunged into the forest.

The vegetation was a typical Sarkovy melange trees, shrubs,

cycads, bubble-shells, grasses of a hundred varieties The high fo-

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hage was for the most part black and brown, with occasional splotches of red; below were purples, greens, pale blues. Edelrod enlivened the stroll with a discussion of various plants beside the way. He indicated a small gray fungus. "Here is the source oftwtus, an excellent selective poison, fatal only if ingested twice within a week. It ranks in this respect with mervan, which migrates harmlessly to the skin, and becomes a lethal principle only upon exposure to direct sunlight. I have known persons who fearing mervan kept to their tents for days on end."

They came to a little clearing. Edelrod looked sharply in all directions. "I have no overt enemies, but several people have died here recently . . . Today all seems well. Notice this tree growing to the side." He pointed to a slender white-barked sapling with round yellow leaves. "Some call it the coin-tree, others the good-for-nought. It is completely inoffensive, either as a primary or an operative. You might ingest the whole of it leaves, bark, pith, roots, and note nothing other than a sluggishness of digestion. Recently one of our venefices became irritated at such insipidity. He made an intensive study of the coin-tree, and after several years finally derived a substance of unusual potency. To be useful it must be dissolved in methycm and wafted into the air as a fog or a mist, whence it enters the corpus through the eyes, causing first blindness, then numbness, then complete paralysis. Think of it' From waste, a useful and effective poison' Is this not a tribute to human persistence and ingenuity3"

"An impressive accomplishment," said Gersen. Alusz Iphigema remained silent.

Edelrod went on: "We are frequently asked why we persist in deriving our poisons from natural sources. Why do we not immure ourselves in laboratories and synthesize3 The answer is of course that natural poisons, being initially associated with living tissue, are the more effective."

"I would suspect the presence of catalyzing impurities in the natural poisons," Gersen suggested, "rather than metaphysical association."

Edelrod held up a minatory finger. "Never scoff at the role of the mind' Eor instance—let me see—there should be one somewhere near . Yes. See there—the little reptile."

Under a mottled white and blue leaf rested a small lizardlike creature.

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"This is the meng. From one of his organs comes a substance which can be distributed either as uigar or as furux. The same substance, mind you' But when sold as uigar and used as such, the

symptoms are spasms, biting off of the tongue and a frothing madness. When sold and used as furax, the interskeletal cartilage is dissolved so that the frame goes limp WTiat do you say to that3 Is that not metaphysics of the most exalted sort3"

"Interesting, certainly . . . Hm . . . What occurs when the substance is sold and used as, say for the sake of argument, water^"

Edelrod pulled at his nose. "An interesting experiment. I wonder . . . But the proposal encases a fallacy. W^ho would buy and administer an expensive vial of water?"

"The suggestion was poorly thought out," admitted Gersen.

Edelrod made an indulgent gesture. "Not at all, not at all. From just such apparent folly come notable variations. The graybloom, for instance. Who would have ever suspected the virtue to be derived from its perfume, until Grand Master Strubal turned it upside down and left it in the dark for a month, whereupon it became tox meratis? One waft will kill; the venefice need merely walk past his subject."

Alusz Iphigema stooped to pick up a small rounded pebble of quartz. "WTiat horrible substance do you produce from this stone3"

Edelrod looked away, half embarrassed. "None whatever. At least none to my knowledge. Though we use such pebbles in ball mills to crush photis seed to flour. Never fear; your pebble is not so useless as it seems."

Alusz Iphigema tossed it away in disgust. "Unbelievable," she muttered, "that people should dedicate themselves to such activity."

Edelrod shrugged. "We serve a useful purpose, everyone occasionally needs poison. We are capable of this excellence and we feel duty-bound to pursue it." He inspected Alusz Iphigema with curiosity. "Have you no skills of your own3"

"No."

"At the hotel you may buy a booklet entitled Primer to the Art of Preparing and Using Poisons, and I believe it includes a small kit of some basic alkaloids. If you are interested in developing a skill—"

"Thank you. I have no such inclination."

Edelrod made a polite gesture, as if to acknowledge that each must steer his own course through life.

They continued; in due course the forest thinned, the path

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turned out upon the steppe. At the edge of town stood a long eight-sided structure of iron-bound timber with ten iron doors facing to the steppe Across an area of packed clay were hundreds of small booths and shops. "The caravanserai," explained Edelrod. "This is

the seat of the Comenace, from which the judgments come." He pointed to a platform at the top of the caravanserai, where four caged men gazed disconsolately down into the square. "To the tar right stands Kakarsis Asm."

"Can I speak to him now?" Gersen asked.

"I will go to inquire. Wait, if you please, at this booth, where my grandmother will prepare you a fine tea."

Alusz Iphigenia looked dubiously at the appurtenances of the booth. On a plank a brass urn bubbled furiously, flanked by brass drinking pots. Shelves displayed a hundred glass jars containing herbs, roots and substances impossible to identify.

"All clean and salubrious," Edelrod declared cheerfully. "Rest and invigorate yourselves. I will return with good news."

Alusz Iphigenia wordlessly seated herself on a bench. After consultation with Edelrod's grandmother, Gersen procured pots of mildly stimulating verbena tea. They watched a caravan trundling in from the steppe, first an eight-wheeled wagon carrying the shrine, the cabin of the hetman and brass tanks of water. Behind were several dozen other wagons—some large, some small—motors rumbling, clacking, whining. All carried astounding superstructures at the very peak of which were tented living quarters, with goods and bales loaded below. Some men rode motorcycles, others lounged on the wagons, which were driven by old women or slaves of the tribe. Children ran behind, rode bicycles or dangled perilously from the understructure.

The caravan halted; women, children arranged tripods, hung up cauldrons and began to prepare a meal, while slaves unloaded goods from the wagons: furs, rare woods, bundles of herbs, chunks of agate and opal, caged birds, tubs of raw gums and poisons, and two captive hankap, the near-intelligent creature which furnished the Sarkov sport known as harbite. Meanwhile the men of the tribe gathered in a quiet suspicious cluster to drink tea and glower toward the ba/aar where they expected to be cheated.

Edelrod stepped briskly forth from the caravanserai. Gersen grumbled to Alusz Iphigenia, "Here he comes with six reasons why the business will cost more money."

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Edelrod procured an infusion of scorched alcohol from his grandmother. He sat down and silently began to sip.

"Well?" asked Gersen.

Edelrod sighed, shook his head. "My arrangements have been for naught. The Chief Monitor declares the interview impossible."

"Just as well," said Gersen. "I only wished to bring him the condolences of Virole Falushe. It will make small difference one way or another. Will he cooperate?"

"At the Poison Inn, as diversion for the Convenance, which currently is in residence at Pamg."

"Perhaps I will have a chance to utter a few words there, or at least make a reassuring signal," said Gersen. "Well, then, let us look through the bazaar."

Subdued and depressed, Edelrod took them through the bazaar. Only in the Poison Quarter did he recover his animation, and pointed here and there to bargains and especially noteworthy preparations. He seized a ball of gray wax. "Observe this deadly material. I handle it without fear: I am immunized^ But if you were to rub it on an article belonging to your enemy—his comb, his ear-scraper—he is as good as gone. Another application is to spread a film over your identification papers. Then, should an overofficial administrator hector you, he is contaminated and pays for his insolence."

Alusz Iphigenia took a deep breath. "How does a Sarkoy survive to become an adult?"

"Two words," Edelrod replied, holding two fingers didactically high. "Caution, immunity. I am immune to thirty poisons. I carry indicators and alarms to warn of cluthe, meratis, black-tox and vole. I observe the most punctilious caution in eating, smelling, donning garments, bedding with a strange female. Ha-ha. Here is a favorite trick, and the ovenpulsive lecher finds himself in difficulties. But to go on. I am cautious in these situations and also in passing downwind of a covert, even though I have no fear of meratis. Caution has become second nature. If I suspect that I have or am about to have an enemy, I cultivate his friendship and poison him to diminish the risk."

"You will live to become an old man," said Gersen.

Edelrod reverently made a circular motion with his two hands, moving in opposite directions, to symbolize a halting of Godogma's wheel. "Let us hope so. And here"—he pointed to a bulb contain-

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ing white powder—"cluthe Useful, versatile, effective If you need poison, buy here "

"I have cluthe," said Gersen, "though it may be somewhat stale "

"Discard it, or you will be disappointed," Edelrod told him earnestly "It will merely provoke suppurating sores and gangrene " He turned to the dealer "Your stock is fresh?"

"Fresh indeed, fresh as the morning dew

After a bout of heated bargaining, Gersen bought a small casket of cluthe Alusz Iphigema stood with her back turned, her head at an angle of angry disapproval

"Now then," said Gersen, "back to the hotel "

Edelrod said tentatively, "A thought occurs to me. Were I to bring the monitors a cask of high-quality tea, at a cost of perhaps twenty or thirty SVU, they might well allow your visit "

"By all means. Make them such a gift "

"You will naturally reimburse me?"

"What? When you already have been conceded a lavish hundred and twenty SVU?"

Edelrod made an impatient gesture. "You do not realize the difficulties!" He snapped his fingers petulantly. "Very well. So be it. My friendship for you impels me to sacrifice. Where is the money?"

"Here is fifty. The remainder after the interview "

"What of the lady? Where will she wait?"

"Not here in the bazaar. The nomads might consider her part of the merchandise."

Edelrod chuckled. "Such events have been known. But have no apprehension! She is under the aegis of Submaster Iddel Edelrod. She is as safe as a two-hundred-ton statue of a dead dog "

But Gersen insisted on hiring a conveyance and sending Alusz Iphigema back to the Poison Inn. Edelrod then conducted Gersen into the caravanserai, through a set of halls, up to the roof. Six monitors hulked on stools beside a bubbling cauldron. Hitching fur collars up around their necks, they glanced incuriously at Edelrod, then turning back to their tea, muttered among themselves. Evidently a satiric observation, for they all gave hoarse caws of amusement.

Gersen approached the cage of Kakarsis Asm, one-time Master Venehce, now condemned to cooperation. Asm was somewhat taller

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than the average Sarkoy, though still bulky through chest and belly. His head was long, narrow in the forehead, broad at the cheekbones, heavy at the mouth. A thick black pelt grew low down his forehead, his lank black mustache drooped dispiritedly. In keeping with his criminal status, he wore no shoes, and his feet, tattooed with wheels in the traditional fashion, were mottled pink and blue with cold.

Edelrod addressed Asm in a peremptory voice. "Villainous dog, here is a nobleman from off-world who deigns to inspect you. Be on your best behavior "

Asm raised his hand as if he were casting poison, Edelrod

jumped back with a startled oath, and Asm laughed. Gersen turned to Edelrod "Wait to the side I wish to speak privately to Master Asm."

Edelrod grudgingly withdrew. Asm, seating himself on a stool, inspected Gersen with eyes like flints. "I have paid to speak to you," said Gersen "In fact I come from Alphanor for this purpose "

Asm made no response.

"Has Viole Falushe made representations on your behalf" asked Gersen

A gleam shone behind the near opacity of the eyes "You come from Viole Falushe3"

"No "

The gleam died.

"It would seem," said Gersen, "that having involved you in wrongdoing, he should likewise be here, sentenced to cooperation "

"There's an agreeable thought," said Asm

"I don't fully understand the crime You were caged and sentenced because you sold to a notorious cnnnaP"

Asm snorted, spat into a corner of the cage "How should I recognize him as Viole Falushe7 I knew him long ago under a different name He has changed, he is unrecognizable "

"WTly then should you be sentenced to cooperation3"

"The decretal was clear enough The Guild-master had prepared a special price schedule for Viole Falushe All unaware I sold him two drams of patziglop and a dram of vole, little enough, but there can be no remission. The Guild-master has long been my enemy, though he has never dared to test my poisons " He spat again, glanced reflectively sidewise at Gersen. "W^hy should I talk with you7"

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"Because I will undertake that you die by alpha or beta, rather than cooperation."

Asm gave a sad sardonic snort of regret. "With Guild-master Peti-us on the scene7 Small chance. He wishes to test his new py-rong.

"Guild-master Petrus can be persuaded. By money if no other means.

Asm shrugged "I expect little, but what then? I lose nothing by talk. What do you wish to know?"

"I take it Viole Falushe has departed the planet?"

"Long ago."

"Where and when did you know him previously?"

"Long ago. How many years? Twenty? Thirty? A long time. He was then a slaver, but very young. No more than a boy. Indeed, he was the youngest slaver I had yet known. He arrived in a rickety old ship bulging with young girls, all fearful of his wrath. Would you believe it? They were happy to be sold to me!" Asm shook his head in wonder. "A terrible young man! He quaked and quivered with the force of his passions. Today he is different. The passion is still terrible, but Viole Falushe has grown to surround it. He is a different man."

"What was his name when you first knew him?"

Asm shook his head. "It escapes me. I do not know. Perhaps I never knew. He traded two fine girls for money and poison. They cried with relief to leave the ship. The others cried from their ill-fortune. Ah, what sobbing!" Asm gave his head a wry shake. "Inga and Dundine were their names. How they would chatter! They knew the lad well and never tired of reviling him."

"What became of them? Do they still live?"

"There I am ignorant." Asm jumped to his feet, strode back and forth, returned as abruptly to his stool. "I was called south to Sogmere. I sold the girls. There was little depreciation, I had only used them two years."

"Who bought them?"

"It was Gascovne the Wholesaler, of Murchison's Star. I can tell no more, for this is all I know."

"And where was the first home of the girls?"

"Earth."

Gersen ruminated a moment. "And Viole Falushe as he is now—what is his description?"

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"He is a tall man, well-favored. His hair is dark. He has no remarkable or distinguishing features. I knew him when his madness was rampant, when it altered the look of his face. Now he is careful and polite. He speaks softly. He smiles. His condition might never be known, unless, like me, you had known him as a lad."

Gersen asked further questions, Asm was unable to augment his

remarks. Gersen prepared to depart Asm, feigning indifference, said, "You intend to speak to Guild-master Petrus on my behalf?"

"Yes."

Asm thought a moment. He opened his mouth and spoke, as if it were an effort. "Be careful. He is a positive man, and baleful. If you thrust at him over-strongly, he will poison you."

"Thank you," said Gersen. "I hope to be able to help you." He signaled Edelrod, who had watched with poorly disguised curiosity. "Take me to Guild-master Petrus."

Edelrod led Gersen down into the caravanserai, through one crooked hall after another, finally to a room hung with yellow silk. On a cushion sat a thin man with intricately tattooed cheeks examining a row of small flagons "An outworld gentleman to speak to the Guild-master," said Edelrod.

The thin man hopped erect, approached Gersen, carefully smelled his hands, patted his garments, inspected his tongue and teeth. "One moment." He disappeared behind the silks. Presently he returned to signal Gersen. "This way, if you will "

Gersen entered a high window less chamber—so high indeed the ceiling could not be seen. Four spherical lamps hanging low on long chains threw an oily yellow light. On the table the ubiquitous brass cauldron bubbled. The air was heavy with warmth and odor. must, fabric, leather, sweat, the sharp dry exhalation of herbs. Guild-master Petrus had been sleeping. Now he was awake, and leaning forward from his couch, tossed herbs into a pot and prepared an infusion. He was an old man with bright black eyes, a pallid skin. He greeted Gersen with a quick nod.

Gersen said, "You're an old man."

"I have one hundred and ninety-four Earth years."

"How much longer do you expect to live?"

"Six years at least, or so I hope. Many men wish me poisoned."

"On the roof four criminals await execution. Are all to cooperate?"

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"I have a dozen new poisons to test, as have other Masters of the Guild "

"I have assured Asm that he will die by alpha or beta "

"You must have the gift of perceiving miracles. I myself am a skeptic. The arrogance of Asm has long been a blemish upon the region. He now must cooperate with the Guild Standards Committee "

Gersen eventually paid 42') SVU that Asm might die by alpha

Edelrod, somewhat sulky, met Gersen in the hall 1 hey set orf through Paing by streets lined with tall timber huts on stilts, the facade of each hut constructed to represent a visage doleful, saturnine or astounded, and so the} returned to the Poison Inn

Alus/ Iphigenia was in her room, Gersen decided not to disturb her He bathed in a wooden vat, went down to the lobby to look out across the steppe Dusk blurred the landscape, the wheeled poles were black intricate silhouettes

Gersen ordered a pot of tea and with nothing better to do reflected on the condition of his life By ordinary standards he was a fortunate man, wealthy beyond the grasp of the mind What of the future? Suppose that by some freak of fortune he was able to achieve his goal, with the five Demon Princes destroyed, what then? Could he integrate himself into the normal flow of existence? Or had he become so distorted that always, to the end of his days, he must seek out men to destroy Gersen gave a gnm chuckle Unlikely that he would survive to confront the problem In the meantime, what had he learned from Asm? Only that twenty or thirty years ago a young madman had sold a pair of girls, Dundme and Inga, to Asm, who later sold them to Gascoyne the Wholesaler of Vlurchison's Star Next to nothing Except that Dundine and Inga knew their kidnaper well and "never ceased to revile him "

Alusz Iphigenia appeared She ignored Gersen and went to look out over the dark steppe, where now one or two far lights flickered In the sk\ appeared a purple glow, a bank of white lights, and a packet of the Robarth Hercules Line descended to the field Alus/ Iphigenia watched a row moments, then turned and came to sit by Gersen, holding herself stiffly erect She shook her head at his offer of tea "How long must you stay here?"

"Only until tomorrow night "

"Whv may not we leave now? \ou have conrerred with your friend, you have bought vour poison "

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As if in response to her question Edelrod appeared bowing in absurd punctilio Tonight he wore a long gown of green cloth, a tall fur cap "Health and immunity!" he greeted them "Do you attend the poisonings? 1 hey are scheduled for the hotel rotunda, for the education of gathered notables "

"Tonight I thought they were tomorrow night "

"The date has been set forward, by a whirl of Crodogma's wheel 'I omght the rogues must cooperate "

"We will be there," said Gersen

Alusz Iphigenia rose swiftly to her feet, departed the lobby

Gersen found her in her room "Are you angry with me?"

"Not angry I am utterly bewildered I can't understand your morbid fascination with these horrible people    Death    "

"That isn't a fair statement The people live by a system different from ours I am interested I live by my ability to avoid death I might learn something to help me survive    "

"But you don't need this knowledge' You have a vast fortune, ten billion SVU in cash—"

"No longer    "

"No longer? Have you lost it?"

"The vast fortune is no longer cash There now exists an anonymous corporation of which I own the stock The money yields a daily income, a million SVU more or less Still a vast fortune, of course    "

"With all this money you need not involve yourself Hire murderers to do your work Hire the disgusting Edelrod For money he would poison his mother'"

"Any murderer I could hire could be hired to murder me But there is another consideration I don't care for notoriety or publicity To be effective I must be unknown, a nonentity I fear I have already been noted by the Institute, and this would be a great misfortune    "

Alusz Iphigenia spoke with great earnestness "You are obsessed You are a monomaniac' This concentration on lethality, effectiveness, masters you completely'"

Gersen forbore to point out that this same effectiveness and lethality had preserved her existence on several occasions

"You have other capacities," Alusz Iphigenia went on "You have sensibilities, even frivolities You never indulge them You are

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spiritually starved, crippled. You think only of power, death, poison, devious plots, revenge!"

Gersen was startled by her vehemence. The accusations were distorted far enough of the mark that they carried no sting; still if she believed them, what a monster he must appear in her eyes! Soothingly he replied, "What you say simply isn't true. Maybe some day you'll know this, maybe some day. . ." Gersen's voice dwindled, in the face of the angry shake Alusz Iphigenia gave her head which sent her gold-brown hair flying. Additionally, what he was about to say, now that he considered it, seemed somewhat improbable, even absurd: talk of relaxation, a home, a family.

Alusz Iphigenia spoke in a cold voice: "What then of me?"

"I have no right to rule your life or disturb you," said Gersen.  
"You have only one life; you must make the best of it."

Alusz Tphigenia rose to her feet, calm and composed. Sadly Gersen went to his own room. Still, in a sense, the quarrel was welcome. Perhaps, motivated subconsciously, he had brought her to Sarkovy to indicate the direction his life must go, to give her the option of detaching herself.

Somewhat to his surprise she appeared for dinner, though grim and pale.

The dining room was crowded; everywhere were the fur collars and black-furred pates of Sarkoy notables. Tonight an unusual number of women were present, in their peculiar purple, brown and black gowns, weighed down with necklaces, bangles, hair-pieces of turquoise and jade. In one corner sat a large group of tourists from the excursion ship which had put into Paing earlier in the -the occasion, Gersen decided, for the advancement of the

evenms

poisonings. By their costumes the tourists were from one of the Concourse planets—Alphanor, to judge by their beige and gray skin toning. At Gersen's elbow appeared Edelrod. "Aha, Lord Gersen! A pleasure to see you here. May I join you and your lovely lady? I may be able to assist for the poisonings." Taking Gersen's assent for granted he seated himself at the table. "Tonight a banquet of six courses, Sarkoy style. I recommend that you attempt it. You are here on our wonderful planet, you must enjoy it to the hilt. I am pleased to be present. All goes well tonight, I trust?"

"Quite well, thank you."

Edelrod spoke correctly—tonight only the Sarkoy cuisine was offered. The first course was served: a pale green broth of swamp

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produce, rather bitter, accompanied by stalks of deep-fried reed, a salad of celery root, whortle-berry and shreds of pungent black bark. As they ate, porters carried four posts out upon the terrace, set them upright into sockets.

The second course appeared: a ragout of pale meat in coral sauce, heavily seasoned, with side dishes of jellied plantain, crystallized jaoic, a local fruit.

Alusz Iphigenia ate without great appetite; Gersen felt no hunger whatever.

The third course was set before them: collops of perfumed paste on disks of chilled melon, accompanied by what appeared to be small mollusks in spiced oil. As the platters were being removed in

preparation for the fourth course, the criminals were led out on the terrace, where they stood blinking into the lights. They were naked except for heavy padded collars, bulky mattress-like gloves, a tight girdle around the waist. Each was attached to a post by six feet of chain.

Alusz Iphigenia looked them over with se-eming indifference. "These are the criminals? WTiat are their offenses?"

Edelrod looked up from the battery of bowls which had just been set before him, containing a hash of crushed insects and cereal, pickles, a plum-colored conserve and pellets of fried meat. Apprehending the question he glanced at the criminals. "There is Asm who betrayed the guild. Next is a nomad who committed a sexual offense."

Alusz Iphigenia laughed incredulously. "On Sarkoy is this possible?"

Edelrod gave her a look of pained reproach. "The third threw sour milk on his grandmother. The fourth dishonored a fetish."

Alusz Iphigenia wore a puzzled expression. She glanced at Gersen to learn whether or not Edelrod were serious.

Gersen said, "The offenses seem arbitrary, but some of our restraints seem strange to the folk of Sarkovy."

"Precisely the case," stated Edelrod. "Every planet has its own rules. I am appalled at the insensitivity of certain folk who come here from other worlds. Avarice is a typical offense. On Sarkovy one man's property is the property of all. Money? It is distributed without a second thought. Unstinting generosity excites approval!" And he looked expectantly toward Gersen, who only smiled.

Alusz Iphigenia had let the fourth course go untasted. The fifth

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course was served: a wafer of baked pastry on which were arranged three large steamed centipedes with a garnish of a chopped blue vegetable and a dish of glossy-black paste, which gave off an acrid aromatic odor. Alusz Iphigenia rose to her feet, departed the dining room. Edelrod looked after her solicitously. "She is not well?"

"I fear not."

"A pity." Edelrod attacked his food with gusto. "The meal is by no means at its end."

To the terrace came four undermasters from the guild and a Master Venefice, to direct proceedings and make analytic comments.

All seemed in readiness for the poisonings. The undermasters set a tabouret in front of each of the criminals, with the poisons arranged in white saucers.

"The first subject," called forth the Master Venefice, "is one Kakarsis Asm. In requital for manipulations deleterious to the guild, he has agreed to test a variation of that activant known as 'alpha.' When ingested orally, alpha almost instantly shocks the main spinal ganglion. Tonight we test alpha in a new solvent, which may well result in the most rapid lethality yet discovered by man. Criminal Asm, cooperate, if you please."

Kakarsis Asm rolled his eyes to right and left. The undermaster stepped forward; Kakarsis Asm opened his mouth, gulped the dose and a second or two later was dead.

"Amazing!" declared Edelrod. "Something new every week."

The executions proceeded, the Master Venefice supplying informative details. The sexual offender tried to kick poison into the undermaster's face and was reprimanded; otherwise the poisonings proceeded smoothly. The sixth course, an elaborate salad, was followed by teas, infusions and trays of sweetmeats, and the banquet was at an end.

Gersen slowly went up to the suite. Alusz Iphigenia had packed her belongings. Gersen stood by the door, puzzled by a sudden gleam of panic in Alusz Iphigenia's eyes, unaware that against the white woodwork he appeared a dark sinister shape.

Alusz Iphigenia spoke in a breathless rush, "The excursion ship is returning to Alphanor. I have booked passage. We must go our own ways."

Gersen was silent for a moment. Then he said: "There is money in your bank account. I'll see that more is paid into it, as

is

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much as you'll ever need ... If an emergency arises, if there are inadequate funds, notify the bank manager. He'll make the necessary arrangements."

Alusz Iphigenia said nothing. Gersen went to the door. "Should you ever need help . . ."

Alusz Iphigenia gave a short nod. "I'll remember."

"Good-bye then,"

"Good-bye."

Gersen went to his own room, where he lay on his bed, hands behind his head. So ended a pleasant passage in his life. Never again, he told himself, never would he involve a woman with the dark necessities of his life: especially one so honorable and generous

and kind . . .

Early in the morning the Robarth-Hercules packet departed with Alusz Iphigenia aboard. Gersen went to the space port, signed the exit register, paid a departure tax, pressed a gratuity upon Edelrod and departed Sarkovy.

3

From Handbook to the Planets; 348th edition. 1525:

ALOYSIUS: Sixth planet to Vega. Planetary constants:

diameter-7340 miles; sidereal day-19.8 hours; mass-.86;...

Aloysius with its sister planets, Boniface and Cuthbert, were the first worlds to be intensively colonized from Earth. Aloysius hence presents aspects of considerable antiquity, the more so that the first settlers, a dynamic group of Conservationists, refused to build structures not in harmony with the landscape.

The Conservationists are gone, but their influence lingers. The pretentious glass towers of Alphanor and Earth, the concrete of Olliphane, the unbridled confusion which has overtaken the Markab system: these are nowhere to be seen.

The axis of Aloysius is inclined at an angle of 31.7 degrees to its plane of orbit; hence, there are seasonal fluctuations of notable severity, mollified somewhat by a dense atmosphere. There are nine continents. Dorgan is the largest, with New Wexford its chief city. Owing to a calculated policy of low taxes and favorable regulations, New Wexford has long functioned as an important financial center, with an influence far in excess of its population.

The autochthonous flora and fauna are not particularly noteworthy. Through intensive effort by the original settlers, terrestrial trees and shrubs are wide-

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spread, the conifers especially finding a hospitable environment.

Landing formalities at Aloysius were as rigorous as those of Sarkovy were lax. At a distance of a million miles, the "first shell," Gersen announced his intention to land, identified himself and his ship, gave references, explained the reasons for his visit, and was allowed to approach the "second shell" at a distance of a half-million miles. Here he waited while his application was studied, his references checked. He was then ordered down into the "third shell," a hundred thousand miles above the planet, and here, after a brief delay, he was given landing clearance. The formalities were

irksome, but not to be avoided. Had Gersen neglected to halt at the first shell, weapons would have been trained on his ship. Had he failed to heed the second shell a Thribolt gun would have fired a salvo of adhesive-paper disks at his ship. Had he then failed to halt, he and his ship would have been destroyed.\*

Gersen complied with all necessary regulations, received clearance and landed at the Dorgan Central Spaceport.

New Wexford lay twenty miles north, a city of crooked streets, steep hills and old buildings of almost medieval aspect. The banks, brokerage houses, exchanges occupied the center of the city, with hotels, shops and agencies on the surrounding hills, and some of the finest private homes in the Oikumene scattered about the surrounding countryside.

Gersen checked into the vast Congreve Hotel, bought news-

\*The Thnholt gun shoots a Jarnell-powered projectile toward its target \ quest-needle protrudes a hundred and sixty feet ahead of the projectile, at the so-called preliminary roil section of the intersplit, and is in tenuous contact with undisturbed space Upon encountering matter, the quest-needle disengages the intersplit and triggers its charge either adhesive paper disks or high explosives In effect the Thnbolt gun is an instantaneous weapon over last distances, its effectiveness limited only by the accuracy of the aiming and launching techniques, since once in flight the projectile cannot change direction

On every technically competent world, methods of guiding the Thnholt projectile by automatic sensors are under intensive study, and have been since the development of the original weapon The most promising system is to fix upon the distance of the target by conventional radar, drive the projectile by intersplit for a very brief period, in order to bring it into space near the target, upon which it then Like a new fix I liners of great delicacy and dependability are necessary, together with the utmost discretion on the part of the launchers, for there is nothing to prevent the projectile, once it leaves the intersplit, from fixing upon a new target which inconveniently happens to be cruising close at hand None of the secondary or tertiary systems are considered trustworthy and are used only under special circumstances

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papers, ate a placid lunch. The life of the city flowed past him:

mercantilists in their consciously archaic garb, aristocrats from Boniface, anxious only to return, occasional!) a citizen of Cuthbert, conspicuous for the eccentric flair of his garments and his glossy depilated head. Farth-folk at the Congreve could be identified by somber garments and an indefinable self-assurance—a quality the citizens of the outer worlds found exasperating no less than the geocentric term "outer worlds" itself.

Gersen relaxed. The atmosphere of New Wexford was soothing, everywhere were reassuring evidences of solidity, good-living, law and order, he liked the steep streets, the stone and iron buildings, which now, after more than a thousand years, could no longer be denigrated as "self-conscious quaintness," the Cuthbertian epithet.

Gersen had paid one previous visit to New Wexford. Two weeks of discreet investigation had then pointed to one Jehan Addels of Trans-Space Investment Corporation as an economist of extraordinary resource and acumen. Gersen had called Addels by public telephone, blanking his own image. Addels was a youngish man, slight of body, with a long quizzical face, a balding scalp which he had not troubled to have rehired. "Addels here."

"I am someone you don't know; my name is irrelevant. I believe you are employed by Trans-Space?"

"Correct."

"How much do they pay you?"

"Sixty thousand, plus some fringe benefits," Addels replied without embarrassment, though he was talking to a stranger over a

blank screen. "Why?"

"I'd like to hire you in a similar capacity at a hundred thousand, with a monthly raise of a thousand, and a bonus even five years of, say, a million SVU."

"The terms are appealing," Addels replied dryly. "Who are you?"

"I prefer to remain anonymous," said Gersen. "If you insist, I'll meet you and explain as much as you like. Essentially, what you need to know is that I am not a criminal, the money I want you to handle has not been acquired contrary to the laws of New Wexford."

"Hm. How much is the sum in question? What securities are represented?"

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"Ten billion SVU, in cash."

"Whisht'" breathed Jehan Addels. "WTwre—" a flicker of annoyance crossed his face and he broke off his sentence. Jehan Addels liked to think of himself as imperturbable. He continued. "This is an extraordinary amount of money. I can't believe it was accumulated by conventional means."

"I haven't said this. The money came from Beyond, where conventions don't exist."

Addels smiled thinly. "And no laws. Hence, no legality. And no criminals. Still, the source of your funds is no concern of mine. Exactly what do you wish done?"

"I want the money invested to yield income, but I want to call no attention to the money. I want no rumors, no publicity. I want the money invested without causing even a ripple of notice."

"Difficult." Addels reflected a moment. "Not impossible, however—if the program is properly planned."

"This is at your discretion. You will control the entire operation, subject to an occasional suggestion from me. Naturally you may hire a staff, though the staff is to be told nothing."

"Small problem there. I know nothing."

"You are agreeable to my terms?"

"Certainly, if the whole business is not a hoax. I can't avoid becoming an extremely wealthy man, both from my salary and from investments I can make collateral with yours. But I will believe it when I see the money. Presumably it is not counterfeit."

"Your own fake-meter will assure you of this."

"Ten billion SVU," mused Addels. "An enormous sum, which might well be expected to tempt even an honest man. How do you know I won't embezzle from you?"

"I understand that you are not only a cautious man, but a man of discipline. Also, you should have no inducement to embezzle. Otherwise I have no safeguards."

Jehan Addels gave his head a crisp nod. "Where is the money?"

"It will be delivered wherever you like. Or you can come to the Congreve Hotel and pick it up yourself."

"The situation is not all that simple. Suppose I should die overnight? How would you recover your money? If you should die, how would I learn of the fact? What disposition would I then make of this vast sum, presuming that it exists?"

"Come to Suite Six-fifty at the Congreve Hotel. I'll give you

the money and we'll make arrangements for any immediate contingencies."

Jehan Addels appeared in Gersen's suite half an hour later. He inspected the money, which was contained in two large cases, checked a few of the notes with his fake-meter, and shook his head in awe. "This is a tremendous responsibility. I could give you a receipt, but it would be a meaningless formality."

"Take the money," said Gersen. "Tomorrow, include in your will an instruction that in the event of your death, the money is mine. If I die, or do not communicate with you within a year, use the income for charitable purposes. But I expect to be back in New Wexford within two or three months. Hereafter, I will communicate with you only by telephone, using the name Henry Lucas."

"Very well," said Addels rather heavily. "I think this takes care of all contingencies."

"Remember, absolute discretion! Not even your family must know the details of your new occupation."

"As you wish."

The next morning Gersen had departed Aloysius for Alphanor.

Now, three months later, he was back in New Wexford, again at the Congreve Hotel.

Going to a public telephone, blanking the screen as before, he tapped out Jean Addels' call-number. The screen burst into a pattern of green leaves and pink briar roses. A female voice spoke:

"Braemar Investment Company."

"Mr. Henry Lucas to speak to Mr. Addels."

"Thank you."

Addels' face appeared on the screen. "Addels."

"This is Henry Lucas."

Addels leaned back in his chair. "I am happy—and I may say, relieved—to hear from you."

"The line is clear?"

Addels checked his anti-eavesdrop meter and blinker light. "All clear."

"How are matters progressing?"

"Well enough." Addels proceeded to describe his arrangements. He had paid the cash into ten numbered accounts in as many banks, five in New Wexford, five on Earth, and was gradually converting the cash into income-producing investments, using enor-

mous delicacy to avoid sending tremors along the sandpapered nerves of the financial world.

"I had not comprehended the magnitude of the job when I undertook it," said Addels. "It is simply staggering! Mind you, I am not complaining. I could not ask for a more interesting or more challenging Job. But investing ten billion SVU discreetly is like jumping into water without getting wet. I am putting together a staff merely to handle details of investigation and management. Eventually, for maximum efficiency, I think we will be forced to become a bank, or perhaps several banks."

"Whatever is most appropriate," said Gersen. "In the meantime, I have a special job for you."

Addels instantly became wary. "And what is this Job?"

"Recently I've been reading that the Radian Publishing Company, which publishes Cosmopolis, is in financial difficulties. I would like you to buy control."

Addels pursed his lips. "I can do this without difficulty, of course. In fact I can buy outright; Radian is on the verge of bankruptcy. But you should know that as an investment, this is not an attractive buy. They have been losing money steadily for years, which of course is why they can be had so easily."

"In this case we will buy as a speculation, and try to put things right. I have a particular reason for wishing to own Cosmopolis."

Addels hastily disavowed any intent to act counter to Gersen's wishes. "I merely want you to be under no misapprehensions. I will start acquiring Radian stock tomorrow."

Murchison's Star, Sagitta 203 in the Star Directory<sup>^</sup> lay out in the galactic plane behind Vega, thirty light-years beyond the Pale. It was one of a cluster of five varicolored suns: two red dwarfs, a blue-white dwarf, a peculiar unclassifiable blue-green star of medium size and a yellow-orange G6, which was Murchison's Star. Murchison, the single planet, was somewhat smaller than Earth, with a single huge continent cincturing the world. A searing wind blew dunes around the equatorial zone; mountainous highlands sloped gradually to the polar seas. In the mountains lived aborigines, black creatures of unpredictable characteristics: by turns murderously savage, torpid, hysterical, or cooperative. In the latter mood they served a useful purpose, supplying dyes and fibers for the tapestries which were one of Murchison's principal exports. The factories which

produced the tapestries were concentrated about the city of Sabra and employed thousands of female operatives. These were supplied by a dozen slaving concerns, chief among which was Gascoyne the wholesaler. By virtue of efficient inventory control Gascoyne was

able to give his customers efficient service at reasonable prices. He made no effort to compete with the specialty houses, dealt mainly in Industrial and Agricultural classifications. At Sabra his principal business was in Industrial F-2 Selecteds: women unprepossessing or past the first bloom of youth, but warranted to be of good health and agility, cooperative, diligent and amiable: such were the terms of Gascoyne's Ten-Point Guarantee.

Sabra, on the shore of the north polar sea, was a drab haphazard city with a heterogeneous population whose main goal was to earn sufficient money to go elsewhere. The coastal plain to the south was studded with hundreds of peculiar volcanic stubs, each crowned with a bristle of liver-colored vegetation. Sabra's single distinction was Orban Circus, an open area at the heart of the city centered on one of these volcanic stubs. The Grand Murchison Hotel occupied the crest of the stub; around the Circus were the most important establishments of the planet: Wilhelm's Trade Hotel, the Tapestry Mart, the depot of Gascoyne the Wholesaler; Odenour's Technical Academy; Cady's Tavern; the Blue Ape Hotel; the Hercules Import Company; warehouse and showroom of the Tapestry Producers' Cooperative; the Sportsman Supply and Trophy House;

Gambel's Spaceship Sales; the District Victualling Company.

Sabra was a city large enough and wealthy enough to need protection from raiders and free-hooters, even though, like Brinktown in another quarter of the Beyond, it fulfilled a service to the folk who lived beyond the Pale. Thribolt batteries were constantly manned by members of the City Militia, and ships coming in from space were regarded with intense suspicion.

Gersen, approaching with circumspection, radioed down to the spaceport, and was directed into a landing orbit. At the spaceport he was subjected to interrogation by members of the local De-weaseling Brigade\*, who were reassured by Gersen's Pharaon. Weasels uniformly traveled space in Locater 9Bs; these were the only

\*The single interworld organization of Beyond, existing to identify and destroy agents of the IPCC. The IPCC, accepting a contract to locate and destroy a malefactor who had fled the Oikumene, could implement its commitments only by sending one or more agents Beyond, where they were known as weasels and considered fair game

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ships the IPCC chose to risk Beyond. Gersen for once could afford to be candid. He stated that he had come to Sabra to locate a woman brought here twenty or more years before by Gascoyne the Wholesaler. The Deweasellers, watching the pips and bulbs on their truth machine, exchanged sardonic glances, amused by this excess of quixotism, and waved Gersen forth to the freedom of the city.

The time was mid-morning; Gersen registered at the Grand Murchison Hotel on top of Orban Stub, which was crowded almost to capacity with tapestry buyers, commercial salesmen from the

Oikumene, sportsmen intent on stalking the Bower Mountain aborigines.

Gersen bathed, changed into local costume: scarlet plush pantaloons and a black jacket. Descending to the dining room he ate a lunch of local sea produce: seaweed salad, a dish of local mollusks. Directly below were the depot and offices of Gascoyne the Wholesaler: a rambling structure of three stories enclosing a central courtyard. An enormous pink and blue sign across the facade read:

GASCOYNE'S MART

Select Slaves for Any Purpose

A pair of handsome women and a stalwart man were depicted below. At the bottom of the sign a message read: Gascoyne's 10-Point Guarantee Is Justly Famous!

Gersen finished his lunch, descended to the circus, crossed to Gascoyne's Mart. He was lucky enough to find Gascoyne himself available and was ushered into a private office. Gascoyne was a handsome well-built man of indeterminate age, with dark curly hair, a dashing black mustache, expressive eyebrows. His office was simple and informal, with a bare floor, an old wooden desk, an information screen showing evidence of much use. On one wall hung a plaque with Gascoyne's famous ten-point guarantee limned in gold leaf and surrounded by scarlet festoons. Gersen explained the purpose of his visit. "About twenty-five years ago, give or take five years, you visited Sarkovy, where you bought a pair of women from a certain Kakarsis Asm. Their names were Inga and Dundine. I am anxious to locate these women; perhaps you would be good enough to search them out in your records."

"Gladly," said Gascoyne. "I can't say as I recall the circumstances, but—" He went to the information bank, worked the knobs

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and dials a moment, evoking flashes of blue light and a sudden grinning visage which nickered away. Gascoyne shook his head despondently. "Might as well be a stone for all the use it gives me. I must have it repaired. . . . Well, we shall see. This way, if you please." He took Gersen into a back room lined with ledgers. "Sarkovy. I go there seldom. A pestilent world, the home of a wicked race!" He searched his ledgers, one year after another. "This must be the trip. So long ago! Thirty years. Now, let us look. My, my, how this old ledger brings back the memories. Good old days is not just a banality. - . . . What were the names again?"

"Inga, Dundine. I don't know their last names."

"No matter. Here they are." He copied numbers upon a slip of paper, went to another ledger, turned to the numbers in question. "They were both sold here on Murchison. Inga went to Qualag's Factory. You know where that is? Third along the right bank of the river. Dundine went to Juniper Factory, across the river from Qualag's. I trust these women were not friends or relatives?"

Like any other, my business has its disagreeable aspects. At Qualag's and Juniper the women live wholesome productive lives, but certainly they are not pampered. Still, who is in this life?" And raising his eyebrows, he made a deprecatory gesture around his austere office.

Gersen gave his head a wry shake of sympathy. He thanked Gascoyne and departed.

Qualag's Factory was a half-dozen four-story buildings around a compound. Gersen entered the lobby of the main office, which was hung with sample tapestries. A pallid male clerk with varnished blond hair came to inquire his business.

"Gascoyne tells me," said Gersen, "that thirty years ago Qualag's purchased a female named Inga, on your invoice 10V623. Can you tell me if this woman is still employed by you?"

The clerk shuffled off to search his records, then went to an intercom and spoke a few words. Gersen waited. Into the office came a tall placid-faced woman with heavy arms and legs.

The clerk said petulantly: "Gentleman here wants to know about Inga, B2-AG95. There's a yellow card on her with two white clips but I can't find the reference."

"You're looking under Dormitory F. The B2s are all Dorm A." The woman located the correct reference. "Inga. B2-AG95. Dead. I remember her very well. An Earth-woman giving herself all style

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of airs. Complained constantly of this and that. She came to the dye works while I was recreation counsellor. I remember her well. She worked in blues and greens, and it put her off; she finally threw herself into a vat of dusty-orange. That's long ago. . . . My, how time flies."

Leaving Qualag's, Gersen crossed the river by a bridge and walked to the Juniper Factory, which was somewhat larger than Qualag's. The office was similar, though with a brisker atmosphere.

Gersen again put his question, this time in connection with Dundine. But the clerk was not cooperative and refused to check the records. "We aren't allowed to give out such information," said the clerk, looking disdainfully at Gersen from the altitude afforded him by his position behind the counter.

"Let me discuss the matter with the manager," said Gersen.

"Mr. Plusse owns the factory. If you will be seated I will announce you." Gersen went to examine a tapestry ten feet wide by six feet high, representing a flowered field on which stood hundreds of fanciful birds.

"Mr. Plusse will see you, sir."

Mr. Plusse was a small surly man with a white topknot and eyes of blue agate. Clearly he had no intention of obliging Gersen or anyone else. "Sorry, sir. We have our production to consider. Trouble enough with the women as it is. We do our best for them; we provide good food and recreational facilities, bathe them once a week. Still it's impossible to keep them satisfied."

"May I ask if the woman still works for you?"

"It makes no difference if she does or not; you would not be allowed to disturb her."

"If she is here, if she is the woman I am looking for, I'll be glad to recompense you for any inconvenience."

"Hmf. Just a moment." Mr. Plusse spoke into the intercom.

"Is not there a Dundine in wicker-stitching? What's her current index? . . . Hmf. . . I see." He returned to Gersen, whom he now regarded in a thoughtful new light. "A valuable employee. I can't have her badgered. If you insist on speaking to her, you'll have to buy her. The price is three thousand SVU."

Without a word Gersen put down the money. Mr. Plusse licked his small pink mouth. "Hmf." He spoke into the intercom. "W^ith a minimum of commotion, bring Dundine to this office."

Ten minutes passed, while Mr. Plusse ostentatiously made no-

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tations on a chart. The door opened, the clerk entered with a large-bodied woman in a white smock. Her features were big and moist;

her hair was short, mouse-brown, crimped and tied with string. Wringing her hands apprehensively she stared from Mr Plusse to Gersen and back again.

"You are leaving our service," said Mr. Plusse in a dry voice. "This gentleman has bought you."

Dundine looked at Gersen with bright fear. "Oh, what do you plan to do with me, sir? I'm useful and well here, I do my work; I don't want to go out on the back farms; I wouldn't want to do this, and I'm too old for barge work."

"Nothing like that, Dundine I've paid Mr. Plusse off; you're a free woman now. You can go back to your home if you like."

Tears sprang into her eyes. "I don't believe it."

"It's true."

"But—why did you do this?" Dundine's face wavered between bewilderment, fear and doubt.

"I want to ask you a few questions."

Dundine turned her back, bent her head over her hands.

After a moment Gersen asked, "Is there anything you want to bring with you?"

"No. Nothing. If I was wealthy I'd take that little tapestry on the wall, the little girls dancing. I did the wickeng on that tapestry and I was all that fond of the thing."

"What is the price?" Gersen asked Mr. Plusse.

"That is our Style Nineteen, which is priced at seven hundred fifty SVU."

Gersen paid 750 SVU and took the tapestry "Come, Dundine," he said shortly. "Best that we start off."

"But my good-byes! My dear friends—"

"Impossible," said Mr. Plusse. "Do you wish to disturb the other women?"

Dundine sniffed and rubbed her nose. "There's my bonuses I haven't taken. It's three recreation half-periods. I'd like to give them to Almenna."

"That can't be done, as you know. We never allow transfer or bartering of bonus units. If you wish, you may use them now, before your departure."

Dundine looked uncertainly toward Gersen. "Do we have time?"

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It seems a shame to let them go to waste—but I suppose it makes no difference now . . . "

They walked along the river road toward the center of town, with Dundine casting timid glances toward Gersen

"I can't imagine what you want of me," she said tremulously. "I'm certain I've never known you in my life."

"I'm interested in what you can tell me of Viole Falushe."

"Viole Falushe? But I know no such person. I can tell you nothing." Dundine stopped short, her knees shaking. "Are you going to take me back to the factory?"

"No," said Gersen hollowly "I won't take you back." He looked at her in deep discouragement. "Aren't you the Dundine who was kidnaped with Inga?"

"Oh yes I'm Dundine. Poor Inga. I've never heard other since she went to Qualag's. They say it's ever so dreary at Qualag's."

Gersen's mind raced back and forth. "You were kidnaped and

brought to Sarkovy5"

"Yes, indeed, and oh, what a time we had! Riding the steppes on those bouncing old wagons!"

"But the man who kidnaped you and brought you to Sarkovy—that was Virole Falushe, or so I am told."

"Him'^ Dundine's mouth twisted as if she had bit into something sour. "His name wasn't Virole Falushe."

And Gersen belatedly recalled that Kakarsis Asm had told him the same. The man who had sold Inga and Dundine had not used the name Virole Falushe at that time.

"No, no," said Dundine in a soft voice, looking far back in her life. "That wasn't any Virole Falushe. It was that nasty little Vogel Filschner."

All the way back into the Oikumene, in fragments and e)aculations, bits from here, oddments from there, Dundine told her story, and Gersen gave over trying to elicit a connected narrative

Expansive, inflated with freedom, Dundine talked with enthusiasm. She knew Vogel Filschner, yes indeed! She knew him well. So he changed his name to Virole Falushe5 Small wonder, after the shame his mother must feel! Though Madame Filschner had never enjoyed the best of reputations, and no one had ever known Vogel F'illschner's father. He had attended school with Dundine, two classes ahead.

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"Where was this?" asked Gersen.

"Why, at Ambeules!" declared Dundine, surprised that Gersen did not already know the story as well as herself. Though Gersen knew Rotterdam, Hamburg and Paris, he had never visited Ambeules, a suburb of Rolingshaven on the west coast of Europe.

Vogel Filschner had always been a strange brooding boy, according to Dundine. "Extremely sensitive," she confided. "Ripe always for a great rage or eyefuls of tears. One never knew what Vogel might do!" And for a space she fell silent, shaking her head in marvel at the deeds of Vogel Filschner. "Then when he was sixteen, and I but fourteen, a new girl came to school. Oh, she was a pretty thing—Jheral Tinzy was her name—and who but Vogel Filschner should fall in love!"

But Vogel Filschner was grubby and unsavory; Jheral Tinzy, a girl of sensitivity, found him repulsive. "Who could blame her?" mused Dundine. "Vogel was an eerie boy. I can see him yet—tall for his age and somewhat thin, with a round belly and a round bottom, like a billiken. He walked with his head to the side, watching all with his dark burning eyes. They watched, they saw all, they never forgot a thing, did Vogel Filschner's eyes. I must say that Jheral Tinzy used him heartlessly, laughing and gay the while! She

drove poor Vogel to desperation, this is my belief. And that man Vogel took up with—I can't recall his name! He wrote poetry, very strange and daring! He was thought ungodly, though he had patrons in the upper classes. Those days are so long ago, so tragic and so sweet. Ah, if I could live them again, what changes there would be."

At this point Dundine went into a nostalgic reminiscence:

"Even now I can smell the air from the sea. Ambeules, our old district, is on the Gaas, and this is the loveliest part of the city, though by no means the richest. The flowers are unimaginable. To think that I have seen no flowers for thirty years, except for those I myself have worked." And now nothing must do but that Dundine should examine her tapestry which she had draped upon the back bulkhead of the saloon.

Presently she returned to the subject of Vogel Filschner. "The most morbidly sensitive of youths. The poet egged him on. And truth to tell, Jheral Tinzy humiliated Vogel dreadfully. Whatever the cause, Vogel performed his terrible deed. There were twenty-nine girls in the choral society. Every Friday night we sang, Vogel

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had learned to operate a spaceship—it was a course all the boys took. So Vogel stole one of those little Locater ships, and when we came out from choral practice to the bus, it was Vogel who drove us away. He took us to the spaceship and made us all get aboard. But it was the one night Jheral Tinzy had not come to practice. Vogel had no knowledge of this until the last girl left the bus, and he was like a stone statue. Too late then, he had no choice but to flee." Dundine sighed. "Twenty-eight girls, pure and fresh as little flowers. How he dealt with us! W<sup>e</sup> knew he was strange, but ferocious as a wild beast? No, never; how could we girls imagine such things? For reasons best known to himself he never used us in bed—Inga thought he was sulking because he had failed to capture Jheral. Godelia Parwitz and Rosamond—I can't think of her name—they tried to hit him with a metal implement, though it would have been the death of all had they succeeded, for none of us knew how to guide the ship. He punished them in a dreadful manner so that they cried and sobbed. Inga and I told him he was a wicked monster to act so. He only laughed, did Vogel Filschner. 'A wicked monster, am I? I'll show you a wicked monster!' And he took us to Sarkovy and sold us to Mr. Asm.

"But first he stopped at another world and sold ten girls who were the least well-favored. Then Inga and I and six others who hated him the most were sold on Sarkovy. Of the others, the most beautiful, I know nothing. Thanks to Kalzibah, I have been succored."

Dundine wanted to return to Earth. At New W<sup>ex</sup>ford, Gersen furnished her a wardrobe, a ticket to Earth and funds sufficient to keep her in comfort the rest of her life. At the spaceport she embarrassed him by falling on her knees and kissing his hands. "I thought to die and have my ashes scattered on a far planet! How was I so lucky?

With so many other poor creatures, why did Kalzibah select me for his favor?"

The same question, in different terms, had been troubling Gersén himself. With his wealth, he might have bought the whole of Qualag and Juniper and every other factory in Sabra, and brought each of the wretched women to their homes . . . What then? he asked himself. Sabra tapestries were in demand. New factories would be established, new slaves imported. A year later all would be as before.

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Still. . . Gersén heaved a sigh. The universe abounded with evils. No one man could defeat them all. Meanwhile Dundine was wiping her eyes, and apparently preparing to fall on her knees once more. Gersén said hastily, "One request I wish to make of you."

"Anything, anything!"

"You plan to return to Rolingshaven?"

"It is my home."

"You must not reveal how you were brought from Sabra. Tell no one! Invent any wild tale. But do not mention me. Do not mention that I asked you of Vogel Filschner."

"Trust me! The fiends of hell can tear forth my tongue, even then I will not speak!"

"Good-bye then." Gersén departed hastily before Dundine could again demonstrate her gratitude.

At a public telephone he called Bramar Investment Company. "Henry Lucas to speak to Mr. Addels."

"A moment, Mr. Lucas."

Addels appeared on the screen. "Mr. Lucas?"

Gersén allowed his image to go forth. "All continues to go well?"

"As well as could be expected. My problems arise only from the sheer mass of our money. I should say, your money." Addels permitted himself to smile. "But gradually I am training an organization. Incidentally, Radian Publishing Company is ours. We had it cheaply because of the circumstances I mentioned previously."

"No one has been inquisitive? There have been no questions, no rumors?"

"To the best of my knowledge, none. Zane Publishing Company bought Radian; Irwin and Jeddah own Zane, a numbered account at a Pontefract bank owns Irwin and Jeddah. Bramar Investment is the numbered account. Who is Bramar Investment?"

Ostensibly it is I."

"Well done!" said Gersen. "You could not have managed better."

Addels acknowledged the praise with a stiff nod. "I must say once more that Radian seems a poor investment, at least on the basis of past performance."

"Why has it been losing money? Everyone seems to read Cosmopolis. I see it everywhere."

"Perhaps this is so. Nevertheless circulation has slowly been

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declining. More significantly, the typical reader no longer is a decision-maker. The management has been trying to please everyone, including the advertisers; as a result the magazine has lost its flair."

"There would seem to be a remedy for the situation," said Gersen. "Hire a new editor, a man of imagination and intelligence. Instruct him to revitalize the magazine, without regard for advertisers or circulation, sparing no reasonable expense. When the magazine regains its prestige, circulation and advertisers will return fast enough."

"I am relieved that you preface the word expense with reasonable," said Addels in his driest voice. "I still am not accustomed to dealing with millions as if they were hundreds."

"No more am I," said Gersen. "The money means nothing to me—except that I find it uncommonly useful. One other matter. Instruct the Cosmopolis head office—I believe it is located in London—that a man named Henry Lucas will be sent to the editorial offices. Represent him as an employee of Zane Publishing if you like. He is to be put on the payroll as a special writer, who will work when and where he chooses without interference."

"Very well, sir. I will do as you require."

4

From Introduction to Old Earth, by Ferencz Szantho

Erdenfreude A mysterious and intimate emotion which dilates blood vessels, slides chills along the subcutaneous nerves, arouses qualms of apprehension and excitement like those infecting a girl at her first ball Erdenfreude typically attacks the outworld man approaching Earth for the first time Only the dull, the insensitive, are immune The excitable have been known to suffer near-fatal palpitations

The cause is the subject of learned dispute Neurologists describe the condition as anticipatory adjustment of the organism to absolute normality of all the

sensory modes color recognition, sonic perception, conolis force and gravitational equilibrium The psychologists differ, Erdenfreude, they state, is the flux of a hundred thousand racial memories boiling up almost to the level of consciousness Geneticists speak of RNA, metaphysicians refer to the soul; parapsychologists make the possibly irrelevant observation that haunted houses are to be found on Earth alone

History is bunk  
—Henry Ford

Gersen, who had lived nine years on Earth, nevertheless felt something of an outworlder's exhilaration as he hung above the great globe awaiting his clearance from Space Security Finally it arrived,

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with precise landing instructions, and Gersen dropped down to the West Europe spaceport at Tarn. He passed through sanitation procedures and health inspection—the most stringent of the Oikumenepunched appropriate buttons at the Immigration Control console, and finally was allowed to proceed about his business

He rode to London by tube, and registered at the Royal Oak Hotel, a block off the Strand The season was early autumn, the sun shone through a high thin overcast Old London, permeated with the vapors of antiquity, shone like a fine gray pearl

Gersen's clothes were in the Alphanor style, fuller in cut and richer in color than the clothes of London. On the Strand he went into a gentleman's outfitter, where he selected a fabric, then stripped to his underwear and was measured by photonic scanners Five minutes later he was delivered his new garments black trousers, a jacket of dark brown and beige, a white blouse and black cravat Inconspicuous now, Gersen continued along the Strand.

Dusk came to the sky Every planet had its distinctive dusk, thought Gersen The dusk of Alphanor, for instance, was an electric blue, gradually fading to the richest of ultramarines Sarkovy dusk was a dead dismal gray, with a tawny overtone Dusk at Sabra had been brown-gold, with domains of color around the other stars of the cluster The dusk of Earth was dusk as it should be—soft, heather-gra), soothing, an ending and a beginning Gersen dined at a restaurant which had maintained an unbroken tenancy for over seventeen hundred years The old oak beams, fumed and waxed, were as stout as ever, the plaster recently had been scraped of twenty layers of whitewash and refinished, a process which occurred every hundred years or so Gersen's thoughts reverted to his youth He had visited London twice with his grandfather, though for the most part they had lived in Amsterdam There never had been dinners such as this, never leisure or idleness Gersen shook his head sadl\ as he recalled the exercises to which his merciless grandfather had put him A wonder that he had stood up to the discipline

Gersen bought a copy of Covmopohs and returned to the hotel,

He went into the bar, and sitting at a table ordered a pint of Worthmington's AJe, brewed at Burton-on-Trent as had been the case for something less than two thousand years. He opened Cosfwpo/is. It was easy to understand why the magazine had become moribund. There were three long articles: "Have Earthmen Become Less Vir-

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ile?" "Patricia Poitrine: New Toast of the Smart Set"; "A Clergyman's Guide to Spiritual Renewal." Gersen flicked through the pages, then laid the magazine aside. He drained the mug, and went up to his room.

In the morning he visited the editorial offices of Cosniopolis, and asked to speak to the personnel director. This was Mrs. Neutra, a brittle, black-haired woman wearing a great deal of preposterous jewelry. She showed no inclination to speak to Gersen. "Sorry, sorry, sorry. I can't consider anything or anyone at this moment. I'm in a flap. Everybody's in a flap. There's been a shake-up; no one's job is any good."

"Perhaps I had better speak to the editor in chief," said Gersen. "There was to have been a letter from Zane Publishing, and it should have arrived."

The personnel director made a gesture of irritation. "Who or what is Zane Publishing?"

"The new ownership," said Gersen politely.

"Oh." The woman pushed among the papers on her desk. "Maybe this is it." She read. "Oh, you're Henry Lucas."

"Yes."

"Hmm . . . Piff puff. . . You're to be a special writer. Something we just don't need at the moment. But I'm only personnel director. Oh hell, fill out the application, make an appointment for your psychiatric tests. If you survive, and you probably won't, show up a week from tomorrow for your orientation course."

Gersen shook his head. "I don't have time for any of these formalities. I doubt if the new owners have much sympathy with them."

"Sorry, Mr. Lucas. This is our inflexible program."

"What does the letter say?"

"It says to put Mr. Henry Lucas on the payroll as special writer."

"Then please do so."

"Oh, double bing-bang hell. If this is how things are going to go, why have a personnel director? Why have psychiatric tests and orientation courses? Why not just let janitors put out the rag?"

The woman seized a form, wrote with swift strokes of a flamboyant quill pen. "Here you are. Take it into the managing editor, he'll arrange your assignment."

The managing editor was a portly gentleman with lips pursed

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in a worried pout. "Yes, Mr. Lucas. Mrs. Neutra Just called me. I understand you have been sent in by the new ownership."

"I've been associated with them for a long time," said Gersen. "But all I want at this moment is whatever identification you supply your special correspondents, so that if necessary I can demonstrate that I'm an employee of Cosmopolis."

The managing editor spoke into an intercom. "On your way out, step into Department 2A and your card will be prepared." He leaned morosely back into his chair. "It seems that you are to be a roving reporter, responsible to no one. A very nice billet, if I may say so. What do you propose to write about?"

"One thing or another," said Gersen. "Whatever comes up."

The managing editor's face sagged with bewilderment. "You can't go out and write a Cosmopolis article like that! Our issues are programmed months ahead! We use public opinion polls to find out what subjects people are interested in."

"How can they know what they're interested in if they haven't read it?" asked Gersen. "The new owners are throwing the public opinion polls away."

The managing editor shook his head sadly. "How will we know what to write about?"

"I have an idea or two. For instance, the Institute could stand an airing. What are its current aims? Who are the men of Degrees 101, 102, 103? What information have they suppressed? What of Tryon Russ and his anti-gravity machine? The Institute deserves a comprehensive study. You could easily devote an entire issue to the Institute."

The editor nodded curtly. "Don't you think it's a bit-well, intense? Are people really interested in these matters?"

"If not they should be."

"Easily said, but it's no way to run a magazine. People don't want to really understand anything; they want to think they have learned without the necessity of application. In our 'heavy' articles we try to supply keys and guides, so at least they'll have something to talk about at parties. But go on-what else do you have in mind?"

"I've been thinking of Viole Falushe and the Palace of Love."

Exactly what goes on at this establishment? What face does Violen Falushe show? What name does he bear when he comes in from

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BeyoncP Who are his guests at the Palace of Love? How have they farced Would they care to return?"

"An interesting topic," the editor admitted "A bit close to the knuckle perhaps. We prefer to steer away from sensationalism and—shall we say—the grim facts of reality. Still I've often wondered about the Palace of Love WTiat in the world does go on? The usual, I suppose. But no one knows for sure. WTiat else?"

"That's all for now." Gersen rose to his feet. "In fact I'll be working on this last story myself."

The managing editor shrugged his shoulders. "You seem to have been accorded a free hand."

Gersen immediately rode the sub-Channel tube to Rolmgshaven, arriving at the vast Zone Station a few minutes before noon. He crossed the white-tiled lobby, past shdeways and escalators labeled W^ien, Pans, Tsargrad, Berlin, Budapest, Kiev, Neapolis and a dozen other ancient cities. He paused at a kiosk to buy a map, then went to a cafe, settled himself at a table with a stem of beer and a plate of sausages

Gersen had lived long in Amsterdam and had passed through the Zone Station on several occasions, but of the city Rolingshaven he knew little. As he ate, he studied the map.

Rolingshaven was a city of considerable extent, divided into four principal municipalities by two rivers, the Gaas and the Sluicht, and the great Evres Canal. At the north was Zummer, a rather grim district of apartment towers and careful malls laid out by some neat-minded city council ot the distant past. On the Heybau, a promontory hooking out into the sea, was the famous Handelhal Conservatory, the wonderful Galactic Zoo and the Kindergarten;

Zummer otherwise was devoid of interest.

South across the Sluicht was the Old City—a teeming confusion of small shops, inns, hostels, restaurants, beer caverns, book-stalls, huddled offices, askew little houses of stone and timber—dating from the Middle Ages. A district as chaotic and picturesque as Zummer was stark and dull; and here as well was the ancient University, overlooking the fish market along the banks of the Evres Canal

Ambeules lay across the canal— a district of nine hills covered with homes and a periphery given to wharves, warehouses, ship-yards, mud flats from which were dredged the famous Flamande

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oysters. The great Gaas estuary separated Ambeules from Dourrai,

a district of somewhat lower hills, again covered with small homes, with the great industries and fabrication plants straggling along the shore and southward.

This was the city where Violen Falushe—or more accurately, Vogel Filschner—had lived, and where he had committed his first great crime. The exact locale was Ambeules, and Gersen decided to base himself in this area.

Finishing the beer and sausages he rode an escalator to the third level above, where a local tube car whisked him south under the Evres Canal to Ambeules Station. He rode to the surface, and looking right and left through the hazy radiance which characterized the region, approached the old woman who managed a newsstand. "Which is a good hotel nearby?"

The old woman pointed a brown finger. "Up Hoebhngasse to the Rembrandt Hotel: as good as any in Ambeules. Of course, if it's elegance you require, then you must go to the Hotel Prince Franz Ludwig in Old Town, the finest in Europe with prices to match."

Gersen chose the Rembrandt Hotel, a pleasant old-fashioned structure with public rooms paneled in dark wood, and was taken to a suite of high-ceilinged rooms overlooking the great gray Gaas.

The day was still young. Gersen rode a cab to the Maine, where he paid a small fee and was given access to the City Directory. He ran the record back to 1495. The screen spun to the letter F, Fi, and finally the name Filschner. At this time three Filschners were listed. Gersen made notes of the addresses. He likewise found two Tmzys, and made similar notes. Then he dialed to the current listings and found two Filschners and four Tinzys. One of the Filschners and one of the Tinzys had maintained the same address across the years.

Gersen next visited the office of the Ambeules Helion, and on the strength of his Cosmopolis card was given access to the morgue. He brought the index to the screen, scanned it for the name Vogel Filschner, found a code number, coded and punched the "show" button.

The tale was much as Dundine had told, though in condensed form. Vogel Filschner was described as "a boy given to spells of brooding and wandering alone by night." His mother, Hedwig Filschner, identified as a beautician, professed herself amazed at Vo-

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gel's outrageous deed. She described him as a "good boy, though very idealistic and moody."

Vogel Filschner had had no close friends. In the biology laboratory he had been teamed with a lad named Roman Haenigsen, the school chess champion. They had played an occasional game of

chess during the lunch hour Roman evinced no astonishment at Vogel's crime "He was a fellow who hated to lose. Whenever I beat him, he would go savage and throw aside the pieces. Still, it amused me to play with him. I don't like people who take the game frivolously "

Vogel Filschner was not a frivolous boy, thought Gersen.

A photograph appeared, the kidnaped girls, grouped in a picture identified as the "Philidor Bohus Choral Society " In the front row stood a plump smiling girl in whom Gersen recognized Dundme. Among the girls would be Jheral Tmzy, and Gersen checked the faces against the caption. Jheral Tmzy was the third girl in the fourth row. Not only did a girl in the third row obscure her face, she also had turned her head aside at the time the photograph was taken, and what could be seen of her face was indistinct.

There was no photograph of Vogel Filschner.

The file ended. So much for that, thought Gersen. Vogel Filschner's identity as Virole Falushe was not widely apprehended in Ambeules, if at all. As verification, Gersen dialed for the file on Virole Falushe, the Demon Prince, but only a single reference excited his interest "Virole Falushe at various times has implied that his original home was Earth. On several occasions a rumor has reached us to the effect that Virole Falushe has been seen here in Ambeules. Why he should wish to haunt our unexciting district is a question which cannot be answered, and the rumors appear no more than an insane hoax."

Gersen departed the newspaper offices and went to stand in the street The gendarmery? Gersen decided against approaching them. Unlikely, that they could tell him more than he already knew Unlikely, that they would if they could. Additionally, Gersen had no desire to arouse official curiosity.

Gersen checked the addresses he had noted, as well as the location of the Philidor Bohus Lyceum, on his map. The Lyceum was the nearest, at the far side of Lothar Parish Gersen signaled a three-wheeled autocab, and was conveyed up one of the nine hills through a district of small detached houses. Some were constructed

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in the ancient fashion, of glazed dark red brick and a high pitched roof of milk-glass tiles, others were in the new "hollow trunk" style:

narrow concrete cylinders two thirds below the ground. There were houses of artificial sandstone compressed as a unit from molded soil;

houses of pink or white panels surmounted by crimped metal domes; houses of laminated paper, with transparent roofs electrically charged to repel dust. The bulbs of urn-cast glass or glass-metal, so common among the worlds of the Concourse, had never won acceptance among the folk of western Europe, who compared them to pumpkins and paper lanterns, and called the people who lived in them "nonhuman futunans." The cab discharged Ger-

sen before the Philidor Bohus Lyceum, a grim cube of synthetic black stone flanked by a pair of smaller cubes

The director of the lyceum was Dr. Willem Ledmger, a bland large-bodied man with taffy-colored skin and a lank lock of yellow hair which wound around his scalp in a most peculiar manner. Gersén wondered at the man's audacity thus to present himself before several thousand adolescents. Ledinger was affable and unsuspecting, readily accepting Gersén's statement that Cosmopohs wished to present a survey of contemporary young people.

"I don't think there's much to write about," said Ledinger. "Our young people are, if I must say it, unexceptionable. We have many bright students and at least a fair quota of dullards . "

Gersén steered the conversation to students of the past and their careers, from here it was an easy connection to the subject of Vogel Filschner.

"Ah yes," mused Dr Ledmger, patting his yellow topknot. "Vogel Filschner. I haven't heard his name for years. Before my time, of course; I was a mere instructor across the city at Hulba Technical Academy But the scandal reached us, never fear. Faculties have big ears. What a tragedy! To think of a lad like that going so far wrong!"

"He never returned to Ambeules, then?"

"He'd be a fool to do so Or to advertise his presence, at any rate."

"Do you have the likeness of Vogel Filschner among your records? Perhaps I might do a separate piece upon this peculiar crime."

Grudgingly Dr. Ledmger admitted that photographs of Vogel Filschner were on file. "But why rake up the old nastiness? It is like breaking into graves."

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"On the other hand, such an article might identify the rogue, and bring him to justice "

"Justice?" Dr. Ledmger curled his lip in disbelief. "After thirty years? He was a hysterical child No matter what his crime, by this time he has made redemption and found peace. What could be gained by bringing him to what you call justice?"

Gersén was somewhat startled by Dr. Ledinger's vehemence. "To dissuade others. Perhaps there is a potential Vogel Filschner among your students this very instant."

Dr. Ledmger smiled wistfully "I don't doubt it an instant. Certain of these young rascals—well, I won't tell tales out of school. And I won't supply you with the photographs. I find the idea completely objectionable."

"Is there a yearbook for the year of the crime? Or better, the previous year-

Dr. Ledmger looked at Gersen a moment, his affability slowly disappearing. Then he went to his wall, plucked a volume from the shelves. He watched quietly as Gersen turned the pages, and finally came upon the photograph of the Girls Choral Society he had already seen. Gersen pointed "There is Jheral Tmzy, the girl who rebuffed Vogel, and drove him to his crime."

Dr. Ledmger examined the picture "Think of it. Twenty-eight girls, snatched away Beyond. Their lives blasted. I wonder how they fared. Some may still be alive, poor things "

"Whatever became of Jheral Tmzy? She was not among the group if you recall."

Dr. Ledmger examined Gersen with suspicion "You seem to know a great deal about the case. Have you been completely candid with me?"

Gersen grinned. "Not altogether I am principally interested in Vogel Filschner, but I don't want anyone to know I'm interested. If I can get the information I need discreetly, with no one the wiser, so much the better."

"You are a police officer? Or of the IPCC?"

Gersen displayed his identification. "Here is my sole claim to fame."

"Hm. Cowioph's plans to publish an article on Vogel Filschner? It seems a waste of paper and ink. No wonder Cosmoph's has lost prestige."

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"What of Jheral Tinzy? You have her photograph in your files?"

"Undoubtedly." Dr. Ledmger laid his hands upon the desk, to signal that the interview had reached its end. "But we cannot open our confidential files haphazardly. I am sorry."

Gersen rose to his feet. "Thank you, in any case."

"I have done nothing to help you," said Dr. Ledmger stonily.

Vogel Filschner had lived with his mother in a narrow little house at the eastern end of Ambeules, bordering on a dingy district of warehouses and transportation depots. Gersen climbed the embroidered iron steps, touched the button, faced the inspection eye. A woman's voice spoke. "Yes?"

Gersen spoke in his most confident voice. "I am trying to locate

Madame Hedwig Filschner, who lived here many years ago."

"I know no one of that name. You must consult with Ewane Clodig who owns the property. We only pay rent "

Ewane Clodig, whom Gersen found in the offices of Clodig Properties, consulted his records. "Madame Hedwig Filschner . . . The name is familiar . . . I don't see it on my list. . . Here it is. She moved, let me see, thirty years ago."

"You have her present address?"

"No sir. That is too much to ask. I have not even a forwarding address from thirty years ago . . . But it comes back! Is she not the mother of Vogel Filschner, the boy slaver?"

"Correct."

"Well then, I can tell you this. When the deed was known, she packed her belongings and disappeared and no one has heard of her since."

Jheral Tinzy's old home was a tall octagonal structure of the so-called Fourth Palladian style, situated halfway up Bailleui Hill. The address corresponded to one which Gersen had noted in the current directory; the family had not changed its residence.

A handsome woman of early middle-age answered the door. She wore a gay peasant smock, a flowered scarf around her head. Gersen appraised the woman before he spoke. She returned a gaze so direct as to be bold. "You're Jheral Tinzy?" Gersen asked tentatively.

"Jheral?" The woman's eyebrows arched high. "No-no in-

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deed." She gave a sardonic bark of laughter. "What a strange thing to ask. Who are you?"

Gersen produced his identification. The woman read, returned the card. "What makes you think I am Jheral Tinzy?"

"She lived here at one time. She would be about your age."

"I'm her cousin." The woman considered Gersen more carefully than ever. "What did you want with Jheral?"

"May I come in? I'll explain."

The woman hesitated. As Gersen came forward she made a quick motion to restrain him. Then, after a dubious glance over her shoulder, she moved aside. Gersen entered a hall with a floor of immaculate white glass tiles. On one hand was the display wall, characteristic of middle-class European homes; here hung a panel intricately inlaid with wood, bone and shell: Lenka workmanship from Nowhere, one of the Concourse planets; a set of perfume points from Pamtile; a rectangle of polished and perforated obsid-

ian, and one of the so-called "supplication slabs"\* from Lupus 2311.

Gersen paused to examine a small tapestry of exquisite design and workmanship. "This is a beautiful piece. Do you know where it came from?"

"It's very rich," agreed the woman. "I believe it came from off-world."

"It looks to me like a Sabra piece," said Gersen.

From the upper floor came a harsh call: "Emma? WTw is there?"

"Awake already," muttered the woman. She raised her voice. "A gentleman from Cosmopolis, Aunt."

"We wish no magazines!" cried the voice. "I am explicit!"

"Very well, Aunt. I'll tell him so." Emma signaled Gersen into a sitting room, jerked her head toward the source of the voice. "Jheral's mother. She is not well."

"A pity," said Gersen. "Where, incidentally, is Jheral?"

\*The nonhuman names of Peninsula 4-\, Lupus 2 III. devote the greater part of their lives to the working of these slabs, which apparcrirly have a religious significance. Twice each year, at the solstices, two hundred and twenty-four microscopically exact slabs are placed aboard a ceremonial harge, which is then allowed to drift out upon the ocean. The Lupus Salvage Company maintains a ship just over the horizon on the Peninsula 4A. As soon as the raft has drifted from sight of land, it is recovered, the slabs are removed, exported and sold as vhrT' il'ni-i.

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Emma turned her bold glance on Gersen. "WThly do you want to know?"

"To be candid, I'm trying to locate a certain Vogel Filschner."

Emma laughed soundlessly and without mirth. "You've come to the wrong place to find Vogel Filschner. What a joke!"

"You knew him?"

"Oh yes. He was in the class under mine at the Lyceum."

"You haven't seen him since the kidnaping?"

"Oh no. Never. Still—it's strange that you should ask." Emma hesitated, smiling tremulously as if in embarrassment. "It's like a

cloud passing over the sun. Sometimes I look around, sure that I've glimpsed Vogel Filschner—but he's never there."

"What happened to Jheral?"

Emma seated herself, looked far back aown the years. "You must remember that there was much publicity and outcry. It was the greatest outrage in memory. Jheral was pointed at; there were unpleasant scenes. Several of the mothers actually slapped and abused Jheral; she had snubbed Vogel, driven him to crime, hence, shared his guilt... I must admit," said Emma reflectively, "that Jheral was a heartless flirt. She was simply adorable, of course. She could bring the boys with one little sidelong glance—like this . . ." Emma demonstrated. "Such a rascal. She even flirted with Vogel. Pure sadism, because she couldn't bear the sight of him. Ah, the detestable Vogel! Every day Jheral would come home from school to tell us another of Vogel's enormities. How he dissected a frog, and then, after wiping his hands on a paper towel, ate his lunch. How badly he smelled, as if he never changed his clothes. How he would boast of his poetic mind, and try to impress her with his magnificence. It's true! Jheral with her tricks incited Vogel—and twenty-eight other girls paid the price."

"And then?"

"Great indignation. Everyone turned against Jheral, as perhaps they had always longed to do. Jheral finally ran away with an older man. She never returned to Ambeules. Not even her mother knows where she is."

Into the room rushed a blazing-eyed old woman with a mane of flying white hair. Gersen Jumped behind a chair to avoid her charge. "What do you want, asking questions in this house? Be off with you—hasn't there been trouble enough? I don't trust your

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face, you are like all the rest. Out, never return' Scoundrel' The audacity, entering this house with your filthy questions . . ."

Gersen left the house as expeditiously as he was able. Emma started to accompany him to the door but her aunt, hobbling forward, shoved her aside.

The door closed, the near-hysterical ranting became muffled. Gersen heaved a deep breath. A virago' He had been lucky to escape without scratches

At a nearby cafe Gersen drank a flask of wine and watched the sun sink toward the sea ... An excellent possibility, of course, that the entire line oi investigation, beginning with the notice in the Avente newspaper, was a wild goose chase. To date, the only link between Viole Falushe and Vogel Filschner was the opinion of Karkarsis Asm. Emma Tm?y apparently believed that she had seen Vogel F'llschncr m Ambeules, Viole Falushe might well enjoy the dangerous pleasure of returning to the scenes of his childhood. If so, why had he not revealed himself to his old acquaintances? Al-

though it seemed that Vogel Filschner had made precious few friends or acquaintances in any event. Jheral Tmzy perhaps had made the wisest of decisions when she took herself away from Ambeules Vmie Falushe had a notoriously long memory. His one friend had been Roman Haemgsen, the chess champion. Somewhere also there had been mention of a poet who had incited Vogel Filschner to excess . . . Gersen called for a directory, and searched for the name Haemgsen. There it was; the book almost fell open to the name Gersen copied the address and asked directions from a waiter. It appeared that Roman Haemgsen lived scarcely five minutes' walk away. Finishing his wine, Gersen set off through the waning sunlight.

The house of Roman Haemgsen was the most elegant of the houses he had visited this day a three-story structure of metal and meltstone panels, with electric windows to go transparent or opaque at a spoken word.

Haemgsen was only just arriving home when Gersen turned into the walk. A small brisk man with a large head and prim meticulous features, he peered sharply at Gersen and asked his business. Candor in this case seemed more useful than indirection. Gersen said: "I am making inquiries in regard to your old classmate Vogel Filschner. I understand that you were almost his only friend "

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"Hm," said Roman Haenigsen. He thought a moment. "Come, inside, if you will, and we will talk."

He took Gersen into a study decorated with all manner of chess memorabilia, portraits, busts, collections of chessmen, photographs. "Do you play chess?" he asked Gersen.

"I have played on occasion, though not often."

"Like anything else, one must practice to keep in fighting trim. Chess is an old game." He went to a board, disarranged the chessmen with affectionate contempt. "Every variation has been analyzed; there is a recorded game to illuminate the results of any reasonable move. If one had a sufficiently good memory, he would not need to think to win his games, he could merely play someone else's winning game. Luckily, no one owns such a memory but the robots. Still, you did not come here to talk of chess. Will you take a glass of liquor?"

"Thank you." Gersen accepted a crystal goblet containing an inch of spirits.

"Vogel Filschner! Strange to hear that name once more. Is his whereabouts known?"

"This is what I am attempting to learn."

Roman Haemgsen gave his head a wry shake. "You will learn nothing from me. I have neither seen him nor heard from him since 1494."

"I had hardly expected that he would return in his old identity. But it's possible—" Gersen paused as Roman Haemgsen snapped his fingers.

"Peculiar!" said Haenigsen. "Each Thursday night I play at the Chess Club. Perhaps a year ago I noticed a man standing under the clock. I thought, surely that's not Vogel Filschner^ He turned, I saw his face. It was a man somewhat like Vogel, but far different. A man of fine appearance and poise, a man who had nothing of Vogel's hangdog surliness. And yet—since you mention it—there was something to this man, perhaps his manner of holding his arms and hands, which reminded me of Vogel "

"You haven't seen this man smce^"

"Not once."

"Did you speak to him?"

"No. In my surprise I must have halted to stare, but then I hurried on past."

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"Can you think of anyone Vogel might wish to see? Did he have friend'i other than yourself^"

Roman Haenigsen pursed his lips wryly. "I was hardly his friend We shared a laboratory table, I played him an occasional game of chess, which he often won. Had he applied himself he might have taken the championship But he cared only for mooning over girls and writing bad poetry in imitation of a certain Navarth."

"Ah, Navarth. This is the poet whom Vogel Filschner sought to emulate "

"Unfortunately In my opinion Navarth was a charlatan, a bombast, a man of the most dubious attitudes."

"And what has become of Navarth^"

"I believe he still is about, though hardly the man he was thirty years ago People have grown wise, studied decadence no longer shocks as it did when I was a lad Vogel naturally was entranced, and went through the most ludicrous antics in order to identify with his idol. Yes indeed. If anyone is to blame for the crimes of Vogel Filschner, it is the mad poet Navarth'"

Drinking whisky by the peg,  
Singing songs of drunken glee,  
I thought to swallow half a keg  
But Tim R. Mortiss degurgled me.

Not precisely comme il faut  
To practice frank polygamy;

I might have practiced, even so,  
But Tim R Mortiss disturgled me.

Chorus:

Tim R. Mortiss, Tim R. Mortiss,  
He's a loving friend-  
He holds my hand while I'm asleep  
He guides me on my four-day creep,  
He's with me to the end.

To woo a dainty Eskimo

I vowed to swim the Bering Sea.

No sooner had I wet a toe

When Tim R. Mortiss occurgled me.

A threat arcane, a fearful bane

Within an old phylactery.

I turned the rubbish down a dram,

Now Tim R. Mortiss perturgles me

Chorus (with a snapping of fingers and clicking of  
heels in mid-air)

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Tim R. Morriss, Tim R. Mortiss,  
He's a loving friend.  
He holds my hand while I'm asleep,  
He guides me on my four-day creep,  
He's with me to the end.

-Navarth

On the following day Gersen paid a second visit to the offices of the Helion. The dossier on Navarth was enthusiastic and ample, reporting scandals, improprieties, defiances and outrageous pronouncements across a period of forty years. The initial entry dealt with an opera, presented by students of the university, with a libretto by Navarth. The first performance was declared an infamy, and nine students were expelled from the university. Thereafter, Navarth's career soared and collapsed, resurged, re-collapsed, at last with finality. For the past ten years he had resided aboard a houseboat on the Gaas estuary near the Fitlingasse.

Gersen tubed to Station Hedrick on Boulevard Castel Vivence and surfaced in the commercial and shipping district of Ambeules beside the Gaas estuary. The district roiled with the activity of agencies, warehouses, offices, wharves, buffets, restaurants, wine-

shops, fruit hawkers, news kiosks, dispensaries. Barges nosed into docks to be unloaded by robots; drays rumbled along the boulevard;

from below came the vibration of freight moving by tube. At a sweetshop Gersen inquired for the Fitlingasse and was directed east along the boulevard.

Automatic open-sided passenger wagons served the boulevard, with patrons riding on benches facing the street. Gersen rode a mile, two miles, with the Gaas on the right hand. The bustle diminished; the imposing blocks and masses of the commercial district gave way to ancient three- and four-story structures: queer narrow-windowed buildings of melt-stone or terra-cotta panels stained a hundred subtle colors by smoke and salt air. Occasionally the wagon passed vacant areas, where only weeds grow. Through these gaps could be seen the next street to the north, on a somewhat higher level than Boulevard Castel Vivence, with tall apartment buildings pressed tightly against each other.

The Fitlingasse was a narrow gray alley striking off up the hill. Gersen alighted and almost at once observed a hulking two-storied

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houseboat moored to a dilapidated dock. A wisp of smoke drifted up from the chimney. Someone was aboard.

Gersen took stock of the surroundings. Hazy sunlight played on the estuary; on the far shore thousands of houses with brown tile roofs stood in ranks down to the water's edge. Elsewhere were unused wharves, rotting piles, a warehouse or two, a saloon with purple and green windows extending over the water. On the dock a girl of seventeen or eighteen sat tossing pebbles into the water. She gave Gersen a brief dispassionate stare, then looked away. Gersen turned back to consider the houseboat. If this were Navarth's residence, he enjoyed a very pleasant prospect—though the wan sunlight, the brown roofs of Dourrai, the rotting wharves, the lapping water, invested the scene with melancholy. Even the girl seemed somber beyond her years. She wore a short black skirt, a brown jacket. Her hair was dark and ruffled, whether from wind or neglect, it could not be known. Gersen approached and inquired, "Is Navarth aboard the houseboat?"

She nodded without change of expression, and watched with the detachment of a naturalist as Gersen descended the ladder to the landing, then crossed an alarming gangplank to the foredeck of the houseboat.

Gersen knocked at the door. There was no response. Gersen knocked again. The door was flung violently open; a sleepy unshaven man peered forth. His age was indeterminate; he was thin, spindle-shanked, with a twisted beak of a nose, ruffled hair of no particular color, eyes which though perfectly set gave the impression of looking in two directions at once. His manner was wild and truculent. "Is there no privacy left in the world? Off the boat, at

once. Whenever I settle for a moment's rest, some sheep-faced functionary, some importunate peddler of tracts insists on pounding me out of my couch. Will you not depart? Have I not made myself clear? I warn you, I have a trick or two up my sleeve . . ."

Gersen tried to speak to no avail. When Navarrh reached within he hastily retreated to the dock. "A moment of your time!" he called. "I am no functionary, no salesman. I am named Henry Lucas, and I wish—"

Navarth shook his skinny fist. "Not now, not tomorrow^ not in the total scope of the future, nor at any time thereafter, do I wish to make your acquaintance. Be off with you! You have the face of a man that brings ill news; a gnashing blacktooth grin. These mat-

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ters are clear to me: you are fey! I want nothing of you. Go away." With a leer of evil triumph he swung the gangplank away from the landing, re-entered the houseboat.

Gersen returned to the dock. The girl sat as before. Gersen looked back down at the houseboat. He asked in a wondering voice:

"Is he always like that?"

"He is Navarth," said the girl, as if this were all that need be said.

Gersen went to the saloon, drank a pint of beer. The bartender was a quiet watchful man of great height with an imposing stomach, and either knew nothing about Navarth or did not choose to reveal what he knew. Gersen gleaned no information.

He sat thinking. A half hour passed. Then going to the telephone directory, he looked in the classified section under Salvage. An advertisement caught his eye:

#### JOBAN SALVAGE AND TOW TUGS—CRANE BARGE—DIVING EQUIPMENT

No job too large or too small.

Gersen telephoned and made his needs known. He was assured that on the morrow the equipment he required would be at his service.

The following morning a heavy ocean-going tug drove up the estuary, turned, eased into the mooring next to Navarth's houseboat, with a bare three feet between. The mate bawled orders to the seamen; lines were flung up to the dock and dropped over bollards. The tug was moored.

Navarth came out on deck, dancing with fury. "Must you moor so close? Take that great hulk away; do you intend to thrust me into the dock?"

Leaning on the railing of the tug, Gersen looked down into Navarth's upturned face. "I believe I spoke a few words to you yesterday?"

"I recall very well; I requested your departure, and here you are again, more inconveniently than before."

"I wonder if you would give me the pleasure of a few minutes' conversation? Perhaps there might be profit in it for you."

"Profit? Bah. I have poured more money out of my shoe than you have spent. I require only that you take your tug elsewhere."

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"Certainly. We are here but for a few minutes."

Navarth gave a pettish nod. At the far side of the tug the diver Gersen had hired was climbing back on board. Gersen turned to Navarth. "It's very important that I speak to you; if you would be so good as to—"

"This importance exists from a single point of view. Be off with you and your mammoth tug!"

"At once," said Gersen. He nodded to the diver, who touched a button.

Under the houseboat sounded an explosion; the houseboat shuddered and began to list. Navarth ran back and forth in a frenzy. From the tug grapples were lowered and hooked to the houseboat's rub-rail. "Apparently there has been an explosion in your engine room," Gersen told Navarth.

"How can this be? There has never been an explosion before. There is not even an engine. I am about to sink!"

"Not so long as you are supported by the lines. But we are leaving in one minute and I must cast loose the grapples."

"WTiat?" Navarth threw up his arms. "I will go to the bottom, together with the boat! Is this your desire?"

"If you recall, you yourself ordered me to leave," said Gersen in a reasonable voice. "Hence—" he turned to the crewmen. "Throw off the grapples. We depart."

"No, no!" bellowed Navarth. 'Til sink!"

"If you invite me aboard your boat, if you talk to me and help me compose an article I'm writing, then that's a different matter," said Gersen. "I might be disposed to help you through this misfortune, even, perhaps, to the extent of repairing your hull."

"WTly not?" stormed Navarth. "You are responsible for the explosion."

"Careful, Navarth. That's at the very verge of slander! Remember, there are witnesses."

"Bah! What you have done is piracy and extortion. Writing an article, indeed. Well, then—why didn't you say so in the first place? I too am a writer! Come aboard; we will talk. I am always grateful for some small diversion; a man without friends is a tree without leaves."

Gersen jumped down upon the houseboat; Navarth, now all amiability, arranged chairs where they caught the full play of the pallid sunlight. He brought forth a bottle of white wine. "Sit then;

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make yourself at ease'" He opened the bottle, poured, then leaning back in his chair drank with pleasure His face was placid and guileless, as if all the racial wisdom had passed through leaving no perceptible traces. Like Earth, Navarth was old, irresponsible and melancholy, full of a dangerous mirth.

"You are a writer then? I may say you do not correspond to the usual image."

Gersen produced his Cosmopoliv identification. "Mr. Henry Lucas," read Navarth "Special writer Why do you come to me? I am no longer heeded, my vogue is a memory Discredited, penurious. Where was my offense^ I sought to express truth in all its vehemence. This is a danger. A meaning must be uttered idly, without emphasis. The listener is under no compulsion to react, his customary defenses are not m place, the meaning enters his mind I have much to say about the world, but every year the compulsion dwindles. Let them live and die, it is all one to me. WTiat is the scope of your article^"

"Viole Falushe."

Navarth blinked. "An interesting topic, but why come to me?"

"Because you knew him as Vogel Filschner."

"Hm Well, yes. This is a fact not generally known." With fingers suddenly limp Navarth poured more wine "What specifically do you wish^"

"Knowledge."

"I suggest," said Navarth suddenly brisk, "that you seek the information at its source."

Gersen nodded agreement. "Well enough, if I knew where to look. But what if he is off Beyond^ At his Palace of Love."

"This is not the case; he is here on Earth." As soon as Navarth spoke he seemed to regret his ingenuousness and frowned in irritation.

Gersen leaned back, his doubts and misgivings dissolved. Vogel Filschner and Virole Falushe were one; here was a man who knew him in both identities.

Navarth had become uneasy and resentful. "A thousand topics more interesting than Virole Falushe "

"How do you know he's on Earth?"

Navarth made a sound of grand scorn. "How do I know anything? I am Navarth!" He pointed to a wisp of smoke on the sky. "I see that, I know." He pointed to a dead fish, floating belly up-

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ward. "I see that, I know " He raised the bottle of wine, held it up against the sunlight. "I see that, I know "

Gersen reflected a moment in silence. "I am in no position to criticize your epistemology," he said at last "In the first place, I don't understand it Have you no more explicit knowledge of Virole Falushe?"

Navarth attempted to lay his finger slyly alongside his nose, but miscalculating, prodded his eye. "There is a time for bravado and another for caution I still do not know the point of your article."

"It is to be a judicious document, without exaggeration or apology. I intend that the facts will speak for themselves."

Navarth pursed his lips "A dangerous undertaking. Virole Falushe is the most sensitive of men. Do you recall the princess who detected a pea under forty mattresses? Virole Falushe can smell out a slur in a blind infant's morning invocation to Kalzibah . . . On the other hand, the world revolves, the carpet of knowledge unrolls. Virole Falushe has given me no cause for gratitude."

"Your appraisal of his character then is negative?" asked Gersen cautiously.

Navarth could control himself no longer. He drank wine with a grandiose gesture. "Negative indeed. Were I to give all orders, what a retribution I could create!" He slumped back in his chair, pointed a skinny finger toward the horizon, spoke in a hushed monotone. "A pyre tall as a mountain, and Virole Falushe at the top. Platforms surrounding for ten thousand musicians. With a single glance I strike the fire The musicians play while their whisky boils and their instruments melt Virole Falushe sings soprano . . ." He poured more wine. "A wistful vision. It can never be I would be content seeing Virole Falushe drowned or dismembered by lions—"

"You evidently are well acquainted."

Navarth nodded, his gaze fixed on the past "Vogel Filschner read my poetry An imaginative youth, but disoriented How he changed, how he expanded. To his imagination he added control, he is now a great artist."

"Artist3 What manner of artist5"

Navarth dismissed the question as irrelevant. "Never could he have arrived at his present stature without art, without style and proportion. Do not be deceived' Like myself he is a simple man, with the clearest of goals Now you—you are the most complicated

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and opaque of men. I see a corner of your mind, then a black film shifts. Are you an Earthman? But tell me nothing." Navarth waved his hands as if to intercept any answer Gersen might feel called upon to make. "There is too much knowledge already in the world;

we use facts as crutches, to the impoverishment of our senses. Facts are falsehoods; logic is deceit. I know a single system of communication: the declaiming of poetry."

"Viole Falushe is also a poet?"

"He has no great art with words," grumbled Navarth, unwilling to relinquish control of the conversation.

"When Viole Falushe visits Earth, where does he stay? Here with you?"

Navarth stared at Gersen unbelievably. "This is a sorry thought."

"Where then does he stay?"

"Here, there, everywhere. He is as elusive as air."

"How do you seek him out?"

"That I never do. He occasionally visits me."

"And he has done so recently?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Have I not implied as much? Why are you so interested in Viole Falushe?"

"To answer this would be to inflict a fact upon you," said Gersen with a grin. "But it's no secret. I represent Cosmopolis magazine and I wish to write an article on his life and activities."

"Hmfmf. A popinjay for vanity is Viole Falushe. But why not put your questions to him directly?"

"I would like to do so. First I must make his acquaintance."

"Nothing is easier," declared Navarth, "provided you pay the fees."

"Why not? I am on a liberal expense account."

Navarth jumped to his feet, suddenly full of enthusiasm. "We will need a beautiful girl, young, unsullied. She must project a particular quality of scintillance, a susceptibility, a fervor, an urgency." He looked vaguely here and there, as if in search of something he had lost. Up on the dock he spied the girl whom Gersen had seen the day before. Navarth put fingers to his mouth, produced a shrill whistle, signaled the girl to approach. "She'll do very well."

"Is this an unsullied young scintillant?" asked Gersen. "She seems more of a guttersnipe."

"Ha ha," cawed Navarth. "You will see! I am weak and ca-

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chectic, but I am Navarth; old as I am, women bloom under my touch. You will see."

The girl came aboard the houseboat, and listened to Navarth's program without comment. "We go forth to dine. Expense means nothing, we shall exalt ourselves with the finest. Prepare yourself then with silks, with jewels, with your most precious unguents. This is a wealthy gentleman, the finest of fellows. What is your name once more?"

"Henry Lucas."

"Henry Lucas. He is impatient to proceed. Go then, prepare yourself."

The girl shrugged. "I am prepared,"

"You are the best judge of this," declared Navarth. "Inside then, while I consult my wardrobe." He glanced at the sky. "A yellow day, a yellow night. I will wear yellow."

He led the way into his saloon, which was furnished with a wooden table, two chairs of carved oak, shelves stuffed with books and oddments, a vase containing several stalks of pampas grass. Navarth reached into a cabinet for a second flagon of wine, which he opened and banged upon the table, along with glasses. "Drink." With this he disappeared into the next room.

Gersen and the girl were left alone. He examined her covertly. She wore the black skirt of yesterday, with a black short-sleeved blouse, sandals, no jewelry or skin tone, which on Earth was not currently fashionable. The girl had good features, though her hair

was a tangle. She was either extremely poised or vastly indifferent. On impulse Gersen took a comb from Navarth's washstand and going to the girl, combed her hair. After a single startled glance she stood, quiet and passive. Gersen wondered what went on in her mind. Was she as mad as Navarth?

"There," he said at last. "You look somewhat less of a ragamuffin."

Navarth returned, wearing a maroon jacket, several sizes too large, a pair of yellow shoes. "You have not tasted the wine." He filled three glasses brimming. "A merry evening in prospect. Here, the three of us; three islands in the sea, on each island a castaway soul. We go forth together, and what shall we find?"

Gersen tasted the wine: a fine heady muscatel; he drank. Navarth poured the wine down his throat as if he were emptying a bucket into the estuary. The girl drank, without a tremor, without

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any display of emotion. A strange girl, thought Gersen. Somewhere behind the grave face was flamboyance. What stimulus could bring it forth? What would cause her to laugh?

"Are we ready then?" Navarth looked inquiringly from the girl to Gersen, then threw open the door and ushered them graciously forth. "In search ofViole Falushe!"

From "Viole Falushe," Chapter III of The Demon Princes, by Carl Carphen (Elucidarian Press, New Wexford, Aloysius, Vega).

Each of the Demon Princes must cope with the problem of notoriety. Each is sufficiently vain and flamboyant (Attel Malagate is the exception) to wish to flourish his personality, to impress his style upon as many lives as possible. Practical considerations, however, make anonymity and facelessness important, especially as each of the Demon Princes relishes his visits to the worlds of Oikumene. Viole Falushe is no exception. Like Malagate, Kokor Hekkus, Lens Larque and Howard Alan Treesong, he Jealously guards his identity, and not even guests at his Palace of Love have seen his face.

In some respects Viole Falushe is the most human of the Demon Princes: which is to say his vices are on a scale of human understanding. The unimaginable cruelty, reptilian callousness, megalomania, weird mischief exemplified respectively by Kokor Hekkus, Malagate, Lens Larque and Howard Alan Treesong are totally absent. The evil in Viole Falushe can be characterized as arachnid vindictiveness, infantile sensitivity, monstrous self-indulgence.

His vices aside, there is an oddly appealing aspect to Viole Falushe, a warmth, an idealism: so much is

conceded by the most uncompromising moralists. Lis-

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ten to Viole Falushe himself, as he addresses the students of Cervantes University (by recording, naturally):

"I am an unhappy man. I am haunted by my inability to express the inexpressible, to come to terms with the unknown. The pursuit of beauty is, of course, a major psychological drive. In its various guises—which is to say, the urge to perfection, the yearning to merge with the eternal, the explorer's restlessness, the realization of an Absolute created by ourselves, yet larger than our totality—it is perhaps the most single important human thrust.

"I am tormented by this thrust; I strive, I build; yet, paradoxically, I suffer from the conviction that should I ever achieve my peculiar goals, I might find the results dissatisfying. In this case, the contest is worth more than the victory. I will not describe my own struggle, my griefs, my dark midnights, my heartbreaks. You might find them incomprehensible, or worse, ludicrous.

<t! am often described as an evil man, and while I do not dispute the label, I have not taken the stricture to heart. Evil is a vector quality, operative only in the direction of the vector, and often the acts which incur the most censure do singularly small harm, and often benefit, to the people concerned.

"I am often asked regarding the Palace of Love, but I do not intend to gratify prurient curiosities in this connection. Suffice it to say that I espouse the augmentation of awareness, and find no fault with the gratification of the senses—though I myself practice an asceticism which might surprise you. The Palace of Love extends over a considerable area and is by no means a single structure, but rather a complex of gardens, pavillions, halls, domes, towers, promenades and scenic panoramas. The people of the Palace are all young and beautiful and know no other life; they are the happiest of mortals."

So speaks Viole Falushe. Rumors are not so kind to him. He is said to be fascinated with erotic variations and culminations. One of his favorite games (reputedly) is to rear a beautiful maiden with great care in an iso-

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lated cloister. She is trained to the knowledge that some day she will meet a miraculous creature who will love her and then kill her . . . and one day she is liberated upon a small island where Viole Falushe awaits.

The Hotel Prince Franz Ludwig was the most elegant rendezvous of Rolingshaven. The main foyer was enormous; it measured two hundred feet on a side, and a hundred feet to the ceiling. Golden light exuded from twelve chandeliers; a deep golden-brown carpet enriched with subtle patterns covered the floor. The walls were covered with silk of pale blue and yellow; the ceiling depicted scenes from a medieval court. The furnishings were of an intricate antique style, solid yet graceful, with cushions of rose or yellow satin, the woodwork lacquered a muted gold. On marble tables stood eight-foot urns from which a profusion of flowers overflowed; beside each table stood a smartly uniformed page boy. Here was a sumptuous intricacy which could be found nowhere but on old Earth. Never before had Gersen entered a place so grand.

Navarth selected a couch near an alcove where a quartet of musicians played a set of capriccios. Navarth summoned a page and ordered champagne.

"Is this where we seek Viole Falushe?" asked Gersen.

"I have seen him here on several occasions," said Navarth. "We shall be on the alert."

Sitting in the murmurous golden room they drank champagne. The girl's black skirt and blouse, her bare brown legs and sandals, whether through paradox or improbable juxtaposition, seemed neither tawdry nor unsuitable, and Gersen was somewhat puzzled. How had she managed the transformation?

Navarth spoke of this and that; the girl said little or nothing. Gersen was content to let events go at their own pace. Indeed, he found himself enjoying the outing. The girl had put down considerable wine, but showed no effects. She seemed interested in the people who moved through the great foyer, but in a spirit of detachment. At last Gersen asked, "What is your name? I don't know how to speak to you."

The girl did not respond immediately. Navarth said, "Call her what you like. This is my custom. Tonight she is Zan Zu from Eridu."

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The girl smiled, a brief flicker of amusement. Gersen decided that she was not, after all, a lackwit.

"Zan Zu, eh? Is this your name?"

"It's as good as any other."

"The champagne is finished, an excellent vintage. We go to dine!" Navarth rose to his feet, and gave his arm to the girl. Crossing the foyer, they descended four broad stairs into the dining room, which was no less magnificent than the foyer.

Navarth ordered dinner with enthusiasm and finesse; never had Gersen enjoyed a finer meal—one which made him regret the limits

imposed by the capacity of his stomach. Navarth ate with voracious enjoyment. Zan Zu of Eridu, as Gersen now thought of the girl, ate delicately, without interest. Gersen watched her sidelong. Was she ill? Had she recently undergone some great sorrow or shock? She seemed composed enough—too composed, considering the wine she had drunk: muscatel, champagne, the various wines Navarth had ordered to accompany the dinner. . . Well, it made no difference to him, Gersen reflected. His business was with Viole Falushe. Though here at the Hotel Prince Franz Ludwig, in the company of Navarth and Zan Zu, Viole Falushe seemed unreal. With an effort Gersen brought himself back to the business at hand. How easy to be seduced by richness, elegance, exquisite food, the golden light of chandeliers. He asked, "If Viole Falushe is not to be found here, where do you propose to look?"

"I have no set scheme," Navarth explained. "We must move as the mood takes us. Do not forget that Viole Falushe long ago regarded me as an exemplar. Is it not reasonable to suppose that his program will merge with our own?"

"Reasonable indeed."

"We will test the theory."

They lingered over coffee, trifles of fragrant pastry, quarter-gills of krystaliek; then Gersen paid the dinner check, well over SVU 200, and they departed the Hotel Prince Franz Ludwig.

"Now where?" asked Gersen.

Navarth ruminated. "We are somewhat early. Still, at Mikmak's Cabaret there is always amusement of one kind or another, if only in watching the good burghers at their decorous ease."

From Mikmak's Cabaret, they moved on to Paru's, Der Fliegende Hollander and thence to the Blue Pearl. Each new tavern and cabaret was somewhat less genteel than the previous one, or so

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it seemed. From the Blue Pearl, Navarth led the way to the Sunset Cafe on the Boulevard Caste! Vivence in Ambeules, thereafter to a succession of waterfront dives, beer cellars and dance halls. At Zadiel's All-World Rendezvous, Gersen interrupted one of Navarth's dissertations. "Is it here that we can expect Viole Falushe?"

"Where else but here?" demanded the mad poet, now somewhat drunk. "Where the heart of Earth beats the thickest blood! Thick, purple, smelling of must, like crocodile blood, the blood of dead lions. Never fear—you will see your man! What was I discussing? My youth, my squandered youth! At one time I worked for Tellur Transit, investigating the contents of lost suitcases. Here, perhaps, I gained my deepest insight into the structure of the human soul . . ."

Gersen sat back in his chair. In the present circumstances passive wariness was the optimum course. To his surprise he found

himself slightly drunk, though he had attempted moderation. The colored lights, the music, Navarth's wild talk were probably no less responsible than the alcohol. Zan Zu was as remote as ever; looking sidelong at her, as he had tended to do all evening, Gersen wondered: what goes on in this umbral creature's mind? What does she hope from life? Does she daydream? Does she yearn for a handsome lover? Does she ache to travel, to visit the outworlds?

From the ancient cathedral on Flammande Heights came twelve reverberating strokes of the bass bell. "The hour is midnight," croaked Navarth. He rose, swaying, to his feet, looked from Gersen to Zan Zu from Eridu. "Now we proceed."

"What now?" asked Gersen.

Navarth pointed across the street, to a long low pavilion with an eccentric roof and festoons of green lights. "I suggest the Celestial Harmony Cafe, the rendezvous of travelers, spacemen, off-world wanderers, wayward vagabonds such as ourselves."

To the Celestial Harmony Cafe they walked, Navarth declaiming upon the poor quality of life in present-day Rolingshaven. "We are stagnant, slowly decaying! What is our vitality? Drained to the outworlds! We have bled our life away! On Earth remain the sickly, the depraved, the cryptic thinkers, the sunset wanderers on the mud flats, the paranoids and involutes, the great epicures, the timid dreamers, the medievalists."

"You have traveled the Oikumene?" Gersen inquired.

"Never has my foot lost contact with the soil of Earth!"

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"In which of the categories, then, are you included?"

Navarth waved his arms on high. "Have I not inveighed against categories? Here is the Celestial Harmony Cafe! We arrive at the peak of the evening!"

They entered, threaded their way to a table, and Navarth instantly ordered a magnum of champagne. The cafe was crowded;

voices, clatter, and shuffle competed with boisterous jigs played by an orchestra of fife, concertina, euphonium and banjo while the clientele danced, cavorted, kicked and pranced after the modes familiar to them. A long bar on a level somewhat higher than the main floor ran the width of the building. Men standing at the railing were silhouetted against the orange and green lights of the bar. At the tables of the main floor sat men and women of every age, race, social condition and degree of sobriety. Most wore European garments, but a few displayed the costumes of other regions and other worlds. Hostesses formal and self-appointed roved here and there, soliciting drinks, dispensing ribald repartee, arranging assignations. The musicians presently took up other instruments: a baritone lute, viola, flute and tympanet, with which they accompanied a troupe of tumblers. Navarth drank champagne with indefatigable zest.

Zan Zu from Eridu looked this way and that, whether from interest, uneasiness, or a sense of suffocation Gersen could not be sure. Her knuckles were white where she held the goblet. She turned her head suddenly, met his gaze; her lips quivered in the faintest possible ghost of a smile—or an embarrassed grimace. She raised the goblet, and sipped her champagne.

Navarth's gayety was at its height. He sang to the music, tapped the table with his fingers, reached to embrace the hostesses, who sidestepped with an air of boredom.

As if struck by a new thought he turned to consider Zan Zu, then inspected Gersen, as if puzzled why Gersen were not more enterprising. Gersen could not resist another glance at Zan Zu, and whether through wine, the colored lights, the ambiance of the evening, the guttersnipe tossing pebbles from a dock was gone. Gersen stared at her. The transformation was astonishing. She was magic, a creature of entrancing intensity.

Navarth was watching, gayety suddenly abandoned. Gersen turned, Navarth looked quickly away. What am I up to? Gersen wondered. What is Navarth up to? ... Reluctantly Gersen rejected

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the concepts which had surged up in his mind. He settled back in his chair.

Zan Zu the girl from Eridu looked somberly down at her goblet. With relief? Sadness? Boredom? Gersen was at a loss to decide. The ways of the girl's mind seemed important indeed. What was he getting into? he asked himself with a pang of bitter anger. He glared at Navarth, who met his gaze blandly. Zan Zu sipped her champagne.

Navarth intoned: "The Vine of Life grows a single melon. The color of the heart is unknown until the rind is split."

Gersen looked out across the tables. Navarth filled his goblet;

Gersen drank. .. Navarth was right. For a gain so wild, so delicious, so magic, there must be an initial abandon, a burning of bridges. What of Viole Falushe? What of his basic momentum? And as if in response to these thoughts, Navarth seized his arm. "He is here."

Gersen roused himself from his brooding. "WTiere?"

'There. At the bar."

Gersen scanned the line of men who stood along the railing. Their silhouettes were nearly identical, some looked this way, some that; some held mugs or flasks; others leaned with elbows on the railing. "W^ich is Viole Falushe?"

"See the man who watches the girl? He can see no one else. He is fascinated."

Gersen searched along the line of men. None seemed to be paying any great attention. Navarth whispered in a husky voice:

"She knows! She is even more aware than I!"

Gersen glanced at the girl who seemed uneasy; her fingers fumbled with the stem of the goblet. As he watched, she glanced across the room at one of the dark shapes. How she had divined the attention was beyond Gersen's comprehension.

A waiter approached the girl and spoke into her ear: Gersen could not hear what was said. Zan Zu looked down at the champagne goblet, twisting the stem between her fingers . . . She came to some decision, and putting her hands on the table she rose. Gersen felt a surge of passion. Ignoble to sit quietly, to allow this to happen. He had been affronted. He was being pillaged of something which, while it had never belonged to him, nevertheless was his own. With a spasm of terror he wondered if it were too late. He lurched forward. He put his arm around the girl's waist, drew her

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down upon his lap. She gave him an astounded glance, like one suddenly waking from sleep. "Why did you do that?"

"I don't want you to go."

"Why not?"

Gersen could not bring himself to speak. Zan Zu sat passively, if somewhat primly. Gersen noticed that there were tears in her eyes, that her cheeks were wet. Gersen kissed her cheek; Navarth gave vent to a mad cachinnation. "Never, never does it end!"

Gersen put Zan Zu back on her chair, but held his hand over hers. "What never will end?" he asked in an even voice.

"I too have loved. But what of that? The time for love is past. Now there will be trouble, of course. Do you not understand the sensitivity of Viole Falushe? He is as strange and delicate as a fern frond. He cannot bear deprivation; it sets his teeth on edge and makes him ill."

"This did not occur to me."

"You have acted altogether wrongly," scolded Navarth. "His thoughts were totally for the girl. You need only have followed her, and there would have been Viole Falushe."

"Yes," muttered Gersen. "True—true. I now understand that." He glowered at the wine goblet, then back at the line of silhouettes. Someone was watching; he could sense the attention. There was trouble on the way. He was not in optimum condition, he had not

trained in weeks. Additionally he was half drunk.

A man walking past seemed to slip. He reeled into the table, and upset wine into Gersen's lap. He looked into Gersen's face with eyes the color of bone. "Did you trip me, you sneak? I've a mind to spank you like a child."

Gersen studied the man. He had a slab-sided face, close-cropped yellow hair, a short neck as wide as his head. His body was stocky and muscular, the body of a man who spent much of his life on one of the heavy planets. "I don't believe I tripped you," said Gersen. "But sit down. Join us for a glass of wine. Ask your friend to join us as well."

The white-eyed man paused to consider a moment. He came to a decision- "I demand an apology!"

"Certainly," said Gersen. "It was on the tip of my tongue. If in any way I am responsible for causing you inconvenience, I am

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sorry.

"This is not enough. I despise foul baboons like yourself who

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insult one, then think to smirk themselves free of the consequences."

"This is your privilege," said Gersen. "Despise whom you like. But why not bring your friend over to join us? We could find much to talk about. You are from which world?" He raised his glass to drink.

The white-eyed man struck down the glass. "I insist that you leave the premises. You have offended me sufficiently."

Gersen looked across the white-eyed man's shoulder. "Your friend comes, in spite of your asinine braying."

The white-eyed man turned to look, Gersen kicked at his knee, hacked into the bulwark of a neck. Seizing one of the man's arms, Gersen heaved and sent him spinning across the dance floor. The white-eyed man bounced erect without effort, and came back in a running crouch. Gersen pushed a chair into his face; the white-eyed man swept it aside, while Gersen struck him in the stomach. This was ribbed with muscle and hard as oak. The white-eyed man hunched his shoulders, jumped for Gersen, but four bouncers had appeared. Two propelled Gersen to the rear entrance and ejected him; two more escorted the white-eyed man to the front entrance.

Gersen stood disconsolately in the street. The entire evening:

a botchery. What had got into him?

The white-eyed man might well be circling the building to find him. Gersen stepped back into the shadows. After a moment he started cautiously around to the front. At the corner waited the white-eyed man. "Dog's meat. You kicked me, you struck me. It is my turn."

"Best that you go your way," said Gersen in a mild voice. "I am a dangerous man."

"What do you think of me?" The white-eyed man approached;

Gersen backed away, in no mood for roughhousing. He carried weapons, but on Earth killing was not taken lightly. The white-eyed man sidled forward. Gersen's heel came in contact with a bucket. He picked it up, slung it into the man's face, and was quickly around the corner. The white-eyed man came after him. Gersen held out his hand to display his projec. "See this? I can kill you."

The white-eyed man stood back, teeth glinting in contempt.

Gersen went to the front entrance of the Celestial Harmony Cafe, the white-eyed man following at a distance of thirty feet.

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The table was vacant. Navarth and Zan Zu were gone. The lounging figure at the railing^ Lost among the others.

The white-eyed man waited beside the building. Gersen reflected a moment. Then slowly, as if in reverie, he moved off down the boulevard and turned into a dark side street

He waited. A minute passed. Gersen slid twenty feet farther along to a more favorable position, all the time watching the gap where street met boulevard. But no one passed in front, no one came to investigate.

Gersen waited ten minutes, watching both ways, and presently craning his neck to peer up, on the chance that his enemy was coming over the roofs. At last he returned to the boulevard. The botchery was complete. The white-eyed man, the most immediate link with Viole Falushe, had not bothered to pursue Gersen's acquaintance

Seething with frustration, Gersen rode out Boulevard Castel Vivence to the Fitlmgasse. The tug had departed; the houseboat, once more sound of hull, rode dark and silent on the water. Gersen alighted from the cab, went out to stand on the dock. Silence  
Lights from Dourrai glinted on the estuary.

Gersen shook his head in mournful amusement. What more could be expected from an evening with a mad poet and a girl from Eridu^

He returned to the cab and was conveyed to the Rembrandt Hotel.

The girl I met in Endu  
Was kind beyond belief;

The hours that I spent with her  
Were hours far too brief.

WTiere willows shade the river bank,  
She urged that I recline.  
She fed me figs and poured me full  
Of pomegranate wine.

I told of force and time and space,  
I told of hence and yonder;

I asked if she would come with me  
To know my worlds of wonder.

She clasped her knees; her voice was soft:

"It dazes me to ponder

The blazing stars and tintamars,

The whirling ways you wander!

"You are you and I am I,  
And best that you return.  
And I will stay in Endu  
With all this yet to learn."

-Navarth

At ten o'clock the following morning Gersen returned to the houseboat. All was changed. The sun was yellow and warm. The sky, shining blue with the blue of Earth, was necked here and there

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with fair-weather clouds. Navarth sat hunched on his foredeck, sunning himself.

Gersen descended the ladder, walked along the landing. He stopped by the gangplank. "Ahoy. May I come aboard?"

Navarth slowly turned his head, inspected Gersen with the hooded yellow eyes of a sick chicken. He shifted his gaze to watch a string of barges sliding silently along on jets of ionized water. He spoke in an even voice. "I have no sympathy for persons of weak liver, who raise their sails only to drift downwind."

Gersen took the remark as implicit permission to board the boat. "Mv shortcomings aside, what eventuated?"

Navarth querulously brushed away the question. "We have strayed. The quest, the undertaking—"

"What quest? What undertaking?"

"—leads by a devious route. First there is sunlight. The road is broad and white, but soon it narrows. At the end is an awesome tragedy. A thousand mind-splitting colors, possibly the sunset. If I were young once more, how I would alter events. I have been blown by winds like a bit of trash. You will find it the same. You failed to seize the occasion. Each chance comes a single time—"

Gersen found the remarks uninspiring. "All this to the side, did you speak last night to Viole Falushe?"

Navarth raised a skinny hand in the air, the palm cupped forward. "Tumult, a reel of shapes. Angry faces, flashing eyes, a struggle of passions' I sat with a roaring in my ears."

"What then of the girl?"

"I agree in every respect. Magnificent."

"Where is she? Who is she?"

Navarth's attention became fixed upon an object in the water:

a white and gray seagull. Evidently he planned no meaningful responses.

Gersen went on patiently: "What of Viole Falushe? How did you know he would be at the Celestial Harmony Cafe?"

"Nothing could be simpler. I told him that we would be there."

"What did you inform him?"

Navarth made a fretful movement. "Your questions are tiresome. Must I set my watch by yours? Must I wisely consult with you? Must I~"

"The question seemed simple enough."

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"We live by different referents. Transpose, if you like; I cannot."

Navarth was plainly in a cantankerous mood. Gersen said soothingly, "Well then, for one reason or another, we missed Viole Falushe last night. How do you suggest that we find him now?"

"I make no more suggestions ... What is your concern with Viole Falushe?"

"You forget that I have already explained this to you."

"To be sure . . . Well, as to arranging a meeting, this is no great problem. We will invite him to a small entertainment. A banquet perhaps."

Something in Navarth's tone, or perhaps the quick glittering glance which accompanied the words, put Gersen on his guard.

"You think he would attend?"

"Certainly, if it were a carefully planned affair."

"How can you be sure? How do you know definitely that he is on Earth?"

Navarth raised a monitory finger. "Have you ever watched a cat walk through the grass? At times it halts, with one paw raised, and calls out. Is there a reason to these sounds?"

Gersen could not trace the linkage of ideas. He said patiently, "What of this party, or banquet, whatever it is to be?"

"Yes, yes, the party!" Navarth had become interested now. "It must be exquisitely arranged, and it will cost a great deal. A million SVU."

"For one party? One banquet? Who is to be invited? The population of Sumatra?"

"No. A small affair of twenty guests. But arrangements must be made and quickly. I am a source, an inspiration for Viole Falushe. In sheer majesty he has excelled me. But I will prove that in a smaller compass I am superior. What is a million SVU? I have dreamed away more than this in an hour."

"Very well," said Gersen. "You shall have your million." A day's income, he reflected.

"I will need a week. A week is hardly enough. But we dare delay no longer."

"Why not?"

"Viole Falushe returns to the Palace of Love."

"How do you know?"

Navarth looked off across the water. "Do you realize that a

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crook of my finger disturbs the farthest star? That every human thought disturbs the psychic parasphere?"

"This is the source of your knowledge—psychic perturbations?"

"As good a method as any other. But now as to the party, there are conditions. Art implies discipline; the more excellent the art,

the more rigorous the discipline. Hence, you must concede to certain limitations."

"What are they?"

"First the money. Bring me a million SVU immediately!"

"Yes, of course. In a sack?"

Navarth gave an indifferent wave of the hand. "Secondly, I am in charge of arrangements. You may not interfere."

"Is this all?"

"Thirdly, you must conduct yourself with restraint. Otherwise you will not be invited!"

"I would not care to miss this party," said Gersen. "But I too will make conditions. First, Viole Falushe must be present."

"Never fear as to that! Impossible to keep him away."

"Secondly, you must identify him to me."

"No need. He will identify himself."

"Third, I want to know how you plan to invite him."

"How else? I call him by telephone, just as I call my other guests."

"What is his number code?"

"He can be reached by coding SORA-6152."

Gersen nodded. "Very well. I will bring you your money at once."

Gersen returned to the Rembrandt Hotel, where he had a reflective lunch. How mad was Navarth? His spasms of lunacy alternated with periods of canny practicality, both somehow conducing to Navarth's convenience. The call code SORA-6152, now; Navarth had yielded it with suspicious facility . . . Gersen could no longer restrain his curiosity. He went to a nearby booth, banked the lens, touched the buttons. The presentation appeared: the outline of a startled human face. A voice spoke: "Who calls?"

Gersen frowned, bent his head forward. The voice spoke again:

"Who calls?" It was Navarth's voice.

Gersen said, "I wish to speak to Viole Falushe."

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'Who calls?'

"One who wishes to make his acquaintance."

"Please leave your name and call number; in due course you may receive a return call." And Gersen thought he heard a poorly suppressed chuckle.

Thoughtfully he left the booth. Galling to be outwitted by a mad poet. He went to the Bank of Vega, called for and received a million SVU in cash. He packed the notes into a case, returned by cab out Boulevard Castel Vivence to the Fitlmgasse. As he alighted he saw Zan Zu, the girl from Eridu, emerging from a fishmonger's shop with a paper cornucopia full of fried smelt. She wore her black skirt, her hair was a tousle, but some of the magic of two nights before still hung about her. She went to sit on an old baulk, and looking out across the estuary munched the fish. Gersen thought she appeared tired, listless, a trifle haggard. He proceeded to the houseboat.

Navarth took the money with a noncommittal grunt. "The party then, seven days hence."

"Have you issued invitations?"

"Not yet. Leave all to me. Viole Falushe will be among the guests."

"I presume you will call him at SORA-6152?"

"Of course." Navarth nodded three times, with great gravity. "Where else?"

"And Zan Zu—she is to come?"

"Zan Zu?"

"Zan Zu, the girl from Eridu."

"Oh—that one. It might not be wise."

The man's name was Hollister Hausredel; his position: registrar at the Philidor Bohus Lyceum. He was a man of early middle-age, with an almost total lack of distinguishing characteristics. He wore modest gray and black and lived in one of the Sluicht apartment towers with his wife and two small children.

Gersen, deciding that his business with Hausredel would go best at a maximum distance from the school, approached him as he left the tube escalator a hundred yards from his apartment building.

"Mr. Hausredel?"

"Yes?" Hausredel was somewhat startled.

"I wonder if we might talk for a moment or two." Gersen in-

licated a nearby coffee bar. "Perhaps you would have a cup of coffee with me."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"A matter concerning a service you can do for me, to your profit."

The talk went without difficulty; Hausredel was more flexible than his superior, Dr. Willern Ledinger. On the following day Hausredel met Gersen at the coffee bar, with a large paper envelope. "Here we are. All went well. You have the money?"

Gersen passed across an envelope. Hausredel opened the flap, counted, tested one or two of the notes with his fake-meter. "Good. I hope I have helped you as much as you have helped me." And shaking Gersen's hand warmly, he departed the coffee bar.

Gersen opened the envelope. He extracted two photographs copied from those in the school archives. For the first time Gersen saw the face of Vogel Filschner. It was a sullen face. Black eyebrows canted down over burning black eyes, the mouth hung in a discontented droop. Vogel had not been a handsome boy. His nose was long and lumpy, his cheeks were puffy with baby fat, his black hair was overlong and even in the photograph seemed unclean. A more striking contradiction to the popular image of Vogel Falushe was hard to imagine. But of course this was Vogel Filschner at the age of fifteen, and many changes had undoubtedly taken place.

The other picture was that of Jheral Tinzy—a delightfully pretty girl; her black hair glossy—her mouth pursed as if she were restraining a mischievous secret. Gersen studied the picture at length. It afforded him rather more perplexity than illumination, inasmuch as the face in the photograph was almost exactly that of Zan Zu, the girl from Eridu.

Thoughtfully Gersen examined the remaining material in the envelope; information regarding other members of Vogel Filschner's class with the present whereabouts—when it was known.

Gersen returned to the picture of Jheral Tinzy. The coquetry was absent in the face of Zan Zu: otherwise one was a replica of the other. The resemblance could not be accidental.

Gersen rode by tube to Station Hedrick in Ambeules and took the now familiar route up Boulevard Castel Vivence.

The time was early evening; sunset color still lingered along the estuary. The houseboat was dark; no one responded to Gersen's rapping. He tested the button: the door slid open.

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Gersen entered, the lights came aglow. He went to Navarth's telescreen. The code, as he had expected, was SORA-6152. The crafty Navarth! To the side was an index. Gersen looked through the listings, finding nothing of interest. He scrutinized the wall, the

underside of the shelf, the top molding of the telescreen, on the chance that Navarth might have noted down a number he did not care to entrust to his index, but he found nothing. From the shelf Gersen took down an untidy portfolio, containing ballads, odes, dithyrambs: "A Growl for Gruel"; "The Juices I Have Tramped";

"I Am a Darting Minstrel"; "They Pass!"; "Drusilla's Dream";

"Castles in the Clouds and the Anxieties of Those Who Live Directly Below by Reason of Falling Objects and Wastes."

Gersen put the poems aside. He inspected the bedrooms. On the ceiling of the one occupied by Navarth was the photograph of a naked woman, twice life-size, arms high and outspread, legs extended and stretched apart, hair afloat, as if she were engaged in a vigorous leaping calisthenic. Navarth's wardrobe contained a fantastic assortment of costumes of every style and color; on a shelf were hats, caps, and helmets. Gersen explored the drawers and cabinets, finding many unexpected objects, but none which seemed to bear upon the matter at hand.

There were two other small bedrooms, furnished in a rather spartan manner. One of these was pervaded with faint sweet perfume: violet, or lilac; in the other was a desk, and here, by a window overlooking the estuary, Navarth evidently created his poetry. The desk was crammed with notes, names, apostrophes and allusions—a discouraging volume of material which Gersen did not even trouble to explore.

He returned to the main saloon and pouring himself a glass of Navarth's fine moscato, dimmed the lights and settled into the most comfortable chair.

An hour passed. The last traces of afterglow departed the sky;

the lights of Dourrai glistened on the waves. A dark shape became visible, a hundred yards offshore—a small boat. It approached the houseboat; there was the rattle of oars being shipped and footsteps on the deck. The door slid back. Zan Zu entered the half-dark saloon. She gasped in fear and sprang back.

Gersen caught her arm. "Wait, don't run away. I've been waiting to talk to you."

Zan Zu relaxed and came into the saloon. Gersen turned up

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the lights Zan Zu sat warily on the edge of a bench 7 onight she wore black trousers, a dark blue jacket, her hair was tied back with black ribbon, her face was white and wan

Gersen looked at her a moment "/\re you hungry:"

She nodded

"Come along then "

In a nearby restaurant she ate with an appetite which nullified Gersen's doubts as to the state of her health "Navarth calls you Zan Zu, is that your name?"

"No "

"What is your name?"

"I don't know I don't think I have a name "

"What: No name: Everyone has a name "

"I don't"

"Where do you live: With Navarth:"

"Yes For as long as I remember."

"And he has never told you your name?"

"He has called me by many names," said Zan Zu somewhat ruefully "I rather like not having a name, I am anyone I wish to be"

"What would you like most to be?"

She flashed Gersen a sardonic glance, gave her shoulders a shrug Hardly a talkative girl, thought Gersen.

She asked a sudden question "Why are you interested in me?"

"For various reasons, some complicated, some simple To begin with, you're a pretty girl "

Zan Zu considered the statement a moment "Do you think so indeed:"

"Hasn't anyone else told you as much:"

"No "

Strange, thought Gersen

"I talk to very few men Or women Navarth tells me there is danger "

"What kind of danger:"

"Slavers I don't care to be a slave "

"Understandable Aren't you afraid of me:"

"A little"

Gersen signaled a waiter After consultation he ordered a large piece of cherry torte floating in whipped cream, which was set be-

fore Zan Zu from Endu

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"Well then," said Gersen, "have you been to school:"

"Not a great deal." Gersen learned that Navarth had taken her here and there to odd corners of the world remote villages and islands, gray cities of the north, resorts of Smkiang, the Sahara Sea, the Levant There had been an occasional tutor, seasons at somewhat unusual schools, much reading of Navarth's books "Not a very orthodox education," Gersen remarked

"It suits me well enough "

"And Navarth—what is his relationship to you:"

"I don't know He has always been there Sometimes he is—" she hesitated "Sometimes he is kind, other times he seems to hate me.. I don't understand, but then I am not particularly interested Navarth is Navarth "

"He's never mentioned your parents?"

"Never."

"Haven't you asked him:"

"Oh, yes Several times When he is sober he becomes flamboyant Aphrodite rose from seafoam Lilith is the sister of an ancient god Arremce sprang to life when lightning struck a rose tree And I may select a source at my own discretion "

Gersen listened, surprised and amused

"When Navarth is drunk, or when he is exalted with poetry, he tells me more, but perhaps it is less—he frightens me He speaks of the journey I ask 'journey where:' and he won't say But it must be something terrible . I don't want to go "

She fell silent The conversation, so Gersen noticed, had not diminished the gusto with which she attacked the torte "Has he ever mentioned a man named Viole Falushe:"

"Perhaps I have not listened "

"Vogel Filschner?"

"No Who are these men?"

"The same man Using different names Do you remember, at the Celestial Harmony Cafe, the man who stood by the railing:"

Zan Zu looked down into her coffee cup, gave a slow thoughtful nod.

