

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

Severin Rossetti



Science Fiction and Fantasy

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

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*“If the doors of perception were cleansed
everything would appear to man
as it is.... Eternal.”*

WILLIAM BLAKE: The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

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Prologue

If it can be imagined then it can exist, and it seemed to Auberjonois that the architecture of Golgonooza had been intended to make this very point. Seated in the bay of the window, on the uppermost floor of the lodging house, he gazed out across the rooftops with a restless dissatisfaction. The sulphurous city skyline offered a jumbled silhouette of gables and spires, buttresses and turrets, steeples and minarets and featureless Cubist fabrications, everywhere the eye roamed it was jarred by a cacophony of architectural styles and for a man who held order dear, a man with a warrior's disciplined mind, it was torture to behold. The city might have been the work of a committee of architects, the product of an argument of planners, a disagreement which would never be resolved. Fabled city of art and science, was it? Well to Auberjonois' mind, at least, it was ample proof that the two could never comfortably coexist.

Dispiritedly he swung his feet to the floor, the action lazy since it lacked any purpose other than to break the monotony, and beneath his considerable weight the parched wooden floorboards groaned. There again was evidence of the laziness which afflicted him, the sloppiness born of lethargy, for if Auberjonois had chosen to he could have walked across a floor of crumpled paper without ever making a sound. But where was the need for such stealth in this godforsaken place? He gave out a curse which was like the discontented grunt of a caged animal and thumped his fist against the thin partition wall, saw the crumbs of stucco fall, knowing that each flake might be counted and weighed and added to his bill.

Well let that be so! Let the harridan of a concierge and her obese husband charge what they liked for their ramshackle

shelter! He would pay whatever they asked and double just to get away from this miserable place!

There was a soft and fragile creak of timber against timber, a stair protesting against the weight which bore down on it, and for a second his senses sharpened, the lobes of his ears pricked, their fragile membranes stiffening like those of a bat. Then, even as his hand was reaching for the sword which lay by the bed, he relaxed again, recognizing the tread and throwing himself back onto the mattress in disappointment.

“Anything?” he asked, on hearing Siddig enter the room, though he could already read the answer in the way his friend’s boots scuffed sulkily across the floor, and Siddig answered with a curse – “fuck all”- spoiling the quiet of the night with the clatter of weapons and armor which he threw to the floor, the sword and shield and the breastplate of burnished metal.

“Fuck all!” he repeated. “We might as well have gone to Bosnia or Bannockburn or the Little Big Horn for all the profit we’ll get out of this damned place!”

“Then we leave at dawn,” Auberjonois vowed, his mind decided, drew his long hair back from his face, clenching two fistfuls as if he would tear it out in his frustration. “I tire of this city, its stench offends me, the sulphurous fumes of the forges Los keeps burning day and night, the stink that drifts across from the Malterre Marshes now the wind has shifted.” He coughed, spat, scuffed the spittle into the dry floorboards with a toe of his boot as he said, “Shit, Siddig, this whole damned place smells of putrefaction and complacency. But first,” he announced, springing to his feet as if the idea which now occurred to him was an impulse rather than something which had been festering within him all day, “first let us go out into the town one last time, take a drink or two, break a skull or more. I know of a place which sells an especially fine warm ale.”

Siddig grinned enthusiastically, buckled on his weapon, was

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about to heave his armor from the floor when Auberjonois said, "A moment, friend. You think you need that in this place?"

Siddig's grin broadened, understanding that if they went out without armor they would present such a tempting challenge. "Let the bastards rip," he said, clenching fingers into a knot to brandish it at the world beyond their squalid room.

"And we will rip back," Auberjonois countered, folding his hands around his younger friend's fist. "We will leave our mark on this city whether there be any profit in it or not."

They filed down the narrow stairs which wound like a corkscrew through the heart of the building, their scabbards beating a tattoo on each step behind them as they passed closed doors behind which they imagined people cowering, went out onto the street with their chests and shoulders bared, as unprotected as they would ever consent to be, their only defense their brawn, their skill and the swords which hung from their belts.

The paved street on which their lodging house was located gave way to a dirt track at the first turn, the buildings which would have been picturesque if they had not been so ramshackle were replaced by featureless blocks of steel and glass. Ahead an enameled pagoda pricked above the rooftops; in the distance to their right the geodesic dome of the Parliament bulged against the sodium sky like a huge translucent fungus; a thatched classical Parthenon standing incongruously beside it. The sickly odor of gas jets lighting their way threatened to bring on a bout of nausea.

"Fucking place!" Auberjonois cursed, kicking up a clod of earth with one boot, then leaping feet into the air to shatter it with the other. He fell to the ground lightly, his descent as gentle as his rise had been sudden. There was nothing gentle about his mood, though, as he spat into the scuffed ground and said, "I hate it! Such a mish-mash of uncertainty"

“But we’ll soon be rid of it.”

“Into the country.”

“When dawn breaks Golgonooza will be no more than a shadow behind us.”

As they reached the inn which Auberjonois had recommended Siddig paused at the door. Above him the sign swung, though there was barely the slightest hint of a breeze in the narrow defile of that silent sullen street. ‘The Moon...’ it flashed with a garish fluorescence ‘...and Sixpence’.

“You smell it?” said Auberjonois, noting his friend’s look of concentration but mistaking the reason behind it. Siddig’s expressions were easily read but rarely understood, so often no more than cryptic clues which were indicative of manner but not of mood. “You mark the stink of the Malterre Marshes, now that the wind has changed? All manner of beasts will be crawling out of that festering sludge now.”

“I smell nothing, I note no change,” said Siddig absently, his head tracking slowly to the left, then to the right, scanning the darkening street, eyes narrowing to pierce the shadows.

“How did you survive so long as a warrior, then?” scoffed Auberjonois, offering a dig at the ribs which his friend easily parried. They sparred a moment, but the enthusiasm was not there.

“I survived,” said Siddig, though he bore the scars which said that it had not always been easy, the herring-bone stripe which ran the length of a forearm, the puckered track of skin which pulled his smile awry. “And if your senses are so finely attuned then how come you failed to notice the three men following us?”

“I noticed,” Auberjonois insisted, felt his friend tense, no contact made but the air between them suddenly bristling. He rested his hand on Siddig’s sword arm, said, “Hold your instincts, wait a while. Here in this place they think we might be

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vulnerable.”

“It serves warm ale?” Siddig now asked, looking once again at the sign which hung above the door.

“It does.”

“Really warm ale?”

“Like it might soothe your throat and mull your innards,” Auberjonois promised. “Come on. I’m sure our entourage will follow.”

The room was dark, the ceiling low, they had to crouch like miners as they entered the place, could only really straighten their spines when they were seated on stools at the counter.

“Two warm ales, the darkest you have, and make them hotter than warm,” Auberjonois demanded, slapping coins on the counter which were not enough but which he knew would be accepted. “And now,” he said to Siddig, with a hushed anticipation, “we wait.”

There were no other customers in ‘The Moon and Sixpence’, warm ale was an acquired taste and few places in Golgonooza served it, regarding it much like ‘Snakebite’ or ‘Cat Pee’, a foul looking concoction which could poison the taste buds or disease the liver. Auberjonois took a deep draught from the tankard which was served him, then set it on the counter and warmed his hands around the pitted pewter. Siddig sipped slowly at his, listening for the sound of the door opening behind them.

* * *

The crystal panes of the geodesic dome fractured the light into a rainbow of colors, splintered beams which danced this way and that, falling to the marbled floor of the Parliament of Golgonooza, there to flare like sparks against each assembled lord and minister.

Caught in a violet glow, van Vogt, First Minister of Golgonooza, rose to his feet, waited for the expected silence and then announced, “There are shifts occurring within the Kingdom

of Eidolon.”

As is the case with many a Parliament, the gathered ministers responded to his words immediately, a hubbub of voices becoming a rumble like thunder, a bobbing of heads like the swell of an agitated sea.

“Shits?”

“Shifts?”

“Do we not know it and is that not the very nature of the Kingdom?”

van Vogt waited until the clamor died down, his patience his greatest virtue, what had earned him his exalted position, gazed out on the assembly to demand silence before continuing: “More shifts than is usual. There have been interruptions in the Temeraire Mountains and to the south of the Malterre Marshes, and now intrusions into the very streets of Golgonooza itself.”

There was a majority who were unaware of the latter fact, many who gasped aloud or caught their breath, having been accustomed all their lives to the constancy and stability of their city; all else might change, it was to be expected that their Kingdom should be in a continual state of flux, but never Golgonooza. There were cries of disbelief, then, of protest, a swelling murmur of outrage which was only stifled when one stepped from their midst to confirm what the First Minister had said.

“It is true,” said the robed figure, passing through a spectrum of colors as he strode forward, using the light to its best effect, adding presence to his gaunt build as he turned as if in a spotlight to address the assembly. “Why this very evening, on my way here to the Parliament, I witnessed one such intrusion, saw the air ripple and the ground tremble adjacent the Cabaret Voltaire.”

“Tell us that it still stands, Lord Lovecraft!” called out one minister who was known to frequent the place.

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“There was no damage?” another of the Cabaret’s patrons hoped.

“Lord Lovecraft and van Vogt in agreement?” a third remarked as he saw the Minister nod, not disguising his surprise, for the animosity that each felt towards the other was common knowledge; First Minister van Vogt and Lord Lovecraft, erstwhile Minister for Defense, had long been opponents, if not quite outright enemies. “Then it must be true, if the two of them can concur.”