"Who was he:"

"I don't know Why do you ask:"

"Because you started to go to him "

"Yes I know."

"W^hy: If you don't know him:"

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The girl twisted the cup back and forth, watching the swirls of black liquid. "It's hard to explain. I knew he was watching me. He wanted me to come. Navarth had brought me there. And you were there. As if everyone wanted me to go to him. As if I were—something to be sacrificed. I was dizzy. The room was unsteady. Perhaps I had drunk too much wine. But I wanted to have it all over with. If this were my fate, I would know . . . But you wouldn't let me go. I remember this much. And I—" She stopped, and took her hands away from the coffee cup. "Anyway, I know you mean me no harm."

Gersen said nothing. Zan Zu asked tentatively, "Do you?"

"No. Are you finished?"

They returned to the houseboat, which was as they had left it. "Where is Navarth?" Gersen asked.

"He prepares for his party. He is tremendously excited. Since you have come all is different."

"And after I left the Celestial Harmony Cafe the other night, what happened?"

Zan Zu frowned. "There was talk. It seems there were lights in my eyes, orange and green blurs. The man came to the table, and stood looking down at me. He spoke to Navarth."

"Did you look at him?"

"No. I don't think so."

"What did he say to Navarth?"

Zan Zu shook her head. "There was a sound in my ears, like rushing water, or the roar of the wind. I didn't hear. The man touched my shoulder."

"And after that—what?"

Zan Zu grimaced. "I don't remember . . . I can't remember."

"She was drunk!" cried out a voice. Navarth rushed into the saloon. "Carefully drunk! What are you doing aboard my private houseboat?"

"I came to learn how you are spending my money."

"All is as before. Now depart at once."

"Come, come," said Cersen patiently. "This is a cavalier tone to take with the man who repaired your houseboat."

"After first stoving it in? Bah! Has there ever been an act to equal it?"

"I understand that in your youth you contrived a few outrages of your own."

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"In my youth?" sputtered Navarth. "I have contrived outrages all my life!"

"What of the party?"

"It is to be a poetic episode, an exercise in experiential art. I think it best that you do not attend this particular party, as—"

"What? I'm paying for it! If I don't come, give me back my money."

Navarth flung himself petulantly into a chair. "I expected you to take this line."

"I'm afraid so. Where is the party to be held?"

"We meet at the village Kussines, twenty miles to the east. The rendezvous is precisely at the hour of two in the afternoon, in front of the inn. You must wear harlequinade and a domino."

"Viole Falushe is to come?"

"Indeed, indeed; have I not made all clear?"

"Not altogether. All are to wear dominoes?"

"Naturally."

"How will I recognize Viole Falushe?"

"What a question to ask. How can he hide? Black radiation hangs about him. He exudes a dread sensation."

"These qualities may be obvious," said Gersen. "Still—how else may he be identified?"

"You must determine this at the time. At the moment, I do not know myself."

At ten minutes before the appointed hour, Gersen parked his rented air car in a meadow on the outskirts of Kussines and alighted. A cloak concealed the harlequinade; he carried the domino

in his pocket.

The afternoon was soft and sunny, fragrant with the exhalations of autumn. Navarth could hardly have hoped for a finer day, thought Gersen. He checked his garments carefully. The harlequinade offered little scope for concealment, but Gersen had made the best of the situation. Inserted horizontally into his belt was a blade of thin keen glass, the buckle serving as a handle. Under his left arm hung a projac; in his right sleeve was poison. Thus encumbered, Gersen swept his cloak about him and marched into the village—a collection of ancient black iron and melt-stone structures on the shore of a small lake. The setting was bucolic and charming, almost medieval; the inn, perhaps the newest structure of the village, was at least four hundred years old. As Gersen approached, a young man in gray and black stepped forward. "For the afternoon party, sir?"

Gersen nodded and was led to a dock at the edge of the lake, where a canopied boat awaited. "Domino, please," said the young man in uniform. Gersen donned the mask, stepped aboard the boat and was conveyed to the opposite shore.

It seemed that he was one of the last to arrive. At a semicircular buffet stood perhaps twenty other guests, all self-conscious in their costumes. One who could only be Navarth came forward, divested Gersen of his cloak. "While we wait, taste this vintage; it is supple and light and will amuse you."

Gersen took the wine and stepped aside. Twenty men and

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women: which was Viole Falushe? If he were present, he was not readily apparent— A slender young woman stood stiffly nearby, holding her goblet as if it contained vinegar. Navarth had allowed Zan Zu to the party after all, thought Gersen. Or dragooned her into coming, to judge by her attitude. He counted. Ten men, eleven women. If parity of sexes were to be observed, there still remained at least one man to arrive. Even as Gersen counted the white-canopied punt drifted into the dock; a man stepped ashore. He was tall, lean; his manner combined indolent ease with taut wariness. Gersen inspected him carefully. If this were not Viole Falushe, he must be considered the most likely candidate. The man slowly approached the group. Navarth hurried forward with a crouch that was almost servile and took the cloak which the man tossed to him. With the cloak hung on its peg, a goblet of wine in the newcomer's hand, Navarth's ebullience returned. He waved his arms, walked back and forth with long springing strides— "Friends and guests, all are now arrived: a chosen group of nymphs and undergods, poets and philosophers. Notice, as we stand here in the meadow, our patterns of orange and red, and black and red; we contrive an unconscious pavan! We are performers, participants and spectators at the same time. The frame within which spontaneity is confined—the theme, so to speak—is that which I have ordained; the variations, and intricacies, counterplay and development is our mutual concern. We must be subtle and free, carefully reckless, at all times consonant; our figures must never leave the chord!" Navarth held

his goblet up to a shaft of sunlight, drank with a grand flourish, then pointed dramatically through the trees. "Follow me!"

Fifty yards away was a charabanc with a tasselled yellow canopy, the sides enameled in red, orange and green. Benches cushioned in bright orange plush ran along the sides. In the center kneeling marble satyrs supported a marble slab on which were dozens of bottles of every size, shape and color, all containing the same soft wine.

The guests climbed aboard, the charabanc slid off, silent and easy on its repulsion skids.

Through a beautiful park drifted the charabanc. Magnificent vistas opened on all sides. The guests gradually discarded restraint;

there was conversation and laughter, but for the most part all were content to sip the wine and enjoy the autumn scenery.

Gersen scrutinized each man in turn. The last man to arrive still seemed the most likely candidate for the identity of Viole Fa-

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lushe; Gersen thought of him as Possibility No. 1. But at least four others were tall, lean, dark and composed—Possibilities No. 2, No. 3, No. 4 and No. 5.

The charabanc halted; the group stepped down into a meadow sprinkled with purple and white asters. Navarth, hopping and skipping like a young goat, led the group under a grove of tall trees. The time was now about three o'clock; afternoon sunlight slanted through the masses of golden leaves, to play upon a great rug of tan and golden silk with a border of gray-greens and blues. Beyond stood a silken pavilion supported by white spiral poles.

Spaced around the rug—were twenty-two tall peacock-tail chairs. Beside each stood an antique tabouret of ebony inlaid with mother-of-pearl and cinnabar, with a vermilion bowl of crystallized spice on each. Working by some mysterious rationale Navarth arranged his guests in the splendid chairs. Gersen found himself at one end of the rug with Zan Zu several chairs distant, and the five possibilities at the far side. From somewhere came music, or more accurately near-music: a succession of wry quiet chords, sometimes so soft as to be unheard, sometimes so complex as to be equivocal and perplexing, never completing or fulfilling a progression, always of a haunting sweetness.

Navarth took his own place, and all sat quietly. From the pavilion came ten young girls naked but for golden slippers and yellow roses over their ears. They bore trays on which were goblets of heavy green glass, containing the same delicate wine as before.

Navarth remained in his chair; the other guests were content to do likewise. Sun-drenched yellow leaves floated down to the golden rug; an aromatic odor hung in the air. Gersen sipped his

wine cautiously; he could not afford to be lulled, soothed. Close at hand was Viole Falushe, a situation for which he had paid a million SVU. The sly Navarth had not kept the letter of his promise. Where was the "aura of black radiation" Navarth had mentioned? It seemed to hang heaviest around Possibilities No. 1, No. 2 and No. 3, but in this regard Gersen was disinclined to trust his parapsychic powers.

A tension, an expectancy began to be felt. Navarth sat crouched in the chair as if already bemused. The naked girls, dappled by sunlight and leaf-shadow, poured wine, moving slowly as if walking under water. Navarth lifted his head, as if hearing a voice or a tar-off sound. He spoke in an exultant voice, and the vagrant chords

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seemed to match themselves to the rhythm of his speech, creating music. "Some here have known emotion in many phases. No one can know every emotion, for these are both infinite and fugitive. Some here are unaware, untouched, unexplored—and know it not. See me! I am Navarth, called the mad poet! But is not every poet mad? It is inevitable. His nerves are conductive and transport uncontainable gushes of energy. He fears—how he fears! He feels the movement of time; between his fingers it is a warm pulsing, as if he grasped an exposed artery. At a sound—a distant laugh, a ripple of water, a gust of wind—he becomes sick and faints, because never in all the extent of time can this sound, this ripple, this gust recur. Here is the deafening tragedy of the journey which we all undertake! Would the mad poet want it to be different? Never exulting? Never desperate? Never clasping life against his bare nerves?" Navarth leapt to his feet and danced a jig. "All here are mad poets. If you would eat, the delicacies of the world await. If you would reflect, sit in your chairs and watch the fall of the leaves. Notice how slow is their motion; here time has slowed on our behalf. If you would exalt yourself, this magnificent vintage never cloys nor stupefies. If you would explore erotic proximities or middle distances or indistinct horizons: bowers and dells surround us." His voice descended an octave; the chords became measured and slow. "There can be no light without shade, no sound without silence. Exultation skips along the verge of pain. I am the mad poet, I am Life! Hence, by the inevitable consequence, Death is here as well. But where Life cries out its meanings, Death sits quiet. Look then among the masks!"

And Navarth pointed from one silent harlequin to another around the circle. "Death is here, Death watches Life. It is not witless, aimless Death. It is Death with a snuff cap, intent on a single candle. So do not fear, unless you have cause to fear—" Navarth turned his head. "Listen!"

From far away came the merry sound of music. It grew louder and louder still, and into the glade marched four musicians: one with castanets, one with guitar and two fiddlers—and they played the most impelling and merry of jigs—enough to set the pulses racing. Suddenly they stopped short in their music. The castanet player brought forth a flute, and now the music was of a heart-breaking melancholy. And playing in this fashion, they moved off

through the trees and presently were lost to hearing. The soft in-

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decisive chords went on as before, without beginning or end, as easy and natural as breathing.

Gersen had become uneasy. Circumstances were moving beyond his control. In this harlequinade, he felt inept. Was this another of Navarth's crafty ploys? Were Viole Falushe to stand before him now and announce himself, Gersen could never act. The autumn air was heavy with haze; the wine had made him maudlin. He could never spill blood on the magnificent rug of tawny tan and gold. Nor even on the carpet of golden leaves beyond.

Gersen leaned back in his chair, amused and disgusted with himself. Very well then, for the moment he would sit and reflect. Some of the other guests were stirring. Perhaps Navarth's talk of death had chilled them, for they moved tentatively and carefully. Gersen wondered to whom Navarth had referred, in his talk of death . . . The girls moved sedately along the line of chairs, pouring wine. As one bent near Gersen, he caught the scent of her yellow rose; straightening, she smiled at him, and passed on to the next guest.

Gersen drank the wine. He leaned back in the chair. Even if he had become detached and passionless, he could yet speculate. Certain of the guests had risen to their feet and leaving their high-backed chairs, they mingled and talked in soft husky voices. Possibility No. 1 stood brooding. Possibility No. 2 stared fixedly at Zan Zu. Possibility No. 3, like Gersen, sprawled in his chair. Possibilities No. 4 and No. 5 were among those talking.

Gersen looked toward Navarth. What next? Navarth's intention must extend beyond the instant. What more had he planned? Gersen called to him. Navarth turned aside reluctantly.

Gersen asked, "Is Viole Falushe here?"

"Tish!" exclaimed Navarth. "You are a monomaniac!"

"I have been told as much before. W^ell, is he here?"

"I invited twenty-one guests. Counting myself, twenty-two are present. Viole Falushe is here."

"Wwiishe?"

"I don't know."

"What? You don't know?" Gersen sat upright, aroused from his lethargy by Navarth's double-dealing. "We must have no misunderstanding, Navarth. You accepted a million SVU from me, agreeing to fulfill certain conditions."

"And I have done so," snapped Navarth. "The simple truth is

that I do not know in what semblance Viole Falushe currently walks. I knew the boy Vogel P'ilschner well. Viole Falushe has altered his face and his manner. He might be one of three or four. Unless I were to unmask this group, send away those I recognized until one remained, I could not give you Viole Falushe."

"V^ry well, this we shall do."

Navarth w^uld not submit. "My life might well be slid from my body by one route or another. I object to this. I am a mad poet, not a lummoX."

"Immaterial. This is how we will act. Be so kind as to summon your candidates into the pavilion."

"No, no!" croaked Navarth. "It is impossible. There is an easier way. Watch the girl. He will go to her, and then you will know."

"A half dozen might go to her."

"Then claim her. Only one man would challenge you."

"And if no one challenges?"

Navarth held out his arms. "What can you lose?"

Both turned to look toward the girl. Gersen said, "WTiat can I lose indeed? What is her relationship to you?"

"She is the daughter of an old friend," declared Navarth suavely. "She is, in effect, my ward; I have been at pains to nurture her and bring her nicely to maturity."

"And this now accomplished, you offer her here and there to passing strangers?"

"The conversation becomes tiresome," said Navarth. "Look. A man approaches the girl!"

Gersen swung around. Possibility No. 2 had approached Zan Zu and was talking in a manner unmistakably ardent. Zan Zu listened politely. As in the Celestial I larmony Cafe, Gersen felt a surge of emotion: lust? jealousy? protective instinct? Whatever the nature of the urge, it compelled him to step forward and join the two.

"You are enjoying the party?" Gersen asked with factitious good-fellowship. "A wonderful day for such an outing. Navarth is a magnificent host; still, he has introduced no one to no one. What is your name?"

Possibility No. 2 answered courteously: "Navarth doubtless has good reason for the neglect; best that we do not divulge our iden-

tities."

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"Sensible," said Gersen. He turned to Zan Zu. "Still, what is your opinion?"

"I have no identity to divulge."

Possibility No. 2 suggested: "Why not approach Navarth and inquire his thoughts on the subject?"

"I think not. Navarth would become confused. He has pounded a fallacy. He seems to advocate intimate relationships between walking costumes. Is this feasible? I doubt it. Certainly not at the level of intensity Navarth would insist upon."

"Quite so, quite so," said Possibility No. 2. "Be a good fellow and leave us to ourselves. The young lady and I were enjoying a private discussion."

"My apologies for interrupting you. But the young lady and I already had planned to gather flowers from the meadow."

"You are mistaken," said Possibility No. 2. "When all wear harlequinade, error is easy."

"If there has been an error, it is for the best, as I prefer this delightful young flower-picker to the last. Be so good as to excuse us."

Possibility No. 2 was amiability itself. "Really, my good fellow, your facetiousness has run its course. Surely you must see that you are intruding?"

"I think not. In a party of this sort, where experience is to be clasped to the naked nerves, where Death walks, there is wisdom in flexibility. Notice the woman yonder. She appears loquacious and prepared to discuss every subject in your repertory. WTly not join her and chat away to your heart's content?"

"But it is you she admires," said Possibility No. 2 brusquely—"Be off with you."

Gersen turned to Zan Zu. "Apparently you must make the choice. Conversation or wildflowers?"

Zan Zu hesitated, looking from one to the other. Possibility No. 2 fixed her with a gaze of burning intensity. "Choose, if indeed there is a choice between this lout and myself. Choose—but choose carefully."

Zan Zu demurely turned to Gersen. "Let us pick flowers."

Possibility No. 2 stared, looked away toward Navarth as if to call upon him to intercede, then thought better of it and walked away.

Zan Zu asked, "Are you really anxious to pick wildflowers?"

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"You know who I am?"

"Of course."

"I don't care to pick wildflowers, unless you do."

"Oh . . . What then do you want of me?"

Gersen found the question hard to answer. "I do not know myself."

Zan Zu took his arm. "Let us go to look for flowers, and perhaps we will find out."

Gersen looked around the group. Possibility No. 2 watched from a distance. Possibilities No. 1 and No. 3 appeared to pay them no heed. They started off through the trees, Zan Zu leaning on his arm. Gersen put his arm around her waist; she sighed.

Possibility No. 2 gave a quick jerk of the shoulders, and by this motion seemed to cast off restraint. He came after Gersen with soft portentous strides; in his hand he carried a small weapon. Behind-Gersen saw in a near-instantaneous glimpse-stood Navarth, looking after them, his posture a curious superimposition of shame on glee.

Gersen pushed Zan Zu to the ground, ducked behind a tree. Possibility No. 2 halted. He turned toward Zan Zu, and to Gersen's shocked amazement, pointed his weapon. Gersen leapt from behind the tree and struck the man's arm; the weapon threw a sear of energy into the ground. The two confronted each other, eyes blazing with mutual hate . . . A shrill blast of whistle. From the forest came the thud of heavy feet; gendarmes swarmed forth, a dozen or more, urged by a lieutenant in a golden helmet and a furious old man in brocaded gray.

Navarth stepped forward haughtily. "What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

The old man, who was short and overweight, bounded toward to shake his fist. "What the devil are you up to, trespassing upon my private property? You are a jackanapes! And these naked girls-an absolute scandal!"

In a stern voice Navarth demanded of the lieutenant: "What is this old rogue? What right does he have to intrude upon a private party?"

Now the old man, stepping forward, discerned the rug, and went pale. "Behold!" he whispered huskily. "My priceless silk Sik-kim nig! Spread out for these rascals to cavort upon. And my chairs, oh my precious Bahadurs! What else have they stolen?"

"This is balderdash!" stormed Navarth "I have rented these premises and hired the furniture The owner is Baron Caspar Heaulmes, who is at a sanatorium for his health "

"I am Baron Caspar Heaulmes!" cried the old man. "I do not know your name, sir, behind that ridiculous mask, but I perceive you to be a blackguard' Lieutenant, do your duty Take them all away I insist on the fullest investigation'"

Navarth threw his hands into the air, and argued the case from a dozen viewpoints, but the lieutenant was inexorable "I fear I must take all into custody Baron Heaulmes is making a formal complaint "

Gersen, standing to the side, had been watching with great interest, simultaneously noting the movements of Possibilities No 1, No 2, No. 3. Whichever was Viole Falushe—and it would seem to be Possibility No 2—he would be sweating heavily at this moment once he were arrested and taken into court, his identity must become known

Possibility No 1 stood dour and dismal, Possibility No 2 was carefully assessing the situation, looking this way and that, Possibility No 3 seemed unconcerned, even amused

The lieutenant by this time had seized Navarth, charging him with trespass, theft, offenses against public morality and simple assault—the latter arising from his attempt to kick Baron Heaulmes The remaining gendarmes now commenced to herd the guests toward a pair of carcel-wagons which had descended to the meadow. Possibility No. 2 loitered at the edge of the group and, taking advantage of Navarth's obstreperous behavior, slipped behind a tree Gersen raised up a shout, a pair of gendarmes looked around, bawled peremptory orders and marched forward to conduct Possibility No 2 to the carcel-wagons Possibility No 2 jumped back among the trees, when the gendarmes ran in pursuit, there came a dire flash of radiation—once, twice, and two men lay dead Possibility No 2 sprinted away through the forest and was lost to view Gersen gave chase, but halted after a hundred yards, fearing ambush

Shedding his mask, he ran to the semicircular buffet beside the pond, where he found and donned his cloak The punt ferried him across the lake to the outskirts of Kussmes

Five minutes later he reached his air car and took it aloft He hovered several minutes, searching the air space If Possibility No

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2 had arrived by air car, he must likewise be taking himself aloft. And also, thought Gersen, patrol craft would be converging on the scene of the murders One man in harlequinade looked much like another, the sooner he was gone the better And Gersen flew full

speed back toward Rolingshaven

From the Rolingshaven Mundus:

Kussines, September 30: Two agents of the county gendarmery this afternoon were murdered by a guest at a mysterious orgy on the estate of Baron Caspar Heaulmes at Kussines. In the confusion attendant upon the violence, the murderer made good a temporary escape and is believed to be hiding in the woods. His name has not yet been made public.

Host and ringleader at the bacchanalian fete was the notorious poet and free-thinker Navarth, whose escapades have long edified the citizens of Rolingshaven . . .

The article goes on to describe the circumstances of the murder. The names of the persons taken into custody are listed.

From the Rolingshaven Mzmdus:

Rolingshaven, October 2: Victim of an inexplicable attack was Ian Kelly, 32, of London, who last night was waylaid in the Bissgasse and viciously beaten to death. There is no clue as to the identity of his assailant and no apparent motive. Kelly figured in the news two days ago as a guest at the poet Navarth's fantastic party on the estate of Baron Caspar Heaulmes. Police are work-

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ing on the theory that the two circumstances are connected-

Article for Cosmopolis:

VIOLE FALUSHR

by Navarth

PART I: THE BOY

Notorious as much for his fascinating Palace of Love as for the ghastly score of his crimes is Viole Falushe, the Demon Prince. Who is he, what is he? I, perhaps better than anyone alive, am able to calculate his motives and analyze his acts. I have little knowledge of the man as he is today. If he were to pass me on the street I would not recognize him. But I can say this much: judging by Viole Falushe as a youth, I find the popular concept of Viole Falushe—which is to say, a man handsome, elegant, gay, romantic—impossible to credit. The notion is, in fact, startling and ludicrous.

I first met Viole Falushe when he was fourteen. His name was then Vogel Filschner. If the man resembles the boy, his celebrated amours can only have been achieved

through duress or drugs. As all know, I am jealous of my reputation for dispassionate candor, and to this end interviewed all the women who, as girls, knew Vogel Filschner well. I withhold their names, for obvious reasons. Representative comments:

"a boy preoccupied with every sort of nastiness."

"Vogel was utterly repellent, though there were boys far uglier than he in our class. Four years I knew him, and instead of learning to take pains with himself he became worse."

"I could never bear to sit next to Vogel. He smelled badly, as if he never changed his socks or his underwear, I'm sure he never washed his hands and possibly never bathed."

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"Vogel Filschner! I suppose it was not all his fault. His mother must have been a sloven. He had disgusting personal habits, such as picking his nose and examining the yield, making queer gulping noises, and above all smelling."

These are representative remarks; indeed, some of the milder comments. I am a man, above all, fair and judicious;

hence I quote none of the more extravagant anecdotes.

Let me describe Vogel Filschner as I knew him. He was tall and arachnid, with spindly legs and an unhealthy round belly. To complete the somewhat spiderlike illusion were his round cheeks and pink proboscis of a nose. To his credit he admired my poetry, though I fear that Vogel distorted my doctrines beyond recognition. I preach augmented existence; Vogel wanted me to approve his solipsistic ruthlessness.

The first occasion I was approached by Vogel Filschner was at the time of my celebrated contretemps with Dame Amelie Pallemont-Dalhouse, in connection with my sponsorship of her daughter Earline, which of course is a fascinating tale in itself. In any event, Vogel appeared one morning with some wretched doggerel he had written. It seems that Vogel's juices were flowing, that he was in love with a pretty girl who needless to say was far from flattered by the compliment.. .

The article continued for several pages.

On October 3, Navarth, having paid exemplary damages of SVU 50,000 to Baron Caspar Heaulmes, was discharged from the court, which likewise dismissed charges against Navarth's guests.

Gersen met Navarth on the mall in front of the Justice Courts. Navarth at first made as if he would pass without deigning to rec-

ognize Gersen, but Gersen finally was able to divert him to the table of a nearby cafe.

"Justice, bah!" Navarth made a grimace toward the courts. "Think of it! Money I must pay that vindictive and sanctimonious unmentionable. He should have indemnified me! Did he not disrupt the party? What did he hope to gain, running forth from the forest like that?" Navarth paused to moisten his throat with the beer Ger-

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sen had ordered. "It is enough to turn a man sour." He set the mug down with a thump and turned a yellow glance toward Gersen. "What do you want of me now? Another exercise in bathos? I warn you, I will not be so malleable a second time."

Gersen displayed the newspaper articles dealing with the event. Navarth refused to look at them. "A wretched lot of nonsense, sheer scurrility. You journalists are all alike."

"I notice that yesterday a certain Ian Kelly was murdered."

"Yes, poor Kelly. Did you come to the arraignment?"

"No."

"Then you missed your chance, because among the crowd was Viole Falushe. He is the most sensitive of men and cannot forget an injury. Ian Kelly was unlucky enough to resemble you in size and manner." Navarth shook his head ruefully. "Ah, that Vogel. He detests frustration as a bee sting."

"Do the police know the murderer is Viole Falushe?"

"I told them he was a man I met in a bar. What else could I

•' if  
sayr

Gersen had no reply to make. He indicated the article once more. "Twenty names are listed, which refers to Zan Zu?"

Navarth made a contemptuous gesture toward the article. "Select as you like. One is as accurate as the next."

"One of these names must refer to her," said Gersen. "Which?"

"How should I know what name she chooses to supply the police? I believe I will drink more beer. The argument has parched my throat."

"I see here a 'Drusilla Wavles, age eighteen.' Is this she?"

"Quite possibly, possibly indeed."

"And this is her name?"

"Merciful Kalzibah! Must she own a name? A name is a weight! A chain to a set of uncontrolled circumstances. To own no name is to own freedom! Are you so stolid then that you cannot imagine a person without a name? She is what one chooses to call her."

"Strange," said Gersen. "She exactly resembles the Jheral Tinzy of thirty years ago."

Navarth jerked back in his chair. "How do you know this?"

"I have not been idle. For example, I have produced this." Gersen produced a dummy CosmopoUs. From the cover looked the face of young Vogel Filschner superimposed upon the outline of a tall

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ominous gray figure. Below was the caption: The Young Viole Falushe, Vogel Filschner As I Knew Him, by Navarth.

Navarth seized the dummy, read the article aghast. He raised his hands to his head. "He'll kill us all! He'll drown us in dog vomit! He'll grow trees in our ears!"

"The article seems balanced and judicious," said Gersen. "Certainly he can take no offense at facts."

Navarth read farther, and went into a new paroxysm of dismay. "You have signed my name! I never wrote all that!"

"It's all true."

"The more so! When is this to be published?"

"In a week or two."

"Impossible. I forbid it."

"In that case, return me the money I lent you, that you might finance your party."

"Lent?" Navarth was shocked anew. "That was no loan! You paid me, you hired me to produce a party, at which Viole Falushe would be present."

"You did neither. Baron Heaulmes, it is true, truncated your party, but this is no affair of mine. And where was Viole Falushe? You can point to the murderer, but this means nothing to me. Please return the money."

"I cannot, I have spent money like water! And Baron Heaulmes demanded his pound of flesh."

"Well, return me the nine hundred thousand SVU you have left."

"WTiat? I have no such sum on hand!"

"Perhaps we can set aside a portion as your payment for this article, but—"

"No, no! The article must not be published!"

"Best that we have a complete understanding," said Gersen.  
"You have not told me all."

"For which I am grateful. You have published the rest." Navarth kneaded his forehead, "These have been terrible days. Have you no pity for poor old Navarth?"

Gersen laughed. "You plotted to get me killed. You knew that Viole Falushe would attempt to possess Drusilla Wayles, or Zan Zu, whatever her name. You knew that I would not allow it. Ian Kelly paid his life in my place."

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"No, no, nothing like that. I hoped you would kill Viole Falushe!"

"You're a devious villain. What of Drusilla, how was she to fare? Did you consider her?"

"I consider nothing," said Navarth huskily. "I cannot allow myself to ponder. If I lifted the partition between my two brains for so much as an instant—"

"Tell me what you know."

With extreme reluctance Navarth obeyed. "I must go back to Vogel Filschner once more. When he kidnaped the choral society, Jheral Tinzy escaped. That you know. But she was the cause of the crime and the parents of the other girls blamed her. It became very hard, very rough. There were threats, names called in public . . ."

Navarth had come under similar attack. One day he proposed to Jheral Tinzy that they run away together. Jheral, bitter and disillusioned, was in a mood for anything. They went to Corfu where they spent three years, and every day Navarth loved Jheral Tinzy more ardently than the day previous.

One terrible day Vogel Filschner appeared at the door of their little villa. He was no longer the old Vogel, though his appearance was much the same. He stood more erect, but the most striking change was his new personality. He had become hard, sure, firm;

his eyes were bright, his voice assured. Evildoing clearly was good for him.

Vogel made a great show of amity to Navarth. "Past is past. Jheral Tinzy? I want nothing from her. She has given herself to you; she is sullied. I am fastidious in this respect; I take no woman fresh from another man's use. Be assured, she never will know an iota of my love . . . She should have waited. Yes. She should have

waited. Because she mi^ht have known I would return . . . But now my love for Jheral Tinzy is gone."

Navarth was somewhat reassured. He brought out a bottle; they sat in the garden, ate oranges, drank ouzo. Navarth became very drunk and fell asleep. WTien he awoke Vogel F'ilschner was gone. Jheral Tinzy was gone as well.

A day later Vogel Filchner reappeared. Navarth was in a frenzy. "W^here is she? WTiat have you done with her?"

"She is well and safe." '

"What of your promise? You told me you had no more love for her."

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"This is true The promise shall be kept Jheral will never know my love, nor the love of any other man Do you underestimate my emotion, poec^ Love can turn to hate in a flicker of time. Jheral will ser\e, and serve well She would not gratify my love, but she will appease my hate."

Navarth threw himself at Vogel Filschner, but Vogel vaulted over the wall, and Navarth was left alone

Nine years later Vole Falushe made contact with Navarth b^ telescreen, but now his face was blanked. Navarth heard only his voice Navarth asked for the return of Jheral Tmzy, and Viole Falushe agreed Two days later a child three years old was brought to Navarth Viole Falushe called again "I have done as I promised You have Jheral Tmzy again."

'Ts it her daughter2"

"It is Jheral Tmzy, this is all you need know I put her into your charge Keep her, nurture her, guard her, see that she remains undefiled—for one day I will return for her " The screen went dead Navarth turned to inspect the girl Even now he could see her resemblance to Jheral What to do? Navarth considered the child with mingled emotion He could regard her neither as a daughter nor as a manifestation of his former love He felt antagonism. There would always be a bittersweet ambiguity in their relationship, for Navarth was unable to love impersonally, the object of his love must relate to himself.

Navarth exemplified his contradicting impulses in his rearing of the girl He fed her, provided shelter, both of the most casual and desultory sort Otherwise the girl was independent She became moody and uncommunicative, she made no friends and presently gave up asking questions.

As she matured, her resemblance to Jhera! Tmzy became ever more striking She was Jheral Tmzy indeed, and her presence tormented Navarth with memories of the past

A dozen years passed, but Viole Falushe had made no appearance. Still Navarth never dared hope that Viole Falushe had forgotten, indeed he became ever more obsessed with the certainty that Viole Falushe would presently arrive and take the girl away. He tried from time to time to acquaint the girl with the danger represented by Viole Falushe, but his approach varied with his mood, and he was never sure that she understood him. He attempted to seclude her, a task rendered difficult by the girl's un-

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predictable habits, and he took her off to remote corners of the Earth

When the girl was sixteen, they lived in Edmonton, Canada, the goal of hordes of pilgrims who came to gaze upon the Sacred Shin. Navarth reasoned that here, among the interminable festivals, processions and sacerdotal rites, they might well live unnoticed.

But Navarth was wrong. Viole Falushe by some means knew his whereabouts. One night the telescreen lit up to show a tall figure standing against a flashing blue background which obscured his features. Navarth, nevertheless, recognized Viole Falushe and despondently called out "Show" to the telescreen.

"Well, Navarth," said Viole Falushe, "what do you do in the Holy City? Have you become a devout Kalziban that you live almost in the shadow of the Shin?"

"I study," muttered Navarth. "I derive a sense of purpose from the pervasive zeal."

"And what of the girl I refer to? Jheral. She is well, I trust?"

"She was in fair condition last evening. I haven't seen her since."

Viole Falushe stared fixedly at Navarth, with only the glitter of his eyes giving dimension to his silhouette. "Is she pure?"

"How would I know?" demanded Navarth crossly. "I can't watch her day and night. In any event, what affair is it of yours?"

If anything, the intensity of Viole Falushe's glance increased. "It is my affair in all respects, to such a degree that you would never imagine."

"Your language is extravagant," sniffed Navarth. "I can hardly believe you to be serious."

Viole Falushe laughed softly. "Someday you will visit the Palace of Love, old Navarth, someday you will be my guest."

"Not I!" declared Navarth. "I am a new Antaeus, never may I detach my toe from Earth, if necessary I will fall flat on my face."

and cling with both hands'"

"Well then, summon the girl Call Jheral before the screen so that I may see her." An odd note had entered Viole Falushe's voice sweetness and tenderness burdened with an almost insupportable rage

"How can I call her when I don't know her whereabouts? She may be prowling the streets, or canoeing on the lake, or lying in someone's bed—"

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A hoarse sound interrupted Navarth. But Viole Falushe's voice was mild. "Never say that, old Navarth. She was given into your care; I intended that you give her proper instruction. Have you done so? I suspect not."

"The best instruction is living itself," declared Navarth bluffly. "I am no pedant, as you well know."

There was a moment's silence. Then Viole Falushe said: "Do you know why I put the girl in your care?"

"My own motivations confuse me," said Navarth. "How should I know yours?"

"I will tell you. Because you know me well, you know what I require without explicit instructions."

Navarth blinked. "I had not considered the matter in this light."

"Then, old Navarth, you are remiss."

"I have heard this accusation a hundred times."

"But now you know what I expect. I hope you will repair your neglect."

The screen went dead. Navarth in a fury of frustration and resentment went striding out along the Great Nave, that avenue extending from the Plaza of Beatitudes to the Temple of the Shin. But the press of pilgrims irked him, and he took refuge in a teahouse, where he drank four cups of strong tea before he was sufficiently composed to think.

Specifically, Navarth wondered, what did Viole Falushe expect? He had a romantic interest in the girl, he wanted her inculcated, preconditioned, receptive—Navarth could not restrain a wild cackle of mirth, which aroused surprised glances from the other patrons of the teahouse, most of them black-clad pilgrims.

Viole Falushe wanted him to make the girl conscious of the great honor which awaited her; he wanted her preconditioned, predisposed, already fervent. . . The pilgrims, fresh from ceremonies

at the temple, were regarding him with suspicion. Navarth jumped to his feet and departed the tearoom. There was no further reason to remain in Edmonton. As soon as possible he took the girl back to Rolingshaven.

Once or twice he mentioned Viole Falushe to the girl, in a tone of dejection, for now he had come to think of the girl as doomed;

to such effect that on one occasion the girl ran away. Fortuitously the event occurred immediately before one of Viole Falushe's visits

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to Earth. When he telephoned Navarth demanding to see the girl, Navarth was forced to blurt forth the truth. Viole Falushe spoke in a mild voice: "Best that she be found, Navarth."

But Navarth made no attempt to find the girl until he was sure Viole Falushe had departed from Earth—here Gersen interposed a question: "How could you be sure?"

Navarth attempted to evade the question, but finally admitted that Viole Falushe, during his visits to Earth, could be telephoned at a particular code number. "Then you could call him now?"

"Yes, yes, of course," snapped Navarth. "If I wanted to do so, which I do not." He continued his story, but now he became cautious, using many flamboyant gestures, shirting his yellow glance all around with only an occasional brief flicker for Gersen.

It seemed that when Gersen appeared on the scene, Navarth sensed that here might be a weapon to be used against Viole Falushe (an aspect to the account Navarth left unspoken). With the utmost caution, committing no overt acts, always leaving himself lines of retreat, Navarth tried to arrange for the discomfiture or destruction of Viole Falushe. Events however superseded his plans. "And now," quavered Navarth, pointing a long finger at the Cosmopolis dummy, "this!"

"You believe Viole Falushe would react unfavorably to the article?"

"Indeed, indeed! He is the least forgiving of men; it is the key to his soul!"

"Perhaps then we had best discuss the article with Viole Falushe himself."

"What benefit can derive from that? He will merely have more time to generate a suitable response."

Gersen pondered. "Well then, it seems that we had best publish the article in its present form."

"No, no!" cried Navarth. "Have I not made all clear? He would punish us in equivalence to his annoyance, and he uses a subjective judgment! This article would offend him to an unprecedented fury;

he hates his childhood, he only comes to Ambeules to gloat and work mischief on his old enemies. Do you know what happened to Rudolph Radgo, who jeered at Vogel Filschner's pimples? Rudolph Radgo's face is a garden of carbuncles, through Sarkovy poison. There was Maria, who moved her seat because Vogel's rheums and snivelings upset her. Maria now lacks all trace of a nose. Twice she

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has had grafts, twice she has suffered the loss of her new member;

she is not to have a nose for all her life. So you see, it is not wise to offend Virole Falushe . . ." Navarth craned his neck. "What are you writing?"

"This is interesting new material; I am incorporating it into the article."

Navarth threw his hands up so wildly that his chair almost overturned, "Have you no prudence?"

"Perhaps if we discussed the article with Virole Falushe he might authorize its publication."

"It's you who are mad, not I!"

"We can only try."

"Very well," croaked Navarth. "I have no choice. But I warn you, I disavow all connection with the article!"

"As you wish. Shall we make our call here, or at the houseboat?"

"At the houseboat."

They left the plaza, rode the tube to Ambeules, and were conveyed to the Fitlingasse by surface wagon.

The houseboat floated, serene and quiet, on the estuary.

"Where is the girl?" asked Gersen. "Zan Zu, Drusilla, whatever her name?"

Navarth refused to answer. Gersen's question, so he implied, was like asking the color of the wind. He hopped on down the ladder, jumped aboard the boat, and with a desperate, tragic gesture, flung wide the door. He stalked to the telescreen, pushed buttons, and spoke a muffled activating word. The presentation sprang to life: a single frail lavender flower. Navarth turned to look at Gersen. "He is available; when off Earth the pattern is blue."

They waited. From the telescreen came a wisp of tender melody, then after a moment or two a voice: "Ah Navarth, my ancient companion. With a friend?"

"Yes, an urgent matter. This is Mr. Henry Lucas representing

Cosmopolis magazine."

"A journal with an honored tradition! But have we not met? There is about you a disturbing familiarity."

"I was on Sarkovy recently," said Gersen. "As I recall, your name was in the air."

"A miasmatic planet, Sarkovy. Nevertheless, one with a certain macabre beauty."

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Navarth spoke. "I have had a misunderstanding with Mr. Lucas, and I wish specifically to disavow responsibility for his actions."

"My dear Navarth, you alarm me. Mr. Lucas is surely a man of courtesy."

"You shall see."

"As Navarth has mentioned I work for Cosmopolis," said Gersen. "In fact I am a senior official. One of our writers prepared a rather sensational article. I suspect the writer of over-enthusiasm and therefore checked with Navarth, who reinforced my doubts. It seems that the writer came upon Navarth in an exalted mood, and on the basis of a casual word, he went to enormous lengths of research and produced the article."

"Ah, yes, the article. You have it with you?"

Gersen displayed the dummy. "It is included here. I insisted on checking the facts, apparently to good avail. Navarth insists that our writer took the most extreme liberties. He feels that in all fairness you should be allowed to authenticate the article before publication."

"Sound notion, Navarth' Well then, allow me to examine this alarming effusion; I'm sure it can't be all that grim."

Gersen slipped the magazine into the transcription rack. Violen Falushe read. From time to time he made sudden apparently involuntary noises: hisses between the teeth, small throaty sounds. "Turn the page, please." His voice was light and mild. Presently he said: "Yes. I have finished." There was a moment's silence, then he spoke again, and now the voice, superficially jocular, rang with a tinny overtone. "Navarth, you have been singularly reckless, even for an exhilarated poet."

"Bah," muttered Navarth. "Did I not disassociate myself from this entire farrago?"

"Not completely. I notice matters which are magnified and distorted in a manner possible only to a mad poet. You have been indiscreet."

Navarth said bravely, "Candor is never indiscreet. Truth, which

is to say, the reflection of life, is beautiful."

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," said Viole Falushe. "I for one find little beauty in this abusive article. Mr. Lucas is quite correct in seeking my reaction. The article may not be published."

For some fantastic reason Navarth saw fit to grumble. "What good is notoriety if your friends are unable to profit from it?"

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"Exploitation of notoriety and humiliation of your friends are not identical," spoke the mild voice "Can you imagine my distress if this article appeared and exposed me to ridicule? I would be forced to demand amends for all concerned, which is only simple justice Since by an act of yours, my feelings are injured, then by other acts you must atone until my feelings are whole again. It is not enough to assert that I am oversensitive If you hurt me, then you must assuage the hurt, no matter how disproportionate the effort "

"Truth reflects the cosmos," argued the mad poet "To expunge truth, one must destroy the cosmos This is the disproportionate act "

"Aha!" declared Viole Falushe "But the article is not necessarily truth' It is a point of view, an image or two snatched out of context. I, the person most intimately concerned, denounce the point of view as a flagrant distortion "

"I would like to make a suggestion," said Gersen "Why not allow Cosmopolis to present the real facts, or that is to say, the facts from your own point of view^ No doubt you have a statement to make to the folk of the Oikumene, who are fascinated by your exploits, whether or not they approve of them "

"No, I think not," said Viole Falushe "Such an article would seem self-inflation or worse, a rather spurious apologia. Basically I am a modest man "

"But are you not an artist as well?"

"Certainly On the truest and noblest scale Artists before me have conveyed their assertions by abstract symbology, the spectators or audience has always been passive I use a more poignant symbology, essentially abstract but palpable, visible and audible—in short a symbology of events and environments There are no spectators, no audience, no passivity There are only participants They encounter experience at its keenest No man has dared conceive on so vast a scope before " Here Viole Falushe gave a slow strange chuckle "With the exception, perhaps of my megalomaniac contemporary Lens Larque, though his concepts are less fluid than my own But I dare to say it I am perhaps the supreme artist of history My subject is Life, my medium is Experience, tools are Pleasure, Passion, Pungence, Pain. I arrange the total environment, in order

to suffuse the total entity f! his of course is the rationale of my estate, popularly known as the Palace of Love "

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Gersen nodded sagely "Precisely what the folk of the Oikumene are anxious to learn' Rather than publish a vulgar expose of this sort"—Gersen tapped the dummy with the back of his hand—"Cosmopohs would like you to explain your thesis We want photographs, charts, odor swatches, sound impressions, portraits—above all we want your expert analysis "

"Possible, possible "

"Good. To this end let us meet together Name a time and place, and I will be there "

"The place? Where else? The Palace of Love Each year I welcome a group of guests You shall be in the current contingent, and mad old Navarth as well "

"Not I!" protested Navarth "My feet have never yet lost contact with Earth, I do not care to risk the clarity of my vision "

Gersen also demurred. "The invitation, though tempting, is not particularly convenient I would prefer to meet you tonight, here on Earth "

"Impossible On Earth I have enemies, on Earth I am a shadow No man can point and say, there stands Viole Falushe—not even my dear friend Navarth, from whom I have learned much of value A lovely party, that, Navarth' Magnificent, worthy of a mad poet However, I am disappointed in the girl I gave you to nurture, and I am disappointed in you. You have exercised neither the tact, the imagination, nor the creative direction for which I had hoped. Consider the girl in the light of what she is and what she might be' I had expected a new Jheral Tmzy gay and grave, sweet as honey, tart as lime, with a brain full of stars, ardent yet innocent What do I find? A wanton, a hoyden, a sour-faced ragamuffin, completely irresponsible and undiscerning Imagine' In preference to me, she chose a certain Ian Kelly, an insolent, unworthy person, far better dead I find the situation incomprehensible The girl clearly had not been well-trained Surely she knows of me and my interest in her?"

"Yes," said Navarth mulishly. "I have pronounced your name "

"Well, I am not quite satisfied, and I am sending her elsewhere for corrective training by less gifted but more disciplined tutors I think it likely that she will join us at the Palace of Love— Ah, Navarth, you spoke^"

"Yes," said Navarth in a dull voice "I have decided to advantage myself of your invitation I will visit your Palace of Love "

"All very well for you artists," said Gersen hurriedly. "But I am a busy man. Perhaps a brief conference or two here on Earth—"

"But I have already left Earth/' said Viole Falushe in a voice of gentle reproach. "I hang here in orbit only until I hear that my plans for the young minx have been implemented ... So you must come to the Palace of Love."

The violet flower flashed green, faded and shifted to a delicate pale blue. The connection had been broken.

Navarth sat sprawled in his chair a long two minutes, head askew, chin on his chest. Gersen stood looking out the window, sensible of a sudden new hollowness . -. Navarth lurched to his feet, went out on the front deck. Gersen followed. The sun was setting into the estuary; the died roofs of Dourrai glowed bronze; the rotting black wharves and docks stood forth in queer shapes and angles; all was invested with an unreal melancholy.

Gersen presently asked, "Do you know how to reach the Palace of Love?"

"No. He will inform us. He has a mind like a filing cabinet; no detail evades him." Navarth swung his arms indecisively, then went inside, to return with a tall, slender, black-green bottle and two goblets. He broke off the seal, poured. "Drink, Henry Lucas, whatever your name, whatever your trade. Within this bottle is the wisdom of the ages, tincture of Earth-gold. Nowhere is tippie to equal this; it is unique to old Earth. Mad old Earth, like mad old Navarth, yields its best in its serene maturity. Drink of this precious elixir, Henry Lucas, and count yourself fortunate; normally it is reserved for mad poets, tragic Pierrots, black angels, heroes about to die .. ."

"Gannot I be counted among these?" muttered Gersen, more to himself than Navarth.

As was his habit Navarth raised the goblet into the sunlight, of which only a few smoky orange rays remained. He tossed half a cupful into his mouth, stared out across the water. "I leave Earth. The withered leaf is lifted by the wind. Look, look, look!" In sudden excitement he pointed to the somber sun-trail along the estuary. "The road ahead, the way we must go!"

Gersen sipped the liquor, which seemed to explode into a spray of multi-colored lights. "There is no doubt but what he has taken the girl?"

Navarth's mouth twisted awry. "I have no doubt as to this. He

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will punish her, hissing like a serpent. She is Jheral Tinzy, and once again she has rebuffed him ... so once again she will return to her

infancy."

"You are sure she is Jheral Tinzy? Not someone who resembles her closely?"

"She is Jheral Tinzy. There are differences, significant differences. Jheral was frivolous and a trifle cruel, this one is somber, pensive, and never thinks of cruelty.... But she is Jheral Tinzy."

They sat, each occupied with his own thoughts. Dusk fell across the water; lights commenced to shine from the far slopes. A uniformed messenger alighted from his air car, and descended the ladder. He called from the landing, "A delivery for the poet Navarth."

Navarth lurched to the gangplank. "I am he."

"Thumbprint here, please."

Navarth returned with the delivery: a long blue envelope. Slowly he opened it, withdrew the enclosure. At the top was the lavender flower of the screen presentation. The message read:

Go Beyond to Sirneste Cluster, in Aquarius Sector. Deep within the cluster hangs the yellow sun Miel. The fifth planet is Sogdian upon which, at the south of the hourglass continent, you will discern the city Atar. In one month's time go to Rubdan Ulshaziz at his agency and say: "I am guest of the Margrave."

10

Excerpt from the televised debate at Avente, Alphanor, on July 10, 1521, between Gowman Hachien, Counsel for the Planned Progress League, and Shzor Jesno, Fellow of the Institute, 98th Degree

Hachien Is it not true then that the Institute originated as a cabal of assassins?

Jesno To the same degree that the Planned Progress League originated as a cabal of irresponsible seditionists, traitors, suicidal hypochondriacs

Hachien This is not a pertinent response

Jesno The elasticities, the areas of vagueness surrounding the terms of your question, do indeed encompass the exact truth of the situation

Hachien What, then, in inelastic terms, is the truth?

Jesno Approximately fifteen hundred years ago, it became evident that existing laws and systems of public safety could not protect the human race from four bland and insidious dangers. First, universal and compulsory dosage of drugs, tonics, toners, conditioners, stimulants

and prophylactics administered through the public water supply Second, the development of genetic sciences, which allowed and encouraged various agencies to alter the basic character of Man, according to conventional progress).

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biological and political theory Third, psychological control through media of public information. Fourth, the proliferation of machinery and systems which in the name of progress and social welfare tended to make enterprise, imagination, creative toil and the subsequent satisfactions obsolete if not extinct.

I will not speak of mental myopia, irresponsibility, masochism, or the efforts of persons nervously groping for a secure womb to re-enter: this is all irrelevant The effect, however, was a situation analogous to the growth of four cancers in a human organism; the Institute came into being by much the same progress that the body generates a prophylactic serum

With trepidation dampened by fatalism, Navarth boarded Gersen's Distis Pharaon. Standing in the saloon, looking right and left, he spoke in a tragic voice. "So at last it has happened' Poor old Navarth, pried away from his source of strength' See him now—a huddle, a sack of tired bones Navarth. You failed to discriminate in your company. You befriended waifs and criminals and journalists; for your tolerance you are to be wafted away into space."

"Compose yourself," said Gersen. "It's not all that bad."

As the Pharaon lifted from Earth, Navarth gave a hollow groan, as if a spike were being driven into his foot.

"Look out the port," suggested Gersen "See old Earth as you have never seen it before."

Navarth inspected the great blue and white globe and reluctantly agreed that the vista was of majestic dimensions

"Now Earth recedes," said Gersen "We point ourselves toward Aquarius, we engage the intersplit and suddenly we are insulated from the universe."

Navarth pulled at his long chin "Strange," he admitted.

"Strange that this shell can convey us so far so fast. Somewhere there is mystery. It impels one to theosophy to the worship of a space god, or a god of light "

"Theory dissolves the mystery, though it lays bare a cryptic new stratum. Quite likely there is an endless set of these layers, mystery below mystery. Space is foam, matter particles are nodes and condensations. The foam fluxes, at varying rates, the average activity of these minuscule fluxes is Time."

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Navarth cautiously moved across the ship. "It is all very interesting. Had I followed an early bent, I might have been a great scientist."

The voyage proceeded. Navarth was a rather trying companion, ebullient one moment, morose the next. At one time he simultaneously became afflicted with claustrophobia and agoraphobia, and lay on a settee with his feet bare and a cloth pulled over his head. On other occasions he sat by the port watching the stars pass, crowing with amazement and glee. Another time he became interested in the workings of the intersplit, and Gersen explained it as well as he could: "Space-foam is whorled into a spindle; the pointed ends crack and split the foam, which has no inertia; the ship inside the whorl is insulated from the effects of the universe; the slightest force propels it at an unthinkable rate. Light curls through the whorl, we have the illusion of seeing the passing universe."

"Hmm," mused Navarth. "How small can the units be made?" Gersen could give no definite answer. "Quite compact, I suppose."

"Think! If you carried one on your back you could become invisible!"

"To drift a million miles with each breath."

"Unless a person anchored himself. Why isn't this done?"

"The intersplit would break the connection; no anchor would hold."

Navarth argued the point at length, and lamented his previous ignorance. "Had I known previously of this marvelous device, I might have contrived a useful new machine!"

"The intersplit has been known for a long time."

"But not to me!" And Navarth went off to brood.

Through the hither stars of Aquarius flew the Pharaon; the Pale, that invisible barrier theoretically separating order from chaos, fell behind. Ahead glowed Sirneste Cluster: two hundred stars like a swarm of bright bees, controlling planets of every size and description. Gersen located Miel with some difficulty, and presently the fifth planet Sogdian hung below, of Earth-size and atmospheric type, like most of the settled planets. The climate appeared temperate; the polar ice was of small extent; the equatorial zone showed expanses of desert and jungle. The hourglass continent was evident at once, and the macroscope located the city Afar. Gersen sent down a request for landing clearance, but received

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no acknowledgment, which Gersen took as a sign that landing formalities were unknown.

He settled toward the planet and Atar spread below: a small pink and white city surrounding an inlet of the ocean. The spaceport was operated in the manner standard at all the outer worlds:

as soon as Gersen had landed, two port officials approached, exacted a fee and departed. There were no Deweasellers, a sign that the world was not a haven for pirates, raiders and slavers—No public conveyance was available; Gersen and Navarth walked a half mile to the town. The people of Atar, dark-skinned folk with hair dyed orange, wearing white pantaloons and wide complicated white turbans, regarded them with great curiosity. They spoke an incomprehensible language, but Gersen by dint of repeating, "Rubdan Ulshaziz? Rubdan Ulshaziz?" presently learned the whereabouts of the man he sought,

Rubdan Ulshaziz operated an import and export agency near the ocean. He was a bland dark-skinned man dressed like the others in loose pantaloons and turban, "Gentlemen, I welcome you. Will you drink punch?" He poured out tiny cupfuls of thick cold fruit syrup.

"Thank you," said Gersen. "We are guests of the Margrave, and were instructed to come to you."

"Of course, of course!" Rubdan Ulshaziz bowed. "You will now be conveyed to the planet where the Margrave has his little estate." Rubdan Ulshaziz favored them with a lewd wink. "Excuse me a little moment; I will instruct the person who is to conduct you." He disappeared behind a portiere, presently to return with a dour-seeming man with close-set eyes, who nervously puffed clouds of smoke from an acrid cheroot. Rubdan Ulshaziz said, "This is Zog, who will escort you to Rosja."

Zog blinked, coughed, spat a shred of tobacco to the floor. "He speaks only the language of Atar," continued Rubdan Ulshaziz. "He will not be able to offer a description of your destination. Are you ready?"

"I need equipment from my spaceboat," said Gersen. "And the spaceboat itself—is it safe?"

"As safe as if it were a tree; I will go bond on this. If you do not find all correct upon your return, seek out Rubdan Ulshaziz and demand an accounting. But what do you wish from your ship? The Margrave furnishes everything, even to new garments."

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"I need my recorder," said Gersen. "I plan to take photographs."

Rubdan Ulshaziz made a suave gesture. "The Margrave supplies all equipment of this sort, the most modern combinations. He wants his guests to arrive unburdened by possessions, though he is indifferent to their psychic baggage."

"In other words," said Gersen, "we are not to carry any personal belongings with us?"

"None whatever. The Margrave supplies everything. His hospitality is all-inclusive. You have locked, sealed and coded your spaceship? Good, then from this moment forward you are a guest of the Margrave. If you will accompany Fendi Zog—" he signaled Zog with a peremptory twist of the hand. Zog inclined his head and Gersen and Navarth followed him to an open area behind the warehouse. Here was an air car of a design unfamiliar to Gersen, and, so it seemed, to Zog as well. Sitting at the controls Zog tested first one operator, then another, squinting at the rather haphazard arrangement of knobs, grips and voice sensors. Finally, as if tiring of the uncertainty, he pushed at a cluster of finger-flicks. The air car jerked aloft, darted across the tree-tops, with Zog crouching over the controls and Navarth calling out in wrath.

Zog finally took command of the air car; they flew twenty miles south across the cultivated plots and stock pens surrounding Atar, to a field on which rested a late-model Baumur Andromeda. Once again Zog betrayed signs of uncertainty. The air car swooped, bucked, wallowed and finally sank to rest. Navarth and Gersen alighted with alacrity. Zog signaled them toward the Andromeda;

they climbed aboard and the port closed behind them. Through a transparent panel in the partition separating the saloon from the forward compartment, they saw Zog settling himself at the controls. Navarth called out an instant protest; Zog squinted back through the panel, bared yellow teeth in what might have been meant as a smile of reassurance, and drew a curtain. The magnetic lock clicked shut on the intervening door. Navarth sank back in dismay. "Life is never so sweet until it becomes a hazard. What a sour trick for Vogel to play on his old preceptor!"

Gersen indicated the pleated burlap screen which covered the ports. "He also wants to preserve his mystery."

Navarth shook his head in bewilderment. "What use is knowl-

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edge to minds benumbed by fright? . . . Why do we wait? Does Zog consult the Operator's Manual?"

The Andromeda lurched and rose at an alarming rate, almost hurling Gersen and Navarth to the floor; Gersen grinned to hear Navarth's roar of protest. The sun Miel, as it could be glimpsed through the burlap, swung right and left, then rolled down and out of sight below the hull. Off through the cluster flew the Andromeda, and it seemed as if Zog changed course several times, whether from inaccuracy, poor spacemanship, or a desire to confuse his passengers.

Two hours passed. A yellow-white sun bulked large behind the screened ports; below hung a planet the configuration of which could not be discerned by reason of the curtain. With an impatient ejaculation, Navarth went to pull the curtain aside. A crackle of

blue sparks struck out at his fingertips, and he fell back with a startled cry. "This is an imposition!" he exclaimed. "Ill usage indeed!"

From an unseen diaphragm a recorded voice spoke: "As cherished guests, you will wish to please your host by adhering to certain standards of courtesy and restraint. It is not necessary to define these standards; they will be clear to all persons of delicacy. The stimulus provides a jocular reminder to the insensitive or thoughtless."

Navarth made a surly sound in his throat. "There's a smug dog for you. What harm in peering forth from the port?"

"Evidently the Margrave hopes to conceal the location of his headquarters," said Gersen.

"Balderdash. What is to prevent a man's searching the cluster until he finds the Palace of Love?"

"There are hundreds of planets," Gersen pointed out. "Very likely other discouragements as well."

"He need fear no intrusion from me," sniffed Navarth.

The Andromeda settled upon a field surrounded by blue-green gum trees of distinctly terrestrial derivation. Zog immediately unsealed the port, a process which Gersen watched first with amazement, then quizzical amusement. Wary of unseen microphones, he communicated none of his ideas to Navarth.

They alighted into the morning glare of a yellow-white sun, much like Miel in color and radiance. The air was pungent with the odor of gum trees and native vegetation: shrubs with lustrous

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black stalks, black and scarlet leaf-discs; blue spikes with fluttering dark blue vanes; puffs of cottony membrane enclosing tomato-red nodes. There were also clumps of terrestrial bamboo and grass and a thicket of blackberry bushes.

"Bizarre, bizarre," muttered Navarth, looking about. "There is fascination to be found on these far worlds!"

"This is almost like Earth," said Gersen. "But other areas may be dominated by local plants; then you will see the truly bizarre."

"No scope even for a sane poet," grumbled Navarth. "But I must put aside my individuality, my pitiful small cell of sentience. I have been snatched from Earth, and no doubt my bones will rot in this strange soil." He picked up a clod, crushed it between his fingers, let the fragments fall to the ground. "It looks like soil, it feels like soil—but it is star-stuff. We are far from Earth . . . What? And we are to be marooned as well, with neither a crust nor a bottle of wine." For Zog had returned within the Andromeda and was sealing the port. Gersen took Navarth's arm and hustled him across

the meadow. "Zog has a reckless temperament; he may take off on intersplit and carry away ship, meadow, shrubs, grass, and two passengers if we stand too near. Then you could well sing of bizarre circumstances."

But Zog raised the ship on its ionic pencils; Gersen and Navarth watched it dwindle into the bright blue sky. "So here we are, somewhere in Sirneste Cluster," said Navarth. "Either the Palace of Love is nearby or Viole Falushe has performed another of his grotesque jokes."

Gersen went to the edge of the meadow and looked through the screen of trees. "Grotesque joke or not, here is a road, and it must lead somewhere."

They set out along the road, between hedges of tall black rods, with scarlet leaf-discs clattering and chattering in the wind. The road wound around a knob of black schist, swung up a steep rise. Gaining the crest they looked out upon a valley and a small city only a mile or two distant.

"Is this the Palace of Love?" wondered Navarth. "Hardly what I expected—far too neat, too precise— And what are those circular towers?" The towers to which Navarth referred rose at regular intervals across the city. Gersen could only suggest that they contained offices or apartments, or perhaps served to house civic functionaries.

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As they started down the hill, a vehicle approached at a great rate—a bumping thudding platform supported by rolling air-cushions. Standing at the controls was a gaunt stern person in a brown and black uniform, who on closer inspection proved to be a woman. She halted the car, inspected the two with a skeptical gaze. "You are the Margrave's guests? Step aboard then."

Navarth took exception to the woman's tone. "Were you supposed to meet the ship? This is inefficiency; we were forced to walk!"

The woman gave him a scornful half-smile. "Get aboard, unless you care to walk more."

Gersen and Navarth climbed aboard, Navarth fuming with indignation. Gersen asked the woman, "What city is that?"

"It is City Ten."

"And what is your name for this planet?"

"I call it Fool's World. Other folk may call it what they like." Her mouth snapped shut like a trap. She swung the vehicle around and started back down the road, the bladders pounding, Gersen and Navarth clinging tight to avoid being hurled into the ditch. Navarth bawled orders and instructions, but the woman drove even more furiously and did not slow until they entered the city by a curving

tree-shaded avenue; whereupon her pace became extremely sedate. Gersen and Navarth were exposed to the curious stares of the city's inhabitants. These were a people without distinctive peculiarity other than that the heads of the men were shaved clean as an egg—eyebrows, scalp, and beard; while the women affected an elaborate coiffure of long varnished spikes, occasionally tipped with flowers or other ornaments. Both men and women wore garments of extravagant cut and color, and carried themselves with a peculiar mixture of swagger and furtiveness; speaking emphatically in low voices, laughing in loud brash bays, only to stop short, look in all directions, then continue with their mirth.

The vehicle passed one of the towers Navarth had noted: a structure of twenty stories, each apparently consisting of six wedge-shaped apartments.

Navarth spoke to the woman—"What is the purpose of the towers which rise so prominently?"

"It is where the taxes are collected," was the reply.

"Aha then, Henry Lucas, you are correct: the towers house civic functionaries."

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The woman gave Navarth a caustic gray glance. "They do, indeed. Indeed and indeed."

Navarth paid her no further heed. He pointed to one of the numerous cafes along the boulevard, patronized principally by men. "These rascals have much idle time," Navarth noted. "See how they loll and take their tipple! Virole Falushe is less than harsh with his subjects, if such they be!"

The vehicle swung into a turn-around, halted before a long two-story building. On the veranda sat a number of men and women in various costumes, obviously outworlders. "Off then, shagheads!" said the woman driver tersely. "Here is the inn; I have done my stint."

"Incompetently, and in a surly manner," declared Navarth, rising and preparing to alight. "Your own head, incidentally, would never be the worse for a few changes. Perhaps a full beard, as a start."

The woman touched a button; the bed of the vehicle tilted;

Navarth and Gersen were forced to jump to the ground. The vehicle departed, with Navarth making an insulting gesture at the woman's back.

A footman came forward to meet them. "You are guests of the Margrave?"

"This is correct," said Navarth. "We have been invited to the Palace."

"During the wait, you will be housed in the inn."

"Wait? Of what duration?" demanded Navarth. "I assumed that we would be taken directly to the Palace."

The footman bowed. "The Margrave's guests assemble here;

all go forth together. I presume there are five or six others yet to come, this being the usual number. May I show you to your rooms?"

Gersen and Navarth were conducted to cubicles eight feet on a side, each containing a low narrow bunk, a wardrobe, a lavatory, ventilated only by the lattice in the door. Navarth was housed next to Gersen, and his complaints were clearly audible. Gersen smiled to himself. For reasons know<sup>^</sup> best to himself, such was the style in which Viole F'alushe wished his guests to wait.

Within the wardrobe were Earth-style garments of a light crisp fabric. Gersen washed, removed his beard with a depilatory, changed into fresh garments and went out upon the veranda. Na-

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varth had preceded him, and already was holding forth to the eight people, four men and four women, who sat there. Gersen took a seat to the side and considered the group. Beside him sat a portly gentleman wearing the black neckband and beige skintone, currently fashionable on the Mechanics Coast of Lyonesse, one of the Concourse planets. He was, so Gersen discovered, a manufacturer of bathroom fixtures named Hygen Grote. His companion Doranie—almost certainly not his wife—was a cool wide-eyed blonde woman with only an ultrafashionable hint of bronze skin luster.

A pair of serious young women sat quietly to the side; sociology students at Sea Province University near Avente. Their names were Tralla Callob and Mornice Whill; they seemed awed, half-alarmed, and sat close to each other, feet flat on the floor, knees pressed tightly together. Tralla Callob was not unattractive, though she seemed unaware of this and took no pains to make the most of herself. Mornice Whill was victimized by overlarge features and a truculent conviction that every man in the group intended assault upon her chastity.

More relaxed was Margary Liever, a middle-aged woman from Earth who had won first prize in a television contest: her "heart's desire." She had chosen a visit to Viole Falushe's Palace of Love. Viole Falushe had been amused and obliging.

Torrace da Nossa was a musician, a man of sophistication and elegance, perhaps a trifle soft, more than a trifle vain, and with an effortless ease of manner which made meaningful conversation difficult. He was visiting the Palace of Love preparatory to composing an opera entitled The Palace of Love.

Lerand Wible was a marine architect of Earth, who recently had constructed a sailboat of ultimate design. The fin was osmium, the sails were tall airfoils of metal-plated foam, self-supporting and unstayed. Sails and fin extended at opposite diameters of a metal slip-ring; the hull always floated upright in its most efficient hydrodynamic posture. Both hull and fin were coated with a water repellent, reducing skin friction to a minimum, while ducts expelled air to minimize turbulence. Wible had met Virole Falushe in connection with his fanciful scheme for a seagoing palace, ring-shaped to enclose a central lagoon.

Skebou Diffiani was a taciturn man with a head of coarse black hair, a black tightly curled beard and an expression conveying disdain and suspicion of all the others. He was a native of Quantique,

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which went far to explain his aloof manner. His occupation was day laborer, his inclusion in the group could be explained only as a caprice of Virole Falushe.

Margery Lieber had been the first to arrive, five of the long local days before. Then Tralla and Mornice had come, then Skebou Diffiani. Lerand Wible and Torrance da Nossa were next, followed by Hvgen Grote and Doranie.

Navarth plied all with questions, pacing the veranda, darting side glances right and left. But no one knew any more than he did;

none knew where lay the Palace of Love or the time of departure. The uncertainty troubled no one, in spite of the constricted chambers, the hotel was reasonably comfortable, and there was the city to be explored a pulling, mysterious city, with latencies and undercurrents some or the guests found fascinating, others disturbing. A gong summoned the group to lunch, which was served on a back court under black, green and scarlet trees. The cuisine was uncomplicated pastry wafers, poached fish, fruit, a cool pale-green beverage and cakes of spiced currants. During the meal six new guests arrived and were brought immediately to the court for lunch. They were Druids of Vale, or Virgo 912 \TI, and apparently consisted of two families, though such relationships were shrouded in secrecy. There were two Druids, two Druidesses and two adolescents. All wore similar garments: black gowns, black cowls, long-toed black slippers. Druids Dakaw and Pruitt were tall and saturnine; Druidess Wust was thin, sinewy, with a hollow-cheeked face, and Druidess Laidig was portly and imposing. The lad Hule was sixteen or seventeen, extremely handsome, with sallow clear skin and clear dark eyes. He spoke little and smiled never, surveying all with a troubled gaze. The girl Billika, about the same age, was likewise pale, with something of the same troubled gaze, as if she constantly strove to balance sets of irreconcilable relationships.

The Druids sat together, ate hurriedly with cowls drawn forward and only occasional mutters of conversation. After lunch when the guests returned to the veranda, the Druids came purposefully forward, introduced themselves with brave cordiality, and took seats

among the others

Navarth came to question them, but their evasiveness was a match for his curiosity, and he learned nothing. The talk became general, reverting as it always did to the city<sup>7</sup>, the name of which was either City Ten or Kouhha. The subject of the towers arose.

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What was their function? Did they contain business offices, as Doranie suggested, or were they residences? Navarth reported the explanation of the woman in the uniform, that the towers were tax-gathering agencies, but the rest of the group found the idea farfetched. Diffiani made the somewhat brutal assertion that the towers were brothels: "Notice: early in the morning girls and young women arrive, later the men come."

Torrace da Nossa said, "The hypothesis is one which leaps to mind, but the women leave when they will; and they seem to include every stratum of society, which is hardly typical."

Hygen Grote gave a sly wink to Navarth. "There is a simple way to resolve the question. I suggest that we deputize one of our number to make direct inquiry."

Druidesses Laidig and Wust snorted and drew their cowls close around their faces; the girl Billika licked her lips nervously. Druids Dakaw and Pruitt looked off in different directions. Gersen wondered why the Druids, notoriously prim, had ventured on the journey to the Palace of Love, when their sensibilities could not but fail to be outraged. Mysteries everywhere . . .

A few minutes later Gersen and Navarth went for a stroll through the city, examining stalls, stores, workshops and residences with the untroubled curiosity of tourists. The people watched them with indifference and perhaps a tinge of envy. They seemed prosperous, gentle, easy of disposition; still Gersen sensed a pervading quality he could not define—nothing so coarse as fear, or discord, or anxiety. A wide tree-shaded cafe tempted Navarth, Gersen pointed out that they lacked money.

Navarth brushed the matter aside, and insisted that Gersen join him for a glass of wine. Gersen shrugged and followed Navarth to a table. Navarth signaled the proprietor "We are guests of the Margrave Vole Falushe, we have no coin of the city. We intend to patronize your cafe and you may send the account to the hotel for collection."

The proprietor bowed punctiliously. "It shall be as you wish."

"Then we will drink a flask of whatever wine you consider suitable for this time of day."

"At once, sir "

The wine was served, a pleasant beverage which Navarth found somewhat too delicate. They sat watching folk walk past. Directly

opposite rose one of the cryptic towers, which now in midafternoon showed no great activity.

Navarth summoned the proprietor to order another flask of wine, and, indicating the tower, asked, "What goes on in yonder

tower r

The proprietor seemed puzzled by the question. "It is like all the rest—where we pay our taxes."

"By why so many towers then? Would not a single tower suffice?"

Now the proprietor was amazed. "What, sir? For so many people as live here? Hardly possible!"

With this Navarth was forced to be satisfied.

Returning to the hotel they found that two more guests had arrived, both men of Earth: Harry Tanzel of London, Gian Mario of no fixed address. Both were well-favored men—tall, keen-faced, dark-haired—of ages not immediately apparent. Tanzel was perhaps the handsomer of the two; Mario was more energetic and vital.

The local day was a long twenty-nine hours; when night finally arrived the guests retired without protest to their cubicles, only to be awakened at midnight by a gong and summoned to a midnight meal, in accordance with local custom.

The following morning saw the arrival of Zuly, a tall languorous dancer from the world Valhalla, Tau Gemini VI. She comported herself with the most exquisite mannerisms, to the suspicion and perturbation of the Druids, especially young Hule who could not keep his eyes away from the woman.

Immediately after the morning meal Gersen, Navarth and Lerand Wible went walking beside the canal, which ran behind the hotel. Today appeared to be a holiday: the people of the city wore garlands; some were drunk; others sang songs in praise of Arodin, evidently a folk hero or ruler.

"Even on a holiday," said Navarth, "they go to pay their taxes."

"Nonsense," said Wible. "When do men go to pay taxes with so jaunty a step?" The three paused to watch men going and coming from the tall tower. "Definitely, it is a brothel. It can be nothing else."

"But so public? So industrious? We may be misled by appear-

ances.'

"Conceivably. Do you wish to enter the place?"

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"No indeed. If brothel it is, I am unfamiliar with their methods and might perform some unorthodox act to the discredit of us all."

"You are unusually cautious," remarked Gersen.

"I am on a strange planet," sighed Navarth. "I lack the strength I derive from the soil of old Earth. But I am curious; we shall resolve the question once and for all. Come." He led the way to the pavilion where they had been served the day before, and scanned the tables. A portly middle-aged gentleman in a wide-brimmed green hat sat looking off along the boulevard, a small jug of wine at his elbow.

Navarth approached him. "Your pardon, sir. As you can see, we are strangers here. One or two of your customs puzzles us, and we wish to learn how matters stand."

The middle-aged man heaved himself erect, and after a moment's hesitation pointed to the other chairs. "I will explain as best I can, though there is small mystery here. We do as best we can and live according to our lights."

Navarth, Gersen and Wible seated themselves. "First of all," Navarth inquired, "what is the function of that tower yonder, where so many people go in and out?"

"Ah, there. Yes. That is our local agency of tax collection."

"Tax collection?" asked Navarth, with a triumphant glance at Wible. "And the folk who go in and out pay taxes?"

"Exactly. The city is under the wise sponsorship of Arodin. We are prosperous because taxes suck away none of our wealth."

At this Lerand Wible made a skeptical sound. "How is this possible?"

"Is it not the same elsewhere? The money collected is the money which otherwise would be spent on frivolity. The system is beneficent to all. Every girl of the region must serve five years, performing a stipulated number of services per day. Naturally the more attractive girls fulfill their quota sooner than those who are plain, and there is consequently a considerable incentive to maintaining pulchritude."

"Aha!" said Wible. "In effect—a civic brothel."

His informant shrugged. "Call it what you wish. There is no

diminution of resource; the yield is devoted to civic expense; there is no outcry at the collection of tax, and the tax collectors find their work not irksome; or if they do, they can make 'in lieu' payments—which usually happens should the girl wed before her service is

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complete. Then, of course, we have our obligation to Arodm, which each of us discharges by the payment of a two-year-old child. Thereupon, we pay no more taxes, except for an occasional special assessment."

"No one complains when his child is taken?"

"Usually not. The child is taken to a creche immediately after birth, so that no bonds of affection are formed. Folk breed children early to discharge their obligation as rapidly as possible."

Wible exchanged glances with Navarth and Gersen. "And what happens to the children?"

"They go to the account of Arodin. The unsuitable are sold to the Mahrab; the satisfactory serve at the great Palace. I gave a child ten years ago; I now owe tax to no one."

Navarth could contain himself no longer. Leaning forward in his chair he pointed a knobby finger. "So this is why you sit here blinking so smugly in the sun? Where is your guilt?"

"Guilt?" The man raised his hands to adjust his wide-brimmed hat in puzzlement. "There is no guilt. I have performed my duty. I gave my child; I patronize the civic brothel twice a week. I am a free man."

"While the child you gave is now a ten-year-old slave. Somewhere he or she toils that you may sit here with your belly on your lap!"

The man rose to his feet, face pink with fury. "This is incitement, a serious offense! What then do you do here, you plucked, foolish old fowl? Why do you come to this city if you don't fancy our ways?"

"I did not select your city as a destination," said Navarth with dignity. "I am a guest ofViole Falushe, and remain here only pending his notification."

The man laughed, a harsh throbbing chortle. "This is the out-world name for Arodin. You come to enjoy the Palace, and you have not even paid!" He pounded the table once with his fist and marched out of the cafe. Other patrons who had been listening pointedly turned their backs. Presently the three returned to the hotel.

Even as they arrived, the thud of the bladder-buggy sounded at

the end of the boulevard. It rumbled up to the hotel, halted. A man alighted, and turned to help a young woman who, ignoring the hand, Jumped to the ground. Navarth gave a raucous cry of surprise.

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The young woman, attired in fashionable Alphanor-style garments, was Navarth's erstwhile ward, known as Zan Zu, Drusilla and otherwise.

Navarth took her aside and pelted her with questions: What had happened to her? WTiere had she been pent?

Drusilla could tell him little. She had been shoved into an air car by the white-eyed man, conveyed to a space vessel and placed in the custody of three grim women. Each of them wore a heavy gold ring; after the poison sprayed from the rings was demonstrated upon a dog, no further threats or warnings were necessary.

Drusilla was taken to Avente on Alphanor, lodged at the splendid Hotel Tarquin. The women were watchful as hawks, speaking seldom, never more than two or three feet away, the gold rings a sinister glitter. They took her to concerts, restaurants, fashion shows, cinematic displays, museums and galleries. They urged her to buy clothes, to tone her skin, to make herself chic. All of which Drusilla resisted from sullen perversity; whereupon the women bought the clothes, toned her skin and arranged her hair. Drusilla retaliated by sagging, drooping, contriving to look as uncouth as possible- Finally the women took her to the spaceport; they boarded a spaceship which conveyed them to Sirneste Cluster and the planet Sogdian. They arrived at the agency of Rubdan Ulshaziz at Atar simultaneously with another guest for the Palace of Love, Milo Ethuen, who stayed in Drusilla's company the remainder of the journey. The three women came as far as the Kouliha space field, then returned to Atar with Zog. Navarth and Gersen looked around to inspect Ethuen, who now sat on the veranda with the others: a man not unlike Taniel and Mario, with a brooding face, dark hair, long arms and sensitive hands.

The manager of the hotel came forth upon the veranda. "Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to announce that your wait is at an end. The guests of the Margrave are assembled; you must now set forth on your journey to the Palace of Love. Please follow me; I will conduct you to your conveyance."

11

Excerpt from the televised debate at Avente, Alphanor, July 10, 1521, between Gowman Hachieri, Counsel for the Planned Progress League and Slizor Jesno, Fellow of the Institute, 98th Degree:

Hachieri: You admit that the Institute arranges assassination of persons striving to improve the human condition?

Jesno: You beg the question.

Hachieri: Do you murder anyone whatever?

Jesno: I don't care to discuss tactical theory. There are very few such events.

Hachieri: But they occur.

Jesno: Only in the case of absolutely flagrant offenses against the human organism.

Hachieri: Is not your definition of offense arbitrary? Are you not simply opposed to change? Are you not conservative to the point of stagnation?

Jesno: To all three questions—No. We want natural organic evolution. The human race, needless to say, is not without flaws. When elements of the race attempt to cure these ills—to create an "ideal man" or an "ideal society," there is the certainty of over-compensation in one or another direction. The flaws

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with the reaction to the flaws creates a distortion factor, a filter, and the final product is more diseased than the original. Natural evolution—the slow abrasion of man against his environment—has slowly but definitely improved the race. The optimum man, the optimum society may never eventuate. But there will never be the nightmare of the artificial man or the artificial "planned progress" which the League advocates: not so long as the human race generates that highly active set of antibodies known as the Institute.

Hachieri: This is a resonant speech. It is superficially persuasive. It is ridden with maudlin fallacies. You want man to evolve through "abrasion against his environment." Other human beings are part of the environment. The League is part of the environment. We are natural; we are neither artificial nor sick. The ills of the Oikumene are by no means obscure or mysterious; they are susceptible to remedy. We of the League propose to take action. We do not intend to be dissuaded or intimidated. If we are threatened, we shall take measures to protect ourselves. We are not helpless. The Institute has tyrannized society long enough. It is time that new ideas permeated the human community.

Behind the hotel waited a long omnibus with six bladder wheels and a canopy of rosy-pink silk. Amid banter, laughing and repartee, the guests—eleven men and ten women—climbed aboard, settled themselves upon cushions of purple satin. The bus trundled across the canal and away to the south; Kouliha with its tall towers was left behind.

For an hour the guests rode past carefully tended farms and orchards toward a line of wooded hills, and speculation was rife as to the exact location of the Palace of Love. Hygen Grote went so far as to push into the forward compartment and make inquiry of the driver. This was the gaunt woman in the brown and black uniform. Hygen Grote was rebuffed, and returned to his seat grinning ruefully and shaking his head. Up into the hills rolled the bus, under tall umbrella-shaped trees with glossy black trunks and green-

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yellow leaf-discs From somewhere in the distance came the melodious hooting of tree-dwelling creatures, enormous white moths fluttered through the shade, which became ever more dank, ever more pungent with the reek of lichens and large-leafed shrubs At the ridge the road broke out into a dramatic blaze of sunlight, ahead spread a vast blue ocean The bus plunged down a steep straight road and halted at a dock Here waited a glass-hulled yacht with blue decks and a white metal superstructure Four stewards in dark blue and white uniforms assisted the guests from the bus, conducted them to a building of white coral blocks, where they were asked to change into new garments white yachting costumes, with rope sandals and loose white linen caps The Druids protested vigorously on doctrinal grounds They flatly refused to part with their cowls;

and so they boarded the yacht—the men attired in white trousers and jackets, the women in white skirts and jackets, with heads encowled in black as before

The time was sunset, the yacht would not get under way until the morrow The passengers assembled in the saloon, where they were served Earth-type cocktails, and presently dinner The two younger Druids, Hule and Billika, wore their cowls rather more loosely than their parents, thereby incurring reprimands

After dinner the three young men, Mano, Tanzel and Ethuen, played deck tennis with Tralla and Mornice Drusilla huddled disconsolately near Navarth, who conducted the strangest of conversations with Druidess Laidig Gersen sat to the side watching, propounding speculations, wondering where his responsibilities lay and to whom From time to time Drusilla wistfully looked across the saloon toward him Clearly she dreaded the future With good reason, thought Gersen He could think of no way to reassure her Zuly the dancer, supple as a white eel, walked around the deck with da Nossa Skebou Diffiani the Quantique stood by the rail, thinking the mysterious thoughts of his race, with an occasional contemptuous glance toward da Nossa and Zuly

Billika shyly came up to talk to Drusilla, followed by Hule, who seemed to find Drusilla attractive Billika, somewhat flushed, had been tasting wine. She wore her cowl artfully disarranged to show her curly brown hair a situation which did not evade the notice of Druidess Laidig, who, however, was unable to detach herself from Navarth

Margary Liever chatted with Hygen Grote and his companion

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Dorame, until Doranie became bored and went to saunter along the deck where, to H\gen Grote's annoyance, she was joined by Lerand Wible

The Druids were the first to bed, followed by Hygen Grote and Doranie

Gersen went out on the deck and looked up at the sky where the stars of Sirneste Cluster blazed To the south and east heaved the waters of an ocean whose name he did not know Not far distant Skebou Difham leaned on the rail, looking across the same ocean

Gersen returned within Drusilla had gone to her stateroom On the sideboard the stewards had arranged a collation of meats, cheese, fowl, aspic and a selection of wines and liquors

Zuly conversed in low tones with da Nossa Margary Liever now sat alone, a vague smile on her face, was she not achieving her heart's desire^ Navarth had become somewhat drunk and was swaggering about, spoiling for an opportunity to produce a dramatic scene But everyone else was relaxed and gave him no scope Navarth finally threw up his hands and went off to bed Gersen, after a last look around, followed

Gersen awoke to the pitch and roll of the yacht The time was shortly after dawn sunlight slanted into the cabin through the section of hull above the waterhne, below dark blue water surged past, not yet illuminated by the sun

Gersen dressed, went to the saloon, to find himself the earliest riser Land lay four or five miles off the starboard beam a narrow beach, a wooded foreshore backed by low hills, with the hint of purple mountains in the distance

Gersen went to the buffet, helped himself to breakfast As he ate other guests appeared, and presently the entire complement sat in the saloon, devouring grills and pastries, drinking hot beverages, marveling at the scenery and the easy motion of the yacht

After breakfast Gersen went out upon the deck, where he was joined by Navarth, foppish in his white yachting costume The day was perfect, sunlight glinted on the blue swells, clouds soared above the hon/on Navarth spat over the side, contemplated the sun, the sky, the sea "The )ourney begins It must start like this, innocent and pure "

Gersen understood Navarth's meaning well enough. He made no comment

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Navarth spoke again, in a voice even more gloomy "No matter what else you say ofVogel, he knows how to do a thing well "

Gersen inspected the gold buttons on his jacket They seemed

no more than buttons In response to Navarth's puzzled stare he said mildly, "Such articles have been known to conceal spy-cells "

Navarth laughed hoarsely "Not likely Vogel may well be aboard, but he won't be eavesdropping He'd be afraid of hearing something unpleasant It would spoil the trip for him "

"You think he's aboard then?"

"He's aboard, no fear Would he miss an experience like this? Never' But who?"

Gersen considered "He's not you nor I, nor the Druids He's not Diffiam "

"He would not be Wible, a different type altogether, too fresh and fair and round. He would not be da Nossa, though it's barely possible Barely possible he's one of the Druids But I think not "

"That leaves only three The tall dark men "

"Tanzel, Mano, Ethuen. He could be any of these "

They turned to consider the three men Tanzel stood on the bow, looking ahead across the ocean Ethuen sat sprawled on a deck chair, talking to Bilhka, who squirmed in mingled embarrassment and pleasure Mano, the last to arise, had just finished breakfast, and was stepping out on deck Gersen tried to match each of them to what he knew of Viole Falushe Each was tense, yet elegant, each might have been Possibility No 2, the murderer in harlequinade who had fled on long legs from Navarth's party

"Any could be Viole Falushe," said Navarth

"And what of Zan Zu-Drusilla-whatever her name?"

"She is doomed " Navarth threw his hands up in the air and stalked away

Gersen looked toward Drusilla, as he had decided to think of her She stood talking to Hule, the young Druid, who in the fervor of the moment had let fall his cowl A handsome lad, thought Gersen. earnest, with a look of internal tension which women must eventually find provocative Indeed Drusilla was examining him with some small interest Druidess Wust barked a sharp order Hule guiltily snapped up his cowl and slunk away

Gersen went over to Drusilla She gave him a look of wary welcome

"Were you surprised to see us at the hotel?" Gersen asked

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She nodded "I had never expected to see you again " After a moment's hesitation she asked, "What's going to happen to me? Why am I so important?"

Gersen, still in doubt regarding spy-cells, spoke cautiously "I don't know what will happen I will protect you if I can You're important because you resemble a girl Viole Falushe once loved and who scorned him He may be aboard the yacht, he may be one of the passengers So you must be very careful "

Drusilla turned a fearful look around the deck "Which one?"

"You remember the man at Navarth's party?"

"Yes "

"He will be a man like that "

Drusilla winced "I don't know how to be careful I wish I were someone else " She looked over her shoulder "Can't you take me away?"

"Not now "

Drusilla bit her lip "Why did it have to be me?"

"I might answer if I knew who you were to begin with Zan Zu Drusilla Wayles Jheral Tinzy?"

"I'm none of them," she said in a dolorous voice

"Who are you?"

"I don't know "

"You don't have a name?"

"The man at the dock saloon called me Spooky That's not much of a name I'll be Drusilla Wayles " She looked at him carefully "You're not really a journalist, are you?"

"I am Henry Lucas, a monomaniac. And I mustn't talk to you too much You know why "

Drusilla's face lost its momentary animation. "If you say so "

"Fry to identify Viole Falushe," said Gersen "He will want you to love him If you don't, he'll hide his anger, but you may know by a glance, a threat, a look on his face Or while he flirts with someone else, he will watch to see if you notice "

Drusilla pursed her lips doubtfully "I'm not very discerning "

"Do your best But be careful Don't bring trouble on yourself Here comes Taniel "

"Good morning, good morning," said Taniel breezily He spoke to Drusilla "You look as if you've lost your last friend That's not the case, you know, not with Harry Taniel aboard Cheer up! We're off to the Palace of Love "

Dmsilla nodded. "I know "

"Just the place for a pretty girl. I'll personally show you all the sights, if I can fight off my competitors "

Gersen laughed "No competition here I can't take time from my job, much as I'd like to "

"Job5 At the Palace ofLove^ Are you an ascetic?"

"Simply a journalist What I see and hear will show up in Cos-mopohs "

"Keep my name out of it'" warned Tanzel facetiously. "Some-day I'll be a married man, I'd never live down that kind of fame "

"I'll be discreet "

"Good Come along now " Tanzel took Drusilla's arm "I'll help you with your morning constitutional Fifty times around the deck""

They walked off, Drusilla with a last forlorn glance over her shoulder at Gersen

Navarth sidled up "There's one of them Is he the man3"

"I don't know He's starting strong."

Three days the yacht plied the sunny seas, for Gersen three pleasant days, though the hospitality came from a man he intended to kill. There was an effortless quality to the hours, a dreamlike isolation, and each person's characteristic style was intensified, becoming a thing larger than life. Attitudes and rigidities relaxed: Hule allowed his cowl to hang loose and finally discarded it altogether, Billika, more tentatively, did the same, whereupon Zuly in a spirit of cool mischief offered to arrange her hair. Billika hesitated, then, with a sigh of hedonistic abandon, assented So Zuly shaped and clipped, to accentuate Billika's pale, wide-eyed delicacy, to the amazement of all the men aboard. Druidess Laidig cried out in anger, Druidess Wust clicked her tongue, the two Druids were startled, but all the others begged them not to browbeat the girl Such was the atmosphere of ease and gayety that Druidess Laidig at last fell to laughing at Navarth, and Billika managed to slip away quietly Not long after, Druidess Laidig allowed her own cowl to hang loose, as presently did Druid Dakaw Druid Pruitt and Druidess Wust held to the full rigor of their habit, but tolerated the delinquency of the others with no more than an occasional disparaging glance or muttered sarcasm

Tralla, Mornice and Dorame, noting the attention paid to the

younger girls, became extremely enthusiastic and gay clearly none planned to rebuff any attempted gallantry

Each afternoon the yacht halted to drift on the ocean All who chose plunged into the clear water, while others went below to watch through the glass hull These latter included the older Druids, Diffiam (who participated in no activity except eating and drinking), Margar<sup>^</sup> Liever, who professed a fear of deep water, and Hygen Grote, who could not swim The others, even Navarth, donned the swim suits provided by the yacht and splashed in the warm ocean

At dusk of the second evening, Gersen took Drusilla to the bow, refraining from any intimacy of contact which might infuriate Viole Falushe, should he be watching Drusilla seemed to feel no such constraint, and Gersen became aware, with a bittersweet pang, that the girl was in some degree infatuated with him Gersen—as susceptible as anyone else—fought back his inclinations Even if he succeeded in destroying Viole Falushe, what then? There was no place for Drusilla in the harsh future he had laid out for himself Still, the temptation remained Drusilla, with her somber moods, her sudden flashes of joy, was fascinating But circumstances were as they were, and Gersen kept his conversation to the business at hand. Drusilla had noticed nothing Mano, Ethuen, Tanzel—all plied her with attention As Gersen had instructed, she showed favoritism to none Even as they stood in the bow watching the sunset, Mano came to join them After a moment or two Gersen excused himself and returned to the promenade If Mano were Viole Falushe, it would not do to antagonize him If he were not, then Viole Falushe, watching hatefully from elsewhere, would be reassured that Drusilla preferred no single person

The morning of the fourth day found the yacht cruising among small islands lush with vegetation At noon the yacht approached the mainland and drifted up to a dock. The voyage was over The passengers disembarked regretfully, with many a backward glance, Margary Liever frankly wept

In a structure beside the dock the guests were issued new garments For the men there were loose velvet blouses in the softest and richest of colors—moss-green, cobalt-blue, dark maroon—with loose black velvet trousers fastened below the knees with scarlet ribbons The women received the same style blouses in paler

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shades, with striped matching skirts All were issued soft velvet berets, square, loose, with an intriguing tassel.

When all had reassembled, they were served lunch, then ushered to a great wooden wagon with six green and gold wheels and a dark green canopy supported by spiral posts of a beautiful dark wood.

The wagon set off along a coastal road. Late in the afternoon the track veered inland over rolling grassy hills spangled with flowers, and the ocean was lost to sight.

Soon there were trees, tall and solitary, much like Earth trees, but conceivably indigenous, then clumps and groves. At dusk the wagon halted beside one such grove. The guests were conducted to a hostel built high in the tree-tops, led along swaying walkways to small wicker tree houses.

Supper was served on the ground to the light of a great cackling fire. The wine seemed stronger than usual, or perhaps all were in a mood to drink. Everyone seemed larger than life; the twenty-one were the only people alive in the universe. Toasts were drunk, including several to "our unseen host." The name *Viola Falushe* was never mentioned.

A troupe of musicians appeared with fiddles, guitars and pipes, they played wild wailing tunes, which set the heart pounding and the head swaying. Zuly leapt to her feet and improvised a dance as wild and abandoned as the music.

Gersen forced himself to sobriety at times like this it was most important to watch. He saw *Lerand Wible* whisper to *Billika*; a moment later she sidled away and off into the shadows, he too was gone. The Druids and Druidesses were rapt with the dancing, sitting with heads back, eyes half-closed. Only *Hule* noticed. He looked thoughtfully after the two, then crept quietly up to *Drusilla* and whispered in her ear.

*Drusilla* smiled. She turned a flicker of a glance toward Gersen, and said something in a soft voice. *Hule* nodded without enthusiasm, seated himself close beside her and presently put his arm around her waist.

A half hour passed. With only Gersen seeming to notice, *Wible* and *Bitlika* were once more among the group, *Billika* with eyes bright and mouth soft. It seemed that only a moment later *Druidess Laidig* bethought herself of *Billika* and sought around to locate her. There sat *Billika*. Something was amiss, something was new and

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different— *Druidess Laidig* could sense this much, but there was nothing else to see. Her suspicion lulled, she returned to her enjoyment of the music.

Gersen watched *Mano*, *Ethuen*, and *Tanzel*. They sat with *Tralla* and *Mormce*, but it seemed as if their eyes wandered toward *Drusilla*. Gersen chewed his lip *Viola Falushe*—if indeed he were among the guests—did not seem disposed to yield his identity . . .

Wine, music, firelight—Gersen leaned back, aware of giddiness. Who among the group was watchful, who attentive? That person would be *Viola Falushe*! Gersen saw no one who seemed other than relaxed. *Druid Dakaw* was asleep. *Druidess Laidig* was nowhere to be seen. *Skebou Diffiani* also had disappeared. Gersen chuckled and leaned toward *Navarth* to share the joke, then thought better of it. The fire became embers, the musicians wandered away like figures in a dream. The guests roused themselves and went by swaying

walkways to their wicker cabins If other assignments had been made, if other trysts were kept, Gersen had no knowledge of them.

In the morning the guests assembled for breakfast to find that the wagon was gone, and there was speculation as to what mode of transport next would be offered them. After breakfast a steward pointed out a path "There we will go, I have been requested to guide If all are ready, I suggest that we set off, for there is far to go before evening "

Hygen Grote spoke in an astonished voice. "You mean to say, we •walk?'"

"Exactly this. Lord Grote There is no other way to our destination "

"I never expected all this backing and filling," complained Grote. "I thought that when we were invited to the Palace of Love, an air car simply took us there."

"I am only a servant, Lord Grote, I can offer no explanation."

Grote turned away, not completely pleased But he had no choice. Presently his spirits rose and he was the first to start singing an old walking song of his fraternity at Lublinken College

Over low hills, through glades and groves went the path. They walked over a wide meadow, startling a number of white birds into flight, they descended a valley to a lake, where lunch awaited them

The steward would not allow an overlong rest. "There is still far to go, and we cannot walk fast for fear of tiring the ladies."

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"I'm already tired," snapped the Druidess Wust. "I don't intend to move another step."

"Anyone who wishes may return," said the steward. "The path is plain, and there is staff to assist you along the way. But now it is time for the rest of us to go on. It is afternoon, and a wind is rising."

Indeed a breeze with a hint of coolness blew small wavelets across the lake, and the western sky was paved with herringbone clouds.

Druidess Wust elected to continue with the group, and all set off along the shore of the lake. Presently the path turned aside, mounted a slope and struck off across a park of tall trees and long grass. On and on trudged the party, with the wind at their backs. With the sun declining behind a range of mountains, they halted for pastries and tea. Then off once more with the wind sighing through the branches.

As the sun sank behind the mountains the party entered dank heavy woods, which seemed all the darker for the going of the sun.

The pace was slow; the older women were tired, though only Druidess Wust complained. Druidess Laidig wore a grim expression while Margary Liever strolled along with her customary small smile. Hygen Grote had lapsed into sulky silence, except for an occasional terse word to Doranie.

The woods seemed endless; the wind, now distinctly cool, roared through the upper branches. Dusk fell over the mountains;

at last the party stumbled into a clearing to find a rambling old forest lodge of timber and stone. The windows glowed with yellow lights, smoke drifted from a chimney; within must be found warmth and food and good cheer.

And so it was. The tired travelers, climbing stone steps to the porch, entered a vast beamed parlor, with bright rugs on the floor and a roaring blaze in the fireplace. Some of the group sank gratefully into deep chairs, others chose to go to their rooms to refresh themselves. Once again new clothing was issued: for the men black trousers and short jackets with a dark brown cummerbund; for the ladies long trailing black gowns with white and brown flowers for the hair.

Those who had bathed and dressed returned to the parlor, to the envy of those who still sat tired and dirty; presently all had bathed and changed into the new dark garments.

Mulled wine was served, and presently a hearty forest dinner—

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goulash, bread and cheese, red wine—and all the toil of the day was forgotten.

After dinner the guests gathered around the fireplace to sip liquors, and now the talk was loud and brave, everyone speculating as to where lay the Palace of Love. Navarth struck a dramatic pose in front of the fire. "It is plain!" he cried in a great brassy voice. "Or is it not? Does not everyone understand, or is it left to old Navarth the poet to illuminate?"

"Speak, Navarth!" called Ethuen. "Reveal to all your insight. Why cherish them for your private pleasures?"

"I have never had that intention; all will know what I know, and all will feel what I feel. We are midway along in the journey. Here is where the carelessness, the amplitude, the calm ease depart. The winds arose at our back and hurried us through the woods. Our refuse is medievalism!"

"Come now, old man," chaffed Tanxel. "Speak so we can understand you."

"Those who understand me will do so; those who cannot will never do so. But all is clear. He knows, he knows!"

Druidess Laidig, impatient with hyperbole, spoke crossly. "He

knows what? Who knows what?"

"What are we all but perambulatory nerves? The artist knows the linkage of nerve with nerve!"

"Speak for yourself," muttered Diffiani.

Navarth performed one of his extravagant gesticulations. "He is a poet like myself. Did I not teach him? Every pang of the soul, every wry ache of the mind, every whisper of blood—"

"Navarth! Navarth!" groaned Wible. "Enough! Or at any rate, something different. Here we are, in this strange old lodge; a perfect refuge for ghosts and wipwarks."

Druid Pruitt spoke sententiously, "This is our lore: each man and each woman is a living seed. When his planting time comes, he is delved and covered, and finally comes forth as a tree; and each soul is distinct. There are birches and oaks and lavengars and black paneyes..."

The talk proceeded. The younger and more energetic folk explored the ancient structure and played hide-and-seek in the long hall among the billowing amber curtains.

Druidess Laidig became uneasy, and craned her neck to find Billika. At last she hoisted herself to her feet and went off, looking

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here and there, presently to return with a downcast Bilhka. Druidess Laidig muttered something to the Druidess Wust, who lumped up and went off down the hall. There were loud echoing voices in the hall, then silence, and a moment later Druidess Wust returned with Hule, who seemed sullen.

Three minutes later Drusilla came back to the saloon. Her face was flushed, her eyes alive with something between mirth and mischief. The dark gown suited her beautifully, she had never looked more beautiful. She crossed the room and slipped into the seat beside Gersen.

"What happened?" he asked.

"We played a game in the hall. I hid with Hule, and watched, as you told me, to see who would be most angered."

"And who was?"

"I don't know. Mano says he loves me. Tanzel was laughing, but he was annoyed. Ethuen said nothing and would not look at me.

"What were you doing, that they should be angry? Don't forget, it's dangerous to thwart people."

Drusilla's mouth drooped. "Yes I forgot—I should feel frightened .. I do feel frightened when I think about it. But you will take care of me, won't you?"

"I will if I can."

"You can. I know you can."

"I hope I can . . . Well, what was going on to annoy Mano, Taniel and Ethuen?"

"Nothing very much. Hule and I sat in an old couch that was turned backwards. Hule wanted to kiss me, and I let him. The Druidess found us and embarrassed Hule dreadfully. She called me names—'Harlot!' 'Lilith!' 'Nymph!' " Drusilla imitated Wust's peculiar grating voice to an exactitude

"And all heard?"

"Yes All heard."

"Who seemed the most upset?"

Drusilla shrugged. "Sometimes I think one, then the other. Mano seems the softest. Ethuen has the least humor. Taniel is sometimes sarcastic."

Obviously, thought Gersen, there had been much which he had missed "Best that you do not hide with anyone, not even Hule. Be pleasant to each of the three, but prefer none."

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Drusilla's face became bleak and drawn. "I am frightened, really. When I was with the three women, I thought I might run away. But I feared the poison in their rings Do you think they would have killed me?"

"I don't know. But for now, go to bed and sleep. And open your door to no one."

Drusilla rose to her feet. With a final cryptic glance at Gersen, she went to the stairs, ascended to the balcony and entered her chamber.

One by one the group dwindled, and at last Gersen sat alone gazing into the dying fire, waiting for he knew not what. . . The balcony lights were dim, a balustrade obscured his vision. A shape drifted up to the door of one of the chambers; it quickly opened and closed.

Gersen waited another hour, while the fire became embers and the wind blew spatters of rain against the dark windows There was no further activity. Gersen went to his own bed.

The chamber which had received the visitor, so Gersen noted the next morning, was that of Tralla Callob, the sociology student.

He watched to see upon whom her eyes rested, but could be sure of nothing.

This morning all wore similar costumes: gray suede trousers, a black blouse, a brown jacket, an intricate black hat which was almost a helmet, with ear flaps flaring rakishly outward

Breakfast, like the meal of the night before, was simple and substantial, as they ate, the pilgrims cast appraising glances at the sky. Ragged patches of mist blew over the mountain. Directly overhead was a thin overcast, breaking at the east into tattered clots of nimbus—a not too cheerful outlook.

After breakfast the steward marshaled the pilgrims, evading questions put to him.

"How far must we walk today?"—this from Hygen Grote.

"I really don't know, sir. I have never heard the distance mentioned. But the sooner we start, the sooner we arrive."

Hygen Grote gave a despondent snort. "This certainly wasn't what I expected— Well, I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

The path led south from the clearing; all turned to take a final look at the somber old lodge before it passed from sight.

For several hours the trail wound through the woods. The sky remained overcast; the gray-mauve light which penetrated the trees

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invested with moss, the ferns and the occasional pale flowers with a peculiarly rich color. Rock outcrops covered with black and red lichen began to appear; everywhere were fragile little growths not dissimilar to the fungus of Earth, but taller and many-tiered, exhaling a bitter old-age smell when crushed.

The path began to rise, the woods fell below. The pilgrims found themselves on a rock-strewn slope, with mountains looming to the west. At a stream they paused to drink and catch their breath, and the steward distributed sweet biscuits.

To the east spread the forest, gloomy and dark; above loomed the mountain. Hygen Grote again deprecated the difficulty of the way, to which the guide made the blindest of replies: "There is much in what you say, Lord Grote. But as you know, I am only a servant, with orders to make the journey as convenient and interesting as possible."

"How can trudging these weary miles be interesting or convenient?" grumbled Grote, to be answered by Margary Liever:

"Come now, Hygen. The scenery is delightful. Look at the view. And did you not enjoy the romantic old lodge? I did."

"I am sure that this is the hope of the Margrave," said the

steward. "And now, Lords and Ladies, best that we continue."

The trail slanted up the mountain slope- soon Druidess Laidig and Dorame were falling behind, and the steward courteously slowed the pace. The path entered a stony gulch, and the ascent became less steep.

Lunch was brief and austere, consisting of soup, biscuits and sausage, then once again the pilgrims set off along the trail. Wind began to strike down the mountainside, a few cold gusts at a time;

overhead dark gray clouds raced to the east. Up the bleak mountainside plodded the pilgrims, and the city Kouhila, the glass-hulled yacht, the green and gold wagon were only remote memories. Margary Liever remained cheerful, and Navarth swung along grinning, as if at some malicious joke. Hygen Grote gave up complaining, saving his breath for the exertion of moving uphill

Halfway through the afternoon a rain squall drove the party to shelter under a jut of rock. The sky was dark; an unreal gray light washed the landscape. The pilgrims in their costumes of black and umber were as if derived from the same stone and soil as the mountain itself

The trail entered a stony gorge. The pilgrims plodded forward

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in silence, the badinage and gentilities of the first few days put aside. There was another brief shower which the steward ignored, for the light was waning. The gorge widened, but the way ahead was blocked by a massive stone wall, topped by a row of iron spikes. The steward went to a black iron postern, raised a knocker and let it fall. After a long minute, the portal creaked back to reveal a crooked old man in black garments.

The steward addressed the pilgrims. "Here is where I leave you. The path lies beyond; you need only follow. Make the best haste possible, because darkness is not far away."

One by one the group passed through the gap; the portal clanged shut behind them. For a moment they milled uncertainly, looking this way and that. The steward and the old man had gone;

there was none to direct them.

Diffiam pointed: "There, the path. It leads up toward the height "

Painfully the pilgrims proceeded. The path traversed a stony barren, crossed a river, once more slanted up through the blowing wind. P'mally, just as the light failed, the path came out on the ridge Diffiani, in the lead, pointed ahead. "Lights. A hospice of some sort."

The group straggled forward, bending to the wind-gusts, turning faces away from driven drips of rain. A long low stone structure

bulked against the sky; one or two of the windows showed a wan yellow illumination. Diffiam found a door, pounded on it with his fist.

It creaked open and a woman peered forth. "Who are you?  
Why do you come so late?"

"We are travelers, guests for the Palace of Love," bawled Hygen Grote. "Is this the way?"

"Yes, this is the way. Enter then. Were you expected?"

"Of course we were expected! Is there lodging for us here?"

"Yes, yes," quavered the old woman. "I can give you beds, but this is the old castle. You should have gone by the other path. Enter then. I must look about. You have supped, I trust?"

"No," said Grote despondently, "we have not."

"Perhaps I can find gruel. What a shame the castle is so cold!"

The pilgrims passed into a bleak courtyard, lit by a pair of feeble lamps. The old woman conducted them one at a time to tall-

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ceilinged chambers in various quarters of the castle. These were austere, gloomy, decorated to the precepts of some long-forgotten tradition. Gersen's chamber contained a cot, a single lamp of red and blue glass. Three walls were black iron, relieved by patterns of rust. In one of the walls was a door. The fourth wall was paneled in dark waxed wood and carved with enormous grotesque masks. There was neither fire nor heating, the room was chill.

The old lady, breathless and anxious, told Gersen, "When food is ready you'll be summoned." She pointed to the door. "Yonder is the bath, with precious little warm water. One must make do." And she hurried away. Gersen went into the bathroom, tested the shower, the water ran hot. He stripped off his clothes, bathed, then rather than dressing in sodden clothes, he stretched out on the cot and covered himself with a quilt. Time passed; Gersen heard a distant gong strike nine times. There might be supper, again there might not. The warmth of the shower had made him drowsy;

and he fell asleep. Vaguely he heard the gong strike ten times, then eleven. Evidently there was to be no supper. . . Gersen turned over and went back to sleep.

Twelve strokes of the gong. Into the room came a slender maiden with silky blonde hair. She wore a skintight garment of blue velvet and blue leather slippers with rolled toes.

Gersen sat up in bed. The maiden spoke, "We have now prepared a meal; all are aroused, all are summoned to eat." She rolled a wardrobe cart into the room. "Here are garments; do you require assistance?" Without waiting for a response, she brought underlinen to Gersen. Presently he was clothed in beautiful fabric after a style quaint, ornate and complicated. The maiden dressed his hair, applied gallantry discs to his cheeks, sprayed him with scent. "My Lord is magnificent," she murmured "And now—a mask, which tonight is of necessity."

The mask consisted of a black velvet casque fitting down to the ears, with a black visor, a nose-cup and a chin-guard; only Gersen's cheeks, mouth and eyes were bare. "My Lord is now mysterious as well," said the maiden in the softest of voices. "I will lead you, for the way is by the old corridors."

She took him down a draughty staircase, along a dank, echoing corridor, with only the feeblest of lamps to light the way. The walls, once splendid in patterns of magenta, silver and gold, were faded and blotched, the tiles of the floor were loose . . . The maiden

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halted by a heavy red portiere. She looked sidelong at Gersen and put her finger to her lips, with the dim light glowing on her blue velvet garment, and glinting in her hair, she seemed dreamstuff—a creature too exquisite to be real. "Lord," she said, "within is our banquet. I must urge you to mystery, for this is the game all must play and you may not speak your name." She pulled aside the portiere, Gersen stepped through into a vast hall. From a ceiling so high as to be unseen hung a single chandelier, casting an island of light around a great table laid with linen, silver and crystal

Here sat a dozen people in the most elaborate of costumes, wearing masks. Gersen examined them, but recognized none. Were they his fellows along the journey? He could not be sure. Others entered the room. Now they came by twos and threes, all masked and all moving with an air of wonder.

Gersen recognized Navarth, whose swaggering gait was unmistakable. The girl, was she Drusilla? He could not be certain.

Forty people had entered the room, converging slowly upon the table. Footmen in silver and blue livery assisted all to seats;

poured wine in the goblets, serving from silver trays

Gersen ate and drank, aware of a peculiar confusion, almost bewilderment. Where and what was his reality? The rigors of the journey seemed as remote as childhood. Gersen drank somewhat more wine than he might have under different circumstances. The chandelier exploded in a dazzling burst of green light, then went out. Gersen's eyes projected orange afterimages into the dark, from around the table came whispers and hisses of surprise.

The chandelier slowly returned to normal. A tall man stood on a chair. He wore black garments and a black mask; he held a goblet of wine in his hand. "Guests," he said, "I make you welcome. I am Viole Falushe. You have attained the Palace of Love "

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Avis rara, black mascara  
Will you stay to dine with me?  
Amanita botulina  
Underneath my upas tree.

This dainty tray of cloisonne  
Contains my finest patchouli.  
Aha, my dear! What have we here?  
A dead mouse in the potpourri.

With mayonnaise the canapes,  
Ravished from a sturgeon^ womb;

With silver prong we guide along  
The squeaking oyster to his doom.

A samovar of hangdog tea:

A cup, or are you able?  
Antimony, macaroni  
On my hemlock table.

-Navarth

"There are many varieties of love/' said Viole Falushe in a pleasant husky voice. "The range is wide, and all have contributed to the creation of the palace. Not all of my guests discover this, and not every phase is yielded to them. For some the palace will seem little more than a holiday resort. Others will be haunted by what has been described as unnatural beauty. This is everywhere: in every detail, every view. Others will revel in ardor, and here I must offer information."

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Gersen studied Viole Falushe with a rapt intensity. The tall masked figure stood spare, straight, arms at sides; Gersen turned his head this way and that, trying to identify the figure, but the chandelier hanging directly above the man distorted his contours.

"The people at the Palace of Love are amiable, gay and beautiful, they fall into two categories," said Viole Falushe. "The first are servants. They are pleased to obey every wish of my guests, every whim or caprice. The second class, the happy people who inhabit the palace, are as independent in their friendships as I myself. They are to be identified by their garments, which are white. Hence, your choice is wide."

Gersen sought around the table, trying to find Tanzel, or Mario or Ethuen and thus eliminate them from suspicion. In this effort he was unsuccessful. Among the forty were a dozen persons who might be any of the three. He turned back to listen to Viole Falushe.

"Are there restrictions? A person who went mad and began to kill would naturally be restrained. Then again, all of us here cherish our privacy, one of our most delightful prerogatives. Only the most thoughtless person would intrude where he was not wanted. My personal apartments are sufficiently secluded; you need not apprehend an accidental intrusion; this is almost impossible." Viole Falushe turned his head slowly, looked around the room. No one

spoke; the room was heavy with expectancy.

Viole Falushe continued speaking. "So now—the Palace of Love! At times in the past I have arranged small dramas of which the participants were never aware. I have contrived moods in artful sequence. I have employed tragic contrasts to heighten the delectation. On this occasion there will be no such program. You will be free to do as you like, to create your own drama. I advise restraint. The rare jewels are the most precious. The degree of austerity I myself practice would astound you. My great pleasure is creation—of this I never tire. Some of my guests have complained of a gentle melancholy which hangs in the air; I agree that the mood exists. The explanation, I believe, arises from the fugacity of beauty, the tragic pavane to which all of us step. Ignore this mood; why brood, when there is so much love and beauty here? Take what is offered; have no regrets. A thousand years from now it will be all the same. Satiety is a problem, but it is your own. I cannot protect you. The servants are to serve; command them. The residents who

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wear white are to woo—to beguile. I pray that you do not become infatuated either with the palace or its people; such a situation presents difficulties. You will not see me, though spiritually I am always in your midst. There are no spy devices, no sound transmitters, no vision cells. Upbraid me if you choose, revile me, praise me—I cannot hear. My only reward is the act of creation and the effect it produces. Do you wish to look forth on the Palace of Love? Turn then in your seats!"

The far wall slid away; daylight poured into the hall. Before the guests spread a landscape of mmd-wrenching beauty: wide lawns, feathery green-bower trees, tall black cypress, twinkling birch;

ponds, pools, marble urns, pavilions, terraces, rotundas; constructed to an airy delicate architecture that seemed almost to float.

Gersen, like the others, had been startled by the sudden opening of the wall. Recovering he jumped to his feet, but the man in black had disappeared.

Gersen sought out Navarth. "Who was it? Mano2 Tanzel? Ethuen?"

Navarth shook his head. "I did not notice. I have been looking for the girl. Where is she?"

With a sudden sinking feeling Gersen swung around. None of the people in the room was Drusilla. "When did you see her last?"

"When we arrived, when we came into the courtyard."

Already the journey seemed remote. Gersen muttered. "I hoped to protect her. I told her so. She trusted me."

Navarth made an impatient motion. "You could have done nothing."

Gersen went to the window, looked across the panorama. To the left was the sea, a group of distant islands. To the right mountains reared ever higher and harsher, with cliffs falling to the valley floor. Below was the Palace, a loose grouping of terraces, halls and pleasantries. A door slid aside to reveal a descending staircase. One by one the guests descended to the valley.

The precincts of the Palace occupied a roughly hexagonal area perhaps a mile on a side. The base was the north cliff, with the Palace at its midpoint. The second side, clockwise, was demarcated by a line of rocky crags, the gaps between which were choked by rank thorny thickets. The third side was white beach and warm blue sea. The fourth and fifth sides were less distinct, and merged into the

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natural landscape. The sixth side, angling back to the cliff, was demarcated by a line of carefully cultivated flower beds and fruit trees arranged against a rude stone wall. Within the area were three villages, innumerable glades, gardens, waterways. The guests wandered where they chose, spent the long days in whatever fashion seemed most pleasurable. Bright mornings, golden afternoons, evenings and nights: one by one they drifted away.

The servants, as Viole Falushe had implied, were acquiescent and possessed of great physical charm. The folk in white, even more beautiful than the underservants, were innocent and willful as children. Some were cordial, some were perverse and impudent, all were unpredictable. It seemed as if their sole ambition was to evoke love, to tantalize, to fill the mind with longing, and they became depressed only when guests found the underservants preferable to themselves. They showed no awareness of the worlds of the universe, and only small curiosity, though their minds were active and their moods mercurial. They thought only of love, and the various aspects of fulfillment. As Viole Falushe had hinted, infatuation too intense might lead to tragedy; of this danger the people in white were gravely aware, but made small effort to avoid the danger.

The mystery of the Druids' presence resolved itself. On the first day after arrival Dakaw, Pruitt, Laidig and Wust, with Hule and Billika in careful convoy, explored the precincts, and fixed upon a delightful little glade for their center of operations. To the back rose a line of black cypress, to right and left were lower trees and flowering shrubs, at the center was a great spraddle-rooted oak. In front of the glade a pair of shelters was erected: low domes of pale brown fiber. Here the group took up residence, and thereafter, each morning and afternoon held evangelical meetings, expounding the nature of their religion to all who came past. With great fervor they urged rigor, harshness, restraint and ritual upon the folk of the garden, who listened politely enough, but after the meetings enticed the Druids to relaxation and pleasure. Gersen decided that the whole affair was one of Viole Falushe's wry jokes: a game he had chosen to play with the Druids. The other guests arrived at the same conclusion, and attended the meetings to judge whose doctrines would triumph.

The Druids worked with great intensity, and built a fane of stones and twigs. Standing at the front one or the other would cry out: "Must you all then die to become dead^ The mode to the

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Eternal is through minglement with a Vitality more enduring than your own. The source of all is the Triad Mag-Rag-Dag-Air, Earth and Water. This is the Holy Immanence, which combines to produce the Tree of Life! The Tree is the wise, the vital, the enduring! Look at lesser things: insects, flowers, fish, man. See how they grow, bloom, lapse, while the Tree in its placid wisdom lives on. Yea, you titillate your flesh, you fror^e your stomach, you flood your brain with vapor— What then? How soon you die, while the noble Tree, with roots in Earth, holds innumerable leaves to the glory of the sky. Forever! And when your flesh sags and withers, when your nerves no longer leap, when your belly is sour, when your nose drips from the liquor you have misused—then is no time to worship the Tree! No, no, no! For the Tree will have none of your corruption. All must be fresh and good. So worship. Give over the sterile cavortings, the animal gratifications! Worship the Tree!"

The palace folk listened with respect and awe. It was impossible to judge how deeply the Druid doctrine touched them. Meanwhile Dakaw and Pruitt began to dig a great hole under the oak, burrowing down between the sprawled roots. Hule and Billika were not allowed to dig and showed no disposition to do so; indeed they watched the process with horrified fascination.

The palace folk, in their turn, insisted that the Druids participate in their festivities, arguing: "You wish us to learn your ways, but in all fairness you must know the way we live too, so that you may judge our lives and see if after all we are corrupt!" Grudgingly the Druids acquiesced, sitting in a huddled group and maintaining the closest possible strictures upon Hule and Billika.

The other guests watched with varied reactions. Skebou Diffiani attended the meetings with regularity and presently, to the astonishment of all, announced his intent to become a Druid. Thereafter he donned black robe and cowl and joined the others at their rituals. Torrace da Nossa spoke of the Druids with pitying contempt. Lerand Wible, who along the way had displayed an interest in Billika, threw up his arms in disgust and stayed away. Mario, Ethuen and Tanzel went their own ways and were seen but seldom. Navarth had become obsessed. He roved the garden, morose, dissatisfied, looking this way and that. He took no joy in the beauty of the garden and went so far as to sneer at Viole Falushe's arrangements. "There is no novelty here; the pleasures are banal. There are no exhilarations, no staggering insights, no sublime

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sweep of mind. All is either gross or maudlin—the gratification of gut and gland."

"This may be true," Gersen admitted. "The pleasures of the place are simple and undramatic. But what is wrong with this?"

"Nothing. But it is not poetry."

"It is all very beautiful. To do Viole Falushe credit, he has avoided the macabre, the sadistic spectacles, which occur elsewhere, and he allows his servants a certain degree of integrity."

Navarth made a sour grumbling sound. "You are an innocent. The more exotic pleasures he reserves for himself. Who knows what goes on beyond the walls? He is a man who halts at nothing. And integrity in these people? Bathos! They are dolls, toys, confessions. No doubt many are the little children extorted from Kouhila—those he did not sell to the Mahrab. And when they lose their youth, what then? Where do they go?"

Gersen only shook his head. "I don't know."

"And where is Jheral Tinzy?" Navarth went on. "Where is the girl? What does he do with her? He has had her at his mercy."

Gersen gave a grim nod. "I know."

"You know," jeered Navarth, "but only after I reminded you. You are not only innocent, you are futile and foolish—no less than myself. She trusted you to protect her, and what have you done? Swilled and trolloped with the others, and this is the extent of your effort."

Gersen thought the outburst exaggerated but made a mild reply. "If I could contrive some feasible course of action, I would do so."

"And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime, I am learning."

"Learning what?"

"I find that none of the people here know Viole Falushe by sight. His offices seem to be somewhere back in the mountains; I can find them nowhere in the valley. I dare not try to cross the stone wall to the west, nor the thorn barrier to the east; I would certainly be apprehended and, journalist or not, dealt with harshly. Since I have no weapons I can demand nothing. I must be patient. If I do not speak to him here at the Palace of Love, I will no doubt find opportunity elsewhere."

"All for your magazine, eh?"

"What else?" asked Gersen.

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They had come to the glade of the Druids. Dakaw and Pruitt were delving as usual below the great oak, where they had excavated a chamber tall enough for a man to stand erect.

Navarth approached, peered down into the sweating dust-streaked faces. "What do you do down there, you burrowing Druids? Are you not pleased with the vista above ground that you seek a new viewpoint below?"

"You are facetious," said Pruitt coldly. "Be on your way; this is holy soil."

"How can you be so sure? It looks like ordinary dirt."

Neither Pruitt nor Dakaw made response.

Navarth barked down, "What sort of mischief are you up to? This is no ordinary pastime. Speak now."

"Go away, old poet," said Pruitt. "Your breath is a pollution and saddens the Tree."

Navarth moved back and watched the digging from a little distance. "I do not like holes in the ground," he told Gersen. "They are unpleasant. Look at Wible yonder. He stands as if he were overseer to the project!" Navarth pointed toward the entrance to the glade, where Wible stood, legs apart, hands clasped behind his back, whistling between his teeth. Navarth joined him. "The work of the Druids enthalls you?"

"Not at all," said Lerand Wible. "They dig a grave."

"As I suspected. For whom?"

"That I can't be sure. Perhaps you—perhaps me."

"I doubt if they will inter me," said Navarth. "You may be more pliable."

"I doubt if they will inter anyone," said Wible, whistling once more through his teeth.

"Indeed? How can you be so sure?"

"Come to the consecration and see for yourself."

"When does this rite occur?"

"Tomorrow night, so I have been informed."

Little music was to be heard on the grounds of the palace; the quiet of the garden was as crystalline and clear as a dewdrop. But on the following morning the folk in white brought forth stringed instruments and for an hour played a wistful music rich with plangent overtones. A sudden shower sent all hurrying to the shelter of a nearby rotunda, where they stood chattering like birds and peering

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up at the sky. Gersen, contemplating their faces, thought how frail

and tenuous was the connection between them and the guests. Did they know anything except frivolity and love? And there was the question raised by Navarth: What happened when they aged? Few in the garden were past the first bloom of their maturity.

The sun came forth; the garden glinted with freshness. Gersen, drawn by curiosity went to the Druids' glade. Within one of the shelters he glimpsed Billika's pale face. Then Wust came to stare at him from the doorway.

The long afternoon passed. Today a portent hung in the air, and uneasiness seemed to infect everyone. Evening arrived; the sun sank in a great tumult of clouds; gold, orange and red flamed overhead and far into the east. With the coming of dusk, folk of the garden went to the Druids' glade. To each side of the oak tree were fires, tended by Druidess Laidig and Dmidess Wust.

Druid Pruitt emerged from his shelter. He went to the fane and began his address. His voice was heavy and resonant; he paused frequently, as if to hear the echoes of his words.

Lerand Wible approached Gersen. "I am speaking to everyone in our group. Whatever happens—do not interfere. Do you agree to this?"

"Naturally not."

"I didn't think you would. Well then—" Wible whispered a few words; Gersen grunted. Wible moved off to speak to Navarth, who tonight was carrying a staff. After Wible spoke, Navarth threw down his staff.

"—On each world a hallowed Tree. How does it become so? By the afflatus, by the concentration of Life. Oh worshipful Druids, who share the life of the First Germ, bring forth your awe, your most poignant dedication! What say we? Two are here, two have lived for this consecration. Come forth, Druids, go to the Tree!" From one shelter staggered Hule, from the other Billika. Baffled, dull-eyed as if bewildered or drugged, they stared this way and that, then saw the fires. Fascinated they approached, step by slow step. Silence was heavy in the glade. The two approached the tree, looked at the fires, then descended into the hole below the tree.

"Behold!" called Pruitt. "They enter the life of the Tree—oh blessed pair—which now becomes the Soul of the World. Exalted children, lucky two! Forever and ever stand in sun, in rain, by day, by night; and help us to truth!" Druids Dakaw, Pruitt and Diffiani

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began to spade earth into the hole. They worked \uth gusto. In half an hour the hole was full, the soil banked around the roots. The Druids marched around the tree, holding brands from the fire. Each called forth an invocation, and the ceremony ended with a chant.

The Druids customarily breakfasted at the refectory of the near

village. The morning after the consecration they marched across the meadows, entered the refectory. Behind them came Hule and Bilhka. The Druids took their usual places, as did Hule and Billika.

Wust was the first to notice. She pointed a trembling finger. Laidig screamed. Pruitt leapt away, then turned and ran from the refectory. Dakaw fell back like a half-filled sack; Skcbou Diffiam, sitting bolt upright, stared in puzzlement. Hule and Billika ignored the consternation they had caused.

Laidig, sobbing and gasping, reeled from the room, followed by Wust. Diffiam was the least disturbed. He spoke to Hule. "How did you get out?"

"By a tunnel," said Hule. "Wible caused a tunnel to be dug."

Wible came forward. "The servants are here to be used. I used them. We dug a tunnel."

Diffiam nodded slowly. He reached up, took off his cowl, inspected it and tossed it into a corner.

Dakaw, roaring, rose to his feet. He struck once at Hule, knocking him to the floor; then aimed a tremendous blow at Wible, who stepped back, grinning. "Go back to your tree, Dakaw. Dig another hole and bury yourself."

Dakaw marched from the inn.

Wust and Laidig were finally discovered, crouching in a bower. Pruitt had run south, beyond the precincts of the garden and was seen no more.

In some fashion the episode with the Druids had broken a web. The guests, looking at each other, knew that the end of their visit was approaching, that soon they would be departing the Palace of Love.

Gersen stood looking up at the mountains. Patience was well and good, but he might never be so close to Viole Falushe again.

He pondered the small clues he had gleaned. It seemed reasonable to suppose that the banquet hall communicated with Viole

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Falushe's apartments. Gersen went to examine the portal at the foot of the stairs. It showed a blank featureless face. The mountainside above was not climbable.

To the east, where crags reared over the sea, Viole Falushe had set a thorn palisade. To the west the way was barred by a stone wall. Gersen turned to look south. If he made a long journey, circling the periphery of the garden, he would then be able to climb into the mountains to approach the area from above. This was the sort of purposeless activity Gersen detested. He would be moving without knowledge, without plan. There must be some better

method, but he could think of none. Very well, then—activity. He looked at the sun; six hours of daylight remained. He must go far afield and trust to luck. If he were apprehended, he was Henry Lucas, journalist, in search of information: a statement of sufficient force, unless Viole Falushe undertook to use a truth-extracting device . . . Gersen's flesh crawled. The sensation annoyed him. He had become soft, diffident, overwary. Reproaching himself first for cowardice, then for willful recklessness, he set forth, walking south, away from the mountains.

13

From Worlds I Have Knoii'n, by L G Dusenyi

The municipal Temple at Astropolis is a splendid edifice of red porphyry with a noteworthy altar of solid silver. The Astropolitans are divided into thirteen cults, each dedicated to a distinct Supreme Deity. To determine which image sits on high, the Astropolitans each seven years conduct a Tournament of the Gods, with trials to measure Paramount Power, Inaccessible Loftiness and Ineffable Mystery.

At the first trial wooden god-images are mounted upon onagers, each hitched to a heavy log. The onagers then are urged around a track, and the winning god is credited with Paramount Power.

At the second trial the images are thrust into a glass cauldron which is then sealed and inverted. The god which floats on high is credited with Inaccessible Loftiness.

The images are then concealed behind booths. Candidates for sacrifice are brought forward, and each attempts to guess the god behind each booth. The candidate with the lowest score receives unction and the blade, while the god who most efficiently conceals his identity is judged Ineffably Mysterious.

Over the past twenty-eight years the god Kalzibah has proved himself so consistently and the god Syarasis has so often failed that the Syaratics are gradually deserting the cult to become ardent Kal/ibahans.

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The garden ended at a grove of indigenous trees, of a type Gersen had not seen before: tall, gaunt organisms with pulpy black leaves, from which dripped a musty unpleasant sap. Fearing poison, Gersen breathed as shallowly as possible, and was relieved to reach open ground with no other sensation than dizziness. To the east toward the ocean were orchards and cultivated soil, to the west a dozen long sheds were visible: Barns^ Warehouses^ Dormitories. Keeping to the shadow of the trees Gersen walked west, and presently came upon a road leading from the sheds toward the mountains.

No living creature was in sight. The sheds seemed deserted. Gersen decided not to explore them, they certainly were not the headquarters of Viole Falushe.

Across the road was a wild area overgrown with thorny scrub. Gersen looked dubiously down the road. Best to travel by the barrens, there would be less chance of discovery. He ducked across the road and struck off toward the mountains. The afternoon sun shone brightly, the scrub was host to swarms of small red mites, which set up an impatient whirring sound when disturbed. Stepping around a hummock—a hive or a nest of some sort—Gersen came upon a bloated serpentlike creature with a face uncannily human. The creature saw Gersen with an expression of comical alarm, then, rearing back, it displayed a proboscis from which it evidently intended to eject a fluid. Gersen beat a quick retreat, and thereafter walked more wanly.

The road veered west away from the garden. Gersen crossed once more and took shelter under a cluster of yellow bladder-plants. He considered the mountain, tracing a route which would bring him to the ridge. Unfortunately, while climbing, he would be exposed to the gaze of anyone who happened by. No help for it. He took a last look around, and seeing nothing to dissuade him, set forth.

The mountainside was steep, at times precipitous. Gersen made discouragingly slow progress. The sun swung across the sky. Below spread the Palace of Love and the garden. Gersen's chest pounded, and his throat felt numb, as if it had been anesthetized. The influence of the noxious black-leaved forest? Ever higher he climbed, the panorama below grew even wider.

For a space the way became easier, and Gersen angled toward the east, where presumably Viole Falushe maintained his headquarters. Motion. Gersen stopped short. From the corner of his

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eyes he had seen—what? He could not be sure. The flicker had come from below and to his right. He scrutinized the face of the mountain, and presently saw what otherwise might have evaded his attention—a deep cleft or fissure with a bridge between two arched apertures, the whole camouflaged by a stone wall.

Clutching and straining, Gersen angled down toward the cleft, finally reaching a point thirty feet above the walkway. There was no means to descend. He could go neither forward nor up nor down. His fingers were tiring, his legs were cramped. Thirty feet—too far to jump; he would break his legs. Out upon the bridge came a pale stoop-shouldered man with a large moist head, a clipped shock of black-gray hair. He wore a white jacket and black trousers. It was the white jacket, Gersen now realized, which had originally drawn his attention. If the man should look up, if a dislodged pebble should strike the bridge, Gersen was lost. . . . The man moved into the opposite aperture and out of sight. Gersen gave a fantastic gravity-defying leap, to throw himself into the angle of the cleft. He thrust out his legs, doubled his knees, pressing between the walls.

Inch by inch he let himself down, gratefully jumping the final six feet. He stretched, massaged sore muscles, then limped over to the western doorway into which the man had disappeared. A white-tiled hall led back fifty yards, broken by areas of glass and occasional doorways. Beside one of these glass areas stood the stoop-shouldered man, peering at something which had attracted his attention. He raised his hand, and signaled. From somewhere beyond Gersen's range of vision came a heavy-shouldered man with a thick neck, narrow head, a coarse yellow brush of hair and white eyes. The two looked through the glass, and the white-eyed man seemed to be amused.

Gersen drew back. Crossing the walkway, he looked up the passage to the east, to see a single doorway at the far end. The walls and floor were white tile; ornate lamps scattered rays and planes of various colors.

With long stealthy strides Gersen went to the far door. He touched the open button. No response. He sought for code points or a lock hole, without success. The opening-mechanism was controlled from the other side. In one sense this was encouraging—the stoop-shouldered man had come this way, and it could only be to confer with whomever sat or stood or worked beyond the door.

It would not do to attract attention. Yet, Gersen must do some-

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thing and quickly. At any moment one of the two men might approach, and he had nowhere to hide. He scrutinized the door with great care. The latch was magnetic; retraction was accomplished by an electro-muscle. The escutcheon plate was fixed to the panel with adhesive. Gersen searched his pockets but found nothing of utility. Loping back down the hall, he reached up to the first lighting fixture and twisted loose a decorative metal cusp with a sharp point. Returning to the door he pried at the escutcheon plate, presently snapped it free, to reveal the mechanism of the open button. Gersen traced the circuit, and with the point of his metal cusp shorted across the relay contacts. He touched the button. The door slid aside, silent as a whisper.

Gersen passed through the opening into an unoccupied foyer. He replaced the escutcheon plate and let the door slide shut.

There was much to see. The far end of the room was ripple glass. To the left an archway opened upon a flight of stairs. To the right were five cinematic panels, each displaying Jheral Tinzy in various guises at different stages of existence.—Or were they five different girls? One, wearing a short black skirt, was Drusilla Wayles. Gersen recognized the expression on her face, the droop to her mouth, the restless habit of tossing her head to the side. Another, this a delightful imp in clown's regalia, cavorted on a stage. A Jheral Tinzy of thirteen or fourteen in the translucent white gown of a sleepwalker moved slowly across an eerie setting of stone, black shadow and sand. A fourth Jheral Tinzy, a year or two younger than Drusilla, wore only a barbaric skirt of leather and bronze. She stood on a stone-flagged terrace and seemed to be performing a

religious ritual. A fifth Jheral Tinzy, a year or two older than Drussilla, walked briskly along a city street. . .

Gersen glimpsed all this in the space of two seconds. The effect was fascinating, but he could not spare time to look. For beyond the ripple-glass wall was the distorted image of a tall spare man.

Gersen crossed the foyer on four silken strides. His hand went to the open button of the door; he tensed, touched the button. The door failed to open. Gersen exhaled: a long slow sigh of frustration. The man turned his head sharply; all Gersen could see was distortion and blur. "Retz? Back once more?" he jerked his head suddenly forward; the glass was evidently permeable to his vision. "It's Lucas—Henry Lucas the journalist!" His voice took on a harsh edge. "There is a need for much explanation. What are you doing here?"

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"The answer is obvious," said Gersen. "I came here to interview you. There seemed no other way."

"How did you find my office?"

"I climbed the mountain, jumped down where the walkway crosses the notch. Then I came along the passageway."

"Indeed, indeed. Are you a human fly to traverse the cliff?"

"It was not so difficult," said Gersen. "There would be no other opportunity."

"This is a serious annoyance," said Viole Falushe. "Do you recall my comments on the subject of privacy? I am rigid on this score.

"Your comments were addressed to your guests," said Gersen. "I am here as a man with a job to do."

"Your occupation gives you no license to break laws," Viole Falushe stated in a gentle voice. "You are aware of my wishes, which here, as elsewhere in the cluster, are law. I find your trespass not only insolent but inexcusable. In fact, it goes far beyond the brashness ordinarily tolerated in a journalist. It almost seems—"

Gersen interrupted. "Please, do not let your imagination dominate your sense of proportion. I am interested in the photographs in the foyer. They seem to be the likeness of the young lady who accompanied us on our Journey; Navarth's ward."

"This is the case," said Viole Falushe. "I have a strong interest in the young woman. I entrusted her upbringing to Navarth with unhappy results; she is a wanton."

"Where is she now? I have not seen her since we arrived at the

Palace."

"She is enjoying her visit in circumstances somewhat different from yours," said Virole Falushe. "But why your interest? She is nothing to you."

"Except that I befriended her and tried to clarify certain issues which she found confusing."

"And these issues were?"

"You will allow me to use candor?"

"Why not? You can hardly provoke me more than you already have."

"The girl was fearful of what might happen to her. She wanted to live a normal life, but did not care to risk retaliation for actions she could not avoid."

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Virole Falushe's voice trembled. "Is this how she spoke of me? Only in terms of fear and retaliation?"

"She had no reason to speak otherwise."

"You are a bold man, Mr. Lucas. Surely you know my reputation. I subscribe to a doctrine of general equity—that he who commits a grievance must repair the effects of his act."

"What of Jheral Tinzy?" Gersen inquired, hoping to divert Virole Falushe.

"Jheral Tinzy." Virole Falushe breathed the name. "Dear Jheral:

as wilful and promiscuous as the unfortunate girl whom you befriended. Jheral could never quite repay the damage she wrought upon me. Oh, those wasted years!" Virole Falushe's voice quavered;

grief lay near the surface. "Never could she requite her wrongs, though she did her best."

"She is alive?"

"No." Virole Falushe's mood changed once more. "Why do you ask?"

"I am a journalist. You know why I am here. I want a photograph of Jheral Tinzy for our article."

"This is a matter I do not care to publicize."

"I am puzzled by the resemblance between Jheral Tinzy and the girl Drusilla. Can you explain this?"

"I could," said Virole Falushe. "But I do not choose to do so. And there still remains your intrusion, which has shocked me, to such an extent that I demand retribution." And Virole Falushe leaned negligently back against an article of furniture.

Gersen reflected a moment. Flight was futile. Attack was impossible. Virole Falushe certainly carried a weapon; Gersen had none. Galling though the situation might be he must persuade Virole Falushe to change his mind. He tried a reasonable approach. "Conceivably I violated the letter of your regulations, but what avail is an article on the Palace of Love without the comments of its creator? There is no communicating with you, since you choose to keep yourself aloof from your guests."

Virole Falushe seemed surprised. "Navarth knows my call-code well. A servant would have brought you a telephone unit; you might have called me at any time."

"This did not occur to me," said Gersen thoughtfully. "No, I had not considered the telephone. You say Navarth knows the code?"

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"Certainly. It is the same as that which I use on Earth."

"The fact remains," said Gersen, "I am here. You have seen Part One of the projected article, Parts Two and Three are even more highly colored. If we want to present your point of view, it is important that we speak together. So open the door and we will discuss the matter."

"No," said Virole Falushe. "It is my whim to remain anonymous, since I enjoy mingling with my guests . . . Well, then," he grumbled, "I suppose I must swallow my outrage. It is not just that you should evade your debt to me. Perhaps you will not in any event. For the moment, you may regard yourself as reprieved." He spoke a soft word that Gersen did not hear; a door opened in the foyer. "Go within; this is my library. I will speak with you there."

Gersen passed into a long room carpeted in dark green. A heavy table at the center supported a pair of antique lamps and a selection of current periodicals. One wall was lined with ancient books, the shelves sliding up or down through floor and ceiling to magazines above and below. There was a standard microreference system, a number of soft chairs.

Gersen looked around with a trace of envy; the atmosphere was quiet, civilized, rational, remote from the hedonistic life of the Palace. A screen glowed to reveal Virole Falushe sprawling in a chair. A light threw his form into silhouette; he was no more identifiable now than before.

"Very well then," said Virole Falushe, "so here we are. You have

been making your photographic records, I believe?"

"I have several hundred pictures. More than necessary to cover the superficial aspects of the Palace—that which you display to your guests."

Viole Falushe seemed amused. "And you are curious as to what else occurs?"

"From a journalistic standpoint."

"Hm. What do you think of the Palace then?"

"It is remarkably pleasant "

"You have a reservation?"

"Something is lacking. Perhaps the flaw lies in your servants. They lack depth, they do not seem real."

"I recognize this," said Viole Falushe. "They have no traditions. The only remedy is time."

"They are also without responsibility. After all, they are slaves."

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"Not quite, for they do not realize it. They consider themselves the Fortunate Folk, and such they are. It is precisely this unreality, this sense of faerie, that I have been at pains to develop."

"And when they age, what then? What becomes of the Fortunate Folk?"

"Some work the farms surrounding the gardens. Some are sent elsewhere."

"To the real world? They are sold as slaves?"

"All of us are slaves in some wise."

"How are you a slave?"

"I am victim to a terrible obsession. I was a sensitive boy, cruelly thwarted; I daresay Navarth has provided the details. Rather than submit, I was forced, by my sense of justice, to seek compensation—which I am still seeking. I am a man much maligned. The public considers me a voluptuous sybarite, an erotic glutton. The reverse is true. I am—why mince matters—absolutely ascetic. I must remain so until my obsession is relieved. I am a man cursed. But you are not interested in my personal problems, since naturally they are not for publication "

"Nevertheless, I am interested. Jheral Tmzy is the source of your obsession?"

"Precisely." Viole Falushe spoke in a measured voice. "She had

blighted my life. She must expunge this blight. Is this not justice?  
To date she has proved unwilling, incapable."

"How could she remove the obsession?"

Viole Falushe stirred fretfully in his chair "Are you so unimaginative? We have explored the matter far enough."

"So Jheral Tinzy is yet alive?"

"Yes indeed."

"But I understood you to say that she was dead."

"Life, death—these are imprecise terms."

"Who then is Drusilla, the girl you left with Navarth? Is she Jheral Tinzy?"

"She is who she is. She made a dreadful mistake. She failed and Navarth failed, for Navarth should have schooled her. She is frivolous and wanton; she trafficked with other men, and she must serve as Jheral Tinzy served. Thus it shall be, forever and ever, until finally there is expiation, until I can feel soothed and whole. By this time there is a terrible score to pay. Thirty years' Think of it!"

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Viole Falushe's voice vibrated and cracked "Thirty years surrounded by beauty, and incapable of enjoying it! Thirty long years!"

"I would not presume to give you advice," said Gersen, somewhat dryly

"I need no advice, and naturally, what I tell you is in confidence. You would be ungracious to publish it. I would be grieved and forced to demand satisfaction."

"What then may I publish?"

"Whatever you like, so long as I am not injured."

"What of the other events here? What goes on at the other end of the hall?"

Viole Falushe considered him a moment. Gersen could sense but not see the smoulder in his eyes. But he spoke in a light voice "This is the Palace of Love. I am interested in the subject, even fascinated, through the mechanism of sublimation I have an elaborate program of research under way. I explore the emotion in artificial and arbitrary circumstances. I do not choose to discuss the matter any further at this time. Perhaps five years from now, or ten, I will publish a resume of my findings. They will provide fascinating insights."

"In regard to the photographs in the foyer—"

Viole Falushe jumped to his feet "No more' We have talked too much, I find myself uneasy. You have provoked this, hence I have arranged a similar uneasiness for you, which will go far to soothe me Thereafter, caution, discretion' Make the most of your time, because shortly you must return to Reality "

"What of you? You remain here?"

"No one shall also leave the Palace My work here is accomplished, and I have an important mission on Alphanor, which well may change all Be so good as to step into the hall My friend Helaunce awaits you "

Helaunce, thought Gersen This would be the white-eyed man Slowly, with Viole Falushe watching him from the screen, Gersen turned and went to the door The white-eyed man waited in the hall He carried an object something like a flail, a rod terminating in a set of cords He appeared to carry no other weapon

"Remove your clothes," said Helaunce "You are to be chastised "

"Best that you confine your chastisement to words," said Gersen

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sen "Revile me all you like, in the meantime let us return to the garden "

Helaunce smiled "I have my orders Be as difficult as you like, the orders must and will be carried out "

"Not by you," said Gersen "You are too thick and too slow "

Helaunce flourished the flail, the cords made a sinister crackling sound "Quick, or you will make us impatient, and the punishment will be commensurate."

Helaunce was hard and tough, Gersen noted, obviously a trained fighter—perhaps as well-trained as himself. Helaunce was also thirty pounds heavier If he had a weakness, it was not apparent Gersen suddenly sat down in the hall, put his hands to his face and began to sob

Helaunce stared in puzzlement "Off with your clothes' Do not sit there " He came forward, nudged Gersen with his foot "Up!"

Gersen jumped up with Helaunce's foot clamped to his chest. Helaunce hopped backward, Gersen gave the foot a cruel twist, applying torque to joints where muscles could interpose no protection Helaunce cried out in agony, then fell flat Gersen wrested loose the flail, struck him across the shoulder The cords hissed, crackled, Helaunce muttered

"If you can walk," said Gersen, "be good enough to show me the way "

There was a step behind him Gersen turned to glimpse a tall shape in black garments. Something splashed purple-white light into his brain, Gersen toppled, dazed.

There was half an hour of nightmare. Gersen slowly regained control of his faculties. He lay naked in the garden, beside the white palace wall. His clothes were stacked neatly beside him.

So much for that, thought Gersen. The project had failed. Not in disaster, for he still had his life. Gersen dressed himself, smiling grimly. There had been an attempt to humiliate him. It had not succeeded. He had paid, but pain, like pleasure, has no duration. Pride was an entity more persistent.

Gersen leaned against the wall until his brain cleared. His nerves still throbbed to the terrible flail. There were no bruises, no lacerations, no more than a few red welts. Gersen was hungry. And here was humiliation indeed: he must eat Viole Falushe's food, walk through the pleasant garden that Viole Falushe's brain had con-

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ceived. . . . Gersen smiled again, even more wolfishly than before. He had known that his life might not be altogether graceful and easy.

The time was about dusk. The garden had never seemed more beautiful. Fireflies moved in the jasmine bushes, marble urns glowed against dark foliage as if exuding wan light of their own. A troupe of girls from one of the villages came capering past. Tonight they wore loose white pantaloons and carried yellow lanterns. Seeing Gersen, they circled around him singing a gay song, the words of which Gersen could not comprehend. One approached, held her lantern to Gersen's face. "Why so strange, guest-man? Why so gray? Come frolic, come join us!"

"Thank you," said Gersen. "I fear tonight I would frolic very poorly indeed."

"Kiss me," coaxed the girl. "Am I not beautiful? Why are you so sad? Because you must leave forever and ever the Palace of Love? And we will remain, and always be young and carry our lanterns through the night. Is this why you grieve?"

Gersen smiled. "Yes, I must return to a far world. And I am forlorn at the thought. But do not let me interfere with your joy."

The girl kissed his cheek. "Tonight is your last night, your last night at the Palace of Love. Tonight you must do all you have neglected so far, never will there be another time!" The girls continued on their way, with Gersen looking after them. "Do all I have neglected? I wish I could. . . ." He went to a sunken terrace where guests sat dining. Navarth crouched over a bowl of goulash; Gersen joined him. An attendant wheeled forth a cart; Gersen, who had not eaten since morning, served himself.

Navarth finally spoke: "What's happened? You appear well-

used."

"I spent an afternoon with our host."

"Indeed. You spoke to him face to face?"

"Almost so."

"And you know then his identity? Mano? Ethuen? Tanel?"

"I can't be sure."

Navarth grunted, and bent once more to the goulash.

"Tonight is the last night," Gersen said presently.

"So they tell me. I will be glad to go. There is no poetry here. It is as I have always set forth: joy comes of its own free will, it cannot be belabored. Look—a great palace, a magnificent garden

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with live nymphs and heroes. But where is the dreaming, the myth? Only simple-minded folk find joy here."

"Your friend Viole Falushe would be sorry to hear you say this."

"I cannot say less." Navarth turned Gersen a sudden sharp look. "Did you ask for the girl?"

"I did. I learned nothing."

Navarth closed his eyes. "I have become an old man, I am ineffectual. Henry Lucas, whatever your name, cannot you act?"

"Today I tried," said Gersen. "I was not made welcome."

The two sat in silence. Then Gersen asked, "When do we leave?"

"I know no more than you."

"We will do what we can."

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From The Avatar's Apprentice in Scroll From The Ninth Dimension:

Struggling to the hill's crest, Marmaduke searched for the blasted cypress which marked the hut of the symbologist. There stood the tree, haggard and desolate, and a hut nearby.

The symbologist gave him welcome. "A hundred leagues I have come," said Marmaduke, "to put a single

question: Do the colors have souls?"

"Did anyone ever otherwise?" asked the perplexed symbologist. He caused to shine an orange light, then, lifting the swing of his gown, he cavorted with great zest. Marmaduke watched with pleasure, amused to see an old man so spry!

The symbologist brought forth green light. Crouching under the bench he thrust his head between his ankles and turned his gown outside to in, while Marmaduke clapped his hands for wonder.

The symbologist evoked red light, and leaping upon Marmaduke, playfully wrestled him to the floor and threw the gown over his head. "My dear fellow," gasped Marmaduke, winning free, "but you are brisk in your demonstration!"

"What is worth doing is worth doing well," the symbologist replied. "Now to expatiate. The colors admit of dual import. The orange is icterine humor as well as the mirth of a dying heron.

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"Green is the essence of second-thoughts, likewise the mode of the north wind. Red, as we have seen, accompanies rustic exuberance."

"And a second import of the red?" Marmaduke asked.

The symbologist made a cryptic sign. "That remains to be seen, as the cat said who voided into the sugar bowl."

Amused and edified, Marmaduke took his leave, and he was quite halfway down the mountain before he discovered the loss of his wallet.

The last night at the Palace of Love was celebrated by a fete. There was music, intoxicating fumes, a whirl of dancers from the villages. Those who had formed attachments made woeful conversation or indulged in a final frenzy of passion. Others sat quietly, each in his private mood, and so passed the night. One by one the colored lights blinked and dimmed; the folk in "white slipped away through the garden gloom; one by one the guests took themselves to their couches, alone or in the company that pleased them most.

The garden was quiet; dew began to form on the grass. To each of the guests went a servant: "The time has come to leave."

To grumblings and protests the servants made but one reply:

"These are our orders. The air car waits; those who are not on hand must walk their way back to Kouhila."

The guests once more were provided new clothing: an austere costume of blue, black and dark green. They were then guided to an area somewhat south of the Palace where a large air car waited. Gersen counted: all here except Pruitt and Drusilla. Ethuen, Mario and Tanzel stood nearby. If one were Virole Falushe, it seemed that now he planned to return to the Oikumene with the others.

Gersen went forward, glanced into the pilot's compartment. Here sat Helaunce. The guests were filing into the air car. Gersen took Navarth aside. "Wait."

"Why?"

"No matter." Tanzel and Ethuen were aboard; now Mario climbed the ladder. Gersen spoke hurriedly. "Go aboard. Make a disturbance. Pound on the bulkhead. Shout. There is an emergency lock between the saloon and the pilot's compartment. Pull this

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open. Distract the pilot, try not to incite either Mano, Ethuen or Tan/el They must not be encouraged to interfere."

Navarth looked at him blankly. "What is the use of this'""

"No matter. Do as I say. Where is Drusilla^ Where is Jheral Tinzv^ WTrv are they not aboard3"

"Yes . . . Why are they not aboard^ I am truly outraged." Navarth jumped up the ladder, thrusting aside the Druidess Laidig. "W^it'" he called. "We are not all present. WTiere is Zan Zu from Endu? We cannot leave without her. I refuse to leave; nothing will remove me "

"Quiet, old fool," growled Torrance da Nossa "You do no good "

Navarth raged back and forth, lie struck on the forward bulkhead, pulled on the handle of the communicating door. Finally Helaunce opened the door and went aft to enforce order. "Old man, sit quietly. It is by order that we now leave. Unless you care to walk the long road alone, sit quiet."

"Come then, Navarth," said Lerand Wible. "You achieve nothing. Sit quietly."

"Very well," said Navarth. "I have protested; I have done all I can, I can do no more."

Helaunce returned forward. He backed into the pilot's compartment, closed the door. Gersen, waiting to the side, struck him over the head with a stone. Helaunce staggered, spun around, he saw Gersen through eyes blinded by blood and gave an inarticulate cry. Gersen struck again; Helaunce fell aside.

Gersen settled himself at the controls. Up rose the air car, up

into the light of the rising sun. Gersen searched Helaunce and found two projacs, which he tucked into his own pocket. Slackening speed until the air car only drifted, he slid open the door and rolled Helaunce out and away.

In the saloon, thought Gersen, Viole Falushe must be wondering as to the peculiar course Helaunce was steering. Gersen sought around the ocean and presently spied a small island some twenty miles from the shore. He circled it, and seeing no sign of habitation landed the air car.

He jumped to the ground. Going to the saloon port, he pulled it open and jumped inside. "Everybody out. Quick " And he gestured with the projacs.

Wible stuttered, "WTiat does this mean^"

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"It means everybody out."

Navarth jumped to his teet. "Gome along," he bawled. "F\-\-erybody out."

Uncertainly the guests filed outside. Mano came to the door. Gersen halted him. "You must remain. Be very careful and do not move, or I will kill you."

Tanzel came by, and Ethuen, both were intercepted, ordered to sit. Finally the saloon was empty but for Gersen, Mano, Tanzel and Ethuen. Outside Navarth excitedly harangued the group. "Make no interference, you will regret it' This is IPCC business. I know it for a fact'"

"Navarth'" Gersen called from the saloon. "Your assistance, please."

Navarth climbed back into the saloon. He searched Mano, Tanzel and Ethuen, while Gersen stood vigilantly by. Neither weapons nor clues to the identity of Viole Falushe were discovered. To Gersen's direction, Navarth tied the three men to chairs, using various oddments of cord, strips of fabric and thongs. Meanwhile the three excoriated Gersen and demanded the basis for his persecution. Tanzel was the most verbose; Ethuen the most acrimonious, and Mano the most enraged. All glared and cursed with equal vigor. Gersen accepted the remarks with equanimity. "I will apologize to two of you later. Those two, aware of their innocence, will cooperate with me. P'rom the third man I expect trouble. I am prepared for it."

Tanzel asked, "In Jehu's name, then. what do you \vish of us^ Name your third man and have done'"

"Vogel Filschner is his name," said Gersen. "Otherwise known as Viole Falushe."

"Why pick on us^ Go seek him at the Palace'"

Gersen grinned. "Not a bad idea " He tested the bonds of the three men, tightened here, reknotted there. "Navarth, you sit here, to the side. Watch these three carefully. One of them took Jheral Tinzy from you."

"Tell me which one."

"Vogel Filschner. You don't recognize him^"

"I wish I could." He pointed to Mano. "This one has his shifty eye " He indicated TanzePs hands "This one has a mannerism I remember in Vogel " He turned to inspect Ethuen. "And this one has a store of spite and clearly is unhappy "

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"Certainly I'm unhappy'" snapped Ethuen "Why should I re-  
pice3"

"Watch them well," said Gersen "We return to the Palace " Ignoring the outcries of the marooned guests, he took the air car aloft So far so good—but what next? Conceivably his reasoning was awry, conceivably neither Tanel, nor Mano, nor Fthuen was Viole Falushe Thinking back over the circumstances of the journey to the Palace, he discarded the notion

The best method of ingress to the apartments of Viole Falushe was from above, Gersen had no stomach for another climb around the cliff He landed the air car beside the stone castle, and went back into the saloon All was as before Navarth sat glaring at the three captives, who regarded him with loathing.

Gersen gave Navarth one of the projacs "If there is difficulty kill all three I go to look for Drusilla and Jheral Tinzy You must guard them with care'"

Navarth laughed wildly "WTio can trick a mad poet? I know him this instant I intend to keep the weapon at his throat "

Gersen could not restrain a sense of misgiving Navarth was not the most stable of guardians "Remember—if he escapes, we are lost He may want a glass of water, let him thirst His bonds may be too tight He must suffer' Show no mercy if there is interference from outside Shoot all three "

"With pleasure "

"Very well Keep your madness in check till I return'"  
Gersen went to the door through which three weeks previously the sodden band of pilgrims had entered The door was locked, he blasted away the hardware and entered.

There was no sound The dank rooms were empty Gersen went down the hall, descended by the way the girl in blue velvet had taken him, and finally found the banquet room, now dim,

smelling faintly of perfume and wine

Gersen moved more cautiously. From the banquet room a way led down to the garden Another must lead to Viole Falushe's apartments

Gersen checked the walls, and finally behind a hanging he found a narrow door of heavy wood barred with metal. Once again he burnt his way through.

A spiral staircase led down into the chamber to the back of the circular foyer

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Gersen searched the room He found a black leather notebook containing exhaustive notes upon the psychology of Jheral Tinzy, and the various methods by which Viole Falushe hoped to win her. It seemed that Viole Falushe wanted more than love he wanted submission, abject quivering abasement derived from a mingling of love and fear

So far, reflected Gersen, Viole Falushe had fallen short in his goal He tossed the portfolio aside On the wall was a telescreen. Gersen turned a knob Drusilla Wayles wearing a white robe sat on a bed She was pale, thin, but apparently unharmed

Gersen turned the knob He looked out upon a gloomy area of sand among tall rock pinnacles To the back were five dark deodors and a little cabin hardly larger than a doll house Sitting on a bench was a girl about fourteen years old, a girl almost identical to Drusilla She wore a transparent white gown, her face had a peculiarly sweet, peculiarly pensive expression, as if she had only just awakened from a pleasant dream From the side came a tall non-human creature, walking on thin black-furred legs It stopped beside the girl, spoke in a thin high-pitched voice The girl responded without interest

Gersen turned the knob again, to bring into view a terrace in front of what appeared to be a temple Inside could be glimpsed the statue of a divinity. On the steps stood another Drusilla, this one sixteen years old, wearing only a kirtle, and a copper fillet to confine her hair Elsewhere were other men and women, similarly dressed To the side was the suggestion of a shore, with water beyond

Gersen turned the knob again and again and again He looked into various environments, various types of rooms and cages They contained an assortment of boys, girls, youths, maidens, young men and women, sometimes separate, sometimes together. Here were Viole Falushe's experiments, from which he evidently extracted a voyeur's pleasure Gersen saw no more versions of Drusilla

Urgency prickled at his nerves, stemming from his lack of faith in Navarth He set off along the hall, and crossing the bridge he

entered the laboratory section to the west Here was the locale of the experiments—in cages and chambers behind one-way mirrors.

Gersen found Retz, the stoop-shouldered technician, sitting in a small office He looked up, startled at the sight of Gersen. "What do you do here? Are you a guest? The master will be displeased!"

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"I am master now " Gersen displayed the projec "Where is the girl who resembles Jheral Tinzy?"

Retz blinked, half-defiant, hair-doubtful "I can tell you nothing "

Gersen struck him with the gun "Quick The girl who came here three weeks ago "

Retz began to whine. "What can I tell you? Viole Falushe will punish me "

"Viole Falushe is a prisoner " Gersen leveled the gun "Take me to the girl, or I will kill you "

Retz made a despairing sound "He will do terrible things to me"

"No longer "

Retz waved his arms, walked down the corridor Suddenly he stopped, turned around "You say he is your prisoner?"

"He is "

"What do you plan to do with him?"

"Kill him."

"And what of the Palace?"

"We shall see Take me to the girl "

"Will you leave me here, in charge of the Palace?"

"I will kill you unless you make haste."

Disconsolately Retz moved on Gersen spoke to him. "What has Viole Falushe done to her?"

"Nothing yet "

"What did he plan?"

"An autofertihzation- a virgin birth, so to speak In due course she would bear a female child precisely like herself"

"Jheral Tmzy gave birth to her in this way3"

"Exactly "

"And how many others7"

"Six others Then she killed herself"

"Where are the Other five7"

"Ah' As to that, I can't say "

Retz was lying, but Gersen allowed the statement to go unchallenged

Retz paused by a door, looked craftily over his shoulder. "The girl is within Whatever she reports, you must remember that I am only an underling here, I only obey orders "

"Then you'll obey mine Open the door " Retz hesitated a final

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instant, with a glance over Gersen's shoulder down the hall, as if hoping against hope for succor He sighed, slid back the door

Drusilla, sitting on the bed, looked up with alarm She saw Gersen, her expression changed from astonishment to joy She jumped up from the bed, ran to Gersen, sobbed in relief "I hoped you'd come They've done such dreadful things to me'"

Retz thought to take advantage of Gersen's distraction and started to slink away Gersen called him back "Not so fast I have use for you " He spoke to Drusilla "Has Viole Falushe shown himself to you7 Will you recognize him7"

"He came to stand in the doorway with the light at his back. He did not want me to see him He was savage, he hated me He said I had been faithless I asked how this was possible since I had promised him nothing He became absolutely cold He said that it had been my duty to wait, to maintain my ideals, until he had come And even then, he said, I had played him false, at Navarth's party and also on the journey "

Gersen said, "One thing is certain then he is Tanzel or Ethuen or Mano Which did you like the least7"

"Tanzel "

"Tanzel, eh7 Well, Retz here will show us certainly which is Viole Falushe, will you not, Retz?"

"How can I? He has never shown himself to me, except behind the glass of his office "

Unlikely, thought Gersen, still, not impossible "Where are the other daughters of Jheral Tmzy?"

"Six there were," muttered Retz "Viole Falushe killed the two oldest. There is one on Alphanor, this one"—he indicated Drusilla—"was sent to Earth The youngest is to the east of the Palace, where the mountains meet the sea The next is priestess to the god Arodm, on the large island directly to the east "

"Retz," said Gersen, "I hold Viole Falushe a captive I am your new master Do you understand this?"

Retz nodded sulkily "If this is how it must be "

"Can you identify Viole Falushe?"

"He is a tall man, he has dark hair; he can be harsh or soft, cruel or easy Beyond that I do not know "

"These are my orders to you Liberate these poor captives "

"Impossible!" fluted Retz. "They know no other life than their

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peculiar environments. The open air, the sun, the sky—they would go mad!"

"This is your task then. As gently and easily as possible, bring them forth. I will return shortly and see how well you have done your job. Further, make known to the folk in the garden that they are no longer slaves, that they are free to go or to stay. Mind you, I will pen you in, closet and punish you for your crimes if you do not obey me."

"I will obey," muttered Retz. "I am accustomed to obedience;

I know nothing else."

Gersen took Drusilla's arm. "I worry about Navarth. We dare not be gone too long."

But when they returned up through the castle and out to the air car, circumstances were as before. The three captives were secure and Navanh held the weapon unblinkingly at their heads. His eyes glowed at the sight of Drusilla. "What of Jheral Tinzy?"

"She is dead. But she had daughters. There are others. What has transpired while I was gone?"

"Talk. Blandishments. Persuasion. Threats."

"Of course. Who was most insistent?"

"Tanzel."

Gersen turned Tanzel a cool inspection. Tanzel shrugged. "Do you think I enjoy sitting here trussed like a chicken?"

"One of you is Virole Falushe," said Gersen. "Which? I wonder— Well, we must undo more of the dreadful mischief performed in the name of love."

He took the air car aloft, cruised slowly east over the mountains. At the ocean's edge, where the crags submerged into the water, a gloomy defile opened upon a narrow gray beach. Behind was a sandy open area perhaps an acre in extent. Gersen lowered the air car into the shadows and landed. He jumped out.

Drusilla IV, the youngest of the group, came slowly forward. From a fissure to the back, two non-human nursemaids made angry chattering sounds. The girl asked, "Are you The Man? The Man who is coming to love me?"

Gersen grinned. "I am a man, true enough, but who is The Man?"

Drusilla IV looked vaguely toward the fissure. "They have told me of The Man. There is one of me, and one of him, and when I see him I must love him. This is what I have learned."

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"But you have never seen this man?"

"No. You are the first man I have ever seen. The first person like myself. You are wonderful!"

"There are many men in the world," said Gersen. "They told you a falsehood. Come aboard, I will show you other men, and a girl like yourself."

Drusilla IV looked around the dreary defile in alarm and bewilderment. "Will you take me from here? I am frightened."

"You need not be," said Gersen. "Come aboard now."

"Of course." She took his hand trustingly and entered the saloon. At the sight of the passengers she halted in astonishment. "I never knew so many people existed!" She examined Mano, Ethuen and Tanzel critically. "I don't like them. They have foolish wicked faces." She turned to Gersen. "I like you. You are the first man I have ever seen. You must be The Man, and I will stay with you forever."

Gersen watched the faces of Mario, Ethuen and Tanzel. This must make poor hearing for Virole Falushe. All sat stony-faced, glar-

ing at Gersen with equal degrees of detestation—except at the corner of Tanzel's mouth, a tiny muscle twitched.

Gersen took the air car aloft and flew out toward the largest of the islands. Almost immediately he spied the temple looming above a village of cane and frond. Gersen landed the air car in the square, while villagers watched in amazement and alarm.

From the temple sauntered Drusilla III, a girl confident and self-possessed, exactly identical to the other Drusillas, yet in some sense different, as the other two were different.

Once more Gersen alighted from the air car. Drusilla III inspected him with candid interest. "Who are you?"

"I come from the mainland," said Gersen. "I come to speak to you."

"You want a rite performed? Go elsewhere. Arodin is impotent. I have beseeched him to send me elsewhere, among other boons. There is no response."

Gersen looked into the temple. "That is his likeness within?"

"Yes. I am priestess to the cult."

"Let us go to look at the image."

"There is nothing to see—a statue sitting on a throne."

Gersen went into the temple. At the far end sat a figure twice as large as life. The head was rudely defaced: nose, ears, chin broken

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away. Gersen turned to Drusilla III in wonder. "Who damaged the statue?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"I did not like his face. According to the Rote, Arodin must come in the flesh to take me for his bride. I am enjoined to pray to the statue for the earliest nuptials possible. I broke the face to delay the process. I do not like being a priestess but I am allowed to be nothing else. I hoped that after I denied the image another priestess might be appointed. This has not occurred. Will you take me away?"

"Yes. Arodin is no god, he is a man." Gersen took Drusilla III into the saloon, pointed out Mano, Ethuen, Tanzel. "Observe the three men. Does one of them resemble the statue of Arodin, before you defaced it?"

One of the men blinked.

"Yes," said Drusilla III. "Yes, indeed. There is the face of Aro-  
din." She pointed to Tanzel, the man who had blinked.

Tanzel cried out, "Here, here! What's going on? What are you  
trying to do?"

"I want to identify Viole Falushe," said Gersen.

"Why pick on me? I'm not Aro-  
din, nor Viole Falushe, nor yet  
Beelzebub, for that matter. I'm good old Harry Tanzel of London,  
no more no less, and I'll thank you to take these ropes from my  
arms."

"In due course," said Gersen. "In due course." He turned to  
Drusilla III. "You're sure that he is Aro-  
din?"

"Of course. Why is he tied?"

"I suspect him of being a criminal."

Drusilla III laughed, a clear merry sound. "What a dreadful  
joke! A man like that putting up a statue to himself and calling  
himself a god! What did he hope to gain?"

"You."

"Me! All this effort for me!"

"He wanted you to love him, to worship him."

Again Drusilla III's laughter ran through the ship. "A great deal  
of wasted effort."

And Gersen, watching closely, thought he saw a pink flush seep  
across Tanzel's face. "You are ready to leave here?"

"Yes . . . Who are these other girls who so resemble me?"

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"Your sisters."

"How strange."

"Yes. Viole Falushe—or Aro-  
din, if you prefer—is a strange  
man

Gersen took the air car aloft, set it to cruising slowly on the  
automatic pilot while he cogitated. Still no absolute proof to the  
identity of Viole Falushe. A twitch of the mouth, a seep of color, a  
defaced countenance; interesting but hardly incontrovertible evi-  
dence . . . Essentially he was no closer to the identity of Viole Fa-

lushe than when he set out on the journey. He looked back into the saloon. Navarth had become bored with his duties and was watching the girls with a half-expectant, half-forlorn expression—perhaps by some miracle they would merge to become his own Jheral Tinzy.

Gersen sifted his courses of action. They were few. If he had access to one or another of the truth drugs, Viole Falushe's identity would emerge swiftly enough . . . There \vas no one at the Palace of Love who could recognize Viole Falushe, probably no one at Atar or Kouhila. On Earth, Navarth knew Viola Falushe's call-code . . . Gersen rubbed his chin. "Navarth1"

Navarth came into the pilot's compartment Gersen indicated the communication system and gave instructions. Navarth grinned from ear to ear.

Gersen went back to the saloon, seated himself near Tanzel. He looked through into the pilot's compartment, nodded to Navarth.

Navarth tapped Viole Falushe's call-code. Gersen bent forward. At the lobe of TanzeFs ear sounded a faint whir—an almost imperceptible vibration. Tanzel )erked, strained at his bonds.

Navarth spoke softly into the forward microphone. "Viole Falushe. Can you hear me? Viole Falushe'"

Tanzel jerked around to meet Gersen's appraising stare. There could be no more dissembling, Viole Falushe was unmasked. A look of desperation came over his face, he writhed against his bonds.

"Viole Falushe," said Gersen. "The tune has come "

"Who are you^" gasped Viole Falushe. "IPCC^"

Gersen made no answer. Navarth came back.

"So this is he. I knew it all the time. He inflicted me with chill. Where is Jheral Tinzy, VogeP"

Viole Falushe licked his lips. "You two have plotted to kill me."

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Gersen and Navarth carried him forward, into the pilot's compartment, closed the door communicating with the saloon.

"Why3" cried Viole Falushe. "Why must you do this to me3"

Navarth turned to Gersen. "Do you need me?"

"No."

"Good-bye, Vogel," said Navarth. "You have lived a remarkable life." He went back into the saloon.

Gersen slowed the air car to a hover. He opened the port. Ten thousand feet below spread the ocean.

"Why? Why? Why?" cried Viole Falushe. "Why do you do this to me?"

Gersen spoke in a dry voice. "You are a monomaniac. I am the same. When I was a child, the five Demon Princes brought their ships to Mount Pleasant. Do you recall?"

"Long ago, oh so long ago!"

"They destroyed, they killed, they enslaved. Everything I loved:

family, friends, all destroyed. The Demon Princes are my obsession. I have killed two of them. You will be the third. I am not Henry Lucas the journalist. I am Kirth Gersen, and all my life is aimed toward this." He stepped toward Viole Falushe, who made a terrible wrenching exertion. His bonds snapped; he lurched, flung out his arms and toppled back and out the port. Gersen watched the long figure drifting down toward the ocean, until it passed from sight. Then he closed the port and returned to the saloon. Navarth had already released Mano and Ethuen.

"My apologies to you," said Gersen. "I hope you have not been seriously injured."

Ethuen gave him a look of unspeakable dislike; Mano made a muttering sound in his throat.

"Well, then," said Navarth cheerfully. "What now?"

"We will pick up our friends," said Gersen. "No doubt they are wondering what is to become of them."

"Then what?" growled Ethuen. "How are we to find our way back to Sogdian? We have no spaceship."

Gersen laughed. "Were you deceived? This is Sogdian. That is the sun Miel. How could you not notice?"

"Why should I? A lunatic pilot careened through the cluster for hours."

"A subterfuge. Zog was no lunatic. But he was careless, he performed no acclimatization routine; when he flung open the port

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there was no difference in pressure or composition. The light was the same intensity; the gravity was the same, the sky was the same color, the clouds were of the same shape, the flora of the same type."

"I noticed nothing," said Navarth. "But I am no space traveler. I feel no shame. If I ever return to Farth, I shall never depart again."

"P'lrst: a stop at the city of Kouhila. The folk wilt be pleased to learn that they need pay no further taxes."

At Afar, Gersen found the Distis Pharaon as he had left it. Mano, W^ible and da Nossa had spaceboats of their own; the other guests were conveyed back to the Oikumene by the ship which Viole Falushe had ordered for their use. Navarth and the three Drusillas came aboard the Pharaon. Gersen flew them to New Wexford and put them aboard the packet for Earth. "I will send you money," he told Navarth. "It will be for the girls. You must make sure that they are raised properly."

"I have done my best with Zan Zu," said Navarth gruffly. "She is raised. WTiat is amiss with her3 The others will need more care."

"Exactly. And when I am next on Earth I will see you."

"Good. We will sit on the deck of my houseboat and drink my fine wine " Navarth turned away. Gersen took a deep breath, went to say good-bye to Drusilla Wayles She came close to him, took his hands. "WTry can't I come with you3 Wherever you go."

"I can't explain to you. But—no. Not now. I tried it once, to no avail."

"I would be different."

"I know you are. But there might be worse problems. I might not be able to part with you."

"Will I ever see you again3"

"I don't think so "

Drusilla turned away "Good-bye," she said listlessly.

Gersen took a step after her, halted, then swung around and went his way

Gersen chartered a freight earner and took it to the Palace of Love. The gardens seemed wild and less well tended An indefinable gloom had come over the airy structures

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Retz greeted him with cautious cordiality. "I have been doing your bidding. Slowly, easily, not to disturb or alarm."

He took Gersen on a tour of the special environments, he described the weird and intricate thought-patterns Viole Falushe had imposed upon his young victims. One by one the victims were emerging into the upper air; some astonished; some delighted, some dazzled and frightened, and whimpering to return.

The villages in the garden had changed. Many of the Fortunate Folk had departed; others had returned from the backlands with

their children. In time the Palace of Love would become a remote farm community.

Gersen could not leave Viole Falushe's books to moulder. He loaded them aboard the freighter and consigned them to the care of Jehan Addels at New Wexford. With a final admonition for Retz, Gersen himself departed, and flew off through the stars of Sirneste Cluster, back toward the Oikumene.

Months later, sitting on the Esplanade at Avente, on Alphanor, Gersen saw a young woman approaching. She wore fashionable garments in the best of taste, she obviously had been raised in an atmosphere of gentility and good manners.

On a sudden impulse Gersen stepped forward. "Please excuse me/' he said, "but you resemble someone I know on Earth. Are your parents Earth-folk3"

The girl listened without embarrassment. She shook her head. "This may seem strange, but I do not know my parents. I may be an orphan, or"—she made a rueful little grimace—"something else. My guardians receive money to provide a home for me. Do you know my parents5 Tell me, please!"

Gersen thought, what in the world am I up to5 Why disturb the girl with the details of her background, or worse, the nightmare she had so narrowly avoided3 For here, certainly, was Viole Falushe's urgent business on Alphanor.

Gersen pretended doubt. "I'm mistaken—I think. The resemblance must be a coincidence. You could not possibly be the person I thought you to be."

"I don't believe you," said Drusilla I. "You know, but you won't tell. I wonder why not?"

Gersen grinned. The girl was immensely appealing, with a thousand charms and graces. "Sit here on the bench a moment. I'll

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read you a ballad or two from the works of the mad poet Navarth. When he wrote them he might have been thinking of you."

Drusilla I seated herself. "An unconventional way to start an acquaintance. But I'm an unconventional person. . . . Well, then, read the poetry."

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PART

Aloysius

From Popular Handbook to the Planets, 330th edition,  
1525:

Aloysius, Vega VI

Planetary constants:

Diameter	7340 miles
Sidereal day	19.836218 hours
Mass	0,86331 standard
Et cetera	

Aloysius, with its sister planets Boniface and Cuthbert, is accounted among the first worlds to be colonized from Earth, and the traveler who enjoys the ambience of antiquity will here find much to please him.

Contrary to popular assumption, the first settlers were not religious zealots but members of the Natural Universe Society, who dealt gingerly with the new environment, and built nothing at discord with the landscape.

The NUS is long gone, but its influence still permeates the system, and almost everywhere will be noted a sedate reverence for native customs and textures.

The axis of Aloysius inclines to an angle of 31.7 degrees from its plane of orbit; there are seasonal fluctuations of notable severity, mollified somewhat by a dense and moist atmosphere. Of the seven continents Marcy's Land is the largest, with New Wexford its chief city. The least of the

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continents is Gavin's Land, on which is situated the city Pontefract.

It may here be noted that each land, during the Sacredotal Epochs, represented the diocese of a cardinal and bore his name, thus: Cardinal Marcy's Land, Cardinal Bodant's Land, Cardinal Dimpey's Land, and so forth. The appellative has fallen into disuse and is rarely heard.

Through a policy of low taxes and favorable regulations, both Pontefract and New Wexford have long functioned as important financial centers, with influence reaching everywhere across the Oikumene. Many important publishing houses also make their headquarters at these places, including the prestigious Cosmopolis magazine.

Religions, sects, creeds, movements, countermovements, orthodoxies, heresies, inquisitions: this is the stuff of early Vegan history; emphatically so on Aloysius, which derives its name from the patron saint of the Aloysian Order. The Ambrosians, who preceded the Aloysians, founded the city Rath Eileann beside Lake Feamish, at the center of Linliffet's Land. The conflicts between these nominally de-

votional brotherhoods make a fascinating chronicle.

Indigenous flora and fauna are not particularly noteworthy. Through intensive effort by the original settlers, terrestrial trees and shrubs are widespread, the conifers especially finding a hospitable environment, and the seas are stocked with selected terrestrial fish.

Jehan Addels, after his meticulous habit, arrived ten minutes early to the place of rendezvous. Before alighting from his car he took pains to scrutinize the surroundings. The scenery was dramatic but apparently devoid of menace; Addels found nothing to excite his misgivings. To the right stood Phruster's Inn, with timbers blackened by centuries of wind and rain, and the Dunveary Crag beyond, rising crag upon buttress, finally to disappear behind high mist. To the left Phruster's Prospect confronted three-quarters of a full circle and several thousand square miles of territory, varying with whims of the weather.

Addels alighted from his car, cast a single skeptical glance up the awesome Dunveary slopes, and walked out upon the observation platform. Leaning against the parapet he hunched his shoulders

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against the wind and waited: a thin man with parchment-colored skin and a high balding forehead.

The time was close upon midmorning; halfway up the sky Vega glowed pale through the mist. A dozen other folk stood along the parapet. Addels subjected each to a careful inspection. Their flounced and tasseled garments in muted reds, browns, and dark green marked them for country folk; residents of the town dressed only in shades of brown, with an occasional black ornament. This group seemed innocent. Addels turned his attention to the panorama: Lake Feamish to the left, Rath Eileann below, vaporous Moy Valley to the right. . . . He frowned down at his watch. The man whom he awaited had given precise instructions. A lack of punctuality might well indicate crisis. Addels gave a sniff, to express both envy and disdain for a way of life so much more eventful than his own.

The time of the appointment was at hand. Addels noticed a path which, originating at the edge of Rath Eileann far below, slanted back and forth up the hillside, to terminate at a flight of steps cut into the rock nearby. Up this path came a man of average stature, unobtrusively muscular, with rather harsh cheekbones, flat cheeks, thick dark hair cropped short. This was Kirth Gersen, of whom Addels knew little except that by some mysterious means, no doubt illegitimate, Gersen had come into the possession of vast wealth.\* Addels earned a large salary as Gersen's legal adviser, to date with his scruples, such as they were, intact. Gersen seemed well acquainted with IPCC\*\* procedures, which in times of stress afforded Addels a degree of nervous comfort.

Gersen ran up the steps, paused, saw Addels, and crossed the observation deck. Addels took dispassionate note that after a climb

which would have reduced Addels to a state of gasping exhaustion, Gersen was not even breathing deeply.

Addels performed a stately gesture of greeting. "I am pleased to find you in good health."

"Exactly so," said Gersen. "Your journey was pleasant?"

"I was distraught; I hardly noticed," said Addels in a measured and meaningful voice. "But certainly you are enjoying your stay at the Domus?"

\*Cf The Killing Machine

\*\*Interworld Police Coordinating Company

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Gersen assented "I sit in the lobby for hours absorbing the atmosphere "

For this reason you remain here at Rath Eileann^'

"Not altogether This is what I want to discuss with you, where \ve won't be overheard "

Addels looked right and left "You suspect eavesdroppers at the Domus^"

"Up here the risk is at least minimized I have taken the usual precautions, no doubt you have done the same "

"[ have taken all the precautions I thought necessary," said Addels

"In that case, we are almost certainly secure "

Addels' only response was a frosty chuckle For a moment the two men stood leaning on the parapet, overlooking the gray city, the lake, and the misty valley beyond

Gersen spoke "The local spaceport is at Slayhack, north of the lake A week from today the Ettiha Gatgamyi will arrive I he registered owner is the Celerus Transport Company based at Vire on Sadal Suud Four This ship was at one time the Fanutis\* registered to Service Spaceways, also at Vire The registrations are both nominal The ship then was the property of Lens Larque, and so presumably is now

Addels pursed his lips in distaste "In our conversation you mentioned his name Somewhat to my distress, I must admit He is a notorious criminal "

"Quite so "

"And you intend to conduct business with \mV Inadvisable He

is not to be trusted "

"Our business runs along different lines As soon as the Etilia Gargantyf arrives, I want a lien, or some other such instrument, placed against ship and cargo, so that the ship is impounded without any possibility of departure I want title to the ship attached, so that the actual owner—not his agent or his legal representative—must come here to protect his interests "

Addels frowned "You want to bring Lens Larque here to Rath Eileann^ An extravagant hope "

"It is worth a trial He will naturall) use another identity "

"Lens Larque standing before a court of law2 Absurd "

"At the Mount Pleasant raid v. hcre Gersul lost: home and hml\ rht- / aittiti\ hid heen employed as i sl.ne trinsport

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"Quite so. Lens Larque enjoys absurdities He is also avaricious. If the action appears legitimate, he won't want to lose his ship by default."

Addels gave a grunt of grudging acquiescence "I can tell you this, at least. The most convincing disguise for legitimacy is legitimacy itself There should be no trouble discovering a basis for action Spaceships trail a rash of small complaints in their wake The difficulty is one of )unsdiction Has this ship touched Rath Eileann before2"

"Not to my knowledge Ordinarily it works the Argo Fringe."

Addels said in a formal voice, "I will give the matter my best attention "

"An important point to remember. Lens Larque is not an amiable man, for all his tricks and fancies. My name—I hardly need emphasize this—must not be used. You yourself would be wise to act discreetly "

Addels ran nervous fingers through his sparse blond hair "I don't care to confront him at all, discreetly or otherwise "

"Nevertheless," said Gersen, "the ship must be immobilized here at Rath Eileann Use a writ of attachment, or replevin or some such document The real owner must definitely appear, or else lose title by default"

Addels said peevishly, "If the ownership is corporate, or vested in a limited society, no such result is possible The action is not all that easy."

Gersen gave a grim laugh "If it were easy, I'd do it myself "

"I quite understand," said Addels in a morose voice "Let me think the matter over for a day or two."

Three days later, in Gersen's chambers at Domus St Revelras, a musical tone signaled an incoming call Gersen touched the "Monitor" button; a cascade of exploding asterisks certified that the line was free of interference A few seconds later Addels' fine-boned face appeared on the screen

"I have made guarded inquiries," spoke Addels in his most didactic voice. "I have obtained definite judicial opinion to the effect that an action of the sort you envisage is valid only if a local citizen has suffered substantial damage, that debt or damage having optimally occurred locally and at a recent time As of now we satisfy none of the requirements Therefore we could not obtain a valid writ."

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Gersen nodded. "I expected as much." He waited patiently while Addels pulled at his bony chin and selected words.

"In connection with the Etilia Gargantyr itself, I have searched records for liens, debts, and other actions under litigation. As ships of space pass from port to port, they often incur small debts or inflict minor damages, which usually no one troubles to pursue. The EttiUa Gargantyr is no exception. Two years ago an incident occurred at Thrump on David Alexander's Planet. The captain provided a banquet for a group of local freight agents, employing ship's stewards and other personnel to prepare and serve the meal. Instead of the Gargantyr's mess hall, he chose to use a chamber at the spaceport. The Thrump Victuallers Guild asserted that such a process contravened local ordinance. They registered a claim for lost wages and punitive damages. The ship departed before a summons could be served, so the action remains in abeyance, pending the ship's return, which is unlikely."

Addels paused to reflect. Gersen waited patiently. Addels made delicate adjustment of his thoughts and spoke on: "The Victualler Guild meanwhile negotiated a loan with a certain Cooney's Bank, chartered at Thrump on the same David Alexander's Planet. Along with other assets they pledged the cause of action against the Etilia Gargantyr. A month or so ago the Guild defaulted on the debt, and the suit has now been transferred to the interest of Cooney's Bank." Addels' voice took on a speculative tone. "It has often occurred to me that your affairs might most flexibly be handled through a bank. Cooney's Bank, while essentially sound, suffers from a tired old management. The stock sells at a reasonable price and you could easily buy control. Branches might then be established wherever it became expedient to do so: for instance at Rath Eileann."

"The lawsuit could then be transferred, so I assume."

"Quite correct."

"And a lien could be laid so as to hold the ship here at Rath Eileann?"

"I have made inquiries, in terms of hypothetical cases. I find that the suit may not be filed either at the City Podium nor the Land Court, but only at the Court of Interworld Equity, which sits three times a year at the Estremont under a Circuit Propounder. I have taken counsel with a specialist in interworld equity. He feels that Cooney's Bank's case might well be prosecuted if the Etilia Gargantyr arrives at Rath Eileann; its physical presence would pro-

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vide in rem jurisdiction. He is certain, however, that no magistrate would issue a mandamus requiring the presence of the ship's owner on grounds so trivial."

"That, however, is the essence of the matter! Lens Larque must come to Aloysius."

"I am advised that this cannot be enforced upon him," said Addels complacently. "I suggest that we now turn our attention to other matters."

"Who is the Propounder sitting at the court?"

"We can't be sure. There are five such magistrates, and they

travel a circuit around the Vegan system."

"The court is not now in session?"

"It has just completed its calendar."

"And presumably won't sit again for months."

"Exactly, In any case, the Propounder would almost certainly

throw out any motion requiring the presence of the Gargantyr's owner."

Gersen nodded pensively. "That is inconvenient."

After a moment Addels inquired. "Well then—what of Cooney's Bank? Shall I make acquisition?"

"Let me think things over. I'll call you tonight."

"Very well."

From "City of the Mists," in Cosmopolis, May 1520

On a map Rath Eileann shows like a twisted T. Along the top horizontal, from right to left, are the Ffolliot Gardens, Bethamy, Old Town, the Orangery with the Domus behind, then Estremont on a Lake Feamish islet. The T's

vertical straggles to the north for miles, through the Moynal district, then Drury, Wigaltown, Dundivy, Gara with its Dulcidrome, and finally Slayhack with the spaceport.

Of all these districts Old Town exerts the most beguiling charm. Despite streaming mists, odd-smelling vapors, crooked streets, crotchety buildings, this district is far from dull. The local folk wear garments only in shades of brown sand and taupe, through the middle tans, through oak and other wood into the deepest umbers. When they go abroad in the fitful Vega-light, their costumes against the stone, black iron, and sooty timbers create an effect of peculiar richness, the more so for an occasional dark red, yellow, or dark blue turban. At night Old Town flickers to the light of innumerable lanterns hung by ancient ordinance before the doorway of every alehouse. Since the crabbed streets and innumerable little alleys have never been named, much less have known the presence of a name-sign, the stranger quickly learns to steer a course by means of the alehouses' lanterns.

The Ambrosian monks, first to settle beside Lake Feamish, built in contemptuous disregard for order, in ac-

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cordance with the hectic fervor of their creed. The Order of Aloysians who came forty years later (and who gave the world its name) halfheartedly tried to modify Old Town, then lost interest and after establishing the new Bethamy Quarter gave all their energies to the construction of Temple St. Revelras.

Gersen left the Domus and sauntered north along the central parade of the Orangery, a formal garden of twenty acres, inappropriately named since, among the carefully clipped trees, were to be found no oranges, but only yews, limes, and the indigenous green-glass tree.

At the Grand Esplanade Gersen turned east around the bend of the lake and presently crossed over a causeway to the Estremont, a massive structure of silver-gray porphyry, built on four staggered levels, surmounted by four tall towers and a central dome. At the Justiciary Gersen made a number of inquiries, then, even more thoughtful than before, returned to the Domus.

In his chamber he took paper and stylus and worked out a careful schedule of times and events, which he pondered with care. Then, turning to the communicator, he brought the image of Jehan Addels to the screen. "Today," said Gersen, "you outlined a procedure in regard to the Ettiha Gargantyr."

"It was no more than a tentative idea," said Addels. "The scheme breaks down as soon as we reach the Estremont. The Circuit Propounder would never make us a favorable ruling."

"You are altogether too pessimistic," said Gersen. "Strange things happen; the courts are unpredictable. Please act along the lines we discussed. Acquire Cooney's Bank and immediately charter a local branch. Then, as soon as the Gargantyr opens its hatch, hit it with every kind of paper you can think of."

"Just as you say "

"Remember, we are dealing with people who are careless of legal responsibility, to say the least. Make sure that the ship is secure. Serve the papers with at least a platoon of constables, and immediately put the crew ashore. Pull the power-bar, seal the junctions with a destruction-lock; chain open the cargo hatch. Then post a strong guard, with at least six armed men on duty at all times. I want to make sure that the ship stays down m Rath Eileann."

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Addels essayed a morose pleasantry "I'll move into the captain's cabin and guard the ship from within "

"I've got other plans for you," said Gersen "You won't escape so easily "

"Remember, the court of Intel-world Equity has jurisdiction. There won't be another session for months, depending on the calendar."

"We want to give the owner time to appear," said Gersen "Make sure that our action alleges malice, conspiracy, and a deliberate policy of interstellar fraud—charges that only the owner can properly deny "

"He'll go into the dock, deny everything The Benchmaster will throw out the case, and you'll be left to sweep out the courtroom "

"My dear Addels," said Gersen. "You clearly don't understand my intentions—which is )ust as well."

"Just so," said Addels bleakly "I don't even care to speculate "

A month later Gersen once more met Addels on Phruster's Prospect,

The time was middle afternoon, mists over the Dunvearys had dwindled to a few^ wisps, the landscape showed a stark grandeur to the cold glare of Vega-light

As before Gersen had climbed the trail which led up from the Ffolliot Gardens at the western edge of Rath Eileann He stood leaning on the parapet as Addels sedately arrived m his car

Addels crossed the road and joined Gersen at the parapet In a heavy voice he said "The Garganty-f has landed The documents have been served The captain made an outcry and attempted to return into space He was removed from the ship and charged with attempted flight to evade the court's )unsdiction He is now in cus-

today. All precautions have been taken The captain has sent off an information to his home office " By this time Addels had learned the details of Gersen's program and had not altogether recovered his composure. "He has also retained an attorney, who presumably is competent and who well may wreak enormous grief upon us all "

Gersen said "Let us hope that the Lord High Benchmaster shares our view of the case "

"An amusing concept," growled Addels "Let us hope that we will find our terms in the Carcery no less amusing "

From Life, Volume I, by Unspiek, Baron Bodissey

If religions are diseases of the human psyche, as the philosopher Grmtholde asserts, then religious wars must be reckoned the resultant sores and cankers infecting the aggregate corpus of the human race Of all wars, these are the most detestable, since they are waged for no tangible gain, but only to impose a set of arbitrary credos upon another's mind

Few such conflicts can match the First Vegan Wars for grotesque excess The issue concerns, in its proximate phase, a block of sacred white alabaster the Aloysians intended for Temple St Revelras, while the Ambrosians claimed the same block for their Temple St Bellaw The culminating battle on Rudyer Moor is an episode to tax the imagination The locale: a misty upland of the Mournan Mountains, the time late afternoon, with Vega darting shafts of pallid light here and there, as roiling clouds allow On the upper slopes stand a band of haggard Ambrosians in flapping brown robes, carrying crooked staves carved from Cornb yew Below is gathered a more numerous group of the Aloysian Brotherhood, small short-legged men, plump and portly, each with ritual goatee and scalp-tuft, carrying kitchen cutlery and garden tools

Brother Whimas utters a cry in an unknown language Down the slope bound the Ambrosians, venting hysterical screams, to fall upon the Aloysians like wild men The battle goes indecisively for an hour, neither side gaining ad-

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vantage. At sundown the Ambrosian Cornuttr, b\ the creed's rigorous rule, sounds the twelve-tone call to vespers the Anibrosians, in accordance with their invariable habit, place themselves in devotional attitudes the \lo\sians quickly set to work and destroy the entire \mbrosun band well before the hour of their own devotions, and so ends the Battle of Rudver Moor

Back into Old Town creep the few surviving Amhrosians, in secular H-aments, where eventually they become a canny group oi" merchants, brewers, atchouse keepers, antiquarians, moneylenders and perhaps pursuivants of other

more furtive trades As for the Moysians, the order disintegrates within the century,, their fervor becomes no more than a quaint tradition. Temple St Revelras becomes the Domus, grandest of all the Vegan hostelnes Temple St Bellaw is only a sad tumble of mossy stone

Gersen sat in the public lobby of Domus St Revelras, the ancient nave where cenobites had sweated under the gaze of the Gnostic Eye Patrons of the contemporary Domus knew little of Gnosis, even less of the Eye, but few could look about the great chamber without awe

The wa\enng sound of a thousand-^ ear-old gong marked the hour of late afternoon Into the chamber stepped a tall thin young man with a thin keen nose, gray eyes of great clarity, and an air of launty intelligence This was Maxel Rackrose, local correspondent to Cosmopoln, now assigned to the assistance of "Henry Eucas"—the identity Gersen used in his role as special writer for Cosniopohs

Maxel Rackrose dropped into a chair beside Gersen "Your subject is both elusive and sinister "

"All ot which makes for interesting copy "

"No doubt " Rackrose brought forth a packet of papers "After a week of scouring I've turned up little more than common knowledge The fellow has a genius for anonymity "

"For all we know," said Gersen, "he is sitting here in the Domus lobby. That's not as improbable as you might suppose "

Rackrose gave his head a confident shake "I've )ust spent a week with Lens Larque, I'd smell him out if he were within a mile "

Such convictions were not necessarily to be dismissed out of

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hand, thought Gersen "That large man yonder, with the nose-piece, might he be Lens Larque3"

"Definitely not"

"You're sure^"

"Certainly He exudes patchouli and ispanola, but none of the reek Lens Larque is said to exhale. Secondly, he corresponds to descriptions of Lens Larque only in that he is big, bald, and dressed in ugly clothes Thirdly"—Rackrose uttered a careless laugh—"it so happens that I know the man to be one Dett Mulhan, who manufactures antique tavern lamps for the tourists."

Gersen smiled wryly, ordered tea from a nearby attendant, then gave his attention to Rackrose's documents

Some of the material he had already seen, such as an excerpt from The Mount Pleasant Raid, by Dauday Warns, published in Coj-

mopolis

When the Demon Princes met to affirm their compact, the massive personalities often collided. Howard Alan Treesong mediated the disputes in a casual manner. Attel Malagate proved as obdurate as stone. Viole Falushe took positions based upon malicious caprice. Kokor Hekkus, while unpredictable and innovative, charmed no one. Lens Larque's arrogance aroused much antagonism. Only Howard Alan Treesong maintained equability. What a wonder that the venture succeeded in any degree whatever! It is a tribute to the professionalism of the group.

The next paper, headed Lens Larque the Flagellator, was the work of Erasmus Heupter. Immediately below title and byline appeared the drawing of a near-naked man of immense size, with a supple and sleek muscularity. The head was small and shaven, narrow at the cranium, wider at the jaws. Heavy eyebrows joined over a long drooping nose, the face looking out of the picture expressed an inane and lewd euphoria. The man wore only sandals and short tight trousers over heavy and unpleasantly meaty buttocks, and in his right hand he flourished a short-handled whip of three long thongs.

Rackrose chuckled "If that's our man, I think we'd recognize him, even here at the Domus."

Gersen shrugged and read the text

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Lens Larque is said to be enamored of the whip; he considers it a trusty friend and a convenient instrument for the punishment of his enemies. He uses it often to this end, judging it preferable to other methods. At Sadabra he owns a great house with a semicircular room where he sits to take his victual: great heaps of hork and pummigum\* consumed with tankards of must. For savor he keeps by his side a fine short-handled whip, with a lash twelve and a half feet long. The pommel is ivory and engraved with the whip's name:

PANAK. The reference has never been elucidated, to this writer's knowledge. The lash terminates in a bifurcated flap of leather four inches long: the "scorpion." Around the wall stand Lens Larque's enemies, manacled to rings and naked as eggs. To the buttocks of each is pasted a heart-shaped target three inches in diameter. To enliven his meal Lens Larque attempts to snap off the targets with the flutter of his whip, and his skill is said to be fine.

Underneath, in a different typeface, appeared the note:

The piece duplicated above appeared originally in the Galactic Review, and probably is no more than the exercise of a perfervid imagination, especially in regard to the illustra-

tion. Report makes Lens Larque out to be a large man, but the giggling giant depicted above is hardly a credible representation.

It is instructive to note that the author, Lrasmus IIeupter, dropped out of sight soon after publication of the article and was never seen again. One of his associates received a short letter:

Dear Cloebe:

I am hard at work elucidating the meaning of the name PANAK. Already I have discovered several clues, but the work is not without its little surprises.

\*Pummiguin: a pudding uf vellow meal, meal, tamarinds, ogave, -jcvit, and like fruits, served in a thousand variant's at restaurants catering to spacemen .UTOSS the human universe.

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The weather is fine, still I would as lief be home.  
In all sincerity, Erasmus.

Gersen gave a soft grunt. Rackrose said: "The skin tingles a bit, does it not?"

"Yes, quite so. Are you still willing to cooperate in this project?"

Rackrose winced. "Please don't use inv name."

"As you like." Gersen examined the next item: a sheet of typescript, apparently the work of Rackrose himself:

The name Lens Larque is probably a pseudonym. Criminals tend to use false names and aliases. A true name can be traced to a home locale where photographs and intimate connections are discovered; secrecy and security are thereby fractured. Again, when the criminal succeeds at his illicit business, he ordinarily feels the impulse to return to his home community and there play the magnate among those who despised him in the past. The pretty girl who rejected him for a conventional husband: he now can patronize her, especially if she has lost her good looks and lives in hard circumstances. All this is possible only if he is not identifiably a criminal; hence, he feels compelled to use a name of operation other than his own.

These concepts, once they are pointed out, seem quite obvious; still, they take us to the question: what is the derivation of an assumed name? They come in two varieties:

first, those names selected at random and intended to be nondescript, and second, those with symbolic significance.

The latter predominate among criminals of personal force and flamboyance, of whom Lens Larque is an excellent example. Therefore, I assume the name "Lens Larque" to be an alias which carries symbolic import.

I visited the local UTCS\* and ordered a search of all the languages and dialects of the Oikumene and Beyond, past and present, for homonyms to the name "Lens Larque."

I attach the result.

\*L.'niversal Technical Consult.irivc Service

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Gersen examined an orange-bordered sheet displaying a UTCS printout.

LENS L'UtQUE—homonyms, with definitions.

1. Lencilorqua a village of 657 inhabitants on Vasselona Continent, Reis, sixth planet to Gamma Endam

2. Lanslarke: a predacious winged creature of Dar Sai, third planet of Cora, Argo Navis 961.

3 Laenzle arc. the locus of a point generated by the seventh theorem of tnskoid dynamics, as denned by the mathematician Palo Laenzle (907-1070).

4 Linslurk: a mosslike growth native to the swamps of Sharmant, Hyaspis, fifth planet of Fntz's Star, Ceti 1620

5. Linsil Orq. a lake of the Blissful Plains, Verlaren, second planet to Komred, Epsilon Sagittae.

6. Lensle Erg: a desert ..

The list continued through twenty-two entries, ever more distant from the standard.

Gersen returned to Rackrose's analysis:

I decided that, granted the hypothesis, the second entry appeared the most likely possibility.

From UTCS I extracted full particulars regarding the lanslarke It is a four-winged creature with an arrow-shaped head and a stinging tail, reaching a length of ten feet exclusive of the tail. It flies over the Darsh deserts at dawn and twilight, preying upon ruminants and occasionally a lone man. The creature is cunning, swift, and ferocious, but is now rarely seen, though as a fetish of the Bugold Clan it is privileged to fly freely above their domains.

So much for the lanslarke, and on to Item No. 8 of the attached papers. This is the single and only account on record of a meeting with Lens Larque, at a relatively early stage of his career The narrator never identifies himself but would seem to be the official of an industrial concern. The locale of the meeting is also indefinite, discretion held full sway

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Gersen turned to Item No ^

Excerpt from "Reminiscences of a Peripatetic Purchase Agent," by Sudo Nommus, as published in Thm\t, a trade Journal of the metallurgical industry (The author's name, as presented, is quite evidently a pseudonym )

We met (Lens Larque and I) at d public eating house a hundred yards down the road from the village The structure was an exercise in massive crudity, as if some monstrous entity had carelessly piled great concrete blocks one on the other, almost haphazard, to create a set of rambling irregular enclosures These blocks, whitewashed and in the sun's full glare, fairly dazzled the eyes The spaces within however were cool and dim and once I had overcome my fear of blocks toppling about my ears, I judged the effect quaint and memorable

Making inquiry of a languid serving-boy, I was directed to a corner table Here Lens Larque sat to a great platter of meat and legumes The food gave off a great waft of sour spice, harsh and offensive to the nostrils, nevertheless, a purchase agent knows no qualms, so I took a seat opposite and watched him as he ate

For a period he ignored me as if I were no more than one of the puff-bugs drifting lazily about the room, I therefore took occasion to measure him on my own terms I saw a large man, heavy almost to the point of corpulence, cloaked in a voluminous white garment, the hood draped close about his face I could see his complexion, a rich russet-bronze, like the haunch of a bay horse, I could likewise discern something of his features, which were large but oddly pinched together, or even compressed His eyes, when at last he troubled to glance at me, burnt with a yellow intensity which might have daunted me, had I not met many another such gaze in the course of my ordinary work, and which most often resulted from avaricious hope No so m this case'

Finishing his meal, the man began to speak, in phrases selected as if by random and conveying no plausible import Was this A novel bargaining trick^ Did he hope to addle

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my thinking under a coil of perplexities? He did not know

his man; as ever, I intended neither to be jockeyed nor hoodwinked, much less swindled. I heeded each word he spoke, taking care to make no assents nor dissents, lest these signs should be considered to form the basis of a bargain. My patience seemed to work an opposite effect upon this strange man. His voice became strident and harsh, and his gestures cut the air like flails.

At last I managed to interpose a quiet suggestion into the harangue. "In connection with our business, may I inquire your name?"

The question caught him up short. In a baleful voice he asked: "Do you question my fidelity?"

"By no means'" I made haste to reply, since the man was obviously truculent. I have dealt with many such in the course of my business, but none like this surly fellow. I continued in an affable tone. "I am a businessman, I merely wish to verify the identity of the person with whom I am dealing. It is a matter of ordinary commercial practice."

"Yes, yes," he muttered. "Quite so."

I pressed home my advantage. "Gentlemen settling to a bargain use conventional manners, and it is only polite that we address each other by name."

The fellow nodded thoughtfully and produced a most remarkable belch, redolent of the spice he had consumed. Since he took no heed of the matter, I gave no sign that I had noticed.

Again he said, "Yes, yes, quite so." And then: "Well, it is really no great affair. You may know me as Lens Larque." Leaning forward, he leered at me through the folds of his cloak. "This name suits me well, do you not agree?"

"On such short acquaintance I could not pretend to hold an opinion. Now, our business. What are your offer-

ings:

"Four tons of duodecimate\* Black, SG 22, prime qual-

ity.'

\*Duodeciinates- those stable transuranic elements of atomic number in the 120's and beyond. Duodecimate Black is an unrefined sand consisting of various duodecimate sulndes, oxides, and similar compounds, with a specific gravity here stipulated as 'sc, 22 '

We had no difficulty in arriving at a bargain. He named a price. I could take it or leave it. I resolved to demonstrate that others than himself could act with dignity and decision, without wheedling, haggling, or feigned outrage. I immediately accepted his tender, subject to proving out the quality. My stipulation stung his vanity, but I managed to allay his annoyance. In the end he saw reason, and became alarmingly jovial. The serving boy brought two great tankards of a vile mouse-flavored beer. Lens Larque quaffed his portion in three gulps and by the exigencies of the situation I was forced to do likewise, all the while giving fervent if silent thanks to the iron belly and matchless capacity developed by my many long years as a purchasing agent.

Gersen replaced the papers in their folio. "Very good work. Lens Larque takes on substance. He is a large fleshy man with a large nose and chin, which might now be surgically altered. His skin on at least one occasion was reddish bronze. Naturally he can use skin-toner as easily as anyone else. Lastly, his place of origin might well be the world Dar Sai, from the evidence of his name and also the mention of duodecimates, which are mined on Dar Sai."

Rackrose sat up in his chair. "Are you acquainted with Wigal town?"

"Not at all."

"It's a coarse and dismal neighborhood with a dozen or more off-world enclaves. Altogether unfashionable, of course; still, if you like odd smells and peculiar music Wigaltown is the place to wander. There's a small Darsh colony and they patronize a public house on Pilkamp Road. Tintle's Shade, the place is called. I've often noticed the sign which reads 'Fine Darsh provender.' "

"That is interesting news," said Gersen. "If Lens Larque is Darsh, and if he happened to pass through the neighborhood, we might expect him to visit Tintle's Shade."

Maxel Rackrose glanced over his shoulder. "Even DettMullian begins to look sinister. Why do you suppose that Lens Larque is nearby?"

"I don't hold any firm opinion. Still, he might arrive at any time."

"Mathematical probabilities guarantee at least this much."

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"Exactly We should acquaint ourselves with Tmtle's Shade for just this contingency "

Rackrose winced "The place reeks with strange odors, I wonder if I'm up to it."

Gersen rose to his feet "We'll try 'fine Darsh provender' for our supper Perhaps we'll become devotees "

Rackrose reluctantly hoisted himself erect "We had best alter our gear," he grumbled "Dressed for the Domus, we'd be remarkable at Tmtle's Shade I'll disguise myself as a roof mender and meet you there m an hour."

Gersen glanced down at his own garments an elegant loose blue suit, a loose-collared white shirt, a crimson sash "I feel as if I'm already in disguise, I'll change clothes and go as myself."

"In one hour Pilkamp Road, in the dead middle ofWigaltown We'll meet in the street If you go by omnibus, get off at Noonan's Alley "

Gersen left the Domus and walked north through the dusk along the Orangery Parade. He wore a dark blouse, gray trousers caught in at the ankles, and soft low boots typical garments of the working spaceman

At the Esplanade he mounted a transport platform and waited The lake reflected the final glimmers of sunset color rust-red, apple-green, somber orange. As Gersen watched they disappeared and the lake became a gunmetal shimmer, illuminated by a few faint lights along the far shore An open-sided omnibus approached Gersen stepped aboard, seated himself, dropped a coin in the slot, that he might not be ejected at the next halt

At the bend of the lake the Esplanade became Pilkamp Road- The omnibus slid north through Moynal and Drury under an endless chain of blue-white streetlamps

The bus entered Wigaltown, At that ramp nearest Noonan's Alley Gersen alighted

Dark night had come to Wigaltown At Gersen's back buttresses of black rock hunched into the lake Across Pilkamp Road narrow buildings pushed their roofs high, to put unlikely shapes and odd angles against the sky Some of the tall narrow windows showed light, others were dark

Diagonally across the street hung an illuminated sign

THE F4CI

IINTLF'S SHADE

Fine Darsh provender:

Chatowsies  
Pourrian  
Ahagaree

Gersen crossed the street From the shadows of Noonan's Alle\ came Maxel Rackrose, wearing brown corduroy trousers, a checkered brown-and-black shirt, a black vest decorated with tinsel bla-

zons, a loose black cap with a metal bill

Gersen read from the sign " 'Chatowsies Pourrian Ahagaree '  
Do you have your appetite with you^"

"Not really. I am a fastidious eater I may taste a bit of this and that."

Gersen, who often had gulped down food he dared not think about, only laughed "A keen journalist doesn't know the word 'fastidious ' "

"Somewhere we must draw the line," said Rackrose "It may be here, at Tmtle's Shade "

They pushed through the door into a hall Ahead stairs led up to the upper floors, to the side an arch opened upon a white-tiled chamber heavy with a musty stench A dozen men drank beer at a counter tended by an old woman in a black gown, with straight black hair, dark orange skin, and a black mustache Posters announced exhibitions and novelty dances, at Rath Eileann and elsewhere One of these read

The Great Rincus Troupe  
Witness a hundred marvelous feats!  
See the bungles dance and play while  
the thongs whisde and keen!

Swister Day,  
at Fuglass Hall.

Another

Whippery Ned Ticket  
and

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his lively bungles!  
How they leap! How they caper!

Whippery Ned sings songs of sliding leather  
and chides his troupe for errors or  
insufficient zeal, perhaps with a  
smart tingle of the flick!

The woman behind the bar called out: "Why do you stand like hypnotized fish? Did you come to drink beer or to eat food?"

"Be patient," said Gersen. "We are making our decision."

The remark annoyed the woman. Her voice took on a coarse edge. " 'Be patient,' you say? All night I pour beer for crapulous men; isn't that patience enough? Come over here, backwards; I'll put this spigot somewhere amazing, at full gush, and then we'll discover who calls for patience!"

"We have decided to take a meal," said Gersen. "How are the chatowsies tonight?"

"The same as always, no worse than any other. Be off with you;

don't waste my time unless you're taking beer. . . . What's this? Smirk at me, will you?" She seized a mug of beer to hurl at Maxel Rackrose, who alertly jumped back into the anteroom, with Gersen close behind.

The woman gave her black mane a scornful toss, twisted her mustache between thumb and forefinger, then turned away.

"She lacks charm," grumbled Rackrose. "She will never know me as a habitue."

"The dining room may surprise us," said Gersen.

"Pleasantly, so I hope."

They started up the steps, which, like the beer-chamber, exhaled an unpleasant vapor: a compound of strange cooking oils, off-world condiments, and a stale ammoniacal waft.

At the first landing Rackrose halted. "Candidly, I find this all a bit unsettling. Are you sure that we actually intend to dine here?"

"If you have qualms, go no farther. I myself have known places both better and worse."

Rackrose muttered under his breath, and trudged on up the steps.

A pair of heavy wooden doors opened into the restaurant. At widely separated tables small groups of men huddled like conspir-

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ators, drinking beer or eating from platters immediately below their faces.

A massive woman stepped forward. Gersen judged her no less formidable than the woman who tended the beer spigot, though perhaps a few years younger. Like the woman below, she wore a shapeless black gown and her hair hung in a rank tangle; her mustache was not quite so full. With glittering eyes she looked from one to the other. "Well then, do you wish to eat?"

"Yes; that is why we are here," said Gersen.

"Sit yonder."

The woman followed them across the room. When they were seated she leaned forward portentously with hands on the table. "What is to your taste?"

"We know Darsh food by reputation only," said Gersen.

"What are your special dishes?"

"Ah! Those we reserve for our own eating. Out here we serve chichala\* and you must make the best of it."

"What of the fine Darsh provender you advertise? The chatowsies, the pourrian, the ahagaree?"

"Look about you. Men are eating."

"True."

"Then that is what you must eat."

"Bring us portions of all these dishes; we will give them a try."

"As you like." The woman departed.

Rackrose sat in glum silence while Gersen looked around the room. "Our man is not among those present," said Gersen at last.

Rackrose glanced skeptically from table to table. "Did you seriously expect to find him here?"

"Not with any confidence. Still, coincidences occur. If he were passing through Rath Eileann, this is where we would hope to find him."

Maxel Rackrose surveyed Gersen dubiously. "You are not telling me all you know."

"Should that surprise you?"

"Not at all. But I'd like a hint as to what I'm getting into."

"Tonight you need fear only the chatowsies and perhaps the

\*Chichala: an indelicate term. In the present context the word metaphorically connotes food prepared for and served to men.

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pourrian. If our research continues, it might entail danger. Lens Larque is a sinister man."

Rackrose glanced nervously around the room. "I would prefer to give the fellow no offense. He has a rancorous disposition. Remember Erasmus Heupter? Whatever the word 'Panak' means, I don't care to know."

The woman approached with a tray. "Here is the beer which men customarily take with their food. It is also usual for newcomers to provide a bit of entertainment. The shadow-box is yonder; a coin will produce a troupe of amusing figments."

Gersen turned to Rackrose. "You are expert in such affairs; you

shall make the choice."

"With pleasure," said Rackrose rather heavily. He went to the shadow-box, read the list of offerings, pulled a toggle, and dropped a coin into the hopper. A shrill voice called out: "It's Javil Natkin and the Sly Rogues!" To a clattering music of blocks and chink-lepins, the entertainers appeared in projected image: a tall thin man in white and black diaper, carrying a whip, and a band of six small boys wearing only long red stockings.

Natkin sang a set of doggerel verses lamenting the faults of his charges, then performed an eccentric prancing jig, snapping his whip this way and that, while the boys hopped, whirled, and scampered with extraordinary agility. Natkin, expressing dissatisfaction with their antics, nicked his whip at the plump buttocks. The boys so stimulated turned frantic somersaults, until Natkin stood surrounded by tumbling boys, whereupon he threw up his arms in triumph and the images disappeared. Patrons, who had given earnest attention to the display, muttered and grumbled and returned to their food.

From the kitchen came the black-gowned woman, with bowls and platters. She thumped them down upon the table—"Here is the food, Chatowsies. Pourrian. Ahagaree. Eat your fill. What you leave returns to the pot."

"Thank you," said Gersen. "By the way, who is 'Tintle'?"

The woman gave a derisive snort. "Tintle's name is on the sign. We do the work; we chink the coin. Tintle keeps his distance."

"If possible, I'd like a few words with Tintle."

The woman gave a derisive snort. "You'd like nothing whatever from Tintle; he's stupid and dull. Still, for what it's worth, you'll

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find him in the backyard counting— his fingers or scratching himself with a stick."

The woman moved away. Gersen and Rackrose gingerly addressed themselves to the food. After a few moments Rackrose said:

"I can't decide what tastes worst. The chatowsies are fetid, but the ahagaree is ferocious. The pourrian is merely vile. And the lady seems to have washed her dog in the beer. . . . What? Are you eating more?"

"You must do the same. We want to establish a pretext for returning. Here; try some of these remarkable condiments."

Rackrose held up his hand. "I have taken quite enough, at least on the basis of my present salary."

"As you wish." Gersen gulped down a few more mouthfuls, then thoughtfully put down his spoon. "We have seen enough for

this evening." He signaled to the woman. "Madame, our account, if you please."

The woman looked over the platters. "You have eaten ravenously. I will need two or, better, three SVU from each of you."

Rackrose cried out in protest. "Three SVU for a few mouthfuls of food? That would be exorbitant at the Domus!"

"The Domus serves insipid gutch. Pay your account or I will sit on your head."

"Come now," said Gersen. "That is no way to attract a steady clientele. I might add that we are waiting to meet a certain member of the Bugold Clan."

"Bah!" sneered the woman. "What is that to me? A Bugold outcast robbed the Kotzash warehouse, and so now I live here in this place of dank winds and curdled rheum."

"I've heard a somewhat different story," said Gersen with an air of careless omniscience.

"Then you heard nonsense! The Bugold rachepol and that scorpion Panshaw connived together. They should have been broken and not poor Tintle. Now pay me my coin and so your way. This talk of Kotzash has put me out of sorts."

Gersen resignedly put down six SVU. The woman, with a triumphant leer toward Maxel Rackrose, swept up the coins. "As for the gratuity, another two SVU will be considered adequate."

Gersen handed over the coins and Madame Tintle departed.

Rackrose gave a snort of disgust. "You are far too obliging. The woman's avarice is matched only by the vileness of other cuisine."

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Madame Tintle spoke over his shoulder. "By chance I overheard that remark. On your next visit I will boil up my crotch-strap for your chatowsies." Once again she swept away. Gersen and Rackrose also took their leave.

Out on the street they stood a moment. Mist hung over the lake; streetlamps north and south along Pilkamp Road showed as receding aureoles of pale blue light.

"What now?" asked Rackrose. "Is it to be Tintle?"

"Yes," said Gersen. "He is conveniently close to hand."

"That vulgar female mentioned a backyard," grumbled Rackrose. "We will find it around yonder, there, up Noonan's Alley."

The two men walked around the corner of Tintle's Shade, up the hill beside a wall which presently showed a gate of metal bars,

giving on Tintle's backyard. To the rear stood a line of ramshackle sheds, one of which showed a light.

At an upper window someone created a clangor by striking a pan against the wall, then lowered a pot on a length of string.

"It appears," said Gersen, "that Tintle is about to dine."

The door to the shed opened, to reveal the silhouette of a squat heavy-shouldered man. He ambled across the yard, detached the pot from the line, and carried it back to the shed.

Rackrose called through the gate: "Tintle! Hoy, Tintle! Over here by the gate!"

Tintle halted in surprise, then turned and ran spraddle-legged to his shed. The door closed behind him; the lights were immediately extinguished.

"That's all from Tintle tonight," said Gersen.

The two returned to Pilkamp Road, boarded the next omnibus, and rode south to Rath Eileann Old Town.

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From *The Demon Princes*, by Carol Carphen:

The author of this monograph, as he ponders the Demon Princes and their marvelous deeds, often becomes confused by the multiplicity of events. To cure this condition he resorts to generalizations, only to see each such edifice collapse under the weight of qualification.

In basic fact the five individuals have but a single aspect in common: their total disregard for human pain.

Thus, as we hold Lens Larque up for comparison to his peers, we find no correspondence save in this single quality. Even that anonymity and secrecy which one might suppose to be a basic element of the craft is, in the case of Lens Larque, distorted into something rude and brash, so that it seems almost a craving for public attention. Lens Larque at times appears almost eager to exhibit himself.

Still, when we sum up what we know about Lens Larque, we discover few definite facts. He has been described as a tall man of considerable bulk who, through his burning gaze and abrupt movements, gives the impression of a passionate and volatile disposition. No clear descriptions of his face are extant. According to rumor, he is expert in the use of the whip and takes pleasure in so punishing his enemies.

The essay concludes with the summation:

Once again, as I succumb to the allure of generality, let me put forward the following propositions

The evil magnificence of the Demon Princes cannot be quantitatively compared. On a qualitative basis they can be, perhaps intuitively, characterized

1 Viole Falushe is as malignant as a wasp

2 Malagate the Woe is inhumanly callous

3 Kokor Hekkus enjoys horrifying pranks

4. Howard Alan Treesong is inscrutable, devious, and very likely insane, if the concept is at all applicable to such folk as these

5 Lens Larque is brutal, revengeful, and extravagantly sensitive to slights. Like Kokor Hekkus he is not unknown to sadism, in grotesque variation. Occasionally one finds references to a "reek" or "coarse effluvium" in connection with his person, but whether this is psychological aura or actual bad odor is never made clear. Still, Lens Larque would seem to be the most physically unappealing of all the Demon Princes, with the possible exception of Howard Alan Treesong, whose aspect is unknown

Trails of rain from a predawn storm swept the north end of Lake Feamish, over Rath Eileann clouds scudded and raced, and let blazing shafts of Vega-light down upon the gray city. So, in alternate shine and shadow, Gersen and Jehan Addels walked along the Esplanade toward the Estremont.

Addels went stiffly and without enthusiasm, his shoulders hunched, his face dour and bleak. As they neared the causeway he stopped short. "Do you know, this is sheer madness."

"But in a good cause," said Gersen. "Someday you'll congratulate yourself."

Addels grudgingly proceeded. "The day I'm discharged from Frogtown Pits."

Gersen offered no reply.

At the causeway Addels halted once again. "You should come no farther. We must not be seen together."

"Quite right. I'll wait here."

Addels continued across the causeway. The great doors of glass

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and iron opened before him, he entered a silent foyer paved in white marble and stult \*

Addels ascended to the fourth floor and marched despondently to the offices of the Chief Clerk Outside in the corridor he halted, drew a deep breath, threw back his shoulders, licked his lips, relaxed his face into a mask of serenity and confidence, then stepped through the door

A marble counter crossed the room At the back four under-clerks in dark red gowns scrutmi/ed documents They looked up with empty expressions, then returned to their work

Addels gave a peremptory rap on the marble One of the clerks made a sad face, rose to his feet, and approached the counter. "What may be your business5"

"I want to consult the Chief Clerk," said Addels

"At what time was your appointment^"

"My appointment is now," snapped Addels "Announce me and be smart about it'"

The clerk spoke a languid word or two into a mesh, then ushered Addels into a high-ceilinged chamber, illuminated by a cnstal globe of a hundred facets Rose velvet drapes hung across the high windows, a semi-circular desk in the Old Empire style, enameled ivory-white with gilt and vermilion accents, occupied the center of a pale blue carpet Here, at his ease, sat a balding middle-aged man, well fleshed and round-faced, with a benign expression Like the underclerks he wore a dark red gown, as well as a square white cap displaying the official emblem ot Llinliffet's Land As Addels stepped forward, he rose courteously to his feet "Counsellor Ad-dels, it is both my duty and my pleasure to serve you "

"Thank you " Addels seated himself in the chair indicated

File Chief Clerk poured tea into a cup of frail Beleek and placed it within Addels' reach

"Most gracious of you," said Addels He sipped. "Superb Lutic Gold, to hazard a guess^ With a bit of something to sharpen the edge="

"You have a fine discrimination," said the Chief Clerk "Lutic Gold it is, from the north slope, with an ounce of Black Dassawary to the pound For brisk mornings such as this I consider it quite appropriate "

\*Stclt J precious sid^ mined from the surraces uf burnt out stars

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For a few minutes the two discussed tea, then Addels said.

"Now as to my business I represent Cooney's Bank, now chartered at Rath Eileann As you may know we have instituted action against Celerus Transport Company, of Vire, Sadal Suud Four, the ship Emha Gargantyr, and others. I have conferred with the Honorable

Uuay Pmgo, who will stand for the ship He is anxious to expedite the case and I quite agree In effect I speak for both parties to the action. We request the earliest possible place on the calendar."

The Chief Clerk, pursing his lips and blowing his cheeks, consulted a document which lay in front of him. "It so happens that we can schedule a relatively prompt hearing A certain Lord High Benchmaster Dalt has been assigned to the circuit."

Addels raised his sandy eyebrows "Would that be Benchmaster Waldemar Dalt who benched Intel-world Court at Myrdal on Boniface?"

"The same. There's quite a piece about him m the Legal Oh-

"The Legal Observer, eh3 I have not seen this |ournal before."

"It's the first issue, published at New Wexford. I received a complimentary copy, no doubt by virtue of my office."

"I must find an issue," said Addels, "if only to read up on Dalt."

"It makes interesting reading. They compliment Dalt for his precision, but they describe him as a bit of a martinet."

"That's my recollection." Taking up the magazine Addels studied the article. A photograph depicted a harsh-featured man wearing black and white judicial costume, the black frontal fringe of the traditional headdress hanging low across his forehead. Black eyebrows emphasized his extreme pallor. A clenched mouth and narrow glinting eyes suggested inflexibility and perhaps severity,

"Hmfm," said Addels "That's Benchmaster Dalt. I've seen him in action He's as hard as he looks." He put the magazine down The Chief Clerk picked it up and read aloud.

"Sometimes regarded as over-abstract and over-rigorous, Benchmaster Dalt is by no means a dreamy-eyed theorist; to the contrary, he insists upon full etiquette. Court officials consider him a stern disciplinarian "

With a faint smile Addels asked: "And what do you think of that?"

The Chief Clerk shook his head ruefully "He seems a tyrannical old griffin, for a fact."

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"He's not all that old, in fact some say he leans over backward on that account."

"Yes, yes," muttered the Chief Clerk "I've heard much the same story, from one source or another."

"Smarten up your bailiffs," said Addels. "Provide your stentor the best throat lozenges—because Benchmaster Dalt is coming to enliven your court. He watches like an eagle. If someone scamps his duty, he's flayed to the bone. Personally, I'd prefer a more affable judge. Won't someone else be working the session?"

The Chief Clerk gave his head a troubled shake. "You'll have to deal with Dalt, and so will I. Many thanks for your advice, I'll warn my bailiffs, and Benchmaster Dalt will have no complaint."

The two men sipped tea in thoughtful silence. Then Addels said "Perhaps I'm lucky to draw Dalt after all. He's draconic against swindlers and he'll cut through technicalities to deal out

Justice, still, it's a mixed blessing. So when will we have our hearing: .\_\_ ^>»i

ing:

"Maasday next, at half morning."

Maasday morning a storm drove down Lake Feamish, piling up whitecaps to pound against the Estremont foundations. The tall windows of the courtroom admitted only a wet gray light, and the three chandeliers, symbolizing the three Vegan planets, glowed at full power. The Chief Clerk sat at his desk wearing immaculate scarlet and black robes with a black cushion hat. By the door a pair of bailiffs stood, erect, alert and mindful of Benchmaster Dalt's reputation for irascibility. To the right sat Counsellor Duay Pmgo with his clients, to the left Counsellor Jehan Addels with officials of Cooney's Bank. A half dozen casual spectators were on hand for reasons best known to themselves. Silence held the room. Only the far whisper of waves against stone could be heard.

A chime sounded the hour of half-morning. From the rear chamber came Lord High Benchmaster Dalt, a personage of middle size, spare of physique, wearing full High Court regalia. The headpiece fringed his forehead and hung black swarfs over his ears. Looking neither right nor left he mounted to the bench, then glanced swiftly around the room, his chalk-white pallor and taut uncompromising features creating an effect of austere elegance.

Across the centuries the rituals of the Vegan judicial system had been simplified, but were still notorious for symbolic homologies—

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The Lord High Benchmaster no longer rode to the bench in a chair carried by four blind virgins, but the bench itself—the "Balance"—still rested upon a wedge-shaped fulcrum, even though most progressive Benchmasters stipulated stabilizing struts to dampen the quivering Needle of Justice.\*

Benchmaster Dalt had ordained rigid stabilizers for the Balance, to hold the needle fixed at equilibrium.

The stentor appeared on a balcony behind the bench. "Be it

now heard; oyez! This sacred court, ruled by Lord High Benchmaster Waldemar Dalt, is now in session!" He threw three white feathers into the air to symbolize the liberation of three white doves. Holding his arms on high, he called: "Let the wings of truth fare far across this land! The Court of Interworld Equity now sits in session."

Lowering his arms, he backed into his alcove and disappeared from view.

Benchmaster Dalt rapped with his gavel, and glanced at a memorandum. "I will hear preliminary statements in the case of Cooney's Bank versus the Celerus Transport Company, the ship Etilia Gargantyr, its officers, and all its lawful owners. Are the parties at contest present?"

"Ready for the plaintiffs, your Lordship," said Addels.

"Ready for the defendants, your Lordship," said Duay Pingo.

Benchmaster Dalt addressed Addels. "Be so good as to construct your complaint."

"Thank you, your Lordship. Our plea for damages is based upon the following sequence of events. On a date, which when translated into Gaeian Standard time, becomes Day 212 of the year 1524, at the city Thrump on David Alexander's Planet, the owner of the ship Etilia Gargantyr maliciously and spitefully conspired with the ship's commanding officer, a certain Wislea Toom, so to defraud the local Victuallers Guild of moneys legally and rightfully due them and thereupon put their nefarious plan into effect, by the simple and shameless process—"

Benchmaster Dalt rapped with his gavel. "If Counsellor will control his indignation and favor the court with a simple explana-

\*! he Benchmaster who rode the Balance so rigidly that the needle showed no motion, in the vernacular of the courtroom, was said to be "stiff of arse," while a more restless official, under whose shifts and shrugs the needle swung back and forth, might become known as "old flitter-batches "

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tion of the facts, and allow me to decide the applicability of such terms as 'nefarious' and 'shameless,' we shall proceed much more crisply with this case."

"Thank you, your Lordship. No doubt I anticipate my full presentation, but we are pleading for punitive as well as actual damages, on the basis of malice and fraud with premeditated intent."

"Very well, proceed. But remember, I am not partial to subjec-

tive presentations."

"Thank you, your Lordship. The defalcation occurred, as I have stated. The injured parties filed local action; however, the Etilia Gargantyr had vanished, as had the Celerus Transport Company.

"In due course the cause of action was transferred to Cooney's Bank.

"The arrival of the Etilia Gargantyr at Rath Eileann laid in rem jurisdiction in this court and, pursuant to our writ of attachment, we prepared a new action. The Etilia Gargantyr is now immobilized at Slayhack Spaceport. We pray for actual damages to the amount of twelve thousand eight hundred and twenty-five SVU. We declare that the owner of the ship, through the apparently fictitious "Celerus Transport Company," maliciously and in arrogant contempt of lawful process conspired with Captain Wislea Toom to the detriment of the plaintiff's assignors. We feel that conduct of such description is all too common and merits a vigorous rebuke, and this is the basis of our plea for punitive damages."

"You use the term 'owner' of the Etilia Gargantyr. I abhor circumlocution. Please identify this person by name."

"I am sorry, your Lordship! I do not know his name."

"Very well, then." Rap went the gavel. "Counsellor Pingo, do you have a statement?"

"Simply this, your Lordship. The action is monstrous and extravagant. It is a mischievous exploitation of what at worst was a rather trivial oversight. We do not challenge that a claim against the ship at one time existed. We adamantly deny the competence of Cooney's Bank to act in this regard and we consider the charges of malice and conspiracy inapplicable."

"You will be given opportunity to demonstrate as much, through the testimony of your principals." Benchmaster Dalt surveyed Duay Pingo's clients. "The lawful and registered owner of the ship is now present?"

"No, your Lordship, he is not."

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"Then how do you expect to defend against the charges?"

"By demonstrating their total absurdity, your Lordship."

"Aha, Counsellor! There you insult my intelligence. In my experience dozens of apparent absurdities have turned out to be unassailable facts. I will point out that the action is specific. It alleges malice, fraud, and conspiracy, and these charges may not be countered by either rhetoric or obfuscation. You are wasting the time of this court. How long will you need to produce the proper re-

spondents?"

Pingo could only shrug his shoulders. "One moment, your Lordship, if you please." He went to consult his clients, who muttered uncertainly among themselves. Pingo returned to face Benchmaster Dalt. "Your Lordship, I point out that my clients are undergoing unnecessary hardship, due to the costs of operating the ship, including salaries, insurance, berth rental, and the like. May we post bond as guarantee to the payment of some fair settlement, should in fact your judgment go against us, and so let the ship be on its way? This is only simple justice."

Dalt glared at Duay Pingo. "You are appointing yourself, in my court, as the arbiter and explicator of justice?"

"By no means, your Lordship! It was merely a way of speaking. An unhappy phrase, for which I apologize!"

Benchmaster Dalt appeared to reflect. Jehan Addels, lifting his arm as if to scratch his head, muttered into his sleeve: "Specify full value of ship and cargo. No bondsman in town or anywhere else will risk so much."

Benchmaster Dalt spoke. "I rule in favor of the defendant's request, provided that he posts bond to the full value of ship and cargo, which would represent the maximum indemnity."

Duay Pingo winced. "That may well be impossible, your Lordship."

"Then produce your proper witnesses and let us try the case properly! You can't have the situation both ways! What good is a defense action without facts or pertinent testimony from responsive witnesses? Get your case together or you must lose by default."

"Thank you, your Lordship, I will hold immediate consultation with my clients. May I request a short postponement?"

"Certainly. For how long?"

"I am not at this point certain. I will presently notify the Court Clerk, if such suits my esteemed colleague and your Lordship."

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"I am content," said Jehan Addels, "so long as the continuance does not exceed a reasonable time."

"Very well, so ruled. Let us be quite definite, Counsellor Pingo. I require direct testimony from the principal of the case. He will be the person who owned the ship at the time of the alleged infraction, together with proof as to his ownership. I will not accept depositions, proxies, or agents. So long as this is understood, I grant a continuance of two weeks. If you require more time, please apply to the Court Clerk."

"Thank you, your Lordship."

"Court is adjourned."

The Lord High Benchmaster stalked to his chambers. The Chief Clerk mopped his face with a blue kerchief and muttered to a bailiff, "Have you ever seen such a griffin?"

"He's a bad one, for sure, touchy as a blastiffwith boils. Glad I am that I'll never need to face him in court."

"Bah!" muttered the Chief Clerk. "Belch once in his court and he'll order your gizzard toasted. I'm all in a sweat from holding my breath."

During the evening Gersen received a call from Jehan Addels.

"Miraculously," Addels noted, "we are still out of jail."

"It's a pleasant sensation," said Gersen. "Enjoy it while you can."

"Everything is so fragile! Suppose a diligent journalist looks in the Legal Record? Suppose the Chief Clerk gossips with someone from Boniface? Suppose he places other cases into the docket?"

Gersen grinned. "Benchmaster Dalt no doubt will dispense equity."

"More properly, Benchmaster Dalt should plead indisposition," declared Addels. "Remember, not all lawyers are fools!"

"No need to borrow trouble. Pingo is sending messages across the galaxy. There will be a great disturbance somewhere."

"How true! Well then—what next?"

"We wait to see who appears when the hearings resume."

From Dar Sai and the Darsh, by Jomville Akers

The Darsh whip-dances constitute a highly structured art form I sav this flatly and without qualification, after having devoted considerable time to the subject A savage and repellent art form, granted, an art form grounded in a whole cluster of sexual aberrations, i.e., pederasty, flagellation, sado-masochism, voyeurism, exhibitionism so much is conceded. It is an art form to which I personally am not attracted, though at times it exerts a certain horrid fascination.

The intricacies of whip-dancing totally elude the uninitiated During the ordinary routine the whip-wielder, contrary to appearances, seldom m)ures or even inflicts serious pain upon the dancers Like other apparently horrendous exhibitions, a great part is show. The thematic

material to the outsider seems repetitive and limited and more often than not depends upon a simple tried and true premise the whipmaster and his troupe of prankish, unruly, or insubordinate "bungle" boys. The variations upon this theme, however, are intricate, subtle, often ingenious, often amusing, and inexhaustibly popular with Darsh males. Darsh females, on the other hand, observe these spectacles with contemptuous indifference, and consider them merely another aspect of masculine fatuity

Gersen and Maxel Rackrose alighted from the omnibus, then stood for a moment looking across Pilkamp Road at Tmtle's Shade

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"It presents no braver face by daylight," said Rackrose. "In fact, I can now discern peeling paint and windows hung all askew."

"No matter," said Gersen. "The dilapidation is picturesque and will enhance our lunch."

"Today," said Rackrose, "I lack all appetite. Still, don't let me deter you from your own meal."

"Perhaps something on the menu will tempt you."

They crossed the street, pushed through the door, passed the beer counter by, and mounted the dank steps to the restaurant—Only a few tables were in use. Madame Tmtle stood idly by the kitchen pass-through, twirling the tip of her mustache. Languidly she signaled them to a table and ambled over to inquire their needs. "So the two of you are back. I never thought to see you again."

Gersen essayed a gallantry. "We were drawn as much by your colorful personality as by the food."

"What would you mean by that?" demanded the woman. "You are aspersing either me or the food. Either way you'll get a pot of slops over your head "

"No offense intended," said Gersen. "In fact I can put you in the way of some money, if the prospect suits you."

"Of all races Darsh are most avaricious. What is the proposal?"

"A friend of mine will shortly be arriving from Dar Sai, or so I expect."

"He is Darsh?"

"Yes "

"The situation is hardly possible. Darsh men make no friends, only enemies."

"This gentleman is, if you prefer, an acquaintance. When he

arrives, he will surely visit Tmtle's Shade, to eat familiar food. I want you to notify me of his arrival, so that we may renew our acquaintance."

"Easily done, but how will I recognize him?"

"Just inform me or my friend whenever a new Darsh comes to Tmtle's Shade,"

"Well—it's not particularly convenient, I can't sort over every odd goumbah\* who creeps in from the street. My curiosity would arouse frivolous comment "

\*A pejorative term used by Darsh women in reference to men a person of vulgar futile stupidity

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"Perhaps Tintle himself might be pressed into service," suggested Rackrose.

"Tintle?" The woman made a rasping sound in her throat.

"Tintle's been smirched and broken, lie's not allowed up here;

everyone would hold their noses and leave. I can barely tolerate his presence in the yard."

Gersen asked; "How did this come about?"

Madame Tintle looked around the room, then finding no better use for her time, condescended to reply. "It was on the whole a sad misfortune, which Tintle never earned. At the Kotxash warehouse Tintle was the proud guard. But when they came to loot and steal, Tintle slept rather than guarded and failed to throw the switch. All the duodecimates were taken. Then it was learned that Ottile Panshaw the bursar had neglected insurance, so all was lost. Panshaw could not be found, so the whole countryside came down on Tintle. He was fixed under the public latrine for three days, and everyone expressed themselves as the mood took them. Tintle and Dar Sai no longer could stomach each other, so we came to this dreary bog. That is the story."

"Hmfm," said Gersen. "If Tintle had been a friend of Lens Larque, affairs might have gone differently."

The woman eyed him with dour suspicion. "Why do you speak of Lens Larque?"

"He is a famous man."

"Infamous, rather. It was Lens Larque who robbed the Kotzash warehouse; why should he be a friend of Tintle? Though that was the accusation."

"Then you know Lens Larque by sight?"

"He is a Bugold and none of my affair."

"He might be sitting across the room at this moment."

"So long as he finds no fault and pays his account, what do I care?" She looked contemptuously around the room. "He is not here today, that is certain."

"Well and good," said Gersen, "but back to our arrangement. When a strange Darsh appears—Lens Larque or any other—notify me or my friend Maxel Rackrose, who will take his lunch here every day. Each time you point out a strange Darsh, you will be paid two SVU. Point out Lens Larque and earn ten SVU. And should you lead me to my friend, you shall earn twenty SVU."

Madame Tintle compressed her black brows in perplexity. "A

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most unusual arrangement. Why do you want Lens Larque? Most folk would pay ten SVU or more to avoid him."

"We are journalists. I consider him a prime subject for an interview—, should he appear. Certainly we cannot expect such good luck."

Madam Tintle shrugged. "I have nothing to lose. Now, what will you eat?"

"I'll take a few bites of ahagaree," said Gersen.

"The same for me," said Rackrose, "but less sulfur and iodine than usual."

"What about chatowsies?"

"None today."

Leaving the restaurant Gersen and Rackrose walked around to the back of the building and approached the iron gate. Through the bars they saw Tintle hunched in the pale sunlight before one of the sheds. Each of his three-inch earlobes terminated in a dangling metal ornament; Tintle amused himself by flicking these with his finger and letting them swing. Gersen called out: "Tintle! Hey, Tintle!"

Tintle rose slowly to his feet: a squat man with copper-colored skin and lumpy features. He came a few steps forward, then halted, to peer in suspicion toward the gate. "What do you want with me?"

"You are that Tintle who guarded the Kotzash warehouse?"

"I know nothing about it!" bawled Tintle. "I was asleep and

innocent in every respect!"

"But you were broken."

"It was a gross error!"

"And you ultimately plan to vindicate yourself?"

Tintle blinked. "I had not thought so far ahead."

"We would definitely like to hear your version of the case."

Tintle came slowly toward the gate. "What are you, asking such questions?"

"Investigators in the cause of justice."

"I have had enough justice. Investigate Ottile Panshaw and break him; I will lead the line to the latrine." Tintle turned and started back toward his shed.

"Just a moment!" called Gersen. "We have not discussed benefits."

Tintle came to a tentative halt. "What benefits?"

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"First a fee in payment for the value of your time. Second, punishment of the robbers."

Tintle made a sound of incredulous amusement. "Who intends to punish Lens Larque?"

"Anything might happen. At the moment we only wish to hear details of the case."

Tintle looked from one to the other. "What is your official status?"

"Don't inquire too closely. High officials can't offer fees."

Tintle at last showed flexibility. "How much are you offering?"

"That depends upon what you tell us. Five SVU, at the least."

"That is no vast sum," Tintle grumbled. "Still, I suppose that it will suffice." He looked up toward the windows at the back of the restaurant. "There she stands, a great rat glaring down from its hole. Let us transfer our business to Groary's Tavern, across the way."

"As you wish."

Tintle unharnessed the gate and passed through into the alley.

"She'll be sorely vexed to see us going off to the tavern, and I'll eat slops for a week. Still, let's be away. A man must never heed the

woman's roar."

Black piles emerging from the waters of Lake Feamish supported the rear deck of Groary's Tavern. The three men took seats at a wooden table. Tintle hunched forward, and Gersen thought to perceive the inkling of a sickly stench. Imagination? Tintle? A bubble up from the lake-bottom slime?

"I believe that five SVU was mentioned," said Tintle.

Gersen put money on the table. "We are interested in the Kotzash robbery. Remember, if the loot was recovered, you might well be vindicated and indemnified."

Tintle gave a harsh laugh. "Do you take me for a fool? In this life events bend to no such kindly patterns. I'll tell you what I know and take your money and that will be the end of it."

Gersen shrugged. "You were guard at Kotzash warehouse. What exactly is 'Kotzash'?"

"Ottile Panshaw formed the corporation. The miners brought in duodecimates and placed them with Panshaw, who paid off m shares of Kotzash Mutual. The shares were ostensibly redeemable in SVU at any time. So it went, and the warehouse at Serjeuz bulged

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with packets of fine duodecimate. How could Lens Larque not be tempted? Some say that Ottile Panshaw notified him when the warehouse could hold no more. So Lens Larque dropped his great black ship into the compound during the night. His villains came bounding into the warehouse and I was lucky to make my escape, for surely they would have killed me. This consideration failed to quell the general rage. They demanded why I, the designated guard, had failed to protect the warehouse, and why the great gate had been left ajar. I blamed Ottile Panshaw, but he was absent. Therefore I was dragged to the Central Sump and broken."

"A sorry tale," said Gersen. "Still, how do you know that Lens Larque was responsible?"

Tintle gave a fretful toss of the head which set his pendules to jerking. "Enough that I tell you as much. It is not a name to be discussed at length."

"Nevertheless, the guilty man must be brought to justice, and your contribution may be of assistance."

"And when Lens Larque hears of my verbosity, what then? I dance ten fandangos to the music of Panak."

"Your name will not be spoken." Gersen brought forth another five-SVU certificate. "Tell us what you know."

"It is nothing very much. I am of the Dupp Clan; Lens Larque is a Bugold. I knew him well in the old days. At Natdnaw Shade we played hadaul\* and everyone joined a cabal against him. But he had worked a counterstrategy, and it was I whose bones were broken."

"What sort of man is he?"

Tintle shook his head, at a loss for words. "He is a big man. He has a long nose and fleering eyes. At the Kotzash warehouse he wore a thabbat,\*\* but I knew him by his voice and his fust.\*\*\*"

"If he stepped into Tintle's Shade, would you know him?"

Tintle gave a gloomy grunt. "I am not tolerated in the Shade. He could come and go a dozen times; I'd never be the wiser."

"When you played hadaul, what name did he use?"

"That was long ago. Then he was simple Husse Bugold, though already he was rachepol."

\*Hadaul! a Darsh game, combining elements of conspiracy, double-dealing, cunning, trickery, and a general free-for-all melee

\*\*Thahhat the Darsh hood, usually of white or blue cloth.

\*\*\*Fust an odor exuded by Darsh men.

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"You have photographs of Lens Larque?"

Tintle snorted. "Why should I cherish such mementos? He is high, I am low. He exudes a fust of menander and fine koruna and red-oil ahagaree, I reek of the sump."

Gersen pushed the money across the table. "If you should see Lens Larque, be wary. Claim no acquaintance, don't let him recognize you. Communicate at once with Maxel Rackrose." He wrote on a card and pushed it across the table.

Tintle twitched his mouth in a quick uneasy wince. "It seems that you expect Lens Larque."

"We can only hope," said Gersen. "He is an elusive man."

Tintle began to have second thoughts. "I might not know him now. It is said that he has changed himself. Have you heard how the Methlen taunted him? He wanted to live in a fine house, but the neighbor wouldn't allow it. He said he wanted no ugly Darsh face hanging over the garden walls. Lens Larque was exasperated and changed his face at once. Who knows what he looks like now?"

"Use your intuition. What happened to Ottilie Panshaw?"

"He crossed to Twanish on Methel. For all I know he's there yet."

"And what of Kotzash: does the corporation still function?"

Tmtle spat upon the floor "I paid m four hundred ounces of good black sand—a true fortune—and I received forty shares of stock. I gambled at hadaul and I now have ninety-two." From a greasy wallet he extracted a packet of folded papers. "There are the certificates. Their value: ml."

Gersen examined the papers. "They are bearer certificates. I'll buy them from you." He placed ten SVU upon the table.

"What?" cried Tmtle. "For almost a hundred shares of prime Kotzash stock? Do I seem such a dunderhead? Each share represents not only ten ounces of sand but other values: rights, options, leases. . . ." He looked askance as Gersen picked up the ten SVU. "Not so fast! I accept your offer."

Gersen slid the money across the table. "I suspect that you have made the better bargain, but no matter. If you chance to notice the man whom we have discussed, inform us and you will be rewarded. Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"No."

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"If you supply us more information, we'll pay you well." Tmtle vouchsafed only a surly grunt. He finished his beer at a gulp and departed the tavern, with both Gersen and Maxel Rackrose leaning back from the waft of his passage.

From Life, Volume I, by Unspiek, Baron Bodissey:

The evil man is a source of fascination; ordinary persons wonder what impels such extremes of conduct. A lust for wealth? A common motive, undoubtedly. A craving for power? Revenge against society? Let us grant these as well. But when wealth has been gained, power achieved and society brought down to a state of groveling submission, what then? Why does he continue?

The response must be: the love of evil for its own sake. The motivation, while incomprehensible to the ordinary man, is nonetheless urgent and real. The malefactor becomes the creature of his own deeds. Once the transition has been overpassed a new set of standards comes into force. The perceptive malefactor recognizes his evil and knows full well the meaning of his acts. In order to quiet his qualms he retreats into a state of solipsism, and commits flagrant evil from sheer hysteria, and for his victims it appears as if the world has gone mad.

At noon on St. Dulver's Day, Maxel Rackrose presented himself at Gersen's chambers in the Domus. His manner was subdued; he spoke tersely. "During the last two weeks I have monitored travelers incoming at Slayhack, New Wexford, and Pontefract spaceports. Twenty originated in the Cora system, but only three described themselves as Darsh. The others are Methlen. None of the Darsh fit specifications. Three of the Methlen might conceivably be our man. These are the photographs."

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Gersen looked over the faces: none held meaning for him. Rackrose placed down another photograph with the air of a magician performing a feat. "This man is Ottile Panshaw, who forgot to pay the Kotzash insurance premiums. He arrived yesterday and is now here at the Domus."

Gersen studied the spaceport photograph, which depicted a middle-aged man, thin and frail with a small luxurious paunch, a large head with alert lucent eyes, a long thin flexible nose, a delicate mouth drooping at the corners. To either side of a bald forehead hung sparse russet curls; his skin had been toned a bitter yellow. Ottile Panshaw wore stylish and ornate garments: a square black velvet hat piped with scarlet and silver, dove gray trousers, a pale pink shirt with a rolled black collar, a fawn-colored jacket.

"Interesting!" said Gersen. "I hope to ask Panshaw a question or two."

"That should be easy enough; he's not a hundred yards away. Getting honest answers might be more of a problem, to judge from his face."

Gersen nodded thoughtfully. "This is not the face of a candid man. It's also not the face of a man who forgets insurance premi-

ums.

"Yes; that's a puzzling situation. Perhaps the premiums were exorbitant— That's not unlikely so close to Beyond."

"And so close to Lens Larque. Perhaps the insurance officials refused coverage on this theory."

"Or—which is even more likely—Panshaw simply pretended payment and put the money in his own pocket."

Gersen once again examined the clever face of the photograph. "I certainly wouldn't want Ottile Panshaw in command of my money. . . . Perhaps he had reason to depreciate Kotzash stock."

Rackrose frowned. "What would induce him in that direction?"

"I can think of several possibilities. One might be voting con-

trol of the company."

"If it were bankrupt?"

"Tintle mentioned other assets: leases, options, and the like."

"I suppose anything is possible."

Gersen reflected a moment, then, turning to the communicator, brought the pale foxy face of Jehan Addels to the screen. "There is a new aspect to our business," said Gersen. "The Kotzash Mutual

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Corporation, based at Ser|euz, on Dar Sai in the Cora system. Might there be information available at New Wexford2"

Addels showed one of his rare grins. "You'd be astonished as to what information we can command. If this Kotzash has done business to the value of one SVU with any bank of the Oikumene, information is on hand."

"I am interested in assets, officers, control procedure, anything else which might seem interesting "

"I will discover what there is to know."

The screen went dark. Turning, Gersen discovered a thoughtful expression on Rackrose's face. "For a simple |ournahst, you exert surprising authority," said Rackrose.

Gersen had forgotten his role as Henry Lucas, special writer for Cosmopolh. "No great affair, Addels is an old friend."

"I see. . . . Well, what shall we do about Ottilie Panshaw^"

"Watch him closely. Hire professional help, if necessary."\*

Rackrose said dubiously. "A man like Panshaw will surely notice such attention."

"If so, his conduct will be interesting."

"As you like. How will I pay the detectives?"

"Make out vouchers payable by Cosmopohs "

With a sigh of languid despair, Rackrose stood to his feet and departed

Presently Addels's face returned to the communicator. "Kot-zash is a queer business. The Ser|euz warehouse was robbed of ore worth twenty million SVU The comptroller had neglected insurance and the company fell apart. No formal bankruptcy, mind you the loss was only to the stockholders. The stock, needless to say, is

worthless."

"And who owns the stock?"

"The Kotzash charter was filed at the Chanseth Bank, m Ser-  
)euz; copies subsequently reached the association office here at New  
Wexford. It specifies that anyone holding twenty-five percent or  
more of the shares becomes a director, with a vote in proportion  
to his holdings. There are forty-eight hundred and twenty shares  
outstanding. Twelve hundred and fifty' shares, something over

\*\ egan law prohibited the use of motile spi-cells and like de\iLLs RI^OI-LIUS  
penalties  
attached tu the use ot such equipment, and detectives relied upon traditional  
methods uf  
surveillance

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twenty-five percent, are registered in the name of Ottilie Panshaw.  
The rest are distributed in unregistered small holdings."

"Very strange."

"Strange and significant. Panshaw is the only director, he con-  
trols Kotzash."

"He must have bought up depreciated stock," said Gersen.  
"Certainly he never put up half a ton of duodecimates."

"Not so fast. Panshaw is a man of style. WTiy spend hard-  
earned money for worthless stock?"

"Why indeed? I am burning with curiosity."

"Kotzash evidently maintains an office on Methel; the prospec-  
tus lists both Ser)euz and Twamsh addresses. Kotzash is, therefore,  
an mterworld corporation and files a yearly report. Last year's re-  
port listed as assets mining charters, leases, and exploration rights,  
as far afield as the asteroid Granate and the moon Shamtra. Kotzash  
also owns fifty-one percent of Hector Transit and Trading Com-  
pany, of Twanish. Who owns the remaining forty-nine percent?  
Ottilie Panshaw. He would seem, as Kot/ash comptroller, to have  
issued twelve hundred and fifty shares of Kotzash stock and paid  
them over to himself for fifty-one percent of Hector Transit and  
Trading."

"And what do the records say of Hector Transit and Trading "

"Nothing. It has never filed a prospectus."

"I find this most confusing," said Gersen.

"It is not confusing," said Addels. "It is merely a case of ]UQ;-  
gling and paperwork, to ease unscrupulous persons past their re-  
sponsibilities "

"Is Kotzash stock listed on the exchange board?"

"The index indicates a nominal value of one centim per share, with no tenders either to buy or sell. In essence the stock is dead "

"Put out feelers," said Gersen "If any Kotzash comes on the market, buy."

Addels gave his head a sad shake. "It is inonev cast into the sea "

"Ottile Panshaw thinks otherwise. He is staying at the Domus, evidently."

"What^ Amazing' 'there now is cause for con)ccure'"

"I am no less perplexed than you. But cake comfort; court convenes tomorrow. Benchmaster Dalt allows no e\asiveness; he'll set the matter straight "

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"If we escape shame and incarceration We walk a tightwire' Panshaw is highly astute'"

"If all goes well, Panshaw can go his way in peace, so far as I am concerned "

"When you say 'if all goes well' do you mean the appearance of Lens Larque at Estremont?"

"Exactly"

Addels gave his head an emphatic shake "I am sorry to say this, but you are chasing foxfire Maniac, brute, torturer—all these Lens Larque may be, but he is not a fool "

"Well, we shall see Now you must excuse me, it is time for Benchmaster Dalt to take his lunch "

Precisely on the hour Benchmaster Dalt made a stately entrance into the Domus restaurant a rigidly erect man, white of skin, with black curls massed around his cold and austere face His garments reflected a formal elegance decades out of date, heads turned to watch the striking implacable jurist cross the room to his table

He consumed a frugal meal of salad and cold fowl, then sat in portentous meditation over a cup of tea A thin man of no great stature who had been sitting across the room approached his table

"Lord High Benchmaster Dalt? May I join you for a moment?"

Benchmaster Dalt turned a leaden stare upon the petitioner, then spoke in a dry and measured voice, "If you are a journalist, I have nothing to say "

The other man laughed politely as if in appreciation of Benchmaster Dalt's little joke "My name is Ottilie Panshaw, and I am definitely no journalist " He eased himself deftly into the chair opposite Benchmaster Dalt "Tomorrow you are hearing Cooney's Bank versus the Etilia Gargantyr, et al Would you think it an impropriety if I were to discuss the case with you?"

Benchmaster Dalt, inspecting Ottilie Panshaw, saw a mature man of slight physique, with a large head, flexible features and a gracious expression, wearing a dapper suit of plum and umber

Panshaw bore the Benchmaster's stare with polite aplomb Benchmaster Dalt finally put a curt question "What is your standing in the case?"

"In an accessory sense, I am associated with the defendant, but naturally I came to make no importunities The case is extraordi-

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nary and certain elements may never be introduced formally, still, they might well illuminate your overall picture "

Benchmaster Dalt's eyelids took on a languid droop, his expression became more remote than ever "I am uninterested in special representations "

"This goes without saying Be assured that I wish only to present a few items of background information, they will carry their own burden of conviction "

"Very well, speak on "

"Thank you, sir To begin, I represent the ownership of the Etilia Gargantyr The vessel is under lease to the Hector Transit Company, a subsidiary of Kotzash Mutual, a company of which I am the managing director All well and good, but the ultimate owner of the ship is a certain Lens Larque Is that name familiar to you?"

"He is a notorious criminal "

"Exactly He would be loath to stand before a Vegan court and identify himself The idea is actually whimsical I therefore suggest that the testimony of myself, the functioning owner, be accepted in lieu of that of Lens Larque "

Benchmaster Dalt's pallid face altered by not so much as a twitch "At the preliminary hearing I ruled that only the owner in actuality at the time of the alleged tort can offer germane testimony I see no reason to alter this ruling The special quality of this witness is quite beside the point, and does not affect the ruling "

"Quite so," said Ottilie Panshaw, with a rueful grin "Your point of view is that if Lens Larque wished to testify in the Vegan courts,

he should not have become a criminal "

Benchmaster Dalt allowed the merest ghost of a smile to bend his lips "Exactly Court convenes tomorrow Is this Larque person at hand to testify?"

Ottile Panshaw lowered his voice "Our conversation is presumably unofficial and confidential?"

"I can make no such commitment."

"In that case, I can tell you nothing "

"Your caution implies a great deal I must assume that this person is at hand "

"Let us pose a hypothesis If Lens Larque were at hand, would you be willing to take his testimony in camera?"

Benchmaster Dalt frowned "I expect that he will testify to ad-

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vance his own case. Reputedly he has looted, tortured, and murdered, why should he hesitate at perjury? Can he supply corroboration to his testimony?"

Ottile Panshaw gave a soft gentle laugh. "You and I, sir, for all our disparities, are ordinary human beings. Lens Larque is something quite different. I could not venture to predict his testimony. Corroboration may or may not exist. Indeed in your previous ruling, you indicated that you needed only the owner's testimony."

Benchmaster Dalt considered. "The case of Cooney's Bank versus the Etilia Gargantyr is obviously out of the ordinary. I can only render the most accurate equity possible without reference to the antecedents of the principals. It is my earnest goal to try each case on its own terms. Therefore, despite my personal preference for formal proceedings, I will undertake to hear this man's testimony in camera. You may bring him to my suite here at the Domus in two hours time. I feel that I am leaning well over backwards in the interests of fairness and equity."

Ottile Panshaw smiled diffidently. "Would you come with me now to a place of my choice?"

"Certainly not."

"You must understand this person's trepidations."

"Had he lived a blameless life he could walk with careless step."

"Oh, his step is careless enough." Ottile Panshaw rose to his feet and hesitated several seconds. The corners of his mouth jerked down in a clownish grimace. "I will do what I can."

The Benchmaster's suite, the finest and most exquisitely appointed at the Domus, included a parlor furnished with antique pieces in that style known as "Dravan Commandeer." In a massive armchair sat the Benchmaster. He had elected to wear his robes of office in order to emphasize the solemnity of the occasion. His face, toned cadaverous white, with its lean cheeks, hard jaw and short straight nose, was in stark contrast with the luxuriant black curls of the ceremonial wig. The Benchmaster's hands, strong and spare, with straight strong fingers, seemed also a trifle incongruous; they seemed more the hands of an active man, accustomed to the feel of tools and weapons.

Jehan Addels sat across the room, in an attitude of anxiety;

clearly he would have preferred to be elsewhere.

A chime sounded; Addels rose to his feet, went out into the

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foyer, touched a button. The door slid aside, to admit Ottile Panshaw and a tall heavy-fleshed man in a hooded white cloak. Under the hood showed a face flat and moonish -with ruddy-bronze skin, a lumpy nose, heavy lips, and round black eyes.

Benchmaster Dalt spoke to Ottile Panshaw. "You are acquainted with counsel for the plaintiff, the Honorable Jehan Addels. Inasmuch as all issues conceivably may be resolved here and now, I deemed it proper to notify him of our meeting."

Ottile Panshaw gave his head a quick birdlike nod. "I understand, Lord Benchmaster. Allow me to introduce a principal in the case. I will not utter his name; there is no need to embarrass any-

one-

"To the contrary," said Benchmaster Dalt. "We are here precisely so that identities may be authenticated and unequivocal responses be made to questions of fact. You, sir, what is your name?"

"I have used many names, Benchmaster. Under the name 'Lens Larque' I assumed ownership of the ship Etilia Gargantyr. During my time of ownership, I have performed no acts-under the influence of malice or vindictiveness. I am innocent of the conspiracy alleged by Cooney's Bank. Against these statements I lay my great oath."

"We require something more than oaths in cases of this sort," said Benchmaster Dalt. "Counsellor, be so good as to summon the clerk."

Jehan Addels opened a side door, beckoned; into the room came the Chief Clerk, wheeling an instrument before him.

Benchmaster Dalt said, "Clerk, allow this gentleman to au-

thenticate his statements."

"At once, Holy Law." The clerk slid the machine toward the man in the white cloak. "Sir, this is a harmless device which reads emanations from your conceptualizer. Notice this luminous indicator: truth excites a green light; falsity is shown by red. I will place the register against your temple; allow me to shift the hood."

Drawing back in annoyance, the man muttered to Ottile Panshaw, who returned only a half-smiling, half-crestfallen shrug. The clerk, gingerly slipping back the hood, placed an adhesive patch upon the ruddy-bronze temple.

Benchmaster Dalt spoke. "Counsellor Addels, ask your questions, but only to the effect of establishing identity and ascertaining motivation at the time of the alleged tort."

Ottile Panshaw said in a silky tone: "May I suggest, Holy Law,

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that exact dispassion might better be approximated if you yourself put the questions?"

"I am intent only upon truth. So long as Counsellor Addels pursues truth, we must all approve. Counsellor, ask your questions."

"Sir, you state your name to be Lens Larque5"

"Yes; this name has been applied to me."

The mdicant glowed green.

"What is your name m actuality?"

"It is Lens Larque-"

"How long have you been known by this name5"

Ottile Panshaw cried out: "Holy Law, the fact has been made clear and verified by the mdicant! Must we incessantly pursue a sterile inquisition3"

"Holy Law, I submit that the identification is not yet unequivocal."

"I agree. Continue."

"Very good. Where were you born?"

"On Dar Sai. I am Darsh." An almost foolish smirk widened the man's mouth.

"And what was your born, or given, name?"

"That is a matter of no consequence." The red light flickered, then the green light glowed.

"Odd," mused the Benchmaster. He himself put a question.  
"How long then have you been known as Lens Larque?"

"That is not important." The red light glowed bright.

"Has someone recently—within the last week or two—fixed the name 'Lens Larque' upon you?"

The Darsh's eyes bulged, and he made lurching motions with his shoulders. "That is an insulting question."