Lord Lovecraft cringed, his muscled body shrinking within the folds of his robes, as if his agreement with the First Minister might be misconstrued as the start of an unexpected alliance, and van Vogt smiled as he noted his colleague’s attitude of irritation. “It still stands,” he assured the other anxious ministers, “but now there stands beside it a building the like of which I have never seen. It climbs a dozen times as high but is as slim as a single man, topped by a bulbous shape much like the cap of a mushroom. It has no entrance, no windows. What purpose such a structure might serve defeats me.”

“Blast the purpose!” someone shouted. “What is the cause?”

van Vogt gave a grim smile, glad that one at least had the wit, the curiosity to ask, said simply, “The Hashishim.” He expected the curses and the cries of indignation which greeted the name, permitted the members of the Parliament their moment of umbrage and then silenced them quickly, adding, “One Hashishim to be precise, a slip of a young girl toying with the Afflatus, lacking the talent of her elders maybe, but possessed of a dangerous mischief.”

“So what might we do?”

“Ask, first, what Los might do,” van Vogt countered cleverly.

“Nothing!” said one.

“He cares little!” another agreed.

“He fritters his time away in his forge, making books of

bronze and scripts of steel!" said Lord Lovecraft, his disdain for the ruler of Golgonooza as great as the animosity he felt towards its First Minister.

"He does," van Vogt agreed, nodding as if with a sad resignation to the fact. "So..."

His voice tailed off, he fell silent, wanting the Parliament to demand action of him before he himself suggested any, his craft as a politician encouraging them to propose the action he had already considered.

"So!"

"What do you intend to do, van Vogt?" Lord Lovecraft demanded, stepping forward a pace to challenge the First Minister, daring him to hesitate and ready to pounce if he did. "For something must be done before this meddling with the Afflatus ruins our city!"

van Vogt's voice fell low, so that people had to strain to hear, had to still their curses and murmurs of umbrage if they were to catch his words. "There are two men at present within our walls," he informed the assembly. "Accomplished warriors both, but growing increasingly bored with our city, with the lethargy which affects it and the lack of adventure it affords."

"Then give them their adventure and send them after this Hashishim bitch!" came the first cry.

"Set them loose on her!" another demanded.

"Sever her head from her shoulders!"

It was all the permission the First Minister needed.

* * *

As sudden as a thought and as silent as a shadow Siddig spun on his stool and drew his sword, his arm sweeping out in a broad blurring arc to cleave with a single stroke the two figures who heralded the entrance of a third, obviously his intended protectors.

The two figures disappeared in a rippling shimmer of light

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without him feeling even a shiver of his blade.

“Simulations,” said the third figure smiling, a short and rotund man, now stepping forward with an assured confidence. “Nothing more than figments of someone’s imagination. But they serve their purpose, they convince most people, so that I might walk the city streets in safety.” He took a stool and turned to the inn-keeper who stood behind the counter. “Bar-keep,” he said, “introduce me.”

The man looked hesitantly at Auberjonois, then at Siddig, said, “But I don’t know...”

“These gentlemen are warriors, I know that,” said the short man, bristling with his own importance. “Introduce me to them is what I meant, dolt!”

The inn-keeper nodded, made a humble bow, said in a stuttering voice,

“S-sirs, may I have the p-pleasure of introducing to you First Minister van Vogt, head of the Parliament of Golgonooza, greatest asset of our leader Los, wisest...”

“That will suffice,” snapped the one now known as van Vogt, silencing the man with a wave of the hand, jeweled fingers catching the light. “Give these warriors what they wish and me a clean glass.”

While the inn-keeper set two more warm ales before Auberjonois and Siddig the First Minister unscrewed the cap of the cane he carried and poured a milky fluid into the glass he was given, sipped at it, his lips pursed in a kiss. Set in the chubby round face, his mouth looked like it had been pinched out of clay.

“Cheers,” saluted Auberjonois, raising his steaming tankard as Siddig glared silently over the rim of his. He took a satisfying sip of the warm ale, smacking his lips, then said, “I take it this is not simply an example of the fabled generosity of Golgonooza?”

“Astute of you,” nodded van Vogt.

“Suspicious,” Siddig grumbled.

“So what have we done to earn your favor?” Auberjonois wondered, as suspicious as his younger friend but a little more discreet in its demonstration. “Or, rather, what might we do to deserve it?”

The First Minister exchanged a knowing smile with the older warrior, regarded his partner, the glitter in his eyes not quite concealing their scrutiny. Here were warriors accustomed to such challenges as few men would consider; their shoulders were broad and their muscles were knotted, even as they sat at rest, and the scars both bore were a testament to their courage. van Vogt wondered how such men might respond to the task which was about to be presented to them, if they might not dismiss it as beneath them or even take its proposal as an insult.

At length van Vogt said, “There is a young girl...”

Siddig spat, loudly, thickly, his reaction the one which the First Minister had feared. “A girl? Young?”

“She is one of the Hashishim,” van Vogt persevered. “You know something of them, I suppose?”

Auberjonois nodded, less prone to rash judgment and unconsidered opinion than his younger companion. “Tales have reached us as we traveled the kingdom. Formidable people, from what we hear.”

“And this one none the less so for being young, inexperienced, not fully practiced in her skills,” said van Vogt, grateful that the warrior seemed prepared to listen, perhaps even to consider the commission. “If anything her lack of expertise presents an even greater threat than the restrained art of her elders, like a child with a flint playing among kegs of powder.”

“So what would you wish of us?” asked Auberjonois.

“That you dispatch her,” said van Vogt simply.

“To anywhere?” Siddig hoped.

“Anywhere, any place, in any which way you choose. Take as much entertainment from the task as you wish, but just be rid of

her.”

“To hell with the entertainment,” said Siddig, “though we’ll take what we can. Payment is the thing.”

van Vogt tossed a leather purse onto the counter, let it fall heavily, to give a hint of how much it contained.

“So where do we find this spawn of the Hashishim?” asked Auberjonois, picking up the purse, hefting it in his hand, then passing it to Siddig.

The First Minister gave a shrug. “As to where you dispatch her, so you might find her. Anywhere, any place, in this world or the next.”

Auberjonois smiled. “You give us a considerable task, First Minister.”

“I give you a considerable reward,” said van Vogt, rising. “Go with my good wishes. Search out the bitch and destroy her.”

And as he left two simulated figures appeared to open the door before him. Part One: An Arid World

Chapter 1

On the bed in the attic the young girl lay motionless, her arms by her side wrapped in the folds of her nightdress so that it swathed her like a shroud. The curtains were drawn across the small window and the only light came from two candles at the head of the bed, tall Pascal candles from which scented plumes of smoke rose slowly in the still air.

A smile played across her lips as dramas unfolded in her mind, tales of obsession and possession which were familiar to artists she had known and which could now be seen in the work covering the walls of her room, paintings in which there seemed to be woven human bones and entrails. The old women of the ‘Sagas’ had used the same medium, weaving their tapestries with human viscera as they chanted their refrain:

'It is horrible now,
To look around,
As a blood red cloud
Darkens the sky.
The heavens are stained
With the blood of men
As the Valkyries
Sing their song.'

As the words filled her veins with fire, so she could feel the heat of the canvasses scorch her closed lids, for their color was always red, a thick red, the color of her menstruum.

Images had begun to flow freely of late, since she had come to this house a mile or two outside the city. It was good to be among fertile minds again, to have imaginations off which she could feed, which she in turn could feed and torture and stretch to breaking point. It caused her great delight to know that of the six of them who shared the house she would be the only one who would not be visited by nightmare.

The others should have been prepared, they who thought themselves so enlightened and far-seeing, as art students their imaginations were given such free rein that they should have been ready for all that was to happen. They were encouraged to conjure their own private worlds, after all, to see their own individual visions on canvas or on paper, in wood or in stone, they were each asked to give substance to such things as were undreamt of by others. Reality was questioned in their work, it was analyzed and dissected and recomposed; new realities were created, nirvanas and arcadias, conundrums of logic and perversions of common sense; each of them, following their own path, could go from the real, by way of the surreal, to some greater reality beyond. Trained to dream, then, it was only to be expected that eventually there would come nightmare. Here, for her, was the joy of living among such fertile minds.

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* * *

Basilides, scribe and librarian, scrier to Lord Lovecraft, felt a wearying conflict of emotions, torn between the elation of a goal successfully achieved and the despair which came of failure. Yes, he had confirmed the existence of the Hashishim bitch and sensed that she was nearby, but sadly she was not close in terms of lengths or leagues, not in the sense that there was some definable distance separating them. He was simply aware of her, of her presence rather than her substance, that air of malevolence she exuded which, though necessarily vague for the moment, was as palpable as her physical being. In the long hall of the library, isolated from the hubbub of the city and even the ceaseless activity of the body of the house below, he sat at his desk with scripts from the Catalogue of Intrusions strewn before him, and as he passed hands over each leaf he could feel the air vibrate beneath his fingers as if he strummed the meaning from the words, saw them shimmer before his eyes as he quickly scanned each entry.

The Catalogue of Intrusions was a record of the interruptions into the fabric of Eidolon, not a single volume but a collection of many dating back as far as that time when people first took an interest, when the enlightened ones began to worry that the phenomenon which made their kingdom what it was might also be what finally unmade it. Some volumes were bound but many were nothing more than folios containing all manner of scraps, of paper and parchment and whatever had been to hand at the time; there were entries which amounted to no more than a line or two, printed in the common language of the peasant, while others ran to pages and were written in the florid fulsome prose of the educated man.