Benchmaster Dalt leaned sharply forward. "That is not the proper tone to take. Either you are Lens Larque, whereupon we come to grips with the case, or you are not, whereupon you and Mr. Panshaw have committed a most serious impropriety."

"The whole matter is a farce," grumbled the Darsh. "Accept the fact that I am Lens Larque and ask your questions."

Benchmaster Dale's eyes glittered. "If you are Lens Larque, answer this. Who were your associates at the Mount Pleasant raid?"

"Bah, I forget such details."

"What does the name 'Husse' suggest to you?"

"I have no skill with names."

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"That may well be. You are evidently not the real Lens Larque. For the last time, state the identity under which you have lived for the last twenty years."

"I am Lens Larque." The mdicant glowed red.

"And I denounce you and Ottile Panshaw as conspirators, per-  
)urers, and frauds. Clerk, place these men under arrest! Take them into custody and lock them in separate dungeons "

The clerk blew out his cheeks and stepped cautiously forward.  
"The pair of you must now consider yourselves m the custody of the Estremont. Stand quietly; hold now! Not a move! I represent the full force of Vegan law!"

Ottile Panshaw's eyelids drooped in worry and despondency.  
"Lord High Benchmaster, I beg your understanding! Please be aware of the special circumstances!"

Benchmaster Dalt spoke m cold tones. "You have seriously pre)udiced your case. I am disposed to find for the plaintiff, unless Lens Larque presents himself at once. You may use this telephone to call him. I am bored with tricks."

Ottile Panshaw showed his sad twisted smile. "Lens Larque is notorious for his tricks." He paused, then continued m an almost

confidential tone- "Cooney's Bank will never enjoy a judgment against Lens Larque, I can state this much."

"What is your meaning?"

"Ships disappear. In not one, but by many modes. Remember the tricks! Now, accept my truly sincere apologies, and allow us to leave."

"Halt!" cried the clerk. "You are in my custody!"

The Darsh looked toward Ottile Panshaw "All of them?"

Panshaw gave a delicate shrug, from which the Darsh seemed to derive exact information. He stepped back and produced a peculiar implement: a foot-long handle terminating in a small spiked knob. The Chief Clerk stood back aghast, then turned and ran for the door. The Darsh swung his haft; the spiked ball was propelled into the back of the clerk's head; he threw up his arms and fell forward. In the same rhythmic motion the Darsh turned, swung the haft, and the ball darted toward Benchmaster Dalt Jehan Addels uttered a croak of outrage and lurched forward, only to be tripped by the dapper foot of Ottile Panshaw. The Benchmaster had dodged low to the side, the projectile struck the wall at his back. He ran crouching forward, black robes fluttering, face white under

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the black curls. The Darsh drew back a step and flourished the haft. Benchmaster Dalt seized the upraised wrist, kicked at the Darsh's knee, thrust an elbow under the heavy red jaw. The Darsh stumbled to the floor. The Benchmaster wrenched away the haft; the Darsh groped and dragged him to the floor. They tumbled about the room, white robe and black, like monstrous black and white moths. Ottile Panshaw skipped here and there holding a small hand weapon. He looked toward Jehan Addels, who instantly threw himself flat behind a couch. Panshaw turned away, to stand rapt in astonishment while the languid and elegant Dunst broke first the Darsh's wrist, then his jaw, then produced a glittering black silver with which he stabbed the Darsh in the back of the neck.

Ottile Panshaw halfheartedly pointed his weapon. Jehan Addels, watching from behind the couch, uttered a sharp cry and threw a bronze vase. Benchmaster Dalt reached for the Darsh's ball-whip;

Ottile Panshaw stepped quietly to the door, bowed, and departed with the aplomb of a successful conqueror.

The Benchmaster pushed aside the Darsh corpse and jumped to his feet. Jehan Addels emerged from behind the couch. "What an appalling situation!" cried Addels. "If we are discovered with these dead things, we will be immured forever!"

"In that case we will depart. It is the only sensible course."

The Benchmaster removed his wig and doffed the black robes. He looked down at the corpses in gloomy dissatisfaction. "Failure.

The scheme is bankrupt." He indicated the huddle which once had been the Chief Clerk. "Provide well for his km; we can at least do that."

"I fear for myself and my own km," Addels fretted. "Is there to be no end to this violence? And these corpses: we are vulnerable' Panshaw from sheer spite may call in the alarm'"

"Quite so. Benchmaster Dalt must now dissolve into nowhere. A pity: he was truly an admirable fellow, with flair and style. Good-bye, Benchmaster Dalt'"

"Bah," muttered Addels. "You should have been a theatnst rather than an assassin, or whatever you consider yourself. Must we loiter here forever^ The kindest dungeons are at Maudley; far worse are the Frogtown Holes."

"I hope to visit neither." Gersen flung wig and gown aside. "Let's be gone from here."

In his own chambers Gersen removed the white skin-tone;

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then, while Addels watched in lambent disapproval, he dressed in his ordinary gear. Addels finally could no longer contain his curiosity. "Where are you off to now<sup>3</sup> The sun is setting, don't you ever think of rest<sup>2</sup>"

Gersen, in the act of arming himself, responded half apologetically "Did you hear Panshaw's hints<sup>7</sup> How Cooney's Bank should never consider the Ettiha Gafgantyf a reliable asset? How famous is Lens Larque for his tricks? Lens Larque is evidently close at hand. I want to watch his trickery."

"I lack all such curiosity' When I think of what I have undergone, I am horrified! I am a legalist and a financial expert, I admit as much; but my disregard for the law goes no further. I need time to rest. I must recover my sense of reality. I bid you good evening." Jehan Addels departed the chamber

Five minutes later Gersen left the suite. The placidity of the Domus seemed untroubled, Ottile Panshaw evidently had not called in an alarm.

In front of the Domus Gersen signaled down one of the city's venerable hacks and climbed into the passenger dome. He called into the mesh. "To Slayhack Spaceport, as fast as possible."

"Aye, sir'"

The hack trundled along the Esplanade and around the bend into Pilkamp Road. As they drove, the afterglow faded and dusk glimmered across Lake P'eamish. Through Moynal and Drury they went and into Wigaltown, and Gersen saw ahead the yellow sign

advertising Tintle's Shade. The upper windows showed red and yellow lights and flickered with moving shadows- merriment tonight at Tintle's Shade! From Wigaltown into Dundivy, then Gar.i and finally into Slayhack, where the spaceport floodlights lit up the sky. Gersen leaned forward in his seat, trying to induce speed upon the lumbering old hack by sheer force of will. ... An explosion of light across the sky, a shuddering burst of yellow-white glare, and seconds later a great belch of sound. Staring from the cab, Gersen saw black fragments hurtling across the light, upon which his imagination put the semblance of human shapes.

The light subsided into a cloud of roiling smoke

The cabdriver cried out in fear- "Sir, what shall I do?"

"Keep going!" called Gersen, then a moment later "Stop here!"

He alighted from the cab and looked across the field. In the

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place of the Etilia Gargantyr lay a few smouldering shards Gersen stood rigid with rage and dismay. Predictable! he told himself between clenched teeth Lens Larque plays quaint tricks! He destroys lawsuit and ship together, and collects fall insurance! These premiums Ottile Panshaw will not have neglected!

"I have become complacent," he muttered "I have lost my hard edge!" He swung around in disgust and returned to the cab. He asked the driver. "Can you drive out on the field?"

"No, sir, the field is forbidden to us."

"Then continue along the road a bit."

The cab skirted the field. In the illuminated area beside the repair shops, Gersen noticed a swarming group of men, apparently in a state of shock, or hysteria. Gersen called to the driver: "Take that access lane yonder, toward the warehouses."

"I may not leave the public road, sir."

"Very well, wait here." Gersen jumped to the ground.

From behind the shops darted a small warehouse truck, driven erratically. At full speed it fled across the field, toward the access lane. The men at the shop reacted instantly. Some pursued on foot;

others leapt aboard vehicles and so gave chase. The truck, gaming the access lane, bounded at full speed toward the road. As it passed under a floodlight Gersen saw the driver's face, which was wide, red-bronze, and heavy, with staring eyes- the face of Tintle. He lacked skill in guiding the truck and drove off the lane into a rut. The truck jerked and bumped, and, slewing to the side, overturned, Tintle was thrown through the air, kicking and sprawling; he fell half on his back, half on his side, and lay for a moment inert. Then,

laboriously, he lurched to his feet, threw a wild glance over his shoulder, and started at a hobbling run for the road. His pursuers caught him under one of the floodlights, and in the circle of blue-white radiance struck him great blows with fists and metal tools. Tintle staggered back and forth, and fell to the ground. The men kicked him and jumped upon his head and body until Tintle was bloody, ruptured, and dead.

Gersen, arriving at the scene, spoke to a young man wearing mechanic's overalls. "What goes on here^"

The young mechanic turned him a stare half-apprehensive, half-defiant. "Don't you see the wreckage? That hulk yonder? This man exploded it, and half a dozen of our fellows as well! Bold as brass he drove his truck under the cargo hatch and set down a great

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crate. It was track, that's what it was! then he drove off and a minute later the blast all but knocked us down, over by the shops. There were four guards aboard and six day-shift men going off to their homes. 'All gone in the blast!'" Overcome by indignation and the importance of the occasion the young mechanic began to bluster. "And who are you to come asking why we should capture the drot!'"

Without troubling to reply, Gersen turned away. He marched back to the hack, where the driver waited nervously in the darkness. "Sir, where now^"

Gersen turned a last look across the field where, in the glaring floodlights, the group of workmen, waving, stamping, gesticulating, still surrounded Tintle's corpse. "Back into town," said Gersen.

Away from Slayhack, south along Pilkamp Road, into Gara and Dundiv, rolled the cab. Gersen stared unseeingly ahead along the line of streetlights which curved in a luminous chain all the way back to Old Town. Gersen's brooding was interrupted by the sight of a sign in IN i IF'S SH'\I)F. As before, colored lights and moving shadows played along the upper windows. Tonight, while Tintle lay dead in Slayhack, Tintle's Shade pulsed with jovial activity.

An eerie emanation tingled the edge of Gersen's mind. For an instant he sat indecisively, then called the hack to a halt. "Wait for me, I won't be long."

"Aye, sir "

Gersen crossed the street. From Tintle's Shade came muffled sounds of revelry, piping music, occasionally a howl and yelp of foolish glee. He pushed through the entrance. The old woman in black looked stonily across the beer hall but spoke no word.

Gersen mounted the stairs to the upper floor. Passing through the door, he found himself behind a row three deep of ranked bodies, heads and sloping shoulders silhouetted against the pink illumination beyond.

At the center of the room an entertainment was in progress.  
Two musicians on a platform played drums and tweedle-pipes Be-  
low and visible only in glimpses past bald heads and dangling ear-  
lobes, a wizened youth cavorted with a pneumatic dummy dressed  
as an old Darsh woman He sang in a nasal voice, urgent and  
breathless, the Darsh jargon\* not altogether intelligible to Gersen:

\*Dirsh nun ind ^onim use dis[inct1\ difftfLnt idioms, horh rich in epithets  
The song is  
phrased m mile l^on

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I first saw light at Gaggar's Shade beneath the nephar tree;

They gave me bottom beer to drink, then good ahagaree.  
My dangle coiled all curlicue to everyone's despair;

A kitchet -wandered past the door; it straightened then and there.  
Tinkle tankle winkle wankle finkle fankle fime  
All the aeons gone before are simply wasted time.

I saw a chelt in native pelt and felt a queer condition.  
The heartless creature jeered and mocked my meager proposition.  
Every day I chased the chelts and prowled the shade by night,  
Wondering -where the kitchets went -when Mirassou shone bright.  
Tinkle tankle -winkle 'wankle finkle fankle fun  
The chelts though brash -wear no mustache, the kitchets only  
one.

Oh -where do all the kitchets go on midnight promenade?

Oh what compels the tender things so far from Gaggar's Shade?

They walk to Dobbin's Fountain; they climb Knobkelly Row;

Out upon Bagshilly Sand the tender kitchets go.  
Tinkle tankle winkle wankle finkle fankle fex  
A fearful thrill to pit your skill against the female sex!

When I became a bungle boy and Mirassou shone fair,

I ran across Bagshilly Plain to catch a kitchet there.

But -who caught me but the vile old khoontz who terrorized the  
place,

With her biffle belly, monstrous arse and gibble-gobble face.  
Tinke tankle winkle wankle finkle fankle fane  
Fear and fright by pale moonlight upon Bagshilly Plain!

She seized my drops and dingles, she toyed with my emotion;

She rubbed my private enterprise with sa'ofulatic lotion.

She put me in a quandary and caused me deep dismay.  
She never let me out again until the dawn of day.  
Tinkle tankle -winkle wankle finkle fankle fade  
Stark and pale I crawled the trail which leads to Gaggar^s  
Shade.

A young girl is a "chelt." After adolescence and until she grows her facial  
mustache,  
usually after six to eight years, she is a "kitchet," Thereafter she may incur  
any number  
of epithets, usually derogatory.

The women use an equivalent set of terms in reference to the men.

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Now that I'm a pooter bold, I wander where I please.

I chase the kitchets hack and forth with condescending ease.

Serene and gay I chanced to stray upon Bagshilly Plain;

Who bounded forth but the same old khoontz and took me once  
again!

Tinkle tankle winkle wankle finkle fankle foom  
Serene and bland, I walked the sand to meet an awful doom.

Pll dare to slog the oozing bog; Pll risk the frozen pole;

Pll challenge fifteen champions at Dinklestown hadaul,  
But I -won Y dare a promenade along Bagshilly Plain,  
In craven fear that the vile old khoontz should take me once  
again.

Tinkle tankle -winkle wankle finkle fankle fore  
Bagshilly Plain has been my bane; Vll go there nevermore.

To the refrains the audience gave enthusiastic support: stamp-  
ing, yelping, belching a plangent obbligato.

Gersen sidled behind the spectators toward the kitchen, where  
the view was less obstructed. Certain folk present wore ordinary  
Vegan garments, others the white Darsh robe and thabbat. Two  
men at a table across the room attracted Gersen's attention: the  
first, massive and curiously still, with his features obscured under  
his thabbat. The other, a smaller man, sat with his back to Gersen  
and made small diffident gestures as he spoke.

Someone thrust at Gersen and pushed him about; Gersen  
looked into the sardonic face of Madame Tintle. "So isn't it you,  
the ardent journalist? Did you come to meet your friend?"

Gersen asked politely: "Which friend do you mean?"

Madame Tintle showed a sly malicious smile which moved her  
mustache more than her mouth. 'T don't know as to this. Iskish\*

look all alike to me. But maybe you'll see him by and by. Or perhaps you came to watch Ned Ticket?"

"Not altogether. I thought perhaps to speak to you, in connection with our understanding. For instance, are these all regular patrons tonight? Who are those men sitting yonder, across the

roomr

'Iskish: Darsh jargon for anyone other than a Darsh.

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"Strangers, fresh in from Dar Sal. Could they be the acquaintances you were seeking?"

"In this dim light I can't be sure."

Madame Tintle's smile became an unpleasant grin. "Why not step across and pay your respects?"

"A good idea. I'll do so after a bit. Have you had news of Tintle? He was sent out on an errand."

"Is that correct? Tintle is becoming all the rage. He danced last night and showed nimble heels."

The singer finished his song, to belching stamping approval. Madame Tintle sniffed in displeasure. "Vile old Khoontz, is it? Never fear! On the woman's floor we eat fresh ahagaree and celebrate Tobo the Tremulous Tyrant. It works no better than a balance. What have we next? Ticket the snaveler? Watch with attention; you shall be diverted!" Madame Tintle lurched away, shouldering spectators aside with neither concern nor apology. Gersen looked back to the two men across the room. The slight man almost certainly was Otdle Panshaw. Who might be the other? ... A drum rattled; out on the floor ran a tall thin man on long thin legs, wearing a right costume of mustard and black. His arms were lean and corded; his long twitching nose drooped over a long pointed chin. He flourished a whip; snaps and cracks accented his recitation. "Hoy ho now, it's time for our fun! I'm Nikity Ticket;

I first tasted water at W^abbers Fountain. I learned leather from Roly Tatwyn. My whip is Whirr; it's never weary, so who wants to dance? Who'll skip to leather music? Dainty and delicate! Here come our dancers!"

In fascination Gersen watched the two men across the room. One was Ottile Panshaw; the other—he hardly dared allow the name to enter his mind—might it be Lens Larque?

Madame Tintle emerged from an alcove behind the two men. Approaching from the side she stood, in a posture at once deferential and contemptuous. She leaned forward, spoke and jerked her thumb. Both men turned to look toward Gersen, who, taking warning, had sidled back into the shadows.

"-hoy, hoy, hoy!" cried Ned Ticket to the dancers. He snapped the long whip close by their feet, creating heavy succulent sounds. "Smartly now, smartly! Dance to music of leather! With a kick and a hop; that's the way of it, show us your heels, then flourish the targets!" The dancers wore right short trousers, with scarlet

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disks sewn upon the seat. Two of the dancers were Darsh boys; the third was Maxel Rackrose, who danced with agility. "Hoop hap hup!" called Ned Ticket. "This is how we dance at Doodam's Shade! A touch of sweetness, the good sweet leather! The glossy leather, supple and sweet! Hey hurrah! A snap-and a snap-and a snap snap snap! Skip now, lively there! W^e're off for a merry reel! Around and step, twist and step, and a taste of the leather! Oh my soul, a fine smart dance! We are truly gay! Hop and skip and a snap snap snap! Pshaw, so soon? Why must you spoil the fun? A snap and a snippet, right on the target; up now, twirl like a graceful fairy. Exhaustion? A fable! Up, on with the dance; we cannot halt so soon! Up! Bend and sway; a smile and a tear, tempt with the target! ... A moment to rest." Ned Ticket swung on his heel, bowed to the man beside Ottile Panshaw. "Sir, your whip is famous;

will you join the dance?" The massive man made a negative signal. Ottile Panshaw cried out: "We need fresh dancers, keen and eager! There's one by the kitchen, the iskish spy! Thrust him out on the floor."

Gersen called: "Rackrose, this way! Quick now!" Rackrose, glassy-eyed and panting, turned his head, hobbled toward Gersen.

"Not yet!" cried Ned Ticket. "Make ready for the dance!" Gersen sensed a loom behind him; he looked to see Madame Tintle, arms outstretched to push. Gersen slid aside, pulled and swung her sprawling out on the floor. Snatching out his gun he fired toward the massive man's belly. His arm was jostled; the bolt went astray. A fist knocked the gun from his hand; dark shapes converged on him.

"Rackrose!" Gersen bellowed. "This way! Quick now!" A roaring figure pressed upon Gersen; he was dealt a buffet on the back of the head. He blinked, jerked an elbow into a nearby paunch. He slipped his left hand into metal fingers, dropped a knife into his right hand. Someone struck him again; Gersen seized the arm; his assailant uttered a rattling gasp as energy jarred his body. Stabbing, slashing, Gersen reached Rackrose, hauled him into the kitchen, and even at this juncture recoiled at the oily stench. Four women bawled objurgations. Gersen seized a cauldron of bubbling sauce and threw it out into the main room, evoking cries of anguish. Through a side door which gave on the steps came Madame Tintle, eyes glaring. She seized Gersen from behind and clasped him to

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herself. "Women!" she bayed. "Bring the sick oil! Work the graters! We'll fry this iskish on the stove!"

Gersen touched her with metal fingers, she cried out and stumbled backward, to tumble down the stairs. Gersen toppled a rack of condiments upon the women, signaled to Rackrose. "Quick now!" They ran down the stairs, hopping over the dazed form of Madame Tintle at the bottom. The beer woman came to look in wonder. "What causes so much turmoil?"

"Madame Tintle has taken a tumble," Gersen explained. "You had best see to her. Come, Rackrose, we must be on our way."

Gersen took a last look up the stairs. At the landing the massive man stood pointing a gun. Gersen slid to the side; the bolt passed him by; he threw his knife. The angle was awkward, instead of piercing the man's neck the blade sheared away his dangling earlobe.

The man called out in rage and fired the gun again, but Gersen and Rackrose were out the door.

They ran across Pilkamp Road to the cab. Gersen called to the driver: "Quick now, back into town at top speed! The Darsh have all gone crazy!"

The cab lurched and rumbled south. There was no pursuit. Gersen slumped back into the seat. "He was there. . . . Twice I tried for his life. Twice I failed. The scheme worked well; he took the bait. Twice I failed."

"I don't know what you're talking about," snarled Rackrose. "Here and now, be notified. I can serve as your assistant no longer. The salary"—Rackrose spoke in a voice of sarcastic delicacy—"is not commensurate with my duties."

Gersen was in no mood to lavish sympathy upon Rackrose. "You came away with your life, consider yourself lucky."

Rackrose snorted and painfully shifted his position. "Easy for you to talk. You were not dancing with Ned Ticket! What a repulsive business!"

Gersen sighed. "I'll see that you're compensated. Enjoy your welts; they've earned you money."

Rackrose presently asked: "Who was that large man in the Darsh robes?"

"Lens Larque."

"You tried to kill him."

"Certainly. Why not? I failed, worse luck."

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"You are a most peculiar |ournahst."

"No doubt you are right."

Three days later Jehan Addels made contact with Gersen by communicator. Taking note of Addels' carefully composed face, Gersen knew that significant news was in the offing.

"In regard to the Etilia Gargantyr," said Addels in a voice so dry as almost to crackle, "the vessel was quite destroyed. The case at law of Cooney's Bank versus Etilia Gargantyr becomes moot."

"That is my own conclusion," said Gersen.

"One immediately begins to speculate as to insurance," said Addels. "We wonder as to the insuring agency, the coverage and, of course, the beneficiary. Some facts have now emerged, and you may wish to learn them."

"Definitely so," said Gersen. "What are these facts?"

"I find that the policy was negotiated only three weeks ago, to a total liability which approximately equals or even exceeds replacement cost of the vessel and its cargo. The insuring entity is Cooney's Fiduciary Assurance, a subsidiary of Cooney's Bank at Thrump on David Alexander's Planet. The insured party, Kotzash Mutual Syndicate of Segeu, Dar Sai, has presented its claim in accordance with company policy, compensation has promptly and faithfully been rendered."

Gersen looked at Addels with a gloomy expression. "I own Cooney's Bank?"

"You do, and Cooney's Fiduciary Assurance, as well."

"Then, in effect, I have paid Lens Larque a large sum of money."

"This is the case."

Gersen, not normally given to emotional demonstration, raised his hands in the air, clenched his fists and brought them down upon his head. "He tricked me."

"He is notorious for his pranks," said Addels primly.

"Yes, so I understand."

"An ancient proverb stipulates that 'he who supps with the devil should use a long spoon.' You would seem to have attempted such a meal with a small dessert fork."

"We shall see," said Gersen. "Are you ready to leave?"

Addels' face became blank. "Leave? For where?"

"Dar Sai, of course."

Addels half lowered his eyelids and tilted his head sideways. In a reedy voice he said, "Important personal affairs prevent me from joining you on this venture. Also—a side issue of course—Dar Sai is a wild and savage world, where I would surely be uncomfortable " "Yes, possibly so."

After a cautious moment Addels asked. "When do you leave?" "This afternoon. There is nothing to keep me here." Addels said gruffly, "I'd waste my breath counseling you to prudence. So I will wish you luck."

"I'm as prudent as necessary'," said Gersen. "I'll be in touch with you before too long."

## PART II

### Dar Sai

From Tourists Guide to the Coranne, by Jane Szantho:

Dar Sai, second planet of the Coranne, cannot be considered a pleasant or propitious world; indeed, the casual observer will at once discount all possibility of human habitation. Each hemisphere may be divided into zones almost equally malignant. At the poles the winds howl around the vortex of a perpetual down-draft cyclone, to deposit incessant rain, slush, and snow. The consequent groundwaters drain into the Bogs, an environment of ooze, poisonous slimes, stiletto bugs, uncounted varieties of algae, some of which achieve the stature of bushes.

From the Bogs water drains south and north respectively into the equatorial Hot Zone: the so-called Wale. Some of this water evaporates, some sinks out of sight into the sand.

The Wale is pitilessly exposed to the blazing light of Cora, and seems as vicious as any other environment of Dar Sai. Gentle variable winds blow during the day, but at night all is quiet on the desert, which, at this time, becomes strangely beautiful.

A small dead star, once Cora's companion, and posthumously known as Fideske, is responsible for human habitancy upon Dar Sai. Twenty million years ago Fideske disintegrated into fragments, the largest of which, Shanitra, orbits Methel, the third planet, as a moon. Some fragments form an asteroidal belt, others fell upon Methel and Dar Sai, bringing rare and precious elements of high atomic

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number, the duodecimates.\* On Methel these elements are lost on the sea bottoms; on Dar Sai they have become a component of the desert sands, which the wind constantly sifts and segregates. The first men came to Dar Sai to mine

duodecimate lodes; over centuries they evolved into Darsh, a folk as fierce and perverse as the world they inhabit

These first settlers, in the main fugitives, desperadoes and ne'er-do-wells, quickly discovered that they could survive by day only with the aid of powerful air-coolers, or in more primitive circumstances, under sheds cooled by trickling water. Using riches gained from duodecimates, the Darsh erected their famous "shades" enormous parasols as much as five hundred feet high and sheltering twenty or thirty acres. Water from the underground aquifers is pumped to the top surface to flow across to the periphery and trickle down in sheets, veils and cool mists. Under these shades live the Darsh. They grow quantities of food in their garden trays; some they synthesize and the rest they import. The spices which enliven their cuisine derive from particular types of bog-algae. Some of these spices—the ahagaree, for instance—is as valuable by weight as good black duodecimate.

The Darsh are not physically appealing to outworlders, or iskish, to use Darsh jargon. They are large-boned, often bulky, and in their later years inclined to corpulence. Their features are heavy and their complexions tend to a raw roan color, occasionally with a chalky undertone. At puberty the men become entirely hairless. The women, to the contrary, are hirsute, and ten years after puberty will often grow mustaches. In that brief decade between puberty and facial moustache, the girls, or kitchets, achieve a certain degree of physical charm and are held in great esteem by Darsh men of all ages.

The Darsh ear cartilage stretches easily, the lobes hang loose and long and sometimes support dangling pendants. The men wear white robes and hoods. When they go abroad in the daylight, small air conditioners pump cold air under these robes. The women, who never leave the shade

'\ misnomer, v<sup>h</sup>ich nevertheless has achieved \vicJe popular usage

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by day, wear less voluminous kirtles of maroon, orange, or mustard, which are in particularly disagreeable discord with their complexion.

Darsh children find themselves in an unsympathetic milieu. They are exploited in all manner of ways; they gain neither gratitude nor affection, and so develop a remarkable egocentricity, which is not dissimilar to pride, as if each had declaimed to Fate: "You have abused and mishandled me;

you have shown me no favor, but I have survived; I have grown stubborn and strong despite all!"

This pride, in the Darsh male, expresses itself as "plambosh," a swaggering willful flamboyance, a reckless disre-

gard for consequence, a perversity which automatically conduces to contempt for authority. If, by one means or another, such as public humiliation, this pride is fractured or destroyed, the man is "broken" and thereafter becomes almost eunuchoid.

In women, the quality is more difficult to define, and takes the form of studied inscrutability. Whoever wishes to experience human opacity need only attempt jocular intercourse with a Darsh woman. Men and women espouse each other for economic accommodation, nothing else. Procreation is accomplished by a far more adventurous process during nocturnal promenades across the desert, especially when Mirassou-shine is in the sky. The system is simple in outline but complicated in detail. Both men and women aggressively seek out young sexual partners. The men way-lay girls barely adolescent; women seize upon boys not much older. To lure the boys out upon the desert, the women ruthlessly send out the pubescent girls and so it goes. The system has permutations unnecessary now to explore. In this connection, the whipping entertainments may be mentioned. These reach elaborate forms in the principal towns, and the off-world visitor who witnesses one of these strange rites will be amazed, fascinated, and no doubt repelled. The characteristic Darsh game hadaul perhaps also should be mentioned, but this is more common among the backland shades.

Lest the reader cultivate a negative impression of the Darsh, their virtues must be indicated. They are brave,

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there are no Darsh cowards. They never utter falsehoods;

they would thereby compromise their pride. They are guardedly hospitable, in the sense that any stranger or off-world wanderer arriving at a remote shade is provided food and shelter as his natural right. The Darsh may confiscate, preempt, or simply avail himself of any object for which he has an immediate use, but he will never deign to pilfer; the stranger's belongings are safe. However, should this stranger discover a pocket of black sand, he might well be confronted, robbed and murdered. The Darsh admit such acts to be crimes but apply no great moral indignation to the perpetrators.

In regard to Darsh food, the less said the better. The traveler must adjust himself to a Darsh meal as he might a natural catastrophe. It avails nothing to pretend relish; the Darsh themselves know that their food is repulsive, and apparently derive a perverse pride in their ability to consume it regularly.

There, my traveling friends, you have, in capsule form, a sketch image of the world Dar Sai. You may not like it, but you will never forget it.

Gersen made the passage to Dar Sai in a Fantamic Flitterwing of modest size and appearance. The course took him into the back-regions of Argo Navis, close to the edge of Beyond: an area which he had never before visited.

Ahead burnt the white sun Cora. In the macroscope Gersen picked out the two inhabited worlds Methel and Dar Sai.

In regard to Dar Sai Traffic Directions made only a brief refer-

ence:

The major settlements are, in order of importance, Serjeuz, Wabber's Fountain, Dinkelstown, and Belfeser. None of these places provides other than rudimentary facilities for the repair or servicing of spaceships. There are neither entry nor departure regulations; indeed, no central Darsh authority. Dar Sai is to some extent policed by Methlen agencies, for protection of their commercial interests, but away from the four main towns Methlen influence diminishes. At Serjeuz a rectangle marked out in white indicates

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the preferred landing site, for easiest access to the commercial warehouses.

From a height of twenty miles, Serjeuz appeared as a small mechanism lost on the gray, pink, and yellow waste. As Gersen descended, details became exact in the morning light of Cora, and Serjeuz was revealed as a cluster of parasols spilling veils of water around the rims.

The fiasco at Rath Eileann had receded to the back of Gersen's memory, where it rankled like a small hidden ulcer. Looking down at Serjeuz, Gersen felt rekindled emotions: the hunter's stealth, tingling alertness, awe for the nearness of the dire beast. Lens Larque's emanations permeated the landscape. A hundred times he had cooled himself under the flowing parasols; a hundred times, in his fluttering white robes, he had crossed the desert between Serjeuz and the Bugold shades. Conceivably at this very moment he ate and drank at some favorite resort not ten minutes' time away.

In a white-bordered rectangle two dozen spacecraft of various sorts and conditions were at rest. Gersen landed the Flitterwing close beside the shimmering water-walls. The vessel became silent;

the deck felt solid underfoot.

Local time was midmorning. Gersen prepared to debark. According to the Immunological Index, wind-borne spores from the bog algae, germinating in the lungs, posed the most significant threat to human health; Gersen had already dosed himself with prophylactic counter-agents. He donned a white hooded robe, tucked money and bonded identity papers into his pouch, made sure of his weapons, stepped through the vestibule, and descended to the sandy surface of Dar Sai. Heat instantly pressed against his face. He narrowed his eyes against the glare and set off toward the water-wall.

Four Darsh burst through the curtain astride dilapidated vehicles rolling on four-foot air-balls. They rode with fine plambosh, bouncing and bounding, white robes fluttering behind. Thabbats covered their faces except for metal hemispheres over their eyes, which gave them the look of white-robed insects. They seemed not to see Gersen and nearly ran him down; Gersen jumped to the side and shouted a curse at their retreating backs, to no effect. The four rode to the north toward the shimmer of a lone parasol at the horizon.

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Gersen passed through the water-veil, into a jungle of vegetation growing from trays stacked fifty feet high. The lane passed underneath, skirted a pair of domed warehouses, and ended at a confusion of small heavy-walled concrete domes low, high, large and small, domes piled on domes, domes impinging upon or growing out of other domes, domes in clusters of three, four, five, or six. These were the so-called "dumbles," or Darsh residences, constructed to an architecture at once heavy, vital, and appropriate to the environment, like the Darsh themselves. Vegetation surrounded and overhung each dumble; in the ways and alleys wandered small children. Gersen noticed a group of young boys playing a pushing, shoving, wrestling game, a child's variation of hadaul.

Gersen selected what seemed to be a principal avenue and presently passed from under the first parasol to the shelter of a second, even loftier and more expansive, enclosing an enormous volume of cool air-space.

The avenue opened into a plaza surrounded by concrete-and-glass domes built in a style half-Darsh, half-Interworld Galactic. The largest of these housed the Chanseth Bank, the Miner's Investment Bank, the Grand Bank of Dar Sai, and a pair of hotels, the Sfennde Select and the Traveler's Inn. Three restaurants fronted the plaza: the Sfennde Garden, the Traveler's Inn Garden, and the Olander. The Sfennde Garden catered to a clientele Gersen could not immediately identify. The Traveler's Inn Garden, spreading haphazardly under lime, persimmon, and sweet amssus trees, served a variety of patrons: tourists, business travelers, miscellaneous wanderers and spacemen, a few white-robed Darsh. The Olander at the far side of the plaza catered only to the Darsh.

Of the hotels, the Sfennde Select seemed the most grand, the

most expensive, and presumably the most comfortable The Traveler's Inn, while perhaps more relaxed, seemed a trifle shabby Gersen once again inspected the folk in the Sfennde Garden They were a handsome people, dark-haired, with clear pallid olive complexions and regular features They wore formal garments of a style strange to Gersen, like the Sfennde Select itself they seemed incongruous to the surroundings of Dar Sai Gersen could more easily have imagined them at a fashionable resort on a remote world at a time either in the far past or far in the future

Intrigued, Gersen decided to take lodging at the Sfennde Select He crossed the plaza and sauntered through the garden res-

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taurant The patrons, pausing in their conversations, turned to watch him with a cool curiosity he found not altogether flattering

He entered the lobby, which under an oyster-white ceiling, occupied the entire ground floor From a central pool grew a tree with black and orange leaves, small birdlike creatures hopped through the branches, dived into the pool, fluttered once more aloft whistling soft flute-like tones The reception desk occupied an alcove to the side, Gersen approached The clerk, a sallow young man with an austere visage, turned Gersen a quick side-glance, then studiously focused his attention upon the ledger in which he had been making entries

Gersen said in a gentle voice, "At your convenience, please summon the reception clerk, I wish to engage a room, or, better, a suite "

The clerk spoke in an even monotone: "We are unable to offer accommodation, we are completely booked. Try the Traveler's Inn, or the Olander."

Gersen wordlessly turned away and departed the Sfennde Select The folk in the garden seemed not to notice him. He crossed the plaza to the Traveler's Inn, a hostelry with a character totally different from that of the Sfennde Select The Traveler's Inn had been constructed in the Darsh manner, with heavy reliance upon improvisational insights The three curving rows of parabolic arches, the eight intersecting domes, the rotundas, upper decks, and balconies had been assembled in a spirit of adventure and lent the edifice a definite flavor of plambosh. The entry led through thick walls into a lobby, practical rather than sumptuous At a circular reception desk worked a thin sandy-haired man with a thin jaw and long chin He greeted Gersen with a courteous if perfunctory salute "Your wishes, sir3"

"A suite, the best available I expect to be staying several days, perhaps a week, or even longer "

"I can suit you very well, sir I have in mind a fine airy bedroom with a sweeping view across the plaza There is a splendid lavatory,

a parlor carpeted in green frieze, and generally excellent furniture. If you wish to make an inspection, mount the staircase, turn right into the first corridor, and enter the blue door trimmed in black."

Gersen visited the rooms and found them to his taste. Returning to the reception desk, he paid over a week's rent to formalize his occupancy.

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The clerk was favorably impressed. "We are happy to secure your patronage, sir."

"I am reassured," said Gersen. "At the Sferinde they wanted nothing to do with me."

"No mystery there: the Sferinde is a Methlen resort; they cater to no one else."

Enlightenment came to Gersen. "So those are the Methlen. They seem quite exclusive."

"'Exclusive' is the proper word. If Holy Symas in all his splendor came down to the Sferinde with a retinue of double-winged mantics and trumpet-playing cherubs mounted on lions, they'd send the lot trooping across to the Traveler's. Expect nothing better of the Methlen."

The clerk, both voluble and alert, might prove a valuable source of information, reflected Gersen. He asked: "Why do they come to Dar Sai in the first place?"

"Some have business interests; others are sheer tourists. You'll often see a contingent out in Traveler's Garden inspecting the lower classes. Still, they're not vicious or even odious. Their wealth allows them to play at life; everything is a dramatic game. At Serjeuz they are all effete aristocrats, with the poor unwitting Darsh as clods and varlets." The clerk made a tolerant gesture. "Still, what of it all? I too am supercilious now and then."

"One would never believe it," said Gersen graciously.

"Oh, I have become easier over the years. Remember, I must deal with every lout and mooncalf who chooses to show me his face, just as I am doing now. For many years my nerves were like electric wires. Then I discovered the first axiom of human accord:

I accept each person on his own terms. I keep a close tongue in my head; I offer opinions only when so solicited. What a remarkable change! Dissension vanishes, novel facts emerge, digestion flows like a wide river."

"Your ideas are interesting," said Gersen. "I would like to discuss them later, but now I think I will try your restaurant."

"Very good, sir. I wish you a pleasant meal."

Gersen stepped into the garden, and selected a table with a view across the plaza. He touched a button and the tabletop became an illuminated display of the food and drink on order. A waiter stepped forward. Gersen pointed to one of the depicted items. "What is this?"

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"That is our 'Sunday Punch.' It is enlivened with three tots of Black Gadroon rum and a half gill of Secret Elixir."

"The day is still somewhat young. What is this?"

"That is a simple swizzle, prepared from fruits and pale elixirs."

"That sounds more practical. What is this?"

"That is 'tourist ahagaree,' especially modified to suit the off-world taste."

"And this?"

"Those are parboiled night-fish, fresh from the bogs."

"I will have simple swizzle, ahagaree, and a salad."

"At your order."

Gersen sat back in his chair and contemplated the surroundings. The plaza extended to a bank of trees with leaves of a rich nutmeg-brown; beyond rose the shafts of distant parasols. In certain areas veils of falling water obscured the view; in others he could see to the far edges of Serjeuz. Cosmopolitan architects, using standard materials and Darsh motifs, had created most of the structures around the plaza, with the notable exception of the Traveler's Inn, which seemed authentically Darsh.

The waiter wheeled up a trolley loaded with covered salvers. The ahagaree was placed on the table with flanking side dishes. To the left went the salad, to the right a beaker of "simple swizzle." The waiter withdrew. Gersen tasted with caution and found "tourist ahagaree" definitely more palatable than that served by Madame Tin tie.

Gersen ate a leisurely meal, then sat musing over a pot of tea. From his pocket he brought a memorandum prepared by Jehan Addels and submitted to him immediately before his departure from Aloysius. It started off briskly:

Kotzash Mutual is an operation formulated by an ingenious trickster with considerable financial expertise. Also evident is a cruel impudence and the utter absence of scruples one might expect in a deep-sea monster. The two gentlemen of

our recent acquaintance, taken in tandem, are reflected in the Kotzash charter as in a mirror. The charter reads, in part:

To ensure efficient and expeditious management the executive directorship shall be vested in that person or entity holding

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the largest number of shares. The second directorship shall be vested in that person or entity holding the second largest number of shares. The third directorship shall be vested in that person holding the third largest number of shares. In all cases, the minimum qualification shall be ownership of at least twenty-five percent of shares outstanding. Other shareholders shall vote in proportion to their holdings to elect an advisory council^ whose duty shall be to advise and inform the directorship in regard to efficient and profitable operation.

The directors, or their nominees, and the advisory council, shall meet at such time and place as may be designated by the executive director^ to consult and to direct the management of the syndicate. At such meetings each director shall vote in proportion to his number of shares. If any director or his nominee is absent from the meeting, the director, or director, present shall constitute a quorum.

You will observe that the executive director effectually controls the company, inasmuch as he can call meetings at the time and place of his choosing, no matter how inconvenient to the other directors and the advisory council.

Four thousand eight hundred twenty shares are in circulation; 2,411 shares constitutes a voting majority. The largest stockholder of record, according to the Interworld Agency is:

Ottile Panshaw  
The Dindar House  
Serjeuz, Dar Sai

holding 1,250 shares. Chanseth Bank (headquarters at Twanish, Methel, with a branch at Serjeux) holds 1,000 shares. A certain Nihel Cahous, oflnkin's Shade, Dar Sai, holds 600 shares. I attach a list of small holders, more or less complete.

The price per share, as currently listed by the LAES, is one cenrim per share. In short, the shares are worthless. The shares I have mentioned total 2,850. You currently hold 92. The remaining 1,878 shares are scattered among a hundred or more individuals, at almost every' shade of Dar Sai.

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Despite the almost negligible value of the shares, it is

interesting to note that Kotzash now possesses substantial assets, including control of a pair of subsidiaries: Hector Transit (which has recently collected a handsome insurance payment); and Didroxus Mining and Exploration. Kotzash would seem underpriced except for the fact that the executive (and single) director is Ottile Panshaw.

The situation has its interesting aspects, but I would not care to explore them at close range. I wish you good health and longevity, and urge caution upon you, both out of personal esteem and consideration of self-interest, since I would have to look long and far to find work as remunerative.

With my very best respects:

JA

Gersen put away the letter, leaned back in his chair and sat in profound cogitation. The way to Lens Larque-*led* through Ottile Panshaw, perhaps via Kotzash Mutual. At this moment the situation was even and serene, like a pond on a windless day. The great fish lurked hidden beneath glassy reflections. To force him to move, to lunge, to display himself, the water must be disturbed.

Out into the garden stepped the receptionist, to stand blinking this way and that. Gersen raised his hand; the receptionist approached: a wiry little man, sandy-haired, with a thin face and wise heavy-lidded brown eyes, either bow-legged or lame, so that he walked with a swaggering hop.

"Sit down," said Gersen. "May I offer you a 'Sunday Punch'? Or would you prefer something less conspicuous?"

"Thank you." The receptionist turned to the waiter. "I'll take a gill of that good Engelman Yellow." He turned back to Gersen. "You enjoyed your meal?"

"Yes indeed. The management seems to understand outworld tastes."

"They ought to, by this time. They've been at it for years."

"What of yourself? You're not native to Dar Sai."

"Certainly not. I was born at Svengay, on Caph TV. A lively little world; have you ever visited there?"

"No. My closest approach would be the Mizar system, or perhaps Dubhe. I'm not certain of the distances."

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"I see you've had your share of wandering among the stars. Where is your home, may I ask? Usually I can make a guess, but in your case I am baffled."

"I was born in a world you have never heard of. As a boy I was taken to Earth by my uncle."

"And where did you live on Earth?"

"We never stayed long in one place. I know London well, and San Francisco, Noumea, Melbourne—wherever my uncle chose to educate me." Gersen smiled faintly as he remembered the style of his uncle's instruction. "I am also well acquainted with Alphanor, and the Concourse in general. May I inquire your name? I am Kirth Gersen, as you know."

"I am Daswell Tippin, at your service: a person of no pretensions.

"Speaking of pretensions, I was interested to hear you speak of the Methlen. They are a people unfamiliar to me."

"They are a group of over-wealthy bashaws and not particularly interesting," said Tippin. "I seldom have dealings with them. Their money comes from duodecimates, and they are here principally to look after their interests. For all I know they are indeed glorious, superb, and exquisitely sensitive. Had I these attributes I might also avoid tourists, Darsh and other vulgarians."

"Do the Methlen themselves mine duodecimates?"

"Certainly not. Show one a shovel, he'd call it an implement. They buy, sell, deal in options, leases, futures, and all mining finance, and of course they all have vast investments."

"What of Kotzash Mutual? Was that a Methlen operation?"

Daswell Tippin darted Gersen a swift sharp glance, then gave a snort of disgust. "To the contrary. Kotzash Mutual was advertised as a counter to the Methlen: a way to beat them at their own game. It cost me six hundred good SVU."

"Then you must know Otille Panshaw."

"By sight, no more," said Tippin with a prim sniff. "He still keeps his office yonder under Skansel Shade."

"He's not considered a swindler and a scoundrel?"

"I've heard hard talk, but what can be proved? Nothing." Tippin drained his goblet and set it down with a thoughtful clink. Gersen raised his finger to the waiter. "Two more of the same, please."

"Thank you," said Tippin. "I seldom take drink hut today I find myself in the mood."

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"I enjoy your conversation," said Gersen. "The Kotzash affair

is intriguing in itself. Is the name of the robber generally known?"

Tippin looked right and left. "People use a dreadful name: Lens Larque, one of the famous 'Demon Princes.' "

Gersen nodded. "I know his reputation. He's Darsh, so I'm told."

Tippin again glanced right and left. "Apparently so: a Bugold rachepol.\* I don't like to use his name; it falters on my tongue. He is a trickster, with a humor like that of the devil Sclamoth, who puts the heads of sons in their mother's ovens."

"Come now," said Gersen lightly. "A name is no more than a word. Words are without substance."

"Wrong!" declared Tippin with intense fervor. "W^ords are what magic is made of! Have you not read Farsakar's Cantrip Mechanisms? No? Then you know nothing of words!"

Gersen, who lacked any large interest in the subject, made an offhand gesture. "We live in a world of solidities. I fear the man and his whip. Not the words 'Lens Larque' and ^Panak.' "

Tippin frowned down into his goblet. "Well, no great matter, one way or the other. He is human and a Darsh. How the Methlen would love to take him! He is their bugbear; he in turn bears the Methlen a grudge. Have you visited Methel?"

"Not yet."

"Twanish is their spaceport and first city'. The Methlen can't abide the odor of ahagarec and Darsh must keep to a special downwind quarter. Isn't this a strange and wonderful universe? I believe that I might enjoy another half gill of this excellent liquor."

Gersen gave an appropriate order to the waiter. "The Methlen lost nothing in the Kotzash calamity?"

"Nothing whatever. The Darsh and small speculators such as myself: we are the victims!"

"And Ottilie Panshaw neither lost nor gained?"

"I wouldn't know. He disappeared for months but now he is back in Serjeuz; I saw him only yesterday. He appears wan and unhealthy."

"Understandable, after such a catastrophe. What might be the value of your own Kotzash holdings?"

"RachepoL a person driven .iua\ friini his n,iti\ shade, an outcast, a homeless wanderer, more often than not :i cnmin>il.

"I own twenty shares. Twenty times zero is still zero."

Gersen leaned back in his chair, frowned up at the underside of the parasol. He reached in his pouch and brought out twenty SVU. "I have a foolish habit of speculation. I'll buy your shares, for an SVU apiece."

Tippin's thin jaw slackened. He frowned down at the certificates, then turned a suspicious side-glance toward Gersen. "Speculation usually has a basis of hope."

"Mine is based on caprice."

"You do not seem a capricious man."

"Suppose Lens Larque indemnified Kotzash I would profit."

"That is forlorn thinking, if ever I heard any."

"No doubt you're right." Gersen reached out to reclaim the money, but Tippin's skinny hand was there first. "Not so fast. Why shouldn't you enjoy your whims?"

"No reason whatever. Where are your shares?"

"Up in my rooms. I'll bring them to you at once." He hurried away and presently returned with the shares; money changed hands. "I have access to other Kotzash shares," said Tippin, "I'm not quite sure how many, but I'll also sell them at this price."

Gersen leaned back with a sour grin. "Be absolutely discreet! Don't tell anyone that an off-worlder is buying Kotzash shares. They'll suspect a swindle and raise their price. I won't buy and there'll be profit for no one. Do you understand this chain of events?"

"In every detail except one, which is why you are buying the shares—aside from caprice, of course."

"Caprice and, let us say, altruism."

Tippin leaned back with a morose sneer. "One is as plausible as the other. Please advance me some working capital. A hundred SVU will suffice for today. You will surely take all and any Kotzash shares at one SVU apiece?"

"Surely and definitely." Gersen produced the money. "One final stipulation: under no circumstances approach Ottile Panshaw!"

Tippin's eyes shifted. "His shares are as good as any."

"He owns more shares than I care to buy. Discretion is absolutely necessary. Do you agree to this?"

"Well, yes, of necessity. Still, I fail to understand—"

"Caprice "

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" 'Caprice' is a blanket which cannot cover every bed. I took you for a man fixed upon grim fact."

Gersen held up a packet of SVU notes "These are my facts, call them 'grim' if you like."

"You have made your point." Tippm rose to his feet. "I'll report back later today." He departed the garden, and at skipping trot set off across the plaza Summoning the waiter, Gersen paid his account "Where is Dmdar House2"

"Yonder, sir, under Skansel Shade. Notice the great dome lust left of the shaft2 That's Dmdar House."

Tippm had gone toward Skansel Shade. Gersen decided to follow.

From "The Darsh Habitat," by Stuart Sobek, in *Cosmopohs*

Dar Sai, hard by the sun Cora, is hot and and around the equatorial band, where the sands are rich with duodecimates Over the centuries a race of hardy men and women have learned tricks to defeat Cora's heat while mining wealth from the sands These are the Darsh a race of ten thousand oddities By day they enjoy the shelter of vast metal umbrellas which spill veils of water from their brims the famous "shades" of Dar Sai Unprotected out on the Wale a man will die of heat and sun-blister in minutes, under his "shade" he enjoys cool greenery and icy sherbets

The Darsh are not a merry folk, nor prone to philosophic insight, still, they concentrate on the essence of every instant, and display a curious propensity for enjoying that particular quality by experiencing its antithesis Their food is seasoned with vile condiments, so that they may better savor cool pure water, they drink offensive teas and beers if only to exemplify this typical perversity, which they value for its own sake

Their erotic relationships are of a quality to alarm placid dispositions, and apparently are based upon hatred and contempt, rather than mutual regard

Gersen passed under the water veil which separated Central Shade from Skansel Shade The flow, a drizzle of misty droplets, felt cool on his face and no more than dampened his garments He

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proceeded to the Skansel Plaza, under trees and foliage, past struc-

tures age-worn and shabby, in contrast to the cosmopolitan modernity under Central Shade The folk peering from the dumbles were urban Darsh, distinguished from desert Darsh by soft slippers, light robes, and a sallow undertone to their complexions, still with heavy noses, anvil jaws, and dangling jeweled ear-lobes

Gersen halted at the edge of Skansel Plaza, Tippm was nowhere visible A few assiduous tourists wandered among the shops and booths, buying curios from Darsh women with wooden faces and black mustaches, or doggedly drinking Darsh beer at outdoor places of refreshment All in all, thought Gersen, a quaint and picturesque scene, tainted only by the psychic proximity of Lens Larque

To the right rose Dmdar House a massive pile of low flat domes, intersecting in curving slanting arcades Across the second level a large sign read

THE MINING JOURNAL

Serjeuz, Dar Sai  
Comprehensive news of desert, mine, and shade

Ottile Panshaw maintained an office at Dmdar House Daswell Tippm had set off in this direction, while Gersen had no wish to confront Ottile Panshaw at this particular instant, it might be wise to check upon Tippin's reliability He sauntered up a ramp and into Dmdar House The foyer, paved with liver-colored tile and rank with a smoky odor, gave upon a pair of dim corridors

A flight of steps ascended to the upper levels

Gersen consulted the directory, Ottile Pamha'w, Mining ^eaifties and Leases, was designated as the occupant of Suite 103

At random Gersen chose one of the corridors and found a set of tall green doors numbered 100, 101, 102 At the door numbered 103, Gersen paused to listen He thought to hear a murmur of voices He put his ear to the panel Either the occupants had stopped speaking or the chamber was vacant

Gersen moved away, fearful of discovery Adjoining offices, so he noticed, were separated by foot-thick concrete walls there would be no eavesdropping into Ottile Panshaw's office, except through door or window.

Gersen departed Dmdar House At a nearby kiosk, almost concealed by the foliage of a kumquat tree, a squat old lady, with a

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bush of black hair and a remarkable mustache, sold sweetmeats, )ournals, maps, and general oddments. Gersen bought a copy of" the Mining Joumal and stood leaning negligently against the kiosk. To the wall were pasted advertising placards, one over the other, an accretion of years. The most recent read.

EXTRAVAGANZA OF TRICKS AND DANCERS

1. Panko Wapshot;

He dances a duel against the Four Armed Snaveler.

2. Bungles and Chelts:

A merry farce.

3. The Four Scorpions and the Drunken Snaveler:

See them at their tricks and pranks.

4. Miffet and his Wonderful Sand-machine:

A notable invention!

5. Other farces and displays. At Twinkner's Plaza, under Twinkner's Shade, on the 20th day of Dirdolio.

Another placard, tattered and faded, announced:

REMARKABLE DISPLAY OF SNAVELRY!

Presenting:

Whippity Ticket and the Inept Bungles  
Jumping Jipsum and the Unwilling Chelts  
Caliogo and Offish

The mad khoontz catches an imbecile snaveler.  
With other amusing tricks, poses,  
and acrobatic feats.

Toward the front a glossy new placard, printed in green and yellow, announced-

GRAND HADAUL

at Dinkelstown

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Daffleday,  
the 10th day oiMirmone.

Gersen's attention was distracted b\ the appearance of a Methlen girl coming from the direction of Central Shade Gersen watched her first with detachment, then interest, then Fascination Loose black curls framed her face, which at the moment was intent and preoccupied, but which on other occasions would seem to be a vivacious instrument of expression.

She wore a knee-length gown of a dark green stuff, and carried a large gray envelope. She moved with a (auntv carelessness which, with her pale, faintly dusky skin, short straight nose, and delicate chin, suggested a background of heedless privilege. To Gersen she exactly represented that existence from which his circumstances excluded him and which occasionally stirred bittersweet longings in his consciousness. . . . Passing the kiosk, the girl turned Gersen an incurious glance, then ran up the ramp and into Dmdar House

Gersen watched her out of sight, her figure-slender and shapely, without soft adiposity, was most appealing. He heaved a heartfelt sigh and gave his attention to the Mmmg Journal

'[ 'en minutes passed. The Methlen girl emerged from Dmdar House and marched down the ramp. Meeting Gersen's gaze, she turned him a cool stare, elevated her chin a trifle, and set off in the direction of Central Shade.

Gersen smiled his crooked smile, folded the )ournal, and once more entered Dmdar House. Again he approached Suite 10^, as before, he seemed to hear subdued voices, and then the scrape ot furniture. Gersen retreated quickly down the hall and took refuge in the shadows behind a buttress. From Suite 103 carne two men One was Daswell Tippm, the other a tall Darsh with a square hard-featured face, a strong physique, and long earlobes Instead ofrohe and thabbat he wore a conventional nutmeg-brown tunic with pale blue breeches and black ankle boots.

The two departed Dmdar House. After a moment Gersen rol- lowed out into Skansel Plaza, but they had entered one of the tree- shrouded byways and could not be seen.

Gersen returned the way he had come back through the veil of mist and out upon Central Plaza. He crossed to the Traveler's Inn and glanced into the lobby Daswell Tippin was not at the desk.

Gersen went out into the garden. The tune was nou middle

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afternoon. The air felt warm and heavy; falling water created a soporific murmur. Those folk still abroad moved at a languid pace, and these were for the most part tourists. Gersen seated himself at a table beside the plaza. Suddenly, there was much to think about. He brought out Addels' letter, referred to the text, and copied off a list:

Ottile Penshaw  
Chanseth Bank  
Nihel Cahouse.  
Others.....

1250  
1000  
. 600  
1970

Gersen performed a few calculations. Were he to acquire all the Chanseth Bank stock and all that owned by Nihel Cahouse, he could claim the executive directorship of Kotzash, although he would still fall short of a majority holding.

Jehan Addels' candid avowals of cowardice amused Gersen. Smiling, he looked up and once again met the eyes of the Methlen girl, by chance passing in front of the Traveler's Garden. Gersen could not fail to notice her look of cleanliness and perfect health. She also seemed self-willed and haughty. Compressing her mouth, she darted Gersen a sidewise glance of annoyance and continued on her way. Gersen's smile became a lame grimace. Glumly he looked after her. Delightful and superb, thought Gersen, if somewhat irascible. Through whim or curiosity she looked back over her shoulder; noting Gersen's continued attention, she tossed her head in contempt and marched off across the plaza. "My status, in this case, is not at all in doubt," reflected Gersen.

Looking beyond the girl he saw the facade of the Chanseth Bank: one of the more splendid structures of Central Plaza. The girl entered the bank and was gone from view, but Gersen already had refocused his mind. The Chanseth Bank held one thousand shares of Kotzash Mutual stock. Time might well be of the essence, now that Daswell Tippin, for better or worse, had become his associate. Gersen rose to his feet and set off across the plaza.

A formal garden flanked the approach to the Chanseth Bank;

four tall pointane trees, each a perfect teardrop, stood surrounded by a low hedge of russet crackleberrv. Gersen passed under an arch into a large cool area paved with blue tile. To his right a balustrade of carved alabaster enclosed the working area; to the left spiral col-

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umns supported a screen set with crystal tenses. The far end of the chamber was a lounge area, where sat half a dozen Methlen of various ages, including the girl Gersen previously had noted, now in company with an older man. Observing Gersen, her jaw dropped in surprise; she turned quickly away and spoke earnestly to her companion.

Gersen smiled sourly and went to the counter. A minute passed, then another. Gersen became restless. He spoke to a clerk. "This is the Chanseth Bank, I presume."

The clerk responded in a neutral voice. "Quite so."

"Who is the managing director?"

"May I inquire your business?"

"I want to discuss a financial transaction."

"Our business is almost wholly commercial. Since we are affiliated with no other bank we cash neither checks nor credit vouch-

ers.

"My business is of some importance. Be so good as to summon your managing director."

"He is that grandee\* yonder, the Gentle Adario Chanseth. At the moment you will notice that he is importantly occupied."

"Oh? That young lady is a person of distinction?"

"That is his daughter, the Gentle Jerdian Chanseth. You may take up your business as soon as he is disengaged."

"My business transcends idle chatter with a girl," declared Gersén. He left the counter and approached the lounge. Two tall men, displaying identical bristling mustaches, came to meet him. Each seized one of his arms and marched him swiftly toward the entrance.

"Here, here!" Gersén complained. "What are you up to?"

"Get out and stay out," said one of the men.

"Never molest a Methlen lady; it will go poorly with you!" said the other.

"I have molested no one!" Gersén protested. "You are making

\*The Methlen term *ii-nii-w* signifies a status considerably more elevated than that connoted by the term "gentleman" in English implies dignity, punctilio, exclusiveness, social poise, and an unthinking mastery of Methlen etiquette. The Methlen gentleman is so fastidious that any Methlen rank-and-file, on even terms with another, hence they use a single honorific here rendered by "the Gentleman." In actual fact social distinctions are minimal, reflecting factors far too numerous and diverse to be considered here.

Parenthetically, it may be noted that the Methlen are highly susceptible to ridicule and humiliation. Their civil and criminal penalties reflect this sensitivity.

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a mistake." He pulled back and resisted their impetus, but they seized him by the back of the trousers, frog-marched him to the entrance, and sent him flying into one of the crackleberry hedges.

Gersén rose to his feet, brushed leaves and trash from his garments, and returned into the bank.

The two gentlemen, astonished by his persistence, stepped forward. Gersén said crossly, "Please stand back. My business is with

the Gentle Adano Chanseth, not yourselves." He sidestepped the two men and approached Chanseth, who had turned away from the Gentle Jerdian.

"Well then, what is the meaning of this affair?"

Gersen produced a business card, which he gave to Chanseth.

"At your convenience, I would like to discuss some business with you."

" 'The Honorable Kirth Gersen,' " read Chanseth. " 'President, Cooney's Bank, Rath Eileann, Aloysius ' " He gave a dubious grunt "What is your business with me?"

"Must we discuss it here? Things go differently at Cooney's Bank. If you came to discuss a business matter with me I would not have you thrown into the hedge "

"There has obviously been a mistake," said Chanseth in a frosty voice. "If you will be good enough to elucidate even an inkling of your business, I can at least inform you as to whether I am the proper person to consult."

"As you wish," said Gersen. "Frankly, I am here to solicit your advice. My bank has substantial interests in the metallurgical field and we are hoping to establish branches both here and at Twamsh. We are interested in duodecimos and duodecimate stock."

"Let us discuss this matter privately." Chanseth led him through a plasmatic film into an office. He indicated a chair of bent whitewood "Sit, if you will." Chanseth himself remained standing.

Ignoring Chanseth's rather pointed rigidity, Gersen relaxed into the chair. In a casual voice he said, "The Methlen method of greeting a business associate is definitely unique."

Chanseth responded in a measured tone. "My daughter reported that you had eyed her in an impudent manner, 'grinning and leering,' so she put it, not once but several times, after following her to Skanse) Shade and back, then here to the bank. I therefore ordered you ejected "

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"If anyone other than your daughter had made the complaint," said Gersen, "I would think her vain and giddy."

Chanseth, clearly uninterested in Gersen's opinions, gave a grim nod. "This is a barbaric world, never doubt it. The Darsh are an indescribably vulgar race, they are brutal and violent as well. You may consider Ser)euze peaceful and orderly, so it is, but only because the Methlen tolerate nothing else. We are on the alert for impudence, and your conduct, whatever its nature, incurred a quick rebuke. There let the matter rest. Please explain your reasons for consulting me."

"Certainly. The collecting and marketing of Dar Sai duodeci-

mates is evidently an inefficient process. I suspect that these operations could be rationalized, perhaps through a central agency, to the benefit of everyone."

"Your assessment is correct," said Chanseth. "The duodecimate business is unstructured and disorderly. But the miners are Darsh, and not disposed to disciplined conduct."

"Still," said Gersen, "they would appreciate the convenience of a single stable agency. Perhaps a cooperative system could be evolved."

Chanseth gave a bark of humorless laughter. "If you wish to be assaulted, broach this topic to a Darsh miner. Kotzash Mutual was just such a syndicate. The Darsh miners took stock certificates for their ore, the warehouse was robbed, and the certificates are now worthless "

"I've heard something of this," said Gersen. "If Kotzash were revived and in some way made good outstanding claims—"

"A very expensive procedure."

"Still, I may take up a few shares of Kotzash. At the very least I would gain a presence in the community."

Chanseth nodded thoughtfully. Walking behind his desk he seated himself. "Possibly so. I hold a few shares—a thousand in fact—which I'll sell at a fraction of their face value."

Gersen gave an indifferent shrug. "I'd have no need for more than a few hundred, if that many. What is the board price on these shares?"

"I'm not sure. Rather low, I daresay "

"No doubt. Well, I'll take up your shares at a strictly nominal price. Fifty svu should be adequate."

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Chanseth raised his eyebrows. "Are you serious? For a thousand shares, each on the face worth ten ounces of duodecimate?"

"Ten ounces of nonexistent duodecimate. Each is worth exactly nothing."

"Quite so, unless someone undertook to indemnify shareholders. Yourself, for instance."

"You must evaluate that possibility for yourself."

"Still, fifty svu is a trifling sum."

Gersen heaved a sad sigh. "I will pay a hundred svu and no more."

Chanseth went to a cabinet, brought out a folder, which he placed before Gersen. "There are your shares. They are to the interest of the bearer, no transfer document is necessary."

Gersen paid over a hundred SVU. "Money thrown away, of course."

"I agree."

"How did you come into their possession?"

Chanseth grinned- "They cost me nothing whatever. I traded them for an item equally worthless: shares in a defunct mining corporation."

"That would of course be Didroxus Mining and Exploration?"

Chanseth eyed him sharply. "How did you know?"

"The LAES lists Didroxus Mining as a Kotzash subsidiary, but indicates no Didroxus assets."

"Correct. The only asset is mining rights on Shanitra, the Methel moon."

"That would seem a valuable concession."

Chanseth showed his cool smile. "Shanitra has been explored a hundred times over; it is no more than a lump of pumice. I traded nothing for nothing."

"Your trade brought you a hundred SVU. You're a clever man."

Chanseth again showed a brief wintry smile. "I'll offer you some free advice worth considerably more. If you envision a branch of your bank here-or anywhere else on Dar Sai, for that matter-reject the notion. There is no business for you. Our trade is almost entirely Methlen; you'd get none of that, and the Darsh rarely use banks."

"I'll keep your advice in mind." Gersen rose to his feet. "Convey my respects to your daughter; a pity that she suffered distress on my account. On the first occasion I'll personally make amends."

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"Please do not trouble yourself," said Chanseth. "She has already forgotten the incident. In any event we very shortly return to Methel." He performed a curt bow. "Good day to you, sir."

Gersen departed the office. In the lounge the Gentle Jerdian sat with a friend, nibbling confections. Gersen nodded politely but she stared unseeingly past him.

Gersen went out upon the plaza. Not far away a dusty blue dendron, spiked with white and red blossoms, arched over an outdoor cafe. Gersen found a table in a shadowed niche and was served

a pot of tea.

He sat considering the possible phases of the future. They made a bewildering tangle: a maze, in fact, at whose center crouched a sinister figure. Gersen smiled at the extravagance of the image. Lens Larque crouched somewhere, certainly. He might be that bulky man munching a custard bun across the cafe; Gersen had no way of knowing. Like all the Demon Princes, Lens Larque concealed his public identity. Through the maze led a single thread, of several strands: Kotzash Mutual Syndicate, Ottile Panshaw, Dicroxus Mining, and the Shanitra exploration and development leases (why had Panshaw troubled to make the trade?); and now, conceivably, Daswell Tippin (why had Tippin, almost instantly and despite Gersen's admonitions, gone directly to the offices of Ottile Panshaw? Who was that quasi-Darsh Tippin had met there?).

The next twist along the "Kotzash" strand would seem to lead to Nihel Cahouse of Inkin's Shade, who owned six hundred Kotzash shares. How had Cahouse gained so large an interest, equivalent to three tons of black sand? No matter what his methods, it would be wise to reach him in advance of Daswell Tippin, or anyone else. ... At the thought of Tippin, Gersen made a restless movement. The enlistment of Tippin might well have been a serious mistake. Originally, he had seemed a useful agent for the collection of small holdings, but Tippin might now have his sights set on larger transactions.

Who then was Cahouse and where was Inkin's Shade?

A shop sign nearby caught his eye:

THE DESERT TRADING POST

Equipment for the Tourist  
Travel Information

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Expeditions and Excursions,  
arranged and conducted.  
Witness an authentic hadaul  
in safety and comfort.

Gersen went to look into the front window. The display featured articles designed to expedite desert travel: motor bubbles, skimmers, Darsh-type robes, insulated boots and undersuits, air-conditioning packs, and like merchandise. A rack of books, maps, and pamphlets was flanked by a pair of easels. The first supported a poster entitled:

NOTICE TO TOURISTS

with an appended text. The second displayed a poster printed in dramatic green and yellow:

GRAND HADAUL

at Dinkelstown  
Daffleday,  
the 10th day of Mirmone.

One of the great games of the year!  
An event not to be missed!

Travel in comfort with our experienced guide,  
and witness this typical Darsh spectacle.

Gersen entered the shop and bought a book entitled The Clans  
of Dar Sai, a folio of maps, and a pamphlet Guide to the Shades

He took his purchases back to the table under the tree. He  
spread out the map: a strip three feet long by a foot wide, tinted  
various colors over an underlying base tone of sandy yellow. The  
limiting areas, at top and bottom, tinted green, were labeled BOG  
and were otherwise featureless. The four principal towns: Serjeuz,  
Wabber's Fountain, Dinkelstown, and Belfeser, were indicated by  
black stars, smaller settlements by large black dots, isolated shades  
by small dots. Places of historical interest, tourist spectacles, and  
the like—"Strangler's Gantry," "The Tournaline Towers," "Scor-  
pion Farm," "Bagshilly Plain," "The Skutch"—were marked by

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crosses or dotted outlines. Tinted areas, some large, some small,  
indicated clan domains. Gersen located "Bugold Region" and  
"Bugold Shade" somewhat to the north and two thousand miles  
east of Serjeuz. . Looking up from the map Gersen noticed Das-  
well Tippin hopping and trotting across the plaza with a look of  
worried concentration on his face. His eyes darted right and left,  
but he failed to notice Gersen in the shadows. With interest and  
amusement Gersen saw him enter the Chanseth Bank. The inter-  
view between Tippin and Adano Chanseth would gratify neither.  
Keeping half an eye on the bank, Gersen folded the map and looked  
into The Clam of Dar Sai. The first chapter outlined the early his-  
tory of Dar Sai: the building of the shades, the formation of the  
clans. The second, third, and fourth chapters described the typical  
circumstances of a clan, its interpersonal relationships, procreative  
habits, caste distinctions, and recreations. In the fifth chapter, the  
game hadaul was analyzed at length, the author tending to the belief  
that the games of any specific society could be viewed as a micro-  
cosm of the society itself. . . . From the bank came Daswell Tippin,  
his gait perceptibly less brisk. He looked nervously in all directions,  
walked listlessly to the care, and seated himself with his back to  
Gersen, not ten yards away.

A waiter approached, Tippin gave a terse order, and was served  
a small glass of carbonated punch, which he sipped as if it were a  
medicinal draught. With a nervous gesture he reached into the  
pocket of his jacket and brought out a sheaf of papers, Gersen saw  
them to be certificates very like those he had bought from Chan-  
seth. Tippin counted through the sheaf with fidgeting fingers.

Gersen rose to his feet, walked up behind Tippin, reached over  
his shoulder, and took the certificates from Tippin's suddenly pal-

sied hand.

"Good work," said Gersen. "I'll take these now and pay you tonight. Carry on." He returned to his seat.

Tippin uttered a small choked protest. He half rose from his seat, then slowly subsided.

Gersen counted the certificates— six of twenty shares, five often shares and eight singles— 178 in all.

Tippin watched him wordlessly a moment, then slowly turned and hunched over his drink, the curve of his back eloquent of angry reproach.

Gersen added up his shares. 1,112 plus 178 1,290. He now

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commanded sufficient shares to qualify as a director— even executive director if Otile Panshaw continued to hold only 1,250 shares— not a realistic hope. . . At Tippin's table, appearing as if from nowhere, stood the tall Darsh Gersen had noticed at Dmdar House. He dropped into a seat beside Tippin, who spoke a single terse sentence. The Darsh uttered a disgusted expletive and glanced in contempt toward the bank. He put a brusque question to Tippin, who gave his head a helpless shake and offered a placatory<sup>7</sup> explanation, which prompted the Darsh to another curse. Tippin made a meek comment which failed to ameliorate the situation. The Darsh jumped to his feet and strode off across the plaza. Tippin watched him go, then looked sidewise toward Gersen, who returned a cold stare. Tippin hopped over to Gersen's table. Attempting a sedate and businesslike manner, he settled into a chair. "Those shares were not intended for you."

"Who were they intended for?"

"No matter. You must return them."

"Small chance of that. I'll pay you your money if you want it."

"I want the shares. I had taken them in trust for that Darsh gentleman."

"Who is he? What is his sudden interest in Kotzash shares?"

"His name is Bel Ruk. I don't know why you want the shares, and I don't know why he does."

"He wants them only because you told him that I wanted them—exactly contrary to my instructions."

Tippin twisted his mouth in a wincing grimace. "No matter. Those shares are mine and I want them back."

"You bought them for me and I'm keeping them. Do you want your money?" Gersen counted out 180 SVU. "There it is."

Tippin picked up the money with indecisive fingers. "This imposes a great inconvenience upon me."

"You shouldn't have gone to Dmdar House. You made the inconvenience for yourself."

Tippin grunted. "I was at one time Panshaw's associate; that's the truth of the matter. I have no choice in what I do."

"Bel Ruk also works with Ottile Panshaw3"

"I suppose that's the way of it."

"With'or'for'3"

" 'For.' That's my guess."

"How many more shares can you locate3"

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"None' I am finished with this business!" Tippin jumped to his feet. Like a nervous bird he peered through the foliage as a party of young Methlen settled at a nearby table. He looked down at Gersen. "Do you know what the Darsh mean by 'rachepoP"

"I've heard the word."

"It means 'crop-ear'—that's the same as 'outcast.' Bel Ruk is a rachepol He has no conscience. He is a skillful killer. If you value your life, leave Ser|euz." Tippin departed the cafe, and limped at best speed across the plaza.

Gersen returned to his reading. A few minutes later one of the Methlen at the nearby table jumped erect and approached Gersen:

a tall young man with fine black eyebrows, a long nose, and a spare patrician cast of countenance. "Sir' A moment of your time!"

"Certainly," said Gersen. "What do you want3"

"I am puzzled by your conduct. I request an explanation."

"There is little to explain. My conduct is as you see. I sit here drinking tea and reading this book, which I bought at the shop yonder. It describes the habits of the Darsh."

"That is not the conduct I had in mind."

"Please explain."

"I refer, in essence, to your traffic m Kotzash shares."

"The basic principle is: "Buy low, sell high.' Why not make inquiries of the Gentle Adano Chanseth3 He is skilled in these affairs and can give you far more information than I."

The young man seemed not to hear. "I am concerned with your acts of misrepresentation and to the suspicions which you have generally aroused."

Gersen, smiling, shook his head. "I can't go into such vague matters. We would sit for hours defining our terms, and I for one have not so much time to spare."

The young man's voice rose in pitch. "You have instigated an odd series of events. I want to know what more you intend."

"For a fact, I don't know. And now, please excuse me " Gersen returned to his reading. The Methlen took a half step forward. Gersen sighed and began to gather his books.

A second person approached the table. "Aldo, the matter is really of no consequence. Come, we want to discuss the excursion."

Looking sidewise Gersen saw a lower torso clad in soft dark green; raising his eyes, he discovered the upper parts and face of Jerdian Chanseth.

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Aldo, never taking his eyes from Gersen, said crisply "This man is devious for a fact' I find him barely civil."

"Well what of that? Things are as they are, do you hope to alter his nature?"

"Even andropes can be guided, perhaps I should have a word with the constables A prod with the truncheon might do wonders for this fellow's disposition."

"Or it might make him more surly than ever Leave him to crouch in his lair why concern yourself?"

"It is not so simple His manipulations already are a source of trouble to your father "

"Well then, let me talk to him Perhaps he will conduct himself gracefully "

"I think not This is a gentleman's affair "

Jerdian's voice took on an edge. "Aldo, stand aside, or better, go back to the table "

"I will wait here," said Aldo with glacial dignity.

Gersen had followed the conversation with only mild interest As Jerdian dropped into the seat vacated by Tippm, he rose politely, once more seated himself "This is an unexpected pleasure May I offer you tea? I am Kirth Gersen, by the way "

"No tea, thank you Why are you here at Serjeuz?"

"I could give you a dozen answers," said Gersen "I travel a great deal I like to explore odd corners of the galaxy I am interested in exotic peoples like the Darsh and the Methlen, I consider them picturesque."

The Gentle Jerdian's lips curled Gersen could not decide whether she was irked or amused "You are evading me "

"Not at all There is far too much to tell Send this fellow away and we will spend the rest of the day together, and perhaps the evening as well "

Aldo stiffened and drew back "I have never heard such astounding nonsense' Jerdian, come along, this man's impertinence is tiresome "

Jerdian turned him an expressionless glance and Aldo became abruptly silent Jerdian spoke to Gersen in a silken voice- "You have represented yourself as a banker "

"True "

"You are like no banker I have ever known."

"Your instincts are sound The usual banker is diffident and

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ruthless only when the odds are on his side. What, in fact, is your opinion of me?"

"If anything, I think of you as the man who has just swindled my father "

Gersen raised his eyebrows. "Odd' Your father was sure that he had exploited my innocence "

Aldo cried out. "These remarks verge upon slander! They will bring you to grief"

Gersen said to Jerdian: "Why not ask this gentleman to leave us? He is like a raven at the feast"

Jerdian looked thoughtfully toward Aldo, then returned to Gersen. "Unless you care to speak candidly, our conversation has come to an end "

Gersen made a contrite gesture. "Perhaps I've been evasive, but I stand in awe of Aldo His threats and interjections inhibit me."

Jerdian turned suddenly "Aldo, please go back to the table For a fact, it is hard to think with you looming over my shoulder "

"As you wish " Aldo stalked away. Gersen signaled the waiter "Bring us a new pot of tea, or better, a flask of Spondent Flux and two glasses "

Jerdian drew back, disassociating herself from Gersen's conviviality- "I don't care for anything In a moment I must get back to my friends "

"Why bother to come at all? You evidently find me detestable "

The remark amused Jerdian, she laughed and became more winsome than ever Gersen felt a sudden throb To love Jerdian Chanseth, and with her correspondingly in love, would be a fascinating circumstance

Jerdian, perhaps sensing something of Gersen's mood, spoke in a carefully neutral voice "I will explain my interest, it is perfectly simple. The Kotzash scandal involved the notorious Lens Larque. When we hear the word 'Kotzash' we are instantly on edge "

"Understandable."

"Then why are you buying Kotzash shares?"

"It's a tactical matter, and not at all discreditable If I explained to you, you'd tell your father, who would tell a dozen others, and I would be inconvenienced "

Jerdian looked off across the plaza. Then she said "And you are not connected with Lens Larque?"

"Definitely not If I were, I'd hardly advertise the fact "

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Jerdian gave her shoulders a half-frivolous, half-disdainful shrug "You seem very much aware of him."

"So do you "

"For good reason He is our local bugbear In fact, we have had an unpleasant little adventure involving Lens Larque Of course he is Darsh of the deepest dye and rache-pol to boot Do you know that word?"

"It means 'outcast' "

"Something of the sort The Darsh make a great ceremony and cut off one of the culprit's ears "

"I cut off the other," said Gersen

Jerdian jerked her head around "What did you say?"

"What was the offense that cost Lens Larque his ear?"

Jerdian put on a face of cool dignity. Lens Larque's offense evidently was one which polite Methlen girls considered either unimaginable or unspeakable "I am not acquainted with the details And still you have given me no information."

Gersen picked up his goblet and squinted through the facets of the crystal "With the representative of Chanseth Bank, I am close-mouthed and evasive With someone whose personality could be considered charming, stimulating, even endearing, I'd have many things indeed to tell "

Jerdian again gave her frivolous shrug "You are definitely impertinent, and very forward "

Her voice, Gersen noted, seemed neither peremptory nor biting. She added thoughtfully "I had reason to complain of you earlier today "

"You misunderstood everything I looked up from a letter which amused me, and saw you, but I neither 'grimaced' nor 'leered ' Then I saw the Chanseth Bank and went there to transact business, but instead was ejected "

Jerdian's dignity had almost evaporated "Well then, what of Dmdar House? Surely you followed me?"

"How is that possible? I was there before you arrived."

"Well-true. But even now you are expressing yourself in personal terms "

"I can't help but notice that you are fascinating to look at, and pleasant to talk to Shall I go on?"

"Please do not trouble yourself "Jerdian rose to her feet "You are indeed a strange man. I can't decide what to make of you "

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Gersen stood erect "On better acquaintance you may be less skeptical."

"Our acquaintance has no prospects- If you are interfering with Lens Larque, he will have you killed "

"He is not yet aware of me. There is still time "

"Not really I'm returning to Methel directly after the Dmkelstown hadaul Are you still likely to be alive?"

"I hope so Will I see you before then?"

"I don't know"

Jerdian went back to her table. Aldo and her other friends had been covertly watching, at once they put questions, to which Jerdian gave absentminded responses. Presently the group went off toward the Sfennde Select Hotel.

Cora slid down Dar Sai's chalky blue sky, trembled on the horizon, became red and oblate, then quickly disappeared, leaving a lemon-

yellow afterglow Hundreds of miles to the north and south, high flakes of cirrus glinted vermilion, then purple, then faded from sight With the coming of dusk the desert air cooled The Serjeuz water veils dwindled to random drops and the evening breeze moved through the domes without impediment With the cessation of falling water, Serjeuz seemed oddly silent, and the white-robed Darsh moving across the plaza were altered into mysterious creatures of intrigue

One of the white-robed shapes was Gersen, carrying a soft bag containing what might be considered the tools of his trade As he passed from Central Shade into the even dimmer precincts of Skansel Shade, he reflected that if Jerdian Chanseth could be with him now, and know his various accoutrements, she would consider him a strange man indeed

Just as well that Jerdian was somewhere else, thought Gersen, presumably safe in the polite environs of the Sfennde Select Hotel Just as well, or even better, if he could put her definitely out of his mind By no reach of the imagination could she ever become part of his precarious life, for which she herself predicted a sudden end

The idea at once saddened him and keyed him to his highest level of competence He approached Dmdar House alert as a hunting beast, with all his faculties, conscious and subconscious, monitoring the environment

He halted in the shadows beside the vendor's kiosk The pro-

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priestess had gone home, leaving her wares and coin dish exposed for the convenience of anyone who might choose to serve himself.\*

Gersen waited. Five minutes passed; Dindar House showed only three lights, on spikes atop the three highest domes. Through the night air sounds arrived from far distances, clear as the small voices issuing from an earphone. He heard a distant raucous outcry, quickly stilled, and somewhat closer the electronic din of Darsh music: a mindless thumping, twanging, and wailing. These sounds only emphasized the quiet of Dindar House.

Gersen left the deep shadow. Quiet and soft as a wisp of smoke he slid up the ramp and into the entrance hall. Here again he paused to listen, but now the outside sounds were muffled, and nothing could be heard but dead silence.

He flicked on a flashlight, swept it up the hall, and saw, as before, moldy concrete, heavy archways, old varnished wood. He dimmed the light to a glimmer, walked on long soft strides down the hall to the tall green door opening into the offices of Ottilie Panshaw.

Carefully he examined doorway, door, lock, and latch in a ten-drill of light but found no sign of alarm or monitor. He tested the

door; unlike most Darsh doors this was securely bolted, with a lock proof against manipulation. Significant, thought Gersen. Locks were discovered only in conjunction with objects of value.

\*The Darsh are not prone to petty theft, indeed, away from the towns, thievery is virtually unknown. Murder face-to-face and robbery, especially in connection with duodccimates, is rather more common, but still considered a vile crime. The perpetrator, when apprehended, is first whipped raw, then chained out among the rocks, where he becomes prey to the lancilark, gnaw-bugs, and scorpions. The crime considered most vile by the Darsh is the then: either of another's desert-roller, or his water supply. The penalties entail flogging, then staking out at the bottom of the town's cesspit.

^s a note of possible interest, the offense which occasioned Lens Larque's election from Bugold Shade was the theft of an air conditioner from the corpse of a man who had drunkenly fallen into poisonous cactus. The crime was considered repulsive but not superlatively heinous. Husse Bugold, as he was then known, suffered the loss of an earlobe and was "hipped away" from Bugold Shade.

As another sidelight it might be noted that Jerdian Chanseth, lacking exact information as to the nature of Husse Bugold's transgression, automatically imputed to him that sin regarded most reprehensible by the Methlens, i.e., unnatural sexual conduct, activity' which the Darsh take for granted hence her reaction. LO Gersen's question

In the full scope of comparative criminology is morbidly fascinating, and is discussed not only in Book 11 of Baron Bodissey's monumental exegesis of the human condition, but also in more specialized works, such as Karen Miller's Intelplawtui-y Cii/m Cansef and Cofiwjttvvie^ or Theodore Pedersen's Peuanf Souh Richard Peitu, in Pt'opifi of the CoranM, discusses the almost polar sociologies of Methel and Dar Sai at length.

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He retreated to the entry ramp, and once again appraised the surroundings. Across the plaza a pair of beer gardens, shrouded under foliage, showed clusters of green and white lamps. No one walked the plaza. Gersen jumped up on the slanting face of a buttress, edged over a dome and down upon another curved surface which extended past a line of windows. Gauging distances, Gersen identified that window opening into Ottile Panshaw's office, and approached along a convenient slope of the dome. Unlike other

windows of the row, a grating of vandalloy tubing guarded the opening, which was additionally closed off by a pane of heavy glass.

There would be no easy entry here.

The room was dark within. Gersen tried to illuminate the interior with his flashlight, but was baffled by reflections.

He retreated a few steps to the next window; this open to the night, careless whether someone might or might not intrude. Gersen flashed his light within, discovering what might be the headquarters of an import agent. This office and that of Ottile Panshaw at one time had functioned as a suite. A case of books, pamphlets, and samples blocked off the interconnecting door.

Gersen stepped into the office, slid aside the case, and examined the door. It hung on hinges and opened toward Gersen. He turned the knob and pulled. The door held firm, secured by a bolt in Ottile Panshaw's office.

Gersen gave his attention to the hinges. They were interlocking and semiconcealed, impossible to disassemble without destroying the door.

Gersen examined the door itself. Lock-picking was not one of his special skills, still, he felt a modest confidence in his abilities. But there might be an easier way.

The door opened toward him. The bolt or latch therefore was only as secure as the fastening holding it to the door. Gersen put his knee to the wall, gripped the doorknob, turned, pulled, exerting leg-force with his knee.

A slight splintering sound, and the door opened. Gersen allowed it to move only a few inches. He ran his torch around the slit, seeking broken alarm wires. None were visible, which meant little: Gersen knew a dozen invisible methods to guard a door. He also had encountered chambers charged with lethal gas, to smother the unwary intruder. Gersen sniffed the air but discovered only the rancid scent of long human occupancy. Unlikely, in any event, that

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Ottile Panshaw as a regular precaution would poison the air of his office. He eased open the door and flashed his light around the room. He saw only what he had expected: greenish brown walls, a desk, table, three chairs, cabinet, and an incongruously expensive communicator.

Gersen worked deftly and quickly. He inserted a trifle of receptor tape into the angle between door-molding and wall, where it became for all practical purposes invisible. Using a pressure canister he sprayed a trail of conductive film from the tape around the door casing into the adjoining office and around the walls to the window. Returning to Panshaw's office he repaired the bolt he had broken loose as best he could, reinserting the fasteners into their sockets. To casual inspection the bolt and its socket were once more

securely attached.

Gersen now turned his attention to the desk. On the top lay a folder marked Impo'ftant, Confidential, which seemed to contain a sheaf of papers. Gersen thought it a somewhat ostentatious invitation, and by extension of logic, a generalized danger signal. Prudent withdrawal became instantly necessary. Gersen's sensory apparatus, tensioned to an almost painful level, at this same instant received a signal. Gersen paused not a second to analyze the warning. He slid through the door, held the bolt hack against its spring tension, closed the door, whereupon the bolt struck into its socket, and the door was apparently secure. Gersen pushed the display cases back into place, then went to the door into the hall. He placed his ear against the panel: no sound. He eased the unlocked door open and at once he heard the shuffle of footsteps along the hall. He closed the door, shot home the latch-bolt, and ran to the window. Standing in the shadows he peered out, and there, at the back of the dim area below, stood a man in a dark cape and a soft slouch hat. Gersen thought to recognize the posture and dimensions of Ottilie Panshaw.

Gersen drew back out of range of Panshaw's vision, should he be wearing night-glasses. He touched his detector to the conductive trail he had sprayed upon the wall and turned high the volume. For a moment he heard nothing. Then: the sound of moving hardware, the creak of the opening door. Again silence, as the room was surveyed. Next footsteps and then a soft voice, apparently speaking into a transceiver: "Nothing. No one here."

Soft and faint in response came Panshaw's voice: "Has there been disturbance?"

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"Apparently nothing."

"Perhaps a false alarm. I'm coming up."

Watching through the window^ Gersen saw Panshaw move off toward the front.

Gersen immediately stepped through the window and out upon the surface of the dome. Again he touched the detector to the conductive trail. Presently he heard Panshaw's voice: "What caused the alarm?"

"Lumen impact, brief and low-intensity."

Silence. Then again Panshaw's voice, cautious and thoughtful. "Nothing seems disturbed. . . . Peculiar. I wonder about that man. Still I am often oversubtle. He may be exactly as he represents himself."

"That in itself is an oversubtle idea."

"Possibly true. . . . We have a mystery on our hands, which will annoy Big Bird. But first things first, which I measure by what is likely to cause Bird the least vexation. In this case, Cahouse comes

first. The fellow at Traveler's Inn must wait his turn."

A grunt, then: "Cahouse is not at Inkin's Shade. I may be out several days looking for him."

"Go your best speed, but get the work done. It will be at your own initiative: I am leaving at once for Twanish."

"So soon? You had better stay here and collect shares."

"I do as I am told. Well, so much for a false alarm. I see nothing to keep us here. ... A moment! The door into Litto's. I believe it has been forced. The paint is broken. ..." A mumble of words which Gersen could not distinguish; then the shuffle of hurried footsteps.

Gersen ran back across the dome, dropped down upon the entrance ramp, gained the shadows of the kiosk before turning. The windows of both offices showed light; as Gersen watched a dark shape appeared briefly at Litto's window, then disappeared.

Gersen returned the way he had come. Crossing Central Plaza he noticed a troupe of musicians in the Sferinde Gardens. They played for a large group of MethIen all wearing an evening costume of yellow and white, the men with pale blue sashes.

Gersen watched a moment; then smiling a trifle wistfully he continued to the Traveler's Inn.

Behind the reception counter stood Daswell Tippin. The sight of Gersen brought a curious expression of surprise and concern to

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his face. Gersen approached the desk. "Why do you look at me like that?"

Tippin blurted, "Someone called asking for you, not five minutes ago. I thought you were in your room, and said as much."

"Who called?"

"Well—he gave no name."

"Panshaw? No? Ruk? I see. Well, no great affair. I am going to my room now, so you were only five minutes wrong—a trivial period. Do you agree?"

"I agree absolutely!"

"Where will I find Nihel Cahouse?"

"At Inkin's Shade; he's Fogle Clan; many Fogies live at Inkin's Shade."

"What if he is not at Inkin's Shade?"

Tippin threw out his hands. "He might be anywhere."

"Do not mention my interest in Cahouse to anyone."

"Your interest in Cahouse is taken for granted," growled Tippin. "I'd be telling nothing new."

"Still—keep a quiet tongue in your head."

"Indeed, indeed, indeed! My tongue is as secret as if it had been torn out!"

Gersen went up to his chambers, which he inspected carefully. Then, installing alarms of his own across doors and windows, he bathed, went to his couch, and slept.

From Peoples of the Coranne, by Richard Pelto:

The Darsh espouse each other only through calculation. The women judge the weight of the man's duodecimates; the men taste the woman's cooking and test the comfort of her dumble: so are Darsh marriages made. The two probably will not engage in sexual congress; both will surely go out on the moonlit desert to pursue their amatory affairs—

The marital relationship is formal and cool. Each party knows what is expected of him or her and, even more keenly, what he or she expects. If thwarted, the woman retaliates with rancid ahagaree or scorched pourrian; the man in his turn will throw less duodecimate upon the table, and spend his time at the beer gardens.

In the morning, an hour before Cora-rise, the woman awakes the man, who sullenly dons his day-clothes and goes to look at the sky. He utters a phrase of rather hollow optimism, in loose translation: "It will be good!" and sets off to his sift. The woman looks after him with a dark phrase other own: "Go to it, fool!"

Late in the day the man returns. As he steps under the shade he takes a final glance around the sky and says, again in rather hollow tones: "Asi achih!" which means, "And so it went!" The woman, watching from the shadow of her dumble, merely chuckles quietly to herself.

#### THE DEMON PRINCES

Gersen awoke at dawn Rays of Cora-light flashing across the desert nearly parallel to the surface cast long black shadows across the plaza Looking from his window, Gersen thought of Rigel-hght, also white and brilliant At the distance of Alphanor Rigel-hght seemed cool, brittle, crackling with overtones of violet Cora-light, received at closer range, sizzled and stung

Gersen dressed in loose gray trousers, a striped blue-and-white singlet, air-pad sandals conventional hot-weather garments across the human universe Using the communicator, he called the Mining Journal, and learned that the offices would not be open for yet another hour

Descending into the empty lobby, Gersen went out into the garden where he found only a few conscientious tourists. He breakfasted upon tea, fruit, pastries, and cheese imported across unknown distances As he left the garden, water began first to drip, then to fall in veils, from the parasol rims Day had started m earnest, Cora's assault must be thwarted

Gersen went directly to Dindar House Ignoring the fusty halls of the first floor, he ascended to the premises of the Mining Journal:

a room long and wide, dominated by an enormous relief map of the Wale along one wall. The front counter showed a checkerboard surface of )asper and )ade and supported to the right a rack of glass vials containing the various fractions of black sand, with small disks of the corresponding metals below, and to the left a faultless cube of pyrite a foot and a half on the side

A man of middle years, grave, deliberate, and wearing an urbane gray beard, came to the counter "Sir, your needs5"

"I represent Cosmopolis" said Gersen. "I've been sent out to do a short series on Dar Sai and the Darsh My budget allows for the hiring of a local aide, hopefully someone from your staff."

"My staff consists mostly of myself But I'll be glad to assist you, as a hireling or otherwise "

"Excellent My name, incidentally, is Kirth Gersen "

"I am Evelden Hoe What sort of thing are you doing5"

"Perhaps a set of biographical sketches I've been told to look up a certain Nihel Cahouse, possibly resident at Inkin's Shade "

Hoe pulled at his beard "I know the name Hmm I can't quite recall the connection Let's check the index Come along, this way, if you will "

Hoe took Gersen into a back room "This is our library, so to

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speak. Our index is in fair shape, if it's appeared in the Journal we'll find it" Hoe seated himself before a buttonboard and screen.

"Nihel Cahouse. Here he is I remember the story now Shall I give you the gist of it5 Or do you care to read the news piece3"

"I'd )ust as soon hear it from you "

"Cahouse is a Fogle, out of Inkin's Shade, and a sandminer At a place called Jamile Wallow he located a rich sift and won over a

thousand ounces of sand He went back to Inkin's Shade and found a hadaul in progress—or maybe he simply went back for the hadaul, which is more likely. He bet like a man inspired and when the day was over he'd won five thousand ounces—a princely fortune At this time Kotzash Mutual was a going enterprise. The Kotzash comptroller, a certain Ottile Panshaw, happened to be on hand. Cahouse converted his sand into six hundred Kotzash vouchers

"Two days later the Kotzash warehouse was looted. Nihel Cahouse lost everything and became the topic of a sad news item "

"Where is he now<sup>3</sup> Still at Inkin's Shade?"

Hoe touched buttons "Here's a followup "

On the screen appeared a brief paragraph

Nihel Cahouse, the erstwhile millionaire, has returned to the desert He'll go back to Jamile Wallow and seek another sift.

"That's a fairly recent item," said Hoe "About three months old."

"How will I find Jamile Wallow?"

"It's west and southerly I'll show you on the map "

"Good, but first another topic Lens Larque, who stole Cahouse's sand "

Hoe's face became still and guarded "That is a name we mention very quietly at Serjeuz "

"Still, he is Dar Sai's most famous citizen, and he'd certainly be the subject of one of my stories "

Hoe showed an uneasy smile "Understandable He is an amazing man Incidentally, he dislikes unfavorable publicity, and he has far connections In short, he is not a man to be trifled with."

"So I am told Have you ever met him<sup>3</sup>"

"Not to my knowledge. I hope never to do so "

"What about photographs? Are any in your files?"

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Hoe hesitated, then muttered: "Probably not. Nothing useful."

"Our conversation is naturally confidential," said Gersen. "The Mining Jowfial will not be quoted, nor named as a source; still, Cosmopolis needs a picture. In fact, it would be worth fifty, or even a hundred svu." Gersen placed down a certificate. Hoe touched it

with tentative fingertips, then regretfully drew his hand away. "I have no recent photographs. But only a few days ago I happened to notice something in an old picture. ... I don't know whether or not it's what you want."

"Show me the picture."

With a glance over his shoulder, Hoe pushed buttons. He spoke in a suddenly brassy voice: "What I am about to show you is a collection of quaint old clan-pictures, recorded over many years. Where would you like to start?"

'With the Bugold Clan."

"Certainly. This is the oldest photograph on file. It was recorded almost two hundred years ago. Look at those people! Aren't they a picturesque sight? In those days the Bugolds were something of an outlaw clan; perhaps they show us their most ferocious expressions. ... Here is something more recent, possibly thirty years old. The Bugolds again, and almost demure by comparison. On this side stand the 'bungle boys'; over here are the 'kitchens,' as they are called. During these fleeting transitory months, the Darsh women are at their best. Look at this girl with her straight body and flashing eyes! She is really quite handsome. Now these are the young bucks, no longer 'bungles' but not yet fleshed out into the full reek of Darsh manhood. Look at this one in particular! I don't know his name, but I am told that he later committed a theft and became what the Darsh call rachepol. WTio knows what has happened to him? . . . Do you care to look at other photographs?"

"Later, by all means. I'd certainly like copies of these two; they make a most interesting study."

Hoe depressed a toggle and facsimiles fell into a tray. "There you are, sir."

"Thank you." Gersen tucked the photographs into his pocket;

Hoe did likewise with the money.

"I'm in something of a rush just now," said Gersen. "Show me Jamile Wallow, or better, give me the coordinates, and I'll be on my way."

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Hoe touched buttons and handed the print-out to Gersen.

"Will you be returning soon?"

"In a day or so."

"Our conversation is of course confidential."

"That goes without saying. In both directions."

"Naturally." Hoe escorted Gersen to the door. "Until our next

meeting, my good wishes."

At the tourist shop Gersen rented a late-model skimmer and desert-wear: a process which, undertaken through the instrumentality of a languid clerk, took an extended period. Gersen envisioned Bel Ruk fleeing through the stars toward Jamile Wallow, and became agonized with nervous frustration, which he managed to dissemble. At last he was given freedom of the vehicle. He jumped into the cockpit, pulled up the cowl, arranged the sunscreen over his head, then took the craft aloft. He swept through the veil of water, up at a slant, away from the clustered parasols of Serjeuz, away to the west.

He fixed the autopilot to the coordinates of Jamile Wallow, pulled the speed control far back, and relaxed into the seat. Below slid the desert in a thousand subtle variations: a gravel plain, sand dunes breaking against outcrops of black tuff, an area of wind-scoured canyons, a plain of pale sand heaving in mounds and swales around a settlement of three parasols: Fotheringay Shade according to the map. On the northern horizon stood a solitary parasol:

Dugg's Shade.

An hour passed and another. Cora kept pace with the skimmer, bearing gradually to the north as the skimmer slanted south.

Below, another lonely shade, uninhabited and derelict: Gannet's Shade, according to the map. No water flowed over the parasol; the vacant dumbles hunched under a tangle of seared brambles and skeleton trees. On the map, a red circle indicated its dead condition. Gersen looked along the course to Jamile Wallow, which was marked by a small red asterisk: still an hour away.

Gersen's mood grew taut. Depending upon Cahouse's whereabouts, Gersen calculated that he had either an hour's advantage over Bel Ruk, or a disadvantage of two or three hours. If Bel Ruk had preceded him to Jamile Wallow his mission became dangerous.

At the horizon appeared a low plateau, and, where a low ravine cut down to the desert floor, Jamile Wallow. Gersen saw a make-

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shift parasol, fabricated of arafin tubing and metal-coated membrane. The structure had been damaged; the parasol tilted drunkenly to the side, dripping random gouts and spatters of water. The parasol shaded three shacks. One had partially collapsed; two were in little better condition. Fifty yards south, in full Cora-light, beside a corroded clutter of mining equipment stood a toolshed built of algaic planks.\*

Gersen lowered the skimmer and drifted around the shade, perceiving no signs of life. He made a second circle, then landed the skimmer behind the cluster of huts. He lowered the cowl and was instantly struck by a waft of hot desert air. He listened. ... A forlorn plash of dripping water, a sighing of wind in the trusswork of the parasol; otherwise, silence.

The heat began to prickle at Gersen's skin. He pulled the hood up over his head and activated the air-cooler. Over his eyes he fitted translucent metal hemispheres and slipped his feet into desert shoes. Alighting from the skimmer he surveyed the landscape. To one side the desert spread stark and far; to the other, a hopper, a rickety conveyor, and a heap of dun sand indicated the site of Cahouse's workings. Overhead the sagging parasol spilled an irregular trickle of water. Nihel Cahouse was nowhere to be seen, and Gersen felt a hollow sense of defeat.

He went to peer into the stone huts, to discover only trash and a few trifles of dilapidated furniture. The fourth shed, fifty yards south, evidently housed the power module, the wellhead, and the water pump. Gersen started across the open space to investigate. A moving glint in the sky caught his attention. He froze to a standstill and instantly identified the object as an approaching aircraft; apparently a skimmer similar to his own.

Gersen ran back under the parasol in excitement and exhilaration: if Eel Ruk were aboard the skimmer, he evidently had not yet found Nihel Cahouse. Gersen jumped aboard his own skimmer, jerked at the controls, and slid it behind the pile of tailings. He threw several broken sheets of arafin roofing over the skimmer, achieving a reasonable camouflage. He armed himself with his pro-jac and hand gun and dodged behind the tailings pile. Here he alarmed three scorpion-like creatures, each a foot long, mottled

'Certain types of bog algae, when compressed and heated, liberate a gun, which upon cooling hinds the matri\ into a waterproof m a l.

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white and tan with orange underhodies. They erected rows of glinting scales, glared from hooded emerald eyes, waved whip-stings, and began a purposeful sidelong encirclement. Gersen destroyed them with quick pulses from his hand gun, creating three small tinkling explosions.

Gersen looked up into the sky. The approaching skimmer was hidden behind the parasol. His place of concealment, he decided, was short of satisfactory; crouching and trying to merge into the hillside, he ran out to the plank shed. Ducking around to the back, he hopped high and twisted in midair, and barely avoided stepping into a hollow crowded with a dozen basking scorpions. The stings jerked erect; emerald eyes flashed and blinked. Gersen killed them with a single pulse of power, then dodged behind the shed.

Overhead hung the skimmer: a craft enameled green and black, somewhat larger than Gersen's rented vehicle. It slid under the parasol and dropped to the surface. Two men in Darsh desert gear alighted. Their faces, hooded and disguised by metal eye-guards, were unrecognizable. So, too, however, was Otfel Panshaw, whose frame was distinctively slight. The two men stood looking glumly about the shade, much as Gersen had done.

Swinging close their hoods to maximize the effect of the cold air,\* they walked to the huts. After a glance within, they stood pointing here and there and discussing their findings. Gersen wondered what could interest them. They clearly had no expectation of finding Nihel Cahouse. What then? The Kotzash shares?

At the third hut the two men became intent. One pointed with an air of satisfaction. He entered, and emerged with a metal box obviously of great weight. He set it down, threw back the lid, touched the contents, gave his head a shake which could indicate almost anything. The other man closed the lid, carried the box to the skimmer. His comrade looked toward the planked shed. He gave a peremptory signal; the two crossed the sunlit area to the shed. One flung open the door, looked within, and jumped back with a startled exclamation. Gersen, at the rear, put his eye to a crack. By the light entering through the doorway he glimpsed the interior.

The second man approached. "What's here?"

The man first on the scene waved his hand. "As you see."

\*A typical Darsh mannerism constantly repeated.

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"A» achih!^

"The place stinks. It swarms with the devils."

"They create their own stink. Ah, how putrid! Well, there are no papers here."

"Not so fast. The shrig\*\* wants twelve hundred vouchers, six hundred from here. We had best be diligent."

"Give him the hundred you have already gained and the news that no more are to be found,"

"It may come to that. Bah, Cahouse would never keep the paper out here, if he troubled to keep it at all."

"Ha, ha! Cahouse the mad reveler! He probably threw it high into the sansuun\*\*\* with a curse. He was noted for his noble curses, so I'm told."

"He'll utter his great curses never again."

"Let's be away from this squalid place. We've got the sand to share; there's profit to the day after all!"

"The shrig wants his vouchers and he speaks with a heavy voice. I am Bel Ruk, but I am not without fear."

"Even fear cannot force the appearance of nonexistent vouch-

ers.

"True. . . . Let's look once more in the huts."  
The two turned away and walked toward the shade.  
Behind them a voice spoke: "Gentlemen, stop in your tracks.  
Do not look around; death is close at your backs."  
The two men jerked quivering to a halt.  
"Slowly raise your hands. . . . Higher. Walk forward, toward the  
base of the parasol. Do not look around."

Ten minutes later Gersen had arranged matters to his satisfac-  
tion. The two men had declared their names to be Bel Ruk and  
Cleander. They stood with faces to the trusswork, hoods pulled  
over their eyes and bound tight by bands of cloth. Similar bands of

\*A Darsh expieuve of fatalistic acceptance' "So be it'" or "That's the way it  
goes'" The  
Darsh do not gracefully or philosophically accept misfortune, they are good  
grumblers.  
Asi achih indicates the final recognition of defeat, or, as m this case, the  
inexorable force  
of destiny.

"Larva of a bog animal, notable for its sinuous dancing gait upon a pair of  
caudal feet.  
The shrig stands four to five feet high and emits a yellow phosphorescence. At  
night the  
shrig dance hv the hundreds across the hog to create an eerie and fascinating  
effect. Here  
the word is used m a deprecatory sense to typify a dileruntish impractical  
fellow, out of  
touch with reaiit\

\*"Sansuun the evening breeze which follows the sun around the planet.

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cloth, but from their own garments, secured their arms to the truss-  
work. When, to Gersen's critical eye, both men were helpless, he  
made an inspection of their persons, removing their hand guns, and  
Bel Ruk's dagger. At their skimmer he investigated the box they  
had taken from the hut; it contained black sand to the weight of  
perhaps fifty pounds. On the seat of the skimmer rested Bel Ruk's  
pouch. Within Gersen discovered Kot?-ash certificates to the ag-  
gregate of 110 shares, which he took into his own possession.

He returned to his two captives, both of whom had been sur-  
reptitiously twisting at their bonds. "I hope that you are taking a  
good-natured view of this situation," said Gersen. "In a sense this  
is your lucky day. I am taking some Kotxash shares which I found  
in a pouch yonder. In exchange I have left ten svu. Since the shares  
are totally worthless, you actually have reason to rejoice. I am also  
taking Cahouse's black sand."

Neither Oleander nor Bel Ruk had comment to make.

"I prefer that you do not struggle against your bonds," said

Gersen. "If you broke loose I might be forced"to kill you."

Oleander's shoulders sagged; Bel Ruk stood rigid and unforgiving. Gersen watched them a moment, then returned across bright sand to the toolshed. Bel Ruk and Cleander had left the door ajar;

sunlight shone on a rumpled heap of gristle and dry bones among shreds of white cloth. Nihel Oahouse apparently had died while attempting to repair his pump, perhaps by electric shock. Scorpions by the dozens ranged in a circle. They had cut away Cahouse's garments to feast upon his corpse.

As Bel Ruk and Oleander had remarked, the stench within the shed transcended all ordinary degrees of fetor.

Gersen went to the hopper, found a shovel, returned to the shed, and half dragged, half scraped the remains of Nihel Cahouse out upon the sand. The scorpions, tinkling in rage, made sorties with emerald eyes glaring. Gersen killed them with the flat of the shovel.

Eventually both corpse and scorpions had been removed. Gersen strolled back under the shade, and examined his captives. Bel Ruk asked in a flat voice: "How long do you intend to keep us here?"

"Not long now. Be patient."

Gersen returned to the shed. The stench had eased somewhat, and the scorpions were gone. Gersen gingerly entered. First he

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threw the master switch on the power panel, then turned to look at what he had seen through the crack.

Nihel Cahouse had used his Kotzash shares to paper the walls of the toolshed. The adhesive had deteriorated in the heat to a granular crumble; the certificates peeled away without difficulty.

Gersen took the salvaged documents back under the shade and counted them: 600 shares. With the 110 shares taken from Bel Ruk, his holdings now totaled an even 2,000.

Gersen returned to his prisoners. Bel Ruk, chafing his bonds against the metal, had almost won free. Without comment Gersen made the bonds once more secure.

"Gentlemen," said Gersen, "I am about to depart. Bel Ruk has demonstrated that the effort of an hour or so will break you loose."

Bel Ruk blurted a question: "Why do you take my Kotzash shares? They are worthless."

"In that case, why do you carry them?"

Bel Ruk said in a rough voice: "At Serjeuz a crazy iskish pays money for trash,"

"Kotzash shares are suddenly in demand," said Gersen. "Perhaps that earless rogue Lens Larque is about to bring back the money he stole,"\*

Bel Ruk and Cleander maintained an uneasy silence.

Gersen watched them a moment; then, carrying the chest of black sand to his skimmer, he departed Jamile Wallow.

At Serjeuz, with Cora half below the horizon, Gersen dropped the skimmer down upon the sand beside his Fantamic Flitterwing. He transferred the coffer of black sand and his Kotzash shares aboard, then slid the skimmer through the water veil and back to the rental agency.

Crossing the plaza to the Traveler's Inn, Gersen waited until Tippin's attention was diverted, then slipped past and up to his room. He bathed, changed into fresh garments, and returned to the lobby. He allowed himself to be noticed by Tippin, who signaled him to the desk. "Good evening," said Gersen.

"Yes, no doubt. Where have you been all day?"

Gersen fixed Tippin with a long level stare; Tippin's gaze shifted. Gersen asked: "W'Tiy are you interested?"

"Inquiries have been made," said Tippin peevishly.

\*Words like "steal," "theft," "pilfer" have a most biting connotation in the Darsh context

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"By whom?"

"By Bel Ruk, if you must know, and not ten minutes ago. He thinks that you robbed him out in the desert."

Gersen asked in a flat voice. "How could I rob Bel Ruk if I was in my room all day?"

"I don't know. Were you in your room?"

"Do you know differently?"

"I don't know one way or another."

"This is the first time you've seen me today?"

"Yes, of course."

"And I just came down from my room?"

"That is true."

"Then tell Bel Ruk that to your knowledge I never left my room all day."

"But are these the facts?" cried Tippin fretfully.

"To the best of your knowledge, they are indeed." Gersen turned away and went out into the garden. He settled himself at a shadowed table, and dined without haste-

From the lobby came Daswell Tippin. He searched the garden, saw Gersen, and approached at an agitated trot. Flinging himself into a chair he said in a tragic voice: "Bel Ruk has threatened my very existence. He claims that I conspired with you; he calls me 'robber.' He says that he will take me out to Sangwy Shade.\* Do you know what that means?"

"Nothing good, apparently."

"It means those cursed Darsh whips, and don't sneer; such affairs occur, to my certain knowledge!"

"When did Bel Ruk make his threat?"

"Not five minutes ago! I spoke with him by telephone; I told him that so far as I knew you had not been gone from Serjeuz. He became furiously angry."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. Here at Serjeuz, so I suppose."

"Look here a moment." Gersen produced the list furnished by Jehan Addels. "When you took up those shares for me, who did you buy from? Mark off their names."

\*Sangwy Shade an isolated settlement on the Sheol Barrens, inhabited by ruftuns, rache-pols, and fugitives. At Sangwy Shade, the purchasing agent "Sudo Nonimus" met with Lens Larque, an episode he chronicled in "Reminiscences of a Peripatetic Purchase Agent"

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Tippin glanced along the list without any great interest. He marked with a stylus "This one. This one. This one." With a gesture of revulsion he threw down the stylus "This is madness! If Bel Ruk sees me, he'll take off my skin."

"Today he had a hundred shares on his person, where did he get them?"

Tippm stared at him aghast "So you did indeed rob him3"

"I took up property to which he had no right. After all, Lens Larque looted the Kotzash warehouse "

"But that is not Darsh logic," whispered Tippin "At Sangwy Shade we shall dance together." He turned sideways and searched the plaza "I'll have to leave Ser)eu; I can live here no longer "

"Where do you want to go3"

"Home To Svengay. I had a bit of trouble long ago, but surely it's forgotten now "

"Then there is no problem Take the next ship out"

Tippm held out his hands "What shall I use for money3 I've been keeping a woman, she's bled me dry "

Gersen scribbled a note on a piece of paper, brought out a hundred SVL, and handed both to Tippm. "Take this letter to Jehan Addels at New Wexford, on Aloysius He'll pay you a thousand SVU, and find a job for you at New Wexford, if you so choose I advise you not to tell the woman you are going, although it's none of my affair If she bled you dry here she'll do it again elsewhere "

With numb fingers Tippm took the money and the note

"Thank you . Your advice is sound. Yes, very sound. I'll leave tomorrow, there's an outbound packet"

"Don't tell anyone you're going," said Gersen "Just go "

"Yes, exactly Won't there be a great surprise when they find me gone3"

"Back to the Kotzash shares; where did Bel Ruk get his hundred shares3"

"Well—twenty he got from me He picked up the others along Melby Sift "

"Mark them off this list "

Tippin studied the schedule and made a number of marks "I can't be sure of these. What's left is out along the Deep Wale, and a few along Scumby Barren You won't find anyone at home now They'll all be up to Dinkelstown for the Grand Hadauls And that's where Bel Ruk will be, if he wants more Kotzash "

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"What does Panshaw want with Kotzash3"

"When you say 'Panshaw,' you are saying 'Lens Larque ' "

"Then why does Lens Larque want Kotzash3"

Tippin searched the plaza. "I have no idea Panshaw thinks Lens Larque is crazy He had trouble with the Methlen and nou

he wants his own back Of all men alive he is most to be feared.  
Imagine an insect in human form . Look now' Here comes Bel  
Ruk'"

"Sit quiet' He won't harm you He's only interested in me "  
"He'll take me away'"

"Refuse to go Say nothing, obey none of his orders'"  
Tippin made an asthmatic whimpering noise Gersen looked at  
him in disgust. "Control yourself."

Bel Ruk entered the garden and marched at a stately pace to  
Gersen's table With exaggerated delicacy he drew back a chair and  
seated himself "I intrude on no private conversation3"

"None whatever," said Tippin in a quavering voice "I must  
introduce you Kirth Gersen, this is Bel Ruk, an important man of  
Dar Sai " With a wild attempt at facetiousness he added "You ha\`e  
much m common, you both are interested in finance."

"Oh we have much more m common than that," said Bel Ruk  
He shrugged back his hood to reveal his bony bronze face, massive  
cheek-bones, and cropped ears Noting Gersen's gaze he said, "Yes,  
it's true I am rachepol My clan dealt harshly with me Still, I took  
vengeance and I cannot complain " He signaled the waiter "Bring  
me a quart of beer, and these gentlemen to their taste "  
"Nothing for me," said Gersen  
Tippin said cautiously "I'll have a tot ofTivol "  
Bel Ruk examined Gersen with a deliberation almost insulting  
"Kirth Gersen, eh3 And where is your home-world3"  
"Alphanor, along the Concourse "  
"And you are taking up Kotzash shares3"  
"WTien I can get them cheaply Are you selling^"  
"I have none to sell, after suffering robbery and shame at \`our  
hands today "

"Surely you are mistaken," said Gersen "'l ippm has hinted  
something to this effect, I'm not sure whether or not I ha\`e con-  
vinced him "

"If he is convinced, he is more of a fool than I caka him for

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Let us discuss our business one item at a time " He held out his  
hand "First, return my shares "

Gersen smilingly shook his head "Impossible "

Bel Ruk withdrew his arm and turned to Tippm "You have  
strained our bonds of friendship."

"Not at all'" Tippm protested "By no means' Never'"

"We shall discuss the matter again " Bel Ruk lifted his tankard  
of beer and swallowed half at a gulp The remainder of the beer he  
threw casually at Gersen's face From vast experience, Gersen had

recognized the pattern of events. Bending to the side, he avoided most of the beer. In the same motion he lifted the table, thrust it at Bel Ruk's chest and toppled him backwards. Bel Ruk fell sprawling across the garden.

The waiter gingerly approached. "Gentlemen, what is the matter?"

"Bel Ruk has had a bit too much to drink," said Gersen. "Take him away before he injures himself."

The waiter helped Bel Ruk to his feet, then picked up the table and set it into its place.

Gersen stonily watched Bel Ruk, who stood considering his options. Finding no obviously profitable course, Bel Ruk turned and departed the garden.

Tippm said in a sick voice: "He's going for his gun."

"No, he's got other concerns."

"There's no way back for me now," gloomed Tippm. "It's either Sangwy Shade or go and never return."

Gersen gave Tippm a certificate for fifty SVU. "Settle my account here, through tomorrow I may also be leaving."

Tippm asked in dull confusion: "Where are you going?"

"I'm not quite sure," Gersen jumped to his feet. "Excuse me, now I'm in a hurry."

He ran up to his room, picked up items of equipment. Returning below, he left the hotel and ran off across the plaza and under Skansel Shade. In Skansel Plaza he halted to look up at Dmdar House. Lights showed from the windows of Panshaw's office, there was no time to be wasted. He climbed up over the entrance, scaled the sloping roof and sidled to the window giving on Litto's office. He brought out his detector, touched the controls to the conductive trail he had sprayed only two nights before. Bel Ruk's guttural voice

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sounded immediately in the earphone: "—not all so easy. I hear scattered here and there around the Wale."

"They'll be at the Dmkelstown for the hadaul, most of them."

"But that's not necessarily to the good," growled Bel Ruk. "These sitters aren't fools; they'll smurf a plot and go for full re-coy cry."

"That may well be. Here's an idea: Cry out a hadaul and post a stake. The challenge can be a hundred Kotzash shares. Let the robbers collect the shares for us."

Bel Ruk grunted "Vnd then when there's a winner2"

Panshaw's voice dripped sarcasm "Must I plan out every de-  
taiP"

"You were glib enough in regard to Gersen, or whatever his  
name "

"That is a different tale Gersen will not be at the hadaul "

Bel Ruk vented a gusty snort "So you say And if he is2"

"I hat again is at your discretion The Bird would like a word  
with Gersen "

"Tell the Bird to come out to the hadaul Let him show his  
famous techniques "

"Maybe he'll come over without mv instructions, to comment  
upon your work "

Bel Ruk's voice was suddenly dubious "Do \ou really think  
so2"

"No I do not He is obsessed with his wonderful scheme "

Bel Ruk's voice came somewhat easier "So lonn- as he works  
his tricks he diverts his energies "

"They'll not be diverted if he loses Kotzash "

"I can only do m\ best Gersen is not inexperienced Still, he  
neglected to kill me when he had the chance."

Panshaw chuckled "He regards you as no great threat "

Bel Ruk said nothing

"Well then," said Panshaw, "do your best From here I cannot  
guide your feet while you walk You are reputedly skillful in the  
robles "t Fight in your own hadaul and come away with the post-  
pot\*\*

"The idea already had occurred to me "

"Rubles, the hadaul ticki

\*\*The post pot the accumuldtion ofchJilen^t- menus rhi. \iLtnrs prize

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"One way or another, collect at least seven hundred shares.  
Then, whether or not Gersen took Cahouse's shares, we'll be se-  
cure. Now I will go back to my couch; Twanish time is a taskmaster.  
The cursed Methlen start the day at sunrise, just when good thieves  
like you and me are ending it. Oh why must I pay the price for the

Bird's social yearnings? If it were not so funny I could cry for grief."

"All this is beyond my understanding," grumbled Bel Ruk. "It's nothing to do with me."

"Just as well! You'd be less effective than ever."

"Someday, Panshaw, in one hand I will squeeze your neck into a thin stalk."

"Someday, Bel Ruk, I will poison your vile beer. Unless, of course, we lost Kotzash and the Bird gives us both to Panak."

Bel Ruk made a dull sound, and the conversation was over.

Gersen waited a moment on the chance that Bel Ruk might make other communications, but the office remained silent, and Gersen presently went back the way he had come.

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Gersen flew eastward in the Fantamic Flitterwing. The desert below, in the blaze of Cora-light, showed swaths and smears of color: pink, ocher, a whitish yellow like talc mixed with sulfur; toward the horizon the colors stratified like sediments into pencilings of cinnamon brown, gray-green, plum, with occasional harsh scratches where ledges of black rock broke through the surface.

Gersen crossed a region of low dunes, a line of rose-red buttes—Beyond extended a plateau overgrown with desert flora; silky coral, jutting ears of honeycomb, yellow sandtripe, tinkleweed, purple magmold.

At far intervals parasols spilled water over lonely communities where old Darsh custom persisted in the purest form. Bunter's Shade, Ruph Shade, Itchy Nola's Shade: so read the names on the map. Then, where Terwig Waste began, the shades were seen no more.

Terwig Waste, a smoldering basin of liver-red pumice, once described by an impressionable travel writer as "the floor of Hell exposed to daylight," ended against a bone-white palisade. Beyond, the ground lay twisted and gashed in a vast badlands of wind-eroded sandstone, and then once again the desert spread away to north, south, and east. Finally, the five parasols of Dinkelstown appeared on the horizon.

Gersen approached and circled the town. On the landing area, at the western periphery, rested an assortment of vessels: two small cargo ships, five space-yachts of various quality, scores of desert-skimmers, air-cars and carryalls.

Gersen landed close behind the water wall. He changed into Darsh robes, armed himself, and disembarked. Heat struck his face;

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he made haste to penetrate the water veil, and found himself in a cluster of dumbles, from which issued pungent odors and loud voices. By crooked ways he came to a plaza far less grand than Central Plaza at Serjeuz. A single hotel-restaurant offered modest hospitality to the offworld visitor.

Around the edge of the plaza, beer gardens under flip-flap trees served the needs of Darsh holiday-makers. In front of the hotel workmen made final arrangements for the hadaul- Circles had been painted upon the paving. Two small grandstands and several sets of serried benches offered seats of vantage to spectators,

Gersen crossed the plaza to the hotel. In the garden sat a dozen Methlen; Jerdian Chanseth was not among them.

The hotel could offer Gersen no accommodation. "These are the days of the clan meetings!" said the clerk in a curt voice. "Sleep out in the bushes like everyone else!"

Gersen returned to the garden. Not ten feet distant stood Bel Ruk in conversation with a fox-faced young Darsh. Bel Ruk wore iskish clothes, with a white sash around his head to hide his mutilated ears. His back was half-turned; Gersen moved past without attracting his notice. He halted behind a sprawling nephar tree and watched through the black-green foliage.

Bel Ruk spoke with force and urgency. He brought a packet of SVU from his inside pocket and slapped it against his hand in cadence with his words. The young man nodded with earnest attention. Finally Bel Ruk gave the young man the packet and made a curt gesture. The young man flicked his fingers in the Darsh signal of assent, and departed across the plaza. Gersen paused five seconds, then followed at a discreet distance.

The young Darsh marched at the striding plambosh gait, across the plaza, through a jungle of vegetation, past a dozen dumbles, under the veil of a second parasol, finally into a second plaza, where he joined a group who sat drinking from iron pots. He spoke, and presently money changed hands. Iron pots were tilted and emptied and all departed, leaving only the young Darsh Gersen had followed.

Gersen seated himself on a hummock in the shade of a plantain bush. An insect crawled up his leg; slapping and shaking, Gersen dislodged the creature and took himself to one of the beer gardens. He settled into an inconspicuous seat, was served beer in an iron pot.

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An hour passed; then one of the group returned with a sheaf of what Gersen thought to identify as Kotzash shares.

Gersen rose to his feet, walked out into the plaza, made a show of looking around the tables, then advanced upon the table which

he had been watching. Without formality he seated himself. "My name is Jaide; Bel Ruk will have mentioned me. There is a change in plan. Enemies are watching him and he wishes to dissemble. You must now work through me. How many shares have you taken up?"

"Sixteen, so far." This was the man whom Gersen had followed.

"Your name?"

"I am Delfin." He indicated the man who had brought in the shares. "This is Bartleman."

"Very good, Bartleman," said Gersen. "Go out again; find more shares for us."

Bartleman showed no haste to obey. "It is not so easy. Folk consider me either a fool or a sharper. I have my dignity to consider."

"What is undignified about paying good money for worthless paper?"

"It's not worthless if someone wants to pay for it. This is the general feeling, especially in connection with Kotzash."

"Well then, offer more money. Delfin, give him money to work with."

Delfin grudgingly counted out twenty SVU. Gersen took the shares, folded them, and tucked them into his pocket.

"Money is draining away," Delfin grumbled. "Ruk told me to bring him shares and he'd give me more money."

"I'll handle that end of things," said Gersen. He brought out the list which Jehan Addels had prepared. "A certain Lampeter controls eighty-nine shares. Find him at once and buy his shares, as cheaply as possible."

Bartleman said sullenly, "I won't get them for twenty SVU, and where is my commission?"

Gersen paid over ten SVU of his own money. "Bring me the eighty-nine shares, and you'll make sure of a commission."

Bartleman gave a skeptical shrug and moved away.

Gersen said to Delfin, "Remember, you will be working through me. Under no circumstances approach Bel Ruk! It could bring the wrath of a certain bird down on your head. Do you understand?"

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"Perfectly "

"If you so much as see Bel Ruk, give him a wide berth Do all

your business with me "

"This is clear."

Another of Delfin's couriers appeared, with nine shares Delfin gave him another ten SVU of Bel Ruk's money and sent him out again. Gersen added the 9 shares to the first 16 2,025 in grand total, 386 to go

One by one the couriers returned, bringing back a total of 49 shares Bartleman returned a second time, somewhat crestfallen. He spoke in a morose voice, "The rumor is out Everyone has become suspicious; no one wants to sell. Those people who already sold are now angry They call me a sharper; they want their shares back "

"Not possible," said Gersen "What of Lampeter2"

"There he sits in Valt's Arbor drinking beer" Bartleman pointed across the plaza "That old man with the crooked nose He says he'll sell for full value, no less "

"Full value5 We don't pay that kind of money for worthless paper "

"Explain that to Lampeter."

"I'll do exactly that" Gersen once more considered his list. "Do you know Feodor Diamant3"

"He is well known "

"He controls twenty shares Find him, buy his shares if possible. If not, bring him here "

"As you say " Bartleman once more moved away

Gersen stepped across the plaza to Valt's Arbor and approached the old man with the crooked nose "You are Lampeter3"

"I am that man Who are you, if not an iskish5"

"I am iskish, certainly As an idle pastime I collect worthless securities- really no more than a whim. Do you have any use for your Kotzash shares^"

"None whatever "

"In that case, perhaps you will give them to me If you prefer I can make a token payment say, ten SVU for the batch "

Lampeter pulled at his nose and turned Gersen a broad gap-toothed grin "It is my experience that when someone wants to buy, the merchandise has value. I will sell at what they cost me, no less "

Gersen exhibited astonishment "That is totally unreasonable "

"We shall see If I collect, I am vindicated If not, I am no worse off than before "

"Do you carry these shares on your person2"

"Naturally not, I considered them worthless until no\\ \"

"Where are they3"

"In my dumble, )ust yonder "

"Let us go for them If you guarantee to say nothing of the transaction, I'll pay you eighty-nine s\u \"

"Eighty-nine svu^ That offer is almost insulting' You are trying to cheat me of two thousand SVU'"

"Lampeter, observe me closely What do you see3"

Lampeter, who had already taken several pots of beer, inspected Gersen with an unsteady vision "I see a green-eyed iskish, who is either a sharper or else crazy "

"I prefer that you think of me as crazy Now ask yourself how many times in the few scant years left to you will a crazy iskish offer you money for worthless trasrr"

"Never again, I have no doubt That is why I must exploit this particular occasion "

"On this particlar occasion, two SVU a share is the limit "

"Full value or nothing'"

Gersen made a signal of defeat "I'll pay quarter value, and that is my best offer I am running low on cash "

Lampeter drank beer, then put down the iron pot and rose to his feet "Come along with me I am being defrauded, but I can waste no more time" He lurched off along a path which led through the )ungle and halted beside the dark entrance into a dumble "One moment " He entered, to emerge with a greasy envelope "Here are the shares WTiere is the money3"

Gersen took the envelope, withdrew the certificates, and counted eighty-nine shares "Good enough, come with me I don't carry so much money on my person "

He led the way to the water well, along the boundary lane, then out through the water to his Fantamic Fhtterwmg He unlocked the port, motioned Lampeter up the ladder Lampeter looked at him in suspicion "WTiere are you taking me3"

"Nowhere I can't pay you out here m the hot sun "

"Well, be swift My beer is going flat "

Gersen brought out the box of black sand he had taken from

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Bel Ruk at Jamile Wallow. "Eighty-nine shares at a quarter value is two hundred twenty-three ounces."

In a grumbling voice Lampeter declared a preference for cash, to which Gersen paid no heed. He weighed out 223 ounces of black sand, which he poured into a canister and gave to Lampeter. "Consider yourself a lucky man."

"I can't avoid curiosity. Why do you pay good black sand for worthless trash that I was about to throw away?"

Gersen calculated. "I need at least two hundred forty-eight more shares. Find them for me and I'll explain why I want them."

"You'll pay in black sand?"

"Not at quarter value. I don't have so much sand."

"I doubt if so many shares can be had at Dmkelstown. Still, let's go back to Valt's Arbor. Bring the box. We'll see what can be done. My friend Jeus owns ten or twenty shares. Maybe he'll agree

to sell " ' "

"Bring your friend Jeus to the beer garden across the plaza, where I now must return." Gersen took leave of Lampeter, and re)omed Delfin. His couriers, between them, had taken up only thirty-one additional shares, which Gersen took m hand. Bartleman, however, had with him a short fat man with round black eyes and a parrot-beak nose. "This is Fat Odo," said Bartleman. "He carries fifteen shares of Kotzash."

"Well, sir, what is your price?" asked Gersen. "I have about all I need for my purposes. Still, I'll listen to your offer."

"The price is printed on the certificates," said Odo.

"So is the signature ofOtile Panshaw. Both are a waste of ink."

"I won't sell; why should I be hoodwinked by an iskish? I am no worse off than an hour ago; good-bye."

"Just a moment. Fifteen shares^ I'll pay a quarter value, no more."

"Impossible."

"Good-bye; these are my terms."

"Oh well; pay half value. Today I will be generous."