Basilides eased back on his stool, stretched, soothed the cramp in his neck and then massaged his back where it felt that someone –Lord Lovecraft, if anyone- had clenched a fist around

the root of his spine. A more comfortable seat would have been welcome, support for his old man's brittle back, but it was demanded that he remain alert, focused, his attention fixed on the manuscripts before him. Where there is comfort there is complacency, Lord Lovecraft would maintain, and the library was lacking in any, its walls bare stone, its floor rough lengths of timber which could splinter slipped feet, its only richness in the knowledge it contained.

For two days and three nights he had been in the library, ever since Lord Lovecraft had returned from the emergency assembly of Parliament in such an agitated state. First Minister van Vogt was at the root of the problem, Basilides guessed, but its precise nature was not explained to him, his task was presented to him simply and without elaboration: that he search out the youngest spawn of the Hashishim and not venture from the library until his goal was achieved. Sleep had been limited to two hours in every ten, taken on a pallet in a corner of the room, his only nourishment bowls of broth which were cold by the time they had been brought from the kitchen to his solitary eyrie.

His stomach gave a low gurgle of protest, his limbs ached and craved for rest, and he decided that he had achieved as much as he could. Yes, the Hashishim bitch was near, this the extracts from the Catalogue told him. As distant as a dream, perhaps, no more real than the nightmares it was her pleasure to conjure, but still near enough that Lord Lovecraft might be alerted.

* * *

It was not a fear of nightmare which caused Griff to shrink out of sight when he saw Ted Baldwin enter the painting studio, but nothing more sinister than an honest dislike of the man.

Ted was by far the worst of the fine art tutors. With his hair greased back and his trousers too short, flashing clean white socks above the crepe-soled shoes, he looked more like a fifties throwback than a bachelor of art, a man who possessed a

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venomous tongue and a wicked temper; though his students might thank him for his attentions in later years, once they had graduated and no longer needed to suffer his scathing criticisms, for the moment he was the one member of staff that they all did their best to avoid.

Griff and Ted had failed to hit it off from the very start, from the first day of term when the new students had assembled in that same studio where he now hid. Ted had entered with a clipboard in his hand, quite patently aggrieved at having to break in another group of twenty or so fresh-faced students, to cure them of old habits and bring them around to his way of thinking. Griff, having decided to make an impression, had sat apart from the rest; this was the thing to do at art school, he felt, to make sure one was noticed, whether it be by manner or dress or attitude. The tutor had made a tour of the studio, asking for names and checking them off on his list, a thick felt pen obliterating each. When he got to Griff he asked the question he had asked of the others - "Who are you?" - and only looked up from his list when he thought that the question might have gone unheard, or he might have missed the answer. It was then that Griff smiled and told his tale of Schopenhauer, walking along the street in a distracted mood, wondering what it was all about as philosophers are wont to do. Other students, intrigued, pricked up their ears and took notice. So Schopenhauer bumps into this guy, Griff told them all, and the other guy turns and grabs him by the collar, asks him who the fuck he thinks he is, barging into him like that, at which Schopenhauer just lifts his head and smiles, kind of sad, shrugs his shoulders and asks the very same question: Who am I?

To Griff and to many others in the studio it was an amusing little reflection on the question of reality, but the tutor was not impressed; he walked on, finished his tour of the studio, came back when there was only one name left on his list.

“I take it you’re John Griffin, then?”

“That’s me,” Griff smiled in reply, now known by all.

“Well try a smart-ass answer like that with me again and I’ll wring your scrawny little neck!”

That was Ted, blunt and to the point.

And still he was no different, the past two years had not mellowed him and the manner in which he was regarded had changed little; now in their final year, Griff and his contemporaries had little respect for the man, they might fear his temper and his acerbic wit but that was all.

Griff’s calves ached as he kept his heels hooked out of sight over the rung of his stool; it was impossible to relax, not with Ted’s crepe-soled shoes squeaking across the polished floor of the studio, drawing closer all the time.

The canvas he hid behind was large and intricate, so many spectral images in its thirty six square feet that he could almost imagine it needed anchoring to the easel for fear that it would be wafted away on a breeze. It was as light and ephemeral as a butterfly, this is how he saw it; like a butterfly it was delicate and needed protection.

Inevitably Ted Baldwin saw it in a completely different light.

“What the fuck’s all this crap?” the tutor asked, hands deep in his pockets, shoulders glumly hunched. His gaze was turned sharply away, as if he was actually offended by the painting.

Griff, dropping his feet to the floor now that it was pointless to hide, had excuses to hand, ways in which to justify the work which had occupied him for the past month or more; there was the exploration of the subconscious, the opening up of the subconscious for those, like Ted Baldwin himself, who were too rooted in rationality to admit its existence, there was the symbolism of the imagery and the creation of a whole new world, or recreation of a world he might once have dreamt of.

There was... nothing to persuade the tutor that the painting

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was of any worth at all.

The tirade began:

“What the hell do you think you’re playing at, Griff? I’ve seen students mimic Pollock and Rothko and that was bad, they’re half a century in the past. I’ve seen people go for Hockney and his kind and I’ve not liked that either. But Jesus Christ! Salvador Dali and his bloody surrealism? It’s history, Griff! It’s what people put up in their lounges these days! You can find it in any cheap department store!”

There was more, much more. Ted was incensed that a third year student could be so unsophisticated, so naive, so unadventurous.

Griff had grown accustomed to such outbursts. He still disliked them but he had learned how to cope with them, to shut himself off, to drift away into a defensive trance. He thought of Anna, out of college for the day, and wished he was with her; he thought of the end of term and the summer ahead; he thought of the future which lay beyond that, of what it might hold for them both, of where they would go.

It was only when soft watches were mentioned that he brought himself back to the real world of Ted Baldwin’s insults, returned his attention to the questionable reality which faced him, itself as difficult to accept as anything which might be found on his canvas.

“Soft watches?” said Ted. “There are no such things! Look!” He thrust his arm forward, slender but wiry. He always wore his wristwatch in such a way that he had to twist his hand palm upwards to see the face, and he did so now, pulled back his sleeve and said again, “Look! There are no such things as soft watches!”

Griff had a strange intuition that it was best not to look, had had a bad feeling about the day from the very start, an idea that something was about to happen; he had had an uneasy feeling about the painting, too, had been unsure of whether to continue

with it or not. Whatever had made him persevere with the work, though, whatever had made him get out of bed that morning to begin with, now compelled him to look at the tutor's wristwatch.

"No soft watches! There never have been and never will be, except in crazy Dali's mind! See!"

Griff saw, and he thought for a moment that he might have returned to his escapist reverie, that distant dreamland where it was his custom to hide. He had to rub his eyes and look again, so quickly was he caught in the grip of disbelief. The upturned palm which was thrust before his nose was alive with ants, not garden ants or the type to be seen swarming from a crack in the pavement but voracious creatures, the piranhas of their kind. As he looked he saw the watch become ever more indistinct and at first he thought that it was simply slipping out of focus, that he was concentrating so closely on the ants that he failed to see it clearly. Then...

There were no such things as soft watches, so Ted insisted, but the one Griff gazed fixedly at became less solid with each sweep of its second hand. Not just soft, but molten. The outstretched arm on which it was worn began to tremble and slowly fingers were severed from the palm which grew into a crater of pulsing raw flesh. One fell, then another, the thumb parted and there were just two fingers left, hanging by threads of skin and gristle. Ted smiled – "Look! No soft watches!" – and the metal of the watchstrap bit into his wrist as it melted, was like candle wax oozing around a flame. The flesh, too, seemed just as molten, flesh and metal flowed freely, spattering onto the floor and over Griff's shoes. The flesh dripped away so quickly that the bones of the wrist were bared, as clearly seen as in the skeleton in the life studio which no one ever used.

Griff took a step back, then another. His brow pricked with sweat and his skin was crawling.

"Well?" said Ted.

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Griff shook his head, backing towards the door.

“You come back here when I’m talking to you,” said Ted, thinking that his criticism was biting –if only he knew!- a little more deeply than usual. He did not seem to be aware of the soft watch disintegrating, nor feel it burning into his flesh. “Griff! You come back here this instant!”

His head shaking slowly, seeing the last finger fall and the palm disappear, the stump of an arm dripping onto the polished tiles and sizzling like fat in a pan, Griff retreated from the studio.

* * *

The guard who had been posted at the door of the library fell in step beside Basilides as the scribe stepped out, the customary military gait slowing to a slovenly shuffle as he matched his stride to that of the older man. No words were exchanged as they traveled the length of corridor to the head of the staircase but each could sense the other’s disquiet, the trepidation they shared at having to confront Lord Lovecraft. The scribe would be berated for the limited results of his labors, he knew, and the guard, blameless himself, worried that he would be subject to the overspill of their Lord’s anger.

As they descended from floor to floor, the soft pile of rugs and carpets now dulling their steps, Basilides relished the warmth of the house rising to meet him, the draughts which brushed his linen vest now more caressing than biting, bringing with them boudoir perfumes and the spicy fatty fragrances of food cooking. Nearing Lord Lovecraft’s chambers, though, what had been a comfort quickly became something too feverish, his cheeks flushed and his brow ran slick with sweat, his tongue thickened in his throat as if it might choke him.