Gersen finally settled for forty ounces of black sand, fust as

Lampeter brought up his friend Jeus, as old, gaunt, and drunk as Lampeter himself. Lampeter pointed out Gersen with a grand flourish- "There he sits, the crazy iskish who pays black sand for Kotzash."

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"Here are my shares," cried out Jeus. "There are eighteen only, but pay me a hundred ounces, in all generosity!"

"The rate is somewhat less," said Gersen. "Twenty ounces for the lot."

The bargaining attracted attention; soon Gersen was surrounded with persons who either held a share or two and wanted full redemption, or persons, now angry, who had already sold at lesser prices. Gersen scraped the box clean of black sand, but acquired only another forty-three shares. His total holdings now were 2,270 shares, with another 141 shares needed. The Darsh now stood around him eagerly flourishing their shares, but Gersen could only shake his head "I have no more sand and no more money, until I cash a bank draft."

The asking prices began to descend. Gersen, now so near to his goal, became correspondingly anxious. He turned to Delfin. "Give me what money you have left."

"It is only five svu," said Delfin. "In view of the large sums being thrown about, this is scanty payment for the day's work."

"Bartleman has thirty svu for which he has not accounted."

"Nor will he ever Go back to Bel Ruk for more money."

"I hardly dare. Already I have spent too much . . . But that gives me an idea. Write out this note- 'Prices are very high. Return another two hundred SVU by the bearer. . . . Delfin.' "

Delfin somewhat dubiously wrote the note. The circumstances were puzzling, but who was he to question the mad iskish?

"Now," said Gersen, "send it off to Bel Ruk, who will surely send back the money."

"Hardous' Here a moment'" Delfin gave Hardous the note.

"Go to the hotel garden; there you will find a rachepol wearing a white head sash with an emerald clasp. Give him this note. He will pay over money which you are to bring here. Hurry!"

Gersen, now on tenterhooks, ran around the circle of those who had been offering shares. He took as many of them as he could reach. "Give me yours, and yours, and yours. Collect from Delfin or meet me tonight at the hotel. Delfin knows me well; he will vouch for me. Tomorrow you will be paid, or perhaps even tonight if Bel Ruk provides the money."

Some of the shareholders numbly surrendered their shares; oth-

ers jerked back. Gersen could waste no more time. He beckoned

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to Delfin. "Come along to the plaza; let us make sure that Bel Ruk is on hand to pay the money."

They halted under the foliage, looked across to the hotel garden, into which Hardous was just now entering. Bel Ruk sat in obvious impatience at a central table. Hardous tendered him the note; Bel Ruk snatched it open and read. For a moment he sat silent, then heaved himself to his feet. He spoke to Hardous; the two left the garden and set off across the plaza.

Gersen spoke soberly to Delfin: "I suspect that events are not going well for Bel Ruk. He seems out of sorts. Avoid him. If he sees you he will demand an accounting and what could you tell him? Nothing. Keep your distance, and we'll all be the easier for it."

Delfin said in a concerned voice: "There is a great deal here which I don't understand."

"No doubt. But do as I say, and as soon as I cash a bank draft you will profit."

Delfin again became moderately sanguine. "That is a gratifying prospect, at least."

"Good. Then I am assured of your cooperation?"

"At every point of the circle."

The metaphor, so Gersen recognized, was abstracted from the language of hadaul and was not altogether reassuring. "I need—let me count—another one hundred twenty shares, at least. Tonight I want you to go everywhere. The news will be out; shares will certainly be offered to you: perhaps the entire one hundred twenty."

"Tonight? Not possible. Mirassou floats high; kitchets run the desert and I run close behind."

"And who runs behind you?" asked Gersen.

"Ha-ha! I've been chased by some fast ones! Tonight is a night to beware! Are you going out? Let me advise you. The kitchets romp among the Chailles, but every shadow conceals a khoontz. The less agile man, who is usually not quite so discriminating, goes out on Differy Downs, but he often comes home stiff and surly, because the kitchets have the upper hand and make their own

choices."

"I'll keep your advice in mind," said Gersen. "What of tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow it's hadaul and that will occupy the day. Kotzash must wait."

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"Still, don't stand aside if Kotzash shares are offered. Take them up on my account, and keep well clear of Bel Ruk; at the moment he may well be annoyed with all of us."

Delfin again became subdued. "Behind your words I divine a larger meaning. I will certainly avoid Bel Ruk. And now I wish you good evening and a happy night on the desert."

Gersen went out to his Fantamic Flitterwing, where he counted his shares and locked them into a cabinet. He changed from the Darsh robes into loose gray trousers and a blouse striped in dark green and black. He made sure of his weapons and sauntered back under the parasol. The time was dusk; the water flow was quiet and Dinkelstown lay open to the desert.

Gersen approached the hotel garden, and halted in the shadows to take stock of those who sat at the tables: a dozen tourists, as many Darsh of evident substance, a group of young Methlen, with two older women of refinement and dignity.

From the hotel came Jerdian Chanseth wearing a soft white gown. She passed close to where Gersen stood—He called out in a quiet voice: "Jerdian! Jerdian Chanseth!"

Jerdian halted, looked wonderingly to where Gersen stood half lounging against a tree. She paused, turned a quick glance toward the Methlen group, then approached. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking at you, and grateful for the opportunity."

Jerdian made a mocking sound between her teeth. "Sssssss! You are gallant in your phrases." She looked him up and down. "You are more relaxed, more easy than the grim banker-swindler-space wanderer of Serjeuz. You seem almost a young man."

"That can't be. I'm at least six years older than Aldo. Still, at this moment, I don't feel at all grim."

"Why, at this moment?"

"Must I explain? I am standing here with you and I find you bewitching."

"More gallantry!" Jerdian, despite a cool little laugh, seemed

not displeased. "Words are cheap. You already have a spouse and a large family."

"Nothing of that sort whatever. I have no one but myself."

"How did you become a banker?"

"I bought the bank for a special purpose."

"But a bank costs money! Are you a wealthy criminal?"

"I'm certainly not a criminal. At least, not altogether."

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"Then what are you, in all truth and candor?"

"A space wanderer is really the best description "

"Kirth Gersen, you take pleasure mystifying me, and I detest secrets!" Then Jerdian added, in a voice dictated by her Methlen training "Still, your secrets are no concern of mine "

"Quite right " Gersen looked away across the plaza, out upon the dusky desert "In fact, I should not so much as talk to you I succeed only in tantalizing myself"

Jerdian stared at him a minute, then uttered a sudden laugh "What marvelous dramas you enact! The picaresque adventurer, the banker who outswindles my father, the patrician in languid garments, and now the lovelorn boy, wistful and noble, renouncing his love."

Gersen's own amusement was somewhat more constrained "I don't recognize myself in any of these roles " A reckless mood came over him, almost an intoxication "Come over here, where we'll be secluded " He took her arm and led her to a table at the far dark side of the garden She walked stiffly, half-resisting, and seated herself in a posture tentative and prim. She looked at Gersen coldly, now all disdainful Methlen "I can only stay an instant, we are making an excursion out on the desert, and I must help with the arrangements "

"The desert is said to be beautiful by night Especially by moonlight Are you walking?"

"Indeed not We have hired a charabanc Now I must go My interest in your affairs is really most casual "

"Our feelings complement each other, since I didn't want to tell you anything "

Jerdian made no move to rise "And why not?"

"You might tell someone else and cause me no end of trouble "

Jerdian scowled "So you think I prattle of everything I know

to my friends."

"Not necessarily But as you yourself point out, our interest is casual, you might easily make an idle comment which eventually would reach the wrong ears I'll take you to your friends " He rose to his feet.

Jerdian perversely refused to move "Be so good as to sit down In effect you are asking me to leave, which is far from flattering. WWhere is your vaunted gallantry now?"

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Gersen slowly resumed his seat "I vaunted no gallantry. I )ust spoke impulsively "

"You show very little concern for my vanity," said Jerdun crossly

"Your vanity is quite safe in my hands," said Gersen "May I express myself frankly?"

Jerdian pondered a moment. "Well--there is no one here to stop you."

Gersen leaned forward, took her two hands in his "The truth is this I have a spaceship outside; I would like nothing better than to take you away with me and make love to you across all the constellations of the universe But I can't indulge myself even m the speculation "

"Indeed? And--again from idle curiosity--why not?"

"Because I have work to do which is urgent and dangerous "

Jerdian asked mischievously 'Would you give up your work if I agreed to c-ome with you?"

"Don't even suggest such things, my heart stops beating when I hear you."

"The gallantry is now back m full force "

Gersen bent forward across the table, Jerdian made no move to draw back With their faces only inches apart, Gersen halted, then drew abruptly back. He felt Jerdian's hands twitch in his

After a moment Gersen said, "If you recall, at Serjeuz, we spoke of Lens Larque "

Jerdian regarded him with pupils dilated "He is the most evil man alive'"

"You mentioned an unpleasant episode What happened?"

"It was nothing important, simply an incident We live in a district known as Llalarkno One day a Darsh wanted to buy the

house next to ours My father is not partial to the Darsh, he hates the smell of their food, he can't tolerate their music He cried out in a passion 'Go away, leave this land' You may not buy the house Do you think I want to look up every day to find your great Darsh face hanging over my wall? Be off with you''

"The Darsh walked away Later we learned that it was Lens Larque himself "

"What did he look like?"

"I hardly noticed I have the impression of a large man, with

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long arms. He had a big smooth head with a black mustache. His skin was brownish pink, pale Darsh color."

"You haven't seen him since?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"He never forgets a harm—so goes the Lens Larque legend—and he is famous for clever tricks."

"He can trick as he pleases. We maintain a careful security, because we are so close to Beyond But why are you interested in Lens Larque?"

"I hope to destroy him. First I must find him. So I buy Kotzash to attract his attention."

Jerdian stared at Gersen in awe and wonder. She started to speak but a tall shape loomed over them. Aldo, his head tilted somewhat back, mouth set in an austere droop. He bowed jerkily to Jerdian— "If you please, your aunt, the Excellent Mayness, is anxious that you should join her."

"Very well, I'll come at once."

Gersen spoke to Aldo. "You are planning an excursion out on the desert."

"That is correct."

"Where are you planning to go?"

"We are visiting the Chailles." Aide's tone was now icy.

"Come, if you will, Jerdian."

Gersen said: "The Darsh, both male and female, will be out in force."

"That is no concern to us, so long as they stay out of our sight."

"They may even cause you annoyance "

"We have hired a charabanc, the driver declares that there will be no slightest inconvenience. In any event, we are Methlen, the Darsh will keep their distance." He went to stand by Jerdian. Slowly she rose to her feet and walked away like a somnambulist.

Gersen sat brooding for a time, then went out to his space-boat. He paused beside the boarding ladder; he stood looking to the east across the desert, where the rising moon already illuminated the sky. Small groups of people slipped out from under the shade, riding vehicles, or going afoot, women and girls apart from the youths and men. On a dilapidated air-buggy came Delfin with three of his comrades, wearing light robes and gay head-sashes. They passed close beside Gersen, who hailed them. Delfin brought

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the air-buggy to a bouncing halt. Gersen moved forward. "How goes the evening?"

"So far very well."

"Have you located any more shares?"

"No. As you suggested, Bel Ruk is unhappy with today's events. He intends to whip both you and me."

"First he must catch us," said Gersen. "Then he must raise his whip."

"True. In any event, you will find no more Kotzash in Dmkelstown. Bel Ruk has ordained a great hadaul, to a prize of a thousand SVTJ. The robbers\* must challenge with either a hundred svu or twenty shares of Kotzash. Needless to say, all remaining Kotzash will go to finance the challenges."

"A pity," said Gersen.

"Still, you did your best and cleverly; you are a tnickish man. But why do you keep us talking? The kitchets are drinking moonlight!"

One of his comrades added- "Along with every old swagbottom of the Wale, as well."

"Look yonder!" cried Delfin in a voice of mirthful amazement. "There go the constipated Methlen out to enjoy the moonlight! Notice the man who drives the charabanc? That is Nobius, a trickster as sly as yourself"

Gersen acknowledged the compliment. "Do you expect that Nobius will trick the Methlen?"

Delfin made a jocular sign. "There is a tender kitchet named Farrero, she is guarded by three enormous khoontzes. Nobius vows that tonight he will take Farrero. How he will do this while driving the Methlen charabanc remains to be seen' We must be off There rises the Mirassou. Kitchets are running the sand and dreaming delicious dreams' Hoy! Off we go' Cambousse\*\* give us power'"

The buggy trundled off on soft wheels. Gersen turned to look after the charabanc, already a dark blur far across the sand.

Uneasy and fretful, annoyed by his own conflicting urges, Gersen watched the charabanc disappear. Methlen affairs were none of his concern—except the comfort and dignity of a certain Jerdian

\*Robleri, participants at a hadaul I he "rubles" are the concentric rings of a hadaul field,  
painted yellow, green and blue

\*\*The s.itvr Cambousse Pittaugh the Sand sprite, and Leino the Grandmother are elements of the Darsh mvtholog\

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Chanseth, toward whom he felt a whole range of emotions, protective and otherwise.

Well, there was no help for it. With a muttered curse, Gersen climbed into the vessel, opened a side port, swung out davits, and grounded the utility boat. He pulled a helmet over his head and clamped a night-seeing panoptic to the visor. Into the side rack he stowed a pair of weapons, then, stepping aboard, he took the boat into the sky.

Mirassou floated free of the horizon a great silver-white disk, subtle and serene, which nevertheless projected an ardent force. The Wale became a place where events otherwise unthinkable became not only conceivable but reasonable. Gersen, as always, aware of at least two levels of consciousness within his mind, was amused to find himself no less susceptible to Mirassou than Delfin. ... He slanted his boat somewhat to the south of the charabanc and drew abreast at an altitude of a thousand feet. Pulling the panoptic down over his eyes, he switched on the nocturnal phase, turned up the magnification, the charabanc with its passengers seemed only yards away. With splendid garments and moonlight-pale faces the Methlen seemed a company unreal: a troupe of Pierrots on a frivolous escapade Gersen watched in fascination, half-sardonic, half-envious. In all, ten Methlen rode the charabanc. Three young men sat along the stern seat. Four girls, a pair of older women, and Aldo occupied the side seats. Jerdian, frail and wan-seeming, sat far forward, turned somewhat away from the others. Influenced perhaps by Mirassou, Gersen felt a swelling of exhilaration for his own escapade on this moonlit night.

High in the front, on the coachman's bench, Nobius rode in a comfortable slouch, occasionally glancing back at his passengers in easy condescension. The older ladies, whenever they chanced to

notice him, became annoyed by what they conceived to be insolence and made haughty gestures, signaling Nobius to mind his driving;

commands which Nobius totally ignored, to augment the antic mood of the expedition.

Over the silken sands moved the charabanc. Ahead and somewhat to the side stood the Chailles. a decayed volcanic crag rising from a shoal of ledges and outcrops. One of the older ladies gave Nobius new instructions, signaling him to veer away from the Chailles. Nobius gave obsequious acquiescence, twitching the controls to change course, but as soon as the lady's attention was di-

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verted, he swung the charabanc back toward the rocks. Scanning the Chailles Gersen detected the flicker of white Darsh robes; other folk had gone out to enjoy Mirassou.

The Methlen ladies once again noticed the proximity of the Chailles, instantly and with vehemence they ordered Nobius to bear away, and again Nobius politely complied with the order, only after a moment cunningly veering the craft back to its original direction. His destination seemed to be a rocky hummock perhaps twenty feet high, standing free a few yards from the principal ledges. On top of the hummock stood a kitchet, quiet and pensive, looking south across the sands.

Nobius suddenly curved the charabanc smartly about, accelerated, and drove it into the sandy avenue between the hummock and the main ledges of the Chailles. The ladies expostulated sharply;

Nobius blandly paid them no heed, then suddenly pretended to hear. Bringing the charabanc to a halt just under the hummock, he turned in his seat as if the better to hear instructions.

The ladies spoke briskly and made agitated gesticulations, which Nobius attentively acknowledged. He turned in his seat, but now something had gone wrong with the machinery. The charabanc lurched forward a few yards, then halted even while Nobius diligently worked switches and levers. At the stern of the charabanc the three young men rose questioningly up in their seats. Nobius desisted from his efforts and sat wanly watching to the side.

Out from the shadows lurched three heavy figures in black gowns. They jumped forward; each seized one of the young Methlen men on the rear seat about his middle and carried him flailing and squirming off into the darkness.

Nobius crouched and became tense. From the shadows under the hummock came a fourth figure, even more massive than the others. She jumped aboard the charabanc, seized Aldo, and despite his shouts, carried him away.

Instantly Nobius bounded from the charabanc and up to the

top of the hummock. He seized the kitchet, led her down the far side and off into the dunes.

Stunned by events, the Methlen ladies rose dumbfounded in their seats. In the shadows and on the ledges was further motion;

the swirl of white robes, then a sudden rush to the charabanc and aboard. The first to arrive seized the girls, and the next, less en-

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thusiastically, possessed themselves of the chaperones, and all retreated to their preferred places.

The man who had seized Jerdian carried her out into the desert, ignoring both her outcries and her blows. A hundred yards out among the dunes he halted and lowered her to the sand. A flying platform landed beside them. Gersen stepped off. Jerdian made a sound of incredulous joy and relief.

The Darsh assumed an attitude of menace. "Be off with you; I am about to entertain this kitchet."

Speaking no words, Gersen pointed a hand gun at the man's feet and burnt the sand into a molten puddle. The Darsh jumped back in fear and fury. Gersen lifted Jerdian to her feet and put her aboard the boat; an instant later they were in the air, leaving the disconsolate Darsh staring after them.

At no great altitude the boat drifted southward over the dunes, Jerdian from time to time looking askance at Gersen. Presently she said in a husky voice: "I'm grateful to you. . . . I don't know what else to say. . . . How did you happen to be so promptly to hand?"

"I saw you on the charabanc. The driver is notorious; I came out to protect you from his tricks—even though you had not asked me to watch over you."

"I'm glad that you did." Jerdian drew a deep sigh. She looked back toward the black rocks, and made an odd sound, something between a sob and a laugh. "My aunt Mayness and my aunt Eustacia are back there. Can't we help them somehow?" Then by implication she answered her own question: "I suppose nothing too dreadful will happen."

"Whatever may happen, it's already in progress." Gersen removed his helmet and placed it in a locker. He allowed the boat to drift low, only thirty feet above the dunes. Jerdian leaned back in the seat and looked off across the sand. She showed neither anxiety nor any urgent desperation to be elsewhere. In a soft thoughtful voice she said: "The desert is a very strange place by moonlight. It gives off an enchantment like a dream place. . . . No surprise that it works so much mischief."

"I'm very conscious of this," said Gersen. He put his arm

around her shoulders and drew her close. She looked up and went limp against him; he kissed her, again and again.

The boat drifted low and grounded upon a sand dune. The two sat quietly, looking out over the moonlit sand. Presently Jerdian

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said, "I am unutterably surprised to find myself here with you. . . . And yet, perhaps not really surprised.... I can't help thinking of everyone's outrage. What will they say tomorrow? Will I be the only one returning with my virtue intact?"

Gersen kissed her again. "Not necessarily."

Ten seconds passed. Then Jerdian said in a husky whisper: "But I do have the option?"

"Yes indeed," said Gersen. "You have the option."

Jerdian stepped from the boat and walked a few feet out along the dune. Gersen came to stand beside her. Presently she turned to face him; again they embraced. Gersen spread the white Darsh cloak down upon the sand, and on the ancient dunes of the Wale, in the light of Mirassou, they became lovers.

The moon reached the zenith, and sank beyond. The night was becoming old; slowly the magic was dying. Gersen took Jerdian back to Dinkelstown, then returned to the charabanc. The four young men, sullen and disheveled, stood to the side. One of the chaperones and one of the girls sat silently in the charabanc. As Gersen approached, the other chaperone appeared through a cleft in the rocks. Wordlessly she climbed aboard the charabanc.

Gersen came forward; they looked at him with suspicious stares. "I happened past and was able to help Jerdian Chanseth," said Gersen. "She is back at the hotel, and you need not worry about her."

One of the older women, Aunt Mayness, said grimly: "We are sufficiently worried about ourselves; we all have had beastly experiences."

Aunt Eustacia said in a voice somewhat more moderate: "I suppose that we must be philosophical. We have suffered outrage, but no irreparable damage; let us be grateful at least to this extent."

"That is hardly my present emotion," snapped Aunt Mayness. "I was set upon time after time by a gross beast smelling of beer and that intolerable food."

"The man who attacked me also smelled poorly. Otherwise he was almost courteous, if the word is at all appropriate."

"Eustacia, you are far too bland!"

"I am, most of all, tired. If Jerdian is back at Dinkelstown that leaves only Millicent and Helen to be accounted for. Here they

come now, together. Let us leave this awful place."

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"And what of our reputations?" cried Aunt Mayness in a brassy voice. "We'll be the laughingstock of all Llalarkno!"

"Not if we bind ourselves to secrecy."

"How can we have these bestial Darsh punished if we hold our tongues?"

Gersen interposed a remark. "I doubt if you will be able to punish the Darsh. They assume that if you go out on the desert by night, your purpose is procreation. The guilty party is your driver;

he played you a merry trick."

Aunt Eustacia said, "This is the sad truth, so we might as well accept it. Let us just pretend nothing happened."

"This man knows! The Darsh know!"

"I'll say nothing," said Gersen. "The Darsh may make a few jokes among themselves, but probably that's as far as it will go. One of you men show some spirit! Drive the charabanc back to Din-

kelstown!"

Aldo grumbled: "If you'd been through what I have, you'd lack spirit too. I'll not go into details."

"None of us is happy with the night's events," snapped Aunt Mayness. "Now get up into the driver's seat and be brisk about it! I am more than anxious for a bath."

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From Games of the Galaxy, by Everett Wright: the chapter entitled "Hadaul."

Hadaul like all good games is characterized by complexity and the multiple levels upon which the game is played.

The basic apparatus is simple: a field suitably delineated and a certain number of players. The field is most often painted upon the pavement of a plaza; occasionally it will be constructed of carpet. There are many variations, but here is a typical arrangement. A pedestal stands at the center of a maroon disk. The pedestal can be of any configuration, and customarily supports the prize money. The diameter of the disk ranges from four to eight feet. Three concentric rings, each ten feet in width, surround the disk. These are known as "robles" and are painted (from in to out) yellow, green, and blue. The area beyond the blue ring

is known as "limbo."

Any number of contestants, or "robbers," may participate, but usually the game starts with a maximum of twelve and a minimum of four. Any more creates excessive congestion; any less reduces the scope of that trickery which is an essential element.

The rules are simple. The robbers take up positions around the yellow roble. All now are "yellow robbers." As the game starts they attempt to eject the other yellow robbers into the green roble. Once thrust or thrown into the green, a robber becomes "green" and may not return to

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yellow. He will now attempt to eject other green robbers into the blue. A yellow robber may venture into the green and return into yellow as a sanctuary; similarly a green robber may enter blue and return to the green, unless he is ejected from blue by a blue robber.

A game will sometimes end with one yellow robber, one green robber, and one blue robber. Yellow may be disinclined to attack green or blue; green disinclined to attack blue. At this stage no further play is possible. The game halts and the three robbers share the prize in a 3-2-1 ratio, yellow receiving the "3" or half share. Green or blue may wager new sums equal to the yellow prize, and by this means once again become yellow, a process which may continue until a single robber remains to claim the entire prize. Rules in this regard vary from hadaul to hadaul. At times a challenger may now propose a sum equal to the prize, the previous winner may or may not decline the challenge, according to local rules. Often the challenger may propose a sum double the prize, which challenge must be accepted, unless the winner has suffered broken bones, or other serious disability. These challenge matches are often fought with knives, staves, or, on occasion, whips. Not infrequently a friendly hadaul ends with a corpse being carried off on a litter. Referees monitor the play assisted by electronic devices which signal crossings of the roble boundaries.

Conspiracy is an integral part of the game. Before the game starts the various robbers form alliances of offense or defense, which may or may not be honored. Tricks, crafty betrayal, duplicity are considered natural adjuncts to the game; it is surprising, therefore, to note how often the tricked robber becomes indignant, even though he himself might have been intending the same treachery.

Hadaul is a game of constant flux, constant surprise; no one game is ever like another. Sometimes the contests are jovial and good-natured, with everyone enjoying the tricks;

sometimes tempers are ignited by some flagrant act of falsity, and blood is wont to flow. The spectators wager among

themselves, or, at major hadauls, against mutualization agencies. Each major shadestages several hadauls each year,

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on the occasion of their festivals, and these hadauls are considered among the prime tourist spectacles of Dar Sai.

Gersen slept in his space vessel and awoke to find Cora halfway up the sky. He lay still a few moments. Already the events of last night had lost reality. What of Jerdian? No longer intoxicated by the moonlight nor emotionally vulnerable by reason of her rescue, how would she feel?

Gersen bathed and dressed, today in ordinary spaceman's gear. He armed himself with care, not knowing what the day might bring.

He ran through the heat, under the water veil, and went to the hotel garden. The Methlen were already at their table. Jerdian turned him a quick half smile, and gave her fingers a secret flutter. Gersen was reassured: she felt no regrets. The other Methlen paid him no notice.

As Gersen made his breakfast, he watched the Methlen. The young men were surly and taciturn. The women seemed more serene, but spoke in measured voices. Only Jerdian showed good spirits, for which she received reproachful glances.

At last the group finished their meal. Jerdian crossed to Gersen's table. He jumped to his feet. "Sit down with me."

"I don't dare. Everyone is a bit edgy, and Aunt Mayness has her suspicions. I'm not worried, since with her they are automatic."

"When can I see you? Tonight?"

Jerdian shook her head. "We're staying for the hadaul, because that's why we came; then we'll fly back to Serjeuz and tomorrow over to Llalarkno."

"Then I'll visit you at Llalarkno."

Jerdian smiled wistfully and gave her head a shake. "Everything is so different in Llalarkno."

"Will you feel differently?"

"I don't know. It would be better if I did. Right now I'm in love with you; I've thought of you all night and all this morning."

After a moment Gersen said: "I notice that you say 'I'm in love with you,' rather than 'I love you.' "

Jerdian laughed. "You are very perceptive. There is a distinction. I love something; I'm sure of that. Perhaps it's you; perhaps—

who knows what?" She searched his face. "Are you offended?"

"It's not exactly what I'd like to hear. Still—I often wonder

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about myself. Am I a man? Or a motivated mechanism? Or an absurd distorted idea?"

Jerdian laughed again. "There's no question in my mind; you are quite delinitely a man."

"Jerdian!" called Aunt Mayness in a cold voice. "Come along; we are going to the grandstand."

Jerdian gave Gersen a wan smile and walked away. Gersen watched her go, an ache at the base of his throat. Foolishness, he told himself; sophomoric nonsense! He was languishing like a schoolboy! He could allow himself no emotional attachments until the work which obsessed his life was done! . . . He followed the Methlen to the center of the plaza, where now a crowd milled around the robes.

The hadaul was about to start; the most characteristic of all Darsh spectacles, an activity somewhere between a game and a gang fight, given savor by tricks, broken faith, and opportunism: in short, a microcosm of Darsh society.

To make convenient provision for spectators was a concept foreign to Darsh philosophy. Those who cared to watch were forced either to use the makeshift grandstands, to perch upon the surrounding structures, or to crowd close to the fence which surrounded the robes.

On a post hung a set of boards listing participants in the various hadauls. Gersen could not read the looping Darsh script. He approached the registration booth and attracted the clerk's attention. "Which is Bel Ruk's hadaul?"

"That would be the third round." The official tapped one of the placards. "The challenge is a hundred sw, or twenty-five Kotzash shares."

"How many challenges have been made?"

"So far nine."

"How much Kotzash?"

"A hundred shares."

Not enough, thought Gersen. He needed at least 120 shares. He looked in distaste toward the robes and the grandstands

crowded with white-robed Darsh. Fastidiously aloof, in a section reserved for tourists, sat the Methlen. Gersen gave a fatalistic shrug. The game was strange to him; the Darsh would be quick to take advantage of an iskish. Still, a hundred shares would bring him close to control of the company. He paid over the last of his money: a

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single hundred-SVU certificate. "Here is my challenge; for Bel Ruk's hadaul."

The clerk drew back incredulously. "You intend to compete in the robes? Sir, you are iskish and I only tell you for good nature, but you are risking broken bones; there are strong and notorious trickers going into Bel Ruk's hadaul."

"It will be an interesting experience. Does Bel Ruk himself take part?"

"He has guaranteed a thousand-svu prize, but he will not fight. If the challenges exceed a thousand SW he will profit."

"But the Kotzash shares are part of the prize?"

"Exactly so; the challenges, including the shares, go on the prize board."

"Then put my name on the placard."

"As you wish. The bone-setters sit under yonder red nag."

Gersen found a vantage where he could look over the field. The robbers for the first turn had now appeared: twelve young men wearing correct hadaul attire: short trousers of white canvas, a singlet of brown, gray, or pale red, cloth slippers, a head-cloth, tied so as to gather up dangling earlobes. The robbers walked around the periphery of the blue, pausing to talk together, sometimes confidentially, mouth to ear; sometimes exchanging no more than a jocular word. Occasionally small groups formed to listen while tactical theories were expounded. Another robber might join such a group to hear plots not to his liking, whereupon angry words would be exchanged, and on one occasion a small scuffle.

From a nearby dumble came the referees: four old men wearing embroidered red-and-black vests. Each carried a six-foot wand terminating in a puff-ejector. The chief referee additionally bore a glass bowl containing the prize—in this case, a sheaf of SVU certificates. He went to the central disk and placed the prize upon the pedestal.

The referees took up their positions. The chief referee struck upon his chest-gong with a heavy metal thimble; the contestants desisted from their conversations and ranged themselves around the yellow robe.

The chief referee spoke: "I now command an ordinary hadaul of craft and force, a ban upon all wields and weapons, and a pri/e of one hundred SVU vouchsafed by the trustworthy Luke Lamas. I now ring the seventeen-second bell." He rapped his chest-gong;

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the players began a restless shuffling motion, sidling to positions from which they hoped to gain advantage.

Again the chief struck a tone from his chest-gong. "Six seconds."

The players crouched, darted glances right and left, extended their arms in formalized postures.

Two sharp tones from the chest-gong. "Play!"

The players moved to the contest, some fast, some deliberate. Some would attempt pre-agreed stratagems; others would betray the same. Three converged on one massive man to hurtle him into the green. In a rage he dragged one with him and swung him dancing across and into the blue. The referees at once used their wands to mark the two with colored fluffs.

Wrestling, butting, tripping, hurdling: one by one the players were ejected from yellow into green, from green into blue, from blue into limbo and away from the game. Some players used agility, others massive strength. A favorite ploy, running around the robes to attack an adversary from the back, kept the game in constant motion. In general the game seemed good-humored; the players chortled at a clever thrust or a particularly stealthy attack from the rear, but as fewer and fewer players remained in the robes, and the prospect of winning the prize became ever more possible, the mood became more intense. Faces became strained and corded; lunges verged on the ferocious; two players in the blue began to exchange blows. As they struck out at each other a third player darted out of the green and thrust both into limbo. The combatants continued to flail away at each other—not too skillfully, so Gersen noticed—until a referee ordered cessation, on the grounds that they distracted attention from the hadaul.

Finally there remained a single player in the green and a larger, heavier player in the blue. Green ran along the boundary, feinting and dodging, while blue limped back and forth pretending pain, fatigue, and despair. Green, however, thought better of venturing into the blue, preferring a certain three-fifths of the prize to the strong possibility of none. Blue at last began to hurl taunts, hoping to infuriate green into recklessness. Green stood stock-still, considered a careful moment, then turned to the chief referee as if about to request termination of play. Blue turned away in disgust; instantly green lunged at his back, to thrust him into limbo. The chief referee struck three tones on his gong, terminating the game, and

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the entire prize went to that resourceful robler who had deceived his opponent.

The basic theory of the game was simple, Gersen decided. Flexibility, vigilance, and a wide field of vision were almost as important as strength and weight. The thrusts, twists, throws, and pushes showed him nothing new; if he could avoid the concerted effort of four or five adversaries he felt that his chances were at least fair. He went to the referees' hut, where he discovered that his costume, while eccentric and sub-standard, could not be judged illegal, except for his boots. One of the referees, rummaging in a box, discovered a pair of dirty old slippers, which Gersen fatalistically strapped to his feet.

Returning outside, Gersen saw Bel Ruk at the registration desk. He seemed angry and agitated; Gersen deduced that he had looked down the list of robbers and there had seen the name Kirth Gersen.

Bel Ruk moved aside and spoke to a tall strong man in robber's costume: a conversation, reflected Gersen, which undoubtedly concerned himself.

The second game, for a prize of two thousand SVU, went with considerably more zeal and less joviality than the first. The victor was a certain Dadexis; a middle-aged man, thin, sinewy, and wickedly clever. He was immediately challenged by a frustrated young robber who had been ejected early in the bout. Dadexis, now with the option of weapons, chose afflocks, that implement with the pronged ball at the end of an elastic thong, which pleased the challenger not at all, but which he must now use or forfeit his challenge stake.

The spectators rose to their feet and pressed so close to the robbers that the referees decreed an empty periphery around the field of play. The chief referee rang his gong; the contestants took up their positions and the challenge match proceeded. The bout was short and devoid of either blood, pain or drama, to the annoyance of the spectators. The canny Dadexis, in a practice flourish, swung his afflock with such frightening skill that the challenger became suddenly gloomy. The contest started; Dadexis sidled and dodged, easily avoiding the effect of his opponent's weapon, then snapped out his own thong. The ball curled around the haft of the other's afflock; Dadexis jerked and the challenger was bereft. Dadexis grinned, flourished his afflock around the field and at four gong

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tones from the referee went to pick up his now augmented prize, while the challenger walked away

Gersen looked toward the grandstand, and discovered Jerdian. She had risen to her feet with the others, the better to observe the

challenge bout, now she settled in her seat between her aunt May-  
ness and Aldo What would she think to see him thrusting and  
bumping, slinking, sliding and lunging, in the robes with the  
Darsh5

At the very least, mused Gersen, she would be perplexed

The contestants for the third hadaul gathered around the field,  
among them, so Gersen noted, that man whom he had noticed with  
Eel Ruk

The chief referee spoke into his microphone. "A hadaul of one  
thousand SVTJ guaranteed by the generous Bel Ruk' Eleven contes-  
tants have challenged with six hundred SVL and one hundred  
twenty-five shares of Kotzash. They include experts from several  
clans and even an iskish "

Feeling slightly ridiculous Gersen went out to join the others  
around the robes One hundred twenty-five shares' If he won the  
hadaul he won Kotzash Mutual Syndicate

At once a stocky round-faced man came to consult with him  
"Have you ever played hadaul before5"

"No," said Gersen "I expect I have a lot to learn "

"Too true Well, let's arrange a compact I am Rudo You, I,  
and Slash yonder are undoubtedly the three weakest players here.  
If we work together we can cut down the odds "

"Good idea," said Gersen "WTio is the strongest5"

"Throngarro yonder"—this was Bel Ruk's confidant—"and  
Mize, the great heavy man "

"Let's first eject Throngarro, then Mi?e "

"Agreed' Easier said than done, of course Our pact holds until  
these two are ejected "

Gersen, now entering into the spirit of the game, looked around  
for other possible allies Pie was again approached, by a stalwart  
young man who exuded that reckless swaggering manner known as  
plambosh "You are Gersen5 I am Chalcane You won't win, of  
course, nor will I, but let's ally ourselves against Furbil yonder He's  
rude and vicious and best ejected early "

"Why not5" said Gersen "I'd also like to eject Throngarro,  
I'm told he's dangerous "

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"True enough Furbil, then Throngarro, and we guard each  
other at least until the green, or even blue, agreed5"

"Agreed "

"Then here's how we thrust Furbil. You feint him from the side, when he turns to deal with you I'll leg him from the rear, you push and he's tumbled "

"Sound tactics," said Gersen "I'll do my best "

A moment or two later Furbil came to confer with Gersen  
"You're the iskish5 Well, good luck to you But you'll want more than luck I suggest that we work in duo "

"I'm agreeable to anything that will keep me in the game."

"Good See that young chap yonder5 That's Chalcone, an insolent rascal, but quick and deft. Here's how we'll ditch him From opposite sides we'll close on him, you drop in front of him, I'll swing him and away he goes, halfway into the stands "

"First, Throngarro," said Gersen. "He's the most threatening of the group."

"Oh very well, Throngarro first, with the same tactics, then Chalcone "

"If we're still in the robes "

"No fear there So long as we work together'"

Three more contestants approached Gersen, suggesting ploys and cooperations of various kinds, to which Gersen gave a general acquiescence, on the theory that any advantage was better than no advantage whatever

Among the spectators he glimpsed Bel Ruk, and for an instant met his baleful glare Gersen also took occasion to glance toward the Methlen, to find Jerdian watching him in total bewilderment.

The chief referee marched to the central pedestal and there arranged the challenges packets of svu certificates and folded Kot-zash shares.

The chief referee pounded his chest-gong "Contestants assume your positions!"

The eleven men moved into the yellow robe  
A gong "I call thirty-one seconds'"

The contestants began to move here and there, hoping to achieve favorable angles of attack against those adversaries they considered the most critically dangerous

Another gong "I call seventeen seconds'"

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The contestants crouched, looked right and left, hopped warily away from obvious thrusts.

"Six seconds'."

Then: "Play hadaul!"

Eleven men created a swirl of motion. Gersen, noticing Throngarro sidling purposefully toward him, moved away. Behind Throngarro appeared Chalcone. He caught Gersen's eye, made a sign, and thrust at Throngarro, who turned to fend off the attack. Gersen moved in, thrust, and Throngarro was greened. "Now Furbil!" exclaimed Chalcone. "Remember our compact! You make the feint. There he is; quick now!"

Gersen obligingly feinted at Furbil, who recoiled against Chalcone, who seized his arm and attempted to swing him into green. Furbil deftly retained his footing, and using their joint movement greened Chalcone. Gersen came behind, thrust, and Furbil also stumbled into the green. At the same instant a massive force struck Gersen from the side: the vast bulk of Mize, whose methods were brutally simple; he merely walked around the yellow, shouldering everyone he met into green. By sheer luck Gersen chanced to catch hold of Skish backing away from another adversary; by greening Skish, Gersen retained his balance and remained in the yellow. Gersen signaled to Rudo and indicated Mize. Sensing the joint attack, Mize put his back to the center table, swung his great arms in menacing circles. "Come at me then, if you dare!"

Gersen seized one of the arms and was almost jerked from his feet. At the same time Rudo, his erstwhile ally, seized him around the waist from behind and attempted to hustle him from the yellow. Gersen jerked his head back into Rudo's nose. He broke the grip and dived behind the great bulk of Mize. Here he put his back to the pedestal, raised his feet, thrust, and sent Mize lurching toward the green, into which he was assisted by Rudo, his nose streaming red. Furious and roaring Mize charged at Throngarro, who nimbly gave way. Four of the green robbers seized on various parts of Mize:

lurching, dancing, cursing, roaring he was thrust through blue toward limbo, but threw himself backward, kicked, and so escaped,

Gersen stood back to assess the situation. Throngarro and Mize, the two most formidable adversaries, had been ejected from yellow, where he remained with four others. Each of the five, with Throngarro and Mize ejected, could now realistically envision victory, and so became correspondingly more cautious. There were

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no more alliances either to be honored or betrayed; each man was reluctant to commit himself for fear of attack from the rear.

Gersen noticed that the other robbers were regarding him with

wary respect. An iskish who had survived so long must be a man to take seriously.

From the corner of his eye Gersen saw Rudo and a certain Hement exchange a few words; then Rudo sidled toward Gersen. "Does our compact still hold?"

"Of course," said Gersen.

"Then Dexter is next, the tall squint-eyed man. You come at him from the side, I'll pass him and catch him in a crotch constrictor, and out he goes. On the ready!"

Gersen, as instructed, sidled toward Dexter, at the same time watching Hement. Just as he came within arm's length of Dexter, Hement lunged toward him, as did Dexter, and smartly from behind, his erstwhile ally Rudo. Gersen had been expecting the ploy. He pulled Dexter into Hement, threw Rudo head over heels into the green, then seizing Dexter's leg, heaved him into the green just as a flying body struck him from behind. Gersen bent, reached over his head, jerked and his assailant toppled on top of Dexter in the green. As they staggered erect, both were seized and blued. Hement somewhat tentatively seized Gersen's arm and tried to swing him;

Gersen hacked, feinted, reached, heaved. Hement hurtled into the green, and Gersen was now left alone in the yellow save for a single other: a bulky young man who had retained yellow principally by staying out of everyone else's way. Gersen advanced upon him; he retreated. Gersen stalked him around the ring once, then twice, whereupon the young robler could retreat no further: to be chased three times around the ring meant automatic ejection into the next robe. Warily the two came together. Gersen extended his arm; the other gingerly took his wrist, essayed a pull. Gersen fell forward, applied an armlock, swung the young man around, and marched him hopping and squirming to the green.

Gersen was now alone in the yellow. He might, if he chose, venture into green, or even blue, and still return to yellow—unless in the green he were forcibly ejected into blue, or, in the blue, thrust into limbo. But he felt no interest in participating in green or blue contests, where theroblers, now anxious and angry, had abandoned temperate conduct. They struck, kicked, butted, and kned with gasping, roaring, cursing abandon. Gersen leaned

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against the pedestal and watched the activity. Throngarro, in blue, had come to grips with Rudo. Gersen watched Throngarro's tactics with interest, he was undoubtedly a skillful fighter quick, strong, and resourceful. He was still no match for Mize, whose sheer bulk made him almost impregnable. At the thought of facing Mize one to one, Gersen grimaced. He probably would win, by striking and hacking, and attempting to close Mize's eye, but he would surely suffer sprains and bruises, possibly broken bones, or even a broken neck.

Throngarro had ejected Rudo, he now gave his attention to Mize. Forming a cabal with a pair of other blues, he attacked Mize. The three men were jerked around like ants on a beetle. Finally, more by luck than design, they caused Mize to stumble into limbo, where he flung himself prone and beat the ground with his fists. Throngarro meanwhile took advantage of the situation to thrust out the two who had assisted him with Mize.

Gersen glanced around the ring of spectators. He encountered Bel Ruk's baleful glare, and let his gaze swing past. He looked toward the Methlen and for a flickering instant caught Jerdian's eye, he could not read her expression. Her aunt Mayness called to her and Jerdian looked away.

The hadaul reached a static level. In blue stood Throngarro, in the green Chalcone and in the yellow Gersen. If the hadaul, as of now, terminated, the prize would be divided 3-2-1.

Gersen spoke to Throngarro and Chalcone: "I'll take the Kotzash shares; you two can divide the money six hundred SVU. Is this agreeable to you both?"

Chalcone calculated. "I agree."

Throngarro started to speak, then looked back at Bel Ruk, who gave his head a stern shake. Throngarro reluctantly said, "No, the whole prize must be shared out."

Gersen signaled Chalcone up close to the yellow-green boundary. "Let's make a compact, which I guarantee to honor, if you will make the same guarantee."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Let us both go into blue and eject Throngarro, then I will return to yellow and you to green. I will take the Kotzash and you can take the money, all six hundred SVU."

"I agree to this compact."

"Mind you," said Gersen, "this is a contract of honor, not a

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hadaul ploy. If you break your promise I will take the matter most seriously. You can trust me, can I trust you?"

"For this single occasion, yes."

"Very well. You go in on the left, I on the right, with an arm's length between us and we will push him out backwards."

"Agreed."

With no more ado Gersen stepped into the green, then into blue, with Chalcone beside him. Throngarro waited in a crouch.

Conceiving his best hope lay in attack, he sprang out at Chalcone, hoping to tackle him around the middle and hurl him around and run him out into limbo Gersen hooked his arm, whereupon Chalcone seized the other arm Gersen kicked the back of Throngarro's knees, Throngarro collapsed, but as he did so kicked Chalcone in the groin and Chalcone went down, bent double Throngarro kicked at Gersen, who seized Throngarro's ankle and twisted, Throngarro screamed as the ligaments tore He struggled to roll over and away, Gersen turned the ankle again Throngarro was forced to roll once again, up to the very edge of limbo, where in a frenzy he struggled and lurched Lashing out with his free foot he kicked Gersen in the side Gersen turned the ankle again, Throngarro, screaming in despair, rolled out into limbo

Gersen stood back panting Chalcone had gained his feet but stood crouched in pain, pressing at his lower abdomen I he two considered each other, Chalcone with glazed eyes Gersen returned into yellow and Chalcone hobbled back into ^recn Gersen called to the chief referee "Give me the Kotzash shares, give Chalcone the money, and the hadaul is ended "

The chief referee asked Chalcone "Are you agreed to this division?"

"Yes. I am more than satisfied "

"So, let it be " He spoke into his microphone "For the first time in my recollection and perhaps in all the annals of our glorious game, an iskish has won at a major game, in combat against the best of Dar Sai I now call out for challenges, does anyone challenge the victory of this redoubtable iskish?"

Bel Ruk stood talking furiously to Throngarro, who sat on a bench, his sprained ankle already swollen Throngarro merely shook his head Bel Ruk savagely turned away "I challenge!" he shouted hoarsely "It is I, Bel Ruk, and we shall fight with whips "

"Weapons are at the option of the challenged, as well you

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know," said the chief referee. "Do you challenge both Chalcone and Gersen?"

"No, I challenge Gersen alone."

The chief referee gave the SVU certificates to Chalcone. "Go in pride from this hadaul!"

"I do so, and I give honor to Gersen, who plays with great skill " Chalcone took the money and hobbled gratefully off the field.

Bel Ruk marched forward. He gave the referee two SVU. "Here is double the value of one hundred twenty-five shares of Kotzash, which are known to be worthless."

The referee stood back in disapproval. "You yourself placed a value upon these shares of four SVU each'"

"By no means' I guaranteed a prize of a thousand SVU; I agreed to allow twenty-five shares to represent a hundred SVU. If Gersen wishes to surrender the one hundred twenty-five shares to me, I will pay him five hundred SVU. Otherwise he will lose his life, as I will kill him if he opposes me."

"You take a stern attitude," said the referee. "Well, Gersen, what is it to be5 Bel Ruk is challenging your Kotzash and your life and all it costs him is a misery two SVU. If you wish to withdraw, evidently Bel Ruk will pay you five hundred SVU for your Kotzash, and you will have spent a profitable day. I must inform you that Bel Ruk is notoriously skillful with his whips and weapons; your chances are not at all good. Still, you may specify which weapons, if any, are to be used."

Gersen shrugged "If I must fight him, I will use either knives or bare hands, as he wishes."

"Knives'" cried Bel Ruk. "I will undertake to cut him apart."

One of the referees tendered a tray in which rested a pair of daggers, with black wooden grips and double-edged blades almost a foot long.

Gersen took one of the knives and hefted it. The blade, a long thin triangle, broad at the grip, made for a lack of that balance which Gersen preferred, still, he decided, it would do well enough;

certainly it was not a weapon designed to be thrown, which implied the absence of such skill among the Darsh. He looked up in the stands, to find an expression of fascinated horror onJerdian's face.

The chief referee spoke: "The bout will be fought within the robes, and will continue until one of the parties m contention in-

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dicates surrender, either by throwing up his hands, or by crying out, or by vacating the robes, or until he is unable to proceed, or until I cry a halt The bout will be tree, there are neither regulations nor limitations You may take up positions in the yellow, on opposite sides of the pedestal The bout will begin at the fourth gong-strike and continue until I intervene, when it must come to an instant halt, on pain of three days in the cesspit. So guard your ardor and stop fighting at my command, since I will have no leasurely carving up of a disabled man." These words were accompanied by a meaningful glance toward Bel Ruk. "Three retreating or pursued circuits of the pedestal also constitute surrender. I now sound the thirty-one second gong Take your places."

Gersen and Bel Ruk faced each other across the pedestal.

"Seventeen seconds."

Bel Ruk waved his blade back and forth, enjoying the feel of death. "I have been waiting for this occasion "

"I am not averse to it," said Gersen "Tell me, did you go out on the Mount Pleasant raid?"

"Mount Pleasant? That was long ago."

"So you were there."

Bel Ruk's only response was a cold grin.

"I can now kill you without compunction," said Gersen.

"Six seconds' Gentlemen, flourish your weapons' At the next gong-strike, make your engagement' "

The seconds marched past, traversing that mysterious boundary which separates future from past.

The gong sounded.

Bel Ruk advanced around the pedestal, kneeling low and held as if it were a sword. Gersen waited in a slouch, then threw the knife at Bel Ruk's heart. The blade skimmed fair to its target, struck with metallic clink, rebounded, and fell to the ground. Bel Ruk evidently wore a vest of dymnet sequins under his singlet. The referee made no protest; apparently the vest was considered a legal accessory

As soon as the knife struck the ground, Bel Ruk kicked it toward limbo; simultaneously Gersen sprang forward and Bel Ruk's attention was diverted. The knife slid to a halt just inches inside the blue

Bel Ruk thrust- Gersen ducked sideways to the left and hacked with his hand at the side of the burly neck and punched at Bel Ruk's left eye. Bel Ruk hacked at Gersen's ribs- the blade cut

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through his blouse and laid open six inches of skin: blood oozed forth.

In a rage Gersen caught Bel Ruk's arm, applied a lock, tripped Bel Ruk, and using Bel Ruk's own momentum broke the elbow joint.

Bel Ruk gave a grunt; the knife dropped from his limp fingers. But he groped with his left hand, seized the haft, and cut up backwards, plunging the knife into Gersen's thigh. Gersen stood back aghast. Had he become so clumsy? He now bled from two wounds;

he would soon go limp and weak, and then he would be killed. .. Not yet! He hacked at Bel Ruk's neck once again. As Bel Ruk attempted to break away and stab, Gersen caught Bel Ruk's left

arm, but could not apply a lock. Bel Ruk jerked away, to stand panting, his right arm limp, his left eye almost closed.

Bleeding from ribs and thigh, Gersen limped over to his knife. Bel Ruk rushed after, dagger held high for a downward thrust. Gersen caught the upraised arm, then reached down to catch Bel Ruk's knee as it jerked up toward his crotch. He heaved; Bel Ruk tottered back, and Gersen retrieved his knife from Bel Ruk, mouth open, nostrils distended, eyes bruised, came staggering forward. Gersen threw the knife a second time. It plunged almost to the hilt into Bel Ruk's corded neck. Bel Ruk fell to his knees, and with a final effort, almost a reflex, threw his knife at Gersen. The point dropped; the edge cut Gersen's hip. Bel Ruk sagged forward and the weight of his body drove the dagger entirely through his neck, and the point issued six inches from the nape.

"I declare the hadaul ended!" called the referee. "Gersen is the winner, his prize is one hundred twenty-five shares of Kotzash and two SVL."

Gersen took the certificates and staggered from the robes. A surgeon led him to a nearby dumble and attended to his wounds.

One hundred twenty-five shares of Kotzash' Gersen now owned 2,416 shares, 6 over half. He controlled Kotzash Mutual.

Gersen emerged from the dumble to find that Bel Ruk's corpse had been carried away. He looked up into the stands. The Methlen had departed, apparently having seen enough.

Gersen limped away from the area, and out to his spaceship. He climbed aboard, secured the hatches, took the vessel into the air and east toward Serjeuz.

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Gersen spent the night in his spaceship, drifting over the desert. In the morning he landed beside the Serjeuz water veils. Impelled by caprice he dressed in loose trousers of black twill, a white linen blouse, and a dark green sash: the costume that a wealthy young aristocrat of Avente on Alphanor might wear on a promenade. He hobbled through the morning sunlight, under the water veils, then out upon the plaza. The garden at the Sfennde Select was almost untenanted. At the Traveler's Inn a few early tourists sat at breakfast.

Gersen went into the lobby. At a telephone he called the Sferinde Select and asked to be connected to Mistress Jerdian Chanseth. Presently her soft voice came from the speaker. "Yes? Who is it?"

"Kirth Gersen."

"Wait a moment, while I close the door. . . . Kirth Gersen! Why did you do what you did? Everyone believes you insane!"

"I needed a hundred and twenty more shares of Kotzash. Now I control the company."

"But the risks you took'"

"I couldn't avoid them. Were you worried for me?"

"Of course! My heart was in my throat. I didn't want to watch, but I couldn't not watch. Everyone says that Bel Ruk was a notorious assassin, extremely skilled with weapons. They think that you must be the same."

"That's not the case. Can I see you?"

"I don't know how. We're leaving for Llalarkno at once and Aunt Mayness is with me every moment. She's certain already that something is wrong with me. . . Where are you? At the Traveler's Inn?"

"Yes."

"I'll come across; I can risk fifteen minutes."

"I'll meet you in the garden, where we sat before."

"Where I first decided that I was in love with you. Do you remember?"

"I remember."

"I'll be right there."

Gersen went out to the garden. Two minutes later Jerdian appeared. She wore the same dark green gown in which he first had seen her. He rose to his feet; she came into his arms and they kissed—once, twice, three times. "This is so pointless," said Jerdian. "This is the last time I'll ever see you."

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"So I tell myself. But I find it hard to make myself believe it."

"Somehow you must find a way." Jerdian looked over her shoulder. "I'd be in disgrace if I were found here with you."

Gersen was a trifle nettled by the remark. "Would you mind so very much?"

"Well—yes. At Llalarkno we maintain very exact images."

"What if I came to Llalarkno?"

Jerdian shook her head. "Our world is small. Everyone knows everyone else, and we must live up to expectations. It makes for a happy existence—usually."

For a long minute Gersen looked at her. Then he said: "If I could offer you a happy serene life I wouldn't listen. But I can't assure you of anything but anxiety, travel to strange uncomfortable

places, and perhaps danger. . . . Not in the foreseeable future. . . . So, good-bye."

Tears welled up in Jerdian's eyes. "I can't abide that word; it's like death. . . . Sometimes I wish you'd just carry me to your ship and fly away with me. I'd not resist, or cry out; I'd be thrilled with happiness!"

"It would be wonderful for a while. But I can't do it. I'd only bring you grief."

Jerdian rose to her feet, blinking against the tears. "I must go."

Gersen stood up but made no move toward her. She hesitated, then came to him and kissed his cheek. "I'll never forget you." She turned and walked from the garden.

Gersen sat back in his chair. The episode was finished. He would forget Jerdian Chanseth as quickly and as thoroughly as possible. He was now in a hurry. Panshaw still would not know of Bel Ruk's death, nor of Gersen's new status as Kotzash majority stockholder. He used one of the two SVU he had won from Bel Ruk to buy his breakfast, then returned to his ship. Into a case he packed a set of tools, then limped hurriedly to Dindar House, under Skansel Shade. He went directly to Panshaw's office.

As before the door was locked. Gersen brought tools from his bag, cut the lock free, and thrust open the door, careless of any alarm which might be set off. With Otile Panshaw off-planet and Bel Ruk dead, there might be no one to heed such an alarm. He entered the room, which as before smelled stale and rancid.

He heard hurrying footsteps in the hall. Two men looked

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through the door. Gersen gave them a cool inspection. "WT-io are you and what do you want here?"

One of the men said sharply: "I am manager of this building. Mr. Bel Ruk has asked me to keep a lookout against intruders. How dare you break into this office?"

"I control Kotzash Mutual. This office is my responsibility; it is my right to enter and do as I like, with or without a key."

"Bel Ruk said nothing to me of this."

"Nor will he ever. Bel Ruk is dead."

The manager's face became grave. "That is sad news."

"Not for any honest man. Bel Ruk was a scoundrel. He deserved worse than he got. Now please go away; I intend to examine the Kotzash records. If you care to inquire about me, I refer you

to Adario Chanseth, at the Chanseth Bank."

"As you say, sir." The two men withdrew and after a whispered consultation in the hall, departed.

Gersen started with the file cabinets, then went to the shelves, then explored the desk. He found records of Kotzash dealings; of ore acquisition and the corresponding distribution of share vouchers, information which at one time he would gladly have possessed. Now it meant nothing. He discovered copies of leases, licenses and mineral exploration rights granted to Kotzash: all worthless, so he had been assured. He made a parcel of these and set them aside.

The desk yielded nothing of interest whatever.

Gersen looked around the office one last time. It had harbored Ottile Panshaw, Bel Ruk, and, almost certainly, Lens Larque; the air still seemed tainted.

Gersen departed Dindar House. He went directly to his Fantastic Flitterwing, and a few minutes later was gone into space.

PART

Methel

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From Peoples of the Coranne, by Richard Pelto.

Methel! the enchanted planet where a folk superb, handsome, proud, and splendidly dressed live in privilege, ostentatious privacy, and the often irritating conviction of their own superiority.

"Arrogance," a word functionally apt when applied to the Methlen, carries far too many incorrect connotations, and quite misrepresents the ingenuous charm of this people. Even their servitors and functionaries—the so-called Mongrels—regard the Methlen with an amused and even appreciative tolerance, which, while often wry, is seldom bitter.

For the student of the human condition and its infinite permutations, the Methlen are a fascinating case. Their history is relatively uneventful. Methel was located for and chartered to the membership of Aretioi, an exclusive club of Zangelberg on Stanislas. Tracts of land were allocated among the membership; the remainder of the planet was designated a wilderness reserve. Many Aretioi who came from Zangelberg to visit remained in residence, and all enormously augmented their wealth by dealing in duodecimates.

With great dedication the Methlen have kept their world private and remote. A spaceport at the service city Twanish is the single depot of ingress or egress. The pop-

ulation of Methel is small. Twenty thousand Methlen inhabit Llalarkno; perhaps as many more keep to their

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country estates. Twanish is, in effect, an enclave inhabited by fifty thousand Mongrels, offworlders of many varieties:

a mixed race indeed, which includes the occasional result of a Methlen/non-Methlen liaison, and a large colony of Darsh, who undertake menial tasks.

Llalarkno is more like an outsized village than a town. The wonderful Methlen homes are sacred to the families who inhabit them. Each is named; each owns a reputation, or an atmosphere, or a mood, which is unique and well known. In these houses the Methlen perform their rituals, play their games, and undertake the pageants which provide variety and color for their lives. Tournaments of a hundred sorts, theatricals, opera cycles, pavaues, classical pantomime; the spectacles progress in their seasons; there are roles for everyone.

Drama is the grand motif of Methlen existence. Part of the game is to pretend that all other folk of the Oikumene are primitive or at best uncouth. The more perceptive Methlen recognize the game for what it is: a fantasy or frivolity to be enjoyed for its own sake. Others hold the concept to be a fundamental truth. The Methlen in general lack awareness of their propensities. They tend to overstate, to make grand gestures, to adopt flamboyant postures. Every instant becomes a new tableau where they arrange themselves to best advantage. However and withal, the Methlen are a hardheaded people who make few mistakes, and will not allow an extravagance to proceed to where it becomes inconvenient.

Eight forts orbited Methel at a distance of half a million miles. Following procedures specified in Space Pilot and Gazetteer, Gersen declared himself to one of these forts. He was boarded and examined by a Methlen lieutenant and a pair of cadets, and presently cleared for entry. He was assigned a landing plat at Twanish Spaceport and a traffic channel for the guidance of his autopilot.

The fortress authorities departed; the Fantamic Flitterwing dropped away toward Methel: a globe solemn and magnificent, showing like mottled velvet, dark blue and green, in the Cora-light. To the side drifted the moon Shanitra, an angular lump of sinter

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the color of ash, an object to which Gersen controlled exclusive rights of mineral exploitation, for whatever these were worth.

The traffic control drew him down to Twanish, the single city

of Methel, and landed him on that plat assigned to him at Twanish Spaceport.

The time was midafternoon. Through the ports came Cora-light, clear and lucid, but lacking the brutal impact of Dar Sai Cora-light. Gersen stepped out upon the soil of Methel: Jerdian Chanseth's world.

In the west Twanish showed a set of glass-and-concrete structures cantilevered out from one, two, or several load-supporting columns, to create an effect of airy solidity. Beyond rose a wooded upland: Llalarkno. To the north the land was planted to crops and orchards; to the south a parkland of meadows and enormous old trees heaved up to become a long range of ancient mountains.

A serene and pleasant prospect, thought Gersen. He crossed the field by a path of cemented sinter to the space terminal, a polygonal structure of black metal and glass with a central tram-and-control tower. A sign directed him to a counter, where a uniformed clerk noted his personal particulars into an information bank, thus extinguishing a small yellow light on a display board: evidently the completion of a verification procedure initiated at the space fortress.

A public conveyance carried him into the center of town. At the Commercial Hotel he was offered room and bath adequate to his needs. His most immediate concern was money, of which he had none whatever. He placed a telephone call and discovered the local correspondent of Cooney's Bank, which Gersen immediately visited and where he was tendered a thousand SVU on his letter of credit.

At a kiosk he bought a map of the city, then took a seat at a nearby sidewalk cafe.

A waitress came to take his order. Gersen pointed to a table where a man sat with a frosty pale green formulation. "What is that gentleman drinking?"

"That is our Cross-eye Punch, sir; it's fruit juice, sweet spirits of arrack, and bangleberry rum, frozen and whipped."

"Bring me one of the same," said Gersen, and settled back to observe the inhabitants of Twanish. These were mostly Mongrels:

folk of various types but all wearing similar garments: jackets striped vertically in dark or muted colors, with black trousers or skirts. The

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effect was one of formality and punctilio. There was a scattering of off-worlders: salesmen, agents, and a few tourists. Gersen also saw Darsh, wearing clay-colored breeches and white blouses or white pajama suits; and Methlen, set apart by their dark hair and olive complexions, their clothes, and an indefinable ease of manner. An interesting mix of people, thought Gersen.

The waitress brought a chilled flask of Cross-eye Punch. Gersen opened his map of the city, which he saw to be of no great extent. The streets and places of Twanish were carefully limned and labeled, but that area to the west designated as Lla-larkno showed no detail whatever. The Methlen abodes and their avenues of ingress apparently were not to be exposed to the vulgar gaze. Gersen gave the faintest of shrugs. Methlen vanities were none of his concern.

The Cross-eye Punch was a success. At a signal the waitress brought a second goblet. "This should be ample to your needs, sir," she told him earnestly. "It is strong drink, and a stranger will not realize its authority until he attempts to stand erect. Sometimes these are known as 'Tickets to Redemption,' because when folk take more than is necessary they become obstreperous, and must be punished."

"I appreciate the warning," said Gersen. "How are these obstreperous ones punished?"

"That depends upon the offense, but often they are locked arm and leg into clouts, and children are allowed to pelt them with soft fruit, which often, so I fear, is spoiled and bad." The girl gave a shudder of distaste. "I for one never want to be made a public mock."

"Nor I," said Gersen. "Would you please bring me the telephone directory?"

"Certainly, sir."

Gersen turned the pages, and immediately found the entry Kotzash Mutual, Skohune Tower, followed by the telephone code.

Gersen called the waitress and paid his score. "And where is Skohune Tower?"

"Look yonder, sir, across the park. Notice the building with the tall center portal? That is Skohune Tower."

Gersen sauntered across the park and approached Skohune Tower; a structure of eight levels, the floors of white concrete, the walls of glass, the load-bearing members four columns of black

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metal: a far cry from Dindar House at Serjeuz. For a bankrupt and debt-ridden concern such as Kotzash Mutual, Skohune Tower would seem a startlingly expensive address. From somewhere had come money: the Etilia Gargantyr's insurance settlement? The sale of plundered Kotzash duodecimates?

Gersen crossed the avenue and entered the ground-level foyer:

a glass-enclosed area between the four columns. A directory instructed Gersen that Kotzash Mutual occupied Chamber 307 on the third level. Gersen considered the options open to him. He might walk into the Kotzash offices and assert control: a forthright act which certainly would arouse the notice of Lens Larque. There might or might not be a corresponding advantage for Gersen; certainly he wanted to act before Panshaw learned of Bel Ruk's death, which could only be a matter of hours.

Gersen crossed the foyer to the business office, where he discovered a whippet-thin Mongrel with keen features and alert black eyes, wearing the orthodox black trousers, a jacket striped in black, brown, dull mustard, and maroon, and glossy black shoes. A brass counter plaque read: Udolf Tester Manager.

Gersen identified himself as the field representative of Cooney's Bank. "We are seriously considering a branch here at Twanish," said Gersen in his most solemn voice. "I'll need a business address, and an office here might well serve my needs."

"I would be most happy to oblige you," said Testel, who seemed not only keen but also somewhat pompous and self-important. "Our occupancy is close to total; still, I could offer you a suite on the second level, or a single room on the fifth." He produced charts and indicated the premises to which he referred. Gersen took the charts, studied them a moment, then examined the third-floor plan. Kotzash Mutual occupied a single room, 307, between a single room occupied by Irie Pharmaceutical Imports, 306, and the three-chamber offices of Jarkow Engineering, 308. "The third level would suit me best," said Gersen. "What is available here?"

"Nothing whatever."

"A pity. Either of these offices would exactly serve my needs." Gersen indicated 306 and 307. "Are the tenants permanently established? I wonder if they might be induced to move to the fifth floor?"

Testel bridled at this somewhat high-handed proposal. "I am

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certain that they would not," he said stiffly. "Mr. Coost of Irie is quite set in his ways. Mr. Panshaw in 307 works with Jarkow Engineering. Neither could consider moving: of this I am sure,"

"In that case I'll look at the fifth level office," said Gersen. "If you'll give me the key, I'll make a quick inspection."

"Allow me to show the office," said Testel. "It is no trouble whatever."

"I prefer to look the place over alone," said Gersen. "Then I am not distracted in forming my opinions."

"Just as you like," said Testel in a nasal voice. He slid open a drawer, selected a key. "Number-510, to the right as you leave the lift."

Gersen rode the ascensor to the fifth level. The key, a strip of laminated metal, controlled the lock through varying permeabilities to magnetic fields. Such a key could not readily be duplicated, and would not facilitate entrance into 306, 307 or 308. Gersen, nevertheless, had noted the drawer in which the manager kept his spare keys.

Gersen made a quick inspection of 510, then returned to Testers office on the ground floor and gave over the key. "I'll inform you of my decision presently."

"We shall be happy to serve you," said Testel.

In a backstreet Gersen located a locksmith's workshop, where he bought three blank keys similar to those used at Skohune Tower, and had them engraved respectively with the numbers 306, 307, and 308. He then returned to the spaceport and his ship, where he packed several types of eavesdrop equipment into a case. When he confronted Panshaw with the new circumstances, the ensuing conversations might well lead directly to Lens Larque, or at the very least provide some indication as to his whereabouts.

Back at the Commercial Hotel he dropped off his equipment. The time was now dusk and possibly too late to advance his program any further. Gersen, nevertheless, felt restless and on edge. Imminence was upon him; events were converging. He crossed the park to Skokune Tower, thinking, to make a reconnaissance. If Ottilie Panshaw were on the premises, who knows where he might lead when he departed?

From the park Gersen counted windows. 306 still showed light. Mr. Coost of the Pharmaceuticals worked late. 307 was dark; Ottilie Panshaw would be enjoying the evening elsewhere. 308, the offices

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of Jarkow Engineering, were also dark. Gersen crossed the street and looked into the foyer. The door into the business office stood ajar, and the diligent Udolf Testel still stood at the counter, frowning down at a ledger.

Gersen went to a telephone in the far corner of the foyer. He called Testel's office and heard the sharp declaration: "Skohune Tower; manager's office."

Gersen pitched his voice at a quavering half-falsetto: "Mr. Tes-

tel, come at once to the roof garden! There's mischief going on; you must put an end to it! Come quickly!"

"Eh?" cried Testel. "What's all this? Who is calling, please?"

Gersen had broken the connection. He went to stand where he could watch across the foyer.

Testel came from his office on the run, his expression eloquent of concern and vexation. He jumped upon the ascensor and disappeared from view.

Gersen crossed to Testel's office, went behind the counter, and slid open the key drawer. He removed keys from the slots labeled 306, 307, 308, and replaced them with the blank keys. He closed the drawer, left the office, crossed the lobby, and departed Skohune Tower.

Pleased with his evening's work, Gersen dined at the Medallion Restaurant, which advertised Classic Cuisine: Authentic Dishes in the Style of the Grand Masters. Gersen, only mildly interested in abstruse gastronomy, put himself at the mercy of the waiter, who handed him a card edged in silver and black. "This is our Grand Repast of today, sir, highly to be recommended!"

Gersen read:

Hors d'oeuvres of Ten Worlds  
Broth with Aloe nuts and Water flowers,  
in the style of Benitres, Capella VI.

Gratin of Pink Nard with Cress and Whitebait,  
as served by Sigismond at the Grand Hotel,  
Avente, Alphanor.

Prime Cutlets of the Five-Homed Darango,  
imported from the Oxygen Marshes, Cuenos Notos.

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Dumplings of Belsifer Root with Saffron,  
in the  
style of Farewell Station, Miriotes.

Relish of Mushroom Dry Saute,  
Chilled Pineapple and Mango Chutney,  
from the gardens of Old Earth.

Salad of Herbs and Greens,  
dressed with oil of Mediterranean olives  
and Alsatian vinegar.

Frivols, Flimsies, Flapdoodles,  
as purveyed along the Esplanade at Avente.

Coffee from the Sunnyrain Highlands, Krokinole, brewed to the instant in a porcelain pot and served with a tot of Mascarene Rum, in the style of Fat Hannah, at the Copus Spaceport.

The menu will be enhanced by five excellent wines, appropriate to each service.

The price of thirty SVU placed this meal in the luxury category. Well, why not? Gersen asked himself, and instructed the waiter:

"You may bring me this 'Grand Repast.' "

"At once, sir!"

The dishes were well prepared, garnished expertly and served with a flourish. Perhaps they were indeed authentic, and so it seemed to Gersen, who had dined at many of the listed localities, and often had taken a tot of rum at Fat Hannah's on Copus. The clientele, so he noticed, was at least halfMethlen. What ifJerdian Chanseth were to wander in? WTiat would she think? What would she do? Gersen wondered what he himself might do. Nothing,

probably.

He left the restaurant and strolled along the principal avenue ofTwanish: a tree-lined boulevard known as The Mall, which, after a sweeping curve around Redemption Park, veered up into Lla-

larkno.

Few vehicles other than cabs moved along the streets. The Methlen system of control, so Gersen would learn, was simple: they

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imposed high licensing fees and built no roads except in the near vicinity of Twanish.

On impulse Gersen signaled down a cab: a small soft-wheeled vehicle with the passenger compartment to the front and the driver mounted behind.

"Where to, sir?"

"Llalarkno," said Gersen. "Just drive around a bit."

"You have no destination in mind, sir?"

"Quite right. Take me around Llalarkno and bring me back here."

"Well—I suppose it can be done, now that it's dark. The Methlen, and you wouldn't know being an outworider, are jealous of their privacy. They don't like to see great charabancs loaded with

tourists trundling about Llalarkno."

"So long as it's not illegal, I'll risk the trip."

"As you say, sir."

Gersen climbed into the passenger's compartment. The driver inquired: "Any particular place that you wish to see, sir?"

"Do you know the residence of Adario Chanseth?"

"Indeed, sir; the Chanseth house is named Oldenwood."

"When we pass Oldenwood, please point it out to me."

"Very well, sir."

The cab rolled off along The Mall, around Redemption Park, and up the incline toward Llalarkno. Weeping acacia trees obscured the lights of Twanish; almost at once Gersen felt himself in a new environment.

The road turned off across a wooded upland, winding among the Methlen homes. Gersen, perhaps prejudiced by his appraisal of Adario Chanseth, had expected splendor and display; somewhat to his surprise he found rambling old mansions built, so it was clear, for no purpose other than to please those who lived there. He glimpsed verandahs grown over with flowering vines, lawns, and pools. Fairy lanterns floated through the gardens; tall windows of many panes glowed golden. The folk who lived in these homes, thought Gersen, would cherish them as if they were things alive. Children would never want to leave, but the eldest son must inherit and, heartsick or not, the others must leave. Gersen, who barely remembered his childhood home, grew melancholy. He could own such a home, if he so chose, as spacious and comfortable as any of these. The expense certainly was no obstacle, only the style of his

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life, which made such a notion no more than a far-fetched daydream. A pleasant daydream, nevertheless, upon which his mind lingered. Where would he choose to live, if circumstances so arranged themselves? Not on Alphanor certainly, nor anywhere along the Concourse, nor on any of the Vegan worlds, where such houses as these would not sit comfortably. Perhaps on Old Earth, or even here on Methel. With Jerdian Chanseth? The idea improved as Gersen considered it. Impossible, however.

Gersen called up to the driver. "WTiere is Oldenwood?"

"We are drawing near. There: Parnassio, the house of the Zanies. There, Andelmore, of Floristys. And there is Oldenwood."

"Stop just a moment." Gersen stepped down from the cab and stood in the road. In a mood of even deeper melancholy he considered the house where Jerdian had lived her life. The windows were dark, except for a few watch-lamps; the Chanseths had not yet

returned home.

The driver spoke. "Notice the house just yonder? That's Moss Alrune and a fine house indeed. It belongs to an old lady, the last of the Azels. She's priced the house at a million SVU and won't take a dit less. Do you know of Lens Larque, the great corsair?"

"Naturally."

"One day he came wandering through Llalarkno, just as you now are doing, and saw the house. He decided to buy; after all, what's a million SVU to Lens Larque? He strolled through the garden, examining this and that, smelling the flowers, tasting the berries. Adario Chanseth happened to be abroad in his own garden, and spied the strange man. He called out, 'Hey there! What are you up to, in that garden?' 'I'm looking this property over, if it's any of your affair,' said Lens Larque. 'I've decided to buy.' Adario Chanseth roared out: \*Be damned to that! I'll never tolerate your big Darsh face hanging over my garden fence, not to mention your stinks and smells. Get out of Llalarkno and stay out!' Lens Larque roared back: 'Be damned to you! I'll buy where I like and put my face where I like.' Chanseth rushed into his house and called the security guards, who of course hustled Lens Larque off the property; and there it still sits, vacant as ever, with no one willing to pay the million SVU."

"And what ensued with Lens Larque?"

"WTio knows? They say he went off in a rage, and whipped a dozen boys to soothe his feelings."

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"And he's still on Methel?"

"Again, who knows? No one recognized him for Lens Larque while he dickered for Moss Alrune; his name was only mentioned later."

Through the trees Gersen could only glimpse Moss Alrune. On the lake beyond a glittering trail reflected from the moon Shanitra.\*

Gersen climbed back into the cab, which proceeded around Llalarkno: through copses and dells, across moonlit glades, past the great old houses, to which Gersen paid no further heed. The cab returned down the incline and into The Mall. The driver's voice intruded upon Gersen's musings. "WTiere do you wish to go, sir?"

Gersen considered. Haste was of utmost importance, but he felt tired and out of sorts. Tomorrow morning would serve his purposes well enough. "Take me to the Commercial Hotel."

\*The moon is named after a grotesque clown in the Methlen opera bouffe.

From People of the Coranne, by Richard Pelto

The Twanish Mongrels, reacting to the exclusivity of the Methlen aristocracy, have developed a counter-society, which is orderly, genteel, and circumspect. Perhaps it should be noted here that "Mongrel" is not a Methlen term. The Methlen take note of only three sorts of people: Methlen, all other folk except the Darsh, and the Darsh. The term "Mongrel" was initiated by the Tivamsh Scribe facetiously to characterize the varied origins of the Twanish citizenry; the term came into vogue as an ironic reference to Methlen pretensions a joke which of course passed the Methlen completely by.

Mongrels prefer to ignore their economic dependence on the Methlen. They like to think of themselves as energetic and hard-working entrepreneurs, with a general multi-racial clientele. Their society is essentially middle class and controlled by an exacting and fastidious etiquette.

Everything considered, Mongrel fantasies are no less flagrant than those of the Methlen, if of defensive origin. Mongrels like to think of the Methlen as frivolous, vain, self-indulgent, and overbred, in contrast to their own dignity, common sense, and stability. The Methlen pageants are considered extravagant, ostentatious, and faintly ridiculous as might be an array of strutting peacocks. Nevertheless, Methlen activities are the source of endless gossip among the Mongrels, and every Methlen of Llalarkno will

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be recognized by name when he or she comes down into Twanish.

The two peoples with their contrasting cultures live harmoniously. The Mongrels affect a contemptuous disdain for Methlen frailty; the Methlen pay the Mongrels no attention whatever.

Gersen arose early and took his kit to Skohune Tower. The foyer was empty and silent; the door into Udolf Testel's office was closed.

Gersen rode the ascensor to the third level. He passed 307 without so much as pausing; Ottile Panshaw's predilection for traps and alarms made his present errand impractical. At 308 he halted and, after a glance up and down the corridor, inserted his key. The door slid ajar. Gersen looked into the offices of Jarkow Engineering. He saw a large reception room, with a glass-walled secretary's office to the left and a hall to the right giving upon a glass-walled drafting room and a pair of private offices.

The chambers were empty. Gersen entered, closed the door behind him. The reception room contained a couch, two chairs, a table, and shelves displaying models of space-mining equipment.

carriers, diggers, grinders, centrifuges, hoppers, conveyer systems  
The secretary's cubicle backed upon Ottile Panshaw's office From  
his case Gersen brought a drive-needle and drilled a small hole deep  
into the wall Into the hole he inserted a probe, so that the tip made  
contact with the outer skin of the wall in Ottile Panshaw's office  
Under the secretary's desk he attached a recording machine inside  
a black box, which he connected to the probe with conducting films  
He removed the back plate from the secretary's telephone console,  
brought wires up from the black box, and attached them to ter-  
minals inside the telephone

He had worked quickly and efficiently, the time was still early  
But as he replaced the back plate to the console, the door opened  
and into the reception room came a young woman in secretarial  
costume a black skirt and a crisp prim blouse, candy-striped in  
purple, red, and white The secretary herself seemed not at all prim,  
in fact she was saucy, vivacious, and pretty, with blond curls fluffing  
out from under a white cap At the sight of Gersen she stopped  
short. "And who might you be?"

"Communications technician, miss," said Gersen "Your line  
has been showing irregular pulses, I've just set it right "

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"Indeed." The girl crossed the reception room and tossed her  
handbag into a chair. "I've noticed something of the sort, especially  
on our calls out to Shanitra."

"Everything should proceed even and smooth now. There's one  
little pan which often corrodes; we generally can fix it in five  
minutes and be gone before anyone arrives to work, but today I've  
been delayed."

"Fancy that. Well, I'm early this morning; I've got some letters  
of my own to write. Do you work all night?"

"Just when I'm on call. I only work part-time; in fact I've been  
on Methel only a month."

"Oh? Where's your world?"

"I'm originally out of Alphanor, along the Concourse."

"I'd love to visit the Concourse! I'll be lucky if I get as far as  
Dar Sai, dog bite it!"

The girl was very composed, thought Gersen, and full of spirit,  
and also far from unattractive. "Working for a space-mining firm

as you do, I'd think you might be called on to travel everywhere." The girl laughed. "I'm Just a receptionist. Mr. Jarkow barely sends me to the store on errands. I suppose I could travel with him under special circumstances, if you know what I mean, but I'm not that sort."

Gersen picked up his case. "Well, I must be getting along." He hesitated. "As I say I'm a stranger in town and I know absolutely no one. Would you think me bold if I asked you to meet me this evening? Perhaps we could go somewhere pleasant for dinner."

The girl threw back her head and laughed, a trifle too loudly. "You are bold indeed. We Mongrels are a very proper folk, and I'm not so sure as to what you have in mind."

"Nothing more than what you can easily cope with," said Gersen, attempting an ingenuous grin, which, had he known it, only twisted his dark face into a cunning leer.

The girl failed to notice. "Are you married?"

"No indeed."

"I really should say no and indignantly." She turned Gersen an arch side-glance. "But, well—why not?"

"Why not indeed? When and where shall I meet you?"

"Oh—let's say the Black Barn, which is very gay, with dancing galore. Are you a nimble dancer?"  
'Well—no. Not really."

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"We'll repair that lack! At the tone of the evening hour. I'll wait just by the red door."

"Understood, except for how to find the Black Barn."

"My faith, you are a stranger indeed! Everyone knows the Black Barn."

"I'll find it without trouble. But let me ask your name."

"Lully Inkelstaff. Tell me yours."

"Kirth Gersen."

"What an odd name! It sounds quite medieval. Did you learn your trade on Alphanor?"

"Partly, and partly here and there across space." Gersen took up his case. "I'd better go. We're not supposed to make calls during business hours. I wouldn't want to annoy Mr. Jarkow."

"You're too late," said Lully Inkelstaff. "I hear him in the corridor. Still, he's not one to worry overly much. He hardly notices anything—except me, I must say."

The outer door slid aside; into the office came two men; the first gaunt and gray, with narrow shoulders and a thin melancholy face; the second tall, ponderous, and heavy-featured, with a pasty complexion and a profusion of unsuitable golden ringlets. He wore a loose and untidy Mongrel suit: black trousers, a jacket striped black, green, and orange, which went ill with his complexion. The thin man went directly into the drafting office; Jarkow paused to rake Gersen up and down with a cold stare. He turned to Lully, who said in a cheerful voice, "Good morning, Mr. Jarkow. Allow me to introduce my fiance, Dorth Koosin."

Jarkow gave Gersen a nod lacking in amicability; Gersen bowed politely in return, after which Jarkow stalked off to his office. Lully put her hand to her mouth to stifle a titter. "The thought came to me on the instant. On occasion Mr. Jarkow attempts familiarities and I wanted to discourage him without a great drama. Sometimes he is really quite peremptory. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," said Gersen. "I am glad to be of service. But now I must go."

"I'll see you this evening."

Gersen left the office, and went directly to chamber 307, the headquarters of Kotzash Mutual. He tried the door and found it locked. Gersen rapped on the panel, but no one responded.

Gersen reflected a moment, then descended to the ground

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floor Consulting the directory, he learned that Evrem Dai, Legal Consultant and Factuary-at-Law, occupied suite 422

Gersen rode the ascensor to the fourth floor and went to Suite 422. A clerk took him to an inner office, where Evrem Dai sat at a desk

Gersen succinctly stated his business Evrem Dai, as Gersen had expected, wanted several days in which to fulfill the requirements, but Gersen insisted not only upon haste but immediacy, and Evrem Dai, after a moment's thought, prepared a document He then used his communicator, spoke to several clerks and finally to a portly gentleman at an enormous desk fabricated from black )et and gold. Evrem Dai displayed Gersen's Kotzash shares and the document he had prepared The portly gentleman made an acquiescent motion, Evrem Dai put the document into his communicator, where it received a transmitted signature and seal

Gersen paid a not inconsiderable fee and left Evrem Dai's offices He descended to the third level, arriving )ust in time to see Ottile Panshaw stepping into room 307 Gersen ran forward and,

catching the door before it slid shut, entered the office. Panshaw looked around with an expression of mild inquiry "Sir5"

"You are Ottile Panshaw5"

Panshaw squinted at Gersen, head to the side. "Do I know you5 I have the impression that somewhere we have met."

"Have you recently visited Dar Sal5 Perhaps we met there "

"Perhaps What is your name and what is your business5"

"I am a speculator. My name is Jard Glay, and I am the controlling stockholder of Kotzash Mutual "

"Indeed " Panshaw thoughtfully started for his desk Gersen said "A moment, Mr. Panshaw I am now your employer You are a paid employee of Kotzash Mutual5"

"Yes, that is so "

"Then I prefer that you use this chair while we talk "

Panshaw smiled wryly. "You still have not demonstrated that you are, in fact, the controlling stockholder "

Gersen produced the document prepared by Evrem Dai "I have here an official attestation to this effect, together with a judicial order that you immediately relinquish into my custody all documents, records, and correspondence pertaining to Kotzash business, together with all assets, including money, stocks, interests, contracts, real property, incidental property in short, everything."

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Panshaw's smile had become tremulous "This is a most peculiar circumstance. Naturally, I am aware that you have been acquiring Kotzash stock May I inquire as to your motives5"

"Why do you trouble to ask5 You would believe nothing told you"

Panshaw shrugged "I am not so skeptical as you appear to believe "

"No matter," said Gersen "What is your nominal position here at Kotzash3"

"Managing director "

"Who is the principal stockholder, after myself"

Panshaw said guardedly "I hold a rather large block of shares "

"And what is the principal business of Kotzash now5"

"Essentially, exploration for duodecimates "

"Be so good as to elaborate "

Panshaw made a delicate gesture "There is nothing much to tell you. Kotzash controls various charters and exclusive rights, and we are trying to exploit them "

"Specifically, how and where5"

"At the moment we are concentrating upon Shanitra "

"Who has been making these decisions5"

"I, naturally Who else5"

"Where is the money coming from3"

Again Panshaw's delicate gesture "The subsidiaries have yielded good profits "

"Which you have not distributed among the shareholders "

"We desperately need working capital The managing director must allocate funds to his best judgment "

"I intend to look carefully into every phase of Kotzash As of now, I want all activities suspended "

"You seem to be in a position of- authority," said Panshaw suavely "You need only give the necessary orders "

"Exactly Do you intend to continue in your present capacity5"

Panshaw's sensitive face became creased with perplexity "You have surprised me, I need time to assess the situation "

"In short, you refuse to cooperate with me5"

"Please," murmured Panshaw "Do not force unnatural meanings upon my remarks "

Gersen went to the desk I o one side rested the communicator screen and coding buttons Behind stood a small filing case for

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current records. Much, if not most, of Kotzash's ramifications would be filed only behind the fragile forehead of Ottilie Panshaw.

Panshaw sat in a melancholy reverie Gersen watched him side-long, now somewhat annoyed, in a sense he had outwitted himself. To give Panshaw scope to conduct a telephone conversation, presumably with Lens Larque, he must leave Panshaw alone in the office, thereby risking the destruction or alteration of Kotzash records

An acceptable procedure suggested itself. He spoke in a reasonable tone of voice. "These changes must come to you as an unpleasant shock. Suppose I give you a few minutes to consider your position."

"That would be most gracious of you," said Panshaw, allowing no more than a trace of irony into his voice.

"I'll stroll up and down the corridor a time or two," said Gersen. "Sit at your desk, if you like, but please do not interfere with the records "

"Naturally not," said Panshaw indignantly. "Do you take me for a scoundrel?"

Gersen left the office, leaving the door pointedly open. He sauntered to the ascensor, then back, looking through the open door as he passed. As he had expected, Panshaw was talking earnestly into the communicator. Gersen could not see the screen, which no doubt was blank in any case. Gersen walked on, to the end of the corridor and back, and Panshaw still occupied himself on the communicator, though now he frowned in nervous dissatisfaction.

Gersen made another tour of the passage, and when he passed the door again, Panshaw sat leaning back in his chair, placidly pen-

sive.

Gersen stepped into the office. "Have you reached a decision?"

"Yes indeed," said Panshaw. "My legal adviser tells me that only two honorable courses of action are open I can either depart the office on the instant, or I can hope to continue in a paid capacity with the company I feel that I would only defeat my own purposes if now I withdraw in a fit of pique."

"Sensible, of course," said Gersen "Am I to understand that you plan to cooperate with me?"

"That is correct, provided that we can come to financial terms."

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"Before I can make an offer I must know more about the company, its resources, commitments, and assets."

"Understandable," said Panshaw. "To start with, allow me to tell you this. Your instincts are superlatively keen. I blame myself for folly and vacillation, long ago I should have made sure of a controlling interest I neglected to do so and now I must accept the penalty with as good grace as possible."

Gersen listened for that barely perceptible falsity which indicated a speaker's awareness of an eavesdropper. He heard nothing

"If circumstances warrant, I will retain your services at an appropriate salary. For the moment, please produce a comprehensive list of Kotzash assets."

Panshaw pursed his lips. "Such a list does not exist. We have a few thousand SVU in the bank—"

"Which bank?"

"Sweecham's, just along the street "

"What of companies subsidiary to Kotzash?"

Panshaw hesitated. "We have working arrangements here and there—"

Gersen interrupted. "Let us put an end to this foolishness. You are congenitally unable to tell the truth, except, I suspect, under duress. I have done a certain amount of research I know of Hector Transit, for instance, and I know of the settlement for the Ettiha Gargantyr Where is this money?"

Panshaw showed neither discomfort nor embarrassment. "Most of it has gone to pay Jarkow "

"Pay him for what?"

"Explorations on Shamtra. We are making a massive effort "

"Why?"

"According to reports Shanitra carries somewhere a monster lode of duodecimates We have been trying to locate it."

"Shamtra carries no duodecimates," said Gersen "The Methlen would have won it long ago."

Panshaw gave an urbane shrug. "New lodes of duodecimates are constantly discovered."

"Not on Shamtra Kotzash is now under my control, and I don't want Kotzash money wasted. Stop the explorations at once."

"Easier said than done. Certain phases have already been funded—"

"We'll get a rebate. Is there a contract?"

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"No I've worked on a basis of trust with Jarkow "

"Then perhaps he'll be reasonable now. Order an immediate

halt "

Panshaw again gave his urbane shrug, then rose to his feet and left the office. Gersen immediately went to the communicator and made contact with Jarkow's office. The decorative image of Lully Inkelstaff appeared on the screen. Gersen had blinked off the communicator's eye and she looked in vain to see who was calling. She spoke. "Jarkow Mining Who is calling please?"

Gersen kept silent. After a moment Lully nicked off her switch. Gersen, however, still controlled the line incoming to the Jarkow offices. He tapped a code against the microphone to activate his recorder playback.

First a crackling sound, steps as Panshaw entered the office, and a moment later his own appearance and his initial conversation with Panshaw. Then the sounds of his departure from the office, and almost at once Panshaw's voice into the communicator. "News at this end, Bel Ruk failed. I've just had a visit from the new control. He's got a writ."

In response came a harsh voice which sent quivers along Gersen's nerves. "Who is he?"

"He calls himself Jard Glay. I've seen him on Dar Sai, I can't quite recall the circumstances. He's an odd fellow, I can't make him out."

A brief silence. Then again the ominous voice. "Play him easy. Watch him. In a day or two I'll have him taken up, then we'll learn who he is."

"It might be better to act at once," said Panshaw cautiously. "He could cause trouble. Suppose he knows of Didroxus Mining? Or the Hector Transit account? Or Theremus? He could block us out financially."

"How could he know?"

"Hector Transit is a matter of record on Aloysius. The accounts are all at Sweecham's."

"Work up a set of transfers dated yesterday. Kosema will handle the matter without difficulty."

"I can do that easily enough. Still, something about this fellow alarms me. There he is now, watching me from the corridor."

"Let him watch. As soon as I show the face I'll deal with him. But first I must show the face."

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"Very well." Panshaw's voice lacked conviction.

"In the meantime, cooperate with him—to a point. Discover what he's after, perhaps he'll teach us something to our profit. In four days, or perhaps five, we'll put an end to him."

"As you say "

Gersen tapped a code to his eavesdrop device, cut off the communication, then rose to his feet and went to the door Panshaw should have returned from his visit to room 308. This time Gersen went back to the communicator and once more called Jarkow's office. This time he allowed Lullv to see his face. "It's I, your fiancée, remember me?"

"Oh yes. But—"

"Tell me, is Ottile Panshaw in your office?"

"He left just a moment ago."

"Thank you. Look at the Black Barn, don't forget!"

"I won't."

Gersen left the office, descended to the ground floor, and went out to the street. A hundred feet north he saw a sign

SWEETCHAMS BANK

Commercial Services . . . Interworld Transfers

Gersen ran to the bank and entered through tall glass doors. An attendant approached. "Sir, how may I assist you?"

"Who is Mr. Kosema?"

"That is his office yonder. At the moment he is busy."

"The matter concerns me. I'll just step over."

Gersen crossed the lobby and entered Kosema's office. A pink pudgy man with a round face and a pouting pink mouth sat at a desk opposite Ottile Panshaw. He had been frowning down at a paper, he looked up with a nervous jerk. Ottile Panshaw smiled sadly.

Gersen took the paper from in front of Kosema. He saw it to be an order transferring funds in the total of \$4,501,100 from accounts described as Kotzash 2 Theremus, Kotzash 4 Hector Transit, Kotzash 5 Didroxus Mining, and Kotzash 9 Wundergast Interests. The beneficiary of the order, dated yesterday, was the Basramp Investment Company.

Gersen stared at Kosema. "Are you participating with Ottile Panshaw in felonious grand theft?"

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"Of course not," spluttered Kosema. "I was about to inform Mr. Panshaw that I could not help him. How dare you suggest such a thing!"

"I could suggest it to the authorities, I could show them this order, which is on a Sweecham form "

"Absurd'" Kosema's voice cracked and quavered "You have no reason to suspect lack of fidelity "

Gersen gave a sardonic snort. "Look at these documents I am managing director of Kotzash "

"Yes, so it appears Well, Mr Panshaw has perhaps failed to inform me—"

Panshaw rose to his feet. "I must be on my way "

"You will wait," said Gersen "Sit down, if you please "

Panshaw hesitated, then resumed his seat

"Mr Kosema, I now notify you that Mr. Panshaw has no further authority m regard to Kotzash moneys I will challenge any drafts which you pay from this moment onward unless they bear my signature "

Kosema gave a curt bow "I understand perfectly I assure you—"

"Yes Your unassailable fidelity. Come along, Panshaw "

Ottite Panshaw followed Gersen out to the street "A moment," he said "Let us go sit on that bench yonder "

The two crossed the Mall to the park and seated themselves upon a bench

"You are an amazing man," said Panshaw "I fear that your acts will cost you dearly "

"How so?"

Panshaw shook his head "I will name no names But I will tell you what I am now about to do. In two hours a Black Arrow packet leaves Methel, bound for Saudal Suud I plan to be aboard Take my advice and depart aboard the same vessel When a person whose name I cannot bring myself to utter discovers that you have taken almost five million S\ U's of money he regards as his own, he will treat you in a way I do not care to think about."

"I am surprised that you warn me "

Panshaw smiled "I am a thief, a swindler, an extortionist I am a thoroughgoing scoundrel But when my self-interest is not involved I am apt to be decent, even generous I am now taking flight, in a panic that this man will blame me for your deeds You will

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never see me again, unless you ]om me aboard the Anvana Syntfo

Otherwise you will be carried a\way to a secret place There you will slowly and carefully be flayed "

"Tell me where to find this man I will put an end to him "

Panshaw rose to his feet "I don't dare so much. He never forgets a wrong, as you will learn Do not ride in a cab, change your hotel every night Don't go back to the Kotzash office, there's nothing there to interest you He chose the office onl\ because it was next to Jarkow "

"Did you order Jarkow to halt operations3"

"My word carries no weight with Jarkow Tell me where have we met before^"

"At Rath Eileann, in the Estremont, and at the Domus Do you remember Benchmaster Dalt3"

Ottile Panshaw raised his eyes to the sky. "Good-bye " He walked rapidly away through the park

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From Life, Volume III, by Unspiek, Baron Bodissey:

I am constantly startled and often amused by the diverse attitudes toward wealth to be found among the peoples of the Oikumene.

Some societies equate affluence with criminal skill; for others wealth represents the gratitude of society for the performance of valuable services.

My own concepts in this regard are easy and clear, and I am sure that the word "simplistic" will be used by my critics. These folk are callow and turgid of intellect; I am reassured by their howls and yelps.

For present purpose I exclude criminal wealth, the garnering of which needs no elaboration, and a gambler's wealth, which is tinsel.

In regard, then, to wealth:

1. Luxury and privilege are the perquisites of wealth. This would appear a notably bland remark, but is much larger than it seems. If one listens closely, he hears deep and far below the mournful chime of inevitability.

2. To achieve wealth, one generally must thoroughly exploit at least three of the following five attributes:

a. Luck

b. Toil, persistence, courage

c. Self-denial

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d. Short-range intelligence: cunning, improvisational

ability

e. Long-range intelligence: planning, the perception

of trends

These attributes are common; anyone desiring privilege and luxury can gain the precursory wealth by making proper use of his native competence.

In some societies poverty is considered a pathetic misfortune, or noble abnegation, hurriedly to be remedied by use of public funds. Other more stalwart societies think of poverty as a measure of the man himself.

The critics respond:

What an unutterable ass is this fellow Unspiek! I am reduced to making furious scratches and crotchets with my pen!

—Lionel Wistofer, in *The Monstrator*

I am poor; I admit it! Am I then a churl or a noddy? I deny it with all the vehemence of my soul! I take my bite of seed-cake and my sip of tea with the same relish as any paunchy plutocrat with bulging eyes and grease running from his mouth as he engulfs ortolans in brandy, Krokinole oysters, filet of Darango Five-Horn! My wealth is my shelf of books! My privileges are my dreams!

—Sistie Fael, in *The Outlook*

. . . He moves me to tooth-chattering wrath; he has inflicted upon me, personally, a barrage of sheer piffle, and maundering insult which cries out to the Heavens for atonement. I will thrust my fist down his loquacious maw;

better, I will horsewhip him on the steps of his club. If he has no club, I hereby invite him to the broad and convenient steps of the Senior Quill-drivers, although I must say that the Inksters maintain a superior bar, and this shall be my choice since, after trouncing the old fool, I will undoubtedly ask him in for a drink.

—McFarquhar Kenshaw, in *The Gaeon*

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The shrubbery behind Gersen rustled; he ducked, fell off the bench in a crouch. When he turned, his small gun was in his palm,

the nozzle protruding between first and second fingers.

A gardener in white coveralls looked at him in wonder. "Sorry I startled you, sir."

"Not at all," said Gersen. "I am a nervous man."

"So I noticed."

Gersen moved to another bench and sat where he could see in all directions. He long had felt himself a man apart from all others, with a certain destiny; often he had known horror and rage and pity, but fear, when it entered his mind, came strangely.

Gersen examined himself with detachment. Fear had affected Tintle, Daswell Tippin, Ottile Panshaw, and now himself. Well, why not fear? The thought of a flaying, with Lens Larque wielding Panak, was horrid enough to frighten a corpse.

Gersen sat motionless, discouraged and despondent. The sources of his mood were clear enough. He had become enamored of Jerdian Chanseth; he envied the Methlen their beautiful homes. Both emotions had broken against his harsh and obsessive purposes like waves breaking against a rock. And now with Panshaw gone, his single link to Lens Larque had frayed to a broken strand or two. One of these strands was Jarkow. Or he could allow himself to be captured and taken to visit Lens Larque, at which thought his skin crawled.

Gersen reviewed the events which had brought him to Twanish. They led from Rath Eileann and Tintle's Shade to Serjeuz, Din-kelstown, and finally to Methel. He had expended vast exertion, but what had he achieved? Nothing of consequence. What had he learned? Only that Lens Larque, for reasons unknown, had engaged Jarkow Engineers to an unreasonably thorough investigation of the moon Shanitra.

So then, he asked himself gloomily, what next? He had not yet inspected Panshaw's office, which in any event was probably a waste of time; indeed, Panshaw had specifically told him so. With no great enthusiasm Gersen returned to Skohune Tower and room 307. Sliding back the door, he scrutinized the room, which already felt disused and dead. To capture a man, the easiest method was narcotic gas. Gersen sniffed the air, which smelled fresh enough. He checked the door casing for sensors, looked along the rug for a hump which might indicate a mine. The rug itself might be woven

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of explosive fibers, which would upon contact break him into fragments.

Carefully he entered the room, and avoiding the rug, sidled to the desk. Using elaborate precautions, he explored Panshaw's files, where he found the various leases, enabling certificates, licenses, and grants which originally had been declared Kotzash MutuaPs only assets. Most carried a terse notation written in red ink: "worth-

less." The Shanitra lease awarded Kotzash Mutual sole and exclusive rights to "explore, test, develop, and exploit all valuable substances present upon the surface or within the interior," and prohibited "all other persons, agencies, and entities, including manned or unmanned mechanical devices" from trespass upon Shanitra for the term of the lease, which ran for the term of twenty-six years.

Interesting, thought Gersen, if not particularly illuminating. The key question remained unanswered: why would Lens Larque invest so much time and money on Shanitra?

Gersen found nothing more to interest him.—The details of payments made to Jarkow, or other engineering firms, were nowhere in evidence; presumably they resided in a bank computer.

Gersen called Sweecham's Bank, and after a series of formalities with which he patiently complied, he was rendered the code which controlled Kotzash financial records.

For half an hour Gersen studied the information presented to him and in the end knew little more than before, although the magnitude of payments made to Jarkow came as something of a surprise. For over a year Kotzash had honored monthly invoices from Jarkow in sums ranging from svu 80,500 to svu 145,720. The payments then dropped off to SVU 42,000. Whatever the search, it seemed to be dwindling and phasing out.

On sudden thought, Gersen looked into the city directory. Jarkow Engineering must necessarily maintain an equipment yard, employment and bookkeeping facilities, transport docks, even a warehouse.

In the directory under "Jarkow" Gersen discovered four entries:

a residential address for "Lemuel Jarkow," another for "Swiat Jarkow," "Jarkow Engineering" in Skohune Tower, and "Jarkow Corporation Yard," on Gladhorn Road.

Gersen put away the directory, leaned back on the chair, and tried to formulate a plan of action. Ottilie Panshaw had served as a

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kind of indicator, registering the presence of Lens Larque as a buoy marks the location of a reef. With Panshaw gone, Gersen himself became the key to Lens Larque's whereabouts, in the same sense that a staked-out lamb is the key to the presence of a tiger. Gersen winced. Far better that he seek out Lens Larque than that Lens Larque seek him out.

The only investigation which seemed even remotely propitious was contained in the question why did Lens Larque invest so much effort on Shanitra?

Jarkow might know, but Jarkow would certainly tell Gersen nothing. The melancholy draftsman might also know Jarkow's em-

ployees—those who had worked on Shanitra—might know

Gersen, prickling with the need for action, jumped to his feet. He crossed the room, slid the door open a trifle, looked up and down the corridor, which was empty. He descended to the street Gladhorn Road, according to his map, angled away from the Mall and curved to the northeast

A cab swung to the curb and halted, as if soliciting his custom. Gersen continued along the Mall, and presently glanced over his shoulder. The cab, old and quite ordinary, distinguished only by a faded white stripe around the skirt, moved out into the traffic and was gone. The driver had been a bulky flat-faced man of uncertain age and unknowable racial background

Gersen performed a set of procedures designed to frustrate any tracer mechanism which might have been put upon him. On Gladhorn Road he stepped into a clothing store, where he brought gray twill trousers, a pale blue shirt, a belted brown jacket, and a black cloth cap, which he donned on the spot. Leaving his former garments on the premises, he went out on the street, now in the guise of an artisan

Gladhorn Road curved to the east, past small shops and miscellaneous enterprises, rooming houses, taverns, restaurants, dim stores dealing in curios, apothecaries, barbers, public clerks. At the outskirts of town Gersen came upon the Jarkow Corporation Yard, where Jarkow maintained his equipment conveyors, rotary torches, gantrys, vertical stabbers, thrusts, loading pods, a pair of mobile cranes. To one side stood a row of small buildings. The first showed a sign EMPLOYMENT OFFICE. Across the doorway hung a second sign NO HIRING TODAY. Beyond were a payroll office and tool

warehouses, then a small landing field, on which rested a pair of weatherbeaten personnel carriers and a heavy cargo lift

For want of a better occupation, Gersen entered the employment office. Behind a counter sat an old man with a scarred brown face. "Sir="

"I saw the sign," said Gersen. "Does that mean there'll be no hiring tomorrow?"

"That's my guess," said the clerk. "We're just closing down a big job and there's nothing else on the boards. In fact we've laid off most of our crew."

"What's the job you just finished?"

"Big exploration job, up on Shanitra."

"Did they find anything?"

"Friend, whatever they found I'm the last man they'd tell."

Gersen turned away and sauntered back out to the street. Opposite he noticed a ramshackle building decorated with extraordi-

nary lightning bolts of black and white on a background of brick red The roof supported a large sign as garish as the building itself a crescent moon with a naked girl reclining in the concavity, she held aloft a goblet of pale liquid from which floated electric sparks The sign displayed a legend SIAR-UANDIRER'S IN\

Gersen crossed the street The music of a euphonium, played with gusto and decision, waxed louder as he approached In his tarings across the Oikumene Gersen had known many such taverns, where he had witnessed many strange events and heard many odd tales, not a few of them true

He entered a long low-ceilinged room, heavy with beer mmes In the far corner a hatchet-faced old woman in a gown of black tinsel, her skin toned white, her hair dyed blue, played the euphonium, at the other end was the bar a single slab of petrified wood In between groups of men and a few women sat at wooden tables Alone at a table to the back sat a large Darsh, brooding into a huge tankard of ale

Gersen went to the bar A shelf to the rear displayed a multitude of beer mugs, imprinted with as many emblems Gersen saw a number of familiar labels Veigence and True Companion from Alphanor, Oblademe and Old SubtefJaneafi from Copus, Smade\ Oun from Smade's Planet, Bass Ale, Hmano, Tuskef, Ancho? Steam from Earth, Mahogany Select from Derdyra, Edeiff impschen from Bogardus Gersen felt himself in the presence of old friends In the spirit of- the

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time and place he requested a flask of the local brew, Hangry's White Ale, which he found eminently palatable.

Turning, he looked around the room. At a large trestle table sat a group of men whose conversation identified them as employees of Jarkow Engineering. They had consumed considerable beer and spoke in loud positive voices, making no effort to dissemble their opinions.

"-told Motry that if he wanted me on that man-killer he'd have to give me back my swamper and also some kind of shroud to bar the dust. He promised, and I ran the dingus for a month and got scabs and red-nose and all else, and then I find that Motry gave my swamper to old Twaidlander, who runs that little tri-nozzle about two hours a day, and never dirties a finger."

"Mocry's a strange one. You got to handle him right."

"Well, I don't work for Jarkow anymore and I might just explain things to Motry."

"He's still up on the job, with the technician."

"The two of them can blow each other up, for all of me."

Gersen took a seat at the table. "You gentlemen all work for Jarkow?"

An instant silence while he was appraised by six pairs of eyes. One said curtly, "Not now. The job's washed out."

"So I was told at the hiring office."

One man said, "You arrived on the scene about a year late."

Another grumbled: "You didn't miss much. Bad food, low pay, and Claude Motry for superintendent."

"And no bonus!"

Gersen said thoughtfully, "Not much chance of a bonus unless they found a lode of black sand."

"They couldn't find black sand because there's none out there. Everybody knows that, except the rich lunatics who paid the bills."

Gersen suggested: "Maybe they weren't looking for black sand."

"Maybe not, but what else is there to look for?"

Another argued: "Even so and irregardless, they never did a proper exploration. All shallow tunnels, no deep probes. Where they'd hope to find sand is deep, and nowhere did we tunnel deep. More of a mesh or a network, as if they were looking for something shallow."

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"Out in Section D we went down a good half mile before we made our horizontals."

Gersen spoke for a round of drinks and the workers gave him their cordial best wishes.

Somewhat to the side sat a young man wearing workman's breeches with a fine green jacket and yellow shoes. In a quiet voice, to no one in particular, he spoke a single word: "Twittle."

One of the workmen nudged Gersen. "Watch this now. Watch the Darsh."

Gersen looked at the Darsh, who as before sat staring into his beer.

"Pfit," said the young man in yellow shoes.

The Darsh brought his hand to the tankard and began to flex heavy red fingers.

"Prat," said the young man.

The Darsh lowered his head between his shoulders, but still did not raise his eyes. The young man jumped to his feet and went to

the door. Along the street came a stout gentleman with a moony face, a pair of glossy mustaches, wearing a fine Mongrel suit.

"Phut," said the young man, and quickly ran off down the street. The Darsh jerked to his feet and lumbered out the door. The stout gentleman attempted to move aside but the Darsh seized him, threw him to the ground, kicked his round rump, poured a mug of beer over his head, then slouched off down the street.

The gentleman in the black suit sat up, to stare in perplexity this way and that. Slowly he rose to his feet, shook his head in wonder, and continued on his way.

The workers returned to their conversation. "The strangest job I ever worked," said one. "I've mined twenty-six asteroids, and never wasted ten minutes on such a block of pumice. All surface scum, so I told Motry. He wouldn't listen."

"He never cared one way or another, so long as Jarkow paid his wage."

"Not Jarkow; somebody by the name ofKotzash."

"Whatever, they had us boring like weevils through cheese, and now they're satisfied at last!"

A newcomer had come to stand by the table. "Don't be too sure! We just got finished today laying out ropes ofdexax-Motry and the technician are arranging the wires. Once they blast, Motry says we'll go back and tunnel some more. I asked him: 'Motry, what

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in the name of Delilah's hind leg are we looking for^ Then I could keep my eyes peeled ' He )ust give me his sarcastic grunt and says 'When I need your advice I'll ask for it' 'Take it anyway, Mr Motry,' I say 'It's free' And he says, 'Free advice is worth what it costs, and how come you're standing here advising instead of working^' 'Because, Mr Motry, I've finished my )ob ' 'Then punch out your ticket and take the carrier down to land The job is done for now'' So I come on down, and just now got my pay There's nobody left up there but Motry and Jarkow and a couple of technicians rigging some kind of radio contact "

Gersen sat a few minutes longer and presently decided that the workmen knew no more about the Shamtra project than he did himself He took his leave, and returned up Gladhorn Road the way he had come At the clothing shop he resumed his usual garments and walked along the Mall to the Commercial Hotel Before entering his room he took careful precautions for fear that someone might have visited him, leaving an unpleasant surprise. He found nothing out of the ordinary

He took his lunch in the hotel restaurant, hardly noticing what he ate. During the last few hours much had occurred, but nothing from which he could derive meaningful information

He left the restaurant and went out on the Mall, watching to right and left He saw nothing to threaten him, unless—was that cab with the white stripe around the skirt the same cab which had accosted him earlier^ He could not be sure He crossed the Mall and went into the park For ten minutes he walked the gravel paths, wondering what to do next Lens Larque was somewhere near at hand perhaps in a space vessel, perhaps on Methel itself.

Gersen's mind had become tired, he was bored with his problems and saw no way to escape them On impulse he went out to a side street, where he signaled down a passing cab one which displayed no faded white stripe around the skirt. He told the driver, "Take me out to Llalarkno "

As before, the driver made difficulties "That's like a big private park The Methlen don't like visitors, in fact they put probation points against any cab they catch with tourists "

'Tm not a tourist," said Gersen "I am an mterworld banker and a man of great importance "

"All very well, sir, but the Methlen draw no such distinction."

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Gersen produced a five-svu certificate "I am also able to pay the fare "

"As you say, sir But if I am approached and notified, then you must pay the impositions "

"Agreed," said Gersen "Take me to Oldenwood, the Chanseth house."

The glades and dells of Llalarkno worked magic upon Gersen's nerves As he looked off at the half-hidden houses, his fears and compulsions began to seem unreal

At Oldenwood the driver slowed the cab "The Chanseth residence, sir "

"Stop )ust a moment," said Gersen The driver reluctantly obeyed Gersen threw open the door and stood up on the boarding flange Past a bank of flowering shrubs and a sprawling candlenut tree a lawn sloped down to Oldenwood Somewhat beyond the house Gersen glimpsed a group of young people dressed in white, yellow, and pale blue They seemed to be watching a game, perhaps tennis or badminton, played beyond Gersen's range of vision.

"Come, sir," said the driver in a voice of urgency "Banker or even mterworld financier, they won't like you peering and staring. They have a mania for privacy, these Methlen "

Gersen returned into the cab "Drive over to Moss Alrune "

"As you wish, sir "

At Moss Alrune Gersen descended from the cab and despite the driver's anxious protests, walked around the grounds, appraising the house, the meadow which sloped down to the lake, the surrounding trees He heard no sound but a faint trilling of insects.

Gersen returned to the cab "Take me back into Twamsh "

"Thank you, sir."

Gersen alighted at the Canna-Crux Bank, where he arranged for the purchase by Cooney's Bank, through its affiliate, the Canna-Crux Bank, of that property known as Moss Alrune, from the estate agent representing Cytherea Azel

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From "The Avatar's Apprentice," in Scroll from the Ninth Dimension

On that fateful afternoon the very skies showed portents a lurid gloom in the east, a cloud of meaningful shape over Ymmyr Marsh in the west

Since dawn's first flush Marmaduke had paced the parapets, overlooking the horde which cloaked Mamnguez Plain Everywhere showed the flux of sinister purpose. Along Shadim Road manciplcs drove their war-wagons Cham River could not be seen for barges loaded with engines, tormentors, and gibbets Halfway up the Yar swarmed the multitudes; from north to south their beacons flashed.

At last Holy Bermssus, in stately robes, stepped out upon the parapets He raised high his arms in benign salute, but the hordes expressed a hateful sound which, mingling from all quarters, produced the dull wavering roar of stormy surf.

Bermssus shook his head in sorrow and drew somewhat back. For moments he gazed across the plain, stroking his beard

Marmaduke reverently came forward "Holy Sir, it seems that we two stand alone against this vindictive multitude "

Bernissus uttered Words "It is well "

Marmaduke stood back in perplexity "Most Excellent'

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Illuminate my ignorance, if you will' How may we find satisfaction in these lonely conditions^"

Bernissus spoke Words "In good time all will be made known "

"I am grateful for the assurance," said Marmaduke "In sheer truth this odious horde has unnerved me "

"Feltaw cannot prevail,1' were the Words, "even though he has wrought a great and busy mischief."

"Holy Appodex allow me to enumerate the victims of his cruel hoax. Of the horde now pullulating across the plain, all are either Devanants or Oblatics, with the exception of ten thousand Cathars Many know syllables of the Unspeakable name Yonder stand the Purple Myrmidons, yonder the Hypogrotes ofLissam, yonder the Glames, who at least show us the etiquette of facing forward inasmuch as they go into battle with naked backsides The Swans of Porving cluster around their Magnates, they menace us with standards on high' I recognize Obus -of Thraw, Vilnisser, the Red Cockatrice, Pleighborn, Flynych, and Sandsifer of Hutt Not ten days ago they burned blue incense at fanes along the Wayvode'"

Once more Bernissus moved forward to stand in majesty, the wind blowing back his robes and white beard Raising arms on high he issued a slogan, which whirled down Manmguez Plain and broke against the Yar in flashes of lightning The enemy quailed but presently took courage and thrust high their standards They shouted "The Decretals must be altered' We nominate Felfaw for the Column' Bermssus, falsest of the false, must be cast down'"

Bermssus spoke gentle Words "Not all are malign In this case, bad leads good "

"The swords of both sorts are long and sharp," declared Marmaduke "I fear that these noble parapets must burst asunder with only the two of us on defense Where are the faithful5 Where Helgebort and the Indefatigables5 Where Nish and Nesso, and Little Mouse^ WTiere the Vervils3"

"Their destinies lie elsewhere," were the Words "They are the cadres, they will teach and counsel, they will declaim the Panticles, and prepare the onset of the Second Realm So let it be'"

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"Blessed Bernissus' What must be my role in the days to come3"

"Each plays his part I go now to the Oratory to devise an irresistible Slogan, to send these poor)ackals reeling For the nonce you must patrol the parapets Post high the standards, dislodge ladders, defy the foe "

"I will do all needful," declared Marmaduke staunchly

"But, Beneficence, make haste' The enemy awaits only the sign "

"All will be well." With deliberate tread Bernissus descended to the Sacred Chamber

The sign came down, the legions gave a tremendous yell and advanced upon the parapets

Marmaduke called into the passage "Beloved Bernissus' The sign has come down from Achernar, the legions are upon us' Their swords are thrice-honed steel, they carry lances, catapults, and war-hooks, they raise ladders to scale the parapets' I have posted the standards, my slogans have created havoc, but I am one against eight hundred thousand. I will necessarily be cut into minute pieces, as each warrior vents his zeal upon my single corpse' Ineffable, the time is at hand!"

Marmaduke listened but heard no response Anxiously he descended the passage and called the holy Name, but his voice rang hollow through empty chambers Down to the uttermost foundations he went, and through a seep-hole crawled out upon the marsh He fled to the north and presently overtook Bermssus, who, with robes gathered high and with thewed legs thrusting back the mire, made ponderous but steady progress north toward Warram Forest

Gersen descended from his room to the lobby of the hotel and looked out the front windows into the street Three cabs stood at the curb, apparently waiting for custom The first, which showed a weathered white stripe around the skirt, was driven by a swarthy flat-faced man with black curls and ears clipped to points Gersen seated himself where he could watch the street

A man and a woman left the hotel They approached the first cab, but were refused service They tried the second and then the

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third with similar results, and finally hailed a cab cruising along the street

Three cabs in a row, each equipped with a tank of narcogen<sup>3</sup> Possible, thought Gersen quite possible indeed

He stepped from the front door and stood a moment before the hotel as if in cogitation From the corner of his eye he noticed that all three drivers had become alert Gersen paid them no heed He crossed the Mall and walked into the park. From behind a copse of snuff-brush he watched the cabs The first remained in place, the second and third slid hurriedly away around the Mall

Gersen returned to the Mall a hundred yards west of the hotel where he nagged down a passing cab, definitely not one of those which had been waiting in front of the hotel

"Take me to the Black Barn," said Gersen

The cab swung about and instead of climbing the incline toward Llalarkno, turned south and out into the country

The Black Barn stood in the middle of a field a half mile from town a circular building with low plank wall and a vast conical roof surmounted by a black iron weathervane in the shape of a crowing rooster Lully Inkelstaff had not yet arrived

The sun sank behind the far hills, leaving a sky of tangerine and gold, and now Lully Inkelstaff appeared, wearing a black-and-white gown, with a great puff of red gauze pinning the blond curls at the back of her head She greeted Gersen with a cheerful wave of the hand "I don't think I'm too late—just a few minutes perhaps, which is quite good for me Have you been inside?"

"Not yet. I thought I'd better wait here for you "

"Just as well It's so easy to miss connections, it happens shamefully often And—must I admit U^—I'm usually to blame Shall we go in? I think you'll be amused Everyone likes the Black Barn, even the Methlen They're always here in force. Wait till you see their strange dancing' But come!" Lully took Gersen's arm with an almost affectionate cordiality, as if they had been friends for years "If we're in luck my favorite table will be waiting for us "

They passed through a pair of iron-bound plank doors and into a foyer furnished with dilapidated old farm implements To right and left were stalls, from which protruded the heads of simulated farm animals

A ramp led down into the main chamber past a pair of rickety old wains Hundreds of tables encircled the dance floor, with a

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bandstand to the back now occupied by a pair of musicians in animal costumes, playing tamboura and oboe.

Lully led the way to a table which Gersen found no different from any other, but at which Lully settled herself with an exclamation of happy satisfaction.

"You'll think me silly, but this is my good luck table. I've had such merry times here! We're sure to have a wonderful evening!"

"You make me nervous," said Gersen. "Perhaps I won't match up to the occasion. Then you'll be annoyed with both me and the table."

"I'm sure not," said Lully. "I've decided that we shall enjoy ourselves and the table had best mind its manners."

Definitely a brisk and determined young woman, thought Gersen; best that he also mind his manners.

Lully, cocking her head to one side, seemed to divine something of Gersen's misgivings. She said breezily: "On the other hand, tragedy might stalk us; anything is possible. We might fall down while we're dancing—"

"Dancing?" inquired Gersen in alarm. Lully seemed not to hear.

"—and then I'd simply have to try another table until this one decided that the old ways were best. Are you hungry?"

"Yes indeed."

"So am I. Let me order, because I know exactly what's good."

"By all means," said Gersen. "Whatever you wish."

"First we'll have a dish of relishes and some pickled smelt, then chipes with black sauce, with a double dish of ramp savouries, and cottrell cutlets. Does that suit you?"

"Perfectly."

"The chirret is very good here, but perhaps you prefer beer?"

"What is chirret?"

"It's a very nice damson cider and not at all strong. Sometimes folk make such fools of themselves trying to dance after drinking Black Barn beer."

"Chirret, then, by all means, although as to the dancing—"

Lully already was signaling a waitress. Like all the other waiters and waitresses she wore festival peasant costume: a voluminous black-and-green blouse over a blue skirt with red stockings and black gaiters. Lully ordered decisively, specifying exactly how the dishes should be prepared and served. Almost immediately the wait-

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ress brought a jug of chirret, and next dishes of nuts, salted sea-flakes, and pickled smelt.

"We're early," said Lully. "The crowd hasn't really arrived. In an hour there'll be almost too much activity and we'll hardly find room to dance. First we'll eat and talk. Tell me all about yourself and the places you've been."

Gersen laughed uneasily. "I hardly know where to start."

"Anywhere will do. I've become interested in idolology and I can't at all understand your skarmatics. They're contradictory; you would seem an unusual man!"

"To the contrary, I'm very ordinary: clumsy and awkward as well."

"I don't believe a word of it. Incidentally, have you decided to settle here at Twanish? I do hope so!"

Gersen smiled thoughtfully, reflecting upon Moss Ah-une.  
"Sometimes I'm tempted to do so."

Lully sighed. "It must be wonderful to travel the stars! I've never been anywhere. How many worlds have you visited?"

"I don't know exactly; I've never counted. Dozens and dozens, at least."

"I'm told that every world is different, that spacemen, even if they don't know where they are, can look at the sky, smell the air, and instantly pronounce the name of the planet. Can you do that?"

"Sometimes. But I'd be fooled as often as not. Tell me about yourself. Do you have brothers and sisters?"

"Three of each. I'm the oldest and the first to take a job. I've never before considered marriage; I've always had such jolly times, it seemed a shame to change."

Gersen's sensitive antennae quivered and jerked; he became more uneasy than ever. "I also intend to avoid marriage for the foreseeable future. Tell me about your job."

Lully wrinkled her nose. "It was nicer before the Kotzash job. I liked old Mr. Lemuel Jarkow very well indeed. Mr. SwiatJarkow is not above making himself familiar."

"Do many Darsh come in to see Mr. Jarkow?"

"Not many; very few in fact."

"Perhaps a large Darsh came in with Mr. Ottilie Panshaw."

Lully pursed her lips, shrugged. "I don't remember. Is it important?"

"I've seen Mr. Panshaw somewhere before. I think on Dar Sai."

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"Very likely. Kotzash was originally a Darsh company. These are such mysterious questions. In fact you're a mysterious man. I wouldn't be surprised if you were with IPCC. Are you?"

"Of course not. If I were, I'd hardly be allowed to advertise it to the first pretty girl who asked."

"That's true. Still, you certainly don't seem an ordinary technician."

"When I'm off-duty, my personality changes," said Gersen, in a strained attempt at facetiousness.

Lully examined him with great intentness. "Why have you never married? Has no one ever selected you?"

Gersen shook his head. "I wouldn't dare ask anyone to the kind of life I lead."

After a thoughtful moment Lully said: "AtTwanish it's customary for the woman to suggest marriage to the man, which is only proper etiquette. It's different elsewhere, so I'm told."

"Yes, that's quite true." Gersen sought for some way to change the subject. "I see some Darsh over by the entrance. Do they come to the Black Barn?"

"Of course! They're asked to sit over yonder, under the ventilator, where their odor won't offend anyone." Lully watched the two Darsh sidling across the room. "They're almost barbarians. They never dance but just hunch over their tables gulping food."

"Where do the Methlen sit?"

"Over beside the bandstand. They usually come in carnival costumes; it's a rather foolish fashion with them. . . . Such a strange folk, always playing games, acting out parts, pretending and skylarking. No doubt it's great fun if you're wealthy and live in Lla-larkno."

"I should think so. Would you like to marry a Methlen?"

"Small chance! In fact, I'd never dare to ask one; they're ever so persnickety, don't you agree?"

"Yes indeed."

"They have their own customs of course, but no real etiquette. Would you marry a Methlen girl if she asked you?"

"It depends on the girl," said Gersen, his mind elsewhere. He hurriedly amplified his remarks. "Naturally I don't expect to marry anyone."

Lully gave his arm a little pat of admonishment. "You've got a good job now; it's time that you settled yourself."

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Gersen smilingly shook his head. "I'm definitely of the wrong temperament. . . . Look: there comes the orchestra."

Lully glanced at the musicians. "It's Denzel and his Seven Barnswallows. A most peculiar name, since they are only five. I don't like it when things are misrepresented. Still, they are quite proficient, especially at step-toes and prances. . . . WTiat are your favorite dances?"

"I don't know any dances whatever."

"How odd! No patterns, no jigs, no gallops?"

"Not even a slow march."

"We certainly must remedy that! It's simply shameful! I could never ask you for marriage!" Lully broke into laughter. "On the other hand, I might go lame, then where would I be with a jigging husband? . . . Here comes our food, and we don't want to think of marriage on empty stomachs."

The orchestra, consisting of flatsoon, bass-pipe, guitar, dimple-horn, and tympanillo, struck up a tune, and folk went forth to dance. The multiplicity of their techniques amazed Gersen. To the first tune they performed an intricate whirling reel punctuated by kicks and leaps. To the next tune they coursed back and forth in a hopping loose-kneed glide; to the third tune they practiced a series of evolutions ending with four dancers, backs pressed together and arms thrown back, performing a high-kneed running-in-place exercise.

Gersen commented upon the versatility of the dancers. Lully looked at him with wide-eyed wonder. "I forgot that you're not a dancer! We do dozens of steps; its considered hacky to dance the same step twice. Wouldn't you like to learn a simple little polka?"

"Well, no. Not really."

"Kirth Gersen, you're really a shy man! It's time someone took you in hand. I think that we'll just prescribe dancing lessons for you, starting tomorrow."

Gersen sought for an adequate reply, but was distracted by the arrival of a group of Methlen. As Lully had remarked, most of them wore Pierrot costume, with pompons on their white hats and long slippers with turned-up toes. They trooped gaily to that area reserved for their patronage.

Presently some came out to dance, keeping well apart from the Mongrels. They used a variety of steps, dancing in pairs in a fashion far less energetic than the mode of the Mongrels.

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Gersen scanned the group but saw no one he recognized. Meanwhile Lully talked of this and that, pointing out acquaintances, explaining dance techniques, commenting upon the delicacy of the chipies and the excellence of the smelt. Gersen tried to divert the conversation to Jarkow's office, with little success.

At the conclusion of the meal, with the orchestra playing a merry tune and the dancers performing an intricate interweaving at a fast skipping pace, Lully became restless. She turned shining eyes upon Gersen. "Tomorrow evening I'll teach you this step!"

Gersen shook his head. "I can't possibly be on hand "

Lully spoke in a reproachful voice "You are seeing another girP"

"Of course not," scoffed Gersen "I have a business appointment."

"Then the next night' I'll prepare a little supper and we can make a good start "

"I'd make a poor student," said Gersen "In fact, I suffer from dizzy fits, dancing would certainly bring them on "

"You are joking with me," said Lully sadly "You are seeing another woman, there can be no reasonable doubt "

Gersen searched for new excuses, but was interrupted by the arrival of one of Lully's friends, a young man wearing a stylish suit of tan and black.

"Why aren't you dancing^" he asked Lully "The orchestra is at its best."

"My friend doesn't dance," said Lully

"What^^ Surely he wouldn't want you to waste your evening' Come, they're starting Stampede of the Gollnvogs "

"Do you mind5" Lully asked Gersen

"Not at all'"

Lully and her friend went briskly out upon the floor and soon were participating earnestly in the dance Gersen watched a moment without great interest. His mind wandered, he leaned back in his chair contemplating the stagnant state of his affairs Doubts, indecisions, reverses hindered him everywhere He had lost the initiative against Lens Larque, who indeed was now moving against Gersen himself The danger had become imminent So far he had evaded the rather casual attempts to capture him, no doubt they would become more direct If Lens Larque grew impatient, a silver of glass projected from across the street would instantly abate the

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nuisance created by Gersen's activities As of now, Lens Larque would seem only irked and resentful, Gersen might expect possibly another day before Lens Larque set to work in earnest ..

Gersen's reverie was interrupted by the arrival of a second group of Methlen He wondered if Jerdian had returned to Lla-larkno, and he wondered if he would see her Almost as he thought her name she turned and he saw her face Like her friends she wore carnival costume a snug white garment covering her from neck to feet, with blue pompons down the front, eccentric slippers, and a conical white hat topped by a pale blue pompon, pulled at a

tilt halfway down across her dark curls She looked so fresh and appealing and innocently gay that Gersen's heart rose up in his throat.

Without troubling to think he rose to his feet and crossed the room She turned her head and saw him, for a moment they looked eye to eye. Her party had now started off across the room, Jerdian hesitated, darted a quick glance after her friends, then came to where Gersen stood in the shadows. She spoke in a husky whisper. "What are you doing here?"

"For one thing I've been hoping to see you " Gersen put his hands under her arms, drew her close, and kissed her After a moment she disengaged herself and drew back "I thought I'd never see you again!"

Gersen laughed "And I knew that you would Do you love me Stil?"

"Yes, of course I don't know what to tell you."

"Can you leave your group and go off with me?"

"Now? It wouldn't be possible I'd cause a scandal " She looked across the room "In a moment my escort will come to find me "

"He'll think you've gone to the rest room "

"Perhaps so. What an undignified pretext for meeting a secret lover!"

"Can I meet you later tonight, when you've left here?"

Jerdian shook her head "We're planning a midnight supper for guests, I couldn't possibly escape "

"Then tomorrow, at noon."

"Very well, but where? You can't come to Oldenwood, my father would be ungracious "

"In front of Moss Alrune, on the side facing the lake "

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She looked at him in surprise. "We can't meet there; it's a private property!"

"Nevertheless it's vacant and no one will molest us."

"Very well then. I'll be there." She looked over her shoulder. "Now I must go." Again she looked over her shoulder. "Quick." She stepped close to him and raised her face; they embraced. Gersen kissed her once, twice; then, breathless and half-laughing, she pulled away. "Until tomorrow noon!" She went quickly off after her party.