The guard cast him a sideways glance, wishing that any aggravation might be the scribe’s alone, rather than shared, rapped his knuckles a single time on the door to Lord Lovecraft’s rooms. The command –“Come!”- was as curt and abrupt as the

salute.

Opening the door, letting Basilides enter first, the guard then followed a pace behind. Heads bowed in the customary attitude of deference, each man took a brace of steps into the room before looking up, and though the presence of the triumvirate awaiting them should have been expected each had to make a conscious effort to conceal his disappointment.

Lord Lovecraft stood with his back to an open fire, its fuel banked so high that coals and sparking brands spilled out onto the stone hearth behind him, giving him the appearance of some demon stepping forth from hell. The heat was oppressive, the air was thick and suffocating, and in the shimmering light his form was made to seem even more spare than Basilides remembered, tall and gaunt, as brutal as a stiletto, as harsh as an exclamation mark.

Eyebrow cocked, shoulders hunched, there was a smile which hinted that both success and failure would afford Lord Lovecraft the same pleasure. "Well, Basilides? You have studied the Catalogue? You have news for me?"

The scribe paused a moment to take in the figures flanking Lord Lovecraft, to one side his wife, Lady Haggitha, with that permanent smile which unsettled, a secretive expression suggesting that she saw too much and saw too deep, and to the other side his nephew Abishai, a sullen youth who bore the impatience of a child but the physique of a man, sulking as if the very air he breathed was an annoyance to him. Abishai stood to attention, reflecting the stance of his uncle, while Lady Haggitha reclined on a couch.

"Answer my Lord," the latter said, and though her voice was softly crooning it was as insistent as any command.

Basilides' fingers closed around the scrolls and folios he held. Then, as if only now remembering them, he held them out like an offering.

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“The bones of it, Basilides, just the bones,” said Lord Lovecraft, with a dismissive wave of the hand. “Where is the young Hashishim?”

“I have divined traces of her, found echoes of her influence. If I may...?” The scribe stepped forward to a low table, knelt before it, cleared a space among the goblets of wine and trays of sweetmeats which had been the triumvirate’s buffet and laid out the selected extracts from the catalogue. “Here,” he said, running his fingers along a line of spidery script. “Here we see...”

“I see nothing!” Abishai immediately interrupted, with accustomed impatience, for though the Catalogue was concerned with a visual account of their world it actually contained nothing which was visual in itself. “The bones of it! My Lord asked for nothing other than the bones of it!” he insisted, with a stamp of the foot which sent a slap of leather on polished wood echoing about the room.

“I see tell of a bridge,” the scribe persevered. “You might know it as...”

“Die Brucke,” Lord Lovecraft nodded. “It leads to the Garden of Earthly Delights, where the Hashishim make their stronghold. You tell us nothing which we do not already know, Basilides. We would expect to have evidence of the young wench there.”

Hurriedly, fingers made clumsy by nerves and arthritis, the scribe shuffled the papers about the table, brought new extracts to the top of the pile. His voice faltering, hesitating over words which would normally have flowed so freely, he related further accounts of intrusions into the fabric of Eidolon, those where he had found the strongest echoes of the young Hashishim girl. They spanned the length and breadth of the kingdom, so haphazardly scattered about the land that they had no pattern or logic about them; tropical oases intruded into the frozen lands of the north, arctic deserts broke up lush temperate grasslands,

mountain ranges were abruptly truncated by barren plateaus of scrub or crowded by cities which suddenly found themselves inaccessible. The more Basilides delved into the Catalogue of Intrusions the more chaotic the world seemed to become, the less clear the clues to the whereabouts of the Hashishim girl.

Abishai paced about restlessly, fingers clenching then splaying, grasping for some ghost of a weapon or an object to hurl, while Lady Haggitha, in leaning forward to take a cup of wine from the table, looked up to offer her smile, some sympathy for the scribe in the pout of her lips but also a disconcerting anticipation.

It was while Basilides' attention was taken by the comely movement of his Lady, by the sinuous way her torso twisted and her breasts filled her bodice as she leant forward, while he was distracted by lustful thoughts which had been denied him for decades that Lord Lovecraft stepped forward and caught him by the hair. He let out a soft cry as fingers clenched, knotting the hair tight against his scalp, heard his brittle spine crack as he was pulled back on his haunches to look up into the face of his Lord.

"This is all you have achieved after three days of poring over the Catalogue?" Lord Lovecraft demanded, lips curling to reveal the tiny teeth of a child and gums as dry as bleached bone, his breath reeking of the last meal he had taken, a stench of rare meat or offal. Basilides had a brief image of his Lord and Lady kissing, mouth to mouth with tongues jousting and teeth meshing, and his stomach might have heaved but then his head was thrust sharply forward, the bridge of his nose brought down on the hard edge of the mahogany table so that the sudden taste of blood overpowered all else. His nose broke as easily as parched wood, splintered again as his head was slammed against the table a second time. "Echoes? Clues? That is all you have to offer me?"

Basilides' head was yanked back, blood dripping from his chin to splatter onto the uppermost pages of the Catalogue,

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soaking into the parchment as quickly as a downpour of rain into a desert of sand. He looked at the red-brown stains before him, searching them for any portents or divinations which might appease his Lord, but before he could make any sense of them, or conjure any lies, he was toppled onto his back by a vicious tug to his hair and dragged across the floor like a sack of provisions. As he was pulled around the table, past the couch on which Lady Haggitha reclined, his Lady swung her legs clear of him, tucking her feet beneath her, and the accompanying rustle of silks brought a perfumed breeze with it, a pungent smell of patchouli not quite masking the musk of swollen genitalia. If he had been the sort to pay heed to household gossip he might have wondered who was presently servicing her, in addition to her husband, but such was the pain he felt, his scalp aching under Lord Lovecraft's fierce grip and his bared knees burning against the abrasive pile of the carpet, his broken nose still dripping blood, that there was nothing else his mind could cope with.

Through his tears he saw Abishai's sandaled feet before him and winced, fearing a poke in the face from one, then tensed his body when none came, expecting instead a kick to the rear to speed him on his way. But there was just the slap of his stride as Lord Lovecraft's nephew followed, to see what would happen, to watch and learn.

Basilides felt his cheeks scorch as he was brought to a halt before the fire and tugged once more into a kneeling position. He closed his eyes against the heat, tried to turn his face away but found it held too firmly.

"I always told you that comfort bred complacency, did I not?" Lord Lovecraft hissed, bending so close that his lips brushed the scribe's ear. An odor of roasting meat came with the whispered breath, but it did not occur to Basilides that it might be his own flesh scorching. "It seems to me that perhaps your sight might be too much of a comfort to you, more of a luxury

than a necessity. Could it be that without your vision to distract you your insights might be a tad more profound, of better quality?"

"No! My Lord! I beg you!" Basilides cried, as his face was forced closer to the fire, the orange glow burning more fiercely behind stinging eyelids.

Lord Lovecraft, marking that the hairs of his forearm crisped and curled and that his knuckles pricked with heat as his clenched fist inched the scribe's face slowly forward, gestured with his free hand, snapping his fingers and pointing to the gauntlets his nephew had tucked in his belt. Understanding, Abishai withdrew one, brought it over, slipped it onto his uncle's hand and drew it snug over each finger in turn.

"You have known too much comfort, scribe," Lord Lovecraft said with regret, running the soft kid over Basilides' face before placing a leather-sheathed finger and thumb against the scribe's left eye socket.

Slowly he pulled apart the upper and lower lid, ignoring the pitiful screams he caused, looked on in fascination as the tears of pain dried, the skin blistered and the glistening orb parched, dulled, clouded.

* * *

"For pity's sake, Leo! Not another of the bloody things!" said Maurice Wall.

In the basement of the art school, in the artificial light of the sculpture studio, shadows danced crazily about the walls; one fluorescent tube overhead was about to die, sparking irritatingly, while from a far corner of the room there came the louder and more vivid flashes of a welding torch. One moment cast into darkness, the next moment caught by a shock of blue-white light, the figure standing before Leo Turner seemed to be joining in a stuttering dance.

"Just move around a bit, Maurice? Out of the light? It's like

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watching an old movie with you flickering about like that.”

Maurice Wall found a stool and sat beside Leo, joining the student in considering the... what could he call it? A construction? This seemed the safest word to use, for though the assemblage of wood standing before them was obviously meant to be a piece of furniture it was something of an insult to any cabinet maker's craft. Mercifully it was not the student's own work but another of the occasional pieces he brought into the studio from time to time, to sand and polish, to glue and mend. There were many people who used the studio's facilities for matters other than the simply aesthetic, a fact which often troubled Maurice.

“This is going to have to stop, you know,” he told Leo, for it was his duty as head of the sculpture department to see that only bona-fide course work was done there.

“Why?” asked Leo. “Everyone's at it. There's Steve making wrought iron gates, Emlyn from graphics knocking up hi-fi cabinets, even your own studio technician doing car repairs.”

“Yes, and it's all getting out of hand. If the Principal gets to hear about this...”

Leo laughed. “Come off it, Maurice. He had that battered old Volvo of his round the back only the other day, patching holes in the bodywork with your fiberglass.”

“He was?” said Maurice innocently. “Well it has to stop all the same. You're in your final year now, you should be concentrating on your work.”

There was no more than a shrug in reply, he knew that any advice would go unheeded. The talented students were often the wasteful ones, the ones who thought they could cope better without guidance. Resigned to the fact, Maurice returned his attention to the object which was being given another fingertip dusting.

What the student had before him had to be his ugliest find

yet. It looked like it had been put together by a disagreement of designers, with the legs of one piece, the drawers of another and some desk or bureau grafted on top. The young man seemed pleased with it, though, his thin shoulders were hunched eagerly forward and his dark curls danced against his neck as he nodded approvingly. As fingers were brushed through the coating of dust they left a sweeping smear behind.

“You’ve picked up a bit of a horror this time, Leo. What is it?”

“A desk,” said Leo, not thinking it at all horrific, not yet.

“Old, is it?”

“There’s old and there’s old. This is probably turn of the century.”

“That’s old enough. I’ll wager the thing’s riddled with woodworm, so you just keep it clear of the timber store,” Maurice warned. He rose to his feet, started to walk away. “And no more after this one, remember. Concentrate on your college work.”

Leo nodded, but absently, too preoccupied with the desk. He was almost sure that there was no woodworm, he had looked as closely as he could without arousing the suspicion of the man in the junk shop and he had seen no tell-tale signs. What he had seen, though, and immediately, what had escaped the attention of the short-sighted man in the flat cap and threadbare coat, was that the desk was by Heal & Son of London. Maurice was right, it was an ugly piece, a mixture of styles trying to be Art Nouveau, but there was money to be made from it; clean it up with vinegar and linseed, turpentine and spirits, and he knew of a dealer in Warwick who would take it from him. He would not get a realistic price, he knew this, dealers looked down on him and cheated him because of his age and the way he dressed; they thought they were conning him but he had the consolation that he was knowledgeable enough to appreciate what he had -this time a desk by Heal & Son, probably late eighteen nineties and

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perhaps the work of Ambrose Heal himself- and this was more than could be said for many others, for Maurice Wall or the man in the junk shop who had parted with it for a few pounds. Leo knew more about furniture than most people he met. He had certainly known more about it than his father.

His grin was as full of hatred as it was of mischief as he recalled the day his father beat seven kinds of shit out of him, all because old Mrs. Henstock next door had left them four tatty chairs in her will. His father had been hoping for more, much more, all the favors the family had done the doddering old geriatric surely deserved some better reward; the old biddy was worth money, she had no relatives, and he had always made the effort -what an effort!- to behave kindly towards her. It took little to anger his father and when no money came his way after the old woman's death, only the chairs, he flew into a rage and smashed them to kindling, hit Leo when he laughed and then Leo's mother, too. Seven further kinds of shit were beaten out of Leo when he explained to his father just what he had done, when he told him just what had been so special about the chairs he had reduced to kindling; Leo had often sat with Mrs. Henstock and talked, he had learned from her and he knew that the chairs were Chippendale.

Yes, Leo had learned from Mrs. Henstock, and he had learned much more since. Finds like the desk before him brought in those few extra pounds which made life at college, without the support of his niggardly father, just that little bit more comfortable.

He examined the desk again, turning it around on the workbench. It was dirty, smeared with grime, but this was all that was wrong with it. The metal hinges on the lid of the bureau were in good condition, the coating of muck probably having helped protect them, and all the desk needed was a good clean. He wondered if Doris in the canteen might have some white

vinegar to spare. Probably not, probably just the usual malt variety. He would have to buy some on the way home, then, find some methylated spirit in the printing department before he could start work in earnest; for the moment all he could do was dust, pluck at the cobwebs, poke his fingers into the awkward corners where the filth of decades had gathered.

There were three drawers beneath the desk, one large one and two smaller ones above; the large one slid a little less smoothly than it should. The runners were probably worn, it often happened, it would be no great task to replace them. He took out the drawer and set it on the floor, then slipped his hand into the dark bowels of the desk. Cobwebs tickled his fingers, he felt feathery balls of fluff so light that they seemed to run up and down his arm. Then his fingers caught something larger, still soft, still yielding to his touch, but very much larger, about the size of a rolled-up newspaper. His hand pulled back instinctively, then he reached in again. The thing, whatever it was, had shifted. It was built in segments, he could feel them, and it seemed to have turned so that it now pointed towards him. He gripped it lightly and was conscious of it pulsing in his hand.

What the...?

Before he could think to draw back his hand a second time he felt the surface of the object part like a smile, like a bulging purse unzipping, a tear in its fabric running from end to end. There was a ticking noise, a soft 'tap-tap', and for a moment he thought the sound was in the room; then the object in his grasp moved more violently, as if in the throes of death or struggling towards a new life. From the soft shell which peeled apart beneath his fingers something more solid emerged, a little tacky to the touch at first but drying and hardening all the time, as if baking in a kiln. There was a rasping sound, a scuttling against the wood inside the desk, and he yanked his hand back, raised it to his face and choked as he saw his fingers dripping with the

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gummy afterbirth of some abominable creature.

Riddled with woodworm, Maurice Wall had supposed.

No, Leo had thought not.

He was no coleopterist but he knew enough to recognize the antennae and mandibles which appeared, the short squat body which followed, encased in plates of armor, and he understood the ticking he had heard. The death-watch beetle raps its head against the roof of the tunnel which its larva has burrowed in the wood, creating a sound which was once believed to be a portent of death, a sound so slight that it could only be heard in the still of the night by anyone awake at that time, a person perhaps sitting at the bedside of a sick relative. Death often followed, in those days when the rumor was born, and the later explanation of the coincidence was simple.

There was a simple explanation for most things, so Leo believed, but there was none for the size of the beetle he now saw, a creature which was a full twelve inches in length. Time became protracted and Leo was transfixed, he leant back on his stool, gripped by a morbid fascination. The beetle teetered on the edge where the drawer had been, moving slowly like a creature just roused from sleep; its second pair of legs reached out into nothingness and it overbalanced, dropping to the floor. The fall seemed to shake it awake, suddenly it was scuttling about frantically and Leo leapt back, overturning his stool and the table behind him.

Jesus Christ but it had to be a dream!

On the far side of the studio Brian Thomas looked around to see what the commotion was about, raised the safety goggles he wore and saw Leo standing there amid the upturned furniture, looking as if the floor was about to swallow him whole.

“What is it, Leo?” he asked with a laugh. “A bad trip? Been puffing too much of Jack’s weed again, eh?”

Leo said nothing. He stood rooted, watching as the beetle

scuttled across the floor towards Brian, towards the welding torch he held, its neon-blue flame pointed down and away from his body. He saw the creature leap -but beetles can't leap!- into the flame. It sizzled and shriveled, fell to the floor like a dirty black clot of tar, and Leo wondered what the hell was happening.

* * *

In the arms of his wife, in the bed they occasionally shared, Lord Lovecraft trembled. With one hand around his heaving shoulders, clutching him tightly to her, Lady Haggitha ran her other hand across his brow, against his cheek, let her fingers flutter in a feather-light caress over his eyes, persuading them shut and easing his agitation, her touch scented with a perfume of her own making, fragrant with ylang ylang which had first calmed him and then stirred his ardor, and with chamomile and lavender to maintain an equable mood. Her soft words further soothed him and promised her understanding.

After a quarter of a century of marriage Lady Haggitha's understanding of her husband was almost total, she could read his moods and surmise his motives, see through every lie, and on those occasions when that understanding might be lacking, such as now, she was well able to fake it. What she understood of the present situation was that First Minister van Vogt had been given Parliament's permission to dispatch a pair of mercenaries to search out an errant Hashishim, that he wanted the creature found. As did her husband, she now knew, and if she did not yet understand why she could at least appreciate how urgent was his need. His treatment of the faithful Basilides had been a testament to that, in the briefest burst of anger he had surpassed himself in his ability to cause suffering. There had been none of the customary build up to his outburst, none of the signs which she had come to recognize, the regular tic of an eyelid or the asymmetric pout of the lips, one corner of the mouth drooping where the pale pink tip of his tongue protruded. Nor had there

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been the usual joy in his anger, that pleasure in causing pain which he liked to prolong and she so loved to share.

The suffering inflicted on the scribe had seemed more for punishment, and perhaps a means to an end -that deprived of a portion of his sight Basilides' divinations might be more focused-than for any personal satisfaction, and it was this which intrigued Lady Haggitha, this she tried to understand as her hand searched her husband's face in some phrenological divination of her own. It was not simply to compete with van Vogt that her husband sought to thwart the First Minister's mission, this much she could sense, there was something more deeply rooted than the hatred their lifelong rivalry occasioned. He did not want the Hashishim girl simply because van Vogt did. So why?

"Husband? My Lord?" she said, her voice low in case he slept, and he stirred, shifted so that his face rested against the swell of her breast. "You are at ease now?"

"Tired, so tired," he murmured into her breast, still fatigued by the anger which had flared and the act it had driven him to, and then by the comfort his wife had afforded him. "Thank you, Haggitha. You are a good woman."

"It is my duty, my Lord," she acknowledged, her fingers brushing his brow lightly, now to probe as well as to soothe, fingertips cool with her cologne.

"And Basilides? How is the scribe?"

"Comfortable for the moment. I will tend to him once I have tended to my Lord."

"Ah, how I love that dear old man. If only..."

"Yes, my Lord?" Lady Haggitha prompted with a gentle insistence, as if she was teasing a fish on a line, drawing it on inch by inch, never quite letting it realize it was caught.

"If only he had not disappointed me."

"In his search for the Hashishim?" said Lady Haggitha, now hoping to understand why it was so important. "Why is the First

Minister so anxious to find this creature?” she asked.