Gersen, turning, met the shocked and unfriendly gaze of Lully Inkelstaff, just emerging from the passage leading to the ladies' rest room. Wordlessly she swept off to the table she had shared with Gersen, snatched up handbag and cloak, and marched away to join her friends.

Gersen gave a rueful shrug. "At the very least, I've avoided tomorrow's dancing lesson."

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Gersen paid off the score and departed the Black Barn. To one side a half dozen cabs awaited passengers. The cab first in line carried a faded white stripe along the skirt. Gersen casually turned away, and stood as if awaiting someone from within. How had he been tracked to the Black Barn? Had he been tagged with a tracer? Perhaps a daub of stuff which, in response to a search ray, returned a signal? . . . Tonight he would scrupulously bathe and change all his clothes.

Tonight—if he arrived at his hotel alive. Most definitely he would use none of the cabs along the rank. Gersen sauntered slowly back and forth with an air of a man preoccupied; arriving at an area where he could no longer see the cabs, he ran off down the road to Twanish.

The night was clear and dark. Constellations strange to Gersen hung in the sky and showed the road as a pale ribbon with dark fields to either side. As Gersen ran his body seemed to come alive;

his whole soul expanded. This was the existence he was meant for and where he felt easy: running through the night across a strange world, with danger behind and himself the very embodiment of retaliatory danger. His vapors and dreary misgivings were gone; he felt the Gersen of old. . . . Against the sky loomed a tall copse of trees. Gersen stopped short to listen. From the Black Barn, now almost a quarter mile distant, he heard the whisper of music, and saw the lights of a cab. Gersen looked to the side of the road opposite the trees. He saw a shallow ditch and, beyond, a clump of weeds. He jumped the ditch and flung himself flat behind the weeds.

The cab came at speed, lights blazing along the road. Coming

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abreast of the trees, the cab stopped abruptly, almost beside Gersen. But the attention of the driver and occupants was fixed upon the trees, not the clump of weeds which barely concealed Gersen.

The driver spoke in a soft voice "He's not down the road. He couldn't have come much farther."

From the compartment stepped three men; Gersen could see only their silhouettes in the glow reflected back from the headlights.

The driver spoke again: "He's hiding in the trees, unless he took to the fields."

One of the passengers, a short squat man, spoke in a plangent bass. "Turn so the lights shine into the trees."

The driver did so, backing the cab almost into the ditch.

The short squat man said, "Ang, around to the right. Dotty, around to the left. Keep out of the light, get him alive That's important. Bird wants him alive."

Gersen rose up from behind the weeds. Soundlessly he jumped the ditch. Climbing the two steps to the control booth, he thrust his adder-tongue stiletto into the nape of the driver's neck. Pincers cut the vertebral nerve, inducing instant death. Gersen lowered the corpse into the foot-space, and seated himself at the controls. The short man stood in the road to the left of the cab: a man with whom Gersen wanted earnest and candid conversation.

Three minutes passed. Gersen sat with his silver pistol in hand, waiting. Ang and Dofty emerged from the trees. They walked forward into light from the cab: Ang, a crooked angular young man with a long high-bridged nose and a short black beard; Dotty, burly and baby-faced with eyes peering through slits Gersen had often met their like Beyond, in disreputable backstreet taverns or working at their trade, as now

The short squat man took an impatient step forward. "Nothing^"

"He's not there," said Ang.

Gersen waited until the two were close in front of the cab; then, with neither qualm nor compunction, he discharged his weapon once, twice, driving splinters of explosive glass through the foreheads of Ang and Dotty, and once again at the short man's elbow as he spun around. The short man's gun dropped upon the road.

Gersen jumped down from the driver's seat. "I'm the man you're looking for "

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The short man said nothing, but stared at Gersen, his face contorted in pain

Gersen spoke in the most casual of voices "Have you ever seen a man die by cluthe3 No7 Yes3 You can choose cluthe, or I'll shoot you in the head. Which3"

"Shoot," whispered the short man.

"Then answer my questions. If you had caught me, what were you to do with me3"

"Bind you with tape and take you to a shed."

"Then what?"

"I would call for instructions."

"Who gives you instructions?"

The short man merely stared. Gersen stepped forward, his hand in a glove. He raised his hand, extended his arm. "Quick!"

"The Bird."

"Lens Larque?"

"You said the name."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. I take my orders by radio."

From the direction of the Black Barn came new lights. The short man lunged toward Gersen, who shot him accurately in the forehead. Gersen carefully replaced the fearful glove in its socket, then turning away, saw in the reflected light a weathered white stripe around the base of the cab. He ran off down the road toward Twanish.

The cab from the Black Barn, finding its way obstructed, halted. Gersen, pausing to look back over his shoulder, saw the driver and occupants alight, to stare in horror at the corpses.

At the Capricorn Cafe, overlooking Redemption Park, halfway between the Commercial Hotel and Skohune Tower, Gersen sat with a pot of tea assessing the events of the evening. His mood, he was pleased to note, had become less troubled. Activity had flushed the stagnant channels of his mind. The four killings he regretted only that he had teased so little information from the short man. He thought of Jerdian and felt a warm excitement, he thought of Lully and laughed aloud. . . Under Lully's desk at Jarkow Engineering reposed the recording apparatus he had installed so short a time before. Directed into the Kotzash office it now served no purpose.

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Much more advantageous if it could record conversations at Jarkow's office.

Gersen looked toward Skohune Tower, which at this hour showed only the dim illumination of night bulbs.

Gersen finished his tea. He went to the hotel, picked up his bag of equipment, returned to the street, and sauntered across the park to Skohune Tower. The lobby was empty. He rode the ascensor to the third floor and using his key to room 308, entered the offices of Jarkow Engineering.

Just inside the door he halted to listen. No sound, no indication

of human presence He stepped into Lully's cubicle, where he found and detached the recorder unit. Optimally, so he decided, the sound probe should be located in Jarkow's office.

Gersei installed the microphone under Jarkow's desk, where he discovered a set of implements which startled him. Gersen recalled an old aphorism- "He who supps with the devil should use a long spoon." Jarkow, working as he did with Lens Larque, had installed several versions of the "long spoon" where it could help him most.

Gersen worked quickly and efficiently, and in half an hour arranged the system to his satisfaction, with the recorder attached to the Kotzash telephone and microphones at vantage places around the room. He packed his tools, and started to leave, but at the draftman's office stopped short. He opened the door and looked in, to find the usual paraphernalia: plotting machines, superficial integrators, automatic scrubbers, a pattern library. Work in process lay spread out on a table page after page of charts, columns, and rows of figures. Each page carried a notation Section 1A, Section 1B, with the last page labeled Section 20F. Under the table Gersen saw a pair of peculiar objects- the first an irregular mass of chalky substance about a foot in diameter. The surface had been marked off into approximately one hundred areas, each labeled in black ink, after the same scheme as the pages had been labeled. The second object was an expanded replica of the first, made of a light transparent substance, and similarly limned into small areas Under the surface ran a myriad scarlet threads, curving, bending, twisting, humping, in no obvious order or pattern.

Most odd, thought Gersen. He picked up the object, looked at it this way and that. Most odd. Most curious. . . . Gersen gave a sudden cry of uncontrollable laughter.

Was such remarkable and magnificent foolishness possible^ He

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thought back across the months, and a hundred items of information suddenly ranged themselves into coherent order

Gersen replaced the transparent object He took his case and left the offices of Jarkow Engineering He had achieved his purpose. Conversations to be recorded in Jarkow's office could not fail but be interesting

Without incident Gersen returned to the hotel The tattletale he had arranged on the door to his room was in place and undisturbed. Gersen entered, closed and locked the door, bathed, and went to bed.

Gersen spent a restless night. Faces floated through his mind Lens Larque the caricatures, drawings, and blurred photograph. Poor broken Tintle and his spouse, Daswell Tippm, Ottile Panshaw, Bel Ruk, Lully Inkelstaff, Jerdian Chanseth

In the morning Gersen ordered breakfast up to his room, then, assailed by doubts, ate none of it. Dressing with care, he descended

to the ground floor, slipped out upon the Mall, went to the Capricorn Cafe, and there took his breakfast Today was to be an important day. At noon to Moss Alrune and Jerdian. Later—who knows5 Possibly a meeting with Lens Larque He returned to the hotel and went up to his room. The tattletale had been disturbed. Putting his ear to the door Gersen heard a set of odd sounds With the most exaggerated delicacy he slid the door ajar, to find a chambermaid setting his room to rights

He entered, bade her good morning, a few minutes later she withdrew Gersen immediately went to the telephone. He called the Kotzash office and activated the recording device. To his ear came those four conversations which had been recorded that morning. First, a call from Zerus Belsant of Stellar Fortress Security Association, requesting conversation with Mr Jarkow

"Sorry," said Lully in a pert voice "Mr Jarkow is not present."

"When do you expect him5"

"I don't know, sir. Perhaps tomorrow."

"Please mention that I called, and I'll try again tomorrow."

"Very ^ ell, sir"

Next to be heard was a call from Jarkow inquiring for Ottilie Panshaw

"He hasn't been in, sir "

"What2" Jarkow's tone was sharp. "Has he left a message5"

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"Not a word! No one's called but a Mr. Zerus Belsaint who wants to consult you."

"A Mr. Zerus who?"

"Mr. Zerus Belsaint of the Stellar Fortress Security Association. May I tell him when you'll be able to see him?"

"I'll be in this afternoon late, but I won't talk with Belsaint. He'll have to wait. If Panshaw calls, have him come to the office and don't let him leave."

"Yes, sir."

Gersen next listened to Lully's private conversation with a friend, where he learned more than he cared to know. Lully described her previous evening's adventures, using images and metaphors which Gersen found unflattering. "And with a Methlen girl, would you believe it?" Lully's voice was pitched in tones of outrage. "I can't imagine what sort of a man he is! I gave him a most awful look, simply withered him! Then I went off with Nary. We danced three suites and a great gallop. And that's not all! On the way home,

we came upon a frightful murder—in fact, four murders, of a cab-driver and three passengers. They lay around the road like so many dog carcasses. I've had a night I won't forget!"

"Who was the Methlen girl?"

"That giddy Chanseth bit. You see her everywhere."

"Yes, I know of her."

The conversation ended, and the final call came through: from Motry, Jarkow's works superintendent. "Mr. Jarkow, please."

"He's not here yet. He'll be in later today."

"I'm just down from Shanitra. I called in to report final check-out. He can pass the word on to his principals. Will you give him the message?"

"Certainly, Mr. Motry."

"Don't forget now!"

"Naturally I won't forget! In fact, I'll put a note on his desk this minute."

"That's the system! Quite proper, my girl! I'll look into the office tomorrow morning."

"Very good, Mr. Motry. I'll tell Mr. Jarkow."

Thereafter the line was dead. Gersen sat back in the chair and reflected. Today must be the day. He looked out the window. The weather was cool, with Cora-light slanting down from an autumnal sky. The uplands of Llalarkno showed indistinct through haze; the

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town, the park, the entire landscape seemed suffused with a melancholy serenity, which Gersen found consonant with his own mood. Problems had been solved; mysteries had revealed themselves to an effect so ludicrous, cruel, and wild that Gersen's mind veered away.

Gersen considered the conversations he had overheard. Jarkow expected important visitors during the afternoon: who could they be? . . . His thoughts shifted to Jerdian Chanseth, and brought him a twinge of hollow uncertainty. What would she be thinking? Now, this very instant? Gersen, so astute, crafty, and resourceful, found himself besieged by doubts and anxieties. He saw her as he had seen her first, in her dark green frock and dark green stockings, the dark hair curling over her ears and across her forehead. Her only notice of him had been a haughty glance; how different now their relationship! Gersen's heart melted within him. . . . He checked the time: less than an hour to noon, not too early to set out for Moss Almne.

Gersen considered the cabs waiting near-the hotel. Unlikely that any of these could be considered threats; nevertheless, he crossed the park and flagged down a cab cruising the street. As always, he discovered resistance, and the driver consented to the journey only when Gersen agreed to sit far back in the shadow of the interior where he could not be seen.

In the road by Moss Alrune Gersen alighted and paid the fare; the driver wasted no time in departing.

Gersen walked back along the road to the entrance arch. Great trees of a type unknown to him overhung the stone wall and cast a dapple shade; the air was still and silent. To right and left of the arch, stone pillars supported the busts of nymphs cast in bronze;

their eyes looked unseeingly down at him.

He passed under the arch and into the grounds. The driveway curved up to a broad portico; beyond, a path led off around the house into the gardens, where Gersen so far had not explored. He walked among confections of flowering shrubs and carefully groomed trees, and presently came to a low stone wall. On the other side spread the grounds of Oldenwood. Gerson looked out across the lawn, now occupied by a pair of small dark-haired girls, naked except for white skimmer hats decorated with flowers. They saw Gersen and paused to stare. Their frolicking became more sedate. Presently they ran off to a more secluded area.

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Gersen turned back the way he had come, wondering if ever his own children would run so blissfully across the lawns of Moss Alrune.... He went around to the front of the house. On the steps satJerdian, looking pensively across the water. She rose to her feet;

he put his arms gently around her and kissed her; she acquiesced, without fervor.

For a few minutes they stood; then Gersen said: "Have you spoken of me to your family?"

Jerdian laughed sadly. "My father does not think well of you."

"He hardly knows me. Shall I go talk to him?"

"Oh no! He'd be frigid.... I really don't know what to say. All last night I thought about you and myself, and all this morning. . . . I'm still confused."

"I've been thinking too. I see three possible courses. We can take leave of each other, finally and forever. Or you can come away with me—now, if you like. Tomorrow we'll leave Methel and go off across space."

Jerdian sighed and gave her head a slow dismal shake. "You don't know what it is to be Methlen. I'm a part of Llalarkno, just

as if I had grown here, like a tree. I'd be forever lonely away from my home, no matter how much I loved you."

"Or I could stay here on Methel and make my home here, with you.

Jerdian looked at him dubiously. "Would you really do that for mer

"I have no other home. Llalarkno appeals to me; why shouldn't I live here?"

Jerdian smiled ruefully. "It's not all that simple. Outworlders aren't often made welcome, if ever. We're very exclusive, as I'm sure you know."

"I've already arranged that part of it. We already own a home."

"Here? On Methel?"

Gersen nodded. "Moss Alrune. I bought it yesterday."

Jerdian looked at him in amazement. "The price was a million SVTJ! I thought you, well, a poor adventurer—a spaceman!"

"So I am, after a fashion. But hardly poor. I could buy a dozen Moss Alrunes and not even notice it."

"I'm bewildered."

"I hope you don't think the worse of me for not being poor."

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"No. Not really. You're more of a mystery than ever. Why did you risk your life fighting that great Darsh at hadaul?"

"Because it had to be done."

"But why?"

"Tomorrow I'll tell you everything. Today—the time isn't quite right."

She looked at him searchingly. "You're not a criminal? Or a pirate?"

"I'm not even a banker."

Jerdian, looking past Gersen, became rigid. A furious voice called out: "Hoy there, fellow! What are you doing here? Jerdian! Whatever is this?" Without waiting for an answer Adario Chanseth signaled to a pair of burly footmen. "Take this fellow and pitch him into the street."

The footmen advanced confidently. A moment later one lay facedown in a flower bed, the other sat nearby numbly holding his bleeding face. Gersen said: "You threw me out of your bank, Mr. Chanseth, but this is my property and I don't care to be molested."

"What do you mean, your property?"

"I bought Moss Alrune yesterday."

Chanseth uttered a harsh laugh. "You bought nothing very much. Have you read the Llalarkno charter? No? Then you are in for a surprise. Llalarkno is a private domain, and retains basic ownership in perpetuity. You bought no title; you bought what is in effect a lease, which must be validated by the Llalarkno Trustees. I am one of these. I don't want your outlander face hanging over my garden wall, staring at my children, no more than I'd tolerate that Darsh blackguard."

Gersen looked at Jerdian, who stood with her hands twisting and tears running down her cheeks. Chanseth glanced at her. "So that's the way of it, eh? A romantic drama. Well, put the role away and out of your head. You're a wayward little creature; your imagination leads you into situations which you can't control. The drama is over; here you must stop. It is time you were learning propriety. Go home at once."

"Just a moment," said Gersen. He went to Jerdian and stood looking down into her tear-stained face. "You don't need to obey him. You can come with me—if you choose to do so."

Jerdian said in a low voice, "He's probably right. I'm a Methlen

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and I'll never be anything else. I suppose I might as well face up to it Good-bye, Kirth Gersen "

Gersen bowed stiffly "Good-bye " He turned to Adano Chanseth, who stood stonily nearby, but could find no words to express his feelings He turned on his heel, strode down the drive, passed under the arch, and the bronze nymphs gazed down with blind eyes

The road was empty Gersen walked southward toward Twanish, with the grounds of Oldenwood to his right He turned a single glance across the sloping lawn The two little girls, now wearing frocks, noticed his passage and paused in their play to watch Gersen continued, through the quiet woods, at last down the slope to the Mall, and around to the Capricorn Cafe He felt hungry, thirsty, tired, and depressed, he threw himself down at a table and made a meal of bread and meat, then sat with a pot of tea, staring across the park

The episode had run its course Emotions, hopes, gallant resolves all past and gone like sparks on the wind

The pattern, Gersen reflected, was that of a simple tragicomedy in two acts tensions, conflicts, confrontations on Dar Sai, a brief

interlude while the settings were shifted, a surge to the climax at Moss Alrune The dynamic thrust to the production had been provided by Gersen's folly How absurd to think of himself against the bucolic background of Moss Alrune, participating in the Methlen frivolities, no matter what his wistful yearnings' He was Kirth Gersen, obsessed by inner imperatives which might never be satisfied

The drama was ended The tensions had resolved, the matters at conflict had settled into equilibrium with a ponderous lurching finality Gersen managed a bitter smile as he sipped his tea Jerdian would not suffer very long, or very painfully

Gersen rose to his feet and went to the hotel He bathed, changed into spaceman's gear He called his recording device, and heard another of Lully's personal calls, to a Nary Balbroke, and another call from Jarkow, again inquiring after Ottile Panshaw, in a sharper voice than before

"He's not called, Mr Jarkow "

"Very strange He's not in the office next door^"

"The office has been empty all day, sir "

"Very well, I won't be m until late afternoon, I've got some important business You go home at your usual time If Panshaw calls, leave me a note."

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"Yes, Mr Jarkow "

Gersen switched off the communicator He looked at his chronometer Lully would presently be leaving the office

Gersen made his preparations, checking and rechecking with meticulous patience Satisfied at last he departed the hotel and walked across the park, arriving at Skohune Tower (ust in time to see Lully trot briskly out upon the street and march off up the Mall Gersen went into the building, rode the ascensor to the third floor, and went directly to room 308

He put his ear to the door No sound Inserting his key he slid the door open and surveyed the interior The rooms were empty He stepped into the reception room and closed the door

He went to Jarkow's office and looked inside Empty, as before Gersen crossed the hall to the drafting room, and seated himself to the side

He waited Half an hour passed The shafts of Cora-light entering by the west windows began to approach the horizontal

Gersen grew tense The seconds went past with an almost audible thudding

He became tired of sitting He went to stand where he could

look through the glass partition, both toward the outer door and, by turning his head, into Jarkow's office. The situation was not to his satisfaction, he felt overly conspicuous. Closing the door, he dropped to his knee and with his knife cut a small slit in the lower panel, allowing him a slantwise view into Jarkow's office.

Steps in the hall Gersen listened a single man. Whoever might be Jarkow's "important visitor," he had not yet arrived.

The door slid back, into the outer office stepped Jarkow Gersen, standing behind a cabinet, watched through a niche in a stack of books.

Jarkow came into the office carrying a small case. He stopped, looked into Lully's cubicle, scowled. An ugly harsh-looking man, thought Gersen, rendered even more so by his elaborate blond hair-piece. But by no means a man to be taken lightly. Muttering under his breath, Jarkow went heavy-footed to his office. Gersen dropped to his knees and out of sight.

Looking through a slit, Gersen saw Jarkow go to his desk, where he opened the case and brought out a black box surmounted by an amber button. Jarkow placed the box in the precise center of

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his desk, then went to sit in his chair. He leaned back, turned to look moodily out of the window across the park toward Llalarkno.

Gersen stepped out of his hiding place and into the hall. Jarkow heard a sound; he jerked about to see Gersen entering his office. His heavy eyebrows lowered, his yellow-gray eyes became narrow. For a moment he and Gersen stared at each other. Gersen took three slow steps forward, so that he stood almost in front of the desk.

Finally Jarkow spoke: "Well, who are you?"

"My name is Kirth Gersen. Have you ever heard of me?"

Jarkow gave his head a jerk. "I know something of you."

"I took Kotzash away from Panshaw. I instructed him to halt all proceedings on Shanitra. Presumably he notified you."

Jarkow nodded slowly. "He did so indeed. Why have you gone to such effort?"

"To begin with, I wanted the Kotzash money. Yesterday I transferred almost five million SVU to my own account."

Jarkow's eyes narrowed even further. "In that case, I will render my bill to you."

"Don't trouble yourself."

Jarkow seemed not to hear the remark. He took the black box

from the center of his desk and moved it to the window ledge beside his chair. "So: what do you want with me?"

"A few moments' conversation. Are you expecting company?"

"Perhaps."

"We'll have time for a chat. Let me tell you something about myself. I was born at a place called Mount Pleasant, which was subsequently destroyed by a syndicate of slavers. One of the group was a certain Lens Larque: a murderer, thief, and general black-guard. This Lens Larque is Darsh, and originally bore the name Husse Bugold. He became an outcast, a 'rachepol,' and lost an ear. His other ear he lost only recently, at Tintle's Shade in Rath Eileann. How do I know? I cut it off myself, Madame Tintle probably cooked it into next day's ahagaree."

In Jarkow's eyes yellow lights were flickering. He rose suddenly to his feet. In a well-modulated voice he said: "Your language offends me, inasmuch as I myself am Lens Larque."

"I am aware of this," said Gersen. "I have come to kill you."

Lens Larque reached under the lip of his desk. "We shall see who kills whom. First I will break your legs." He squeezed, but no

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answering fan of power spurted forth; Gersen had disconnected the circuitry' during his visit.

Lens Larque muttered a guttural curse and from his pocket drew a weapon. Gersen fired his own pistol, exploded the weapon out of Lens Larque's hand. Lens Larque roared in pain. Lurching around the desk he threw himself forward. Gersen swept up a chair, thrust it into Lens Larque's face. Lens Larque thrust it aside with a sweep of bull-strong arms. Gersen stepped close, kneed Lens Larque's abdomen, slapped the back of Lens Larque's neck with his right hand. He stepped back, ducked a massive blow, then kicked Lens Larque's knee, pulled him off balance, and sent him sprawling to the floor, where the blond hairpiece fell away to reveal a ridged skin-bald scalp and vacant ear-holes.

Gersen leaned on the edge of the desk and pointed his pistol at Lens Larque's midriff. "You are about to die. I wish I could kill you a dozen times."

"Panshaw betrayed me."

"Panshaw is gone," said Gersen. "He betrayed no one."

"Then how did you know me?"

"I saw your face in the other room. I know your plan, and why you used Kotzash. All to no avail."

Lens Larque clenched his muscles and tried to seize Gersen's

feet, but performed only a feeble cramped movement. He stared up at Gersen. "What have you done to me?"

"I have poisoned you with cluthe. The back of your neck is now burning. Your arms and legs are already paralyzed. In ten minutes you will be dead. As you die, think of the harm you have inflicted upon innocent people."

Lens Larque gasped. "The box yonder—give it to me."

"No. I take pleasure in thwarting your plans. Remember Mount Pleasant? There you killed my father and my mother."

"Take the box," whispered Lens Larque. "Pull the guard back; press the button."

"No," said Gersen. "Never."

Lens Larque began to thrash across the floor as his viscera knotted and cramped. Gersen went to the reception room and waited. The minutes passed. The sounds continued as Lens Larque's muscles coiled, knotted, and pulled in different directions. His breath came in stertorous gasps. After nine minutes he lay

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twisted in a grotesque contortion. At ten minutes he ceased to breathe, and a minute later he was dead.

Gersen, sitting on the reception chair, drew a deep breath, and released it. He felt old, sad, and tired.

Time passed. Gersen rose to his feet, went back into that room he had known as Jarkow's office. Twilight was deepening to night. Over Llalarkno rose the moon Shanitra, in its full phase.

Gersen picked up the black box. He held it a moment, weighing it, feeling its power. Contrary impulses thrust at him. He remembered Adario Chanseth's austere face. Gersen laughed mirthlessly. Lens Larque had labored long to achieve his most sardonic trick. Should such toil and expense be wasted, especially since Gersen shared all of Lens Larque's motivations?

"No," said Gersen. "Of course not."

He slid back the guard sleeve and put his finger on the amber button.

He pushed.

The surface of Shanitra erupted: chunks fell away with majestic deliberation; fragments sprayed in different directions; a cloud of dust created a nimbus glowing in the Cora-light.

The dust dissipated. The disrupted material settled into new configurations. The irregular surface of Shanitra had now taken on

the similitude of Lens Larque's face: the earlobes long, the scalp bald, the mouth twisted into a leer of idiotic mirth.

Gersen went to the communicator. He called Oldenwood and was put into contact with Adario Chanseth.

Chanseth peered at the screen. "Who is calling?"

"Go out into your back garden," said Gersen. "There's a great Darsh face hanging over the garden wall."

Gersen broke the connection. He left Skohune Tower and went to the hotel, where he paid his bill and departed.

A cab took him to the spaceport. He went out to his Fantamic Flitterwing, climbed aboard, and departed the planet Methel.

From The Book of Dream\

Raise your eyes, stranger, to that age-worn rampart  
which confronts all else there stand the paladins, stern,  
grave, serene Each is one, each is all

At the center is Imrrur of the graces He controls certain  
sleights of magic, he is master of ploys and plots and awful  
surprises He is Immir the unpredictable and claims no single  
color

At Immir's right hand stands Jeha Rais, who is tall in man-  
esty and whose color is black He is sagacious and always  
first to notice a far event, for which he construes eventualities  
Then he points his finger, to direct the gaze of the  
other paladins He is without qualm and advocates decisiveness  
Sometimes he is known as "Jsha the Inexorable "  
He wears a black garment, supple and close as his skin, a  
black cape and a black morion, fixed at the crest with an  
orb of crystal in a silver star-blaze

At Immir's left hand stands Lons Hohenger, whose color  
is the red of new blood He is the feroce, impulsive and  
reckless, and ever reluctant to leave the slaying grounds,  
though of all the paladins he can be most generous He  
lusts after fair women and they deny him at great risk to  
their dignity Should they make complaint or give chiding,  
his redress is even more fulsome. When finally he leaves

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the bed their voices are still and they look longingly after  
him.

Green Mewness stands beside Loris Hohenger. Expert in  
skills is Mewness. He can fling a bridge or topple a tower;

he is patient, cunning, and if the road is closed to right and  
left, he finds a way between. His memory is exact; he never  
forgets a face or a name and he knows the ways of a hun-

dred worlds. Soft men of wealth think him ingenuous in his dealings, to their ultimate consternation.

Yellow Spangleway is wry, astonishing, and ignores every precedent. He is antic and droll, and able in the acting of roles. All the paladins, save only one, laugh to see his capers;

when the time is appropriate all—save only one—dance to his musics, for Spangleway can elicit sweet sounds from a dangling pig, should he so choose to turn his skills. Never think to match Spangleway jape for jape, since his knife is even keener than his wit. In battle, the enemy cries out:

"Where is the laggard Spangleway?" or: "Aha! The coward Spangleway takes to his heels!" only to have him on their necks from a new direction, or in some shocking guise.

Beside Jeha Rais stands gentle Rhune Fader the Blue. In battle, though he is dauntless and first to succor a hard-pressed paladin, he is also first to urge mercy and forbearance. He is slim, tall, clear of feature, and handsome as the summer sunrise; he is skilled in the arts and graces and sensitive to beauty in all things, especially the beauty of shy maidens upon whom he casts a glamour. Alas, in the battle councils the voice of Rhune Fader carries little weight.

Beside blue Rhune, and a little apart, stands eerie white Eia Panice, whose hair, eyes, long teeth, and skin are white. He wears a full casque of white metal and little of his face can be seen: a high-bridged hooked nose, a harsh chin, gleaming eyes. In the councils he speaks, for the most part, either "yea" or "nay," but more often than not his word decides the issue, for he seems to know the ways of Destiny. Alone among the paladins he is unmoved by the droll contrivances of Spangleway. Indeed, on those occasions when his grim smile is seen, then is the time for all who can to depart and

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never look back lest they discover the limpid gaze of Eia Panice fixed into their own.

So then, stranger, go your way. When at last you make your homecoming, wherever it may be among the sparkling worlds, bring report of those who stand brooding yonder.

From The Demon Princes—Caril Carphen:

... we turn the focus of our attention upon Howard Alan Treesong, his wry exploits and the incredible virtuosity of his organizational genius. At the outset let me, in all candor, confess my awe and perplexity: I do not know where to start. He is possibly the greatest rogue of all (if, in that perfervid ambience surrounding the Demon Princes, such niceties of comparison carry any shred of conviction). Certainly he is attended by the most extravagant contradictions. His cruelty is wanton and horrid, so that his occa-

sional magnanimitities are cast into sharp relief. Judged by the elaborate methodicalness of his programs, he would seem passionless, absolutely logical. Against a different perspective, he is seen to be volatile and as frivolous as a circus clown. He is a mystery, and his ultimate purposes cannot even be guessed.

Howard Alan Treesong! A name of magic, instilling dread and wonder! What, precisely, is known of him? The few nodes of fact are made ambiguous by a luminous dust of rumor. He is declared to be the most solitary person alive;

by other reports he is the ultimate ruler of all criminals. His person is said to be unremarkable: tall, thin, with well-shaped if gaunt features and pale gray eyes of exceptional clarity. His expression is often described as droll and his manner vivacious. He dresses most usually in ordinary garments, without ostentation. By all accounts he enjoys the company of beautiful women, none of whom seems to profit from the association either spiritually or financially. To the contrary, the romances of which anything is known all end tragically, if not worse.

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The events which finally brought Howard Alan Treesong to bay ran an erratic course—twisting, forking, making confused halts and unlikely linkages—a consequence of the mystery in which Treesong shrouded himself. According to the few extant descriptions, Treesong stood rather taller than ordinary with a luminous gaze, a broad forehead, a narrow jaw and chin, and a foxy rueful mouth. His manner was usually described as gracious with a metallic undertone. Almost every account mentioned a "curious field of suppressed energy," or "unpredictable extravagance," and in one case the word "madness" was used.

Treesong's obsession with mystery extended far. No photographs, representations, or likenesses were known to exist, on or off the public record. His origins were unknown; his private life was as secret as the far end of the universe; he regularly disappeared from public notice for years on end.

Treesong's zone of operations encompassed the Oikumene; he rarely ventured Beyond. He was known to have used for himself the title "Lord of the Overmen."\*

Gersen picked up the track of Howard Alan Treesong essentially by dint of abstract reasoning—pure deduction in the classical pattern—using information supplied by one Walter Koedelin, an old-time associate and now a Senior Officer of the IPCC.<sup>2</sup>

The two met in Sailmaker Beach, to the north of Avente, the metropolis of Alphanor, first among Rigel's Concourse of Worlds.

Chancy's Tea House at the top of Sailmaker Beach overlooked a thousand small houses, shops, taverns, and a small plaza used by a hundred kinds of people. Each structure was washed a different

color: pale blue, pale green, lavender, pink, white, yellow, and each cast a stark black shadow to the crackling Rigel-glare. Far below could be seen a small crescent of beach. Beyond, the Thaumaturge Ocean, soft dark blue, extended to the horizon, where floated pinacles of white cumulus.

1. The allusion is perhaps explained in a paragraph from an interview in which Freesong

stated "Men exploit animals to their needs and think nothing of the process So-called

criminals exploit die ordinary ruck to their needs in die same manner, employ ing equal

morality, hence criminals are properly to be known as 'Overmen ' "

2 Intei-world Police Coordinating Company originally a small bureau, collecung and

collating information for the various police organizations of the Oikumene, gradually- ex-

panding, diversifying, and undertaking special missions, at last to become die largest and

most efficient law-enforcement agency of the human universe

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At a table shaded under a dense growth of dark green memaris sat Kirth Gersen and Walter Koedelin, a sandy-haired, pink-skinned man somewhat more stocky than Gersen, with a short-nosed, big-jawed face. Like Gersen, he wore spaceman's dark blue and gray, the costume for folk who hoped to avoid attention. The two men drank rum punch and discussed Howard Alan Treesong.

In the company of Gersen, Koedelin spoke without restraint.

"What is he up to now? That's a real puzzle. Ten years ago he called himself 'Lord of the Overmen.\* "

"In effect, 'King of Thieves.' "

"Exactly. He licensed every illicit act from Far Edge to Tangiers Old Socco. One rime Howard walked a backstreet in Bugtown, on Arccurus IV, and a mugger jumped out. Howard asked:

'Are you registered with the Organization?'

" 'No, I am not.'

" 'Then you'll not get a cent from me, and I'm also turning you in for a fink.' "

Koedelin drained his goblet of rum punch and looked up at the dark green foliage from which depended strips of pink blossoms.

"Splendid place for microphones. I wonder who is listening to us."

"No one, according to Chancy."

"It's hard to be certain nowadays. Still, the Organization isn't all that strong around here."

Gersen raised his hand. "Two more of the same. . . . So, Tree-

song is no longer Lord of the Overmen?"

"Hardly that. But he gave up detail work to sublords quite some time ago. Howard only looks in from rime to rime and runs his eye over the books."

"Benign fellow. So what is he up to now?"

Koedelin hesitated, calculating his response, then made a fatalistic gesture and drew himself forward. "There's no harm in telling you, although if the story gets wide circulation we'll be embarrassed. It may not even be true." Koedelin looked right and left. "Don't let it go any further."

"Certainly not."

"IPCC administration is rather loose—that you know. There is a board of directors and a presiding officer, who is now Artur Sancho. Five years ago his confidential aide died in an accident. A close friend recommended a man named Jethro Cope for the job, and after the usual background check Cope was hired. Cope proved

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very efficient, so much so that Sancho had less and less work to do. And now began a strange process. The directors began to die—by disease, by accidents, by murder and suicide.

"Sancho, or more accurately Jethro Cope, recommended new directors who were thereupon voted into office. Jethro Cope always handled the vote and counted the ballots. He put seven men into the IPCC board of directors and needed only six more to achieve a voting majority. He probably would have gotten them had not one of the new directors, who called himself Bemus Carlisle, encountered an agent who recognized him to be Sean McMurtree of Dublin, Ireland, a high-class blackmailer.

"To make a long story short, McMurtree was quietly expunged, but not before he mentioned a name. Can you guess the name he mentioned?"

"Howard Alan Treesong."

"Quite right. The agents went looking for Jethro Cope, but he was gone and never returned."

"What of the other six new directors?"

"Three were killed. One disappeared. Two are still there. They have no record; they claim innocence, and the other directors won't vote them out."

"Very noble, very corrupt, or very frightened."

"Take your choice."

"To be Lord of the Overmen and Chief of the IPCC—both

and at the same time—that's like a beautiful dream, no matter which side you're on."

"Alas, indeed. Treesong is a sly devil. I'd still like to carve up his liver."

"What of photographs?"

"Not one to be found."

"So we still don't know what he looks like."

Koedelin gave a grunt of derisive disgust. "People who dealt with Cope remember long blond curls, a bushy blond beard and mustache, an affable manner."

"And since then?"

"Nothing. He's gone invisible. I forgot to mention that three years ago an order went down to the library to void all material pertaining to Howard Alan Treesong, on the grounds of inaccuracy. This was done; now there's very little on tap."

"All successful criminals at some time return to their home-

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towns.' Somewhere out there Treesong was born and raised. Dozens of people must know him well. Maybe after three years new material has come in."

Koedelin, leaning back in his chair, ruminated a minute or two.

"I'll check over my sources and let you know. Where are you staying?"

."

ing:

"At the Miramonte."

"I'll look in about noon, if that's convenient."

On the following day, at precisely noon, Koedelin joined Gersen in the observation lounge of the Hotel Miramonte, on Avente's esplanade.

"It's as I suspected," said Koedelin. "There's not a clue as to his origin. He first appears on Earth as a young man, robbing banks, swindling, extorting, committing murders, organizing a strike force. He's competent at his trade. Still, it's amazing how little we know of him as a human being."

Declaring himself pressed for time, Koedelin left shortly after. Gersen went out to walk on the esplanade, which for ten miles paralleled Avente's superb white sand beach.

The harms Treesong had inflicted upon Gersen were now over twenty years old, when Treesong had only just attained his full criminal stature.<sup>2</sup> Since this time his exploits had become ever more grand. . . . A wraith of insight nickered through Gersen's mind. He went to lean on the balustrade.

Three years ago Howard Treesong had dropped from sight. This man, who had tried to be, simultaneously, King of Thieves and Chief Director of the IPCC, was certainly not now idle; somewhere he plotted new schemes, more monumental than any before.

Gersen considered a number of possibilities: deeds of cruel magnificence, ingenious abominations, shame visited upon all humanity. None of Gersen's constructions seemed plausible or worth the effort. Evidently, so Gersen told himself, he lacked Treesong's gorgeous, if wild and savage, imagination.

1 Gersen here referred to the book *The Criminal Mentality*, by Michael Diaz  
2. At Mount Pleasant, an agricultural settlement on the world Providence, a consortium of five master criminals—the so-called Demon Princes—had dropped out of the sky to enslave the entire population, killing those who resisted. Kirth Gersen and his grandfather escaped, and thereafter in Gersen's life there had been room for little but preparation for retaliation and revenge.

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Gersen returned to the hotel and telephoned Koedelin. "Regarding the subject of our conversation, it would seem that something dramatic should be coming to the surface about now. What would answer that description?"

Koedelin could cite nothing definite. "I've been thinking along similar lines—waiting, so to speak, for the other shoe to drop. No matter how hard I listen, I hear only utter silence. . . ."

The three populated Vegan worlds were Aloysius, Boniface, and Cuthbert. During the first Explosion of Peoples, they had been settled by religious orders, each more fanatic than the next. In the sixteenth century of the Space Age the sacerdotal flavor yet lingered, especially in the public buildings, converted from temples during the "Bum's Rush."

Pontefract on Aloysius, a small city notable mainly for its incessant mist, by some trick of fate had become an important publishing and financial center. In the oldest section of town, dominating St. Paidrigh Square, stood the ancient Bramville Tower, now headquarters of *Cosmopolis*, a journal of news, photographs, and short essays. The magazine's contents, sometimes profound, often dramatic or even sentimental, were directed to the attention of intelligent middle-class folk across the entire Oikumene.

Kirth Gersen, through the manipulations of his financial advi-

ser, Jehan Addels, had acquired a controlling interest in Cosmopolis; in the guise of Henry Lucas, Special Writer, he used the offices as a convenient headquarters.

Arriving in Pontefract, Gersen went to dine with Jehan Addels at his splendid old mansion in Ballyholt Woods, to the north of Pontefract. During the course of the dinner Gersen mentioned Howard Alan Treesong and his peculiar invisibility.

Addels instantly became tense. "You speak, naturally, only from casual interest."

"Well-not altogether. Treesong is a scoundrel and a criminal. His influence reaches everywhere. Tonight burglars might break into this house and steal your Memlings and Van Tasals, not to mention your Rhodosi rugs. Objects of this quality might go directly to Treesong himself."

Addels nodded somberly. "It is a serious matter. Tomorrow I will submit a memorandum to the IPCC."

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"It can do no harm."

Addels glanced suspiciously toward Gersen. "I hope that you take no personal interest in this man?"

"Probably to no great extent."

Addels uttered an angry ejaculation under his breath. "Please do not include me in these investigations, not to the slightest degree!"

"My dear Addels, how can I avoid coming to you for advice?"

"My advice in this case is succinct and definite: let the IPCC do their job!"

"That is excellent advice, and I will assist them in this work as much as possible, and I know that you will do the same."

"Of course, of course," muttered Addels.

At the Cosmopolis library Gersen searched in files for references to Howard Alan Treesong. These were voluminous and told Gersen little that he did not know and nothing of the topics which were his chief concern: Treesong's place of origin and his present whereabouts. Treesong's pictorial likeness was conspicuous by its absence.

At the end of a disappointing day, Gersen, for no reason other than simple persistence, riffled through the contents of a file labeled Miscellaneous: Sort, discovering nothing to his immediate interest. A pair of trays marked "File" and "Discard" caught his eye. The "File" basket was empty; the "Discard" basket contained a large

photograph, almost a foot square, depicting a party at a banquet. Five men and two women were seated; three men stood somewhat to the back. At the top someone had scrawled: H. A. Treesong is here.

With numb fingers and a prickling skin, Gersen stood staring at the photograph. The camera had recorded a full circle, from the center of a circular table, so that each member of the group was depicted from the front, though none was looking directly at the camera and perhaps no one was aware that the picture was being made.

In front of each place stood a curious little semaphore, displaying three colored flags, and each place had been served a silver dish containing three purple-brown objects about four inches high: apparently the first course to the banquet.

Aside from the scrawled notation across the top, the photo-

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graph lacked further legend except for a number printed at the bottom 972

The diners were of various ages and races All projected a confident air, the effluvium of position and wealth They were identified by place cards, unfortunately turned away from the camera

Gersen looked from face to face Which might be Howard Alan Treesong? His description fitted, more or less loosely, perhaps two of the men A file clerk approached, a jaunty young man wearing a pink-and-black striped shirt with baggy brown trousers in the local style He gave Gersen a glance which, while respectful and affable, also contained the shadow of a sneer Around the Cosmopolis offices Gersen was regarded as a man of questionable talents. "Rummaging through the garbage, eh, Mr Lucas?"

"Everything is grist for the mill," said Gersen "This photograph which you were about to throw away—where did it come from?"

"Oh, that affair? It arrived a few days ago from our Starport office The Watch and Ward Society at its annual glut, or something similar Is it useful?"

"Probably not Still, it's rather quaint I wonder who H A Treesong might be?"

"One of the local goblins The ladies are absolute frumps Nothing here for our readers, that I assure you "

But Gersen was not to be discouraged "From our Starport office, you say Which Starport, incidentally? There must be at least a dozen "

"Starport on New Concept, Marhab Six " Again the flavor, almost undetectable, of condescension Around Covmopolis no one understood how Henry Lucas had gained his job, and even less how he held it

Gersen was indifferent to the opinions of his colleagues. "How did the photograph get here'"

"It came in the last mailbag When you're finished, throw it back in the trash, there's a good fellow "

The clerk went off about his duties Gersen took the photograph to his private cubicle and called the personnel office "Who is our representative at Starport, New Concept2"

"Starport is a zone headquarters, Mr Lucas The /onal superintendent is Ailett Mayneth "

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Gersen discovered upon looking into Universal Travel Routes that direct connections between Aloysius and New Concept were non-existent If he wished to travel by passenger packet he must expect three stopovers at junction points and three changes of ship, with consequent delay

Gersen closed Universal Travel Routes and replaced it on the shelf. He rode out to the spaceport and boarded his Fantamic Flit-terwmg, a serviceable and competent space cruiser, with a small cargo hatch and accommodations for four a vessel larger than his Distis Pharaon and more comfortable than his Armmtor Starship.

In the late afternoon of the day on which he had discovered the photograph, Gersen departed Aloysius, with Vega hanging cold in the sky on his port quarter. He gave appropriate coordinates to the automatic pilot and was whisked off toward the middle reaches of Aries

During the voyage he studied the photograph at length, and slowly the banqueters took on a static two-dimensional life Of each male face Gersen asked "Are you Howard Alan Treesong2"

Some answered indignantly in the negative, others held their own counsel, and several seemed to return a brooding challenge, as if to say, "Who I am, what I am—interfere at your own peril'" And one of the men Gersen examined ever more often, with increasing fascination Glossy chestnut hair framed a philosopher's forehead, hollow cheeks were joined to a gaunt )aw by a sheath of corded muscle, the thin tender mouth was twisted as if in recollection of a mischievous joke. A face strong and subtle, sensitive but not soft. the face of a man capable of anything so thought Gersen

Ahead glowed Marhab, off to the right wheeled the planet New Concept and its three moons.

From Civilized Ideas and Civilized Worlds, by Michael Yeaton:

As the student reflects upon the development of the newly settled worlds he notices an odd and ironic circumstance, recurring so often as to seem the rule rather than the exception. The ideal program by which each new society is shaped, by some as yet unenunciated law of conduct, begins to generate its own obverse, or opposite, impulse, which in due course overcomes the original scheme. Human perversity? The malice of Fate? Who can say? In any event, the examples are everywhere. For instance, consider the world New Concept.. .

Arriving at New Concept, Gersen located Starport and landed at the space terminal. A sleek car riding a monorail shuttled him the five miles between the terminal and Starport; Gersen was thereby afforded a view of the New Concept fells, here overgrown with heavy, dark blue turf. In the middle distance the dark blue gave way to maroon, and beyond, purple. A mile from the terminal the monorail skirted an area of moldering white ruins, originally an intricate complex of structures in the Neo-Palladian style: almost a small city. Now the columns were chipped, broken, or toppled; the roofs had partly collapsed; the once-noble entablatures were stained and streaked. At first Gersen thought the ruins uninhabited; then he noticed movement here and there, and a moment later saw a pack of gangling animals loping across a once-grand plaza.

The ruins fell behind; the monorail entered Starport and came

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to a halt at a central depot. At an information booth Gersen learned the location of the local Cosmopolis office—a suite in a ten-story tower a few hundred yards from the depot—and set out on foot.

Starport seemed a city of no distinction whatever. Except for the lemon-yellow sunlight and the flavor of the atmosphere, Gersen might have fancied himself in an outer suburb of Avente on Alphanor, or any of a dozen quasi-modern cities of the Oikumene. The folk wore garments similar to those of Avente and the cities of Earth. Whatever "new concept" had originally been intended, was now no longer in evidence.

Presenting himself at the Cosmopolis office, Gersen approached a counter behind which stood an elderly man with a keen birdlike cast of countenance, bright blue eyes, and a crest of gleaming silver hair. He was thin, taut and carried himself with a stern and exact posture, somewhat at odds with his garments, which were casual: a bright blue turtleneck shirt of lightweight velour, soft beige trousers, and sandals of dark suede. He addressed Gersen in a formally terse voice: "Sir, your requirements?"

"I am Henry Lucas, from the Pontefract office," said Gersen.  
"I would like a few moments with Mr. Ailett Mayneth."

"I am he." Mayneth looked Gersen up and down. "Henry Lucas? I have visited the Pontefract office and I can't remember hearing your name."

"I carry the title 'Special Writer,' " said Gersen. "I am in fact a general-purpose roustabout; whenever there's a Job too dull or uncomfortable for anyone else I'm assigned to it."

"I see," said Mayneth. "And what is so dull and uncomfortable here at Starport?"

Gersen displayed the photograph. Mayneth's manner changed at once. "Aha! So that is how the wind blows. I wondered what would happen. So you are here to investigate?"

"That is correct."

"Hmm. Perhaps we can make ourselves more comfortable. Shall we go up to my apartments?"

"Whatever you like."

Mayneth conducted Gersen to an elevator, which lifted them

1. Experienced space travelers become sensitive to the variations of a breathable atmosphere, discriminating between inert gases, oxygen levels, and complex organic exudations peculiar to individual planet. In the air of New Concept Gersen noted a muscyp peppery redolence, evidently rising from the blanket of rurf which cloaked the fells.

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high to the top floor. Mayneth slid open his door with easy indifference. Gersen entered what he recognized to be the domicile of a connoisseur of judgment and, so it would seem, wealth. In all directions he saw beautiful objects, of various eras and as many places of origin. Many of the objects Gersen could not precisely identify: for instance, a pair of earthenware lamps glazed a dull gray-brown. Possibly ancient Japan? In regard to the rugs he knew somewhat more, by reason of an episode in his early career. He recognized a pair of Persian rugs, glowing serenely in the sunlight, a QUII-QUN, a Mersilin from the Adar Mountains of Copus, several small Gypsy rugs probably from the Khajar Realm of Copus. A satinwood case displayed a group of Myrmidense porcelains and a casual arrangement of precious old books, bound in shagreen and hornskin.

"Since I have nothing better to do with myself," said Mayneth half-apologetically, "I try to surround myself with beautiful objects. ... I fancy myself as a shrewd trader and I enjoy nothing more than to prowl the country bazaars of some remote little world. This is

my so-called study. The books in here are exclusively from Earth. A miscellany, I fear. But sit down, if you will." Mayneth touched a gong with his fingers, producing a plangent tone. A servant appeared, a young girl of odd appearance, thin and supple as an eel, with a shock of curly white hair, slate-colored eyes in a small pinched face, a small pointed chin, and a thin lavender mouth. She wore a short white smock and moved with a curious lithe sliding gait. She watched the two men attentively, without any trace of self-consciousness. Gersen could not identify her racial stock. He thought that, if she were not feeble-minded, her rationality was surely of a most unconventional sort.

Mayneth hissed between his teeth, touched the palm of his hand, held up two fingers; the girl backed away. She returned almost immediately with a tray, two goblets, and two squat bottles. Mayneth took the tray; the girl was gone in a whisk of fluttering smock. Mayneth poured. "Our excellent Swallowtail beer." He served Gersen and picked up the photograph, which Gersen had placed on the table. "A very strange affair, this." He seated himself, drank a dainty swallow of beer. "A woman came into the office, and I inquired her business. She stated that she had valuable information which she wished to sell, for a substantial sum. I seated her in my office and looked her over. Her age was about thirty, a bit

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run to seed; just short of blowsy. Still, she seemed respectable, if in a dreadful state of nerves. She was not a local woman; she stated that she had come directly from the space terminal and that she desperately needed money. I looked her over once again, even more carefully, but I could not place her background." Mayneth took a meditative sip of beer. "I noticed one or two small points, still—" He shrugged, as if to dismiss the problem. "She began to work up her proposition. She said she was able to offer an item not only unique, but highly valuable. Not her exact words, of course. She was so nervous as occasionally to be incoherent.

"I tried a bit of whimsy—rather sophomoric, really—'You've brought me the directions to a cache of hidden treasure!'

"She became angry. 'Are you interested in what I have to offer? Mind you, I want a fair price!'

"I told her that I'd have to see to Judge. Immediately she became cautious. It was quite a game. Finally I said, 'Madam, show me what you want to sell, otherwise I can't spare any more time.'

"She asked me in a whisper, 'Have you heard the name Howard Alan Treesong?'

" 'Yes, indeed. He is Lord of the Overmen.'

" 'Don't say that! Although it's true ... I have his photograph. How much will you pay?'

11 'Let's see the picture.'

" 'No, first you must make me a good offer!'

"I'm afraid I became a bit lofty. I asked her, 'How can I buy something until I've seen it? Is it a good likeness?'

" 'Indeed, it's a good likeness. He is about to commit a mass murder.'

"I said nothing and finally she produced her merchandise." Mayneth indicated the photograph. "I examined it carefully, then said, 'This is admittedly an excellent picture, but which is Treesong?'

" 'I don't know.'

" 'Then how do you know he's here?'

" 'I was told so, by someone who knew.'

" 'He might have been joking.'

" 'If so, he was killed for his joke.'

" 'Really?'

" 'Yes, really.'

" 'May I inquire your name?'

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" \*Is it important? In any event, I won't give my proper name.'

" 'Where was the picture taken?'

" 'If I told you that, other people would suffer.'

" 'Madam, be practical. Consider the circumstances. You show me a photograph; one of the persons, so you say, is Treesong, but

you can't point him out to me.'

" 'That proves I'm honest! I could easily point to anyone in the photograph; that man there, for instance.'

" 'Quite true. As a matter of fact, he's my own choice. All this aside, and conceding your own honesty, how do you know that the picture is authentic? Someone has been killed. Who? Why? Without these details the picture has no particular value.'

"She thought a moment or two. 'Can you guarantee confidentiality?'

" 'Naturally.'

" 'One of Treesong's aides is named Ervin Umps. His brother

was a waiter at the restaurant where the picture was taken. He was also my husband. He spoke with Ervin, and discovered that Treesong was at the banquet. The photograph is automatic, for the restaurant's records, and my husband took this copy, which he left in my keeping. He told me only that Treesong was in the picture, and that Treesong had murdered everyone else present. The picture, he said, was very valuable. That same night he was killed. I knew that I'd be killed too, whether I gave up the photograph or not, so I left at once, and that's all I can tell you.'

" 'And where is the restaurant?'

" 'I won't tell you. It's not necessary that you know.'

" 'I don't understand. You've told me everything else.'

" 'I have my reasons.'

"That's where the matter rested. We had a long discussion about the price. I explained that I was taking her on trust; that the photograph might not be worth a hollow dinket. She agreed but wouldn't yield an inch. I asked, 'How much do you expect me to

pay?'

" 'I want ten thousand SVU!'

" 'That is out of the question.'

" 'What will you offer?'

"I told her I'd risk a hundred SVU of company money and fifty of my own. She started to leave. I decided that I couldn't risk letting

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the picture get away. I offered another hundred and guaranteed that if Cosmopolis used the picture she'd be paid two hundred more.

"She caved in. 'Give me the money. I must leave here at once. The picture is dangerous.' I paid her off. She ran from the office and I saw no more of her." Mayneth filled the goblets with Swallowtail beer.

"What happened next?"

Mayneth cleared his throat. "I inspected the picture with great care. I found few clues. The clothes are diverse, and suggest a variety of backgrounds. They seem to be lightweight, which indicates a warm local climate. Those little semaphores—I can't understand them. Nor can I identify the food."

"You hinted at one or two details in connection with the woman."

"So I did. Her clothes were standard, but she spoke with an

accent. Around the stars you'll hear a thousand accents and dialects. It is one of my interests, and my ear is fairly keen. I listened carefully but I could not place her particular speech."

"What else?"

"At the corner of each eye she wore a little blue shell. I've seen these before but I can't connect them with any particular place."

"She never mentioned her name?"

Mayneth pulled on his chin. "Her husband's brother is Ervin Umps. She might or might not use the same name."

"Possible. Not necessarily probable."

"My own feeling. Still, I became curious and decided to make inquiry at the spaceport, and I did so, although the trail by then was three days cold. I checked passenger lists, asked questions, and to make a long story short, I found no 'Umps.' She apparently called herself Lamar Medrano. She transferred aboard the ship at a place called Virgo Junction, out on Spica Six. I checked the place in Universal Travel Routes. A dozen different liners touch there. I doubt if she could be traced away from Virgo Junction."

"When did she leave New Concept?"

"Possibly never."

"How so?"

"She booked passage to Altair aboard a Green Star packet, the Samarthi Tone, departing three days after her consultation with me. I checked around the hotels and found her at Hotel Diomedes,

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where she had stayed two nights. They remembered her well, because she skipped without settling the bill."

"Odd."

"Sinister. I made further inquiries at the Diomedes, and learned that she had become acquainted with a certain Emmaus Schahar, a salesman in sports equipment from Krokinole. One morning Schahar paid his account and departed. Lamar Medrano went out the previous night and never returned."

Gersen gave a dour grunt. "As to this Schahar, whsit of him?"

"A saturnine fellow, soft spoken, with plenty of money."

"He's not now in Starport?"

"He left on the Gacy Wonder. One of its way-points is Virgo

Junction."

"Interesting."

"Very much so. I don't know whether or not to be reassured."

"You wonder why Mr. Schahar did not call on you?"

"Exactly."

"Schahar might conceivably be an innocent salesman with only ordinary interest in Lamar Medrano."

"Conceivably."

"Assuming that Schahar is not an innocent salesman, Lamar Medrano might have become fearful and fled, so that she is now hiding somewhere on New Concept."

"Possible."

"Thirdly, Lamar might have died before revealing where she had taken the photograph. Perhaps she convinced Schahar that she had put it in the mails."

"Possibly she had two copies of the photograph. Schahar considered his mission accomplished and is now pleased and happy."

Gersen laughed. "When Howard Treesong reads Cosniopohs, sometime in the near future, Schahar will not be so pleased and happy." He brought out stylus and paper, wrote a few words, placed five hundred-SVU certificates on top, pushed all over to Mayneth. "Your expenses and a bonus for constructive activity Please sign the receipt so that I may recover from the central bursar."

"Thank you," said Mayneth "That is indeed generous of you. Perhaps you will take lunch -with me?"

"It will be a pleasure."

Mayneth touched the gong, the white-haired girl appeared Mayneth made signs and sounds, the girl slid off, easy and soft of

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motion She returned with beer, paused to watch as Mavneth filled the goblets, peering in fascination at the foam, her lavender-pink tongue darting in and out of her mouth

"She loves beer," said Mayneth. "I won't allow her anv because she becomes agitated. She'll lick all the foam from our empty goblets."

Daringly the girl hooked some foam from Gersen's goblet with her finger and put it into her mouth. Mayneth slapped her hand

without any great vehemence, and the girl (umped back like a playful cat. She hissed at Mayneth, who hissed in return and gestured;

the girl departed. Passing through the door she bent to arrange a tassel in the fringe of the rug, Gersen noted that under the short white smock she was nude.

Mayneth sighed and swallowed half a goblet of beer. "I'll be leaving New Concept before long. I came originally as a collector. The original settlers created many beautiful things- hand-illuminated books, grotesques, musical instruments. Notice that gong yonder, it sounds to no more than a touch. The best are supposed to sing even before they are touched. Some were exported, but the best were hidden in caves I've explored a thousand miles of caverns, acquisitiveness conquering my claustrophobia."

Gersen leaned back in his chair and looked out across the tells. The sun stood at its zenith, across a low ridge in the middle distance ran a pack of animals, gamboling and curvetting on long lank legs. They darted into the shadow of a thicket and began to graze on a growth of green sedge.

"This doesn't seem a particularly well managed world," said Gersen. "I don't see any signs of agriculture."

"It's been tried. The Feeks destroy crops before they get started. There's no keeping them out short of poison, which is prohibited."

"I noticed classical ruins out near the space terminal. Do they represent the 'New Concept'?"

"The original structures were the gift of a mad philanthropist. The 'New Concept' was dietary-vegetarianism, in fact, mixed with stints of meditation. For fifty years the settlers lived in the great Temple of Organic Unity. They ate alfalfa sprouts, collard greens, and odd bits of the native vegetation. The human form is wonderfully adaptable. The settlers adapted all too well, and there they are now"-Mayneth pointed to the pack of lank animals grazing under

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the thicket-"having their lunch. . . . Speaking of lunch, we might as well go examine our own."

Mayneth led Gersen to his dining room, where the white-haired girl stood staring in fascination at the table. Sudden illumination came to Gersen. "She is one of the locals?"

Mayneth nodded. "They leave babies lying out on the fells. Simple forgetfulness, I suspect. Sometimes they're brought in and trained, more or less successfully. Catch them early and they'll learn to stay clean and walk on their hind legs. Tiptoe here is a clever one; she serves beer and fluffs pillows and generally behaves herself."

"She's fascinating to look at," said Gersen. "Is she, well, affectionate?"

"It's been tried, with generally poor results," said Mayneth. "Are you curious? Touch her."

"Where?"

"Well, to begin with, on the shoulder."

Gersen approached the girl, who swayed back, blinking her great gray eyes. Gersen reached out his hand; she uttered a quick spitting hiss and sprang back, mouth open to show sharp teeth,

hands raised and fingers curled.

Gersen drew back, grinning. "I see what you mean. Her opinions are very definite."

"Some of the local lads use a bait of molasses candy," said Mayneth. "They like it and while they're eating they can't bite. . . . Well, here's our lunch. She'll go away now, because she can't tolerate anything but lettuce and occasionally a bit of boiled carrot. Such is the dark side of vegetarianism."

3

From Life, Volume I, by Unspiek, Baron Bodissey:

... I often reflect upon the word "morality," the most troublesome and confusing word of all.

There is no single or supreme morality; there are many, each defining the mode by which a system of entities optimally interacts.

The eminent entomologist Fabre, observing a mantis in the act of devouring its mate, exclaimed: "What an abominable custom!"

The ordinary man, during a day's time, may be obliged to act by the terms of a half dozen different moralities. Some of these acts, appropriate at one moment, may the next moment be considered obscene or opprobrious in terms of another morality.

The person who, let us say, expects generosity from a bank, efficient flexibility from a government agency, open-mindedness from a religious institution will be disappointed. In each purview the notions represent immorality. The poor fool might as quickly discover love among the mantises.

Gersen, returning to Aloysius, landed at Dunes Spaceport a few miles south of Pontefract. The time was late on a dark purple-gray afternoon. Mist blowing in from Bottleglass Bay almost obscured

the terminal buildings. Gersen bowed his head and walked to the depot across a boardway of weathered sea-wood.

He rode first by underground train, then by taxi to the mansion of Jehan Addels, his financial adviser and general business factotum, in Ballyholt Woods.

Addels greeted him with his usual air of sour disapproval, which Gersen believed to be a mask for esteem and possibly even affection, though this might be asking a bit too much from Addels, whose views of man and the universe were filtered through a lifetime of mistrustful cynicism. Addels looked the part, with a gaunt yellowish face, a tall thin forehead, a long thin nose with a tremulous tip. His hair was scanty and yellow-brown, his eyes a bland pale blue.

Gersen went to his usual room, bathed, dressed in garments left on a previous occasion. He dined with Addels and his numerous family in a grand dining room, at a table illuminated by candles. The tableware was antique silver and they ate off ancient Wedgewood.

After dinner the two men returned to Addels's yampang-pane\ed study and sat before a fire with coffee served from a silver coffeepot.

Gersen displayed the photograph, to Addels's consternation. "I had hoped that you were finished with this sort of thing."

"Not quite," said Gersen. "What do you think?"

Addels feigned stupidity. "Regarding what?"

"We want to identify Treesong and discover where he makes his headquarters."

"And then?"

"Perhaps we'll bring him to justice."

"Bah! And perhaps someone will get himself killed by being hung on a hook a mile in the air, which was what happened to poor Newton Flickery."

"A shame, that. Well, we must hope for the best."

"Therefore I hope that you will have nothing to do with this business. Here, let me throw the photograph into the fire."

Gersen ignored him, and for the hundredth time studied the photograph. "Which is Treesong? How can we identify him?"

Addels said crossly, "He's one of ten persons. The others must know him, or at least know themselves. Treesong can be identified by eliminating the others."

"First we must identify the others."

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"Why not? Each must have many friends and acquaintances. But let us talk no more of this foolishness."

Gersen wandered the crooked old streets of Ponteftact. He sat in small irregular squares, planted with boxwood and wallflowers. He idled along valleys smelling of age and wet stone; he took several meals at a restaurant suspended over Bottleglass Bay on rotten black pilings.

He saw little of Addels except at the stately dinners which Addels considered a basic element of civilized existence. Addels refused to discuss Gersen's preoccupation, and Gersen had only small interest in the highly profitable dealings by which Addels augmented Gersen's wealth.

On the fourth day Gersen settled upon a method to increase the leverage of his single tool to the utmost. For several years the Cosmopolis directorship had contemplated a companion magazine, to be known as Extant. Much of the preliminary work had been done. The new journal would rely heavily upon Cosmopolis production and distribution facilities, with an editorial policy intended to appeal to a livelier and less sedate readership than that of Cosmopolis.

Through a linkage of holding companies, Gersen owned Cosmopolis outright. Now he ordained the instant existence of Extant. Overnight it came into being. Copy long prepared entered printing machines, and Extant surged out through the Cosmopolis distribution adits to the far edges of the Oikumene.

To increase its impact on the market this first issue would be given away free. It featured a remarkable contest, certain to attract the attention of all its readers. A photograph on the cover depicted ten persons at a banquet. The caption read:

WHO ARE THESE FOLK?  
NAME THEM CORRECTLY AND WIN  
100,000 SVU!

The inside cover added qualifying details. Only the first three contestants to identify all the depicted faces would win prizes. Should no one name all persons correctly, then those three persons identifying the largest number of faces would receive the prize. Six additional rules stipulated the prizes to those who were first, or among the first, correctly to identify fewer than all the faces. Entries

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were to be mailed to: Extant; Corrib Place, 9-11; Pontefract, Aloysius (Vega VI). Such entries would be adjudicated by members of

the Extant staff.

Wherever periodicals were sold Extant impinged on the eye, the more so for the prominent overprint on its cover: FREE.

At refuges on the frozen salt tundras of Irta; under the lime trees of Duptis Major; at halts along the cableways of the Midor Mountains; at kiosks along the grand boulevards of Paris and Oakland; on Alphanor, Chrysanthe, Olltphane and Krokinole, and every other world of the Rigel Concourse: Extant. In spaceports, barber-shops, jails, hospitals, monasteries, bordellos, construction camps:

Extant. Millions of eyes saw the faces, usually with only casual interest. Not a few studied the photograph with care, and even fascination, and took occasion to write letters to Contest Editor, Extant. Two persons especially, separated by light-years of space, saw the photograph with startled amazement. The first sat frowning through his window as he pondered the significance of the contest. The second, occasionally sounding a rather harsh chuckle, took pen in hand and addressed a letter to Contest Editor, Extant.

Gersen decided to move into town, closer to the Extant office. Ad-dels recommended the Penwipers Hotel. "It is convenient to your office, and quite the best address in town, very respectable." His gaze lingered thoughtfully upon Gersen's costume. "In fact..."

"In fact what?"

"Nothing whatever. You will be made comfortable at Penwipers. They take good care of their guests. I will call to make arrangements; they seldom accept new clientele without favorable recommendation."

The facade of Penwipers Hotel, six stories of carved brownstone and fluted black iron, surmounted by a Flemish mansard roof of green copper tiles, overlooked Old Tara Square. An inconspicuous portal opened into first a foyer, then a reception hall, with the lounge to one side and the dining room to the other. Gersen registered at a counter of carved brown marble, supported by pilasters and corner columns of glossy black gabbro. The receptionists wore formal morning clothes of old-fashioned cut—how old-fashioned Gersen did not immediately appreciate. The style, in fact, had

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changed by not so much as a buttonhole since the hotel's opening eleven hundred years before. At the Penwipers, and in Pontefract generally, tradition yielded grudgingly, if at all, to novelty.

Gersen waited while the registration clerk quietly consulted the head porter, the two glancing at Gersen from time to time. The consultation ended; Gersen was conducted to his suite. The chief porter led the way, an assistant carried Gersen's small handbag, a third carried a velvet box. At the door the chief porter opened the box, withdrew a damask cloth scented with lavender, with which he

briskly wiped the door handle, which he then twitched with thumb and forefinger. The door opened; Gersen entered a set of high-ceilinged rooms, famished in a style of austere comfort, something short of luxury.

The porters moved swiftly around the room, adjusting the placement of furniture, wiping surfaces with their scented cloths, then departed, swiftly and quietly as if they had merged into the shadows. The chief porter said: "Sir, the valet will attend you at once to assist with your wardrobe. The water-is already drawn for your bath." He bowed and prepared to leave.

"One moment," said Gersen. "Is there a key to the door?"

The chief porter smiled benignly. "Sir, you need not fear intrusion at Penwipers."

"Possibly not. But, for instance, suppose I were a jewel merchant carrying a parcel of gems, and a thief wished to rob me. He need merely saunter to my room, open the door, and divest me of my wealth."

The chief porter, still smiling, shook his head. "Sir, such a terrible thing could never happen here. It would simply not be tolerated. Your valuables are quite safe."

"I don't carry any valuables," said Gersen. "I merely suggested a possibility."

"The inconceivable, sir, is rarely possible."

"I am totally reassured," said Gersen. "Thank you."

"Thank you, sir." He drew back as Gersen extended his hand.

"The staff is adequately paid, sir. We prefer to accept no gratuities." He inclined his head crisply and departed.

Gersen bathed in a sunken tub carved, like the reception desk, from a block of brown marble. He emerged to find his belongings packed neatly into a bottom drawer of an ancient wardrobe. The valet, deeming his garments unsuitable, had laid out new: sedate

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dark brown trousers, a lavender-and-white striped shirt, a cravat of white linen crash, a knee-long coat of black twill, pinched at the shoulders, belled at the hips.

In rueful resignation Gersen dressed in the new garments. If nothing else, Jehan Addels would be pleased.

Gersen descended to the lobby and crossed to the main entrance. The chief porter stepped forward to intercept him. "A moment, sir, I will fetch your klapper." He tendered a large black velvet hat with a wide rolled brim, a coil of dark green, and a small

stiff brush of black bristles. Gersen looked askance at the hat, and would have slipped past had not the doorman contrived to position himself between Gersen and the door. "You'll find the air a bit brisk, sir. It is our pleasure to assist you in the use of appropriate attire."

"That is kind of you," said Gersen.

"Thank you, sir. Allow me to arrange the hat. Just so ... Afternoon wear will be laid out for your use at the stroke of the second gong. The weather portends a drifting wet mist, with showers later in the day."

In the foyer Gersen paused to glance at himself in the mirror. Who was this somber exemplar of Old Pontefract gentility who stared back at him? Never had he worn a disguise more deceptive.

Gersen wandered along the crabbed streets, under tall narrow-fronted buildings, across the ubiquitous small squares, each with its boxed beds of wallflowers, pansies, native bulrastia, and St. Olaf's Toe. From time to time the mist parted to allow a shaft of Vega-light down to glisten on wet stone and infuse a sudden gush of color into the flower beds. At a public telephone he called Jehan Addels and arranged a meeting at the Extant office, at Addels's convenience.

"That will be in one hour's time," said Addels.

"I will be there."

Gersen turned into Corrib Place, a short street somewhat wider than ordinary and paved with slabs of polished granite, dovetailed each to each, and laid down long ago as an act of penance by the Estebanite monks.

Corrib Place occupied the oldest part of Pontefract Old Town. To one side the ancient Estebanite monastery had been converted into commercial suites; the structures opposite, built of age-darkened mace and ganthar wood, bound with brackets of black

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iron, stood tall and gaunt and compressed, often with upper-story bays overhanging the street.

With time to spare before his appointment with Addels, Gersen sauntered along Corrib Place, looking into shops, which here affected a special eclat and offered only goods of distinction and elegance: fancy pastries and imported sweetmeats; rare gems, pearls from the local rorqual, crystals won from dead stars; gloves, cravats, gaiters, kerchiefs; perfumes, philtres, magic Duhamel oil; bibelots, curios, portfolios of antique art: Giotto and Gosl-wane; William Snyder and William Blake; Mucha, Dulac, Lindsay; Rackham, Nielsen; Durer, Dore, David Russell. Gersen paused ten minutes to watch a pair of puppets at a game of chess. The puppets were Maholibus and Cascadine, characters from the Comic Masque. Each had captured several pieces; each in turn, after deliberation, made

his move. WTien one captured a piece, the other made gestures of rage and agitation. Maholibus made a move and spoke in a creaking voice: "Checkmate!" Cascadine cried out in anguish. He struck himself on the forehead and toppled backward-off his chair. A moment later he picked himself up; the two arranged the pieces and started a new game. . . .

Gersen entered the shop, bought the chess-player puppets, and ordered them delivered to Penwipers: one of the rare occasions of his life when he had encumbered himself with a trivial article.

Strolling along Corrib Place, Gersen found himself opposite the offices of Extant Publications. He paused by the window of the Horlogicon, to study a timepiece seemingly fashioned from puffs and swirls of mist, with spots of colored light designating the time. Interesting, but impractical, thought Gersen. . . .Jehan Addels turned into Corrib Place and approached, placing his feet carefully one before the other. The time was several minutes early. He stopped beside Gersen to catch his breath and inspect the Extant offices. After an incurious sidelong glance, he ignored Gersen and continued peering toward the Extant offices.

Gersen spoke. "Sir, are you expecting someone?"

Addels swung around, stared in hemusement. "My dear fellow, I failed to recognize you!"

Gersen smiled a wintry smile. "The hotel has allowed me the use of these clothes. They feel that my ordinary attire is a bit too ordinary."

Addels spoke in a precise voice. "A person makes a statement

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about himself with his clothes A genteel person wears genteel clothes to establish his status, and status, whether we like it or not, is a key factor in human interrelations."

Gersen said, "At the very least I am provided an excellent disguise "

Addels's voice rose a quick tone or two. "Why should you need a disguise5"

"We are dealing, you and I, with a remarkable man He is a ruthless murderer, but at the same time a paragon of gentility who could lodge without qualm at Penwipers Hotel "

Addels gave a glum grimace. "You surely don't expect him here?"

"I don't know what to expect. We are publishing his photograph, which he has been at great pains to conceal "

"Please do not use the word 'we' so loosely. But I agree that the contest will attract his attention."

"That is part of my plan. He will wonder who is interested in him and investigate."

Addels sniffed "Or he might simply decide to destroy the entire building."

"I think not," said Gersen. "First, he will want to discover the facts."

"He will try to infiltrate your organization. It will be very difficult to forestall him."

"I won't even try. In fact, I'll make it easy."

"Risky business! What good can come of it?"

"His infiltration in effect becomes our infiltration. We will lure him close, then work to arrange a meeting. You will be the intermediary—"

"By no means! Never! Not in a million years!"

"I expect no danger until after he satisfies his curiosity."

Addels refused to be convinced "That is like telling a staked-out goat that the tiger will not bite until after he sniffs around a bit."

"I wonder if the parallel is quite exact."

"Regardless, I do not intend to participate in this scheme. I have had my fill of scares and frights! My proper work lies elsewhere."

"Just as you say. We will make our plans accordingly."

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Addels was not yet reassured "When do you expect him to

-> K

act"

"As soon as he sees the photograph. He will then send someone here to investigate, or possibly he will arrive on the scene himself. We still have a few days to prepare."

"The lull before the storm," muttered Addels.

Gersen laughed "Don't forget, we are laying the plans, not Treesong. Come along, I'll take you to lunch at Penwipers, if you think they'll allow you in the dining room "

On the door of the Extant offices appeared a sign

NOTICE TO THE PUBLIC  
STAFF IS NOW BEING ENGAGED. TEMPORARY  
HELP IS REQUIRED TO ASSIST WITH PHOTOGRAPH IDENTIFICATION CONTEST. IT IS PREFERRED, BUT NOT ESSENTIAL, THAT APPLICANTS MAKE APPOINTMENTS FOR AN INTERVIEW.

An applicant, upon entering the Extant offices, found himself in an anteroom divided by a counter 'I o the left was a door with a notice reading

CONTEST PROCESSING ROOM  
AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

the door to the right was imprinted

EDITORIAL OFFICES

At the counter the applicant would be met by Mrs Millicent Ench, a brisk, dark-haired lady of middle age, who invariably wore, day after day, a long black skirt, a pale blue blouse with a red sash, a cap with a red visor, glossy black shoes which laced up past the ankles Mrs Ench performed a screening process, turning away those applicants who were patently unsuitable Others she sent into the adjoining room, where the\ filled out an application form, under the eye of the personnel manager This was Mr Henry Lucas, who, from the evidence of his clothes, fancied himself a patrician of the most refined gentility His features were good if a trifle harsh,

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his mouth was wide, thin, and crooked. Black ringlets were arranged with care across his forehead and down past his sallow-pale cheeks.

After a casual word or two with the applicants, Henry Lucas seated them in cubicles, back to the room, and asked them to respond to a questionnaire. The cubicles and desks were apparently improvised and roughly constructed for the occasion. Actually, they concealed and disguised exceptionally sensitive sensors and stress gauges which recorded every slight tremor of the applicant, each flicker of his eye, every variation of blood pressure, every alteration of brain-wave pattern. The findings, when collated, were indicated as colored lights at Gersen's desk and colored marks upon a facsimile of the questionnaire.

Gersen had composed the questionnaire with care, in order that the responses and their associated reactions should provide the maximum information, even though the questions in themselves seemed innocuous.

The first questions were straightforward, in order to establish normal circumstances and to calibrate the equipment.

Name-

Type of Employment Desired

Local Address

Birthplace

Se?

Age-

Name of Parents: Father Addr\*;\* ,

Mnrhpr ArMrP'-'-

Occupation of Father Mother

Rirthnlapp of Father Morhpr

The next group of questions, so Gersen calculated, would place a rather greater strain on other than a legitimate applicant.

How long at local address-

Local references (List at least two. These people may or may not be consulted in regard to your character and competence.):

1. \_\_\_\_\_

3.

Previous address, if any.

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List at least two persons who have known you at this address. (They may be consulted.):

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

Your address previous to address noted above, if any:

List at least two persons who knew you at this address:

1.

2.

3.

NOTE: You will understand that, under the circumstances^ Extant

must diligently ensure the integrity of its personnel.

The following questions were intended to exert maximum stress upon any person intending deception.

If nonresident, why have you come to Pontefract? (Give specific reasons. Do not generalize.) \_\_\_\_\_

Contest personnel must necessarily be impartial. Examine the photograph here depicted, which is submitted to the contestants. Do you know or recognize any of the persons herein? Write '0' in the boxes of the persons you do NOT know. Fill in solidly the boxes of the persons you DO know.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

aaaDDnaoaa

(Read clockwise from bottom left center.)  
What is his/her name, or their names?

(List names with corresponding numbers.)

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What are the circumstances of your acquaintances? (Please be specific.) \_\_\_\_\_

If engaged, when can you start work?

In due course applicants for employment presented themselves to the office: students from Saint Griegand's Seminary and the Celtic Academy, and as many middle-aged women with time on their hands. Gersen rigorously applied his sensors to each applicant, in order to adjust the mechanism and to establish the accuracy of his methods. Apart from a few fluctuations and trivial exceptions, his system of colored imprints certified the innocence of each applicant. Of these, Mrs. Ench, who also supervised the Judging procedure, selected a group to process the beginning flood of entries. Each envelope as it entered the office passed through a numerator to establish the priority of its reception.

Gersen himself opened and examined a number of envelopes, but found a wide disparity of response, lacking all consistency.

On the afternoon of an uncommonly sunny day Gersen returned from lunch to encounter among the applicants a slim, slight red-haired girl, in whom he took an immediate interest, for at least two reasons. In the first place, she was very pretty in a style at the edge of the unconventional. Her face, rather wide of forehead and cheekbones, slanted across flat cheeks down to a small chin and a curving pink mouth, which even when still seemed to express intriguing possibilities. Her gray-blue eyes, under dark lashes, were clear and direct. She was perhaps a trifle smaller than average but

constructed of apparently durable material; she was engagingly suntanned, as if she spent much of her time outdoors. She might have been a student from one of the local institutions, but Gersen thought not. He noticed her first through his window, standing across the street, wearing pale gray trousers, black sash, and a pale gray cape, not at all in the local mode. . . . She stood a moment with a bleak expression on her face, then squared her shoulders, crossed the street, out of range of Gersen's vision. A moment or two later Mrs. Ench allowed her into Gersen's office.

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Gersen gave her a brief stare. The bleak expression had vanished; she now seemed composed, and here was the second reason for Gersen's interest. There was a third rising from his subconscious, and perhaps most important of all.

She spoke in a pleasant husky voice, with the trace of an accent Gersen could not identify. "Sir, you are offering employment?"

"To qualified persons," said Gersen. "I suppose that you are aware of the Extant contest?"

"I've heard something about it."

"We need temporary clerks to help with the contest, and we are also hiring permanent personnel."

She considered his remarks. Gersen wondered whether her artlessness was real or most carefully contrived. He took care to accentuate his half-debonair, half-supercilious formality. She offered a polite suggestion. "Perhaps I could start as a contest clerk, and then, if I do well, you might consider me for a permanent job."

"That is certainly possible. I'll ask you to fill in this form, which is self-explanatory. Please answer all questions."

She glanced at the questionnaire and uttered a soft sound under her breath. "So many questions?"

"We consider them necessary."

"Do you investigate all this for everyone you hire?"

Gersen spoke in a flat voice: "A great deal of money is involved in the contest. We must ensure that our personnel is absolutely honest."

"I quite understand." She took the form and went to the booth.

Gersen, pretending to occupy himself with paperwork, touched a switch and watched a pair of desk screens, as the red-haired girl filled in the questionnaire. To the left appeared her face, to the right the questionnaire and colored lights to indicate the verdict of the stress detectors.

She had started to write.

Name: Alice Wroke  
Sex: Female

The question as to gender and its response, certifying- a self-evident condition, calibrated the instruments at base level. Conceivably, as in the case of a man disguised as a woman, the question might generate stress, thus distorting the interpretation of every other reading. In addition to the colored-light indicators, a graph

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recorded responses in terms of absolute units; anomalous responses might therefore be identified. In practice the color-coded indexes had provided reliable information. Blue lights now signified that Alice Wroke had truthfully declared her name and her gender; although before she wrote her name, the light flickered into pink for a moment, as if she were debating the use of a false name. The warnings from his subconscious were apparently vindicated. Surprising! He had hoped for Treesong to attempt infiltration of Extant, but that the infiltrator should be someone like Alice Wroke was quite unexpected. Gersen felt a surge of primitive excitement. The game had begun. With his own pulse accelerated, Gersen watched Alice Wroke write responses to the questions he had framed.

Age: 20'  
A clear blue light: no dissimulation.

Type of Employment desired:

Here, Alice hesitated. The color, wavering from blue into blue-green, indicated indecision rather than stress. She wrote:

Clerical or journalistic work. I am qualified for either.

As she wrote the final sentence the blue-green verged momentarily into green, as if perhaps she were not as sure of her qualifications as she professed. . . . She still hesitated and the green gradually became sharper and more acid. She added to her response:

However, I am prepared to work in any capacity, and do whatever is required of me.

As she considered the next question, the color shifted back to blue-green, indicating a heightened state of consciousness.

1. By general convention, age and almost all other units of duration were reckoned by terrestrial standards.

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Local address:

The color shifted not an iota. Alice wrote:

St. Diarmid's Inn.

This was a large cosmopolitan hotel at the heart of the city, frequented by tourists and offworld travelers, considerably less prestigious than Penwipers, but not without distinction and certainly not inexpensive. Alice Wroke would seem to be in no immediate need.

Birthplace: Blackford's Landing, Terranova, Denebola V.  
Name of Parents:

Father: Benjamin Wroke

Address: Wild Isle

Occupation: Engineer

Mother: Eileen Sversen Wroke

Address: Wild Isle  
Occupation: Accountant

These questions were negotiated without stress, except in regard to Father's Occupation, where the light glowed yellow green.

Now commenced those questions which were intended to apply pressure upon a dissembler.

How long at present address?

Alice had defused this question by identifying her residence as a transient hotel. Still, the indicator shifted into the bright green as she wrote:

Two days.

Local references: list at least two:

1. Mahibel W^roke

The Blawens, Gungold Street

2. Sean Paldester

Dingle Lane, Tuorna

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On this response the indicator glowed placidly blue. The first was evidently a relative, as might he the second who resided at Tuorna, a nearby village.

Your previous address, if any:

The blue brightened to green, flashed momentarily into yellow.

Watching Alice's face, Gersen saw her compress her lips, then lean forward with a determined expression; simultaneously the indicator swung back through green toward blue. She wrote:

Wild Isle, Cvtherea Tempestre  
The references were:

1. Jason Bone  
Wild Isle

2. Jade Channifer  
Wild Isle

To the next question, inquiring as to previous address, she responded without tension:

1012-792nd Avenue, Blackford's Landing, Terranova, De-  
nebola V

As references she cited:

1. Dain Audenave  
1692-753rd Avenue

2. Willow Tarras  
1941-777th Avenue

The following questions were those designed to exert maximum pressure.

If nonresident, u'hy have you come to Pontefract?

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As Alice studied the question the indicator glowed yellow and flickered into orange. Her tension diminished. . . . The indicator returned to green. She wrote:

To secure employment.

Turning the page, Alice discovered the photograph of the contest, and the question:

Do you know or recognize any of the persons here depicted?

The indicator light glowed yellow, then orange. She deliberated a moment and the color became yellow green. Presently she filled in all the boxes with 0's. At box 6, the light glowed pink. She quickly turned the page, to avoid looking at the photograph, and her tension diminished slowly into green.

What is his or her name, or their names?

The light glowed vermilion. Alice answered the question with a dash.

What are the circumstances of your acquaintance?

The light glowed red. Alice answered with a second dash.

If engaged, when can you start work?

The light cooled quickly into green and greenish blue, as if in relief.

At once.

The questionnaire now was complete. As Alice reread it, Gersén watched her face. This slender red-haired girl was the instrument of Howard Alan Treesong. Conceivably she knew him by another name, and in this case she might or might not know his reputation. In due course the truth would become known. ... Gersén rose to his feet and sauntered across the room. She looked up with an uncertain smile. "I've just finished."

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Gersén glanced at the responses. "This looks to be in order. . . . You're originally from Terranova, it appears."

"Yes. My family moved out into Virgo five years ago. My father is—well, a consultant at Wild Isle. Have you ever been there?"

"No. I understand it's rather a different environment than here." Gersén contrived to speak in a voice of tired disapproval.

Alice encompassed him with a glance, expressionless save for a nicker of wonder. She responded without intonation. "Yes. It's a kind of dreamland, not altogether real."

"Out of idle curiosity, why did you leave?"

Alice shrugged. "I wanted to travel, and see something of other worlds."

"Do you intend to go back?"

"I hardly know. At the moment I'm only interested in working for Extant. I've always wanted to be a journalist "

Gersén paced slowly back and forth, hands behind his back, a figure of pompous elegance. He spoke in a ponderous voice. "Allow me a moment to consult Mrs. Ench. I'll find what positions are open."

"Certainly, sir."

Gersén wandered through the contest room, where a dozen clerks processed great stacks of contest envelopes. He checked the computer readout. Thirteen persons already had identified number seven as John Gray, and ten knew number five as Sabor Vidol:

identifications which might well be considered definite. The tall gaunt man with the philosopher's forehead and the foxy jaw was known by a variety of names Bentley Strange, Fred Framp, Kynl

Kyster, Mr. Wharfish, Silas Sparkhammer, Arthur Artleby, Wilton Freebus, a dozen more.

Gersen returned to his office. Alice Wroke had moved to a chair close to his desk. Gersen halted to look at her, admiring the pleasant accord between her orange-red curls and her dusky ivory-tan skin. She smiled. "Why are you inspecting me so?"

Gersen spoke in his most pompous and nasal voice. "If nothing else. Miss Wroke, you are indeed a most decorative bit of work. Though I will ask, should you choose to enter our employment, that you dress a bit more sedately."

"Then I am to be hired?"

"Tonight we will check your references, and I am sure that they

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will reinforce my favorable opinion of you. I suggest that you report for work tomorrow at the second gong."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Lucas." Alice's smile conveyed no great emotion. If anything, she seemed strained and disheartened. "Where will I be working?"

"At the moment Mrs. Ench is adequately staffed; however, I need an assistant to manage the office when I am out. I believe that you are well equipped to handle the job."

"Thank you, Mr. Lucas." Alice rose to her feet. She turned Gersen a glance over her shoulder, flirtatious, demure, puzzled, sad, and apprehensive, in equal proportions.

She departed the office. Gersen looked after her. Curious, most curious.

4

A former colleague recalls Howard Alan Treesong, then about eighteen years old, when they worked at the Philadelphia factory of the Elite Candy Company.

"He was restless and fluid and unpredictable, like a puddle of quicksilver on a table, but I always got along well with him. He seemed mild and rational. Certainly he was clever and amusing, and he had an inclination for wild practical jokes. Sometimes he carried the mischief too far—much too far. One day he brought in a box of dead bugs—cockroaches, bumblebees, beetles—and carefully fixed up a box of chocolate creams, each candy containing a big bug. He put it out for shipment, and said to me with a faraway look on his face: 'I wonder who will receive my little surprise.'

"But that wasn't what got him fired. There was a foolish old lady named Fat Aggie who always wore high-topped

black shoes, which she took off when she sat down to work. Howard stole the shoes and filled them to the brim with peanut fondant in one and our Supreme Molasses Taffy Delight in the other, then put them back under Aggie's chair.

"That trick cost Howard his job. I never saw him again."

In the morning Alice Wroke appeared at the Extant offices wearing a skirt and jacket of a soft blue stuff which clung lovingly to her slender haunches. A black ribbon confined her orange hair;

coming through the old black wood doorway she made an arresting

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picture. She was intelligent enough to realize as much, so Gersen felt assured. The costume was hardly as conservative as that which he had suggested, but he decided to let the matter rest; he gained nothing by exaggerating his role as a pompous frump. Alice Wroke, who seemed not only intelligent but perceptive, might not be deceived.

"Good morning, Mr. Lucas," said Alice in a soft voice. "What do you wish me to do?"

This morning the valet at Penwipers had laid out for Gersen gray trousers with a lavender pinstripe, a black frock coat, pinched at the shoulders, flaring at the hips, with a white high-collared shirt and a black-and-lavender striped cravat, to which the chief porter had added a black hat with a foppish side-slanting brim and a purple ribbon. In the costume Gersen felt cramped and constricted; he needed only to hunch his shoulders to split the coat down the back. His discomfort and annoyance, together with the need to hold his chin high over the stiff collar, imposed upon him a manner which might easily be interpreted as priggish disdain for the commonalty with whom he was forced to associate. Well, so be it, thought Gersen. He said, in a voice to suit his costume: "Miss Wroke! I have taken counsel with Mrs. Ench and temporarily at least you will be assisting me, in the capacity of private secretary. I am discovering more paperwork than I care to handle and, if I may say so, you add a colorful accent to an otherwise drab office."

Alice Wroke gave a small involuntary grimace of annoyance, which amused Gersen. A most peculiar situation. Alice Wroke, were she intimately associated with Howard Alan Treesong, must be a wicked woman indeed. Hard to believe . . . Gersen invented work to keep Alice occupied, and went out to check the tabulations.

Incoming mail now filled a bin. Six clerks opened the entries, examined the contents, entered the information into the rationalizer. Gersen went to the readout screen at the end of the room, which only he and Mrs. Ench were allowed to use. He touched a button to call up the tabulations to date.

Nineteen persons now had identified number 7 as John Gray,

of Four Winds, on Alphanor; his identity might be regarded as certain. The same could be said for number 5, Sabor Vidol, of London, Earth; number 1, Sharrod Yest, of Nova Bactria; and number 9, A. Gieselmann, of Long Parade, Espandencia, Algenib IX. Number 6 was known far and wide across the Oilumene by a variety

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of names: Kyril Kyster, Timothy Trimmons, Bentley Strange, Fred Framp, Silas Sparkhammer, Wilson WTiarfish, Oberon. Number 4 was named twice as Ian Bilfred, of the Pallas Technical Institute, at Pallas, Alcyone.

Gersen returned to his office, remembering, as he passed through the door, to reassume the role of Henry Lucas.

During his absence, Alice had reconsidered her tactics. Now, the better to manipulate this overdressed dunderhead, she thought to try breezy affability, perhaps even a bit of flirtation. Good enough, thought Gersen. Why not?

"I wonder if I have read any of your articles, Mr. Lucas. Your name is very familiar."

"Possibly, Miss Wroke, quite possibly."

"Do you have special subjects you write about?"

"Crime. Vice. Dreadful deeds."

Alice looked at him askance. "Really?"

Gersen realized that for an instant he had let his mask slip. He made an airy gesture. "Someone must write such things. How else is the public to know?"

"But you hardly seem the sort to be interested in such things."

"Oh? What topics would you consider appropriate for me?"

Again Alice turned him a glance of wary speculation. "Civilized things," she said brightly. "The best restaurants, for instance. Or the wines of Earth. Or Lily Milk, or Si Shi Shim dancing."

Gersen gave his head a sad shake. "Those aren't my subjects. What of yourself?"

"Oh, I'm not expert at anything."

"This Si Shi Shim dancing, how does it go?"

"Well—one needs the proper music. Gongs, water flutes, a kur-daitsy—that's a rather repulsive trained beast which squeals when its tail is pulled. The costumes are mostly feather anklets, but neither the dancers nor the audience seem to mind. Actually, I can't do it well, if at all."

"Oh, come, I'm sure you're over-modest. How does it go?"

"Please, Mr. Lucas. Suppose someone looked into the office and saw me gyrating about, what would they think?"

"Quite right," said Gersen. "We must set an example of de-

l, A precious ceramic ware, produced along the Susimara Islands of Yellow Sun Planer.

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corum. At least during working hours. Where are you staying now?"

"I'm still at St. Diarmid's." Alice Wroke's response was guarded and cool.

"You're here alone? That is to say, you have no local friends or relatives?"

"I am quite alone, Mr. Lucas. W^hy do you ask?"

"Simple curiosity, Miss Wroke. I hope that you are not offended?"

Alice gave a tolerant shrug, returned to the work which Gersen, at some effort, had contrived for her.

At noon a caterer's van arrived at the premises. Lunch was served to Mrs. Ench and her clerks in a small refectory; to Gersen and Alice Wroke in Gersen's office.

Alice expressed surprise at the arrangements. "Why don't we all eat together? I'm curious as to how the contest is going."

Gersen gave his head a magisterial shake. "That is not possible. My superiors have stipulated maximum security, especially in view of the rumor."

"Rumor? W^hat rumor is that?"

"A notorious criminal has interested himself in the contest:

that's the rumor. Personally I am skeptical. Still, who knows? We've even arranged sleeping accommodations here for our clerks. They won't leave the premises until after a winner is declared."

"It seems a bit exaggerated," said Alice. "Who is the notorious criminal?"

"It's absolute rubbish," declared Gersen loftily. "I refuse to disseminate such nonsense!"

Alice became haughty. "I'm really not interested." And during the lunch she retreated into herself, from time to time darting opaque glances toward Gersen.

After lunch Gersen invented more work for Alice, then carefully set the slant-brimmed hat on his head. "I'll be gone an hour or so."

"Very well, Mr. Lucas."

Gersen went to the Penwipers Hotel. From his room he called St. Diarmid's Inn. "Miss Alice W^roke, please."

After a pause the receptionist replied: "Miss W^roke is not currently in the hotel, sir."

"I believe she's in room 262?"

"No, sir, it's room 441."

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"Is any other member of her party in the room?"

"She's alone, sir Will you leave a message?"

"No, it's nothing important "

"Thank you, sir "

Gersen assembled various articles of gear, packed them in a case To forestall difficulty at the front desk, he changed into afternoon wear, then departed the hotel

At this time of day, afternoon tea break, the dank old streets of Pontefract were crowded with men in flare-bottomed brown and black suits and buxom pink-faced women in voluminous patterned skirts and black capes. Gersen soon arrived at St Diarmid's Inn He entered and surveyed the lobby, but saw nothing he could consider consequential

He approached the registration counter and pretended to make calculations on a sheet of paper. The clerk watched a moment, then approached "Sir, may I oblige you?"

Gersen wrote several numbers on his paper while the clerk watched in perplexity "I need a room for several days or a week, during the Numerologists Congress Mathematical vibrations indicate number 441, and I will engage this room." Gersen placed an SVU on the counter, and the clerk hastened to consult a readout screen

"A pity, sir' That room is already engaged "

"Then I must have either 440 or 442 "

"I can oblige you with room 442, sir "

"It will serve adequately I am Aldo Bnse "

Established in room 442, Gersen went to the wall and placed a

microphone against the paneling. From 441 came no sound

In the corner he dropped to his knees, drilled a minute hole, and inserted a near-invisible audio pickup He attached a recorder, which then he coupled to the telephone He placed the recorder in a drawer, opened the circuit, made tests, and departed

Returning to his office he entered, stalked across the room, carefully doffed his hat, placed it on a shelf Then he favored Alice with a stately nod, to which she returned a demure murmur and a quiet side-glance from under her long dark lashes Gersen settled himself at his desk with a grunt, sat frowning into space for five minutes, as if deep m thought Then he rose to his feet, went out into the passage, and so to the workroom

The clerks were at the full tide of work Gersen looked over

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the current listing at the rationalizer Identification of all the sub-jects could now be considered complete, save for number 6, who was known by a variety of names As yet no one had used the name Howard Alan Treesong

Gersen went back to his office Alice looked up from her desk "How goes the contest3"

"Extremely well, from a promotional standpoint Response exceeds our pro)ection by seventeen percent "

"But no one has won the grand prize3"

"Not yet "

"Why did you use that particular photograph3"

Gersen went to his desk and seated himself with the gravity of a judge He spoke m his nasal voice: "I have never thought it appropriate to ask "

Alice pulled in the corners of her mouth but said nothing

After a moment Gersen put the tips of his fingers together. tt! think that I can inform you, in absolute confidence, of course, that all our sub)ects except one have been correctly identified "

Alice gave an indifferent shrug "I'm not all that interested, Mr. Lucas."

"Come now," said Gersen, heavily facetious, "let's not have our noses out of joint I believe you mentioned that your home is Cyth-erea Tempestre3"

"For several years now, yes "

"I understand that people conduct themselves most informally on Cytherea "

Alice considered "I'm not sure I know what you mean by 'informally.' "

"Isn't there often—let us say—a bit of excess?"

"Yes, that's occasionally true. Tourists often misbehave when they're away from home. Some of the worst offenders are from Pontefract."

Gersen laughed. Alice, watching him sidelong, thought: The idiot is human after all.

"Have you ever visited the Wild Isle casinos? I'm told people gamble away vast sums of money."

"They can hardly expect to win."

Gersen said with plangent severity. "The money they lose lines the pockets of notorious criminals."

"So I've heard," said Alice. "My father lines his pockets, so to

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speak, at the casinos, but I don't think that he is a notorious criminal."

"I should hope not. Is he a gambler?"

"To the contrary. He designs gambling machines and adjusts them so that they fleece the gamblers. He finds his work entertaining. I've heard him say that he lacks all sympathy for gamblers. He considers them self-indulgent, foolish, and lazy, if not psychotic." Alice inspected Gersen with an innocent expression. "I hope that you're not a gambler, Mr. Lucas. I wouldn't care to hurt your feelings."

"Rest easy, Miss Wroke. I am neither vulnerable to casual depreciation nor a gambler."

"In regard to the contest, which one has not yet been properly identified?"

Gersen said evenly: "Number six."

"When will the contest be over?"

"I don't know." Gersen looked at his watch. "I have no further work for you today, Miss Wroke. You may leave at any time."

"Thank you, Mr. Lucas." Alice slipped on her jacket and went to the door. She paused and gave Gersen a tentative smile. "Will there be anything more tonight, Mr. Lucas?"

"No, thank you, Miss Wroke. I'll see you in the morning."

Alice departed. Gersen went out into the contest room and stood watching the operatives. Then he returned to his office, removed his coat, and subjected walls, windows, floor, ceiling, and all the contents of the room to a slow and expert inspection. Had the need arisen, he could have carried detection devices to measure the quiver of energy flux, but the process might well attract attention to his vigilance. High in a corner of the ceiling he noticed a few strands of web, which might have been spun by a spider, something the eye would slide away from, unheeding.

After five minutes of scrutiny he decided that the web indeed was the work of a spider and brushed it away.

He sat in his chair, collar open, cravat loose, and reflected. The time was now late afternoon. Gersen went out into the workroom to find that the evening shift had come on duty. He watched a moment, then, adjusting his garments for the street, departed the office and strolled through cool evening mist to Penwipers.

The doorman acknowledged his arrival with a grave bow; the

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footman hurried forward to take his hat and to assist him up the stairs, as if he were a centenarian.

Gersen went up to his rooms. He removed his coat and seated himself at the telephone. . . . He hesitated, hand in midair. He gave a snort of sour mirth. Eavesdrop devices at Penwipers5 Unthinkable'

To make absolutely sure—after all, the doors were innocent of locks—he tested the premises with his detector, the specifications of which he himself laid down.

The room was clean of spy cells.

Gersen went to the telephone and called room 442 at St. Diarmid's Inn.

"Mr. Bnse is not in," stated his answering device. "Please leave a message."

Gersen spoke a code word to activate the recorder. A musical tone notified him that material had been recorded and announced the time of the reception: only half an hour previously.

The first sound was Alice's voice. "Mr. Albert Strand, please."

"Thank you, madam." An institutional voice, thought Gersen. A moment later: "Hullo Alice!"

"Hello, Mr. Sparkhammer. I—"

"Tish, Alice! Also tush! Remember, here I am the gentleman Albert Strand of the Wambs County Strands."

"Sorry. Does it make any difference?"

"Who knows?" The voice was airy. "We are dealing with clever people. Not that we can't deal with them, but let us nurture our advantages. Boldness, power, stealth, decision! Let these be our watchwords!"

"Don't forget fear," said Alice in a soft, bitter voice.

"And of course, fear! So then, what have you learned?" This was a rich voice, under exquisite lilting control. Gersen listened with rapt attention.

Alice responded in a voice almost without expression. "This morning, when I arrived at work, Mr. Lucas told me I was to be his private secretary."

"Oh, dear me. I had not reckoned upon that. So then, what of Mr. Lucas?"

"He is careful about security—extremely so. I am not allowed into the contest room. Today I tried twice while he was out, but Mrs. Ench turned me away. I asked Mr. Lucas how the contest was

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going and he became insufferably pompous. He said that everyone in the picture had been identified except one—number six. No one as yet has come near winning the prize."

"And that is all!—"

"I'm afraid so. Mr. Lucas says very little. He's a silly over-dressed fool but rather a cunning fool, if you gather my meaning."

"Perfectly. Still, it seems that he is not impervious to your rather remarkable charms."

"Well—I'm not sure "

"Well then, find out! We can't waste time. I have important commitments in the near future."

"I'll do my best, Mr. Strand." Alice hesitated, then said: "Actually, you've never explained exactly what you want me to find out."

"Haven't I, though?" Mr. Strand's voice became briefly acrid and venomous. "Find out why they are using this specific picture! When and where did they get it? There's something going on, something in back of this contest, and I want to know what."

The conversation ended.

On the following day Alice made her second report. "Mr. Strand?"

"I am here, Alice."

"I don't have much to tell you. Today was much like yesterday. I tried to talk about the contest but Mr. Lucas won't answer my questions. He just sits and looks down his nose at me."

"Time is becoming critical, Alice " Mr. Strand spoke in a harsh hissing voice, curiously at odds with his mellifluous tones of the day before. "I want results. You know the circumstances "

Alice's voice became dull. "I'll try again tomorrow "

"You had better try something effective."

"But I can't think of anything. He is totally secretive'"

"Take him to bed. It's hard to be secretive without any clothes on."

"Mr. Sparkhammer—I mean Mr Strand—I can't behave like that' I wouldn't know how'"

"Tush, Alice, everyone knows how'" Mr Strand chuckled and his voice lost its menacing rasp, rising in pitch to become gay, quick, and almost brittle in quality. "If you must, you can—and indeed you must'"

"Mr Strand, really, I don't—"

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"Alice, you make such an affair of it all' It's most simple. You smile at him, he takes you to dinner. One thing leads to another, and presently you find yourselves without your clothes Mr. Lucas is panting like a beached haddock. You start to snivel. 'My dear Alice!' cries Mr. Lucas. 'Why, at this ecstatic moment, all these tears3'

" 'Because, Mr. Lucas, I am sad and afraid. You are only trifling with me, isn't it true?'

" 'Not so, Alice' I am ardent; can't you tell? The thought of your orange curls on that white pillow yonder sets me aquiver' Feel my pulse' Trifling5 Never! I am deadly in earnest!'

" 'But you treat me like an outsider' WTly can't you truly demonstrate your regard for me?'

" 'I am ready and anxious to do so''

" 'Not in that fashion. I want your full trust and esteem. For instance, when I show a natural interest in office affairs, such as the contest, you turn away your head. This is why I am sad.'

" 'Hrrumph, harra—I wouldn't want so petty a matter to come between us. Tomorrow at the office—'

" 'No, Henry, you might become cold again. You must tell me

now, to prove your faith.'

" 'Well, it's really a simple matter.' And so-out come all the secrets, in a great vulgar belch. In the morning, tired but happy, you communicate what you have learned to me, and all will be well. Otherwise"—here Mr. Strand paused—"otherwise," and his voice dropped half an octave, "I can offer no such assurance."

"I see."

"You can handle the job?"

"I suppose so."

"Remember, time is of the essence, as I have a commitment which cannot be disrupted: a gathering of old school chums, in fact. So please put your best efforts into this project, in the manner which I have outlined. After all, you were brought here to Pontefract for precisely this function."

"I'll do my best, Mr. Strand."

"Your best, I'm sure, will be adequate."

The conversation ended; there was silence in the room

From- Fauna of the Vegan Worlds, Volume III-  
The Fish of Aloysius, by Rapunzel K. Funk:

Gaid, also known as the night-tram- this is a splendid fish of a lustrous black color, often reaching a length of twenty feet The body is exceptionally well shaped, with an almost round cross section. The head is large and blunt with a single visual bulb, an aural pod, and a wide mouth, which when open displays an impressive dentition. Immediately behind the head and almost to the tail grows a row of dorsal spines, to the number of fifty-one, each tipped with a lummporph which at night emits a bright blue light.

By day the gaid swims beneath the surface, where it feeds upon wracken, borse, and similar creatures. At sundown the night-train rises to the surface and cruises steadily with all lights aglow

The pelagic voyages of the night-train remain a mystery; the fish peregrinates on a direct course, as if to a specified destination. This may be a cape or an island or perhaps an unmarked station in the middle of the ocean. Upon reaching its destination, the night-tram halts, floats quietly for half an hour, as if discharging cargo, or taking on passengers, or awaiting orders; then it swings about with majestic and ponderous deliberation. It hears a signal and sets off once more to its next destination, which well may be five thousand miles distant

To come upon this noble fish by night, as it cleaves the black waters of the Aloysian oceans, is a stirring experience indeed

Gersen felt restless, on edge. He went out into the evening and wandered the crooked streets of Pontefract.

Somewhat to his surprise he found himself at St. Diarmid's Inn. He halted and looked along what was by Pontefract standards a garish facade, of pale blue and purple tiles. Gersen moved on, across Mullawney Square into Portee Old Town, a tawdry district of taverns, odd shops, artists' studios, fned-fish booths, and discreet brothels, each showing an illuminated green-glass globe, in accordance with ancient law. Presently he arrived at the waterfront.

He stood looking across Bottleglass Bay, to the far lights of Port Rufus. A breeze brought him the smell of the Aloysian mudflats. Gersen had stood beside many shores, on many worlds. No two had smelled alike. . . . At the end of a nearby pier a string of colored lights festooned the front of a restaurant. Gersen walked out on the pier, looked into the restaurant, which seemed cheerful and clean, with red-checkered cloths on the tables. The name of the restaurant was Murdock's Bay View Grill.

Gersen entered and dined upon the house specialties, which were in the main derived from the ocean Aloysian cooking tended to blandness; Murdock, however, seemed to have no fear of sharp herbs and piquant sauces. . . . Gersen sat a long time looking out the windows toward the lights of Port Rums and listening to the mutter of slow waves on the ancient piles below.

It seemed that as time went by Gersen found himself ever more susceptible to strange moods, to which no name could be applied. In the early years his emotions focused along a single axis: hate, grief, revengeful lust. He had been humorless, clenched, passionate only in his dedication. Now there were numerous axes, in many directions. Was the intensity thereby diluted^ A profitless line of inquiry.. . His strategies, so he reflected, were at least partially effective. Howard Alan Treesong had been lured into tantalizing proximity, conceivably in Pontefract itself Possibly at this instant he strolled the cramped old streets, or took his ease in one of the formal hotels, where now he sat thinking dire thoughts, contriving plans.

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Gersen looked around the restaurant. Somewhere Howard Treesong might be at his evening repast... . Among the patrons of Murdock's Bay View Grill there was no tall spare man with a philosopher's forehead and a cunning foxy )aw. Treesong was elsewhere.

Gersen went to the telephone, called the Penwipers Hotel.

"Henry Lucas here. Has my friend Mr. Strand registered? . . . No? What about Mr. Sparkhammer^ . . . No one of that name either^ . . . Then do me a service, if you please. With discretion-do

not mention my name—try to find where Mr. Strand and Mr. Sparkhammer are staying."

"I'll do my best, sir."

Gersen returned to his table. Small chance of locating Treesong so easily He must be teased, baited, and tricked, and Alice Wroke must necessarily be the intermediary. It would be a fascinating game, mused Gersen, especially since Alice thought him pompous, stuffy, vain, overdressed, and silly.

Gersen departed the restaurant and returned to Penwipers. The desk clerk, as expected, had been unable to locate either Mr. Strand or Mr. Sparkhammer. Gersen assured him that the affair was of no consequence and went to his room.

No one had passed through the door since his departure, the telltale he had installed was still in place.

In the morning the valet outdid himself and dressed Gersen in a costume so splendid that even the doorman stared in admiration. Gersen arrived at the Extant offices to find Alice Wroke already at her desk. Gersen gave her a civil greeting, to which she replied in kind. Today she wore a knee-length skirt of a dark brown stuff and an ash-beige singlet, which suited her coloring to perfection. The costume showed her slender figure to advantage; her orange hair had been brushed till it shone. Sitting at his desk, Gersen pretended to ignore her presence. Several times, glancing across the room, he found her eyes upon him, pondering, appraising, wondering.

Gersen went out into the contest workroom. Mrs. Ench brought him a letter. "A near winner, Mr. Lucas' Perhaps even a winner! And how very strange it all is!"

Gersen read the letter:

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Contest Manager, Extant  
Ponterract, Aloysius

Sirs.

I can identify the persons in your photograph. It was my duty to attend them at the terrible event which cost them their lives This photograph was taken in the Rainflower Room at Wild Isle Inn. They are about to sup on the charnay which unaccountably poisoned them all, save only Mr. Sparkhammer. The names of those at the table are, reading from left to right

Sharrod Yest

Dianthe de Trembuscule

Beatrice Utz

Robun Martiletto

Sabor Vidol

Stanley Sparkhammer

John Gray

The men standing are

Ian Bilfred

A. Gleselman

Artemus Gadouth

I know their names from the place cards which I myself prepared. Two other men were present. Neither of them ate charnay and so both survived. The picture, incidentally, is customarily made in order to record the sign of the chef who prepared each serving of charnay. The signs are the little colored signal posts of each place. In this case the wonder persists, as several chefs prepared the charnay. Poison was evidently transmitted by a tainted utensil.

I trust that I have satisfied the conditions of your contest and will win the prize.

Cletus Parsrval

Wild Isle Inn

W^ild Isle, Cyntherea Tempestre

"Most interesting," said Gersen. "The letter is evidently genuine."

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"So it seems to me." Mrs. Ench turned Gersen a curious glance. "Did you know what this Parsival fellow tells us—that these men died of poison?"

"I am as surprised as you. But it won't hurt Extant's circulation."

"Why would anyone eat this charnay if it is known to be poison? Very strange goings-on!"

"Exactly so, Mrs. Ench."

"Well, this Mr. Parsival seems to have the names correctly," said Mrs. Ench.

"All except number six. Sparkhammer is not his proper name."

"Hmfm," said Mrs. Ench. "That number six is a will-o'-the-wisp in the matter of identity."

"Yes, he seems a strange case."

"I'd be inclined to name Mr. Parsival the winner and let be," said Mrs. Ench. "Surely no one has given us so long a list."

"I'm inclined to agree," said Gersen. "But still we'll have to wait out the rest of the contest. How is the mail?"

"About the same. Perhaps slacking a trifle."

"Very well, Mrs. Ench, keep up the good work. And ask your people to be most attentive in regard to mention of number six."

"I will do so, Mr. Lucas." Unlike Alice Wroke, Mrs. Rnch considered Gersen a polite and gracious gentleman, "without any side to him," as she put it to her sister.

Gersen returned with the letter to his office.

Alice asked brightly, "Do you have exciting news?"

Gersen ponderously settled himself at his desk. Alice waited, her face frozen in a mask of cheerful expectancy.

Gersen spoke in his most nasal and affected drawl. "As a matter of fact, we have a letter identifying all our faces."

"Correctly?"

"He claims to have inscribed the place names at the banquet."

"Then the names would seem to be correct."

"Not necessarily. There is one very dubious identification."

"Oh? Which one?"

Gersen darted her a stern glance. "I'm not sure that it's proper for me to comment upon these matters, Alice. Not just yet, anyway."

Alice's face fell. She gave a small grimace. Gersen, watching surreptitiously, thought: No'w she considers ho'w best to arrange her begiillements.

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Alice Jumped to her feet, went to the commode, where she poured two cups of tea. She placed one of these before Gersen, took the other to her own desk, where she poised herself, half-leaning, half-sitting. "Have you always lived here in Pontefract, Mr. Lucas?"

"I have traveled, of course, to many places."

Alice sighed. "Pontefract seems so impersonal, even a bit dreary

after five years at Wild Isle."

Gersen proffered no sympathy. "I can't understand why you came here in the first place."

Alice gave a dainty shrug. "A dozen reasons. Wanderlust. Restlessness. Have you ever visited Cytherea?"

"Never. I'm told that it's a most hedonistic environment, and that the residents live very unconventional lives."

Alice laughed and turned Gersen a saucy side-glance. "In some cases that's true. But not all. At Wild Isle you'll find every range of lifestyle. My mother is almost as conventional as you."

Gersen raised his black eyebrows. "What? You consider me conventional?"

"Yes, to some extent."

"Aha." Gersen gave a scornful grunt, as if to imply that Alice's opinions were callow and superficial. "Tell me more about Wild Isle. Is it true that criminals manage the casinos?"

"That is a considerable exaggeration," said Alice. "My father is not a criminal."

"But no one ever wins."

"Naturally not."

"Do you ever go into the casinos?"

"No. It's not at all amusing."

"Wild Isle is a city?"

"It's more like a tourist resort: casinos, hotels, restaurants, yacht harbors, beaches, and lots of little villas in the hills. It's no longer wild, of course."

"Have you ever visited a charnay restaurant?"

Alice turned him a look of wary perplexity. "No."

"What is charnay like?"

"W<sup>^</sup>ell, it's a purple fruit with rough skin. Inside, tubes full of poison run along the husk. The fruit itself is said to be delicious, but I've never tried it. I don't want to die. And it's fearfully expen-

sive.

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Gersen leaned back in his chair. "We've received a suggestion

that our contest photograph depicts a charnay banquet."

Alice picked up a copy of the photograph and examined it. "Yes . . . That might well be true."

"Very strange! You might have passed some of these people in the street."

Alice's response was cool. "Possible. But not likely. Thousands of transients pass through Wild Isle. And there's no indication when the picture was taken; it might be ten years old."

"It's a recent picture. Everyone has been identified, and we're now into authentication."

"So someone has won the contest?"

"I made no such statement."

Alice asked ingenuously: "How did you come by the picture?"

"I rescued it from the trash can, as a matter of fact. But I mustn't gossip about the contest; all results are not yet in. Why don't you take the rest of the day off, Alice? I'll be busy away from the office."

"Thank you, Mr. Lucas. I don't quite know what to do with myself. I'm acquainted with no one in town but yourself—and you're so remote."

"What nonsense!" declared Gersen. "You can't really think

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"But I do! Perhaps you don't think it proper to have social contacts with the staff. Is that company policy?"

"I'm sure there's no such rule."

"Do you think I'm dowdy and plain?"

"To the contrary," said Gersen in all sincerity. "I consider you most engaging. Extraordinarily so. I'm sorry that you find Pontefract so dreary. Perhaps we might have supper together sometime."

Alice's lips trembled. A smile? A grimace? In a demure voice she said, "That would be nice. Why not tonight?"

"Why not indeed? . . . Let me see. Where are you staying?"

"St. Diarmid's Inn."

"I'll meet you in the lobby, at Median."

"I feel much better already, Mr. Lucas."

In Praise of Charnay!

Of all the good things to be had in this bountiful universe, there is nothing to exceed a fine ripe charnay, except two or three more of the same.

—from Gustations, by Michael Wiest

If one must die—and this seems to be the general fate—why perform the act in mean and vulgar style? Rather, die splendidly, in a manner all will envy, engorged with charnay.

—Gillian Seal, chef, musician, and bon vivant

Believe or disbelieve as you will, but a safe, salubrious, and nonpoisonous charnay could easily be developed, grown, and harvested. But every effort in this direction has been thwarted by the Charnay Growers Association, nor is there any great public clamor for such a development. Is it possible that the admittedly fine flavor of charnay is enhanced by the presence of awful danger?

—Leon Wolke, journalist, writing for Cosmopolis,

who, two weeks after publication of his article, ate improperly prepared charnay and died

St. Diarmid's Inn had passed through the hands of various owners. Each had contributed original ideas to the decor, eventually producing an effect of considerable novelty. The lobby occupied the

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entire ground floor. Heavy columns, decorated in ancient Cretan style, supported the ceiling, which was patterned in lavender and pink. Beside each column Rhodanthus palms, in terra-cotta pots, grew to the ceiling, where the bare boles terminated in balls of dark green foliage. By Vegan standards the decor was garish. The movement of many folk, in costumes from every corner of the Oileumene, added life and drama to the hectic and vaguely disheveled atmosphere which characterized St. Diarmid's.

Gersen arrived punctiliously on time, wearing what the valet had considered appropriate for an informal evening on the town:

skintight black trousers, a shirt vertically striped in black, dark gray and light gray, with a high black neckband in lieu of a cravat. The black jacket, responsive to the dictates of high Pontefract style, was cut away in front, cramped at the shoulders, and almost bell-shaped around the hips. Gersen had refused a plumed hat, and the valet somewhat sulkily had allowed him the use of a soft, square black cap. With his harsh saturnine face, black curls, and pallid skin tone, he made a striking picture, one which, however, brought him satisfaction other than a kind of mischievous pleasure in playing dis-

guises and bemddling poor Alice Wroke.

Gersen saw her coming along the central aisle, looking diffi-  
dently this way and that. Gersen examined her as if he had never  
seen her before: the wistful mouth, short delicate nose, cheeks slant-  
ing to a small chin. Tonight her orange hair hung loosely past her  
ears, almost to the shoulders of her simple smoke gray frock.

She saw Gersen; her expression became charged with a syn-  
thetic enthusiasm. She nipped up her hand in a gay greeting and  
crossed the room at a half trot, to halt ten feet from Gersen. She  
gave him an admiring head-to-toe inspection. "I must say, Mr. Lu-  
cas, that you turn yourself out most elegantly."

"It's Penwipers all the way," said Gersen. "Give the credit to  
my valet."

Alice heard him without any great comprehension. Still smiling  
brightly she said, "Well then, where shall we dine? Here? The  
Escutcheon Room is pleasant."

"Too loud, too crowded," said Gersen. "I know a place far  
more exclusive."

"I place myself completely in your hands," said Alice.

"This way then, out into the Vegan night."

They left St. Diarmid's and Alice gingerly took Gersen's arm.  
"Where are we going?"

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"It's a pleasant night," said Gersen. "We can walk, if you like."

"I don't mind."

They crossed Mullawney Square to Beaudry Lane, and so into  
Partee Old Town. Unreal' muttered Gersen to himself. We walk  
the streets of Pontefract, she in her masquerade, I in mine.

Alice sensed something of Gersen's mood. "Mr. Lucas, why are  
you so somber?"

Gersen evaded the question. "You may call me Henry. We are  
not at the office."

"Thank you. Henry." She looked uneasily over her shoulder.  
"I haven't been in this part of town before."

"It's not at all like Wild Isle?"

"Not at all."

Presently they arrived at the waterfront and Murdochs Bay  
View Grill. Alice considered Gersen thoughtfully. Mr. Lucas, so  
stuffy and meticulous, seemed to have unconventional facets to his

character.

They sat in a corner of the restaurant, beside a window. Below them the water heaved in slow swells and sighed through the piles;

stars and far lights reflected from the dark surface. Gersen asked, "Can you find your home star?"

"I don't know the patterns from here."

Gersen looked around the sky. "It's already set. But there's old Sol yonder."

Their dinner was served a soup of native artichokes, a stew of crustaceans, onions, and herbs bubbling in brown pots, a salad of fresh greens. Alice nibbled at this and that, and in response to Gersen's question, pleaded lack of appetite. She drank several glasses of wine and achieved a degree of vivacity.

"And what of the contest?" she asked. "Is it still a mystery? Especially from me?"

"Mystery? No longer. But let's not talk shop. You're the mystery. Tell me about yourself."

Alice frowned out across Bottleglass Bay. "There's nothing much to tell. Life at Wild Isle isn't all that exciting, except for the tourists."

"I'm still baffled about why you came to Pontefract."

"Oh—circumstances."

Dessert was served, fruit tarts and heavy coffee smothered with cream, in accordance with Aloysian taste.

Gersen, who felt that he had lapsed far enough from character,

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attempted a ponderous analysis of Pontefract politics, of which he knew next to nothing. Alice sat apathetically, looking out the window across the dark water, her own thoughts obviously not focused on Gersen's remarks.

Finally Gersen asked: "Where now? There isn't much entertainment in Pontefract, except at the Mummery, and we're too late for the program. Would you care for a carouse in one of the taverns along the docks?"

"No ... I suppose we should go back to the hotel."

A top-heavy old cab conveyed them back to St. Diarmid's Inn.

In the lobby Gersen halted and performed a pontifical bow, as if to take his leave. Alice said quickly, "Oh, please don't go so soon." Looking off across the lobby she spoke in a carefully offhand

voice. "You can come up to my room, if you like."

Gersen protested politely. "But you must be tired."

Still looking away and with a trace of a flush coming over her face, Alice said, "No. Not really. In fact, I'm—well, lonely."

Gersen bowed formally once again, in acquiescence. "In that case I'll be happy to come up with you." He took her arm; they went to the lift and rode up to the fourth floor.

Alice opened the door and walked into the room, rigid as a prisoner.

Gersen followed warily. He halted in the doorway and surveyed the room. Alice watched incuriously, not even troubling to inquire the reasons for his vigilance.

Reassured, Gersen came slowly forward. He closed the door. "Henry," said Alice breathlessly. "May I call you Henry?"

"I've told you so already."

"I forgot. Isn't that idiotic? Let me take your hat and coat."

Gersen tossed the hat into a chair and relinquished his coat. "That's a relief. The Pontefract tailors have no concept of the human form."

"Sit down. Henry—there."

Gersen obediently eased himself down upon the couch. Alice brought a silver tray from the sideboard. "What is all this?" asked Gersen.

"Candied flower petals. Hydromel crystals. This is Liquor of Life, from Sirsse " She poured clear green tincture into a pair of small bowls. "At home, lovers drink Sirsse together," said Alice. "Of course we've not lovers, you and I, but.. ."

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"But what?"

"Oh—nothing particular."

Gersen tasted the liquor, which seemed heady and subtle.

Alice asked, "Do you like it?"

"It's unusual, certainly. And very fragrant."

Alice settled beside him and sipped from her own bowl. "It makes me feel shudder)". Gersen was surprised to find his arm around her shoulders, he had intended to maintain his decorum. She relaxed against him and he kissed her—rather more than sheer decorum might have dictated

Alice looked at him with pupils dark and dilated. Gersen asked, "What's wrong? Have I offended you?"

"Oh no." She laughed nervously. "You frighten me, just a little. You're so different from Mr. Lucas at the office I don't know how to describe it."

"There's definitely only one of me."

She poured out more of the liquor. "Drink."

"The lovers' potion?"

"If you want to call it that."

"Do you have another lover?"

"No...Whatofyou?"

"I'm quite alone."

Alice put up her face and he kissed her again. Her dress fell apart at the front, revealing her torso and a small round breast. She seemed not at all perturbed.

Gersen heaved a deep sigh. "This can't go any further."

"No?" Alice touched his cheek.

"I can't dispel a cruel suspicion."

Alice stared at him in consternation. "What do you mean?"

"I'd be very hurt to learn that you were cultivating me only to gain information about the contest. Absurd, of course."

Alice sat tense and pale. "Absurd, indeed."

"Well, then, could we be lovers if I told you nothing whatever about the contest?"

"This becomes so intellectual. . . I couldn't love someone who places no trust in me."

"In other words—no."

"But I don't want it to be that way," said Alice earnestly.

Gersen reflected a moment. "It seems that, to demonstrate my trust, I must tell you everything I know."

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"If you wish."

"Very well, why not?" Gersen stretched his legs out and put

his hands behind his head. "There's really not much to tell. The persons in the picture have been identified, all except one, whose identity is known to us under a different name " From his pocket Gersen brought a list, from which he read names: "Yest, de Trembuscule, Utz, Bilfred, Vidol, Sparkhammer, Gray, Gadouth, Gieselman, Martiletto; all correct except 'Sparkhammer,' who is know by dozens of other names. No one has submitted his real name. Does that surprise you?"

"No. Why should it?"

Gersen tossed the list upon the table and leaned back once. "Because he would seem to be a notorious criminal named Howard Alan Treesong."

"Howard Alan Treesong? That can't be true!"

"Why not?"

Alice had no answer.

"The people in the photograph are all dead—except number six, who is Treesong. What does that suggest to you?"

Alice, with her thoughts far away, responded with a gloomy shrug. "I don't understand any of this."

"There's another aspect to the matter," said Gersen. "If number six is Howard Treesong—and he surely is—I'd like to interview him. Extant could very profitably use such a piece, or a short autobiography. I wish I knew some way to get this message to him. I want him to communicate with me."

Alice stared across the room and away into nothingness. Gersen rose to his feet. He picked up his coat and hat Alice looked up and spoke in a husky half whisper. "Are you going?"

Gersen nodded. "I've told you everything I know "

"But you haven't!" Alice blurted despairingly. "How did you get the photograph?"

"I walked into the Cosmopolis library: I looked into the trash basket and found this photograph. No one could tell me anything about it, and so the Extant contest was born."

"Who put the picture into the trash basket?"

"A young and foolish clerk."

"Still—why did you choose this particular photograph? There must have been many others equally suitable."

"Someone unknown had written 'Treesong is here' on the pic-

ture. I became interested because there are no known likenesses of Treesong available. I felt that the picture would have considerable news value. As it happens, that is the case "

Alice sat silently. Gersen went to the door. "Good night."

Alice looked at him with a tired gaze. "I wonder how much you know of me."

"Not a great deal. Is there anything you want to tell me? Trust works both ways."

Alice gave her head a sad shake. "I haven't anything to tell."

"Good night then."

"Good night."

Alice sat where Gersen had left her, leaning back on the couch, legs stretched out, a wintry expression on her face. She ran her fingers through her orange hair, pushing the curls back from her forehead into a tangle. For ten minutes she sat deep in reverie. Then, rousing herself, she went to the telephone and made a complicated connection.

A voice spoke. "Alice, so early? You're a pair of fast workers."

Alice responded in a level voice. "I have your information. The persons in the photograph are as follows—" She read names from the list Gersen had left behind.

"What is the source of these names?"

"All the different entries. There's also at least one entry listing the names all correctly, except one."

"And which name is that?"

"Mr. Lucas said that 'Sparkhammer' seems to use many different names: Fred Framp, Bentley Strange, Howard Alan Treesong. . . I've forgotten the rest."

A silence. Then in a different voice, calm and meditative, "What did Mr. Lucas make of this?"

"I think he's anxious that Mr. Sparkhammer, or Mr Treesong, should get in touch with him for an interview. He wants to publish Mr. Treesong's autobiography."

The response was prompt and definite. "He is doomed to disappointment Mr. Sparkhammer, or Mr. Treesong, whatever his name, has no taste for such a vulgar antic. How did Extant come into possession of the photograph?"

"Mr. Lucas found it in a trash basket in the Covrnopolis library. A clerk had thrown it away."

"Odd, most odd . . . Are these facts?"

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"I think so."

"How did the photograph arrive at CosmopohsV

"I didn't think to ask; I suppose it came in whatever way is usual."

"And what led him to select this particular photograph?"

"Someone had written on it 'Treesong is here.' That attracted Mr. Lucas's attention."

"So he proposed a contest to identify Mr. Treesong and his colleagues."

"That is what he told me."

"Did he say why?"

"He said he very much wanted to publish Mr. Treesong's autobiography. As I told you, he wants Mr. Treesong to get in touch with him."

"Small chance of that. Mr. Treesong is very busy with urgent affairs." Mr. Strand became silent, for so long an interval that Alice began to fidget. Then: "What else did he tell you?"

"Not very much. He knows that the photograph was taken at Wild Isle, and that everyone died of charnay except Mr. Sparkham-

n

mer.

Another long silence. Then: "Very good, Alice. In the main you have done well."

"I can go back home? And you will do as you promised?"

"Not yet! Oh dear no, not yet! You must remain at your post! Keep your eyes and ears open. This Henry Lucas person, what do you make of him?"

Alice spoke in a bleak voice: "I don't know what to make of him. He's a contradiction."

"Hmfmf. That tells me nothing. But no matter, continue as before. Tomorrow I am going away; and for a day or so you will not be able to reach me. Continue your intimacy with Mr. Lucas. I have a feeling that there is something more here, beyond what he has told you."

"For how long?"

"In due course I will let you know."

"Mr. Strand, I've done all I can' Please—"

"Alice, I have no time for your complaints. Continue as before and all will be well. Is this understood?"

"I suppose so."

"Good night then "

"Good night "

Excerpt from an address by Nicholas Reid, Fellow of the Institute, Phase 88, at the Madera Technical College:

The Institute is dedicated to human excellence. We try to augment beneficial processes and discourage those which are morbid and septic.

Our credo derives from the history of the human race, which evolved across millions of years in the natural environment.