Slowly coming alert, easing himself from her embrace to prop himself against the pillows, Lord Lovecraft’s look of dreamy content was darkened by a frown. “The young Hashishim has gained some mastery over the Afflatus,” he told his wife. “Either through her own devices, or using another as her instrument, she is causing all manner of intrusions into our world. Her skill poses a threat and van Vogt wants her stopped.”

“But you do not?” Lady Haggitha guessed.

“Once the rest of her Hashishim kin come to appreciate this youngster’s talent they will think of better uses for it than mere adolescent mischief. This is van Vogt’s worry, that they will seek to expand their lands and increase their influence.” He permitted himself a smile which could almost be taken for approval, baby teeth glistening in the lamplight. “Even as far as Golgonooza, which is our venerable van Vogt’s greatest fear.”

“A move that you would welcome?” Lady Haggitha suggested, now coming to an appreciation of her husband’s motives, adding to the compendium of her understanding.

Lord Lovecraft had lain idle too long, with only the intrigues of Parliament to distract him, had once been a warlord with legions at his command who, for the past decade or more, in the name of a defense which was rarely needed, had had as their sole occupation the policing of the petty thieves and whores of Golgonooza. Such was the extent of the city’s problems, such the gravity of its crime, and the Lord’s troops had grown fat on complacency, become dulled and dissatisfied with the lack of adventure. A Hashishim move towards Golgonooza would be the excuse he needed to mobilize his companies of men.

Emboldened to speak, knowing that her husband was mellow enough to be receptive to hints she might implant, if not to outright suggestions, Lady Haggitha said, “So the aim is not so much to find the Hashishim girl as to prevent van Vogt’s two

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mercenaries from doing so?”

“Correct,” Lord Lovecraft agreed, his brow furrowing, as if either task presented the same difficulty.

“Then why trouble yourself over the girl, my Lord? After all, if she is able to achieve all that is claimed, if she has the power over the Afflatus that is suggested, then at present she must be somewhere other than in this world.”

Lord Lovecraft was comfortable with the reasoning, for though it was the Afflatus which made their world the thing it was, any influence of the phenomena had to come from a place beyond, where there were the artists and artisans who had the imagination to mould it. “Little wonder poor Basilides had so little success in tracking the bitch,” he accepted, with perhaps a little regret for his actions towards the scribe.

“Yes, little wonder,” said Lady Haggitha, her sympathy going out to the scribe who had suffered so needlessly, not because the task had been thankless but because she now saw how its efforts had been misdirected by her husband’s lack of foresight. But that could be remedied later, would be remedied later, and for the moment she simply said, “The Hashishim girl might prove to be too elusive for your scribe’s arts, but what of these mercenaries the First Minister has engaged? Might...” She paused to stifle a yawn, suggesting that she was tired and that further mental exertion was beyond her. “Oh, I don’t know, my head aches with all the thoughts that fill it,” she said, with a frustrated wave of the hand, and then fell silent to give her Lord the opportunity to elaborate more fully, to make something practical of a woman’s vague musings.

* * *

Turning from the drawing board, rubbing aching eyes which were tired after working in such fine detail, Selina looked out of the window. It was a clear bright day and from the third floor of the college she had a splendid view. Immediately opposite, in an

office block not quite as tall as the college, she could see the reflection of the college itself, a Bauhaus blossom in the early summer sun, its windows open at varying angles to break the light into so many mosaic pieces. Beyond the office block, sweeping in an arc to the right, were the planes of the city, grey slate rooftops which gradually gave way to the rich sienna tiles of the suburbs. She saw the mat of green which was the park -she had lived close by there during her first year- then more patches of emerald which were like the baize of billiard tables. Beyond was the golf course, the university campus, the more open country which was found outside the city. She had chosen a pleasant place to live, a pleasant place to study, the city was just large enough to satisfy any needs -shops, entertainment and the like- but not so big as to overwhelm a person from a small town.

Coming from a terrace which was but one of many, Selina enjoyed the nearness of the countryside. She had seen no true countryside until she had come down to college for her interview, had spent eighteen years without sight of a field or stream, eighteen years with nothing but cramped streets and pokey buildings. It hardly seemed creditable, so far into the twentieth century, but the mill town where she was born could still be as much a prison as it had been a hundred years earlier. The only time people left, those people she knew, was to go to London for a show or a cup final, and then they were always back within twenty four hours. It's not nice down there, would be their opinion on their return, the folk aren't nice, you're better off staying where you are, Selina.

But Selina would not stay, her one ambition was to get away. At first she had escaped in her drawings, and then, on being told that the drawings showed promise, she had understood how they might bring her a more permanent escape. This they had done, they had brought her to college, and now that she had got away from home she vowed that she was never going back.

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She returned to her work, dismissing thoughts of home and any guilt she might feel at not wanting to return; if she was to succeed in life then she had to be single-minded. Never mind that her parents had hopes of her returning home after college, of her taking up a post as a teacher there, part of a respected profession; she had greater ambitions than this.

After the panoramic expanse of the view through the window it took a while for her to adjust her gaze to the design before her; it was intricate, it demanded a painful amount of concentration, but it excited her. She believed that one of the great things in fashion and textiles -her particular field of study- was to have a sense of history, to be able to guess what would next come back into style; it was not so much a matter of innovation as regurgitation, and she had decided that the next fad would be fired by the work of William Morris. His designs were already being used by Liberty and such people for fabrics and wallpapers, but in dress they had not yet been fully exploited. A psychedelic neo-hippie style was what she had in mind, but using subtler colors and more carefully considered patterns which would suit the rather more conservative market of those with money to spend. She already had designs fixed in her mind, long flowing skirts which looked like hedgerows lush with vegetation, long sleeveless waistcoats to match and a similar scarf wound once around the neck and then hanging down to the waist. All she needed was the pattern for the cloth and it was this which was giving her the headache. She had a template, a cluster of a dozen leaves which she repeated again and again; half the design had been colored, just two shades of green with yellow and brown, tasteful, practical enough to be put into production.

She worked through the afternoon and the sun seemed to grow more fierce as it dipped towards the horizon, its slanting light bursting through the window with a tropical warmth. Her head throbbed with a dull ache, she took frequent sips from a can

of Coke by her side. This was the tedious aspect of the work, so repetitive, but she stuck at it, knowing that if she took another break now she would give up for the day. Best that she did as much as she could, worked to exhaustion or until her head felt that it might burst. The window beside her was open, a soft breeze blew into the studio, and in her rapt state of concentration she thought that it was stirring the leaves in her design.

As if!

Brushing an irritating strand of hair from her cheek -her hair was impractically long but she could not bring herself to have it cut- she rubbed her eyes and stuck at the work. Seconds later she saw the foliage she had drawn shift as if someone was parting the shrubbery to peek out at her. A record came to mind, one she had been listening to with Anna and the others the night before; it was some song about Alice, about one pill making you larger and one pill making you small.

Was it auto-suggestion which was at play? Or was it tiredness? Too much concentrated hard work?

She felt herself shrink, the foliage parted to let her step through and she could hear whatever had been spying on her running away. Her two dimensional design took on depth, branches whipped at her face and legs as she walked through, she could smell the sap and hear the insects buzzing. She swatted at one bug and then laughed; she had surely been working too hard.

The carefully repeated pattern of William Morris became more chaotic, she began to sweat, it was no longer a cool English glade but something more exotic, the dream world of the Douanier Rousseau. Colors were more vivid, the form of the plant life more unlikely, it was like being in a hothouse of orchids and cacti and somewhere nearby she could hear strange murmurings, creatures she trembled to imagine.

It was time to stop work for the day, she had done enough, but first she had to get out, get back, get away from the sticky

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vegetation which threatened to smother her. Ahead she heard footsteps again, the footsteps of whoever or whatever had been spying on her from the drawing, and she thought that while she was there she might as well follow; she would probably come to her senses long before she could encounter any other living creature in this shimmering dream world.

With foliage meeting in a canopy above her the light was unreal, the sun filtering through the leaves, and the greenery took on a strange translucency. Before her there was a brighter light, a clearing in the undergrowth, and she went towards it; it would be the studio, she was certain, she would find herself back there and awake and packing her things to go home.

A single screen of foliage now separated her from the clearing, she parted it with one hand and held back the springy branches, used her other hand to shield her eyes against the light. What she saw made her gasp, the steaming tropical air was like syrup in her throat and made her catch her breath. She saw her hometown, the smoke-stained redbrick houses so out of place in that verdant setting and seeming dirtier than ever in the blazing viridian landscape. The shock of seeing her home transported some two hundred miles to her dream was in itself enough to shake her, but then, from the houses with which she was all too familiar, there came faces she could recognize, her mother and sisters, neighbors and school friends. Yet no, she could almost recognize them, but not quite, for they were all dusty and grey, tired and ashen. Then she saw others she knew only from photographs, her grandparents who had died when she was no more than an infant, her father's elder brother who had been killed by the Japanese in Burma -had those prisoners of war really looked so emaciated?- and her great aunt Edith whose famous copper curls now sprouted like fungus from a skull devoid of flesh.

She thought she might go insane if she had to witness any

more, she thought she had gone insane when all these people from dreams and nightmares and family tales came staggering towards her with arms outstretched, saying as one, "Don't leave us, Selina, we need you, come back."

* * *

Lord Lovecraft had come to the conclusion that van Vogt's mercenaries would present an easier quarry than the evasive Hashishim creature, that a troop of his best men could easily search them out. The end would be the same, surely, whether it was the Hashishim who was found or the two who were pursuing her; van Vogt would be thwarted and the safety of Golgonooza put in jeopardy. He thanked his wife for encouraging such clarity of thought in him, not acknowledging that it was more than just a seed that she had planted in his mind, not even realizing that the strategy he had decided upon had been as much hers as his.

Lady Haggitha smiled indulgently as her husband took his leave of her, the adolescent enthusiasm coloring his cheeks speaking of important things to be about. She lay back in the pose of the indolent female he took her to be, sated by his loving and fatigued by unaccustomed serious deliberation, watched while he busied himself about the bed-chamber, pulling on clothes with a disregard to the clash of colors, strapping on sword and dagger and settling them comfortably at his side. When he strutted across to the bed and bent low to kiss her she persuaded her smile to broaden, nipped at her lower lip to bring it full of color, eyes wide and bright to demonstrate the admiration he wanted her to feel.

"There is much to do, I may be late, might find it convenient to stay in the city," he pronounced, with the gravity of someone who was anticipating a night at a nobleman's club, with dull men in dark rooms as quiet as libraries, when his wife knew full well that it was the sleazy Cabaret Voltaire he had in mind, pungent with smoke and spiced drinks, teeming with whores and people

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devoted to all manner of decadent entertainment. "It will spare you any disturbance," was his feeble excuse.

After sharing a bed for the past two hours she could count on there being subsequent nights without his company, but still she nodded her appreciation of his kindness, watched him leave the room and listened to him descend the staircase, heard him calling out for an escort to accompany him and, finally, slamming the heavy oak door.

"Be about your task, my Lord," she muttered, swinging from the bed and pulling on a robe of heavy velvet to ward off the house's evening chill. "For all the good it will do you, go about it with assiduity."

Leaving the bed-chamber, Lady Haggitha climbed the stairs to the floor above, and then again, her robe billowing behind her and her slippered feet silent, making her seem like some kind of wraith sweeping along the corridor. Stopping before a door less grand than her own she eased it gently open and stepped through into a candlelit room, the flickering flames of a dozen tallow sticks perfumed with scents which would soothe and heal.

On a cot in a corner of the room lay Basilides, seated on the edge at his side the young girl who was tending him.

"How is the scribe?" she asked, striding quickly across the room.

"The pain is still there, my Lady," said the girl, applying a wad of white muslin to the scribe's scorched face. "The left eye is as dry as a ball of chalk, as puckered as a sun-dried tomato." She shuddered at the image she conjured, as if she shared his pain as she dabbed the muslin into a clay pot she held. "He has been delirious since he was brought here, speaking of all manner of things so horrid that I fear to repeat them."

"But what is this?" Lady Haggitha cut the girl short, snatching the clay pot from her. She sniffed at the contents, found the smell unpleasant. "Grease?"

“Animal fat, my Lady.”

“Then what are you thinking of, girl?” Lady Haggitha demanded, flinging the pot to the floor where it shattered into pieces. “You hope to baste his face like a goose? Is that it?”

“But for burns, my mother swears...”

“Your mother is a fool, and more so for bearing a daughter like you!” She pushed the girl away from her nursing, so roughly that she tumbled heavily to the floor. “Get away from him!” she said, aiming a kick at the prone figure, her soft slippers connecting, a pedicured nail splitting a lip. “Bring me water and clean cloths, quickly, and then be away! See that no one disturbs us!”

The girl scuttled across the floor, poured water from a pitcher into a bowl, brought this and new strips of muslin to her Lady and then retreated.

“No one, but no one is to intrude,” she was told. “Find a guard to post at the door and then get back to the scullery where you can do no more harm.”

As the door closed after the girl Lady Haggitha tore off a strip of fresh muslin and gently wiped the fat from Basilides’ face, then took from her purse a small vial, sprinkled a few drops of lavender into the water. Animal fat, indeed! It was lavender that was needed for treating burns, it would soothe the pain and speed the healing, guard against any infection. As careful as she was the blisters still burst at the merest touch, splitting like swollen purses to bare yellow pus and weeping pink flesh. Basilides brought up a hand to brush his cheek, cried out at the pain he caused himself even more agony but still tried to bring his hand back a second time. When Lady Haggitha caught first one hand, then the other, he began to thrash his head from side to side, complaining that he burned, itched, could feel colonies of insects stinging as they scampered across his face, such creatures as could only be found in steaming tropical jungles.

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“Hush, Basilides, be still,” Lady Haggitha persuaded him, fastening his hands to the sides of the cot with two strips of the muslin, then holding him firm by the back of the skull while she wiped away as much of the grease as she could. That done, she soaked more lengths of muslin in cold water and laid them across his face, added a few drops of clary sage to the lavender to help him relax.

She changed the dressings on each half hour, refreshed the perfume, found ice to chill the water and other oils to make it more efficacious, to soothe his wounds, but throughout her ministrations, which lasted through the night and into the morning, still he continued to rave, plagued by visions of a world become molten, peopled by ants and beetles and giants of men with insane black eyes, fathers eating their children and mothers spilling stillborn abominations from their loins. It was the trauma brought on by the treatment at the hands of her husband, she believed, the scribe’s mind denying what had happened and seeking other reasons for his condition, but even as his contortions subsided and his pain began to ease, as his speech took on a more coherent tone, still his preoccupations were the same.

Ants, beetles, all manner of insects inhabiting a world in which each form was becoming liquefied, in which they were the only things which had any permanence, nightmare figures rearing up from fantastic landscapes. Objects flowed one into another, the sky into the land, the sea into the coast, rocks and trees and the buildings they sheltered all becoming a part of a single amorphous whole.

And time too, he said, that flowed, but now there was a look of confusion in his single seeing eye, for this was not time in the abstract, flowing inexorably on as it passed from moment to moment, but rather in its physical manifestation. Sundials and hourglasses, clocks and chronometers, all the instruments by

which time is recorded he could see becoming liquid, taking on new shapes or no shape at all, more living than manufactured, as elastic as the human form, pliant and soft.

“Soft watches? There can surely be no such things,” said Lady Haggitha, but with some uncertainty, for the scribe now seemed so coherent.

The skin had pulled tight down one side of his face, it drew his mouth awry in an ugly grimace. “I fear there can be, my Lady, in this world or another. As I scribed the Catalogue of Intrusions I suspected such places; now, with my bad eye, I can see them.”

Lady Haggitha wiped a drool of saliva from the corner of the scribe’s mouth. “In this world or another,” she echoed. “Tell me, Basilides, would it not make more sense for the Hashishim our Lord Lovecraft seeks to be someplace other than this world?”

“To have such an effect as she has on this world, to conjure the intrusions she has, yes it would, since any mastery of the Afflatus is denied the people of this land. So she is elsewhere.” Here his voice fell to a hushed whisper, as if fearing eavesdroppers. “Or, the alternative...”

“Yes, Basilides?” said Lady Haggitha expectantly, wanting confirmation of a possibility which had already occurred to her, one which might render her husband’s strategy all the more futile.

“Or...” The scribe’s ruminations should have been for Lord Lovecraft and him alone, but Lady Lovecraft was so persuasive in her ways, so coaxing in her tone, while her husband had been too cruel in his treatment to deserve any loyalty. “...or she has brought someone with her from this ‘elsewhere’. Such a person, be they man, woman or child, would have a mastery of the Afflatus. In their own world a creator, but in this world something even more. Only such a person could possibly conjure the visions I have seen.”

And Lord Lovecraft’s only concern, the height of his

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ambition, was to prevent van Vogt's men finding the Hashishim, to give her the freedom to bring about conflict, when he could actually be harnessing her talents for his own end.

Lady Haggitha took the scribe's hands in hers, squeezing them gently as she drew them into her lap, said, "So speak to me again, Basilides, of these soft watches and steaming jungles."

* * *

Jack was in a good mood, a great mood, his luck was changing and he had every reason to be happy. And strangely enough Ted Baldwin, of all people, had been the cause of it all.

Ted had wanted him to go into Birmingham to see an exhibition of prints by Goya. It would do him good, the tutor said, it would spur him on, which was what he needed if he was to get anything more than a meager pass from his final degree show. Jack was broke, though, so Ted, not quite the bastard some people took him for, had donated a few pounds from the petty cash.

And what did Jack do? Well first he had to celebrate with a beer or two, after which, since the day was fine and the weather fair, he thought he might try hitching into Birmingham. It wasn't far, no more than twenty miles, and if he could get a lift then he would go to the exhibition; if not, well, he would be able to fake it, he knew enough about Goya's work to be able to convince Ted that he had been.

It seemed that the warm sun brought out the best in people that day. Standing by the A45 he got a lift in a matter of minutes and was in Birmingham by early afternoon. More important than the lift, though, was the tip; the driver who stopped for him was a professional punter on his way to Wolverhampton racetrack. 'Baudelaire' in the two-thirty and 'Le Momo' in the next were the horses he tipped. It was too much of a coincidence for Jack to ignore. He knew Baudelaire from those few art history lectures he had attended, and had also heard mention of Le Momo, crazy

Antonin Artaud, he of the Theatre of Cruelty. He checked on how much he had left of Ted's petty cash, found a betting shop and put the lot on a straight win double. After all, if you backed a coincidence you backed it to the hilt.

He never recalled what the individual odds were -thoughts became blurred later that day- but the double paid out at thirty to one, returned a little over sixty pounds for his stake.

Rolling! He was fucking rolling in it!