What happens when a saltwater fish is transferred into fresh water? It goes into spasms and dies. Consider, then, a creature whose every sense, capability, and instinct have been shaped by the natural environment, by interaction with sun, wind, clouds, rain; the look of mountains and far horizons, the taste of natural food, contact with the soil. What happens when this creature is transferred to a synthetic environment? He becomes neurotic, a victim of hysterical fads, willful hallucination, sexual perversion. He deals with abstractions rather than facts, and so becomes intellectualized and incompetent. Confronted with a real challenge, he screams, curls into a ball, closes his eyes, befouls himself, and waits. He is a pacifist who fears to defend himself.

From Better Understanding of the Institute, by Charles Bronstem (82):

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Urbanized men and women experience not life but the abstraction of life, on ever higher levels of refinement and dislocation from reality. They become processors of ideas, and have evolved such esoteric occupations as the critic, the critic who criticizes criticism, and even the critic who criticizes criticism of criticism. It is a very sad misuse of human talent and energy.

From The Institute A Preface, by Mary Murray

Our tutelary genius is the titan Antaeus

Urbanity is an unnatural habitude.

Are we elitist, as it is often asserted^ Well, we surely do not consider ourselves the dregs of society

We approve of contrast, social disequilibrium, extremes of wealth Often we are accused of sponsoring chaos, however, this has never been admitted

The Urbanites Strike Back'  
"Elitist prigs'"

"If they like the Pleistocene so much, why don't they wear skins and live m caves5"

"Residents of very lofty and very remote ivory towers which they confuse with 'natural habitat' "

"I'd rather push a pencil in an air-conditioned office than push a wheelbarrow in the mud "

In almost the same terms

"I'd rather pick flaws in someone's manuscript than pick tomatoes in the hot sun "

Again

"I'd rather drive my Fissel Flasher than a balky mule "

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Gersen stood at a window of his sitting room at Penwipers, brooding down across old Tara Square The time was midnight, Tara Square was dark and still Starlight illuminated the roofs of Ponteftact, casting black shadows down tall gables, under crooked eaves and thousands of crotchety chimney pots

Gersen's mood was reflected in his posture, he felt morose and drained of energy The great scheme had failed The program had gone with precision Howard Treesong had reacted as positively as Gersen could have hoped, in Alice Wroke he had found a conduit leading to Treesong Then, almost casually, defeat. For whatever motives—pride, press of affairs, the workings of his uncanny wariness—Howard Treesong had refused to consider the publication of his autobiography, or so much as an interview.

There was no further leverage to be found in the contest In the morning he would put Mrs Ench in charge of the entire project

What next5 Alice Wroke remained his single avenue of access to Howard Treesong, but the linkage had become fragile and uncertain.

Two questions remained unanswered How did Howard Treesong control Alice Wroke3 Why had Howard Treesong poisoned nine people with charnay5

The answers were probably to be found at Wild Isle, but, so Gersen reflected glumly, the information would most likely be stale and useless

Of far more interest what was Howard Treesong's present "urgent business"?

Of this Alice Wroke evidently knew nothing No other source of information suggested itself

Gersen looked over the starlit roofs In the pubs of Partee Old Town lights would still be burning. He looked toward St Diarmid's Inn and wondered if Alice Wroke was still awake

Gersen turned away from the window and stood motionless Then he threw off the Penwipers shirt, donned a dark gray space-man's blouse, pulled a soft cap down over his forehead, and started for the door A chime at the communicator turned him back He stood frowning at the instrument Who would be calling him at this hour?

The screen came alive and presented the long pale face of Maxel Rackrose "Mr Lucas?"

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"Speaking."

Rackrose spoke in a carefully languid voice. "The information you wanted—authentications and so forth—has come together, except for a few bits and pieces."

Maxel Rackrose spoke with such hushed restraint that Gersen instantly became alert. Rackrose said without any great conviction, "I do hope I haven't jerked you from your bed?"

"No. I was on my way out the door."

"Then why don't you step over to the office for a few minutes? I think you'll be interested in what's turned up."

'Til be right there."

The Cosmopolis offices were never closed; work proceeded every hour of the day, every day of the year. A tall glass door whisked aside at Gersen's approach; he entered the foyer, where luminous slabs of colored glass blacked out a Mercator map of Earth.

Gersen rode a lift high into the North Tower and so to the offices of Maxel Rackrose, who now used the title Superintendent of Miscellaneous Operations. The outer chamber, which reflected Rackrose's pose of fastidious sophistication, was an exercise in the most exquisite excesses of the High Clapshott style. The inner room, where Rackrose spent most of his time, was a jungle of disorder. A long table supported stacks of books and periodicals, papers, photographs, oddments, curios, and perplexing trifles of junk.

There were several stools, a communicator, a complicated device for the brewing of tea, another for the projection of kaleidoscopic patterns on the wall, an attenuated statue of a nude woman nine feet tall, whose belly opened on the hour to permit a bird to step forth and cry "cuckoo."

Rackrose, a tall, angular young man in expensive if unconventional garments, with a long, somewhat equine face, lank blond hair, and heavy-lidded blue eyes, greeted Gersen in a carefully offhand manner. "Sit down, if you will." He waved a limp white hand toward one of his precious antique chairs. "Perhaps you'd take a cup of tea? And a biscuit?"

"That would be nice."

With tea poured and anise cakes set forth, Rackrose settled into a chair beside a kidney-shaped table. "And how goes your contest?"

"Quite well. One entry names nine of ten, and if no one does

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better I think we'll nominate him the winner. What of your authentications?"

Rackrose leaned back, pressed the tips of his fingers together, looked toward the ceiling with pursed lips.

"In accordance with your instructions, I processed all available information. I started with the Index' and information from our own files. I may say that there was no trouble with authentication. The subjects are persons of substance and reputation. Except for number six. None of his purported names correlates with anything other than disreputable activities. In short, he seems to be a criminal."

"What of the others?"

"Aha! That's where we make an interesting discovery. I found recurring references to the Institute, and such remarks as 'said to rank high in the hierarchy,' and 'an apparently high-ranking Fellow.' In fact, Beatrice Utz is identified as '103.' Artemus Gadouth was the Triune." Maxel Rackrose paused to allow Gersen to reflect upon the implications of his information.

Gersen studied the photograph, which he already knew in minute detail. A startling suspicion formed in Gersen's mind, an idea strange and terrible, "Ten faces; could it be the Dexad?"

"The same idea occurred to me," said Rackrose.

Gersen reflected a moment. Rackrose knew nothing of the

1. A directory or identities, originally compiled by the IPCC and continually augmented by other agencies. The Index includes the records of history social welfare registrations,

military rosters, passenger lists of interplanetary vessels, birth, marriage, and death records, telephone directories, school and university graduation lists; criminal identifications, the memberships of clubs, associations, and fellowships, names culled from the daily news by automatic scanners.

2. The Institute grades its Fellows with Ranks 1 through 111- Number 111 is the Triune.  
Ranks 110 and 100 are always empty

Ranks 101 through 109 are limited to a single Fellow- With the Triune, these ranks make up the Dexad, though as often the nine Fellows from 101 through 109 are known as the Dexad.

Fellows advance from 101 to Triune in order of precedence.  
Three Fellows only occupy Rank 99. When a vacancy occurs in the Dexad, usually by reason of death, surviving Fellows elect one of the three 99s to fill the vacancy

From the three Fellows in Rank 98, one is elected to Rank 99- Similarly, Fellows advance up the ranks from 90- Below 90, there is no limit upon the Fellows allowed into each rank

To achieve Rank 89 is difficult. To attain Rank 99 is much more difficult. A Fellow elected to Rank 101 has a good chance of becoming Triune. This is not necessarily true in Rank 99, where a Fellow who has made enemies among the Dexad may never be advanced

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charnay poisonings, nor did he realize that number six was Howard Alan Treesong. He asked, "Who ranks highest locally?"

Rackrose frowned toward the ceiling. "There's a hermit out on Boniface who is supposed to rank high. I've heard he's in the Dexad. If so, this picture would not seem to be the Dexad, because there's no one here from Boniface."

"Who ranks high in Pontefract?"

"I'm not sure. Let me ask Condo; he knows such things." Rackrose spoke into the communicator using a soft voice only a trifle louder than a whisper. He made notes on a pad of pale pink paper. "Good enough." He turned back to Gersen with a page torn from his pad. "Her name is Leta Goynes. She lives at seventeen Flaherty Crescent, out in Bray, and she might be as high as a sixty or sixty-five."

Gersen took the address to his own small office, which was far less splendid than that of Maxel Rackrose. At his communicator he placed a call. A moment passed, then an unemphatic female voice spoke. "Leta Goynes here."

"I'm sorry to disturb you at this late hour, Mrs. Goynes. My name is Kirth Gersen, and I want to consult you on a matter of great importance."

"Now?"

"Unfortunately yes. It's Institute business of extreme urgency. If you'll allow me, I'll come directly out to your house."

"Where are you now?"

"At the Cosmopolis offices."

"Take Transit to Bray Junction; a cab will bring you out to Flaherty Crescent."

As Gersen approached the cottage at 17 Flaherty Crescent, the door slid back; backlighted in the opening stood a dark-haired woman, sturdy, solid, and obviously in good physical condition. She gave Gersen a cursory inspection and stood back. Gersen entered; the door closed behind him. "This way," said Leta Goynes, and led him to a neat parlor. "Tea?"

"Yes, please."

She poured and handed Gersen a cup. "Sit anywhere you like."

"Thank you." Gersen seared himself; Leta Goynes remained standing, a rather handsome woman in her early maturity, her black

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hair cut close to her head, her eyes dark and direct under strong black eyebrows. "There is no Kirth Gersen known to Cosmopolis."

"For a good reason. I call myself Henry Lucas, Special Writer."

"You are a Fellow?"

"No longer. At Phase eleven I discovered that the Institute and I often worked at odds with each other."

Leta Goynes, smiling faintly, inclined her head in a terse nod. "So then?"

Gersen handed her the contest photograph. "Have you seen this? It appeared in Extant."

"I haven't seen it before."

"What do you make of it?"

"Nothing particular."

"You recognize no one?"

"No one."

"It might well be the Dexad. Artemus Gadouth is this gentleman. He is Triune, as I suppose you are aware."

Leta Goynes nodded. "I've never met him."

"This is Sharrod Yest. . . Dianthe de Trembuscule . . . Beatrice Utz, rank one hundred three . . . Ian Bilfred . . . This gentleman calls himself Sparkhammer . . . Sabor Vidol, rank ninety-nine . . . John Gray . . . Gadouth . . . Gieselman, rank one hundred six . . . Robun Martiletto." Gersen paused.

Leta Goynes said, "This is not the entire Dexad. There are three persons—those numbers five, six, and seven—who are probably ninety-nine. Last month we lost Eimo Shookey. This banquet precedes, so I presume, the elevation of a ninety-nine."

"The elevation may not have occurred," said Gersen. "All except number six were poisoned by charnay."

Leta Goynes's face became cool and faintly scornful. "The Institute is not only strong; it is flexible. Normal adjustments are being made."

"In this case the adjustment will not be so easy. The survivor, number six, poisoned the others. His name is Howard Alan Treesong."

Leta Goynes stared at the photograph. "That is terrible information—if it is true. And I see that it must be true. . . . How did he gain rank ninety-nine?"

"Through fraud, extortion, fear, mind bending—so I suppose. Certainly he never rose through the ranks. But a more important

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question: What members of the Dexad are missing from the picture? And where are these members?"

Leta Goynes managed a harsh cold laugh. "Under the circumstances that becomes highly important information."

"True. And I might be one of Treesong's colleagues."

"Or Treesong himself"

Gersen handed her Jehan Addels's business card. "Telephone this man. He is a local resident of good reputation. Ask him whatever you like about me."

Leta Goynes went to the communicator. "First I will ask someone about Jehan Addels."

She made a set of guarded inquiries, watching Gersen meanwhile from the corner of her eye. Then she telephoned Jehan Addels. After some delay he responded, displeased that his rest had been disturbed. Gersen spoke to him: "This lady is Leta Goynes. Answer any questions she cares to ask."

Leta Goynes questioned Addels for fifteen minutes, then slowly turned away from the communicator. She had gradually resumed that manner typical of the Institute's upper ranks: a serene and exasperating indifference to events, including personal convenience.

"Addels gives you a remarkable reputation." She thoughtfully sipped her tea, then spoke in a pensive voice: "The Institute tends to ignore ordinary social problems, even criminals as egregious as Howard Treesong. Still. . ." Leta Goynes set her chin. "I will give you your information. Three of the Dexad are not present in the photograph. They are one hundred one, one hundred two, and one hundred seven. The death of one hundred seven was the occasion for the conclave, one hundred one lives in isolation on Boniface, at a place called Athmore Violet, in the wildest part of World's Moil. His name is Dwyddion and he is our Triune, although he may not know it, since he sees no one and refuses to communicate."

"And what of one hundred two?"

Leta Goynes smiled a strange crooked smile. "His name is Benjamin Wroke. He drowned in the Shanaro Sea. Last week his body was washed up on the beach at Cele, which is near Wild Isle."

From Everyman's Guide to the Stars:

Vega; Alpha Lyrae:

... The three inner planets, Padraic, Mona, Noaille, are cinders of scorched stone, baking in the austere glare of the Great White Star. Noaille holds one face steady to Vega, and is noteworthy for the rains of liquid mercury which fall on the dark side, flow to the hot side where they vaporize, and return to the dark side.

Next are the inhabited worlds: Aloysius, Boniface, and Cuthbert. Cuthbert is humid and unpleasantly marshy, with few areas comfortably habitable, in part due to the numerous insects which give Cuthbert its sobriquet: "Bug Hunter's Paradise."

Aloysius is next in orbit, temperate, if damp, and most densely populated of the Vegan worlds.

The early history of Aloysius is dominated by rivalry between religious sects; the effects of the hatred and warfare so engendered persist to the present, most especially in the countryside, in the form of provincial suspiciousness. The cities Pontefract, New Wexford, Yeo are relatively cosmopolitan.

Boniface, outermost and largest of the habitable worlds,

is gloomy, dank, and like a caricature of the other two, exaggerating all the harshness and oddities of its sister planets. The oceans are bedeviled by awful storms, the land masses are notable for an extravagant topography: vast plains supine to the force of winds and rain; mountains,

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caves, crags, chasms, broad rivers flowing from sea. to sea Here and there the land allows habitation, though never ease or comfort.

From earliest times the shrewd and provident folk of \loysms, wresting value from dross, used the inhospitable wastes of Boniface as a penal settlement, and here were discharged the atheists, incorngibles, and irredeemables of the Vegan worlds

Arriving at Port Swaven, the convicts were processed at a staging compound operated by the Order of St Jedasias A certain Abbot Nahut, through divine revelation, received instruction in a new regimen to which arriving convicts must be subjected, the better to prepare them for life on Boniface The methods were drastic and unique Many of the survivors suffered genetic damage which stabilized, and a new human species was thereby more or less accidentally created These were the "Fops," one of the curiosities of the human universe The typical FO)O was tall, with thin arms and legs, big hands and feet, gnarled heavy features, and a shock of white quills in place of hair The Fops became functionally the indigenous race of Boniface and migrated to all the most sheltered nooks, crannies, and lonely valleys of their harsh world.

In a few little towns—Slayman, Cashel Creary, Nahutty, Kaw Doon, Fiddletown—a few ordinary men and women operate shops and agencies and perform technical services, dealing with the FO)OS in a state of mutual distaste

The Order of St Jedasias is long extinct, but by one of the more acrid cosmic ironies, the FO)OS still espouse a variant of the Jedasian creed, and in every little FO)O village exists a square Jedasian church

Time suddenly had become a critical factor, inasmuch as Dwyd-dion, hermit and new Triune, must surely represent one of Howard Treesong's "urgent affairs " Gersen made all possible haste, from Leta Govnes's cottage to the spaceport, aboard his Fantamn Flit-tenvmg, and away into space

The automatic pilot sw^ng the boat high over Vega and down on the opposite side, to where Boniface coasted in orbit A primitive world, with nothing of value to be plundered, looted, or kidnapped,

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Boniface lacked all entry controls, Gersen dropped unchallenged

down to the harsh blue-black-and-white disk

Gersen searched the Vegan Gazetteef, but found only a single vague reference to Athmore Violet The Skak Range ran diagonally across a section known as World's Moil, in the middle of St Cro-decker's continent Along the southern flanks of the Skak, the river Meaughe meandered down Meaughe Vale, where Gersen noted the town Poldoolie, which might well be a source of local information

The surface of Boniface, obscured by clouds and camouflaged by cloud shadows, revealed no obvious landmarks Gersen oriented himself with the help of radio beacons, calculated the coordinates of the town Poldoolie, and slanted down into the heavy atmosphere

Over Meaughe Vale the sky was clear Gersen located Poldoolie, a huddle of stone structures beside a growth of purple voitch ' Gersen descended in a spiral and landed the Flittering in a soggy meadow a quarter mile east of the town

The time was local noon Gersen stepped from the Fhttef'wi'ng into a dank cold wind smelling of mud and rancid vegetation.

Out from the town bounded a dozen gangling ragamuffins, the larger thrusting the smaller aside, the smaller cursing and tripping the larger. All wore dirty white smocks which they hiked up as they ran, revealing white legs and knobby knees Their heads were narrow, their facial structures crude and gnarled Iron each narrow scalp rose a bush of stiff white spines The first to arrive halted two feet from Gersen and screamed "I'm the guardian, I'm here first, the others are smashers, pay them naught' I'm Keak, for me the gautch "

"Gautch3 What is gautcrr" asked Gersen

"That is my payment I want either five SVU or five picture books"

The other boys cried out in eager voices "Give him books for gautch' Good books, with bosers' Vetch bosers1"

"Bosers3 What are bosers2"

The question evoked strangled guffaws Keak wiped his mouth and explained "Bosers—with the wide areas and no clothes on Yetch they're the good bosers'"

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sonous others predatory and carnuurou'i I he benign specimens furnish food drink hber

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"I see," said Gersen "And suppose I pay neither coin nor pic-

tures of naked bosers—then what5"

"Then the smashers—those ugly chuts yonder' They'll muck up your ferberator crystals and pour stale dog piss into your air intakes So pay up and I'll fend them off "

Gersen considered "How can you control so many smashers5"

"They know better than to flout me Cukkms' Tell what I'll do to you "

"Faith, and I smash so much as a twittle, he'll shove me head up my own bum He's a scarfer, is Keak, and he knows how to do it"

Gersen nodded "Well, Keak, I see that you mean business Still, I think I had better make sure of everyone This way, then, around the boat, I've got fine things in the cargo hatch for lads like you"

"Eh5" asked a small youth "What sort of fine things2"

"What of boser books5" asked Gersen "Dozens of them, all rotten scurrilous'"

"That's the talk'" cried Keak "Let's have a look'"

"This way " Gersen went around the ship, followed by the youths, loping and hopping. Gersen slid open the cargo port and drew down the ladder He pointed to Keak. "First choice goes to you, quick now, I can't waste time."

Keak hopped up the ladder, followed by the others, with Gersen at the rear

"There's naught for light in here," croaked Keak "Make light' Show us bosers "

"Wide arse, big udders "

Gersen touched a button, light came to the chamber, which was starkly empty

"Hey'" called Keak "There's naught here'"

Gersen grinned "Only a clutch of young blackguards I'm going now about my business and I'm locking you in If you make any mess I'll fly you into the mountains and turn you out, and you won't be home for supper tonight So mind your conduct'"

Gersen backed down the ladder, closed and locked the hatch He set off across the dank meadow and presently found a lane which flanked a stagnant drainage ditch choked with magenta slime

At the outskirts of town he passed a small cottage, raised from

the bog on posts Under the porch crouched an old man, sorting rocks from a sack into three piles

Gersen called out, "Hoy' Can you direct me to Athmore Violet5 I can't find it on my map.'

The old man merely crouched in the shadow Thinking that he had not been heard, Gersen approached. The old man threw a cloth over his rocks and, spraddling on long legs like an ungainly spider, scrambled back into the muck under his house.

Gersen turned away and continued along the lane, passing another cottage, somewhat more substantial, with a black energy unit on the roof, surmounted by a religious fetish In the gateway of the low wall stood a man wearing a tall conical hat

Gersen halted and tendered an affable greeting. "Good day, sir"

"Yes, yes," replied the FO)O in a patronizing drawl.

Gersen )erked a thumb toward the first cottage "Why does the old man hide under his house5"

The FO)O chuckled at Gersen's naivete "He is a miner, isn't that clear5 Those are his new ores Look under the house, notice how his eyes gleam' He carries a bylo-by Had you touched his ores he would have blown away your head and ears "

"I only want information Where is Athmore Violet5 My map doesn't show it"

"Naturally not At Athmore Violet Bugardoig mines alexandrites'"

"I am not interested in alexandntes I want to find a man who lives nearby Can you direct me to Athmore Violet5"

The FOJO )erked his thumb toward the town "Bugardoig is the man to ask "

"I'm in a hurry I don't want to waste time looking for Bugardoig "

"Rest easy, he will find you as soon as he notices your vessel on his water meadow, and he won't waste time "

"What of yourself5 Do you care to earn a hundred SVU5 Help me find my friend "

"Near Athmore Violet, you say That must be the hermit of Voymont "

"He is a solitary man, true "

"Athmore Violet and Voymont perilous parts, if only because

of Bugardoig's mines "

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From inside the cottage came a hoarse voice "Take the money, Lippold Do as required' It is a small thing "

Lippold made no acknowledgment of the advice Apparently he had lost interest in Gersen and stood staring serenely off across Meaughe Vale Overhead the sky broke apart and Vega darted light of resplendent clarity across the landscape Objects came alive with color swamp gorse in maroon and ocher, the mountains behind Poldoolie blue-black and white; the voitch, purple, with an inexplicable blue-green umbra below. The clouds closed like a trap, Vega-light was gone Lippold stood unmoved by the sudden splendor and its equally abrupt disappearance Gersen turned away and continued toward the town an irregular huddle of stone huts, sties, stables, and sheds, a dozen shops and agencies, a tavern, a squat Jedasian church

Above, clouds from east and west collided They swirled and churned, rain began to fall Gersen looked over his shoulder, Lippold, in a blur of rain, stood as before

Gersen ran into town and took shelter under the eaves of a shuttered mechanic's shop Only the tavern seemed open for busi-

ness

Gersen waited a moment The rain continued to fall in gray sheets, momentarily illuminated with flashes of lightning Gersen saw tall figures loping through the drench toward the tavern, pausing at the door to shake and kick off the wet, then enter For a moment the rain paused. During the lull Gersen ran up the street to the tavern

He entered a long room, with a counter to one side, benches and tables to the other. A line of high windows with panes of yellow mica allowed a dreary light into the room At the tables sat groups of FO|OS, hunched over cups of mulled liquor The pungence of hot brew mingling with the sour steam of wet clothes and damp flesh brought a twitch to Gersen's nostrils

As he advanced into the room, all conversation halted and all heads turned and rows of milk blue eyes scrutinized Gersen Each man wore a stocking cap pulled down over his spike of hair, similar caps hung on poles beside each table Gersen nodded politely to the company and went to the counter The barman, wiping great hands on the dirty towel tied around his stomach, approached "What is your want2"

I HE BOOK OF DREAMS 823

"I'd like a few words with someone named Bugardoig," said Gersen "Is the gentleman here at the moment2"

"There's no Alois Bugardoig here, and what are you needing from him that you wouldn't be better without? And will you not wear a hat? Where's your manners?"

"Sorry, I don't own a hat."

"No matter, you'd look a silly ape with the prut hanging past your cheek like a spent coigel. Aha, who is this?"

Into the tavern lumbered a man, thick and heavy, with slit pale blue eyes almost closed by bulging apple-red cheeks. He went to a pole, took off a "prut," and with a deft twist brought it down over his spike of hair. Gersen turned to the barman: "Is that Bugardoig?"

"Ha-ha! That's cause for laughter, or—should you be Bugardoig—a great twinge of rage. That is Looke Hollop, and he empties the town swill. Notice his arms. He's a strong man, is Hollop, but never like Bugardoig. Are you drinking? Do you like our boiled twirps?"

"What else do you serve?"

"Little else. It's good enough for us, are you for fluting and luting with your nose over our good twirps?"

"Never," said Gersen. "Be good enough to serve me a portion."

"Well, said Jocko. A battern of twirps for this outlander. And here, since I'm taking pity on you, let me wrangle up a semblance of decency for your head." The barman stuffed paper into a soiled and oily prut and pulled it down over Gersen's brow, so that the stuffed part wobbled first to one side, then the other. "Not good," said the barman, "but better, especially since your business is with Alois Bugardoig, who is a rare stickler for the niceties of life, in fact, he's sworn never to harm another man on the Holy Day, can you believe it? Some declare he's only that much worse other days. Oh, worry, who is this?"

Into the tavern came a FO)O with a great barrel chest and a face splayed and gnarled like a jungle fungus. Gersen asked: "Is that Bugardoig?"

"Him? Never. That's Shirmis Poddle Shirmus, what's it to be? The usual?"

"The usual, since there's naught better. I wonder where is my brat? He should have been out back addling the deckers and not a flap of his shirttail. Well, no matter. It's his bones I'll bruise and not my own."

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The barman slid across a jar of heavily spiced twirps. "Drink in joy, Shirmis. Today so far has been quiet."

"Is that surly thing on his way? Or will I have a moment's peace?"

"Only the High Eye sees so far. Hush! Do you hear him now?"

Shirmis again looked toward the door. "That's only thunder. Still"—he raised his jar and drank—"you've roused my nerves. I'm away for places more serene."

The barman watched him depart and gave a sad shake of the head. "Fear is a strange sense and can't be explained. Ah then, is that yet thunder, or is it Bugardoig shaking his leg?"

A Fojo entered the tavern, his shoulders tilling the doorway. Twin buttresses of ropy muscle arched up to support his jaw, so that the head seemed more narrow than the neck. His mouth was a gash, his nose a jut of cartilage.

Gersen looked to the barman. "And there . . . ?"

"There you see Bugardoig, and today he has flame in his eye. Someone has treated him poorly, and it may be hard for all of us. Is your prut on straight?"

"I hope so. What does he drink?"

"The usual and several more like it."

"Serve up a double order." Gersen turned toward Bugardoig, who stood looking among the patrons of the tavern with an air of glowering purpose. Turning toward the bar he took notice of Gersen, and gave an exaggerated jerk of displeasure. "And what is this here, with hat askew and face like a gargoyle?"

"A friend in Pontefract asked me to seek you out. He suggested that I put down my ship in your water meadow, as you are notoriously generous. Incidentally, I have ordered a double portion of liquor on your behalf."

Bugardoig lifted one mug in his right hand, drained it; he took the second mug in his left hand, poured it down his throat with equal facility, and set the empty containers back on the counter.

"And so to business. Since I make no exceptions, pay me now and at once a hundred SVU for landing fees, demurrage, and berthing for the month."

"First, let us discuss a larger matter," said Gersen. "Have you a few hours to spare at this moment?"

"On what kind of business?"

"Profitable business."

THE BOOK OF DRK4MS S25

"Explain yourself."

"Near Athmore Violet lives an important man whom we must visit at once."

"Eh? Who is this? The crazy hermit on Voymont?"

"He is not altogether crazy," said Gersen. "In fact, he has recommended you as most qualified to take me to Voymont, since your properties are nearby."

Bugardoig uttered a great boom of laughter. "Not so nearby that I care to risk my life on V^oymont. So pay me my fee and go to Voymont alone. If you approach Arthmore Violet, expect my intense displeasure."

Gersen nodded slowly. "Well then, come along to my boat; I carry no money on my person."

Bugardoig contorted his face into an astonished scowl. "Must I plod the wet marsh because you have been fool enough to forget your money?"

"Whatever you like," said Gersen. "Wait here. I will go for the money and bring it to you."

"Ha!" roared Bugardoig. "I am not to be tricked so readily. Come; if I must, I must. To your ship, and I will collect a surcharge often SVU."

"Hold a moment!" bawled the barman. "I want a three-piece' for the liquor!"

Gersen put a coin on the counter and signaled to Bugardoig. "Let us hurry before the rain returns."

Bugardoig grumbled under his breath, then followed Gersen from the tavern. They walked back along the lane under a plum-colored sky, past the cottage where Lippold stood as before, past the hut of the miner, who was nowhere to be seen, and out upon Bugardoig's water meadow.

They approached the Flittefiving. Gersen said to Bugardoig:

"Wait here. I will jump aboard and fetch the money."

"Don't waste my time with foolishness!" said Bugardoig.

"Open up. You won't stray beyond the clutch of my fingernails until I heft what is due me."

"The Fojos are a suspicious race," said Gersen. He climbed the ladder and opened the port, with Bugardoig close at his heels. "This

1. A coin worth three-quarters of an SVU.

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way," said Gersen. At the after bulkhead of the saloon he slid open

a door, gestured to Bugardoig. "Through here."

Bugardoig shoved impatiently past and into the cargo hold;

Gersen slid the door shut and engaged the clamps, even as Bugardoig realized his error and hurled himself against the door. Gersen pressed his ear to the panel and heard strident voices. Grinning, he went to the controls, took the boat into the air, and new away up Meaughe Vale. Below, the river moved south like a sullen gray snake through terraces splotted with various sorts of vegetation:

gray goiter bush, purple voitch, pale green wax plant, black smut-trees. Minarets of pink and yellow land-coral thrust a hundred feet into the air; poisonous orange smears delineated colonies of wandering musk.

Ten miles slid behind. Gersen dropped the boat upon a meadow of broad-leaved silver-grass. He alighted from the boat and walked to the cargo hatch and slid it open, lowered the ladder. He called, "Keak! Keak! Speak up!"

A surly voice replied: "W^hat do you want?"

"How much mess have you created?"

A short pause; then in airy tones, cracking up into falsetto: "I personally? Nothing of consequence."

"Keak! Listen carefully—very carefully indeed! I am now about to let the brats go free. All but you. We will look over the cargo hatch. If conditions offend me, I will carry you two hundred miles into the mountains. There you, and you alone, will scour that cargo hatch until it glistens and smells sweet as the roses of Kew. Then you will go your way and I will go mine."

Keak's voice came somewhat tremulously: "Conditions are tolerably good. I notice a bit of mess here and there—"

"You had better clean it now, while you still command help, and while you are still close to home."

"We have no cleaning stuffs."

"There is water in the meadow. Use your shirts."

Keak uttered a furious spate of barking orders. The boys came blinking and winking down the ladder. Then appeared a pair of massive legs, next a great torso, and finally the head of Alois Bugardoig. At the base of the ladder he halted to stare at Gersen, his cheeks pulsing in and out, his mouth a giant scarlet polyp. Slowly he hunched his shoulders and started for Gersen, who burnt a line

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of crackling dazzle almost across Bugardoig's toes. "Don't provoke me," said Gersen. "I'm in a hurry."

Bugardoig drew back a pace, his face flushed and dismal. Gersen w^ved the gun toward Keak. "Faster! Remember how fast you ran out from town?"

Half an hour later Gersen took the boat aloft, leaving a disconsolate a^roup of shirtless boys staring up after him. As he watched they turned and, tucking elbows against skinned white chests, loped off down the valley.

Bugardoig now sat in the saloon, a cord limiting his scope of action. Knots of muscle played up and down his cheeks; his eyes showed as cracks of blue glitter. Bugardoig clearly was not one to show a tolerant or even fatalistic face to adversity.

Gersen took the ship high under the first fleeting layers of cloud. He turned to Bugardoig. "Are you acquainted with Dwyd-dion?"

"The hermit? Certainly I know him. He lives over Voymont from Athmore Violet. Have I not said he was crazy?"

"Crazy or not, we've got to get him away from Voymont or he'll be killed."

"And this is important?"

"Quite important. So, where is Voymont from here?"

"Yonder. Across the Skak."

"And what are the landmarks?"

Bugardoig uttered a rasping groan. "All, the inconveniences I owe this evil yetch and his gun . . . What if I am struck down by lightning?"

"That then will be your fate."

Bugardoig heaved himself erect and looked out the ports. "Go west and a slarsh-tit' north. Voymont is beyond those three sharp peaks. Notice that black shadow? That's the Pritz, across from Voymont, with Airy Gulch between. Notice the devil's-light! Ah, there's weird tricks along the Pritz!"

Gersen took the FUTtefiving high, across ascending ramparts of dreary black rock, and over an awesome badlands of crag and crevasse. To the west loomed the Pritz. Lightning flashes up and down its face became ever more noticeable.

1, Sl.irsh^ Fojo renii tor a pre.idolesc-'em girl. Slarsb-dt is a vulgar colli.iqui,iliM]i for "trifling .imounr," or "ro an .ilmusr negligible degree."

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A jumble of confused ridges passed below, which Bugardoig named in a despondent voice: "The Shaggeth . . . Morney's Tooth, and yonder, Athmore Violet. . . Hunckertown Trabble, with a bore of palladium . . . Mount Lucasta; there's the head of Poorleg's River . . . Now the Vovmont. . ."

The Flitterwing cruised out over an enormous gulch, with a silver trickle of water far below.

"Below is Airy Gulch," said Bugardoig.

The Flitterwing hovered and settled slowly. From churning clouds spasms of lightning clawed the Pritz. Gersen asked in a voice unconsciously taut: "Where is Dwyddion?"

"Lower your vessel into Old Airy . . . There, yonder, the ledge, where only a madman would live."

Gersen slid the Flittering close to the Voymont, settled through gusts of wind.

Bugardoig pointed a red-knuckled finger, "There, Dwyddion's house. I now have done my undertaking; take me back to Pol-doolie."

"We'll stop only long enough to make sure of Dwyddion."

"Bah," grumbled Bugardoig. "I am tempted to pound your head with my fist, gun or no gun."

"Be patient," said Gersen. "We will not be long. In fact, the faster the better."

The Flitterwing drifted close to the mountainside. Dwyddion's house was a simple structure: a block of welded stone and glass, perched precariously on a ledge. To the north the ledge had been widened by an artful piling and wedging of large boulders, creating first a viaduct a hundred feet long, then a small shallow landing area: a place open and exposed to view. South of the house the ledge became a path leading to a cramped level place in the angle of a crevice. Here sat a small black flier, and beyond, half excavated into the stone, a structure which Gersen assumed to be a workshop. This area was concealed and unobtrusive. He lowered the Flittering to a landing behind Dwyddion's black flier.

Bugardoig made a sneering criticism of Gersen's choice of landing place. "Are you yetch so foolish? Why do you not use the convenient area? Is it too easy and obvious an operation?"

Gersen replied in a measured voice: "A criminal is coming to kill Dwyddion. I don't want him to know that I'm here."

Bueardoier erave a rattling snort of derision.

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Gersen opened the port and jumped to the ground. "I can't

leave you alone in front of those controls," he told Bugardoig. "Something strange might happen. You'd better come along with me."

Bugardoig folded his massive arms. "I stay here."

"Right now!" said Gersen. "There's no time to waste."

"For crazy yetch business any time is a waste," growled Bugardoig. "Get along with you."

"Then it's the cargo hatch for you."

"No."

Gersen held out his hands. "Watch me." He Jerked his right bleep; into his hand as if by magic appeared a projac. "You know what I can do with this." He Jerked his left bicep and displayed that complicated weapon known as a dedactor. "Is this familiar to you? No? It discharges three sorts of glass needles. The mildest causes a maddening itch of three weeks' duration. I will use ten needles on you unless you make a very quick move to the cargo hatch."

"At last you persuade me," said Bugardoig. He groaned, belched, and with maddening deliberation lowered his bulk to the ground. "I'll go with you and watch your tricks."

Gersen looked around the sky. "Let's make haste."

He set off along the ledge with Bugardoig ambling behind.

A door at the back of Dwyddion's house slid ajar; in the shadow stood a tall thin man. He took a step forward and his features became clear; a dome of a forehead with a high receding mat of dust-colored hair, black eyes brooding in shadowed eye sockets, gaunt cheeks, a delicate pointed chin: a face implying great intellectual force and a cheerless disposition. He inspected his visitors without amiability.

Gersen halted. "You are Dwyddion?"

"I am he." Dwyddion's voice was deep. "Do not the terms of this place suggest my earnest desire for solitude?"

"Death is also solitary. You must listen carefully as we have very little time. I am Kirth Gersen; this is Alois Bugardoig, a gentleman of Poldoolie, who consented to guide me here."

"To what purpose?"

Gersen again searched the sky, and again saw only dark overcast and low clouds whirling down the wind.

A gust howled across the mountainside, pelting their faces with drops of half-fro/'en rain. Dwyddion made an impatient sound,

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hunched his head between his shoulders, and retreated into his house Gersen and Bugardoig followed, with the poorest possible grace Dwyddion allowed them to pass

They had come directly into the main room of the house Gersen received an impression of austere proportions, neutral colors, humorless and marginally comfortable furnishings The message of the room was ambiguous Here might be the expression of Dwyddion's personality, his overview of existence, or he might simply have subordinated the room to the view from its wide windows, the vast gulch blowing with winds and mists, the Pntz, and the incessant play of purple-white lightning

Dwyddion spoke coldly "Again may I inquire the reason for your intrusion?"

"Certainly You were notified in regard to a recent conclave of the Dexad at Wild Isle?"

"Yes I chose not to attend In discussions I find myself consistently a minority of one, and my presence seems unnecessary "

Gersen held out his photograph "You know all these men?"

"Of course."

"And this person here?"

"He is Silas Sparkhammer, a ninety-nine I consider him intelligent, spontaneous, extremely inventive, and totally unsuitable for the Dexad "

"I agree entirely," said Gersen "His name, incidentally, is Howard Alan Treesong He poisoned the Triune and the entire Dexad with charnay. There were two exceptions Benjamin Wroke, whom he drowned, and you, who must now be considered the new Triune Upon your death, Treesong becomes Triune, and he is now on his way here to murder you "

Dwyddion stared, blinking from the photograph to Gersen "All are dead?"

"All "

"Ha hum I find this simply incredible "

"No doubt It is shocking news But we have no time to waste You must come with us—" Gersen gestured toward the door

Dwyddion drew back "I know nothing, I have no facts I cannot act so abruptly Who, then, are you?"

"I'll tell you everything as soon as we're away from here Come now "

Dwyddion gave his head a fretful shake "No, of course not  
This is sheer hysteria I can't--"

Gersen gestured to Bugardoig. "Seize this fellow, carry him  
out" With Dwyddion safe and out of the way on the FlitTtei-wing,  
an ambush of Howard Treesong would become feasible With luck,  
the affair could be brought to its finish on this very day

Bugardoig blinked, then advanced upon Dwyddion, who cried  
out in a choked voice of outrage "Stand back!" He flailed out with  
his fists as Bugardoig stepped forward Bugardoig uttered a grunt  
of annoyance for the foolish position in which he found himself  
He seized Dwyddion, slung him aloft and over his shoulder Bu-  
gadoig growled at Gersen: "And what now? I am bored with this  
nonsense "

Gersen opened the door. "Carry him to the ship, and quickly  
It's a thankless task, agreed " Bugardoig stalked out upon the ledge  
with Gersen close behind

Three men who had been advancing upon the house stopped  
short The person on the left was sleek as a seal in a suit of black  
velvet His face was round and white and distinguished by an ornate  
artificial nose wrought from gold filigree. At the center stood How-  
ard Alan Treesong, wearing green trousers, plum red coat, flapping  
black cape, and black cheese-slice hat To the right a chisel-faced  
man with a black skin and black beard stared at Bugardoig in won-  
der

Treesong called out in a quick gay voice "Hola! What goes on  
here?"

Gersen brought forth the projac He aimed at Treesong only  
to find Bugardoig in front of him. Leaning aside, he pulled the  
trigger, the bolt struck into Treesong's long taut thigh. Treesong  
whirled to the ground in a flutter of his black cape. Gersen dropped  
to his knee and fired again, but Treesong had slid over the edge of  
the viaduct, and lay among the boulders, where he gave vent to a  
set of peculiar many-voiced outcries

Gersen fired at the black-skinned man and killed him )ust as he  
aimed his own weapon Gold-nose, dropping to the ground, fired  
a bolt which tore open Bugardoig's great corded neck Bugardoig  
toppled like a tree and fell upon Dwyddion, who fretfully pulled  
himself free and crawled away, while Bugardoig lay pumping \ivid  
red blood across the stones

Gersen fired again Gold-nose jerked, cursed, rolled over the

edge of the viaduct. Gersen rose to stand in a wary crouch, watching  
for motion. Treesong had halted his remarkable multivocal yam-  
mer; Gersen ran a few steps forward and searched over the declivity,

hoping to surprise Treesong. He saw nothing. Treesong had evidently taken shelter behind a squat boulder of gneiss.

Gersen ran crouching across the viaduct. He saw motion and dropped flat. A bolt sizzled through the air a foot above his head. Gersen fired his projac; rock splinters sprayed the head and neck of Gold-nose, who screamed in pain. He lost his footing and slipped down the slope. Gersen watched in fascination as Gold-nose rolled, slid, and tumbled, slowly gathering momentum to become a toppling limp object, bounding, rolling, falling free to strike the rock walls, glance away, and disappear into the murk.

Gersen clambered back upon the viaduct, in time to see a small airboat raise from the landing-plat and slant into the sky. Howard Alan Treesong had not taken shelter behind the boulder; he had crawled back through the rocks and so had made his escape.

For ten seconds Gersen stared after the airboat. So near, and now so far. His intrigues and strategems gone for naught, and poor Bugardoig a corpse, now drained of blood. He turned to Dwyddion, who stood to the side, watching Gersen with an unreadable expression.

"Get into the ship," said Gersen gruffly. "We've got to leave here in a hurry."

"I see no reason—"

Gersen put his anger and frustration under icy control. "That was Howard Alan Treesong. He came to kill you. He used a ship's boat. Somewhere not too high hangs his ship; in fact it's already dropping to pick him up. As soon as he's aboard, the ship will destroy your house and us as well, if we are fools enough to wait."

Dwyddion gave a fatalistic shrug, but made no further protest. The Flitfef-wmg rose into the sky and flew off to the west. Down from the clouds eased a dark hull, toward Voymont. "There's his ship. We're not away too soon."

"I understand none of this," gloomed Dwyddion. "It is an outrage that I, who seek only seclusion, should be harassed, coerced, and inconvenienced."

"Sad," said Gersen. "Still, if it's any satisfaction to you—and to Bugardoig—we have blown Treesong's master plan sky-high, and we have also shot him in the leg."

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"What plan is this?"

"With you dead, he would have become Triune. He's already tried for the IPCC and failed—although the way is still open to him. He rules the criminals of all the major worlds. There is his power base. In ten years he would be emperor of the Oikumene."

"Humm ... At Pontefract, before the day is out, I'll appoint a new Dexad. The man is a megalomaniac'"

"He is all of that." Gersen reflected upon Howard Treesong's outcries in what seemed a multitude of voices. "He is something very strange indeed."

Three recollections, vivid beyond all others, in connection with Dwyddion's house on the Voymont persisted with Gersen to haunt him all the days of his life.

First, the Pntz itself, hunched to the attack of a thousand furious lightning bolts, and Airy Gulch, reverberating to wind and thunder.

Second, the corpse of Bugardoig, face astounded by the unthinkable tragedy which had overtaken him, his topknot daubed red with his own blood.

The third recollection, strange and marvelous, would be the many-voiced babble of lamentations and threats produced by Howard Treesong as he lay among the rocks. "—by the sibyls of Hades, such pain'" "—no matter, no matter—" "—that mad dog; who knows him=" "Not 1 " "Nor I." "Enough' Elhur padache^ "Staunch Green'"

The Flitfefwing once again swung high around Vega. Dwyddion sat stiff and resentful, mouth drooping, face glum. Presently he began to turn sidelong glances toward Gersen. But Gersen sat in silence, occupied with his own problems.

At last Dwyddion broke the silence. In a dignified voice he said—"I would be interested in learning the reason for your involvement in this business."

"There's no great mystery," said Gersen. "I hold something of a grudge against Treesong. It's as simple as that."

Dwyddion managed a sour chuckle. "Something of a grudge, eh^ What occurs when you're seriously offended? . . Well, no matter, I suppose I should feel grateful to you."

"Probably so."

I HE BOOK OF DREAVIS

"Ah, you concur^ Then allow me formally to tender my gratitude. ... I may have been solitary too long a time. For a fact, with the Dexad destroyed, I have no further cause for isolation. The secret now is known only to me."

Dwyddion sat musing and twitching his long white fingers. Now that he had started talking he found it hard to contain his

loquacity. "You probably wonder why I chose isolation From bitterness and disillusionment—there is the answer. Or, if you prefer, I learned 'the Secret.' Perhaps I was callow, perhaps naive—but no one had ever faulted my zeal. There was never such a swotsman.' I was very early selected as an 'Exemplar' and cited for my 'nobility and ease'; I spent all my time at monstrosities and on walking tours. I've trudged a thousand landscapes, I've exhorted countless granges. The places I've seen' Berenskaya, Kotop, the Long Hills, Old Home and Prairie Lands, the Green Star Swantees, the Polders of Pedder-Dulah: I've walked them all' I was jailed at Chlodie on Marskens; the Factors of Pollardich on Copus shaved my head, I became resident Thwartermen at Vasconcelles. Perhaps you recall the crusade against electric sports in Mvra, on the south continent of Alphanor<sup>5</sup> What is its name^"

"Trans-Iskana."

"Do you remember the crusade^"

"No."

"I led the march and we did great things, but not without suffering. Oh' when I recall the toil, the heat, the derision and abuse, not to mention insects, crawlers, and bane-bugs' But we thrust on through to Cattlesbury and won the day. . . . How long ago it seems' And suddenly I was rank fifty, and sixty' I directed the campaign against pesticides on Wirfil; I worked as liaison officer with the Peas and Beans at New Gorcherum, I served with the Natural Jungle League of Armongol. All considered me the definition of an Institute activist; I was compelling, trenchant, sublimely assured that my ideals were the best of all possible ideals. My rank soared aloft—through the eighties and nineties and now no more campaigns, no more programs—now I was concerned with policy. I had time to rest, to think. I went before the Dexad, I watched their deliberations and I joined their banquets, and at last I was appointed ninety-nine. Suddenly I was in line for the Dexad I met the other

1 Institute argut <i person who emergecaully strnes [Q climb the ranks r,ipidl\

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ninety-nines, my rivals and my peers One was Benjamin Wroke, a person not unlike myself", who had arrived at his status much as I had We had much in common, yet we never achieved full amicability which, after all, could not be expected when three men vie for the Dexad The other ninety-nine called himself Sparkhammer. He was a man I could not fathom, he was impenetrable to the usual processes of analysis I found him by turns charming, repellent, soothing, infuriating He demonstrated both competence and confidence, his decisions were effortless He might have been considered a certainty for the Dexad, except for a certain flamboyance which hurt his chances Both Benjamin Wroke and Silas Sparkhammer yearned for the Dexad—Sparkhammer almost shamefully so Cloyd Free, rank one hundred four, died in the Kankashee jungles The Dexad voted in Benjamin Wroke and brought Sabor Vidol up to ninety-nine Sparkhammer could barely conceal his fury Only

two weeks later, Hassamide was murdered by a Thracian footpad. I was elevated into the Dexad and Ian Bilfred was raised to ninety-nine Sparkhammer congratulated me with grace and composure;

in truth, he was far too anxious and everyone knew it. As for me, the Dexad meant nothing I perceived suddenly—in the space of ten seconds—that this supreme achievement—I refer to membership in the Dexad—was factitious. I had overshot my goals. I saw my old self as a child playing games. It was a point of view, so I now suspected, in which the Dexad quite concurred I had invested thirty-two years of toil and sacrifice in a cause which the leadership regarded at best with indulgent approval. Mind you, these were the best intellects of the Oikumene, they were neither corrupt nor dishonest' I gradually understood that in the processes of maturity and wide purview, they discerned that the strength and virtue of the Institute lay not in its goals, nor in the hopeful achievement of these goals, but in its operative function as a system into which persons like myself could spend their energies, and in so doing leaven an otherwise ponderous society "

Dwyddion paused and stared off along an avenue of memories, his mouth trembling in a bitter smile. Gersen asked "You changed, so you say, in a space of ten seconds. Was that not abrupt?"

"Yes. Well, why should you not know? I was approached by Rob Martiletto, the one hundred and eight. He said 'Dwyddion, you are now Dexad. Needless to say you have earned the rank. May I

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ask if, in your appraisal of the Dexad, you have noticed what I shall call a transcendental serenity?"

" 'Yes, I have noticed something of the sort I ascribed it to age and a waning of energy. '

" 'That is not altogether the explanation. The jump from ninety-nine to one hundred and one is farther than from, say, seventy to ninety-nine. This is because the Dexad shares a secret, which now I will impart to you. In the Dexad you advance a long step past the rationale which brought you up to ninety-nine. The new ideology is contained in the Secret.' He then told me the Secret. The ten seconds to which I referred passed by. I said, 'Sir, not only can I not endorse your views, I will not seaf myself with the Dexad. In short, I now and forever resign from the Institute. '

" 'Not possible.' You have sworn to serve for the duration of your days, and so you must.'

\* 'Good-bye,' I said 'You will see me never again. '

" 'Where are you going?'

" 'Where no one will ever come to seek me out. '\*

"Martiletto showed neither surprise nor resentment, in fact he seemed amused. 'Well then, do as you must. Solitude may bring

you a new perspective '

"I went away I sought and found solitude, and I must say it has been until today the most peaceful time of my life "

"And the Secret?"

"It is implicit in what I have said The Dexad perceived society as separated into three elements In order of consequence, they were humanity at large, the Institute, and the Dexad Humanity and the Institute were seen as opposing forces in a state of dynamic equilibrium I he Dexad functioned to maintain the tension, and to prevent either side from overwhelming the other The Dexad therefore has often acted in opposition to the Institute, creating situations constantly to outrage and stimulate the membership. That is the Secret "

"Now you are Triune, and you will appoint a new Dexad. How do you regard this point of view?"

Dwyddion uttered a short bleak laugh "I have discovered something about myself The Secret embarrassed me. I saw myself across thirty two \ears the earnest swotsman, the sweating dupe controlled by Institute cant, reverent toward Triune and Dexad, contemptuous of the general population Then I learned the Secret,

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to my distress. Now that I am Triune, I must either impart the Secret to the next Dexad or suppress it."

Gersen said, "You are not yet free of Treesong. Today he was thwarted and hurt. He will be crazy for revenge."

"Revenge?" cried Dwyddion, with as much ordinary human emotion as Gersen had yet seen him display. "When he came to kill me? Absurd. It is I who demand revenge, for the murder of my fellows, for the great indecency perpetrated upon the Institute."

"Let me offer advice," said Gersen. "At Pontefract you must make a public disclosure of events. The role of Silas Sparkhammer, ninety-ninth of the Institute, will no longer be possible for Treesong."

"I intended to make a statement."

"The sooner the better. In fact, when we reach the Pontefract spaceport, we can call into Cosmopolis."

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Feature article in Pontefract Clarion:

INSTITUTE TRIUNE DESCRIBES  
FANTASTIC MURDER BANQUET

Accused: Howard Alan Treesong

Entire Leadership Poisoned; Plot to Control Institute  
Ascribed to Notorious "King of Criminals," "Demon  
Prince" Howard Alan Treesong.

"I personally escaped death by a combination of luck, quick thinking, and the assistance of my aide," declared Dwyddion, formerly of Institutional rank 101 and now Triune, a title indicating rank 111. "I did not attend the banquet," said Dwyddion. "I learned of the event through Institute intelligence. I was informed that the notorious criminal Treesong, by some means, had preempted to himself rank 99, naturally not in his own identity. He called himself Sparkhammer, and in due course I will discover the deception by which he gained rank 99.

"Needless to say, his spurious ranking is canceled.

"I have appointed a new Dexad from a roster of authentic rankings. The work of the Institute proceeds.

"I did not attend the murder banquet, for a number of reasons. The Dexad and the Triune met at Wild Isle, on the planet Cytherea Tempestre, to elevate one of three 99s to the Dexad; and to enjoy a banquet including charnay,

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which is a delicacy known only on Cytherea. I have tasted eharnay and find it delectable, but if not prepared properly it is a deadly poison.

"Howard Alan Treesong obtained eharnay, extracted the poison, injected it into the already prepared, certified wholesome fruit, which was then served to Triune, Dexad, and the candidate 99s. Treesong himself abstained from eating, or perhaps ate wholesome fruit. Benjamin Wroke, rank 102, who like myself chose not to attend the banquet, was subsequently drowned by Treesong.

"Why did he perform such an atrocious act, when he still might have been elevated into the Dexad? Because twice already he had been passed over, and probably had received information that he was to be rejected again, in favor of either Vidol or Bilfred. When a 99 is gainsaid for the third time he must face the bitter fact that he will never attain the Dexad, and so might as well retire from candidacy.

"Treesong chose, rather, to murder all ranks above him, whence, by Institute law, he ascended to the highest rank left open: in this case only 109, until I could be disposed of. I, naturally, being of higher rank, would precede him to Triune."

Gersen rubbed his face with sallow skin tone, arranged a hairpiece

of effusive black curls over his own short black pelt, and donned his exquisite garments, to achieve once more the semblance of an indolent wastrel.

He set off across Tara Square. The day was gray, and a gray mist hung on the air. The folk of Pontefract marched stolidly past. Their black and brown costumes made a muted richness against the wet stone and old black iron.

Gersen turned into Corrib Place, halted to inspect the Extant offices. Nothing seemed amiss. The aged structure, black with grime, seemed as placid as ever. The duration of his absence could be measured in hours; the psychological time seemed far longer. ... He crossed the street, entered the building, and went directly to the contest workroom. Today, so he recalled, saw the end of the

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contest; the workload had decreased significantly and only a half dozen sacks of mail lay in the bin.

Mrs. Ench bustled forward to greet him. "Good morning, Mr. Lucas!"

"Good morning, Mrs. Ench. Any startling developments?"

"Not yet, Mr. Lucas. The Cytherea entry is still the closest. But have you seen the newspapers this morning? It's absolutely remarkable!"

"Yes, most amazing."

"How will it affect our contest?"

"In no way whatever, or so I hope. We are lucky that our deadline is today. Otherwise we might have multitudes of opportunistic winners."

"We still might have some."

"We'll simply have to judge each entry on its own merits."

"Quite right, Mr. Lucas."

Gersen turned away but Mrs. Ench called him back. "Oh, Mr. Lucas, one interesting letter—at least I consider it interesting. I set it aside for you, since it concerns our number six." She handed Gersen an envelope.

"Thank you, Mrs. Ench." Gersen read the letter. "Interesting!" He read the letter a second time. "I suppose it has no particular bearing on our contest, as the newspapers have established Sparkhammer's true identity."

"My feeling exactly. Our contest seems remarkably timely. Is

it all a coincidence?"

Gersen laughed politely. "In case anyone asks, we are all dumb-founded by the new developments."

"No one has asked, but many may be wondering."

"That's as may be. The publicity can't do Extant any harm."

Gersen went on into the front office. Alice sat quietly at her desk. She wore a simple black shirt and jacket, upon which the tips of her orange hair rested and then curved upward. At the sight of Gersen she made an abrupt motion toward the newspaper on her desk, then restrained herself.

"Good morning, Mr. Lucas."

"Good morning, Alice. You've seen the news, evidently."

Alice feigned no misunderstanding. "Yes." She looked down at the journal. "It is-interesting."

"No more than that?"

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Alice only gave a noncommittal shrug.

Gersen said, "Treesong is a terrible man. He is one of the 'Demon Princes/ "

"I have heard the name, certainly," said Alice stiffly.

Gersen said, "There's mention of a 'Benjamin Wroke' who drowned in the Shanaro Sea. I hope that he is no connection of yours."

Alice looked up with somber eyes, then turned away. "Yes. He is a close connection."

"That's a great pity. You have my sincere sympathy."

Alice made no reply. Gersen went to his desk. He sat down and studied Alice's profile. "I still wish very much to meet Howard Alan Treesong."

Alice's chin rose an eighth inch. She spoke a bitter monosyllable. "Why?"

"He is now more than ever a superb subject for an interview."

Alice lowered her chin to its original position. "Do you think it wise to publicize the exploits of such a man?"

"Certainly. Sooner or later he will come to a bad end. How do such men function? What are their motivations? How does he regard himself?"

"He would never allow you to write undignified things about him."

"He could write the copy himself, for all I care. What with the contest and the murders, we'd sell a hundred million copies."

Alice abruptly rose to her feet. "I don't feel well. If there's nothing for me to do, I think I'll rest for an hour or two."

"Just as you like," said Gersen. He rose politely to his feet. "I hope you're better soon."

"Thank you." With a final swift glance toward Gersen, skeptical and dubious, Alice left the office.

Gersen sat back. He brought out the letter tendered him by Mrs. Ench and read it for the third time.

Director of Extant Contest:

Please consider this letter as my entry in your contest. I can definitely identify one person in the photograph. This entitles me to one-tenth of a share in the contest prize, which I claim.

That person marked "Number 6" was born at Home

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Farm, near Gladbetook, in the Land of Maunish. He was named by his mother Howard Alan, after the television wizard H. A. Topfinn and Arblezanger, in remembrance other grandfather. With his patronymic he was and is Howard Alan Arblezanger I lardoah and so do I identify him. He has not been a close son, and indeed left us some years ago. I have heard that he is successful and doing well and I hope to see him shortly at the school reunion to which he has been invited.

In any case, I render this identification and I will expect my share of the contest money at once.

I am Adrian Hardoah,

at Home Farm

Gladbetook, Land of Maunish

Moudervelt

## Van Kaathe's Star

Gersen reflected a moment, then called Information Service. Moudervelt he found to be the only populated planet of Van Kaathe's Star. It was a world somewhat larger than Earth, with a single continent sprawling two-thirds of the way around the equator. The world was old and its soil was mellow. The mountain ranges of its youth had eroded low, leaving wide prairies and meandering rivers. Moudervelt had first been settled by a variety of small groups: religious sects, clans, sporting associations, philosophical societies, and the like. They had quickly exterminated the race of semi-intelligent beings in residence, parceled out tracts of land, established frontiers for their 1,562 realms, and for century after century occupied themselves with their own affairs. The Land of Maunish occupied a section of the Goshen Prairie, in the eastern midlands of the great continent. The capital, Cloutie, maintained a population of three thousand. Eighty miles north in F'luter Township on the banks of the W'iggal River was Gladbetook, with a population of three thousand. Maunish had been settled by the Partitioners of the Pure Truth; the Teachings discouraged space travel, and the nearest spaceport lay three hundred miles south, at Theobald Station, in the Land of Leiander.

Gersen turned away from the communicator. Howard Treesong had been born a country boy, in one of the most placid backwaters of the human universe. Gersen decided, upon reflection, that

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the fact had no general significance. There were many country boys who never became criminals. . . . He turned back to the communicator and made connection with room 442 at St. Diarmid's Inn. Alice would be arriving at her own room just about now.

His timing was exact. He heard the door open and Alice's steps as she crossed the room. For a few moments she moved here and there, rather listlessly, then came to rest.

She sat five minutes arranging her thoughts. Then he heard her speaking, in a voice resolute and steady. "Alice Wroke here."

A minute passed. Then Howard Treesong's voice replied, in tones strident and harsh: "Yes, Alice, I hear you. What have you accomplished?"

"As much as possible."

"I am satisfied only with achievement."

"Where is my father? According to the newspapers he is dead."

"Do not presume to question me. Make your report."

"I can report only what you already know. Mr. Lucas told me again that he is anxious to interview you."

The voice became even more harsh. "He knows you are in contact with me?"

"Certainly not. He is as callous as you are. He wants to publish your biography, or your autobiography, so that he can sell a hundred million copies of his journal."

"And he considers me an altruist?"

"I doubt that, but then I am only reporting his remarks. Do as you see fit."

"Just so."

Alice hesitated, then asked, "The contest is over. I have kept to the terms of my bargain. Is my father truly dead?"

Treesong's voice, changing once more, became flat yet throaty, acrid yet thick. "You now know my name."

"Yes."

"And you know who I am."

"I have heard of you."

"Perhaps you divined my great scheme."

"You planned to be Triune of the Institute."

The stridency returned to Treesong's voice. "That plan has hatefully and viciously been thwarted. Benjamin Wroke—who was he? What did he matter? Naturally he is dead, and why did I trouble myself? The plan is broken, by the journalists and their contest!"

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"So he has gone?"

"Who? Wroke? How could you think otherwise?"

"You assured me otherwise."

A rasping laugh. "People believe whatever they want to believe."

"I am now done with you."

"Go your way. You are destructively beautiful; you have brought dissent among the colors of my soul. Red lusts; Blue feels a melancholy longing, while Green would cause you pain. But nothing will be done; I have taken injury and I suffer. There is no time;

also you have soiled yourself; you bedded with the journalist. Granted, at my behest, but you should have pleaded and made out-cry."

"I showed poor judgment," said Alice tartly.

When Treesong responded his voice was stern and sullen. "I am about to depart. Vega has not been kind; nor was it ever. I am wounded and sore, but in due course I will set things straight—and then! My pain will be remedied a thousand times over."

"What happened to you?" Alice spoke with ingenuous interest.

"We met ambush. A demon in the shape of a man sprang out of Dwyddion's house and fired his projac into my leg."

"I should think you'd be expecting such things."

Treesong seemed not to hear the remark. Another brief silence, then a new voice, clever and electric: "The Extant contest ends tomorrow?"

"No. Today."

"And there is yet no winner?"

"That's correct."

"Then these are your instructions: Do not call me again."

"I am free of you! Save your instructions!"

Treesong ignored the interruption. "Continue as before." But the conversation had ended.

At noon Vega burnt away the overcast, leaving the sky suffused with bright milky haze. Alice returned to the office looking pale and drawn.

"You're feeling better, I hope?" asked Gersen.

"Yes, thank you." She went to her desk and seated herself. She had changed into a gray-green frock with a prim white collar which her orange curls barely brushed: the colors of some exotic desert

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flower, thought Gersen. She became aware of his attention and gave him a quick glance. "Is there anything I should do?"

"Not really. The contest is essentially over. There have been interesting developments, don't you think?"

"Definitely so."

"Still, it's not much better than a standoff. Treesong failed to take over the Institute. On the other hand, he's still alive and his career goes on. Your father is dead, which is your private tragedy. If you had known that Sparkhammer was Howard Alan Treesong, you could never have hoped otherwise."

Alice turned in her chair to stare at Gersen. "How did you know that Benjamin Wroke was my father?"

"It's on your application," said Gersen. He smiled a rather lame smile. "Also, not to put too fine a point on it, I tapped into your conversations with Treesong."

Alice sat like a statue. "Then you knew—"

"From the moment you walked into the office. Even before. I knew when I saw you across the street."

Alice flushed suddenly pink. "And you must have known . . ."

"So I did."

"But still..."

"What would you think of me if I had taken advantage of you?"

Alice showed a strained, meaningless smile. "What difference does it make what I think?"

"I don't want your self-esteem to be damaged—especially for the wrong reasons."

"This is an idiotic conversation," said Alice. She rose to her feet. "And it is idiotic for me to stay here any longer."

"Where are you going?"

"Away. Am I not discharged?"

"Of course not! I admire your courage! When I look across the room, I like to see you sitting there. Furthermore—"

The desk communicator chimed. Gersen touched a button; a voice spoke: "Howard Alan Treesong calling Henry Lucas."

"Henry Lucas here. Do you have a face?"

"I do indeed." Upon the screen appeared an image: a face with a high square forehead, clear hazel eyes, a fine straight nose, long chin, wide easy mouth, an expression of prideful verve and vivacity. Gersen pulled the black curls of his hairpiece forward and down across his white cheeks, half closed his eyes and dropped his jaw,

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in order to project an impression of aristocratic languor. Alice watched in sardonic amusement as Gersen transmitted the image

to Howard Treesong.

The two men studied each other. Treesong spoke in a rich flowing voice. "Mr. Lucas, I have been following your contest with interest, since, as you know, I am included in the photograph."

"So I understand. Naturally it augments popular interest in the event."

Treesong said airily: "I am not sure whether or not you intend to flatter me."

"For the purposes of this occasion I am a journalist, which is to say, an automaton, without personal feelings."

"If so, then you are unusual. But no matter. Since you make no specific bans or debarments, I wish to submit my personal solution to your contest. Be kind enough to note my identifications, or better, ask your remarkably beautiful secretary to do so."

Gersen said thoughtfully, "I doubt if this could be considered regular procedure. All our other entries have arrived in written form."

"You make no stipulation to this effect, so why should not a verbal identification be valid? I can use the prize money as well as the next person."

"Quite so. Our award ceremony takes place shortly. If you were adjudged the winner, could you be on hand to accept the prize?"

"A bit awkward, I'm afraid. Unless the occasion were celebrated in the far Beyond."

"That might be troublesome, from our point of view."

"Then you must send the money to an address which I will supply. Now for the identifications."

"Quite so, quite so ... Alice, take notes."

"I will identify as you have numbers. One is Sharrod Yest. Two is that acidulous harridan Dianthe de Trembuscule. Three, the corpulent Beatrice Utz. Four is the once-voluble Ian Bilfred, whose agile tongue, alas, is now forever stilled. Five is the overeager Sabor Vidol. Six is that person known on this occasion as Sparkhammer, but more generally known as Howard Alan Treesong. Seven is John Gray. Eight is that otiose lummoX the Triune, Gadouth. Nine is Gieselman; ten, Martiletto. I hope that I am the first correctly to identify these folk."

"I'm afraid not. As soon as Dwyddion's revelations were made

public, dozens of opportunists swarmed into our office with correct identifications."

"Pah! Greed is rampant everywhere! Another score to be settled with Dwyddion!"

"Something may still be salvaged. I want to publish your biography, at terms to be arranged. You are a unique individual and your memoirs should interest our readers."

"It is something to think about. I have often felt the need to express my views. The public regards me as a criminal- By ordinary definition, I am a very paragon of the trade; I recognize no peer. By the very nature of my accomplishments, I have created a new category by which I and I alone may be judged. I will not now enlarge upon the idea."

"In any case, public interest will not be diminished."

"I must consider the matter carefully. I don't like to station myself in a designated place at a specific time. If you will reflect upon the conditions of my existence, you will perceive that the need for vigilance is one of its very few disadvantages."

"Yes, so it would seem."

"Certain folk do not yield gracefully to my instructions; they thereby incur penalties. This is sheer simple fact. I am meticulous in regard to rewards and penalties, I assure you. I usually take the rewards and others must make do with the penalties, but no matter. Is not the cosmos a more vital and adventurous place for my presence? Of course! I am indispensable."

"All this will fascinate my readers. I hope you agree to the interview."

"We shall see. At the moment I am pressed for time. I have a rendezvous to keep upon a distant planet and I must make my arrangements. That is all for now."

The screen went dim. Gersen leaned back in his chair. "Tree-song seems to have an elastic disposition."

"He changes from minute to minute," said Alice. "He terrifies me. Still, I hope to see him at least once again."

Gersen was intrigued by her lackluster voice. "Why so?"

"I'll try to kill him."

Gersen stretched his arms into the air. The narrow-shouldered coat constricted him. He pulled it off and threw it aside. Then he took off his hairpiece and threw it after the coat. Alice watched him sidelong, but made no comment.

"He is cautious," said Gersen. "I was lucky to get a single shot at him out on the Voymont."

In a soft wondering voice Alice asked, "Who are you?"

"In Pontefract I'm known as Henry Lucas, a writer for Cosmopolis. Sometimes I use a different name and do different things."

"Why?"

Gersen rose, sauntered across the room to her desk. He reached under her arms, pulled her up so that her face was close. He kissed her forehead, her nose, her mouth, to which she remained passive.

He eased the pressure of his arms. "If Treesong calls to ask about me, you can't tell him if you don't know."

"I will tell him nothing in any case. He has no more power over me."

Gersen kissed her again, to which she yielded but again made no response. She drew back. "Then you want me to remain here?"

"Very much so."

She turned and drew away from him. "I have nothing better to do."

"Then you'll be here when I get back?"

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going out to a strange old world, to take part in a social occasion."

"Where Howard Treesong is going?"

"Yes. I'll tell you all about it when I return."

Alice asked wistfully, "When will that be?"

"I don't know." Gersen kissed her again, and now she responded, and for a moment relaxed against him. Gersen kissed the top other head. "Good-bye."

and civilizations. . . . The disparate races coalesce only when territory is limited, cramped, and crowded, with compressive social pressures. Strong, exact governments are typical of these circumstances; they are both necessary and welcome. Conversely, when land is vast and easily available, as in the broaching of a new continent or a new world, nothing can keep different sorts of people in close contact. They migrate to new places and particularize, whereupon languages mutate, costumes and conventions elaborate, aesthetic symbols take on fresh meanings. Now the public mood turns inward; government imposed from another place cannot be tolerated. The processes, as the race wanders from its native star, are of infinite richness and a source of endless fascination. . . .

Mouderuek: Then and NOTV, from Studies in Comparative Anthropology, by Russell Cooke;

Had the astute Baron chosen to adorn his famous Introduction to Volume II with examples, he might well have selected the remote world Moudervelt, orbiting Van Kaathe's Star, as a felicitous paradigm for the illumination of his general principle.

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Moudervelt is a world benign and fertile, with an expansive land area. The flora is generally compatible with Earth stock; the fauna offers no menace except for a few predatory sea creatures.

Moudervelt is an old world. The ancient mountain ranges are now forested hills; rolling plains extend horizon to horizon, under blue skies and flotillas of tall white cumulus. Great slow rivers wander the prairies, where the soil is deep and the climate fair. Except for rivers, the land lacks natural boundaries, but boundaries and borders aplenty \* have been created, to delineate 1,562 separate dominions, each jealous of its identity, each cherishing its own roteh and rites, each celebrating its distinctive cuisine and scorning all others as filth and scum, each considering itself the single home of civilization among 1,562 barbaric, incomprehensible, and unpleasant neighbors.

Moudervelt knows no true cities. Most of the lands maintain a spaceport. Commerce is carried on the rivers, which are all interconnected by canals. Only a few land routes connect the states.

Moudervelt is by no means isolated from the universe. It exports a considerable quantity of special foodstuffs for the use of former inhabitants, and imports technical goods, special tools, a few books and periodicals: in total bulk, no great amount. Moudervelt by and large is self-sufficient.

From Popular Handbook to the Planets, 330th edition, 1525: Moudervelt, Van Kaathe's Star;

(After the usual exposition of physical data and an historical summary, the text devotes a paragraph or two to each of the 1,562 dominions.)

Maunish, at the center of Goshen Prairie, occupies an area of about 40,000 square miles and supports a population of about a million, descended from a mission of the Pure Truth Partition. The area is bounded by the DalGLISH River on the south and east, by the Land of Puck to the west,

1. Ships trading in offworld foods roam even where .leniss the settled worlds-Old Earth supplies perhaps a third of all such comestibles. The wines of Earth are especially prized.

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Amable and the River Bohuloe on the north, the lands of Ganaster and Erquhar to the east. The principal town is

Cloutie.

Notice to Offworld Arrivals: There are no spaceports within the confines of Maunish. Indeed, space vessels, aircraft, hoppers, or sky-riders flying at an elevation over forty-nine feet are prohibited. Entry must be made by surface transportation at an authorized checkpoint. Border controls are strict, as are import regulations. Bring in no weapons, intoxicants, erotic materials, medicines, except those personally required. Border searches are thorough;

penalties are severe.

Gersen lowered the Flittefwing down upon Theobald Station. Farmlands punctuated by white houses spread away from the town in all directions. The DalGLISH River crawled in great loops across the landscape, finally to swerve to the north and disappear.

The spaceport projected no detectable beacon or signal. Gersen isolated it from adjacent fields only by virtue of three spacecraft already on hand; a pair of small cargo carriers and a bedraggled old

Sissle Wandcf-way.

Gersen landed the Flittefwing, made his usual arrangements, and jumped to the ground. He found himself at the center of a sunny open field sodded with blue-green turf. Cool country air blew in his face; there was no sound except for a slight hiss from the Flitterwings recharging respirators. A hundred yards across the field, shaded under a pair of sprawling trees, he saw a small shed, upon which rested a sign:

Central Space Terminal  
Theobald Station, Land of Leiander

All Incoming Traffic Report Here

Inside the shed Gersen discovered a small fat man dozing at a table, the remains of his lunch spread before him. He wore what once had been a smart uniform of black, tan, and red twill; but for breeches and boots he had substituted a white knee-length skirt and sandals.

Gersen rapped on the table; the official woke abruptly. Almost before opening his eyes he groped for his cap and pulled it over his

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balding pate. He looked Gersen over with a bland expression. "Sir?"

"I am an item of 'Incoming Traffic.' The sign directed me here."

"Yes. Yes indeed. Well, there are a few formalities incident to entry. . . ." He secured a form, put questions to Gersen, noted the responses.

He completed the form and filed it in a box. "That is all, sir, except for the landing fee."

Gersen said, "First, a bit of information. I am actually en route to Maunish; are there any hindrances to travel?"

"None whatever. The borders are open."

"I can rent a vehicle?"

"Certainly. I will rent you my own car, and my son will drive you."

Gersen's ears were attuned to almost imperceptible hints and implications. He looked sharply at the official. "At what rent?"

"Oh—nothing unreasonable. Ten SVU per diem."

"No extra charges or supplements?"

"None. Do you take me for a scarper?"

"He will drive me to Cloutie and elsewhere in Maunish at my convenience?"

The official showed an expression of indignant wonder. "Into Maunish? You must be joking! To the Maunish border, no farther! How could I risk my car in that nation of stoneheads, where girls strut around with bare elbows and men show their teeth while eating? They drive like catatonics; the air stinks with their pickled ramp. To the border, no farther. Perhaps you can secure onward transportation at that point."

"Well then, what are the public conveyances between the two countries?"

"Nothing to suit a wealthy offworlder. You would be forced to ride the Trans-World bus with bumpkins returning to Maunish."

"That will suit me well enough. I have ridden in worse company."

"If that is your taste, you are in luck. The afternoon car passes by in a matter of minutes. Now as to the landing fee, a vessel such as yours is rated at two hundred SVU per week, payable a month in advance."

Gersen laughed. "I have important friends in the neighbor-

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hood. They warned me that public officers tend either to larceny or daydreaming." He produced five SVU. "This will have to do."

The official took the money with poor grace. "It is not regular but I suppose that exceptions are possible for the sake of good public relations. . . . Yonder comes the Trans-World."

Along the road came a rickety triple-jointed omnibus, riding on eight great air-wheels. Gersen flagged it down, paid another five SVU to the driver, and found a seat.

For hours he rode across a gently rolling land of fields, rivers, ponds, and orchards. White farmhouses sprawled under luminescent foliage of pink, rose red, orange, and yellow. The farmers seemed prosperous; life could not be totally bad in the Land of Leiander, even if the girls might not show their elbows.

A line of dark blue and black foliage wandered across the horizon, where the Dalglish River swung east to delineate the Maunish frontier. A hundred yards short of the boundary the bus halted. From a station house marched a sergeant and six soldiers in fine uniforms.

The sergeant boarded the bus, put several questions to the operator, who jerked his thumb toward Gersen.

The sergeant signaled to Gersen. "This way, sir, for just a moment. Bring your luggage."

Gersen took his small traveling bag and followed the sergeant from the bus and into a shed. The sergeant took the bag, netted it, looked at Gersen with a smile "I see that you are attempting to smuggle a Model 6A pro)ac into Maumsh." He untaped a pair of grips from the handle to the traveling bag. "This is not a new trick, we are alert for it. Here I merely confiscate the weapon. Across on Maumsh you would be placed in a cage, submerged in the river for

three hours, or until you were thoroughly drowned. They are barbarically strict in this regard. Give me the other parts, please."

Gersen opened the bag and produced the other components, which he had disguised by various methods. "There you are, Sergeant. I thank you for your warning." He jerked his right forearm and a throwing blade appeared in his hand "You had also better take custody of this." He shook his left arm, producing an air-tube for shooting glass needles. "And this "

"Very wise, sir."

"Please don't sell them at once If I return this way—and I plan to do so—I will buy them from you myself."

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"That is often the situation, sir "

Gersen returned to the bus, which at once proceeded across the wide Dalglish on an iron bridge and so entered the Land of Maunish.

The road slanted off across a marsh of brown mud and purple reeds, passed through a grove of giant papaws which emitted a fetid sweetness into the air, burst out into the sunlight, and now the countryside had altered. Yonder, across the river was Leiander; here was Maumsh; nothing was quite the same. The bus halted at the Maumsh border station, in the shade of an enormous linglang tree, with blue foliage and a gnarled contorted trunk six feet in diameter. As before guards marched out to meet the bus. Here they wore uniforms of gray and green instead of red, black, and tan. They were a people notably different from the short, soft-featured Leianders, here they were tall, spare, with lank brown hair and bony faces.

At a signal from the sergeant the passengers alighted and one by one they entered a long shed, where each was examined and searched at three separate stations. In Gersen's case they were brisk, impersonal, and extremely thorough. They ignored his offworld origin. His professed trade, journalism, aroused only slightly more interest. "What do you expect to learn in Maunish?"

"Nothing of consequence. I am coming here as a tourist."

"Then why not call yourself a tourist?"

"It is no great matter, one way or the other."

"Perhaps not to a tourist, nor to a journalist, but we are security officers responsible for the decency of Maunish. To us the roles are very different. In the first place the tourist may stay at the Hotel Bon Ton in Maumsh, while journalists must spend each night at the police station."

"In that case I am definitely a profound tourist. I agree that the differences are significant."

"Apparently you carry no contraband "

"Apparently not."

The official showed him a wintry smile. "You will discover that many of our good Maunish customs become persuasively practical, upon acquaintance. Still—and I can assure you of this, since I have traveled widely; I have visited thirty-nine distinct and separate domains—Maunish is a haven of tolerance compared to such as Malchione or Dinkland. Our statutes are simple and reasonable. We

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forbid the advancement of polytheism and the display of white flags We prohibit offensive belching and other breaches of the public peace Our schedule of crimes is ordinary enough, you need only conduct yourself with discretion to avoid trouble " He signed Gersen's certificate of admission with a flourish "There you are, sir The freedom ofMaumsh is yours'"

Gersen boarded the bus, which suddenly lurched into motion, the border station under the sprawling blue linglang was left behind The landscape was now that of Maunish, different from that of Leiander, whether by reason of psychic shift or immanent character or altered references Gersen, who had experienced such shifts many times before, had no way of knowing The country seemed bigger, the sky more open In a new clarity of atmosphere the horizons seemed both far and near, in a curious visual paradox Along the plain trees grew in private clusters and copses, each to its own kind gmsaps, orpoons, linglangs, flamboys, the shadows below were a dense darkling black which seemed to glimmer with a strange rich color without a name The farmhouses were both less frequent and older, high and narrow for no obvious reason, and set far back from the road in jealous seclusion . The country became softer The bus rolled through orchards with black trunks and effulgent pink or yellow foliage, across brimming rivers, through hamlets, and at last into Cloutie, to halt in the central square The sides swung up, those passengers with business in Cloutie alighted, among them Gersen He looked around him with interest To the young Howard Treesong Cloutie would have seemed a most important place, the center of the civilized universe, where he might be brought once a year on some special occasion Across the square Gersen saw the Hotel Eon I on, an ungainly four-story structure, high and narrow, with a heavy overhanging roof and a pair of two-story wings

If Howard Treesong were traveling to Gladbetook to take part in his school reunion, quite possibly, like Gersen, he might choose to lodge at the Bon Ton The time for caution had arrived, and indeed might already have passed him by At a haberdasher's shop Gersen changed into local garments a shirt of heavy green cloth, bag-breeches gathered at the knee, gray wool stockings and

black broad-toed shoes, a wide-brimmed, low-crowned black hat, tilted somewhat to the back of the head. The local mannerisms— a slow stiff-legged gait with arms at the sides and face turned

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squarely forward—were less readily simulated. He would still be noticed as an outlander, but less readily.

He crossed the square to the Bon Ton Hotel and entered a dim lobby smelling of years upon years of waxed wood, moldenng leather, heavy cushions, and unnameable local exudations. The lobby was deserted, the reception desk was dark. Gersen knocked at a wicket until a small old lady appeared from a back room. In a shrill voice she demanded his business.

Gersen replied with dignity "I wish to take lodging for a few days "

"So indeed, where will you feed?"

"Wherever I find the best meals "

"Those are far away, over at the lake, where folk forget Stricture and pamper their guts. You must ingest what we choose to serve here, in our dining room "

"Whatever is proper "

"It is very proper " The old woman peered at him slantwise. "What are you doing here? Are you for selling things?" She contrived to invest the word with an emphasis at once lubricious and minatory.

"No, I am selling nothing "

"Oh " And after a pause, "Nothing whatever?"

"Nothing whatever "

"That's a pity," she declared in a voice suddenly bright and garrulous. "I always say that a body should buy and sell as they choose, despite the Health Agency. Where are you from? I can't place you. You're not a Mandyke? Nor a Booder?"

"None of those "

"Do you burn fires or pour waters?"

"No, never "

"Very well, you may have the Smiling Sunrise Room " The woman's face became so beatifically innocent that Gersen instantly was prompted to ask "What are the rates?"

"It is our best room, reserved for important dignitaries It rents at a corresponding level "

"How much?"

"Eighty-three SVU per diem "

"That is far too much Let me see your schedule of rates "

"Well then, five SVU "

Gersen was pleased with his room, which included the lowest

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of the central verandas, a bathroom paneled in white wood, an adjacent sleeping cubicle, a small gymnasium.

The time was now late afternoon. Gersen descended to the street, looked right and left, then set off to inspect the town. The south end of the square was dominated by a stone statue and, behind, a tall, austere structure, evidently a church or temple. A plaque at the base of the statue identified the lordly form as Bandervoum the Didram, who held aloft a carpenter's try square that he might gauge the souls of the dead. Behind the church grew a hne of heavy black deodars; gaps in the foliage revealed a field on which stood a throng of white statues.

Near the church Gersen discovered a small stationer's shop selling a miscellaneicy of small objects. On a rack he noticed several copies of *Cosmopolis*, of assorted dates, and an Extant. The Extant cover displayed a picture of ten men and the caption:

WHO ARE THESE MEN?  
NAME THEM CORRECTLY AND WIN  
100,000 SVU!

Gersen entered the shop. Behind a pair of parallel counters, to right and left, stood a pair of small girls, dressed in long-sleeved black flocks. Their black hair was tied into topknots, so tightly drawn that their eyes seemed to bulge. Into the hair a pair of coral-russet fronds had been fixed. On the counter Gersen found for sale a pamphlet entitled:

#### THE LAND OF MAUNISH OFFICIAL MAP AND SURVEY

This authoritative rendering includes all roads, towns, rivers, bridges, frontier posts, together with physiographic details.  
Price: 25 centums.

Gersen took a copy of the map and paid over a coin. The girls protested instantly: "Sir! The price is two SVU!"

Gersen indicated the printed notation. "The price is set at twenty-five centums.n

"That is for local residents," said one girl.

"Outlanders must pay a surcharge," said the other.

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"Why is this?" asked Gersen, wondering how the girls knew him for an outlander in his new Cloutie clothes.

"Because the map includes valuable secret information," said the girl to the right in an earnest voice.

"Extremely valuable to an enemy army," said the girl to the left, even more grave.

"But surely your enemies already possess maps ofMaunish?"

"Perhaps not all of our enemies."

"Perhaps not with so much secret detail."

"In that case," said Gersen, "your map is far more valuable than a mere two SVU."

"True, but no one would pay such a price," said one girl.

"They would prefer to use any old thing," said the other girl.

"Well, it so happens that I am a local resident and not an enemy," said Gersen. "I live at the Bon Ton Hotel; therefore I am eligible for the lower rate."

The girls stood silent, considering the theoretical basis ofGersen's position; before they could formulate an argument, Gersen was gone.

Gersen sat on a bench and studied the map. He found Gladbetook forty miles to the north, on the banks of the Sweet Trelawney River.

Gersen continued around the square. .Along the way he noticed a sign:

PANTILOTE GARAGES

Vehicles of Quality! Sale or Hire:

By Hour—By Day—By Week

Apply at our correctly managed workshops. You will observe and approve the dutiful exactitude of our processes.

29 Didram Rummel Street

Gersen located Didram Rummel Street and the Pantilote Garages, where, after considerable formality, he succeeded in renting a three-wheeled runabout, which had been constructed on the premises from miscellaneous bits and pieces.

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Evening was already darkening the skies. The way to Gladbe-  
took seemed too long a )ourney. Gersen arranged to call for the  
vehicle on the following morning, whereupon he would drive across  
Goshen Prairie to the early home of Howard Alan Treesong.

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From the Teaching of Didram Bodo Sime, 6.6

(Obloquies against the Toper and his Drink)

Motto

It is not good to inebriate nor to souse, using swillage,  
near or far beers, or distillations

Expansion

The toper is a fuming bore, a loon, a mongrel, a social  
mockery' Often he soils his clothes and commits mal-  
ditties. He smells and belches, his familiarities trouble  
all decent folk His songs and tirnlavs offend the ears  
He often gives breath to scurrilous conjecture.

The toper suborns good fruit and gives it to decay, and  
the good person who wishes to enjoy the samvacuity and  
good savor of the wholesome fruit is bereft and must  
raise this outcry "Why have you despoiled me, O  
toper, of my fruit and given it to filthy decayrf

The toper performs foolish dances He postures like a  
clown and cleans his ears with broomstraws He is  
prone to perform pugnacities upon good and earnest  
folk who chance to halt upon their way to chide him  
for his fully

North of Cloutie the countryside became wild and desolate, first  
because oftheJumfer River boglands, then b\ reason of long ledges  
of black rock which made the land fit only for grazing For the first

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time Gersen saw indigenious fauna ofMoudervelt: two-legged toad-  
like creatures bounding high after flying insects; a band of lizard-  
foxes, with gray-green pangolin scales and a single optic orb. They

reared high to watch Gersen pass by; when he slowed the car they advanced with dancing sidelong steps, for purposes Gersen could not guess. He drove on, leaving the troop staring after him.

With the Rock-Wallows behind, the solitude persisted. Empty steppes spread away to the horizon: a land gently rolling, without trees, lonesome and forlorn in the sunlight.

Finally, across the north, appeared a dark line: the trees along the banks of the Great Swomey River. Once across the river the land again became settled. Gersen drove through half a dozen hamlets, as like to each other as eggs: a main street, a few cross streets, an inn, several shops, a school to the side, a hall, a temple, a varying number of houses and cottages.

Close on midmorning Gersen arrived at Gladbetook: a village much like those others along the road, if perhaps a trifle larger, a condition signaled by the Uankwal! Tavern on the outskirts of town as well as the more pretentious Swecher's Inn on the central avenue.

Gersen halted the runabout to the side of Swecher's Inn, an ancient agglomeration of twenty guest rooms of various sizes on different levels- The public chambers were no less irregular, with sloping ceilings, black woodwork, and windows stained violet by a hundred years' exposure to Van Kaathe's Starlight. The stone exterior could hardly be seen for vines. Along the front, citizens of the town sat at their ease under an arbor.

At a desk in the entry hall stood a man seven feet tall and thin as a cane, with waxen cheeks and cavernous eye sockets. "Your needs, sir?"

"Lodging, if you please. I prefer a suite of several rooms."

The innkeeper inspected Gersen with raised eyebrows and sagging mouth. "You are alone?"

"Quite alone."

"And you want several rooms?"

"If such a suite is available."

"It seems an immoderate taste, if I may say so. How many rooms can you occupy at once? In how many beds do you plan to sleep? How many sanitary requirements are essential for your health?"

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"No great matter," said Gersen. "Give me a single room with a bath. . . . Has my friend Jacob Bane arrived?"

"To Swecher's? No."

"Not yet? Any outlanders at all besides myself?"

"No one here by the name of Bane, nor any other name. You are the first to check in today. Please settle in advance for your accommodation. A person who arrives like a waywisp from some far corner of the universe can depart as easily without paying his bill."

Gersen was taken to a dim room with blue walls and a black ceiling which seemed higher than it was wide. A stand supported a basin of water with a scrub brush. A pad of gray felt covered the bed, with a similar pad on the floor. Glancing into the bathroom, Gersen discovered a state of disorder. The innkeeper anticipated his complaints. "At the moment this is the best we can offer. The inn is heavily booked for an occasion two nights hence. To bathe, use the pan and the brush. For your other needs, go to the latrine down the hall." The innkeeper departed.

Luck is mith me^ Gersen told himself. The Danku'all Tavern is probably worse.

Gersen wasted no time in the room. He descended to the street, looked right, in the direction he had come, then turned left and strolled into Gladbetook's modest business district.

At Golcher Way he turned left, crossed the Sweet Trelawney River by a mossy stone bridge. On the side stood a statue in the likeness of Didram Runel Fluter, who held aloft in one hand a short curved knife, in the other a severed set of male genitalia. Behind stood the church. A sign read:

PARTITIONERS POSITIVE OF CREATIVE TRUTH

"There is no retreat!"

"There is no looking aside!"

"There is only the Truth and its Teaching!"

A cemetery occupied the field opposite, which was bordered by heavy deodars. Everywhere stood statues honoring the dead: simulacra carved with uncanny skill from glossy white marble or synthetic stuff. The statues stood in groups and companies, arranged as if in a colloquy of consolation for the grievous event which had been their common lot.

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A quarter mile along the road another bridge crossed the broad, slow Swanibel River, on its way to meet the Sweet Trelawney; beyond Gersen saw the Gladbetook High School. . . . He halted and reflected a moment. The time was something short of noon. He turned and went back along Golcher Way into town.

At a meat market Gersen asked directions to the farm owned by Adrian Hardoah.

"Turn left at the corner by Swecher's," he was told. "Make out of town; you'll be on Virle Way. Go four miles to the crossroads, turn right on Bausger Lane. The second farm on the left, that's the Hardoah place, with the big green barn. What do you want from Hardoah? Don't think for money; he's tight as a constipated dudde on a cheese diet."

Gersen made a noncommittal reply and went his way. In the runabout he set out along Virle Way to the north. Four miles across the prairie he came upon the crossroads, and turned right into Bausger Lane. A mile along the road and a hundred yards back from the road, he saw a farmstead surrounded by garoms and pepper-nuts, the foliage fluorescing in the light of Van Kaathe's Star. Another mile along the road he noticed a small cottage to the left of the road—the Hardoah farm? It seemed somewhat modest and even ramshackle, nor did he notice a green barn. On a bench in the sunlight sat an old woman, small and thin, with a peaked, wrinkled face. Beside her hung a coil of coarse string, from which she tatted a patterned cloth, working her stiff fingers with painful intensity.

Gersen halted the vehicle and alighted. "Good day, madam."

"Good day, sir."

"Would this be the Hardoah place?"

"No, sir. By no means. You'll find the Hardoahs yonder, a mile along the road."

Fifty yards to the side of the bungalow Gersen noticed a dilapidated old structure, obviously derelict, surrounded by a copse of blue-black ginsap. "That looks to be an old schoolhouse," said

Gersen.

"It is indeed and where I taught thirty years, and sat here another twenty years watching the place fall apart. Nowadays they take children over the hill to the new school at Leek."

"You've lived here all this time?"

"Aye, indeed. I've never had a man. I drink water and whey

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and pot liquor. I follow Teaching close as close can be, and I was judged a good teacher of the young."

"You taught Howard Hardoah, then."

"I did that. Do you know him?"

"Not well."

The old woman looked off through the air, seeing scenes across the years. "I've often wondered what chanced with Howard. He was an odd little boy, and moody. I've his picture somewhere, but I'd never find it. He was like an elf-child; in fact, I remember him now at the school pageant, where he represented the elf, all dressed in green and brown, and an elfish little elf he was: wry and fidgety and with an eerie face. Ah yes, and wasn't he naughty with little Tammy Fluter, the fairy! She cried out and Howard was brought up short, and no doubt roundly punished by his father. They were Fundamentals, that's the strictest of the Partitioning, and mostly died out now. You're not a Fundamentalist?"

"I'm totally ignorant of the sect."

"They espoused a strong creed, and quite sensible it all were said that need be said. They asserted man's sins could be bred out by careful choice, and brother married sister and cousin married cousin, so to achieve the best. Did you notice the statue to Runel Fluter the Didram in town? Well, he was master of the creed, and did the work that needed to be done, hut little thanks he got, especially from those he considered unworthy. Oh, those were rare days, with Teaching ever so strong! Now there's none left in these parts but the Hardoahs, and they don't practice the old ideas."

"Howard must have been quite a handful."

"Sometimes, yes. Or he might be sweet as sweet could be. He had overmuch imagination. How he loved flowers and how his little mind worked! One day he sorted the flowers out by color, for the Battle of the Flowers; and such wild antics never did you see, with petals flying and the cries of the corpses. From hither to yon went Howard, charging his Red troops against the Blues, with roses dying in great gallantry and bluebells triumphant over the vervains. Ah me, what a day! Then he went up to high school and did poorly, or so I'm told. He was small and young and no doubt the big boys bullied him a bit. Then he went at odds with the Sadalflourys, and naturally that was a scandal."

"How so?"

"Mmf-hmm. I shouldn't be calkin? so much, but it's long ago

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and times have changed, though the Sadalflourys are still important folk. Howard took a fancy to one of the girls, I think it was Suby. She naturally jilted him and Howard did something very reprehensible, and the Sadalflourys were in a passion of rage, only Howard hastily departed and traveled offworld."

Gersen bent over the woman's tatting. "That's beautiful work."  
"It's my best, I say no more, and it earns my victual."  
Gersen gave over ten SVU. "You can start such a cloth for me. If I don't come back, well and good, sell elsewhere, without a thought."

"But thank you, sir!"

"Not at all. I've enjoyed your talk, and now I must be on my way."

A mile along the road Gersen came to a farmstead with a conspicuous green barn to the side. He halted the runabout and surveyed the house, a queer tingle of imminence coursing along his skin. The house was like many another: three stories high, built of pink clapboard with blue trim at the windows, a high roof broken by gables and dormers. In the kitchen garden a tall man in blue trousers and a black shirt worked a cutthroat hoe. Noticing Gersen and the runabout, he paused in his work to stare.

Gersen drove into the yard and was approached by the tall man, evidently Adrian Hardoah. His hair was yellow-brown streaked with gray, cut with no attention to style; his face was long, bony, and weatherbeaten. He examined Gersen with neither cordiality nor interest. "Sir?"

"This is Home Farm?"

"So it is."

"And you are Adrian Hardoah?"

"That is right." Adrian Hardoah spoke in a soft deep voice, with careful pace and precise enunciation.

"I am Henry Lucas; I represent Extant magazine and I have come here from Pontefract on Aloysius."

"Ah! That was the contest magazine." Hardoah's voice took on a more lively note.

"True. Among millions of entries, you were the first correctly to identify subject number six, who is, of course, your son."

Adrian Hardoah instantly became defensive. "That should make no difference. Identification is identification."

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"No argument whatever. In fact, I have come to award the prize."

"That's grand news! How much?"

"By our rules, the first accurate single identification gains three hundred SVU. I carry that sum with me."

"Blessings on us, with the help of the Didrams! And would you know that you just missed Howard himself by no more than an hour? He's come for his school reunion."

Gersen smiled and shrugged. "An odd coincidence, certainly. But it's nothing to me, one way or the other. He just happens to

be a man in a photograph."

"He's doing well, is Howard, though he left us no coin, and it's been many long years since he went out from home. But come inside; the woman must hear the good news. Truth to tell, I clear forgot the matter and never even thought to ask Howard of his great publicity. Folk must be looking at him everywhere, with his picture out like that."

"Few folk are so observant, sir." He followed Adrian Hardoah up the stairs and into a tidy kitchen. A woman almost as tall as Adrian looked around. Her face, with a hundred elusive hints of Howard Treesong, fascinated Gersen. Under a wide square forehead her eyes were set a trifle too closely; a long straight nose hung over a pale mouth and a near-invisible chin: characteristics which for better or worse gave her an unrelenting and secretive look, with no indication of ease or humor.

Still, to Adrian's report of his winnings, she responded with a totally ordinary gurgle of pleasure. "Well, isn't that fine! So Howard has warded us willy nor nilly!"

"So it seems. Well, then, what of a taste of tea? And a good scone? What do you say to that, Mr. Lucas?"

"I'd say thank you very much."

At Adrian's gesture, Gersen seated himself at the table. He brought forth a packet of notes and began to count them out. Adrian spoke reverently. "To think that by the flick of chance, no more, did I look toward that photograph, and only for its being in that outw<sup>o</sup>rld jinket Extant. And who won the grand prixe?"

"Persons of the group are essentially strangers who chanced to meet at a pleasure resort. An attendant at the resort was first to supply the names. Your son Howard also submitted an accurate identification, but too late."

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Reba Hardoah smiled a caustic smile. "Isn't that just like Howard? He always fell short, by just so much! A pity . . . Hist! I do hear Ledesmus. He'll be Howard's older brother, a different sort altogether. He'll have the farm when we ford the Flowing River."

Ledesmus halted in the doorway, surprised to see the offworld visitor. He was bulkier than his father, with apple cheeks and heavy-lidded eyes which gave his face a look of sly humor. Adrian spoke out: "Ledesmus, step forward to meet Mr. Henry Lucas from a far planet. He has brought us an account of money."

Ledesmus pursed his lips to whistle. "Phee-oo! What a day! First Howard, down from nowhere, and now Mr. Lucas."

"Coincidence," said Gersen. "Still, it's a pity I missed him, as I am ordered to write an article on the folk in the photograph."

Adrian spoke in a voice of dispassionate judgment: "There's not much to say about Howard. He never worked a good stint around the farm. He dreamed away his schooltime and I daresay he's nothing very much today, for all his travels."

"Now then," said Reba, "don't be too near with the boy. You've always known him to be eerie-like."

Gersen asked, "Do you expect him back?"

Adrian responded curtly, "No."

"Strange that he should come so far to stop by for just an hour or two."

Reba tried to explain. "Well, we expect conduct just a bit indecorous' from Howard. Still we grieve to see him stray from Teaching. If only he would shake the star dust off his heels and come back home to work the fields with Ledesmus. That would give us joy."

Ledesmus, showing his sly grin to Gersen, said, "He won't be back. He is more indecorous now than ever."

Adrian agreed. "He won't be back. He came out and looked the old place over. All he'd say was: 'It's the same. But it's not the same.' He spent as much time out in his old office as he did with his mother."

"His office?"

"The old pump shack yonder, where he'd take himself with his books and papers and colored pens."

1. The word 'ardespanT lacks contemporary equivalence It includes the notions of obstinacy, perverse wrongheadedness, a jeening attitude toward somber recitide-

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Ledesmus said soberly, "Howard read too much for his mentality, a lot of crazy offworld stuff. He had a chair and a table, and halfway through the night he'd be out there burning lights, until we called him to bed. Regular werd' was Howard."

"Where is he staying now?"

Adrian said dubiously: "He mentioned friends he wanted to visit."

Ledesmus gave a Jeering laugh. "Friends? Howard? There was nobody but poor Nimpy Cleadhoe, and he's no more."

"Now then," said Reba in mild reproach, "you don't know everything, Ledesmus."

Adrian said, "He came mainly for his school reunion. Still, a

person would think he'd want to bide at home. After all, it's here he was born and here he was bred, and this is the dirt that made up his bones."

Gersen pushed the sheaf of SVU certificates over to Adrian Hardoah. "There you are, sir, and our gratitude for participating in the contest. I suppose you'll want to subscribe to ExtantV

Adrian pulled at his chin. "We'll give thought to the matter. It's an offworld jinket and beyond our concerns. If I can't fathom the acts of the False-head Ulms in next land to north of us, how can I hope to understand the doings at Alpheratz, or Caph? No, we'll study our own knowledge. Which, after all, is Pure Truth. So the Didrams tell us."

"Blessed be the Teaching," murmured Reba.

Gersen rose to his feet. "I'd like to look about your farm, if I may. It will serve as background for the article I must write on Howard."

"Certainly. Ledesmus, show the gentleman about."

Gersen and Ledesmus went out into the yard. Ledesmus peered sidelong at Gersen. "So now you must write of Howard? Who wants to read of him?"

"There's great interest in the contest. I'll mention your father and mother and, naturally, you."

"Indeed now. There'll be my picture and all?"

1. A man-shaped siipernan.ir.il being who prowls b\ night and sleeps underground by day. According to Mannish folklore, it hides in the shadows, -waiting to pounce on children and carry them away.

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"Unfortunately not. I don't have a camera with me. . . . You're older than Howard?"

"Aye, three years."

"Did you get along well?"

"Well enough. Father allowed no bickers. I did the work and Howard dreamed away in his office."

Gersen stood irresolute. The spoor of Howard Alan Treesong was strong but seemed to lead nowhere. "I'd like to look into Howard's office."

"Right yonder. It's changed not at all in thirty years. We pump irrigation water from the pond for orchard and truck. House water we draw up from the well; that's another pump."

Ledesmus led the way to a shed ten feet long by eight feet wide. He pulled at the door, forcing it open against the screech of corroded hinges. Two windows admitted light and showed a dusty clutter.

"Place hasn't changed much," said Ledesmus. "Yonder is his table, and that's the very chair where he planted his bewalkus. These shelves held his books and papers; he was neat, was Howard, with everything just so."

"And where are the books and papers?"

"Hard to say. Some are back to the house, some destroyed. Howard was fidgety with his things; when he took to far ports little enough was left behind. Howard liked his secrets."

"Had he friends? What of girls?"

Ledesmus made a guttural sound of scornful amusement.

"Howard never had the knack for girls. He talked too much and acted too little, if you get my meaning. He liked little young girls, and he played dirty on one or two, but don't print that." Ledesmus looked over his shoulder toward the house. "Father never heard these tales. He'd have skinned Howard for wallpaper. It didn't mean much; Howard just wanted to try out the equipment; after all, that's why it's there, aren't I right? Teaching is a bit vague on this score, but if Sarter Martus didn't want girls for to play on, he'd have wrought them with snap-teeth, like fish traps, if you get my meaning. His great love was a girl called—what was it now? She drowned in Persimmon Lake . . . Zada Memar, a pretty thing . . . Friends? There was Nimpy Cleadhoe from down the road. He and Howard roamed the woods together and went out for nuts; and he was

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somewhat a friend. Father didn't like it because old man Cleadhoe was then town marmelizer."

"What's a marmelizer?"

"You've seen the cemetery, where dead folk stand? They're all marmels. It's low work, with dead stuff and all. Still, they're gone now, and that was Howard's friend, if friends they were." Ledesmus turned Gersen a sheepish smile. "I ruined that friendship, me and my foolishness."

"How so?"

"Well, Howard treasured a red writing book and he was most private of it. One time Nimpy called him out of his office and sent him to see Mother, over something or another. I reached through the window and took the red book and tossed it over the pump. Well, as luck would have it, the book slid behind the siding. I went back of the barn and waited. Howard came out and went to lock up his book and couldn't find it, and then I never saw such crazy doings. He began talking in funny voices and hopping around.

Then he saw poor innocent Nimpy, and jumped him. I ran out and pulled him away before he killed the boy. That was Howard's friend and he wasn't a friend after that; in fact he never come back. Howard went off to summer Teaching, and I forgot about the book. Let's see if it's still there." Ledesmus stepped over the pump, pulled aside the wallboard, and thrust down his arm. "Hope I don't grab the hot end of a cangl ... I got it." He held up a red notebook and tossed it to Gersen, who took it out into the sunlight and glanced through the contents.

Ledesmus came from the pump room. "What's in the book?"

Gersen handed it over and Ledesmus nipped through the pages. "Nothing important. .. W^hat kind of writing is that? I never saw anything like it before."

"It's hard to make out."

"Whatever, it's tomfoolery. What's the use of writing what nobody can read? . . . Here's pictures: dukes and kings in fancy dress. Silly rigobands at a carnival. Father thought Howard was copying out the Organon. I thought he was making up girl-stuff. Howard fooled us all."

"It would seem so," said Gersen. "I'll take it off your hands for  
1 Indigenous stinging insect, reaching a length of four inches.

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a souvenir of Gladbetook. Would you take ten SVU for your trouble?"

"Well, I don't know—" Ledesmus hesitated, then took the money. "I guess it's nothing Father would want. Just don't speak of the matter."

"I'll say nothing, and you don't mention the book to Howard should you see him before I do. I wonder where he's staying."

Ledesmus shrugged. "I think he planned to stay here, until he had words with Father, and he left as soon as he arrived. He might be at Swecher's Inn since that's the best in town."

Once more in Gladbetook, Gersen went to the arbor in front of Swecher's Inn and found a seat at one of the tables, his back to the lowering afternoon sun, his black shadow across the scrubbed pinkwood table. A tall, gangling boy, all arms, legs, and neck, came to inquire his needs. "How, sir?"

"What are you serving for lunch?"

"Lunch is out, sir. Just a bit too late. I could get you a dish of maunce, with a crust of our good bread."

"WTiat is maunce?"

"W^ell, it's a kind of put-together, from herbs and river fish."

"That will do me very well."

"And will you drink?"

"What's to be had?"

"Whatever you choose, sir."

"I'd like a pint of cold beer."

"That we don't serve, sir, cold or warm."

"In that case, show me the card, or the list."

"Nothing of the sort here, sir. People know what they like without reading about it."

"I see. . . . What are those folk yonder taking?"

"They have our chilled gruel seepings."

"And those folk to the side?"

"They take tanglefoot soak."

'What else can be had?"

"Kidney tonic. Nibbet. Soursap toddy. Belchberry sprig."

"Whatisnibbet?"

"Vitalizing tea."

"I'll try nibbet."

"At once, sir."

The boy departed and Gersen was left to ponder his situation.

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Near at hand, perhaps within earshot, was Howard Alan Treesong;

Gersen could feel the weight of his presence. If Gersen could lure him a few steps out of town, perhaps through mention of the old red notebook, and drown him in the Sweet Trelawney, there would be a satisfactory end to the affair. Unlikely that all would go so well. . . . The serving boy brought a platter of fish stew, bread, and a pot of tea.

Gersen poured the tea, tasted, to discover flavors to which he could put no names. One of the ingredients seared first the tongue, then the entire oral cavity. The servant boy, hiding a grin, asked politely: "Sir, is nibbet to your taste?"

"Excellent." Gersen had devoured white curry in the Lascar Quarter of Zamboanga; he had drunk pepper rum in Mama Potts's Swillery at Sairle City on Copus. "Incidentally, I'm expecting a friend from offworld. He doesn't seem to be here at the inn. Are you reserving rooms for Mr. Slade or any other foreigners?"

"That I don't know, sir."

Gersen produced a coin. "Find out, but discreetly, as I want to surprise my friend. He's coming for the school reunion."

The boy scooped up the coin and departed. Gersen stolidly ate the maunce as he had eaten dozens of other such dishes across the inhabited planets.

The boy returned. "Nobody like that here, sir, and we're holding no rooms."

"Where else could he be?"

"Well, there's Dankwall Tavern down the road, but their rooms are poor; and there's Ott's Resort out on Skooney's Lake, where rich owls go to roost. Else, there's nothing closer than the inn at Blurry Corners."

"I see. Where is the telephone?"

"In the office, but first pay for maunce and nibbet—I've had such tricks played on me before."

"Just as you like." Gersen laid down coins. "On second thought"—Gersen gave the boy another SVU—"be so good as to call first Skooney's Lake, then the Dankwall Tavern, and inquire as to offworld visitors here for the school reunion. Mind you, discreetly now! Don't so much as mention me."

"As you say, sir."

Minutes passed. Gersen essayed another taste of nibbet. The boy returned. "No one known, sir. The reunion is mostly locals,

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though there'll be a few in from foreign places. Ditty Jingol's uncle is in from Bantry and some others from Wimping. Your friend will likely be along tonight. Anything else, sir?"

"Not just now."

The boy departed. Gersen brought out the red book. On the front was a title, carefully printed in block letters:

THE BOOK OF DREAMS

Gersen opened the book and concentrated his attention upon young Howard Hardoah's handwriting. . . . An hour passed, two hours.

Gersen looked up, turned, gauged the height of Van Kaathe's Star. Late afternoon. He slowly closed the book and tucked it into his pocket. He beckoned to the serving boy. "What is your name?"

"My name is Vitching, sir."

"Vitching, this is an SVU. It is for you. Presently there will be another. In return I want you to perform a service for me."

Vitching blinked. "All very well, sir, but how? I can't counter-wink Teaching. I'd blight all my good deeds of the past."

"You'll find no conflict with Teaching. I want you to watch for that offworld person I mentioned to you."

"Well—one thing with another, I see no reason why I can't do this work."

"Remember, the work must be done in secrecy! If one word leaks out, I'll be seriously angry."

"No need to fear, sir."

Gersen transferred the SVU to the skinny-fingered hand. "I am now going out to walk about the town."

"Precious little to see, sir, for folk like you who have been to Cloutie."

"Well, I'll still look about. Mind you, not a word to anyone of our business."

"Right, sir."

Gersen set out along the street, and now he felt conspicuous in his citified Cloutie clothes. He paused at a clothing shop and looked over the merchandise. A tray beside the door displayed sharp-toed black boots. On a rack hung scarves, hats, and high gaiters in mole-skin gray, embroidered with green and red. He entered the shop and fitted himself out in Gladbetook style: a high-shouldered coat

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of black furze, loose-bottomed trousers, gathered at the knees with black straps, a wide green hat fitting low over his forehead instead of tilted back, Cloutie-style. Looking in the mirror Gersen saw a bumpkin sufficiently bland and moony to deceive any offworld eye.

Leaving the shop, he turned down Golcher W<sup>^</sup>ay. He crossed the Sweet TreWney, passed Didram Runel Fluter, the Orthometric Ghurch and, opposite, the cemetery where marmels of the dead stood with their kindred. With uneasy side-glances Gersen marched past, in the uncanny conviction that blank white eyes shifted to watch as he went by. A quarter mile beyond, he crossed the Swanibel River, and once again stood before the school, a structure conforming to the most elaborate tenets of Maunish architecture. Each

side extended a wing capped by a baroque tower; a heavy, steep-faced roof culminated in a belfry of fluted brass, surmounted by a tall brass finial. In the silver-gold light from the setting Van Kaathe's Star each detail, each crotchet, bracket, and ornament was picked out in strong contrast. Over the gate a sign read:

25th Anniversary Reunion  
Welcome the return  
of the famous Galloping Flatfish Class

Galloping flatfish? An old pleasantry, a special joke to be apprehended only by members of the class . . . An effort to think of Treesong in this environment, walking this road, climbing the school steps, peering from the tall windows . . .

Between the north wing and the Swanibel extended a paved pavilion, a place for students to idle, gossip, survey the river. A dozen men and women worked on the pavilion now: hanging festoons, arranging tables and chairs, decorating the speaker's platform with banderoles, tall gilt fans, and tassels.

Gersen sauntered into the driveway, climbed broad steps of polished red porphyry, crossed a piazza, approached a line of bronze-and-glass doors, one of which stood ajar.

Gersen entered, found himself in a long central hall that ran east and west. At the far end, Van Kaathe's Star poured level light through other glass doors. On the walls to either side hung a succession of group photographs: graduating classes reaching far into the past.

Gersen stood listening. Silence except for a wisp of music, ris-

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ing, falling, halting abruptly. A nearby door stood open. Looking through, Gersen saw a tall thin-faced man with a bush of white hair and a pair of girls, each of whom played the flageolet in time to majestic sweeps of the man's long arms.

Gersen moved away and looked up at the photographs. He saw a date fifty-two years past. As he proceeded along the corridor the dates approached the present. Gersen halted at the photograph displaying the class of twenty-five years before and studied the young faces gazing forth, some proudly posing, others grinning sheepishly, still others sullen and bored with the entire procedure. . . . Voices and footsteps. From the music room came the instructor and his pupils. The instructor stared suspiciously at Gersen. The girls, after an incurious glance, departed. The instructor spoke in a voice stiff and pedantic: "Sir, the school is not open to visitors. I am now leaving and must lock the door. May I ask you to leave?"

"I have been waiting for you, sir. Might we speak together a moment?"

"Concerning what?"

Gersen began to develop an idea which had just entered his head "You are professor of music here at the school?"

"Here I am Professor Kutte. I give lessons; from little musical barbarians I create the majesty of an orchestra. Away from here, I am Valdemar Kutte, Master Musician, and Director of the Grand Salon Orchestra." Valdemar Kutte raked Gersen up and down with eyes sharpened by decades of instructing children in the correct fingering of piano, lute, harp, flageolet, and liltaphone. "And who are you, Mr. Offworlder, so I see?"

"How do you see that?" asked Gersen. "I thought to look an ordinary Gladbetooker."

"Not with those clumsy boots. And you wear your trousers low. Here we cultivate style, not slackness. Without intent to offend, you seem like someone dressed for a charade."

Gersen laughed ruefully. "I will try to profit by your instruction."

"Good day, sir. We must depart."

"One moment. Is the Grand Salon Orchestra playing at tomorrow's festival?"

Valdemar Kutte responded curtly "They have engaged no orchestra whatever, owing to financial stringencies "

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"Circumstances would seem to warrant the presence of your orchestra."

"Perhaps so. As always there is someone to hold a tight hand on the purse strings—usually the most affluent of the persons in authority."

"This is how they become affluent."

"Yes, perhaps."

"How long have you been musical director here?"

"Far too long. I celebrated my twenty-fifth anniversary three years ago. I may add that no one took notice of the 'celebration' save myself."

"So then you instructed these folk?" Gersen indicated the photograph on the wall.

"Many of them . . . Some had will but no talent. Some had talent but no will. Many more lacked both. A very few displayed both qualities, and these I remember."

"What of this group? Who were the musicians?"

"Aha. Darben Sadalfloury had a nice touch on the tantalem. I believe that he still plays. Poor Mirtisha van Boufer—she labored four years on the vanence but always played flat. Howard Hardoah, he was most adept but undisciplined. Alas, I believe that he might have gone far."

"Howard Hardoah? Which would he be?"

"Third row down on the end, the lad with the brown hair."

Gersen scrutinized the young Howard Alan Treesong, who showed a not ill-favored face with a square forehead, wide and high, neat light brown hair, an intense blue-gray gaze. The candid and wholesome effect was flawed by a foxy chin, a drooping girlish mouth, and a nose somewhat too long and too thin.

"—Fadra Hessel of course plays loitre to this day at the catechisms. I confess my memory brings forward little else. Sir, we must depart and lock the school "

The two made their exit; the door was locked. Valdemar Kutte bowed. "A pleasure talking to you, sir."

"One moment," said Gersen. "A pleasant concept has come to mind. I have strong sentiments toward this particular class, and I, as an anonymous benefactor, will engage an orchestra, to augment the joy of the occasion. Can you suggest such an orchestra?"

The instructor stood erect, eyes snapping. "Fortuitously, I can do so I refer you to the Valdemar Kutte Grand Salon Orchestra,

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which I personally supervise. It is the only conceivable choice. True, there are other local groups: scattleboggers, bang-and-bump groups, and the like, but I control the single musical organization worthy of the name this side of Cloutie."

"And are you available for the evening in question?"

"By chance, I am quite free."

"Then consider yourself engaged, as of now. What will be your fee?"

"Well, let me think. . . . How many pieces will you require? Generally, I present two tarables, on the right and left; zumbolt, soprano pipe, gamba, cornet, vibre, fiddles, a guitar and flageolet, in the classical manner. For an engagement of this sort I ordinarily ask two hundred SVU but—" Professor Kutte looked dubiously at Gersen's attire.

"I won't quibble," said Gersen. "You are hired, at two hundred and fifty SVU. My only stipulation is this: I want to become a member of your orchestra for this engagement only."

"Eh? You are a musician?"

"I can't play a note. I'll tap quietly on a drum and not disturb anyone."

"You would disturb us all! The drum is a baby's noisemaker!"

"What would you suggest?"

"This is preposterous. Why cannot you merely listen from beyond the fence?"

"I want to participate close at hand. Still, if you can't—"

"No! We will find a way. Can you play so much as a tin whistle?"

Gersen could not help but feel humiliation at his incompetence. "I have never so much as tried."

"Bah! This is bathos. Come with me. We will see what we can do."

13

The only good drummer is a dead drummer.  
—Valdemar Kutte

Director, Grand Salon Orchestra  
of Gladbetook

In Valdemar Kutte's studio, Gersen was handed a long wooden flute. "A child's instrument," said Kutte disdainfully. "Still, to sit with the Grand Salon one must play, if only a wooden pipe. Now, fingers here, here, here. So. Now blow."

Gersen achieved a sour tone.

"Once more."

Three hours later Gersen had learned one of the five basic scales and Kutte was fatigued. "For now, that is enough. I will number these stops: one, four, five, and eight. We shall play simple tunes:

promenades, gallops, an occasional ramble. You will play one-five one-five one-five-eight one-five-eight, in time to the music, occasionally four-five-eight, or one-four-five. W^en we use a different mode I will furnish you a different instrument. I can do no more. Please pay me my fee in advance, plus twenty-four SVU for three hours' intensive instruction."

Gersen paid over the money.

"Now then! Take this flute. When opportunity offers, practice. Play the scale. Play simple progressions. Above all: learn one-five-eight one-five one-five."

"I'll do my best."

"You must do better than your best! Remember, it is the Grand Salon Orchestra with whom you play! Even though 'play' is a pre-

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tentious word for your level of achievement, and you will of course be making only soft sounds. I hope that all will go well. It is an eccentric situation, but for a musician, life is a succession of remarkable events. We will meet here tomorrow, at middle afternoon. Then you will go to Van Zed's store to be fitted in proper musician's uniform, as worn by the Grand Salon Orchestra; I will instruct him before you arrive. Then, after securing your uniform, come here and I will supply further instructions, as best I can. Who knows? This occasion may make a musician of you!" Gersen looked doubtfully at the flute. "Perhaps so."

Once more at Swecher's Inn, Gersen dined on lentil paste, a stew of pale meat and herbs, a salad of river reeds, and a half loaf of crusty bread. Vitching, the serving boy, reported no success in his investigations but Gersen rewarded him suitably.

Darkness fell on Gladbetook. Leaving the inn, Gersen wandered up the main avenue to the center of town. At each corner of the square a tall post supported a white-green globe around which careened dozens of foot-long pink insects, with eight soft wings to either side like the oars of a galley.

The shops were dark and empty. The haberdasher had neglected to move his tray of boots inside, and his scarves hung as before, where anyone so inclined could purloin the entire selection. Other merchants seemed equally casual; the folk of Gladbetook were evidently not addicted to larceny.

In the center of town nightlife was nonexistent. Gersen returned along the main street, past Swecher's, to the Dankwall Tavern, where in the common room, to the light of a few dim lamps, a half dozen farm workers drank sour-smelling beer. . . . Gersen returned to Swecher's Inn, went up to his room, where he softly practiced the flute for an hour, until his lips failed. Then he brought out The Book of Dreams and puzzled over its crabbed script. Apparently young Howard had evolved a set of heroic tales, involving a company of heroes, whose persons Howard had depicted with loving care and in the most intricate detail.

Gersen put the book aside and tried to make himself comfortable upon the unyielding bed.

In the morning he followed Kutte's instructions. He practiced the flute, and presented himself to Kutte's studio on the extension

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of Golcher Way a hundred yards south of the square. Kutte heard him play the scales without enthusiasm.

"Now try one-four-five."

"I haven't reached that stage yet."

Kutte raised his eyes to the ceiling. He heaved a sigh. "Well, what must be, must be: that is the lesson all musicians learn. I have spoken to Mrs. Lavenger. She is chairman of the reunion. I told her that an anonymous benefactor had hired the Grand Salon Orchestra and she was very pleased. We must arrive tomorrow afternoon at the fourth hour and arrange ourselves. We will play before the supper when the guests drink liquor outland fashion, and during supper. After supper there will be encomiums and congratulations, then several dance promenades, and no doubt the stylish folk will take punch, which is not my habit, needless to say. As an outworlder, you have probably seen inebriation in your time?"

"I have so, indeed."

"Glory to the Teaching Didrams! Think of that! Still, you seem a relatively sound man!"

"I seldom, if ever, drink overmuch."

"But is not the stuff pernicious?"

"I've heard opinions in both directions."

Kutte seemed not to hear. He knit his eyebrows thoughtfully. "Where, to your knowledge, is the most intolerably drunken den of the Oikumene?"

Gersen considered. "Not an easy choice to make. A hundred thousand saloons from Earth out to Last Call clamor for that distinction. Twast's Place on Krokinole can hold its head high, Dirty Red's on the pier at Daisy's Landing, on Canopus III, is another well-known resort."

"How fortunate are we in Gladbetook! Our decency is the envy of the cosmos! However, and I say this with regret, tomorrow night our reputation may become tarnished. The SadalfLOURYS, the van Bessems, the Lavengers—all surely will taste essences and stings. But none will trouble us, so I feel assured or at least hopeful. Once more—let us hear those scales. . . . Now: one-five-eight. One-four-five. One-five one-five . . . One-four-five . . . Harp on the Sacred Ram! Stop! It will have to do; today I can hear no more. Practice diligently tonight. Concentrate on sound production, on tone, justness, pitch, timbre, clarity, precise attack, and sonority. When you alter tones, raise one finger, depress the other simultaneously, not

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after a lapse of a second or so Practice finger placement "When you seek to put a finger on four, let it be four, neither two nor six. Cultivate verve, avoid that dreary flatness which now pervades your articulation. Is this all clear?"

"Perfectly."

"Good!" cried Valdemar Kutte heartily. "Tomorrow will show us hope and improvement."

On the following afternoon the orchestra assembled at Kutte's studio. Kutte distributed scores, took Gersen aside and listened as he played his parts. Kutte had arrived at a state of fatalistic calm and made no expostulations. "It will have to do," he said. "Play very softly and all will be well, especially if essences flow freely."

Kutte led Gersen before the other musicians "All, pay heed! I wish to introduce my friend Mr. Gersen, who has become an amateur of the flute. He plays experimentally on this single occasion only. We must all try to be polite to him."

The musicians turned to look at Gersen and muttered among themselves. Gersen submitted to the attention with as much aplomb as he could muster.

The orchestra set off down Golcher Way, each man carrying his instrument, except Gersen, who carried five flutes, tuned in various modes. All were dressed alike, in black suits—high-shouldered coats and bag-bottom breeches—gray gaiters, pointed black shoes, flat-crowned black hats with down-drooping brims.

The group approached the school and Gersen grew ever more uneasy. The scheme which originally had seemed so ingenious now, as the critical moment approached, he saw to be inconvenient, cranky, and uncertain. If Howard Treesong gave the musicians more than a cursory look, he might recognize Henry Lucas offatant, which would create an awkward situation. Howard Treesong would undoubtedly arrive well armed and with an entourage. In contrast, Gersen carried five flutes and a kitchen knife bought the same morning from an ironmonger.

The orchestra filed into the pavilion, placed their instruments upon the platform, and waited while Valdemar Kutte conferred with Ossim Sadalfloury, of the locally important Sadalfloury family a portly and jovial man in a fine suit of dark green gabardine.

Valdemar Kutte re)omed the orchestra. "A collation will be set

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behind the pavilion for our convenience. It will include braised navets and conserve; there will also be tea and raisin water."

At the back of the group someone muttered and laughed; Kutte glared and spoke with meaningful emphasis. "Mr. Sadalfloury realizes that we are all valetudenanans and respects our convictions. No essences or fermented products will be served to the orchestra, as that in any event would detract from its performance. So now, up on the platform, hup, hup, hah! Lively and smart, everyone!"

The musicians seated themselves on the platform, arranged music, tuned instruments. Kutte placed Gersen in the back row, be-

tween the zumbold and the gamba, both instruments played by large blond men of phlegmatic disposition.

Gersen arranged his flutes in the order Kutte had dictated. He played a few tentative scales, contriving to seem musicianly, then he sat back and watched the old classmates as they entered the pavilion. Many were local residents, others had arrived from outlying townships. A few resided in far lands, and a few had made the journey to Gladbetook from offworld. They greeted each other with cries of marveling surprise and brassy laughter, each astonished to discover how the others had aged. Hearty salutations were exchanged between folk of equal social standing, greetings more carefully measured took place between persons of disparate status.

Howard Hardoah, as these folk knew him, was not yet in evidence. When he arrived, what then^ Gersen had not even the vestige of a plan.

At the fourth hour of the afternoon the reunion officially began. The tables were already filled with groups. To the right of the bandstand the gentry had tended to collect; to the left sat farm folk and shopkeepers. A few tables to the far left were occupied by river folk, who lived on barges, the men wearing brown corduroy, the women coarse-woven pantaloons and long-sleeved blouses. The gentry, so Gersen noted, sipped liqueurs from exquisite little flagons of blue and green glass. When a flagon was empty, it was dropped with a mannered gesture into a basket.

Valdemar Kutte, carrying a fiddle, stepped up on the platform. He bowed to right and left, then turned to his orchestra. " 'Shar-melld's Dance,' the full version Easy but lightsome, not too much vigor in the duets, are we ready^' Kutte glanced at Gersen, waved a finger. "The fourth mode . No, not that one . . Yes, correct."

He jerked his elbows; the orchestra broke into a merry bounce-

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about, with Gersen blowing the tiute as he had been taught, though quietly.

The piece ended. Gersen gratefully put down the flute. It might have gone worse, he thought. The basic rule seemed to be to stop playing w^en everyone else stopped.

Valdemar Kutte bespoke another tune, and as before signaled Gersen in regard to the proper instrument.

The tune "Bad Bengfer" was familiar to everyone present. All vigorously sang the choruses and stamped their heels on the floor. The song, so far as Gersen could determine, celebrated the escapades of Bengfer, a drunken roustabout, who fell into the cesspool at the back of Buntertown. Convinced that he had fallen into a vat of "Nip-doodle Beer," he drank to satiety, and when Van Kaathe's Star rose to illuminate the scene, astonished passersby discovered Bengfer's rotund belly protruding above the banks of the cesspool. An unsavory song, thought Gersen, but Valdemar Kutte conducted

his orchestra with gusto. Gersen took advantage of the general confusion to blow more daringly into his flute, receiving only a warning glance or two from Kutte.

A gentleman from a table to the right came up to the bandstand and spoke to Valdemar Kutte, who responded with a peevish if obsequious bow.

Kutte addressed the company. "By request. Miss Taduca Milgher will sing for us."

"Oh no!" cried Taduca Milgher from her table. "Utter terror!"

She was urged to the platform while Valdemar Kutte stood smiling sourly.

Taduca Milgher sang several ballads: "A Lonesome Bird Am I," "My Little Red Barge on the River," and "Pinkrose, the Space Pirate's Daughter."

The tables were full; the latecomers apparently had all arrived. Gersen began to wonder if Howard Treesong would after all be on hand for the occasion.

Taduca Milgher retired to her table. Supper was announced, and the orchestra went to enjoy their collation behind the service screen.

Evening had come to Gladbetook. A hundred fairy lamps hanging from a bamboo trellis illuminated the pavilion. At their tables the patricians dined at leisure and took their liqueurs. Folk who

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interpreted Teaching more earnestly sat over pots of tea, but missed very little of what went on at the stylish tables.

Unreality, thought Gersen. Where was Howard Treesong? Near at hand? came a sudden message from his subconscious, harsh and strong. Gersen looked across the edge of the pavilion, out over the river meadow. . . . Time seemed to freeze. Unreality dissipated. Now was the true, the real Now. Near the river three men stood motionless, looking toward the pavilion. Gersen turned, looked off toward the road. By the fence, faces and garments blurred by twilight, stood three other men. Gersen knew by their postures that these were not men of Gladbetook.

All was changed. To this moment the reunion had been an occasion of froth and fancy: exaggerated, quaint, absurd. Beyond the glimmer of the fairy lamps were fancies of another sort, brooding and sinister. Gersen went to the edge of the pavilion and looked to the south. He discerned other shapes, inconspicuous under a copse of elms. . . .

Kutte called his orchestra back to the platform. "Now then! We will play 'Rhapsody of Dreaming Maidens.' Mind now! Grace

and delicacy."

Revelry among the reunited schoolmates had reached a mellow state of joviality and good fellowship. Friends called to old friends across the pavilion, recalling escapades, feats, and jokes. Social rigors were loosening; badinage included folk along the length of the pavilion: "—never, never! It was Crambert all the while! I was censured and blamed—" "Hoy there, Sadkin! Remember the stink-flower in Miss Boab's bouquet? What a lark, eh?" "—most fearful scandal ever! That was a year before your time! He was known as 'Pussy-britches' ever after." "WTiat happened to Tussy-britches'?" "Drowned in the Quade Canal, poor chap. Fell from his barge." "Worse scandal yet was Fimfle's periscope; remember that?" "Aye, so I do. Over the transom into the girl's dressing room, for knees, elbows, and all between." "What a thought was that!" "Fimfle! What a sorry chap! Where is he tonight?" "Not a clue." "Hey there, whatever happened to Fimfle?" "Don't mention the horrid little fellow." —This from Adelie Lagnal at the Sadalfloury table.

A sound like the lowest tone of an enormous gong—was it real? or subliminal? Gersen felt it, but no one else seemed to notice.

In the entrance stood a tall, square-shouldered figure. Tight trousers of green velour encased his long strong legs; over a loose

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long-sleeved white shirt he wore a black vest with purple and gold fobs. His ankle-boots were pale brown leather; a soft black cap was pulled askew across his wide high forehead. He stood in the entrance, smiling a twisted smile. Then with exaggerated self-effacement, he went to a vacant table nearby and seated himself, still smiling his twisted smile. From the Sadalfloury table came a hoarse choked whisper, which penetrated a sudden silence: "It's Fimfle himself!"

Howard Alan Treesong, or Howard Hardoah, slowly turned his head and looked toward the Sadalflourys. Then he glanced toward the bandstand. His gaze passed over Gersen and fixed upon Valdemar Kutte, and his smile became a trine wider.

The school chums resumed their conversations. Back and forth went the badinage, but not so easy and not so free, as eyes turned curiously toward Howard Hardoah.

At last Morna van Hulgen, one of the chairwomen, took herself in hand and, approaching, gave him a hearty and only faintly false welcome, which Howard Hardoah accepted graciously. Morna van Hulgen gestured toward the buffet table, proffering supper. Howard Hardoah smiled, shook his head. Morna looked uncertainly around the room, from group to group, then turned back to the suave man at the table before her. "It's so nice seeing you after all these years! I'd never have known you—except you haven't really changed! The years have been kind to you!"

"Very kind indeed. I am happy with them."

"I don't remember your particular friends. . . . But you mustn't sit here alone. There's Saul Cheebe; you remember him? He's sitting with Elvinta Gierle and her husband from Puch."

"Of course I remember Saul Cheebe. I remember everyone and everything."

"Why not join him? Or Shimus Woot? There's so much to talk about." She indicated the tables which were well to the left end of the room.

Howard Hardoah glanced briefly toward the tables in question. "Saul or Shimus, is it? Both, as I recall, were lummoxes, dull and dirty. I, on the other hand, was a philosopher."

"Well, perhaps so. Still, people do change."

"Not so! Consider me, for instance. I am still a philosopher, even more profound than before!"

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Morna made uneasy movements preparatory to edging away. "Well, that's very nice, Howard."

"So then, with these considerations in mind, what groups would you recommend that I join? The Sadalflourys yonder? Or the van Bouyers? Or for that matter, your own?"

Morna pursed her lips and blinked. "Really, Howard! I'm sure that you'd be welcome anywhere, it's just that, well, at school, you know, and I thought—"

"You thought of me as a poor vagabond of space, returning, tired and forlorn but full of sentiment, to rejoin Shimus and Saul at our class reunion. In some respects, Morna, time is like a magnifying lens. As a boy I never so much as tasted liqueurs or essences. I brooded upon these illicit delights, and the pretty little flasks became objects of fascination and wonder. Be so good as to signal for the steward, Morna, and sit with me. Together we will taste Nectar of Phlox and Blue Tears and Now-You-See-Me."

Morna drew back a step. "There is no general steward here, Howard. The drink you see has been privately supplied. And now—"

"In that case I will accept your invitation." Howard Hardoah jumped to his feet. "We will join your table, and no doubt Wimberly can spare a flask or two from his basket." With a debonair gesture he urged Morna across the pavilion to the table she shared with her spouse, Wtmberly, Bloy and Jenore Sadalfloury, Peder and Ellicent Vorvelt.

The group gave Howard Hardoah a cool and minimal welcome. His response was an easy salute— "Thank you all. Morna has commended me to this noble old Blue Tears, and I will gladly take a dram or two. Gentlemen and ladies, my best regards' Let the fes-

tivities proceed!"

"There is no formal program," said Jenore, "Are none of your old friends here?"

"Just yourselves," said Howard Hardoah. "No program, you say? We must see about that. After all, a reunion should be memorable! Thank you, Wimberly, I'll try another gill. Hey there, Director Kutte, strike up a tune!"

Valdemar Kutte performed a rigid inclination of the head and shoulders. Howard Hardoah chuckled and leaned back in his chair. "He has altered not a whit; same dry old frump. Some of us develop

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in one direction, some in another. Right, Blov? You've developed outward; indeed, you're quite corpulent."

Bloy Sadalfloury became red in the face. "It is not a matter I care to discuss."

Howard Hardoah had already passed on to a different subject. "So many Sadalflourys in Flutter Township I can't keep the various branches separate. As I recall, you are of the senior line."

"That is correct."

"And who now is head of the family?"

"That would be my father, Mr. Nomo Sadalfloury."

"He is not present tonight?"

"He is not a member of this class."

"And what of Suby Sadalfloury who was once so beautiful?"

"You are evidently referring to my sister, Mrs. Suby ver Ahe. She is present."

"Where is she sitting?"

"At the table yonder, with her husband, and others."

Howard Hardoah swung about and inspected the dark-haired matron at a table twenty feet away. He rose to his feet and went to lean over the group. "Suby! Do you recognize me?"

"You are Howard Hardoah, I believe." Suby ver Ahe's voice was cool.

"I am he. And who are these others?"

"My husband, Paul. My daughters, Mirl and Maud, Mr. and Mrs. Janust of River Vista, Mr. and Mrs. Gildv of Lake Skooney and their daughter Halda."

Howard Hardoah acknowledged the introductions and returned to Suby. "What an event, meeting you again! I am happy now that I came. Your daughters are as lovely as you were at their age."

Suby's voice was colder than ever. "I am surprised that you should wish to bring old events to mind."

Paul ver Ahe said, "Astonishing that you should choose to appear at all!"

Howard Hardoah showed a plaintive smile. "Was I not invited? Is this not my class and my school?"

Paul ver Ahe said gruffly, "Certain things are best left unsaid."

"Quite true." Howard drew up a chair and seated himself. "If I may, I'll try a flask of your Ammarv."

"I have not invited you to do so."

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"Tush, Paul, don't be mean! Does not your mill grind out ton after ton of valuable murdock flour?"

"The mill is still in operation. I dispose of the profits as I see fit."

Howard Hardoah threw back his head and laughed. "A pleasure to meet you all." He took up Mirl's hand and kissed her fingers. "Especially you. I have an absolutely unappeasable-insatiable perhaps is not quite the word—admiration for beautiful girls, and before the evening is over we must arrange to meet again."

Paul ver Ahe started to rise to his feet, but Howard Hardoah had already turned away from Mirl. He tilted the flask of Ammary to his lips and swallowed the contents at a gulp. "Refreshing!" In proper style he dropped the empty flask into a basket.

Suby's attention had been distracted. She touched her husband's arm. "Paul, who are those people?" She pointed to the edge of the pavilion. There stood three hard-faced men wearing uniforms of gray and black with black casques. Each carried a short, heavy gun.

Mrs. Janust cried out softly: "They are everywhere! They're all around us!"

Howard Hardoah said in a negligent voice, "Pay them no heed, They are part of my entourage. Perhaps I should make an announcement, to allay curiosity."

Howard Hardoah jumped up on the bandstand. "School chums, old acquaintances, others, you will notice here and there groups of what appear to be battle troops. They are, in fact, a squad of my Companions. Tonight they wear this rather forbidding costume, which tells us that they are in a somber mood. WTien they wear

yellow, you'll find them jaunty and gay. When they wear white, we call them 'death dolls.'

"On this occasion, attend their wise counsels, and we'll all enjoy an evening of fun. Everyone, proceed with the party! Let the reminiscences flow! Jenore Sadalfloury tells me that no entertainments have been planned. I feared as much, and saw fit to arrange a little program. Let me talk briefly of myself. Perhaps of everyone attending the dear old school I was most innocent. I laugh now to think of my illusions. Ah, that dear dreamy lad twenty-five years gone! At school he discovered a mysterious new world of illicit pleasures and tantalizing possibilities. But when he tried to explore and extend himself, he was rebuffed. Nothing went right for him. He was bullied, abused, taunted, and given an odious nickname:

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'Fimfle.' Bloy Sadalfloury, I believe, was first to use that expression. Am I correct in this, Blov?"

Bloy Sadalfloury puffed out his cheeks but made no response.

Howard Hardoah gave his head a slow, marveling shake. "Poor Howard! The girls treated him little better. Even now I wince at the slights! Suby Sadalfloury played a particularly heartless game, which I will not describe. I now invite her charming daughters on a cruise aboard my ship. We will visit interesting regions of space, and I assure them that in my company they will not be bored. It is possible that Suby may be distressed and lonesome, but she should have considered the possible consequences of her acts twenty-five years ago, which resulted in my own departure from Giadbetook.

"In sheer point of fact, nothing could have been more to my advantage. I am now a very rich man. I could buy all Giadbetook and never notice. Philosophically, I am a far more definite person. I subscribe to the Doctrine of Cosmic Equilibrium: in simple terms, for every 'tit' there must be a 'tat.' Now for tonight's program. It is a little pastiche called 'A Noble Schoolboy's Daydream of Justice!' How fortunate we are to have on hand many principals to the seminal circumstances!"

Cornelius van Bouyers, chairman of arrangements, came hurrying forward. "Howard! You're talking extravagant folly! You can't be serious; in fact, you're making fun of us all. Come down at once, there's a good fellow, and we'll all enjoy the evening."

Howard raised a finger. Two Companions led Cornelius van Bouyers from the pavilion and locked him in the girls' gymnasium and he was seen no more that night.

Howard Hardoah turned to the orchestra. Gersen, twenty feet away, hoped that a wide-brimmed hat and a bland expression were adequate disguise.

Howard Hardoah barely glanced at him. "Director Kutte! It gives me s-reat pleasure to see you tonight! Do you remember me?"

"Not\vell."

"That is because you flew into a rage with me and snatched away my fiddle. You said I played like a drunken squirrel."

"Yes, I remember the occasion. You used a clumsy vibrato. In the attempt for sentiment you achieved only larmoyance."

"Interesting. You do not play this style?"

"Decidedly not. Each note should be met justly and precisely, with an edge to each side."

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"Let me remind you of a musician's truism," said Howard Har-  
doah. " 'When you stop going up, you start going down.' You have  
never played 'drunken squirrel' style, and it is time that you should  
make the essay. In order to play like a 'drunken squirrel,' while you  
cannot become a squirrel, at least you can become drunken. Here  
we have the necessary essences. Drink, Professor Kuttc, then play!  
As you never have played before!"

Director Kutte bowed stiffly and pushed aside the proffered  
flasks. "Excuse me, I do not drink ferments or spirits. Teaching  
expressly condemns their use."

"Bah! Tonight we throw a blanket over theology, as we might  
cover a cantankerous parrot. Let us rejoice! Drink, Professor! Drink  
here or outside the pavilion with the Companions."

"I have no taste for drink, but since I am forced . . ." Kutte  
threw the contents of a flask down his throat. He coughed. "The  
flavor is bitter."

"Yes, that is Bitter Ammary. Here, try Wild Sunlight."

"That is somewhat better. Let me try<sup>7</sup> the Blue Tears. . . . Yes.  
Tolerable. But quite enough."

Howard Hardoah laughed and clapped Kutte between his nar-  
row shoulders, while Gersen watched sadly. So near and yet so far.  
The zumbold player next to him muttered, "The man is insane! If  
he comes within reach I'll clap the zumbold over his head; you make  
play with the flute and we'll have him helpless in a trice."

By the entrance stood two men: the first short and thick as a  
stump, near bald, with a square head and flat features; the second  
spare, saturnine, with short thick black hair, hollow cheeks, a long,  
pale Jaw and chin. Neither wore a Companion uniform. "See those  
two men?" Gersen made a discreet indication. "They are watching  
and waiting for just some such foolishness."

"I am not a man to accept humiliation!" growled the zumbold  
player.

"Tonight you had better go carefully, or you may not awake to

life tomorrow morning."

Director Kutte ran his hand through his hair. His eyes had become a trifle glassy and he lurched as he turned to his orchestra. "Play us a tune," called I loward Hardoah. "Drunken squirrel style, if you please."

Kutte mumbled to his orchestra: " 'Gypsy Firelight,' in Aeolian."

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Howard Hardoah listened carefully as the orchestra played, keeping time with his finger. Presently he called out, "Enough! Now for the program! It gives me great pleasure to present tonight's entertainment. It has been germinating for twenty-five years. Since I am the impresario, and since the themes derive from my own experiences, the subjective point of view need come as no surprise.

"Let us begin! Our stage properties are at hand. I roll back the curtain of time! We are now at school with Howard Hardoah, a dear lad mistreated by bullies and fickle girls. I recall one such incident. Maddo Strubbins, I see you yonder; you seem as overbearing now as then. Come forward! I wish to recall an incident to your mind."

Maddo Strubbins glowered and sat back defiantly. The Companions approached. He lurched to his feet and sauntered toward the bandstand, a tall, burly man with coarse dark hair and heavy features. He stood looking up at Howard Hardoah with mingled contempt and uncertainty.

Howard Hardoah spoke in a harsh brassy voice: "How good to see you after all these years! Do you still play on the quadrangles?"

"No. That is a game for children, striking a ball back and forth."

"Once, we both thought differently- I went on the court with my new racquet and ball. You came with Wax Buddle and pushed me off the courts. You said, 'Cool your arse, Fimfle. You must wait on your betters.' So you played your game using my ball. Do you remember? When I protested that I had arrived first, you said: 'Sit quiet, Fimfle! I can't play my best with you caterwauling in my ear.' When you had finished, you hit my ball over the fence and it was lost in the weeds. Do you remember?"

Maddo Strubbins made no reply.

"I have long felt the deprivation of that golden day forever lost," said Howard Hardoah. "It has hung in my memory: a frustration! The price of the ball itself was fifty centums- My time spent waiting and hunting for the ball is worth another SVU, to a total of one and a half SVU. At ten percent interest compounded across twenty-five years, it is exactly sixteen SVU, twenty-five centums, and two farthings. Add ten SVU punitive damages for a total, let

us say, of twenty-six SVU. Pay me now."

"I don't carry so much money."

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Howard Hardoah instructed his Companions: "Flog him well for twenty-six minutes, then cut off his ears."

Strubbins said, "Wait a minute. . . . Here is the money." He paid over coins, then turned and hunched back toward his table.

"Not just yet," said Howard Hardoah. "You have only paid me for the lost ball. 'Sit quietly,' you said."

The Companions rolled forward a wooden chair-frame on which rested a block of ice. They conducted Maddo Strubbins to the chair, cut away his trousers, sat him on the ice, and strapped him in place.

"Sit quietly; cool your own arse," said Howard Hardoah. "You lost my ball and I am tempted to order an excision along your own rosy scrotum, except that this is a family entertainment. One other matter. . ." A Companion stepped forward and pressed a contrivance against Maddo Strubbins's forehead; he cried out in pain. When the contrivance was removed the letter F, in heavy purple block print, remained.

"That is an indelible reminder of the odious nickname 'Fimfle,' " said Howard Hardoah. "It shall be a memento for anyone I recall using this term. It was evolved by Bloy Sadalfloury. Let us deal next with this corpulent scalawag."

Bloy Sadalfloury was stripped naked and tattooed with F's over his entire body, except across his buttocks, where FLVIFLE was spelled out in full.

"You are bedizened in style," said Howard Hardoah with critical approval. "While you are bathing at Lake Skooney and your friends ask why you are spotted like a leopard, you will respond: 'It was the fault of my malicious tongue!' Hey, Companions! A clever elaboration! Stamp his tongue as well!"

"So then, who and what is next on the program? Edver Vissy? Forward, please . . . Remember Angela Dam? A pretty little girl from the lower grades? I admired Angela with all the fervor of my romantic heart. One day as I stood talking to her, you came along and pushed me aside. You said, 'Run along, Fimfle. Just pick a direction; Angela and I will go the other way.' I have puzzled over this command long and often. 'Run along.' Along what? The road? An imaginary line? A long way?" Howard Hardoah's voice became nasal and pedantic. "In this special case, we will simplify and imagine a course around the pavilion. You will run 'a long way' 'along' this course, and we will learn where emphasis ties. Four blackguard

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dogs will chase you and gnaw your legs should you tarry. Hurrah then, Edver! Let us watch a fleet pair of heels as you 'run along.' A pity that little Angela is not here to enjoy the evening."

The Companions took Edver Vissy to the course and set him running, with four squat hounds lurching and snarling behind him.

The zumbold player muttered to Gersen, "Have you ever seen the like? The man is mad, to play such spiteful tricks!"

"Take care," said Gersen. "He hears whispers ten minutes old and half a mile away. So far his acts are almost benign; he is in a good mood."

"I hope never to see him in a rage."

The program proceeded, as, one by one, Howard Hardoah adjusted strains and imbalances in the cosmic equilibrium.

Olympe Omsted had arranged to meet Howard at the Blinnick Pond Picnic Grounds. Howard had trudged ten miles and had waited four hours, only to see Olympe arrive in company with Gard Thornbloom. "You will now be conveyed to a far place," Howard told Olympe. "You will wait eight hours, until morning, then walk twenty miles to the Wiggal River. That you may forever remember this occasion, I have arranged a further penalty." Olympe was stripped nude to the waist; one breast was stained bright red, the other an equally intense blue, and for good measure a purple F was stamped on her belly. "Excellent!" declared Howard Hardoah. "In the future you will find it more difficult to beguile and deceive trusting young boys."

While Howard gave his attention to Leopold Friss, Olympe was led from the pavilion, and carried off through the night. Leopold had instructed young Howard to "Kiss his arse." Six pigs were brought before Leopold, and he was obliged to kiss each appropriately.

Hippolita Fawer, who had slapped Howard's face on the front steps of the school, was spanked by two Companions, while Professor Kutte played a threnody in time with her outcries.

Professor Kutte, now loose in the knees, found difficulty in applying bow to strings. Howard Hardoah seized the fiddle in disgust. "I have drunk five times as much as you!" he told Kutte. "You boast of musical competence, yet you cannot play while drunk! For shame! I shall play the tune properly." He signaled the Companions who set about spanking Hippolita, who resumed her cries while Howard played the fiddle. He began to dance as he played, lifting

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one of his long legs, thrusting it high and forward and giving a little kick, then prancing forward, knees bent, meanwhile playing with rapt face and half-closed eyes.

The zumbold player said dubiously to Gersen: "Truth to tell,

he plays in fine style. ... A sure touch there; notice how justly he accents the woman's outcries. I am tempted to shout 'bravo.' "

"He would be pleased," said Gersen. "On the whole it is probably best not to call attention to yourself."

"I am sure that you are right."

The tune came to an end and Hippolita returned in dishevelment to her table. Howard Hardoah was in the mood for music. He faced the orchestra. "All together now, with zest, rare tones, and precise execution: 'Pettyville Pleasures.' Parnassian Mode."

Gersen nudged the zumbold player. "Which flute?"

"With the brass flange."

Howard Hardoah stamped his foot; the tune began. After one rendition, Howard called a halt. "Fair, only fair! More bite with the cornet! You on wood-pipe! Why do you not play the traditional solo?"

Gersen showed a moony grin. "I'm not that sure of the part, sir."

"Then you should practice your instrument!"

"I give my all, sir."

"Once again, lively now!"

The tune was played, with Howard Hardoah performing his absurd capering dance.

Abruptly he stopped, stamped his feet, raised his hands on high, brandishing fiddle and bow in outrage. "You, on the wood-pipe! Why do you not play as you should? Why this preposterous pip-pup-pup, pip-pup-pup?"

"Well, sir, truth be told, it is how I learned the instrument."

Howard Hardoah clutched his head, deranged his hat in a frenzy of impatience. "You exasperate me to distraction, with your pip-pup-pup! Also your foolish leering face. Companions! Seize this mooncalf, take him down to the river, and throw him away! Musicians of his sort the world is better without."

The Companions seized Gersen, draped him from the platform. Howard addressed the audience. "You are witnessing an important event. The population is divided into three classes: first, fastidious persons of discrimination and taste; second, the vulgar

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masses, exemplified by yourselves, and third, a few wretched parvenus who mimic the style of their betters, as in the case of this wood-pipe player. His sort must be discouraged! Now—on with

the music All who wish may dance "

Two Companions frog-marched Gersen across the pavilion and down the slope toward the river. A third strolled negligently behind. Nothing could have been more to Gersen's satisfaction. Down the steps to the boat dock they marched, and out to the far end, where the fairy lamps reflected in jerks and jiggles on the dark water.

The Companions seized Gersen by the arms and the seat of the pants Gersen hung supine and limp. "It's to be one, two, three and on your way! So, here we go!"

"Here we go," said Gersen. He swiveled, broke holds, struck the man on his left a fearful blow in the neck, crushing his larynx. He struck the other across the temple with his fist and felt the crush of bone. Turning at a crouch he flung himself against the knees of the third man, who staggered, swayed, lurched backward, clawing at his side arm. Gersen caught him in a clamp, flung him face down, planted his knees on the heavy shoulders, reached down into the man's mouth, jerked up and back and snapped the man's neck.

Panting, Gersen rose to his feet. In less than thirty seconds he had killed three men. Gersen took up one of the long-guns, a pistol, a pair of daggers, then rolled the bodies into the river.

He started back toward the pavilion. The music had halted. The Companions, coordinated by radio-communicator, by one means or another had been notified of trouble at the riverside.

Gersen glimpsed a dozen Companions running at a crouch from the pavilion. Howard Alan Treesong stood on the bandstand, scowling in his direction. Gersen raised the long-gun, aimed, fired a round. Just as Howard Treesong jumped from the bandstand he whirled in midair, struck in the shoulder. Gersen fired again, and struck Howard Treesong in the groin, spinning him around again. He fell to the floor of the pavilion and out of Gersen's range of

vision.

Gersen hesitated, leaning back and forth, almost irresistibly urged to rush forward and make sure of Howard Treesong's death.

Danger was too close. If Howard Treesong were only wounded, as seemed likely, and Gersen were captured, it would be a grisly business. He could wait no longer. Dodging into the shade of the larch trees, he ran around the pavilion to the driveway, where he

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crouched among the parked vehicles. Three Companions ran along the front of the pavilion, Gersen aimed, fired once, twice, three times, and three bodies tumbled to the ground.

Gersen gingerly rose to his feet and craned his neck, hoping for another shot at Treesong.

Danger hung heavy. Death was imminent. Gersen retreated to

the road, crossed and took refuge in a copse of some dank local growth. A giant shape blotting out the stars descended upon the pavilion. Searchlights suddenly illuminated the entire area. Gersen decided to wait no longer, infrared scanners would soon be combing the landscape. He ran to the riverside, lowered himself into the water, and floated away to the north, secure from infrared detection.

He swam across the river and emerged a quarter mile downstream. He climbed the bank, sodden as a muskrat, and stood surveying the scene to the south. Failure once more. Bitter, galling failure. For the second time he had been offered a shot at his quarry, for the second time he had inflicted only a wound.

Tenders drifted down from the ship and a moment later returned. The floodlights were extinguished, the ship, now a black mass picked out by lines of illuminated ports, rose to an altitude of a thousand feet and hovered.

Within the ship, Treesong's brain would not be inactive. The alarm had emanated from the dock, where the Companions had taken the inept musician. Who was this musician whom Professor Kutte had allowed to play in his orchestra? Obviously, the question would be put to Kutte, who would briskly tell all he knew: the musician was an offworlder who wished to be present at the reunion.

An offworlder? He must be captured, without fail. Inquiry quickly would be made at inns, towns, transport agencies, spaceports. At Theobald Spaceport, the Flittering would be noticed, boarded. The registration, in the name of Kirth Gersen, would duly be recorded and made known to Howard Treesong. Gersen grimaced. He climbed the bank and trotted north to Glocher Way, then west beside the cemetery. The dead of Gladbetook, uncannily sentient in the starlight, watched him pass.

At the main street Gersen hesitated a moment, thinking of the runabout, but Professor Kutte represented the greater urgency and he continued along Glocher Way to Kutte's house.

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Light glowed from the front windows. Keeping to the deepest shadows Gersen approached the house. Valdemar Kutte, in a ma-ron dressing gown, paced back and forth, holding a towel to his forehead. So far, thought Gersen, so good, the normalcy of the scene made him wonder as to the accuracy of his projections. The spaceship might already have departed, with the idiot musician remaining as an unsolved, if trivial, mystery. . . . Nevertheless Gersen decided to wait. Behind a hedge he found concealment and settled himself.

Minutes passed, five, ten.

The street remained quiet. Gersen stirred fretfully. He looked around the sky, to find only stars and strange constellations. He heaved a sigh, adjusted his position, his clothes still damp.

A faint sound from above. Gersen became instantly alert. Again 'Imminence'

Down from the sky drifted a small airboat. Soft as a shadow it dropped to a landing in the street, ten yards from Gersen's hiding place. Three men stepped to the ground, dark shapes in the star-shine. For a moment they stood in muttered conversation, evidently making sure of Kutte's house.

Gersen ran crouching behind the hedge, circled Kutte's hydrangea bushes, and waited behind the gatepost.

Inside the house Valdemar Kutte, in a posture of outrage and indignation, complained of the night's events to a small plump woman who listened aghast.

Two men came along the avenue. They turned into Professor Kutte's yard. Gersen hit one upon the forehead with an iron garden ornament, grappled the other and stabbed him to the heart.

There had been no sound. Within the house Professor Kutte continued as before, striding back and forth, nourishing his hands, pausing to emphasize some particularly heinous episode.

Gersen crept back behind the hedge to his former post. The third man stood leaning against the skycar. Gersen stepped quietly into the street behind him. Striking hard with the dagger, he cut the man's spinal cord.

Into the back of the skycar Gersen tumbled the three corpses. He took the vehicle aloft, floated across Gladbetook, now dark and shuttered for the night, and settled into the yard behind Swecher's Inn. He went quietly to his room, changed gratefully into his ordinary clothes, tucked The Book of Df earns into his pocket. Returning

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to the skycar, he rose into the night and flew south toward Theobald.

Over the Oalglish River he lowered the skycar, dettisoned the three Companions, then continued south.

The scattered lights of Theobald presently appeared below. Red and blue twinklers marked the outlines of the spaceport.

Unnoticed and unchallenged, Gersen landed the skycar beside his Fantarnn Flitteiii'mg. He went aboard and started up the flight systems.

He considered the sky'car. If Howard Treesong found it here, near the spot vacated by a Fantamic Fhttei-ivmg^ he would draw the natural and obvious conclusion. The depot official would supply him the Flittet-wmg's registration codes, the trail would lead directly to Kirth Gersen, care of Jehan Addels, Pontefract, Alovsm . . . Gersen overrode the safety latch, set the controls, and let the skycar

fly off into the night.

He returned into the Flittaning, sealed the ports, and left the Land of Lelander below. At an altitude of ten miles he hovered and searched the sky. Neither macroscope, nor radar, nor xenode detector discovered any trace of Treeson's ship, which was just as well, since the Flittewing lacked armament.

Gersen flew into the far north and landed on an expanse of desolate tundra, safe from Treeson's detectors, should anyone think to deploy them.

Silence and starlight on the waste outside the observation ports. Gersen consumed a bowl of goulash and sat slumped in his chair, profoundly tired but prevented from sleep by a flux of queer moods. nervous excitement slowly waning, disappointment for his failure to kill Howard Treeson, contradicted by a grim satisfaction for the damage he had done, which would cause Treeson inconvenience, anger, fear, uncertainty, and pain not a bad evening's work. The events themselves—they could only be comprehended in terms of Howard Treeson's personality. . . . Taking up The Book of Dreams Gersen began to study the contents. He was too tired to persist. . . . He went to his couch and soon slept.

14

In the morning Gersen went out to drink a cup of tea in the slanting sunlight. The air carried a smoky reek of fust, mud, and aeons of slow-decaying vegetation. Low hills huddled across the southern horizon; elsewhere a plain, half tundra, half bog, extended as far as the eye could see. Gray-green lichen covered the ground, punctuated by starved clumps of sedge and small black plantains with scarlet berries. The reunion at Gladbetook School seemed far distant in both space and time.

Gersen went into the saloon and drew another cup of tea. Sitting on the top step of the exit port, in the wan light of Van Kaathe's Star, he once more set himself to an examination of The Book of Dreams.

The tea grew cold. Gersen read, page after page, and came at last to where young Howard had stopped his writing almost in mid-sentence.

Gersen put the book down and looked off across the distance. Once, Howard Hardoah had treasured this book. For Howard Alan Treeson it would represent a memento of the sweet sad days of his youth. And far more: it denned his being; it was precious beyond calculation. Suppose he were now to learn of its existence? . . . There were dozens of permutations to the situation. Howard believed that the book had been taken from him by his friend Nimpy Cleadhoe. An all-important question: where now was Nimpy Cleadhoe?

Gersen sat thinking: of young Howard Hardoah, frail, tentative, sensitive; of Howard Alan Treeson, strong, radiant with confi-

dence, pulsing with vitality. Picking up The Book of Dreams, Gersen thought to feel from the faded red cover a quiver of similar life. ...

#### THE BOOK OF DRK-^MS 901

On first reading, the book had seemed a rather formless pastiche. There were personal assertions, colloquies between seven paladins, twelve cantos of narrative verse. A late chapter revealed the language Naomei, known only to the seven paladins, and included a syllabary of 350 characters, by which Naomei might properly be transcribed. Before young Howard had fully developed Naomei, the book came to its abrupt ending.

The book apparently had occupied Howard for a period of years. The initial manifesto occupied a page and a half: a statement in which a sympathetic ear might find much that was vivid and compelling, whereas a cynical spirit would hear only callow bombast. So much, thought Gersen, might be said for the entire book;

final Judgment could only rest upon how closely achievement matched youthful fantasy. In this light the term "callow bombast" must be discarded. Feeble understatement, thought Gersen, was a more appropriate phrase.

The book began:

I am Howard Alan Treesong. I profess no fealty to the Hardoah ilk; I expect none. That my birth occurred through the agency of Adrian and Reba Hardoah is an incident over which I lacked control. I prefer to claim my substance elsewhere: from brown soil like that which I now clutch in my hand, from gray rain and moaning wind, from radiance discharged by the magic star Meamone. My stuff has been impregnated with ten colors, of which five are found in the flowers of Uahane Forest and five may be struck from the Meamone scintilla.

Such is the stuff of my being.

For ilkness I claim the line of Demabia Hathkens, specifically from his union with Princess Gisseth of Treesong Keep, from which came Searl Treesong, Knight of the Flaming Spear.

My vistgeist<sup>2</sup> is known by a name of secret magic.

1 Protagonist of a heroic cycle of folktales from Vhc IScham Fjulirot, a collection of sagas and fain tales acknowledged glani: mglv and pamfull\ h\ Teaching

2 \ term from the jargon of Teaching essentially, the idealized version of one's self  
Teaching defines the ustgeist rather narrowly and exhorts the individual to a lifelong attempt to match the beatitude of the ustgeist Howard, for vistgeist, formulated an entity totalh emancipated from the strictures of Teaching

This name is IMMIR.

May sullen rays from the dark star beside Meamone  
strike liver and lights of him who utters this name to scorn.

To the following page was attached a drawing worked by an unskilled hand yet infused with ardor and an earnest directness. Depicted was a naked boy standing in front of a naked young man, the boy stalwart and determined, with a bright intelligent gaze; the young man somewhat insubstantial but effulgent with a nameless quality compounded of daring, ardor, magical wonder.

This, thought Gersen, was young Howard's concept of himself and his vistgetst Immir.

The next page listed a set of aphorisms, some legible, others so erased and altered as to be unintelligible:

IN COUNTERMANDS OUT.

Problems are like the trees of Bleadstone Woods; there is always a way between.

I am a thing sublime. I believe. I surge, and it is done. I defeat heroes; I woo fair girls; I swim warm with glorious longing for the ineffable. With my ardent urge I outstrip time and think the unthinkable. I know a secret force. It comes from within, exerting irresistible thrust. It partakes of all gaiety, of the striding gallantry of the beautiful Tattenbarth nymphs, of the soul's conquest over infinity. This is VLON, which may be revealed to no one. Here is the secret symbol:

THE BOOK 01^ DRFAMS

I love Glaide with the blond curls. She lives in dreaming, as an anemone lives in cool water. She is not aware that I am I. I wish I knew the way into her soul. I wish I knew the magic to join our dream-ways. If I only could talk to her by starlight, afloat on quiet waters.

I can see the outlines; there are ways to control the beast. But I have much to learn. Fear, panic, terror: they are like wild giants who must be conquered and enslaved to my service. It shall be done. Wherever I go they will follow at my heels, unseen and unknown until I command.

Glaide!

I know she must be aware.

Glaide!

She is made from starlight and flower dust; she breathes  
the memory of midnight music.  
I wonder I wonder I wonder.

Today I showed her the Sign, casually, as if it were of  
no importance. She saw it; she looked at me But she spoke  
no word.

(The next few passages bore traces of erasure with passages  
overwritten in a stronger hand.)

What is power? It is the means to realize wants and wishes.  
To me, power has become a necessity; in itself it is a virtue  
and balm sweet as a girl's kiss, and—similarly—it is there  
to be taken.

I am alone. Enemies and hurlibuts surround me, and  
stare with mad eyes. They flaunt their insolent haunches as  
they pass by on the run.

Glaide, Glaide, why did you do so? You are deprived  
to me, you are soiled and spoiled. O sweet soiled Glaide!  
You shall know regret and remorse; you shall sing songs of  
woe, to no avail. As for the dogskm Tupper Sadalfloury, I  
shall take him in the amber gondola to Slaymarket Isle and  
give him to the Moals.

But it is time to think beyond.

The text passed over a page, to resume in ink of heavy purple-  
black. The hand seemed more firm, the characters more regularly  
formed. The next passage was headed:

M/WI RICS

The accumulation of power is a self-sustaining process.  
The first accretion is slow, but increases according to di-  
rection.' First, the requisite steps These are an equable and  
careless fare, where nothing is revealed. During this phase  
all strictures are methodically discarded. Discipline in itself  
is not a corrupt concept, only discipline that is imposed

1 Direcuon" evidently signifies "personal control,' ' personal manipulation  
"

I HE BOOK OF DRL.4M^ 905

rather than self-calculated. Emancipation, then, is first  
from Teaching, from duty, h-om setter emotions, which  
loosen the power of decision.

(An evident lapse of time, perhaps several months. The ensuing  
hand was tall, spiky, angular, and exuded an almost palpable en-  
ergy.)

A new girl has come to town!

Her name is Zada Memar

Zada Memar.

To think of her brings a blur of enthrallment across the brain.

She moves in a cosmos other own, colored by her own colors and urged by her own fascinating ardors' How can I )om my cosmos to hers^ How can I share our secrets^^ How can we merge ourselves into a unity of body and soul and ardo^

I wonder if she knows me as I know her?

There followed several pages of extravagant speculations upon Destiny and circumstances subsequent to a chance meeting between himself and Zada Memar.

The next passage consisted of passionate apostrophes addressed to the inner consciousness of Zada Memar. There was no explicit clue as to the progress or outcome of the love affair, except in the termination of the passage a wild burst ot emotion directed against the environment in which Howard Hardoah found himself

Enemies surround me, they stare at me with mad eyes, walking or loping past, or veering as if blown on the wind, they flaunt their insolent challenges I see them through several minds, as is useful.

The time is Now [ call on Imnur  
Immir' To the tore'

\ blank page, and a division in The Book ofDfiW?i\ For want of better terms, the foregoing could be designated Part One. Part

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Two was indited in a firm round hand. The rasping fervor or previous passages seemed under strong control.

The apparent continuity between the final line of Part One and the first line of Part Two would seem to be misleading.

Upon that place made sacred to myself I bled my blood, I made the sign. I spoke the word, I called on Immir, and he came.

I said, Immir, the time is Now. Stand together with me. Assuredly. We are one.

Now we must set about our affairs. Let us form our company, so that each is known to each, mighty paladins all.

So it shall be. Come, stand in the ray from Meamone and

by their redolent colors let them be known.

The ray struck down upon the black gem, so that a person of black splendor appeared; he and Immir embraced like boon companions of old.

Here is the first paladin; he is Jena Rais the Wise, and far of vision. He reckons eventualities and counsels the necessary, without weakness, pity, ruth, or clemency.

I give you welcome, noble paladin.

To Meamone's ray Immir showed the red gem, and a person wearing crimson amphruscules<sup>1</sup> joined the three.

Here stands Lons Hohenger the red paladin. He knows and works the executive arts. Without effort he does deeds wondrous to the ordinary man. He is a stranger to fear. He cries: Ah ha ha! when the falbards are raised for combat.

Loris, I accept you as my red paladin, and I promise you feats and forays to surpass any which have gone before.

That is i?ood to hear.

Immir, who now will Join us?

1 \mphrusculcs the en.imeled tablet-- forming die shoulder insignia .md chest medallion  
ot a Trelancthun Lmgghl

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Immir used the green gem, and one wearing the green garments of an Idaspian grandee stepped to the fore. Tall and grave he stood with hair like midnight and eyes blazing green.

Here is Mewness, who upholds the Green: an extraordinary paladin, supple, strange, and eerie in his manner of mind. He conducts the madcap exploits, he performs that which is direly unexpected. He owns to no more qualms than a lizard and makes no explanation to friend or foe. He has no peer in riddling mazes and also he is a most talented musician, proficient in the several modes.

Green Mewness, will you join us as a paladin?

With great joy, and forever.

Excellent! Immir, who now?

Immir found a fine topaz and cherished it under Meamone, and so appeared a person wearing a black halpern fetched with a yellow plume, yellow boots, and gauntlets. Strung over his back he carried a lute. Immir gave him greeting and named him Spangleway the Antic.

We are fortunate indeed; here is merry Spangleway the Antic, to relieve us when the way is weary. In battle he is wily

and master of terrifying artifice; only Mewness can match him for his cunning ploys and startling displays.

Immir, who else do we command?

I hold this sapphire to Meamone; I call on Rhune Fader the Blue!

A person slender and strong, as blithe and winsome as the sunny sky of memory, stepped forward.

Here is our gay Rhune, fair and strong and ignorant both of despair and defeat! Sometimes he is known as Rhune the Gentle, still he strikes hard, deep, and often, but never in harsh rage, and he allows his captives easy repentance.

Rhune Fader, we welcome you; will you join us?

90S lilt DPMON PRINCES

All the winds and thunders, all the energetics of war, all the ploys and plots of cunning cowards none could hold me apart.

Then you are our sworn paladin

Immir, who else^ Are there more to add to this marvelous troop;

One more, a person to make out the whole.

Immir held high a white crystal. I call for Eia Pamce the White!

A person appeared wearing a black cape over body armor of white sequins. His face was pallid and without humor, his cheeks were hollow and his eyes showed like glimpses of pale fire

Immir spoke: Eia, as fearsome to enemies as death itself, speaks little. His deeds tell their own tale and terror trembles in his wake. Re)oice, paladins, that Eia is one of us; as foe he is redoubtable.

Eia Panice, I greet you and make you my brother paladin, and we shall venture through many circumstances.

That is my hope.

Immir spoke: So then, the gallant seven' Let all advance and clasp hands and may the bond be broken only by sorry

death'

All averred, and so was formed the noble troop, destined to perform deeds and feats to surpass all those of yore or hence.

On the next pages the young Howard had attempted portraits of the Seven, with much evidence of painful reworking. The sketches terminated Part Two of the book.

There followed several pages of notes and memoranda, a few written in the Naornei syllabar) Howard apparently tired of the exertion and continued in ordinary language.

A list of descriptive titles appeared-

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1. The Adventure at Tuarech
- 2 The Duel with the Sarsen Ebratan Champions
- 3 The Coming of Zada
4. The Insolent Pride of King Weper
5. Zada Forlorn
6. The Castle Haround
7. The Wooing of Zada Memar
- 8 The Seven Weirds of Haltenhorst
9. The Adventure at the Green Star Inn
10. The Great Games at Woon Windway
11. The Dungeons ofMourne
12. Paladins Triumphant!

Whatever text Howard Hardoah had planned for the twelve titles was not included in the book, except for excerpts and fragments which occupied the pages following; then, abruptly, two-thirds of the way through the book, almost in midsentence, there was no more writing.

Gersen put the book down He descended to the tundra and paced back and forth beside the Flittef-wmg All could yet go well. There had been failure at Voymont, and likewise at Gladbetook, but The Book of Dreams might permit a third opportunity—if he used it correctly To any obvious bait, Howard Treesong, twice wounded, would react wath hypersensitive suspicion.

The problem, then, was to deploy the bait where it would be perceived as something otherwise.

Gersen halted and stood looking gloomily south. Before plans could be formed, he must return once more to Gladbetook.

The proscriptions m regard to Maumsh airspace no longer troubled

Gersen, clearly no one made the slightest attempt at enforcement. About the hour of noon he dropped the Flittefwing down from behind a low cloud and into the woodland at the back of Hardoah's Home Farm. Mindful of previous frustrations, he armed himself with care, then sealed his ship and walked to the edge of the open land. To his right spread a large pond, to his left that strip of land formerly worked by the Cleadohes. As Gersen approached Home Farm, Ledesmus Hardoah left the barn with a bucket of feed which he tossed into the fowl run, and then returned into the barn. Gersen went to the door of the farmhouse and knocked.

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The door slid back to reveal the gaunt figure of Reba Hardoah. She looked Gersen up and down with a blank expression.

Gersen greeted her politely. "Today I'm here on business, I'm afraid. I need just a bit more information. Naturally, I'm quite willing to pay for taking your time."

Reba Hardoah spoke in a nervous rush of words: "Mr. Hardoah isn't here at the moment. He has gone into the village."

Ledesmus, emerging from the barn, saw Gersen. He put down his bucket and ambled across the yard. "So you're back, eh? Did you hear the news about Howard?"

"News? What news?"

Ledesmus guffawed and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Maybe I shouldn't laugh, but that crazy Howard come to the school meeting with a gang of thugs and made everyone jump through a hoop. Settled all his old scores, did Howard."

"Terrible, terrible," keened Reba Hardoah. "He insulted the van Bouyers and struck Bloy Sadalfloury and acted a great cruel villain. We've been properly shamed by a graceless son."

"Now there, lady," said Ledesmus, "it's nothing to pine over. Truth to tell, it gives me to laugh when I think of it. That Howard now, who'd have thought he'd turn out such a scarper?"

"It's a disgrace!" cried Reba. "Your father even now is trying to make amends."

"He's much too upright," said Ledesmus. "Howard is nothing to do with us."

"That's my point of view," said Gersen. "Still, it's a pity that he brought you such bad notoriety."

"When I go to Teaching House, I'll never know where to look," said Reba Hardoah.

"Just stare them down," Ledesmus told her. "Specify that if they don't behave you'll complain to Howard. That should shut a mouth or two."

"What an insane idea! But give this gentleman his information; he's willing to pay for it."

"Indeed? What is it this time?"

"Nothing of consequence. You mentioned one of Howard's friends, Nimpy Cleadhoe."

"Certainly. So then?"

"What happened to Nimpy? Where is he now?"

Ledesmus frowned and looked across the field to a dismal little

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house under a pair of straggling ginsaps. "Those Cleadhoes were always queer folk, offworlder stock. Old Cleadhoe was queerest of all; in fact he was marmelixer for Fluter Township. I don't remember all so clearly, but they didn't take kindly to Howard fighting on Nimpy and accusing him of stealing his book; and the lady, Mrs. Cleadhoe, come over to complain to father, who had words with Howard, and Howard went away to make his career, and succeeded, as we have seen."

"Ledesmus, don't say so! It's shame on us for his awful deeds!"

Ledesmus only laughed. "I wish I'd been to see it all. Think of Maddo Strubbins with his hind parts on ice! That's rich, now!"

Gersen asked, "And what of Nimpy?"

"The Cleadhoes left, and that's all we saw of them."

"Where did they go?"

"They told me naught." He looked to his mother. "What of you?"

"They went back whence they came." Reba Hardoah jerked her thumb toward the sky. "Offworld. When the old Cleadhoes died, they called for their offworld kin to inherit the land, so the new Cleadhoes arrived. That was before you were born. We had little to do with them, and we can't be blamed, considering the man's calling."

"Town eviscerator and marmelizer." Ledesmus spoke with disgust.

Reba Hardoah hunched her bony shoulders and shuddered. "It comes to us all, Teaching or no. Still, who'd be marmelizer but someone low-caste, or offworld?"

Into the house came Adrian Hardoah. He stopped short at the sight of Gersen and stared suspiciously from face to face. "What's

all this? Something to do with Howard again?"

"Not this time, sir," said Gersen. "We were discussing your old neighbors, the Cleadhoes."

Hardoah grunted and flung his hat upon the settee. "Bad stock, those folk. Never did well, never bred true. A boon that they're gone."

"I wonder where they went."

"WTw knows? Off-planet, at least."

Reba spoke. "Don't you remember? Old Otho said he was going back where he came from."

"Yes, something of the sort."

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"Where could that be?" asked Gersen.

Hardoah gave him an unfriendly glance. "The Hardoahs are the lineage or Didram Fluter. I am Instructor at the College; my mother was a Bistwider; my father's mother was a Dwint of the nineteenth generation. Otho Cleadhoe was public eviscerator, who turned a flat ear to Teaching. Am I then to be his crony?"

"Definitely not."

Adrian Hardoah gave a gloomy nod. "Go look at the marmels. The first Cleadhoe stands proudfast. His plaque tells of his birth."

"Correct and exact!" cried Ledesmus. "Trust Father for wisdom; he's never failed yet!"

Ledesmus and Gersen drove into town in the Hardoah's old power-wagon. Along the way Ledesmus discussed Howard's exploits at the school reunion. His chortles of amusement indicated neither shame nor remorse for Howard's outrageous deeds.

Ledesmus halted the wagon beside the church and led the way into the cemetery, threading the dead convocations with the ease of long acquaintance. "The Hardoahs and our other ilk are yonder. Over here stands the dross-outworlders and persons of poor reputation."

The time was late afternoon. In the low light the two moved among the shadowed figures. Plaques bespoke their names to those who after the passage of years might have forgotten them. Kassideh . . . Hornblath . . . Dadendorf. . . Lup . . . Cleadhoe . . .

Gersen pointed. "Here's one of them."

"That's one of the old ladies. Here's Luke Cleadhoe; he'll be the first, and there's your answer: 'Born on Bethune Preserve, out in the Crow, a far world lost to the goodness of Teaching. In his

youth a notable outrider, by diligence he earned to the post of disease monitor to the wild beasts, then to First Apprentice Taxidermist. Arriving at Gladbetook, he diligently worked the farmlands and nurtured a family of several souls, all sadly impervious to the truths of Teaching.' So there you have it," said Ledesmus in triumph-

As they walked back through the cemetery toward the church, Gersen chanced to notice the marmel of a young girl. She stood straight, head turned a trifle to the side as if she were listening for a far sound, a voice or a bird call. She wore a simple gown; her head and feet were bare. Her plaque read: Zada Memar, unfortunate

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child, taken from her loving family almost before her first bloom. Woe and alas for this poor maiden!

Gersen called Ledesmus's attention to the marmel. "Do you remember her?"

"Yes indeed! At the school outing she wandered off into the woods and they found her in Persimmon Lake. A pretty thing she was!"

The sun had set low behind the line of deodars; the marmels stood in gloom.

Ledesmus said suddenly: "Time to move along! Here's no place to loiter after dark."

15

From The Avatar's Apprentice, in Scroll from the Ninth Dimension •

Surrounding the pedestal: a low mound, agglomerated from the shards of false effigies across a hundred centuries. The latest of these, in the likeness of Bermssus, lay toppled, with one mighty leg thrust high. Marmaduke, standing to the side in a robe of brown frowst, was moved to a tear of sad recollection.

Now the effigy of Holy Mungol was brought forward and raised on high, to be exalted by the throng.

The Warkeep of Gortland climbed to the plinth. He raised his arms and called out in a brazen voice: "Victory-at last and forever! Mungol stands on high; the holy and the true guard our land! For all eternity so it will be! Let there be joy!"

The host responded with jubilation, uttering deep-throated shouts and dancing in circles. The Wind Lords struck their shields with mailed fists; the Bracha skirled

their noblest tunes. Arrayed in glistening mists the Prudesses rang bells and made signs, the Little Wefkms rejoiced.

Again spoke the Warkeep. "All is complete! The parapets are guarded by our mighty Vencedors; Bernissus is less than nothing: the remembered smell of a latrine in a diseased leper's nightmare'

"But of the past no more' Holy Mungol stands on high and casts his sublime gaze across eternity. Let each take up

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his loot and march in glory to his home' Blue Men to the east; Green Men to the west. I with my Cantarurces fare north!"

The host gave a final glad cry and dispersed, each marching his preferred way. A single group of seven persons set off to the south across Maudly Waste, toward Sesset. They were: Chathres, a flat-faced lumpkin with burly shoulders and a lewd tongue; three Lygons Ordinary: Shalmar, Bahuq, and Amaretto, Implissimus, Knight of the Blue Kerlanth; Rorback the glutton, and Marmaduke. It was an ill-assorted troop and a surly one, for none had taken loot.

Faring across the waste they encountered a train of three wagons laden with the plunder of Molander Abbey. The commander was Herman the one-eyed vagabond. He and his henchmen were given short shrift, and the band set about dividing the spoils.

In the front wagon Marmaduke discovered the delightful Sufnt, who had caused him such heartache at the Grand Masque. To Marmaduke's dismay Chathres insisted that Sufnt be considered a segment of his plunder, and his arguments won the day.

With sly forethought Chathres told Marmaduke:

"Since you have expressed dissatisfaction with the arrangements, divide the spoils as you will, into seven lots, and each shall choose that lot which suits him best."

"What is the order of choosing^"

"The order is determined by lot."

Marmaduke set about dividing the booty. Sufnt whispered into his ear. "You have been tricked. The lots will determine who chooses first, but you must choose last, as you are arranging the division, presumably, into parts of equal value."

Marmaduke uttered a cry of consternation. Sufnt said. "Listen then! Place me in one lot, alone. Divide all treasure

into five lots. Into the last lot place Herman's three iron keys, his shoes, his drum, and other valueless oddments. These naturally will fall to you Make sure you keep the keys, but abandon all else "

Marmaduke did as he was bid. By trickery the salacious Chathres won first choice and with a grand flourish took

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Sufnt for his own. The others chose lots of gold and gems, and Marmaduke was left the oddments

Suddenly it was discovered that the draft beasts had escaped and, worse, that all the water bags had been slashed with a knife and hung empty.

Furious talk was heard and accusations were exchanged. "How can we reach Sesset, w^ich lies five days hence across the burning waste5" cried Chathres.

"No matter," said Sufnt. "I know of a fountain not far to the south. We will reach it by sunset."

Grumbling and already thirsty, the band took up the loot and staggered to the south. At dusk they came to a fertile garden surrounded by a high iron w^ll which none could scale by reason of poison spikes A single postern afforded entrance, which one of Marmaduke's keys controlled.

"What luck!" cried Chathres. "Marmaduke's foresight has helped us all!"

"Not so fast," said Marmaduke "I demand a fee for the use of my key. From each of you I will take your best jewel."

"I have no jewels!" cried Chathres. "Must I then remain outside to become prey to wild animals5"

"What can you offer5"

"I have only my sword, my garments, and my slave girl, whom you may not have, and no warrior of honor would part with his sword "

"Then give me your garments, every last stitch and strap."

So it was done and Chathres entered the garden naked as an egg, to the amusement of all.

"Laugh now," Chathres told them "Tonight I shall take pleasure with mv slave girl. Then who will be laugh-

mg5"

For supper the band ate fruit from the trees and drank copiously of clear cold water. Then Chathres took Sufnt among the trees and set about his lascivious endeavors. But the iron walls surrounded a sacred grove and whenever Chathres attempted a lewd act a great white bat flew down to buffet him with its wings, until Chathres at last desisted.

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and Sufnt WAS allowed to sleep undisturbed. Chathres, however, found no comfort in the chill air of the desert night.

The next day, still lacking water bags, the group continued to the south, Chathres annoyed by the rays of the sun as well as sharp pebbles and thornbushes.

At sunset Sufnt guided the troop to an abandoned monastery to which only Marmaduke's key gave access.

On this occasion Chathres was obliged to yield his sword before Marmaduke allowed him through the portal.

During the night Chathres again tried to use Sufnt for his pleasure, but a ghost came from the ancient stones and sat on his back, and Chathres was distracted from his intent.

In the morning the troop set off to the south, Chathres suffering greatly from sore feet, insect stings, and heat blisters. Still, he never released the rope which he had tied around Sufnt's waist.

An hour before sunset the band entered a ravine which almost at once narrowed to a defile. A flight of stairs led high to a locked door, which Marmaduke's third key opened at a glance. Each of the troop passing through the portal gave up a choice gem except Chathres, who gave over to Marmaduke the rope attached to Sufnt. "She is yours, along with all my other goods. Let me pass."

Marmaduke instantly removed the rope. "Sufnt, you are free. I supplicate your love but not your submission."

"You shall have both," she told him, and they clasped hands.

The troop continued along a narrow path. From a grotto sprang a rock devil. "How dare you use my private

•• n

way

"Be calm," said Sufnt. "We will pay toll."

For herself and Marmaduke she paid over the sword and garments once owned by Chathres. Each of the others

gave up a jewel, except Chathres, who cried out- "I cite my naked body in evidence' I have nothing. I cannot pay."

"In that case," said the devil, "you must step into the grotto."

The others hurried along the way, the better to escape the sound of Chathres's appalling outcries.

At last the way came out upon a pleasant land Roads

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led off in several directions. The comrades took leave of each other and went their separate ways.

Marmaduke and Sufrit stood hand in hand considering the various directions. One of the roads dropped into a green vale, rose again, and slanted across the downs toward a steeple marking a dear and familiar village. Marmaduke stared in wonder. "That is the road I would travel," he told Sufrit. "Will you come with me?"

Sufrit looked along another road which led to a place she knew well, but none there did she love. "Yes, Marmaduke, I will come with you."

"Hurry then, and we'll be home before sunset!"

And so it was. They ran joyously along the road to home, while the light faded behind them. At tea, only Pin-nacy asked awkward questions, but they said they'd been to a fancy dress party, and that was all there was to it.

Later, events of this particular time tended to blur in Gersen's memory: a consequence of fatigue and the necessity of constantly contriving new plans on the ruins of old. Howard Alan Treesong had become a will-o'-the-wisp, dancing elusively ahead, ever out of reach.

Once again in space, Gersen repressed the urge to make for Pontefract, there to ponder new schemes and perfect his acquaintance with Alice Wroke.

Instead, he brought out the Celestial Handbook. Bethune Preserve was the single planet of Corvus 892, a yellow dwarf, in a group of a dozen such stars. The system as a whole controlled fourteen planets, uncounted planetoids, moons, and fragments of debris, of which Bethune Preserve alone supported life.

Bethune had been discovered by locator Trudi Selland. Her description of its phenomenal flora and fauna caused a public sensation, and prompted the Naturalist Society to instant negotiations, which ultimately led to purchase outright. Centuries passed, during which Bethune Preserve became in effect a planet-sized vivarium.

From the Handbook Gersen read:

At the present time Bethune Preserve is a curious mixture:

ten parts nature preserve, five parts tourist attraction, three parts headquarters for the Naturalist Society, its affiliates,

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and a dozen other organizations such as: Friends of Nature, Leave Be, Scutinary Vitalisis, Life in God Church, Sierra Club, Biological Falange, Women for Natural Procreation. A few residential tracts had been allocated for the use of these groups, as well as scientists, students, and research fellows. In practice, almost anyone who finds the conditions of Bethune Preserve congenial is allowed temporary residence, which may be extended indefinitely.

Today Bethune Preserve comprises over six hundred game and nature reserves, jealously guarded in their original state, ranging from an entire continent to that acre supporting the single and unique lillaw tree, whose provenance is a total mystery.

The Executive Trustees today are as zealous as their predecessors—sometimes heard are the words "arbitrary," "pedantic," "vindictive," "capricious," "obstinate." They rule the world as if it were a private natural history museum, which in fact it is.

In compliance with the local requirements, Gersen drifted close to one of the ten orbiting quarantine stations. He was boarded by four officials in uniforms of blue and green. The FlitU'fwing was searched; Gersen was questioned in regard to contraband life forms and instructed in local regulations. A pilot remained aboard to guide the Flittering down upon a plat at the Special Visitors Compound near the city Tanaquil. Here Gersen was required to post a bond and forbidden to introduce, sequester, molest, capture, modify, annoy, or export living entities of any sort. He was then allowed to proceed about his business.

From the space-field Gersen rode an omnibus into Tanaquit, through a grove of enormous black-trunked trees burdened with vermilion flowers and alive with small twittering creatures, who jumped, swung, and glided across high sunlit spaces. The omnibus was evidently their ancient foe; a troop followed overhead, twittering and pelting the vehicle with fruit pods.

The bus continued into Tanaquil, a town unexpectedly quaint, like a town built of children's blocks in bright primary colors. The original scheme had been conceived by the chairwoman of an ancient architectural board, who derived inspiration from the illustra-

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rions in a children's book. She had laid down the architectural

parameters to which "concordance" must be achieved.

Gersen took lodging at the Hotel Triceratops, a tourist inn notable for a stuffed saurian twenty feet long, with six splayed legs and two horns, popularly known as Triceratops Shanar.<sup>2</sup>

Gersen made inquiry of the desk clerk. "I want to locate an old acquaintance, but I don't know where he lives."

"No difficulty whatever. Apply to the Registry. There aren't all that many of us; all told, fewer than five million. But you won't find anyone there now; they'll all be at lunch."

In the dining room, which was decorated to resemble a primordial forest, Gersen was served a stolid meal, based upon standard cosmopolitan cuisine, though the individual dishes all carried picturesque local names. He drank beer from a bottle labeled SAV-AGE MAULER ALE, which exhibited the picture of a hideous brute glaring at a distant tourist charabanc.

At the Registry, Gersen was efficiently provided the addresses of two Cleadhoes, both resident upon the continent Rheas, in a place known as Blue Forest Gamp, within the Grand Triste Primitive Reserve.

Gersen had noticed the Halcyon Vista Tourist Service in a building adjacent to the hotel, but when he applied at the office, it had already closed for the day; it seemed that the business community of Tanaquil operated in a fashion convenient to themselves rather than their customers.

Gersen returned to the hotel and spent the rest of the afternoon on the shaded veranda, watching tourists, locals, and great floating insects: wispy creatures of froth, film, and trailing tendrils depend-

1. Concordance: a concept basic to the functioning of Bethune society. The Trustees govern Bethune Preserve in "concordance" with the old regulations.

Trustees are selected from "Notable Organizations," in which membership is hereditary. These onetime naturalist groups now serve principally to denominate the aristocracy.

Caste distinctions, while mild and nonrestrictive, are real. Tourists are outcasts and lack entry into local society.

By a curious and amusing inversion of values, those persons performing physical manual labor in regard to the animals and other nature objects—park rangers, veterinarians, biologists, herders, plant pathologists, and the like—rank low in status.

2. Bethune taxonomy, while precise, lacks verve. Popular terms carry more impact. Shanar is one of the Bethune continents.

ing from a gas bladder. He drank a succession of gin pahits and wondered how best to approach the business at hand.

If he apprised the Cleadhoes of his plan, they might help, they might hinder, or they could inflict total disaster upon him. He sorted through a hundred possibilities; then as the sun settled into the forest, he threw his hands into the air. He could make no definite plans until he knew more about the Cleadhoes.

In the morning Gersen returned to the Halcyon Vista Tourist Service, where the clerk smilingly informed him that only qualified scientists on specially approved expeditions were allowed the hire of air vehicles.

"No end of troubles otherwise, sir," explained the clerk. "Think it out for yourself! We'd have little family picnics in the middle of the Gunderson Wallows, with baby eaten by a three-armed swamp ape, and daughter raped by the game warden."

"Then how can I get where I want to go?"

"Tourists are recommended to book aboard one of the Wild Life Inspection Safaris, in a totally safe and air-conditioned vehicle. That is the easiest and best way to visit the preserves. But where do you want to go? You must understand that many areas are off-limits."

"I want to go to Blue Forest Camp in the Grand Triste Primitive Reserve."

The agent shook his head. "That is not an area developed for tourist travel, sir."

"Suppose you yourself wished to visit Blue Forest Camp, how would you go about it?"

"I'm not a tourist."

"Still, how would you do it?"

"I'd naturally take the commercial flight to Maundy River Station, and the day flight into the forest. But—"

Gersen put a fifty-SVU certificate on the counter. "I'm not a tourist, I'm a commercial traveler. I sell insect repellent. Get me the tickets. I'm in a hurry, incidentally."

The agent smiled and shrugged and put the certificate into a drawer. "It does no good to hurry here. In fact, it may even be against the law."

Blue Forest was a heavily wooded savanna, rather than an unbroken growth of trees, and occupied the basin of the Great Bulduke River, an area of half a million square miles. The forest foliage was only predominantly blue, in three hues: ultramarine, bright sky blue, and pallid chalk blue. Additionally, certain trees showed foliage of beetle-wing green and a few were gray. Enormous soft-winged moths moving through the sunlight created a teasing flicker of crimson and black. Beasts were numerous- The herbivores were protected by bulk, armor, speed, agility, stench, nailing arms, bristling horns, or poison glands. Carnivores displayed equipment to overcome the defenses. Various sorts of scavengers skulked through the shadows.

The Junction of the Lesser Bulduke and the Haunted River occurred in a network of sloughs and swamps, inhabited by an extravagant variety of creatures: large, small, fearsome, mild, with and without yellow wattles, with and without gaping purple maws. North of the swamp rose a low tableland, the site of Blue Forest Camp.

Gersen walked from the airport to town along an unpaved road guarded by a pair of ten-foot fences, which held back vegetation and beasts but permitted the free passage of insects. Heat and humidity oppressed the air, which smelled of twenty unfamiliar odors:

vegetation, soil, animal essences.

The fence struck off to either side at right angles to enclose the town. Gersen went to the Corporation Circuit Hotel and entered a lobby dim and cool. Without comment he was assigned a room by a morose young woman, who took his money and jerked her thumb toward the hall. "Room four." Keys were considered unnecessary.

Gersen's room was clean, cool, sparsely furnished, and well screened from the outdoors. An old town directory lay on the table. Gersen turned the pages. He saw:

Cleadhoe, Otho  
Cleadhoe, Tuty

Residence:

Employment:

Residence:

Employment:

20 Perimeter  
Post-station Workshop  
20 Perimeter  
Commissary

Gersen went out into the little central square. The town was quiet; few folk were abroad. Across the street a gaunt structure

showed a sign: COMMISSARY.

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Gersen looked through the door. He saw an elderly man and a portly black-haired woman with thick black eyebrows, a heavy nose, and an uncompromising manner. The affairs of a customer occupied her attention; Gersen turned away. The Commissary was not an appropriate place to meet Tuty Cleadhoe.

In the center of the square a refreshment stand sold cold drinks and ices. Gersen obtained a pint of cold fruit punch and seated himself on a bench.

For an hour he waited while the folk of Blue Forest Camp went about their affairs. Children trooped past on their way home from school; persons entered the Commissary and departed. The sun dropped into the west.

From the Commissary came Tuty Cleadhoe. She walked briskly away to the south part of town.

Gersen followed, along a lane shaded under great spreading trees. Tuty Cleadhoe entered a house close by the peripheral fence.

Gersen waited ten minutes, then rang the doorbell. The door slid back and Tuty Cleadhoe looked out. "Sir?^

"I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes."

"Indeed." Tuty's dark eyes snapped as she looked Gersen up and down. "To what purpose?"

"You formerly were resident at Gladbetook in Maunish?"

After a short pause. "Yes. A long time ago."

"I have just come from there."

"That is of no interest to me. I have only bitter memories of Gladbetook. You must excuse me. The neighbors will wonder at my talking to a strange man." She started to close the door.

"Wait!" cried Gersen. "You lived near the Hardoah family?"

Tuty Cleadhoe looked through the narrow gap. "That is true."

Gersen found himself proceeding faster than he had intended. "Do you remember Howard Hardoah?"

Tuty Cleadhoe stared at Gersen a long ten seconds. She responded in a thick voice: 'T do indeed."

"May I come in? I am here in connection with Howard Hardoah."

Tuty Cleadhoe grudgingly stepped aside and made a gesture.

"Come in then."

The interior of the house was dim, stuffy, and, for so warm a climate, overfurnished. Tuty pointed to a chair upholstered in rose-

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pinkvelour. "Sit, if you will. . . . Now then, what is this of Howard Hardoah?"

"Recently I had occasion to visit the Hardoah farmstead, and the conversation turned to the subject of Howard."

Tutv Cleadhoe looked incredulous. "Howard lives at home?"

"No. He left long ago."

Tuty thrust her head forward. "Do you know why?"

"Trouble of some sort. That's mv guess."

"If I could have put my hands on him"—she extended her hands with fingers clenching—"I would have torn him into bits."

Gersen leaned back in his chair. Tuty spoke on iu a voice hissing with passion. "He came to our house; he called to our son, softly, so that we should not hear. But we heard. He called out our one chick, our boy Nymphotis, who was so meek and good. They went to the pond and there Howard drowned our little son, held him under the water.

"I had a terrible feeling; I called, 'Nymphotis! Where are you?' I went to the pond, and there I found my lovely child. I pulled out the little bedraggled corpse and carried him home. Otho went to find Howard, but he had already gone."

Gersen asked, "Howard never knew that you suspected him?"

"There was no suspicion. It was certainty!"

"But Howard never knew?"

Tuty made a fierce controlled gesture. "How could he know? He was gone. It was our tragedy."

Gersen said, "I did not know Nymphotis was dead. I'm sorry to revive bitter memories."

"You revive nothing' We live with them daily. Look!" Tuty's voice cracked with emotion. "Look!"

Gersen turned his head. In a shadowed corner of the room stood a boy formed of a glossy white substance.

"That is our Nvmphotis."

Gersen turned away. "I will tell you something of Howard Har-

doah and what he has become, and how justice may be done upon him."

"Wait! Otho must hear you. If you think I am bitter, he surpasses me fourfold." She went to a telephone, made a connection, and poured a tumble of words into the mesh. P'rom time to time a man's voice uttered a question. Tuty gestured to Gersen.

"Now speak! We both will hear you."

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"Howard Hardoah is now a great criminal. He calls himself Howard Alan Treesong."

Neither Tuty nor Otho Cleadhoe made comment. "Go on."

"I have tracked him across the Oikumene. He is wary. He must be lured and baited with great care. I have failed twice, but now I have the bait to lure him again. Here your help would be useful."

Gersen paused. Otho said, "Go on."

"I don't want to continue unless you feel able to help me. There will be danger."

"You need not worry for us," said Otho. "Tell us what you have in mind."

"You will help?"

"Tell us what you have in mind."

"I want to bring him here, take him out into the jungle, and kill him."

Tuty said in an angry voice: "There is nothing for us to do! You will confront him, you will kill him! It is for Nymphotis that he must pay!"

"No matter," said Otho in a heavy voice. "We will help."

16

From The Book of D? earns

Gentle and gracious is Blue Rhune Fader, yet when moan the winds of war, Rhune's sword drinks as deep as any When the land is quiet, then Rhune wanders the flowered fields and sings songs of music

Not so Lons Hohenger, the feroce, whose color is the reddest of the reds' His ardor needs always a strong control, his truculence balances on a hair Only the paladins know his tolerance and his true affection All others, when in his

company, walk as if on eggshell His lusts are intractable, he plunders fair ladies of their treasure, usually to their delight, but occasionally to their distress, as with golden-haired Mehssa, who had vowed her virginity to the glory of Sancta Sanctissima Zada Memar, of fabulous beauty, excited him past all control, but she gave herself to Immir And Lons was first to hold high his sword in praise' Gallop forward along your mad and reckless must, ' oh Lons, on and ever on'

Arriving in Pontefract, Gersen rode by taxicab to Tara Square, where he alighted around him, on all sides, order and rectitude narrow old buildings, pallid folk in formal garments, pansies and wallflowers in raised beds, mist, overcast, dank winds and smells, all placid, custom, and reassuring At a public telephone,

1 The meaning of this fortune like others in Thi Hoof. i) Dmim^ can on he LoniLcnirni (Must lir^enLV VHthi.f/i-f in Old Russii a leagm \- irtetchnl hut who Lnims )

THE BOOK Or DKI^ WS

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Gersen called the Extant offices and was connected to Maxel Rackrose, who was serving as interim managing editor

Rackrose gave Gersen a greeting at once cordial and cautious He reported that, in general, all went well with Extant, credit for which he ascribed to himself

"I'm glad to hear all is going well," said Gersen "I suppose I'd better check in with my secretary "

"Your secretary?" Rackrose's voice sounded puzzled "Who is that?"

Gersen's heart sank "Alice Wroke The redheaded girl. Isn't she at Extant anymore?"

"Oh yes, I remember," said Rackrose "Yes indeed Alice Wroke Girl, sport-model, redheaded She's gone "

"Gone where?"

"I haven't a notion I'll look in the hook . You're in luck She's left a letter addressed to you "

"I'll be right there "

The envelope was inscribed

To be given into the hand of Hem-y Lucas only  
The letter read

Dear Henry Lucas

I discover that I am not really interested in journalism  
Therefore I have resigned my position with Extant I am  
staying at Gladen's Hotel, Port WTuary, which is south  
along the coast

Alice Wroke

Gersen telephoned Gladen's Hotel at Port Wheary Miss  
Wroke was not in but was expected back m an hour or so

At a rental station Gersen hired an air-car He flew south along  
the coastline, following the wavering white line created b\ wallows  
of gray water crashing up and over the rocks, across St Kilda's Bay,  
over Cape Mav and Point Kittery He passed Hannah's Head )ust  
as Vega shone through a rent in the clouds to illuminate the white  
houses of Port W^hearv across Polwheel Bay

Gersen landed at the public plat, walked along the waterfront  
to Gladen's Hotel

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In the lounge by the fireplace he found Alice Wroke. She  
turned her head, saw him, and started to rise.

Gersen crossed the room He took her hands, pulled her to her  
feet, kissed her face, then put his arms around her.

"Henry7, stop'" cried Alice Wroke. She gave an excited laugh.  
"You're smothering me'"

Gersen relaxed his grip "You needn't call me Henry anymore.  
Henry is |ust a mailing address. This is me."

Alice drew back and looked him up and down. "Does this ver-  
sion have a name3"

"It's called Kirth Gersen and it's less of a gentleman than  
Henry Lucas."

Alice inspected him again. "I enjoyed Henry Lucas, even  
though he was arrogant and hateful. What of you-know-who3"

"He's still alive There's a lot to tell. Will it keep until I've had  
a bath and changed my clothes3"

"I'll call Mrs. Gladen and she'll give you a room. She's very  
respectable, so don't do anything to shock her."

Gersen and Alice dined by the light of candles in the corner of the  
veranda. "Now," said Alice, "tell me your adventures."

"I went to Howard's school reunion at GIadbetook on Moud-  
ervelt. Howard played ;okes and danced the hornpipe. He criticized  
the performance of a musician in the orchestra. The musician shot  
him in the backside and the party ended."

"And where were you?"

"I was the musician."

"Ah' It's all clear now. What else happened3"

"I found Howard's Book of Dfeamf, which he lost twenty-five years ago I'm sure that he wants it back." Gersen pushed the old red notebook across the table. "There it is "

Alice bent her head over the book The candlelight burnished her hair and cast shadows along her slanted cheeks. Gersen sat watching her Here sit I, he thought, across the table from miraculous Alice Wroke. .

Alice turned pages. She came to the end and closed the book After a few moments she said "Almost always he is Immir. But I've met Jeha Rais and Mew ness and Spangieway, and I've had a glimpse or two of Rhune Fader, who paid me no heed. I'm happy that Lons Hohenger was otherwise occupied "

THE BOOK OF DRUM^

Gersen put the book back in his pocket Alice mused "Zada Memar—I wonder what happened to her "

"She came to GIadbetook from offplanct IMule on a school picnic she drowned in Persimmon Lake "

"Poor Zada Memar I wonder. "

Gersen shook his head "Not I "

Alice looked at him, her eyes dark in the candlelight "What do you mean3"

"I don't wonder at all."

In Comiopoli^ appeared an article accompanied b\ se\cral illustrations. The heading read

HOWARD ALAN TREFSONG ATT ENDS  
25TH ANNIVERSARY SCHOOL REUNION  
A Party No One W^ill forget

E\en Criminals Show Sentiment

The Greater the Criminal, the Greater the Sentiment  
—by our local correspondent,  
GIadbetook, Maumsh,  
Moudcrvelt, Van Kaathc's Star

(Editorial note Mannish is one of 1,^62 independent principalities comprising the political estates of Moudenelt Its landscape includes prairies, nverlands, farms, and forests, supporting nearly a million persons. Howard Alan ^ rec-song was born on a farm near the village Gtadbetook.)

Twenty-five years ago a shy brown-haired boy known as Howard Hardoah attended the district reunion at Gladbc took That boy is now the preeminent criminal of the Oik-umene and Beyond, and is reckoned as one of the notorious "Demon Princes" His name, Howard Alan Treesong strikes terror into a multitude of hearts, and his exploits have attracted the attention of everyone But Howard Alan Treesong still remembers old times, and with no lack of nostalgia at the recent reunion of his class he made a dramatic appearance, evoking from his old school chums what best can be described as mixed emotions

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The event will never be forgotten, and, if only in this regard, must be considered a great success. Early in the evening Howard Hardoah (as he was known at school) became convivial and roamed from table to table telling anecdotes and recalling old incidents, sometimes to the discomfort of his audience.

As the evening progressed, Mr. Hardoah's spirits soared to ever higher levels of fun and audacity. He played merry tunes on the fiddle; he danced several gavottes, a hornpipe, and a twitcherv. Mr. Hardoah's revelries knew no limits and totally captivated the group. He ordained ingenious pranks and charades to celebrate old episodes; these were dutifully performed by his now-nervous classmates, to whom his ultimate intentions were never quite clear. He sat Mr. Maddo Strubbins on a block of ice; he tattooed Air. Bloy Sadal-floury; and he arranged to escort Mrs. Suby ver Ahe with her two charming daughters, Mirl and Maud, on a long cruise through the outer worlds.

The festivities were interrupted by a gang of marauders who shot Mr. Hardoah in the buttocks and caused such consternation that the party came to an end. Mr. Hardoah departed in pain. The wound will surely curtail his dancing for some time to come. Mr. Hardoah expressed outrage that in a presumably well-ordered community such crass acts of violence could take place. He hopes to return to the next reunion, providing that it could be terminated less abruptly, inasmuch as he had staged only a few of his ingenious frivolities.

In the next issue of CosrfiopoHs:

HOWARD ALAN TREESONG

His Memorabilia and Boyhood

(Editor's note: A recent article relating to the notorious Howard Alan Treesong evoked much comment. The following communication, so we hope, may also be of interest to our readers.)

THE BOOK OF DREAMS

To the Editors of Cosmopolis:

I read your recent article about the school reunion at Gladbetook with great interest, inasmuch as my son Nymphotis was a school chum of young Howard Hardoah. It is strange how life works out. The two boys were inseparable, and Nimpy, as we called him, often spoke of Howard's talents and skills, and his dearest possession was a little book of fancies, The Book of Dreams, which Howard gave to him.

Our little lad died in a swimming accident shortly before we left Maunish and we still have The Book of Dreams to remind us of the old days on the prairie. We find it hard to imagine Howard Hardoah, so shy and careful, becoming the person you describe, but in our lifetime we have known many surprising events; more so, I believe, than most people, since we have traveled from place to place, and even now hardly know where we will die. We think often of our poor little Nimpy. If he had lived, perhaps now he might also be a person of consequence.

Please do not include my name and address, cope with correspondence at this time.

T

as I cannot

Respectfully,  
TutyC.

(Full name and address withheld by request.)

Into the Cosmopolis office came a spare and saturnine man of indeterminate age, wearing a neat black suit cut in the local style:

pinched at the shoulders and flaring at the hips. He moved with the quiet deftness of a cat. His eyes were black, his face was hollow-cheeked and narrow. Dense black hair grew to a widow's peak, then coved back over his temples and down past his ears. He went to the reception desk, looking alertly to both sides as he did so, as if from long habit. The clerk asked: "Sir, how may we oblige you?"

"I'd like a few words with the gentleman who wrote about Mr. Howard Treesong a few weeks ago."

"Oh, that would be Henry Lucas. I believe he's in his office. May I ask your name, sir?"

"Schah'ar."

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"And the nature of your business, Mr. Schahar?"

"Well, miss, it's somewhat complicated. I'd prefer to explain it once only to Mr. Lucas."

"Just as you like, sir. I'll ask if Mr. Lucas can see you now." The girl spoke into a mesh and received a response. She looked

back to Schahar. "Will you have a seat, sir? He'll see you in five minutes."

Schahar sat quietly, his black eyes nicking here and there around the room.

A musical tone sounded. The receptionist said: "Mr. Schahar, if you please."

She conducted Schahar along a hall and ushered him into a room with pale green walls and a lavender rug. Behind a kidney-shaped table lounged a stylishly pallid man with a languid face framed by glossy dark ringlets. His clothes were a confection of superb elegance; his manner, like his expression, was languid and just short of supercilious. He spoke in a toneless voice. "Sir, I am Henry Lucas. Please seat yourself. I don't think I know you. Mr. Schahar, I believe."

"That is correct, sir." Schahar spoke easily in a neutral voice. "You are a busy man and I will not take too much of your time. I am a writer, like yourself, though certainly neither as competent nor as successful."

Gersen, noting Schahar's strong shoulders, long sinewy arms, heavy hands with long strong fingers, controlled a smile of grim amusement. Schahar exuded a psychic aura of lethal expertise, of stabbings and strangulation, of terror and pain. Schahar had been present at the school reunion, standing at the entrance with the short thick man. Gersen recalled an event of months before when Lamar Medrano of Wild Isle had met Emmaus Schahar at Starport, New Concept. She had departed the Diomedes Hotel with him and had never been seen again.

"Tush," said Gersen. "I am not a writer; I am a journalist.

What is your particular field?"

"General affairs. Facts and personalities. I have recently become interested in Howard Alan Treeson^ and his amazing career. Unfortunately, facts are hard to come by."

"I have found it so," said Gersen.

"The article on the school reunion—you wrote that, I believe?"

"Our local correspondent submitted ten pages of very excited

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prose, which I cobbled together as best I could. For information about Treesong, Maunish would seem the place to go."

"I may well take your advice. What of this woman and her Book of DreamsY^

Gersen gave an uninterested shrug. "I haven't looked into it. The letter is around here somewhere. I seem to have been designated the Treesong expert." Gersen opened a drawer, withdrew a sheet of paper, glanced at it. Schahar leaned forward.

"An old exercise book or something similar," said Gersen. "Probably nothing remarkable."

Schahar held out his hand. "May I see?"

Gersen looked up as if in surprise and seemed to hesitate. He frowned down at the letter. "Sorry, I think I'd better not. The woman doesn't want to be identified. I can't say that I blame her, with so many cranks and crackpots running loose." Gersen replaced the letter in the drawer.

Schahar drew back, smiling a faint smile. "I'd like to collect any and all information available on this particular subject. My main interest is Howard Treesong's early life—his formative period, so to speak. I am anxious especially to examine such trifles as The Book of Dreams.^ Schahar paused, but Gersen responded only with a non-committal nod.

Schahar went on, speaking with a persuasive urgency: "Suppose I undertook to approach this woman in the capacity of a writer submitting to Cosniopolis, would you then allow me her address?"

"Your efforts would far exceed your profit, that's my opinion. Why not visit Gladbetook on Moudervelt and make inquiries of his old acquaintances? That would seem more fertile scope for research."

"Again, that is excellent advice, sir." Schahar rose to his feet, paused a moment, and seemed to sway slightly forward.

Languidly Gersen also arose. "I have an appointment elsewhere, otherwise I'd be happy to discuss the matter with you at greater length. I wish you success."

"Thank you, Mr. Lucas." Schahar left the room.

Gersen waited. An instrument to the side of his desk sounded a tone. Gersen smiled. He arranged a telltale to the drawer of his table, then turned a key in the antique lock. Clapping a triple-tier Aloysian hat on his head, he departed the room, strolled down the

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corridor past a pair of unoccupied offices. Behind one of the doors stood Schahar, so the signal-tone had informed Gersen.

Gersen walked at a leisurely rate around the block, then returned. He went directly to his office. Standing to the side, he slid open the door.

No explosion, no hiss of projectile.

Gersen entered the room. The telltale at the drawer had been disarranged. The lock showed no evidence of tampering; Schahar was a skillful operator. Gersen opened the drawer. The letter remained as he had left it; Schahar had been satisfied with the name and address.

Gersen went to the telephone and called Alice. "It's happened."

"Who came?"

"A man called Schahar. I'm going directly to the spaceport."

Alice's voice was neutral. "Take care of yourself."

"Of course."

Gersen threw the hat toward a chair, changed from his tight-shouldered suit into spaceman's ordinary, and left the Cosmopolis office—perhaps for the last time.

A cab took him to the spaceport and out the access avenue to the Fantamic Flitferwing. It had been cleaned, washed, polished, overhauled, inspected, and provisioned. The ports had been scraped clean of space dust. The linen had been renewed, the tanks were full of water, the bins loaded with food. The support systems had been recharged; the energy cells were replete.

The Fantamic Flittey-wing was ready for space.

Gersen climbed aboard, closed the port, stepped into the saloon. His nose detected the faintest of perfumes. He looked to right and left.

Nothing extraordinary.

He took three strides to the stateroom: empty. He threw open the door to the head. "Out with you."

Wearing mouse gray shorts and a black tunic, Alice marched forth. "So there you are," said Gersen.

"So it would appear," said Alice.

"I half expected this." Gersen pointed to the port. "Off the ship with you."

"Absolutely not. I've decided never to let you out of my sight

again. You might not come back." She stepped close to him and looked up into his face, "Don't you want me aboard?"

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"Oh, I'm sure I'd find you useful. Still, it's dangerous "  
"I know."

"Well, I can't waste time arguing. Now that you're here . . ."  
Alice gave a triumphant laugh. "I knew you'd see it my way."

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Bethune Preserve hung in space full in the light of Corvus 892 Gersen eased the Flitterwmg close up beside one of the orbiting stations No pilot was immediately available, he was ordered to

stand by

Alice grumbled about the formalities "I don't intend to molest their animals' I told them so but I don't think they believe me "

"Howard will be even more vexed He can't simply show up in his battle cruiser and throw his weight around "

"Perhaps he'll arrive as a tourist Perhaps he won't dare to come at all "

"I can't see him sending Schahar down for his precious Book of Dreams In any event you'll have to stay in Tanaquil, out of the way, if he catches one glimpse of you, we're in trouble "

Alice put on a submissive face "Whatever you say Still, you yourself said I don't look like Alice when I'm dressed as a boy, with my hair covered "

"We'd better cut off your hair and dye the stubble black "

"That's not necessary I'd be a funny-looking sight You'd laugh at me, I'd be angry and there would go our romance "

Gersen put his arms around her "That's a chance we can't take "

"Of course not WTIat are you doing3 Stop' You've chased me around the ship twice today already'"

" there's nothing else to do You bring it on yourself, really "  
"Aren't you afraid I'll wear out^ No^ Oh well  
The pilot presently arrived and took the vessel down to Tanaquil, despite Gersen's request to put down at the Blue Forest Camp airport

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"Sorry," said the pilot "That's not regulation "

It occurred to Gersen that even third word the pilot spoke was "regulation " 1 he pilot went on "We can't make it convenient, you know Everyone would be tracking about, picking flowers, tcis mg the monkeys 1 ounsts must go about their visits with decorum and respect Personally I'd keep the blighters out altogether "

"Then there'd be no one to inflict your regulitions on and you'd be out of a )oh "

The pilot turned Gersen a blue-eyed stare He decided Gersen had intended a )oke and laughed "I'd make out one way or another I'm not fust a flight attendant, you know In fact, I'm a fourth-level type and reckoned an expert on the pathology of the segmented melantid-worm "

Alice asked, "In that case why are \ou here piloting and not out taking care of sick worms3"

"There aren't that many worms They hide deep in the mud where they are hard to catch Then, like as not, they are quite well I may quality for a second specialty In the meantime, I do oui regulation stint with the company Here we arc at the terminal Leave all weapons and contraband aboard your vessel 'Now, it you'll alight I'll seal the doors "

Gersen and Alice, each carrying a small travel bag, alighted, underwent further examination and search, and were finally issued clearances

At a wicket marked OIIKI-\L \D LIMIID ( OMMI R< l\l i R^NSI I, Geisen attempted to book passage to Blue I orcst Gamp aboard the Station Service Flier The clerk refused to listen to him and pushed back his money "You'll ha' e to apply to the designated authorities, we're very keen here on orderly methods "

"Out of curiosity, when is the next departure for Blue Forest Camp3"

"Two departures today, sir, middle afternoon and shortly after, by the left- and right-hand routes "

By open-sided omnibus Gersen md -Mice rode into town under tall jacarandas and drupes, pursued by hysterical tree creatures

'Vt the I lalcyon Vista Tourist Service Gersen found i new clerk in attendance a self-important young worn in vuth narrow eyes and supercilious nostrils She instantly declared Gersen's request impossible and tried to sell him tickets on ^ ounst Schedule Route C Gersen used persistence and reasoned argument, after ten minutes

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of grim research into travel regulations the woman could find no

stipulations expressly supporting her position and grudgingly issued a pair of passage vouchers

The spaceport omnibus had gone out of service for the day Gersen located the town's only taxi, and the two returned to the spaceport, arriving only ten minutes prior to the early flight

Two hours later the flier dropped down upon the (ungle compound north of Blue Forest Camp The door opened, into the cabin came a waft reeking of the swamp

Gersen and Alice alighted, the flier departed into the south, and they stood alone in the )ungle clearing.

"The middle of nowhere," said Gersen " l'his way to the vil- lage "

From the Corporation Circuit Hotel Gersen telephoned Tuty Cleadhoe at the Commissary "I'm back again All is going accord- ing to plan Have you had word yet from, let us say, anyone else3"

"Nothing yet " i'uty's voice was harsh "We await him with hope and anxiety You have the book3"

"I'll bring what I have to your house, in say, half an hour "

Tun7 made a peevish tskm^, sound "We have regulations here. I can't leave my work on an instant's whim' . Well, if I must, I must I'll make an excuse "

Gersen told Alice, "Mrs Cleadhoe has strong views, in fact, she's obstinate and suspicious " He examined her critically "You'd better wear something drab and inconspicuous "

Alice looked down at herself She wore gray spaceman's breeches, black ankle-boots, a dark green shirt "What could be more drab and inconspicuous than this3"

"Well, pull that hat down over your hair and try to look like a boy"

"Mrs Cleadhoe might well be more suspicious than ever "

"I'm also thinking of Howard Treesong," said Gersen "If he sees red hair he'll think 'Alice ' It would be better if you stayed here at the hotel "

"We've been through this before."

"Stay in the shadows Talk in a low gruff voice "

"I'll do my best "

From his carrying case Gersen took various bits and pieces and stowed them about his person Alice watched without comment. Ciersen finally said, "These are weapons, all invoking poison Take

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this and be very careful with it " He gave her a bit of glass tube four inches long "If someone you don't like comes close, aim the tube toward his face and blow into this end Then, move as far away as possible "

Alice soberly tucked the tube in the chest pocket of her shirt

They left the hotel and walked around to Tuty Cleadhoe's cottage She had been watching, the door opened as they approached

Tuty's heavy face clouded with surprise at the sight of Alice "Who is this? And what?"

"Her name is Alice Wroke She is my colleague "

"Hmmf Well, it's none of my business Come in "

The room had changed from Gersen's previous visit in a single particular Nimpy's marmel no longer stood wistfully on the dais

Tuty gave a grim nod "Nimpy is gone for the while Now then, where is the book?"

Gersen gave her a red notebook inscribed The Book of Dreams Tuty glanced through the pages She looked up in annoyance "There's nothing here!"

"Naturally not Do you think I'd risk the real book so easily? It is a facsimile-bait, so to speak "

Tuty said grimly, "It is enough You need do nothing more Otho and I have formed our plans Nothing is left to chance You should go back to Tanaquil and wait. When the work is done you will be notified "

Gersen laughed "You may have formed plans but so has Howard He is a professional "

"I have no doubt How would you deal with him?"

"Sooner or later he'll show himself here When he does, I will kill him "

Tuty stood, arms akimbo, hands on her sturdy hips "Indeed, indeed How will you do this without weapons?"

"I could ask you the same "

"I have a gun, a Model J pro)ac It will blow the head off a thrombodaxus "

"Will you allow me the use of this gun?"

"Certainly not' Regulation strictly forbids it Nor would Otho approve . How long before Howard comes?"

"I don't know I came as fast as possible I suspect that he will do the same There won't be much time between us "

Alice pointed out the window "No time at all. Look "

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Along the street came Schahar, and behind him a short, thick man with heavy shoulders and a near-neckless head.

"Those are two of Howard's men," said Gersen. "Do you still think you can cope with them?"

"Certainly. Here he comes! Into the back room with you. And not a sound!" She hustled them into the back parlor and pulled the door shut. Light through a side window shone on a photograph of young Nimpy, in a silver frame, resting on a nearby library table.

Gersen tried the door, which refused to move. He cursed under his breath. "The old fool has locked us in!"

Alice looked at the window. "It's small. But I could squeeze through."

"The door isn't all that solid. We can break through any time we like."

"Shh. Listen."

From the front room came sounds of conversation.

"You are Tuty Cleadhoe?" This was Schahar's voice.

"What of it? Who are you? No one I know."

"Mrs. Cleadhoe, I am traveling secretary—"

"Go to the hotel. I don't want strangers about. I'm not alone;

I have a great gun ready for intruders. Be off with you."

"—for a noble and important gentleman, who wants to speak with you, I'm sure to your profit."

"An important gentleman? I know no one like that. What's his name? And if he's so noble why doesn't he come here himself instead of sending you?"

"Like yourself, Mrs. Cleadhoe, he doesn't care to deal with unpredictable people. He is also nervous and timid. Guns alarm him, so please—"

"Be off with you and your affronts! And be quick, before I nervously and timidly blast off your leg! I am old and alone, but I take no abuse from bald-headed tourists!"

"Excuse me, Mrs. Cleadhoe. I'm sorry to offend you. Please don't flourish your gun so freely. One question; are you the 'Tuty C.' who recently wrote to Cosmopolis magazine?"

"What of it? WTiy should I not write as I wish? What harm have I done?"

"No harm whatever. You brought good luck to yourself as you will see, if you put away your gun and compose yourself; then I will ask my principal to join us."

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"And then it'd be two against one? Ha-ha. No chance of that. Send in this noble timid gentleman and don't come back. The gun? I'll put it by, unless it wants use."

"I'm sure you'll find no cause for alarm, Mrs. Cleadhoe, and every reason for satisfaction."

"I can't imagine why or how."

No response from Schahar, who evidently had departed. Gersen put his shoulder against the door, which creaked and groaned. At once a loud rap sounded on the panel. "You two stay quiet! You are not to interfere with our plans! Not a sound now; someone's at the door."

Gersen muttered under his breath. Alice said, "Shh. Listen. I think it's Howard."

They heard the sound of the outer door opening and Tuty's voice: "Sir, and who are you?"

"Mrs. Cleadhoe, you don't recognize me?"

"No. Why should I? What do you want?"

"I'll refresh your memory. You wrote to a magazine about old times in Gladbetook and a certain chum of your Nymphotis."

"You're not Howard Hardoah? But I see it now! How you have grown! As a boy you seemed so frail! Well, think of that! I must telephone Otho! A pity he can't be here."

Inside the back room Gersen, clenching his teeth in frustration, put his hand to the door latch. Alice pulled him back. "Don't be foolish! Tuty would shoot you without a second thought! She knows what she's after."

"So do I. It's not this."

"Shh! Be reasonable."

Gersen again put his ear to the door.

"—a marvel how the years go by!—seems so long ago and far away! But how you've changed, so handsome and fine you've become! But come in, do, and I'll pour us a drop of something. . . . Here's some good old fructance. Or would you like tea and perhaps a bite of cake?"

"That's very good of you, Mrs. Cleadhoe. I'll take a drop of fructance. . . . That's more than enough."

"Have some of these little cakes. I can't imagine how you found me here, or why. . . . But of course. My letter to the magazine."

"Of course! It brought back old memories, things I hadn't thought of in years. Like the little book you mentioned."

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"Oh dear yes! That funny little red book! What a fanciful lad you were, so full of dreams and glammers! The Book of Dreams—that's how you named your book!"

"True! I remember distinctly. I'm anxious to see it again."

"And you certainly will. I'll find it in a moment, but you must Join me in my meal. I was just about to cook up some hotchpotch Gladbetook-style, and a dish of lessamy. I hope you haven't lost your taste for home cooking?"

"Worse, far worse! I've taken a stomach ailment and I'm restricted as to what I eat. But don't let me interfere. Cook up your own dinner and meanwhile I'll glance through my old red book."

"Let me think now, what have I done with it? . . . Of course, it's at the station, where Otho does his Grafting. He works such long hours, it's a pity and disgrace! But there are so few qualified nowadays, and Otho is at it night and day. He'll be so pleased to see you! Surely you can spend the week here with me until he comes out of the jungle! He'd never forgive me if I let you go."

"A week? Oh, Mrs. Cleadhoe, I truly can't spare so much time!"

"Now then, I have a nice spare room, and I'm sure you need the rest. And then you'll be able to see Mr. Cleadhoe. I'll have him bring your book when he comes. We'll have such good gossips over old times."

"It sounds delightful, Mrs. Cleadhoe. but I can't spare so much time. Still, I'd like to see Mr. Cleadhoe. Where is the out-station?"

"It's away through the jungle, a good hour's ride on the railcar. Tourists naturally aren't allowed anywhere near."

"Really? Why not?"

"They bother the beasts, or give them unwholesome food. Some of these beasts are under experiment; we keep them close under observation and provide their food. Mr. Cleadhoe does things just so."

"A pity he can't come in from the station tonight. Why not call him on the telephone?"

"Oh no. He'd never hear of it. The connections are wrong, in any event."

"How so?"

"By afternoon there's a feed train that tends for sick animals. It goes out to the station and returns by morning; that's routine and won't be changed. Sometimes I drive it out and stay the night

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when the regular driver wants time to himself. He always reimburses me for my lost time at the Commissary."

A pause, then came Treesong-'s voice, light and easy: "Why not drive us out tonight? It would be a great experience for us. Of course I'd reimburse your expenses."

"And who do you mean by 'us'?"

"You, me, Umps, and Schahar. We'd all like to see the station."

"Not possible. Tourists aren't allowed at the station; that's a strict regulation. One person besides the driver can crouch in the back cab and not be seen, but not three."

"Couldn't they ride elsewhere?"

"Among the slops and swill? Your friends would not like it' It's against all regulation!"

Another pause. Then: "Would fifty7 SVU cover your expenses at the Commissary?"

"Of course. They don't overpay us, that's a sad truth. Still, we don't complain. Our cottage comes without rent and I get a nice discount at the Commissary. Look in tomorrow and if there's anything you fancy, I can get it at a good price. If you don't care to go out to the station without your friends, why not Just stay the week? Otho would be distressed to miss you."

"Actually, Mrs. Cleadhoe, time presses me hard. Here's fifty SVU. We'll go out this afternoon."

"Well, there's not much time for arrangements. I'll have to telephone here and there like a wild woman. And perhaps I should have something for Joseph to close his mouth. He's the regular driver. That way we're on the safe side. Can you manage another twenty?"

"Yes, I think so."

"That should suffice. Now then, take your friends back to the hotel, then meet me with your overnight kit at the terminal; it's just a hundred yards along the road. In half an hour, no later—and don't approach until I signal, in case Superintendent Kennifer is strolling about. . . . Oh, and I must call Mr. Cleadhoe to tell him we're on our way, and to air the extra room. If it's jungle you want, it's all there at the station. Perhaps tonight we'll see a lucifer or a scorposaur. Hurry then, be off with you. In half an hour, at the terminal."

The door closed. Tuty Cleadhoe approached the back parlor.  
"You two in there—did you hear?"

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Gersen threw his shoulder against the door; it burst open. Tuty Cleadhoe stood back holding the blaster in both hands, her squat body braced and her face creased in a grin. "Stand back there! Make a move and I'll blow you up! I don't care a whit about you! Live

or die! So stand back!"

Gersen spoke with dignity. "I thought that we were in this business together."

"So we are. You brought Howard here; I'm taking him out to Mr. Cleadhoe and we shall see. Now sit down yonder, as I must make my arrangements." She jerked the gun. Alice pulled Gersen to a couch and the two seated themselves.

Tuty nodded and went to the telephone. She made several calls, then turned back to Gersen and Alice. "Now then—as for you—"

"Mrs. Cleadhoe, listen to me. Don't take Howard Treesong for granted. He is clever and dangerous."

Tuty swung her heavy arm. "Bah. I know him well. He was a haunted little milksop who bullied girls and little boys and finally destroyed my Nimpy. He hasn't changed. Cleadhoe and I, ha-ha, we're glad to see him. Now up with you, and remember, you're nothing to me whatever." She herded them into the kitchen and opened a door. "Into the cellar, quick-time."

Alice took Gersen's arm and dragged him through the door, down a steep stairs, and into a concrete-walled space smelling of strange molds, old paper, and condiments.

The door shut; the bolt jarred home. Gersen and Alice were left in the darkness.

Gersen climbed back up the stairs and listened at the door. Tuty had not moved. Gersen could picture her standing foursquare, gun at the ready, balefully watching the door. A half minute passed; the joists creaked as Tuty moved away.

Gersen groped around the head of the stairs, hoping to find a light switch, without success. He thrust on the door, which creaked, but withstood the relatively slight force he was able to apply from his unbalanced position.

Gersen groped through the darkness. Floor joists above, otherwise nothing substantial. He descended the ladder. Alice's voice came muffled through the darkness. "There doesn't seem to be much down here. I don't feel any other doors. Just cases full of old junk."

"What I want is a plank or a length of timber," said Gersen.

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"There's nothing but the cases, and some boxes and old rugs."

Gersen explored the cases. "Let's unload these things. If I can stack them on the landing so that I can somehow get my back to the door and my feet against the joists . . ."

Ten minutes later Gersen clambered up the rickety construction. "Don't stand below. This is quite precarious. . . . Ah." Lying back, he put his shoulders to the door, kicked up, and found a joist with his feet. He straightened his legs, thrusting with his thigh muscles. The door burst open and Gersen tumbled backwards into Tuty Cleadhoe's kitchen.

He picked himself up, helped Alice up the stairs, then paused to sort through Tuty Cleadhoe's cutlery. He selected two heavy knives, which he tucked into his belt, and netted a cleaver.

Alice found a cloth bag. "Put it in this. I'll carry it."

They went to the front door, looked up and down the street. Seeing no one, they stepped out into the droning afternoon.

Keeping to the shadows the two set off toward the railcar terminal: a cluster of dilapidated structures a hundred yards ahead.

"Tuty will be angry if things go wrong," Alice remarked. "She is a vehement woman."

"She's a conniving old harridan," said Gersen. "Slowly now. We don't want to be seen."

A heavy feter assaulted their noses, a smell sour, ripe, rich, and rank. Looking through the foliage they discovered the origin of the odor. By a hopper stood a portly white-haired man with heavy-lidded eyes and a placid expression. He controlled the flow of pink-

gray pulp sliding from the hopper into a vat on a railcar. He worked a lever; the flow ceased. A small locomotive backed close and coupled to the vat. Under the locomotive's observation cupola sat Tuty, peering over her shoulder and manipulating the throttle.

The man at the hopper waved his arm, turned away, and walked into a workshop. Tuty pulled back the throttle; the locomotive and vat-car moved ahead. Howard Treesong raised himself and settled into the goods compartment behind Tuty. From behind a bush came two men: Schahar and Umps. They ran behind the vat-car, swung themselves up to the small rear platform. The cars rolled around a curve and out of sight.

Gersen went to the workshop. The portly man looked up and gave a peremptory jerk of the thumb. "Sir, no public allowed here."

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"I'm not the public," said Gersen. "I'm a friend of Mrs. Cleadhoe."

"You've missed her. She's just taken feed out to the station, along with her nephew."

"We're in the same party. It seems we've arrived a bit too late. Is there another locomotive which could make the trip?"

Joseph pointed to a rusty old mechanism, dented and bent, supported on blocks and bereft of wheels. "There's old Number Seventeen, down for repair. One of these days I'll put on new drive wheels, when time and money come together."

"How far is the outstation?"

"It's a good seventy miles by the track. Shorter airwise, but there's not a flier in town. Quite illegal, for reasons of ecology and frightening of the beasts."

"Seventy miles. Ten hours at a steady run."

"Ho ho!" chortled Joseph. "You'd run maybe a mile before an eye would push up from the mud, then a messenger arm sixty feet long, ending in grab-hooks, and away you'd go through the air, over to the mud and down; and then what happens, who knows? Devil a soul has come back to tell!"

Alice pointed across the shop. "What's that thing?"

"That's the track inspector's go-cart. It won't pull freight, but she'll go lickety-split where the track is level."

Gersen walked around the contraption: a platform on four wheels with a pair of cane seats under a hemispherical visor splotched with the juices of smashed insects. The controls were starkly simple: a pair of handles, two toggles, and a dial. "It's not beautiful, but it rolls along fine," said Joseph with modest pride. "I built it myself."

Gersen produced a crisp certificate, which he handed to Joseph. "I would like to use the go-cart. Mr. Cleadhoe will be anxious to see us. Is it ready to go?"

Joseph inspected the certificate. "It's not covered by regulation. In fact—"

"There'll be another twenty for you tomorrow when we return. The Cleadhoes wouldn't like to miss us, and that's more important than regulation."

"You don't work for the Corporation! Nothing is more important than regulation."

"Except life and money."

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"True. Well, I hereby forbid you to use the cart. The black handle is throttle, the red handle is brake. The toggle controls switches in the track. The first fork to the left goes north to the observation post at Salmi Swamp. The second fork goes right and down to the breeding wallows of the red apes. The third fork switches off through the feeding meadow and back around to the station: so it's right, left, then either way. Now I'm going home, and I'm not looking back. Still, remember, you've been warned off the premises."

Joseph turned and marched from the shop. Gersen climbed aboard the go-cart. He pushed the black lever; the can rolled forward. Alice quickly jumped up beside him. Gersen advanced the throttle; the cart rolled away from the station and into the jungle.

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From Life, Volume II, by Unspiek, Baron Bodissey:

"Intelligence" demands the most strict of definitions, since the word is easily and often abused. Intelligence rates the quality of Gaeian man's competence at altering environment to suit his convenience, or, more generally, the solution of problems. The corollaries to the idea are several. Among them: In the absence of problems, intelligence cannot be measured. A creature with a large, complicated brain is not necessarily intelligent. Raw abstract intelligence is a meaningless concept. Secondly, intelligence is a quality peculiar to Gaeian man. Certain alien races use different mechanisms and processes optimally to rearrange their environment. These attributes occasionally resemble human intelligence, and, on the basis of results achieved, the effective organs seem to serve analogous purposes. These similitudes almost always are deceptive and of superficial application. For the lack of a more precise and universal term the temptation to use the word "intelligence" incor-

rectly is well-nigh irresistible, but can be countenanced only when the word is set off by quotes, viz: my own monograph (which I include in the appendix to Volume Eight of this slight and by no means comprehensive series). Students seriously interested in these matters may well wish to consult the monograph: A Comparison of Mathematical Processes as Employed by Six "Intelligent" Alien Races.

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The vehicle had been built of odds and ends, scraps and make-shifts. The right-hand stringer was a length of tungsten fiber pipe, while the left-hand stringer was hacked from jungle hardwood. A slab of magnesium hexafoam provided support for the seats, these originally a sofa with orange and blue cushions. The hemispheric windscreen was a reclaimed skylight; the wheels were a stock commissary item, for the repair of wheelbarrows, carts, and the like, with a flange welded around the inner circumference. Despite all, the vehicle ran smoothly and quietly, and Blue Forest Camp was left behind.

For the first few miles the track led through a floral tunnel of a hundred colors, permeated by shafts and sifts of afternoon light. Drooping fronds, dead black on top, transmitted ruby red light;

other fronds showed gradations of blue, green, yellow. Stalks of black-and-white tubing moved back and forth, thrusting their round black fronds this way and that for maximum impingement of sunlight. In open places moths floated on many-layered wisps of gossamer, black and crimson and lemon yellow. Other flying things, golden blurs, darted past in a hiss of air.

The jungle became broken. The tracks led across clearings and meadows dappled with ponds, each with its resident water bull:

great mottled creatures with horns and shovel-snouts, which they used to enlarge their ponds. A trestle built of concrete posts and timber laterals took the track across a series of bogs crusted over with pale blue scum, or alternately a carpet of angry orange stalks supporting spherical spore pods.

Beyond the bogs the ground rose to become a savanna. Rodentlike creatures in carapaces armed with prongs and barbs grazed the turf in bands of twenty or thirty. Often these were attended by ten-foot bait-apes: white-skinned creatures splotched with black fur. Sinuous black printhenes skulked through the meadows on splaved legs. These were voracious, cunning, and capable of prodigious feats of savagery; still, they avoided the vile-smelling bait-apes.

The track led up a slope and ran across a plain of coarse black and green grass clumped with thorn tree. Bands of spindly ruminants wandered the open areas, nervously alert for printhenes or packs of scalawags: ravening, pounding, yelping creatures half lizard, half dog. A dozen kinds of ruminants moved across the savanna, the largest an armored monster twenty feet tall supported on a

dozen short legs. In the hazy northern distance a pair of apelike

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saurians thirty feet tall overlooked the landscape with an eerie semblance of brooding intelligence. A mile to the south a flock of bird-like bipeds fifteen feet tall, scarlet-crested, flaunting bright blue tails, ran after a bewildered myriapod and hacked it to pieces with beaks and spurs.

The tracks led directly across the plain, diving at half-mile intervals under animal pass-throughs. The electric guards were now paralleled by a second electric fence fifty feet to either side of the track.

The sun hung low in the sky, sweeping the landscape with a halcyon unreal illumination, and the creatures of the land, rather than horrid reality, seemed more the subjects of an imaginary, if macabre, bestiary.

The tracks stretched clear and empty; the feed train had passed from view. Gersen pulled the throttle open; the cart lurched forward at great velocity, jumping, bounding, and shivering to irregularities in the track. Gersen reluctantly reduced speed. "I don't want to take this thing into a ditch. It's too heavy to carry out and it's too far to walk."

Mile after mile, and still no sign of the feed train. To right and left spread the savanna. Four double-headed browsers watched from sensors at the ridge of their humps.

A mile ahead the track plunged into a dark forest; at the edge of the shade sunlight glinted for an instant on the housing of the locomotive.

"We're gaining," said Gersen.

"And what do we do when we catch up?" asked Alice.

"We won't catch up." Gersen estimated the distance ahead. "We're only a few minutes behind. Still, I'd like to be a bit closer. Howard won't be able to explain Schahar and Umps; there might be trouble right away, unless he's a very smooth talker."

At the edge of the forest, the tracks wound back and forth to avoid outcrops of rock. Gersen reduced speed, accelerating when the tracks stretched empty ahead.

A post beside the track supported a white triangle; almost at once the track switched, one fork leading to the north, the other continuing directly east—the direction the feed train had taken, by the evidence of the open points.

A mile along the track another fork led to the south; as before the feed train had proceeded east. Gersen became even more vig-

ilant; the feed train could not be far ahead. As before he increased speed along straightaway^, cautiously slowing and peering around curves.

Another white triangle appeared beside the track. "The third fork," said Alice. "Station to the right, feed lot to the left."

Gersen braked the cart to a halt. "The feed train has gone left. See the switch points? We'd better follow."

For half a mile the tracks led north through a forest. Gaps in the foliage revealed yet another savanna stretching away to the east. The tracks curved east and slanted down upon the savanna.

Alice pointed. "There's the feed train!"

Gersen braked the cart to a halt. The feed train passed over an unloading device, in an area unprotected by the electric fence. Tutv stopped the locomotive, uncoupled the vat-car, and proceeded. A valve in the bottom of the feed car opened, discharging the pulp into a trough.

On the back of the car Schahar and Umps rose to their feet, to stare in dismay after the departing locomotive: Then they turned to examine the creatures which from all directions converged on the feeding trough.

A twenty-foot halt-ape, with head half bear, half insect, lurched forward at a shambling trot. Schahar and Umps jumped down and ran toward a tree. The ape caught Umps and lifted him by the leg into the air. Umps kicked out in a frenzy and drove his heel into the creature's proboscis. It threw Umps to the ground, jumped up and down on his torso, pounded the body with its fists. Then it turned away and looked toward Schahar, now perched in the lower branches of the tree, where he attracted the attention of a spiderlike reptile which inhabited the upper branches. It dropped a long gray arm which it swung toward Schahar, who yelled in alarm, drew a knife, and hacked. When the spider-reptile descended by swift acrobatic swings, Schahar jumped to the ground, dodged to escape the bait-ape, which then pulled at the spider-reptile's tentacle. The spider-reptile jumped from the tree, wrapped itself around the bait-ape's head, flourished high its sting, and thrust it home. The bait-ape keened in pain, tore at the tentacles with monstrous arms. The tentacles clutched tighter; the sting struck again. The ape banged the spider-reptile into the tree trunk, again and again, reducing it to pulp, and finally tore it loose. The ape staggered away, save a convulsive bound, and fell into a heap. A band of scavengers, at-

tracted by the outcries, loped forward. Noticing Schahar, they circled him, yelling, Jumping, biting, and Schahar presently was pulled

down to disappear under a seethe of animals.

Gersen spoke in a rueful voice. "Do you think Tuty knew that those two were riding behind her?"

"I don't care to guess."

The train with Tuty and Howard Treesong had disappeared into the jungle at the far side of the meadow. The feed car now blocked the track. "We've got to go back to the fork," said Gersen. He pulled on levers and toggles. "Where is reverse gear?"

He searched in vain. The throttle controlled forward motion;

the brake brought the car to a stop. Gersen jumped to the ground and tried to lift one end of the cart, without success; it carried ballast to hold it to the tracks. He tried to push the can, but the slope defeated him.

"This is absurd," said Gersen. "There must be a way to go backward. . . . If I had a length of timber I could pry the car off the tracks. But I'm afraid to go into the forest."

"It's getting dark," said Alice. "The sun is going down."

Gersen went to the edge of the track bed and looked into the forest—high, low, right and left. "I don't see anything. . . . Here I go."

"Wait," said Alice. "What is this little gadget here?"

Gersen returned to the cart. At the center of the platform a handle turned a worm gear. "Alice, you are an intelligent girl. That is a jack, which lifts the cart high enough so that we can swivel it around, end for end."

Alice said modestly, "I thought that perhaps I might be helpful, or even indispensable."

Five minutes later they returned the way they had come, to the third switch, and now they turned east, and drove at full speed through the twilight.

A mile, two miles, five miles . . . The forest abruptly became a soggy moor. Ahead the sunset glimmered on a wide loop of river. The track led across a bridge of metal bars, evidently electrified to inhibit the creatures of the bog.

Inside the compound the track led past a commissary store, a dispensary, and a row of six small cottages. A few yards farther stood the laboratory, which overlooked the swamp and, beyond, Gorgon River.

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The track branched into a siding. Gersen coasted up behind the locomotive and stopped. For a moment the two sat listening. Silence.

At Blue Forest Camp Howard Treesong said in a voice of jovial camaraderie: "The passenger compartment? Nonsense, I'll ride up forward with you!"

"A pity, but it can't be done," said Tuty. "Suppose Superintendent Kennifer should happen by? You sit in the back and crouch till we're in the jungle. Then relax and enjoy the ride. Watch for marshmallow moths and water flowers."

Treesong climbed into the compartment behind the driver's cupola and made himself inconspicuous. The train moved away from the terminal. If, from the corner of her wide-set eyes, Tuty had noticed Schahar and Umps as they clambered aboard the swill car, she gave no sign.

Through Jungle, across savanna, in and out of the dark forest, rolled the feed train. At the third switch, Tuty swung north and out upon the feed meadow, which was rarely used except when biologists intended experiments. But tonight Tuty had decided to feed the animals. Almost without halting the train she detached the feed car. Howard Treesong jumped to his feet in the back compartment and stared out the rear window. Tuty Cleadhoe never so much as looked over her shoulder. Howard Treesong, shoulders sagging and ashen of face, sank once more into his seat.

The train trundled into the station, rolled across the compound, and halted beside the laboratory.

Tuty climbed to the ground, grunting and wheezing. Howard Treesong alighted from the passenger compartment and stood looking around the compound.

Tuty called out in a brassy voice: "So then, Howard! How did you find our lovely countryside?"

"It's not at all like dear old Gladbetook. Still, it's quite picturesque."

"True. Well then, let's find if Mr. Cleadhoe is expecting us with a nice supper. I do hope he's put out his pets. He's a wonder with animals, is Mr. Cleadhoe. Come along, Howard, the night bugs will be after us in another minute."

Tuty led the way to the laboratory. She slid back the door.

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"Otho, we're here! Make sure Ditsy is out. Howard won't care to be annoyed by any of your charmers. Otho? Are you about?"

A gruff voice said: "Tush, woman, of course I'm about. Come in. ... So this is young Howard Hardoah."

"Isn't he changed? You'd never recognize him!"

"That's a fact." Otho Cleadhoe stepped forward on long thin legs, standing six inches taller than Howard Treesong. Cleadhoe's great head was bald on top, harsh and craggy, with an untidy tussure of gray hair, a stained gray beard, and eyes in deep lavender sockets. He fixed Howard Treesong with a long stare of impersonal appraisal. Howard ignored the inspection and looked around the room. "And this is your laboratory? I'm told that you're now an important scientist."

"Ha, not altogether. I'm still a practitioner of my old trade, but now both my subjects and my methods are different. Come along, I'll show you some of my work while Mrs. Cleadhoe puts out our soup."

Tuty called out in a voice of brassy jocularly: "Ten minutes, then, and no more! You've all evening to show off your trophies!"

"Ten minutes, my dear. Come, Howard . . . Through here, and watch your head. These arches weren't built for tall men. Let me take your hat."

"I'll wear it, if I may," said Treesong. "I am very sensitive to drafts."

"A pity. . . Well then, along this route we take Tanaquil dignitaries who come to learn how we spend the public money. I might add that they never leave dissatisfied. This is the Chamber of Astinches."

Howard Treesong inspected the room with his eyes heavy-lidded. Otho Cleadhoe, if he noticed Treesong's unenthusiastic manner, paid no heed. "These are all varieties of astinche, the Bethune andromorphs, a local evolutionary development. The genus is especially rich on Shanar and in this particular neighborhood. They vary in size up to the thirty-foot giant you see there." He indicated an alcove. "I processed the creature almost single-handed, with trifling help from my staff. I worked in an atmosphere of argon, under germicidal conditions. I skinned the beast, marmelized the soft tissues, reinforced the skeletal frame, and refitted the pelt."

"Remarkable," said Treesong. "A fine piece of work."

"They are amazing creatures, agile for their size. We often see

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them capering across the distance. . . . These others over here are its cousins, or so we believe. Do you know, there are still mysteries regarding these creatures? How they breed, how they develop, how they order their body chemistry? All mysteries! But I won't bore you with technical details. As you see, they come in every size, every color. 'Intelligence'? Who knows? Some are clever, some—"

A blur of motion, a cry of annoyance from Howard Treesong, as down from one of the alcoves jumped a creature eight feet tall

with thin arms and legs, to snatch Treesong's hat and bound from the room.

Otho Cleadhoe laughed a croak of indulgent amusement.

"Clever: yes. Mischievous: yes. Intelligent? Who knows? That is Ditsy, who is full of tricks. I'm afraid your hat is gone. I'll have to replace it."

Howard Treesong ran to the door and peered through.

"What's got into the beast? It put my hat in the fire!"

"It's a pity, for certain. I can't apologize enough. Ditsy, outside! What can you mean, acting in such a way? He's destroyed your fine hat. If your head becomes cold, please say so. Tuty can provide a hood, or a shawl."

"No great matter."

"Ditsy must be punished, and I will see to it. The creature is attracted to bright colors and makes a mischief with guests. Perhaps I should have warned you."

"No matter. I have a dozen hats."

"None other so splendid, I'll warrant! Well, it's a pity. . . . Through here now. We leave the Chamber of Astinches for the Hall of Swamp-Walkers."

Howard Treesong showed only a cursory interest in the twenty purple and black creatures with their odd cloaks of woven vegetation. "A very representative collection," said Otho Cleadhoe. "They are found only along the Gorgon River. . . . Now to the Den of Horrors, as I call my workshop. It never fails to impress."

Cleadhoe led the now bored and languid Howard Treesong into a room illuminated by a high glass cupola. A central platform supported a massive red-and-black creature with six legs and a ferocious head.

"An awesome beast," said Treesong.

"Quite so. And an awesome project—the largest of my experience. Yonder is my office—a dismal sort of place, but the Cor-

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poration won't spare me anything better. Your little book is there and we'll pick it up presently."

"Why not now?" suggested Treesong. "Since it's close at hand?"

"As you like. It's on my desk, if you care to fetch it. Now then, I wonder! Do you think that here and there the hide tends to sag

across the haunches?"

Howard Treesong had gone to the side chamber. On the desk lay a small red volume inscribed *The Book of Dreams*. Treesong stepped forward; the door closed behind him. Out in the workshop Otho Cleadhoe turned a valve, waited fifteen seconds, then turned it off. Tuty Cleadhoe looked into the workshop. "The soup is ready. Do you care to eat?"

"I'll be busy," said Cleadhoe. "I don't care to eat."

19

Navarth sat drinking wine with an aged acquaintance who bemoaned the brevity of existence. "I have left to me at the most ten years of life!"

"That is sheer pessimism," declared Navarth. "Think optimistically, rather, of the ten hundred billion years of death that await you!"

—from *Chronicles of Navarth*,  
by Carol Lewis

Navarth despised latter-day poetry, save only those verses composed by himself. "These are faded times. Wisdom and innocence once were allied, and noble songs were sung. I recall a couplet, by no means sublime—quaint, rather—succinct, yet reverberating a thousand meanings:

A farting horse will never dre.  
A farting man's the man to hire.  
Where is the like today?

—from *Chronicles of Navarth*,  
by Carol Lewis

Gersen and Alice went quickly through the dark to the laboratory. The night was warm, clear, and dark, illuminated by thousands of lambent stars. From the swamp and the jungle came sounds: a far strident howl and, uncomfortably near, a grunting bellow of rage.

Light shone from a window; Gersen and Alice watched Tuty Cleadhoe moving around in the kitchen. She sliced bread, sausage, and ramp; she stirred the contents of a kettle and set out implements at a table.

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Gersen muttered: "For two? Who won't be taking supper?"

"She seems quite placid," whispered Alice. "Perhaps we can just knock on the door and ask if we're in time for supper."

"That's as good a plan as any." Gersen tried the door latch,

then knocked. In the kitchen Tuty stiffened, then darted to a sideboard, tucked a weapon into her pocket. She went to a communicator, spoke, heard a few guttural words, then turned, marched to the front door, and threw it open, her hand close to her gun.

"Hello, Mrs. Cleadhoe," said Gersen. "Are we too late for the party?"

Tuty Cleadhoe stared grimly from one to the other. "Why did you not stay where I left you? Are you impervious to reason? Can you not understand when your presence is unwanted?"

"All this to the side, Mrs. Cleadhoe, you failed to honor our agreement."

Tuty Cleadhoe showed a small quick smile. "Perhaps I did;

what then? You'd have done the same to me, had you fixed on it." She looked over her shoulder. "Come in then. Wrangle with Mr. Cleadhoe if you like."

She led them into the kitchen. Otho Cleadhoe stood at the sink, carefully washing his hands. He swung around and surveyed Gersen and Alice from the depths of his lavender eye sockets. "Visitors, eh? Tonight I'm busy or I'd show you around."

"That's not why we're here. Where is Howard Treesong?"

Cleadhoe jerked his thumb. "Back yonder. He's safe. And now I'll want my supper. Wi\ [ you eat?"

"Sit down," said Tuty, with automatic if graceless hospitality. "There's enough for all."

"Eat," said Cleadhoe in a cavernous bass voice. "We will talk of Howard Hardoah. Did you know he killed our Nymphotis?"

Gersen and Alice seated themselves at the table. "He's killed many people," said Gersen.

"W^hat would you have done with him? Killed him in return?"

"Yes."

Cleadhoe nodded ponderously. "Well, you shall have your chance. I took him into a still room and turned gas on him. He'll be awake in about six hours."

"So you haven't killed him?"

"Oh no." Cleadhoe's smile broke a pink gap through the beard.

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"Life is awareness and Howard Hardoah should become more broadly aware. Perhaps in time he will repent his crimes."

"Possibly so," said Gersen. "Still, you have not kept good faith with us."

Cleadhoe glanced at him uncomprehendingly, then resumed his chewing. "Perhaps in our emotion we acted less than politely. But postpone your annoyance. You shall take part in the ultimate judgment."

Tuty cried out: "And don't forget, we guarded you from harm! Howard brought two of his murderers with him. Ha, but they will murder no more!"

Otho Cleadhoe smiled approvingly, as if Tuty had been describing the recipe for her soup. He said, "Howard is crafty! Imagine this: he carried a weapon in his hat! I instructed Ditsy to snatch away the hat and destroy it. As Mrs. Cleadhoe says, we have done our share in the work."

Neither Gersen nor Alice had any comment to offer.

"In about six hours Howard will recover his faculties," said Cleadhoe. "In the meantime, you may rest, or sleep, or examine the collections, or you may sit comfortably, drink tea, or brandy, and tell us of the harms you have suffered from Howard Hardoah."

Gersen looked at Alice. "WT-iat of you?"

"I can't sleep. Mr. and Mrs. Cleadhoe might like to hear of the school reunion at Gladbetook."

"Aye, that we would indeed."

At midnight Otho Cleadhoe left the kitchen. Twenty minutes later he returned. "Howard is returning to consciousness. If you like, you can come."

The group filed through the laboratory, and along a corridor. Cleadhoe halted beside a door. "Listen! He speaks."

Through a mesh came the sounds of a colloquy.

First came Howard Treesong's voice, clear and strong, but puzzled and fretful: "--an impasse, like a wall; I can neither advance nor retire, nor yet sidle away. . . . The sunrise is here. We are lost in the jungle. Take care, let none stray aside. Paladins? Who hears my voice?"

The responses came quickly; the voices almost seemed to overlap, as if several spoke together.

"Mewness stands by your side." This, a calm, clear voice, precise and without passion.

"Spangleway here, among the apes."

"Rhune Fader the Blue, and Hohenger and Black Jeha Rais: all are here."

A thin, cool voice spoke. "Eia Panice is here."

"And Immir?"

"I am here till the end."

"Immir, you are steadfast, like all the rest. Now, to set a wise strategy. Jeha Rais, you are grave."

The deep voice of Jeha Rais, the black paladin, sounded: "I am grave and more than grave. After these mighty years did you not recognize him?"

Immir: (troubled)

He called himself Cleadhoe of Dandelion Farm.

Jeha Rais:

He is the Dree.

A few seconds of silence.

Immir: (softly)

Then we are in desperate condition.

Rhune Fader:

We have known desperate times before. Remember the course at Ilkhad? It was enough to daunt the Iron Giant, yet we won through.

Spangleway:

I recall the ambush in Massilia Old Town. A dreadful

hour!

Immir:

Brothers, let us fix our thoughts on this moment only.

Jeha Rais:

The Dree is a brute of malevolence. To shift his force we need counterforce. Can we offer wealth?

Immir:

I will open our treasury. He can own Sybaris, for all of

me.

Mewness:

It will not tempt the Dree.  
Loris Hohenger:

Offer a dozen maidens, each more beautiful than the last. Let them wear gowns of sheer diaphane and regard

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him with gazes neither gay nor grave, as if they asked,  
"Who is this marvel? Who is this demigod?"

Immir: (laughing sadly)

Good Hohenger, the concept moves you! I suspect that you would throw your brother paladins into Lake Chill to take part in such a parade.

Mewness:

Not the Dree.  
Spangleway:

Wealth, beauty—what is left?  
Rhune Fader:

If only we had Valkaris's Cup and eternal youth!

Immir: (in a mutter)

Complications, complexities. I sense a devilish plot.

Rhune Fader:

Silence all! Someone stands outside the door!

Cleadhoe spoke in a whisper: "He is half-awake; he talks as if he were dreaming. . . ." He slid back the door. "Enter."

Half the room was bare and dim; the other half had been planted and worked to simulate a jungle glade. Light slanted down through a hundred sorts of foliage. On gnarled tendrils hung flowers, bug-catchers, and spore pods. A stream passed through rocks, forming a small pool, which drained through dark red reeds into an unseen outlet. Beside the pool, in an armchair, sat Howard Alan Treesong, nude except for a short skirt around his hips. His hands rested on the arms of the chair; his legs, which were stark and glossy white, rested on the turf. His head had been shaved bald. Across the pool on a bank of turf reclined the marmel of Nymphotis. In the bushes moved a half dozen small astinches, with faces formed of mottled red-and-blue cartilage, crests like small black hats, and glossy black pelts. The presence of Howard Treesong interested them; they watched and listened with respectful attention.

The colloquy had ended; Howard's eyes glinted under half-closed lids; his breathing seemed normal.

Cleadhoe spoke to Gersen and Alice. "This originally was a display cage for the little astinches. They are called 'puppet mandarins,' and are strange little creatures. Don't go too close; there is a mesh of invisible pin-rays which will sting you. It seemed a fine

place to maintain Howard."

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"You have marmelized his legs."

"Quite so. He is immobile, and he must gaze at Nymphotis whom he murdered. This is our judgment upon him. Whatever additional punishment you or Alice Wroke wish to apply, I shall not object. It is your right."

Gersen asked, "How long will he live like this?"

Cleadhoe shook his head. "That is hard to predict. His natural functions continue but he is immovably anchored. His hair, incidentally, concealed a mesh of circuitry. There are no implants or internal weapons; I have made sure of this!"

Treesong's eyes were open. He looked down at his legs, moved his hands, felt the cool material which now composed the sheathing of his upper thighs.

Cleadhoe spoke: "Howard Alan Treesong, we, from among all your numberless victims, are now working retribution upon you."

Tuty cried out in a rich contralto: "There he is, our son Nymphotis, and there sit you, Howard Hardoah, his murderer. Reflect upon your evil deed."

Howard Treesong spoke in an even voice: "I have been well and truly trapped. And who are these other two? Alice Wroke? What brings you here among these zealots?"

"I am one of them. Do you not remember what you asked of me, to save the life of my father? When you already had taken his life?"

"My dear Alice, when one deals in high policy, one sometimes overlooks nice details. Your father's death and your services were both elements in a larger design. And you, sir? Your semblance is disturbingly familiar."

"It should be. You have met me several times. Both at Voymont and at Gladbetook I had the pleasure of shooting you, unfortunately not to serious effect. You also know me as Henry Lucas, of Extant. I am responsible for enticing you here through your Book of Dreams. But let me take your memory even farther back. Do you recall the raid on Mount Pleasant?"

"I remember the episode, yes. It was a remarkable exercise."

"I saw you for the first time on that occasion, and I have devoted my life to arranging this confrontation."

"Indeed? You are a fanatic."

"You have the faculty for creating fanatics."

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Howard Treesong made an easy gesture. "So now I am at your mercy. How will you deal with me?"

Gersen laughed sourly. "What more could I do to you?"  
"Well--there is always torture. Or you might take pleasure in killing me."

"I have destroyed you as a man. That is enough."  
Howard Alan Treesong's head drooped. "My life has run its course. I intended to rule the human universe. I would have been first Emperor of the Gaeen Worlds. I almost did so. Now I am tired. I cannot move and I will not live long. . . . Leave me now. I prefer to be alone."

Gersen turned and, taking Alice's arm, left the room. The Cleadhoes followed. The door closed. Almost at once the colloquy began:

Immir:

Now all is known. The Dree has done a terrible deed. Oh my paladins, what now? What say you-, Jeha Rais?  
Rais:

The time has come.  
Immir:

How so? Green Mewness, why do you turn away?  
MeTuness:

There are long roads yet to be traveled and many an inn where I would take refuge.  
Immir:

Why do you all look this way and that? Are we not all brothers and paladins? Jeha Rais, make for us a great strategy, to move these marmel legs.  
Spangleway:

Immir, I bid you farewell.  
Rais:

Farewell, Immir. The time has come.  
Immir:

Loris Hohenger, are you deserting me too?

Hohnenger:

I must be away, to far places and new battles.  
Im mir:

And sweet Blue Fader, what of you? .And you, F.ia Pan-  
ice?

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Panice:

I will do my brotherly best for you. Paladins, turn back!  
A single deed remains to be done. Farewell, noble Immir!  
And now . . .

In the corridor the four heard a thud, a splash. Cleadhoe ran  
to the door, threw it aside. The great chair had toppled; Howard  
Alan Treesong lay in a grotesque heap, face down in the pool.

Cleadhoe turned, his nostrils flaring, his eyes aglitter. He made  
a wild gesticulation. "The chair was solidly fixed! He could not have  
toppled it alone!"

Gersen turned away. "Whatever has happened, it is enough for  
me." He took Alice's arm. "Let's go somewhere else."

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In the FHtterwing and traveling space, Alice picked up The Book of  
Dreams, then at once put it down again. "What will you do with  
it?"

"I don't know . . . give it to Cosmopolis, I suppose."

"Wliy not just put it out into space?"

"I can't do that."

Alice put her hands on his shoulder. "And now, what of you?"

"What of me, how?"

"You're so quiet and subdued! You worry me. Are you well?"

"Quite well. Deflated, perhaps. I have been deserted by my  
enemies. Treesong is dead. The affair is over. I am done."