He had money to take the train back, now -a taxi, even- but Jack knew he would probably still hitch a lift home, for he hated any travel of an organized kind, had tired of it even before he reached his teens.

Jack's father was with the diplomatic service and from an early age he had been left very much alone, since going to prep school reckoned that he had seen his parents no more than half a dozen times each year, then even less frequently since starting art school. There were some people, like Griff -a northern peasant who had never been further than Blackpool until he had come down to college- who thought he was foolish not to take advantage of the opportunity to travel. At the time he began college his father had been posted to Vienna, which Griff thought would be wonderfully decadent, and he had recently moved on to the States, which had to be even better still. "Go there! Don't be such a fool!" his friends encouraged him, but he could never quite make them understand how bored he had grown with traveling, how the trips from boarding school had soon lost their novelty; it was more trouble than it was worth traveling all that way each vacation, to a strange place, to see parents who had become little more than strangers themselves. He had long ago decided, and still adhered to the notion, that a need to travel was symptomatic of a lack of imagination, and he had recently come to realize that there were other journeys to be made, journeys which mattered, true 'trips' which were all in the mind.

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He knew of a place out Handsworth way where such trips could be bought, with the money he had made he could go across there and score a few tabs of acid, maybe some other stuff as well. But first, the exhibition.

And wasn't that something else! Just too fucking much!

There were never all that many good exhibitions at the gallery adjacent the art school, the city where he studied was a motor city, a Detroit UK, and cars took up most of the exhibition space, old Jags and Daimlers, Humbers and Sunbeams. After such a cultural quagmire the show of Goya prints was something special, sublimely weird, a jolt to the imagination. Even in the man's straight bread-and-butter portraits there was something which smacked of madness, there was insanity and mayhem in the pinprick ink-black eyes of his subjects. And then there was the gory stuff, the images of war, the dreams and nightmares, 'Saturn devouring his children' and 'The Colossus' with his enormous back turned as if he had something grotesque to hide. It was great! Simply superb! Jack could feel that something good would come of the visit, he could hardly wait to get back to his own work and throw himself into it with renewed vigor. His imagination had been fired by what he had seen.

For a moment he thought that today at least he could manage well enough without any artificial stimulants, his brain was racing already, but the money was there in his pocket, he had cash enough for some grass and some acid. What he didn't need himself he could always sell for a profit, there was a continual demand in college and he was known as the man he could meet everyone's needs.

To Handsworth, then.

As he jumped a bus and made his way across the city he felt a shiver of uncertainty about his errand, like a solitary knight fearful of a challenging mission. For all that he felt comfortable in his role of the middle-man, dealing with others on behalf of his

friends at college, he was never quite happy about going to see the man he knew as Flash; there was something about the guy that disturbed him.

Eddie Spaak -pronounced 'spark', to give him his nickname- was a man in his forties, about the same age as Jack's own father; he belonged to the generation which wore suits and ties, cardigans and slacks. As eccentric as any of the students Jack knew, though, Flash dressed like a child playing pirates, wore a patch over one eye -whether out of necessity or not, no one knew, though he did sometimes picture the man's eye puckered and scorched- had a large gold loop the size of a curtain ring in one ear, tied a scarf about his head and tucked his jeans into knee length boots. The man was off his head, for Christ's sake! He was a madman, Le Momo incarnate! And he could grin so menacingly. His leering smile was of such disturbed delight that anyone in his company could well doubt their own sanity, as well as that of the pixilated pusher.

Still, Flash had the stuff and Jack had the money. The deal would go ahead.

Flash lived on the top floor of a dilapidated block of flats. The hallways had a sweaty sheen to them, the stairs were slippery with the grease which had spilled from carelessly discarded bags of rubbish, and as Jack mounted each flight he felt himself losing courage with every step. He thought of turning back, he hesitated any number of times, it was in a daze of uncertainty that he rang the bell of the uppermost flat.

From a speaker grille on the wall a voice said, "Yes?"

Jack gave his name and the lock slipped back, he entered and went along the dim hallway to a second door at the end. He could hear music playing.

'Here come old fat top, he come groovin' up slowly...'

Flash scared the shit out of him at times, he had to admit it; boarding school had not prepared him for ordeals like this.

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‘...he got joo-joo eyeballs, he one holy roller...’

One last chance to turn and leave.

‘...hold you in his arms, yeah, you can feel his disease...’

One last chance to turn and run but then it was gone, he knocked on the door at the end of the hall and pushed it open.

Flash was sprawled across a mattress in the living room; but for mattresses and cushions there was no other furniture. He was bare-chested, had an arm around a girl by his side, one hand tickling the tip of her breast. She was pretty and this disturbed Jack, for Flash was ugly and scarred with pockmarks, the type of man who could corrupt everything he touched.

“Hey, Jack! How’s things?”

“Fine,” said Jack, but not with much conviction.

“So? What’re you looking for?”

Jack put a hand over the winnings in his pocket before answering, “Some shit. Some acid. Have you got it?”

“Haven’t I always? How much do you want?”

The girl had fine blonde hair down to her shoulders. Each time she turned to smile at Flash, or to regard Jack, it brushed her cheeks. Flash was still toying with her nipple and Jack could see it pricking against the thin fabric of her cheesecloth shirt.

“How much are you charging? You give me a price for the stuff and I’ll let you know,” said Jack cautiously.

Flash laughed, reached behind the cushion he rested against and pulled out his wares, a cake of resin wrapped in foil and a plastic bag of bright purple tabs. He was cool, so at ease, so reckless that nothing seemed to ruffle him. The girl beside him squirmed like a reptile, working deeper into his embrace, seeming to want more than a kiss and a cuddle.

“You’ll have to excuse the girl,” Flash smiled, delighted with the attention he was receiving. “She’s got a voracious appetite, see, like she could gobble a man up whole.”

The girl burrowed into him, chuckling as she did so, nuzzled

into his armpit and then kissed and took a mouthful of a bite. Jack saw a spurt of blood which jetted from either side of her mouth, smearing her cheeks. When she turned and smiled at him there was a pound or so of pink flesh filling her mouth.

“Jesus!” said Jack, but the girl shook her head, as if to tell him that Christ would never be found there, in that room, with the likes of them. Jack could well believe it. The girl was actually chewing and choking the flesh down, he could see great chunks of it forcing their way down her throat.

Flash held out a hand -as if for the girl to kiss it, as if to wipe a speck of blood from her mouth- and she bit off the tips of two fingers, fixing her teeth into the flesh just above the nails. She gulped and swallowed and they were gone, she was grinning again, her lips dripping blood and scraps of skin.

“Flash...?” said Jack.

There was a sudden loud knocking at the door. Jack looked towards it, then back to Flash whose lips were being chewed away in a vicious parody of a kiss. The knocking continued, louder, against the walls as well as the door, and Flash’s bared teeth and fleshless jaw worked up and down like that of a ventriloquist’s dummy.

“Police! Quick! Eat the stuff!” he said, loose folds of skin flapping where his mouth should have been. “It’s a bust! Hurry up! Swallow the shit!”

The hand which came forward was without its fingertips, Jack did not want to touch it but somehow the dope was being fed to him, crumbled like Dundee cake and forced into his mouth along with pieces of bloody flesh.

“Oh shit!” he moaned, gagging on the taste and the texture, feeling that he was chewing on the parts of people long since dead.

The pounding on the door continued, the chewing and the slurping of the girl, there was the lacerated smile of Flash.

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Am I stoned? Jack wondered. Am I dying? What the fuck is happening to me?

* * *

Cups of spiced wine and cocktails of liquors had Abishai's mind spinning, smoke fogged the senses as much as it did the room, making his head feel as light as mist, and it seemed that the only thing which kept him anchored in his seat, other than the fatigue he felt, was the weight of the plump whore bearing down on his lap. An hour ago she had been made uncomfortable by the rigidity of his member, but now that had grown limp with the drink, she was settled easily atop him and both were dozing contentedly. He had a belly full of drink, she a purse full of gold.

A heavy boot struck his, kicking his feet from the table where they rested though not disturbing the slumber of the girl in his lap.

"Do you intend servicing the tart or not?" asked his friend Elusai, his voice sounding as blurred with drink as were Abishai's senses, though with a touch less somnolence about the tone, a little less contentment.

"When she has rested," Abishai answered sleepily.

"Rested?" Elusai laughed, for the three of them had done little else for the past two hours. "But from what? You have done little yet to weary the girl, except perhaps ply her with drink."

Abishai opened his eyes, feeling them smart from the heat of the fire before him. In the large upper room of the inn there were perhaps a dozen men, as many women and then some to spare, all engaged in varying degrees of intimacy, some content with an embrace, as he was, while others had progressed to acts of full penetration of some orifice or other, too caught up by their lust to adjourn to one of the private chambers. "My women need to rest prior to the act, not after," he said, surveying the room, in his eye a challenging look which no one caught. "They need to build up a reserve of stamina if they are to suffer this rutting beast."

Elusai acknowledged the boast, wondered if his friend might not wish to delegate the chore, as he did so many others, but Abishai tightened his hold on the girl, drawing her close to him so that a plump breast protruded from the slack bodice of her dress. Through sleepy eyes she looked down at her nakedness, smiled, but made no move to cover herself, leaving the rouged nipple to peer out like a bloodshot eye.

Noting the covetous glance of his friend, Abishai suggested that he find a girl of his own.

“I would if I had your gold,” Elusai responded glumly, “but all I can afford are the diseased sluts downstairs.” Of all those on the upper floor of the inn he was the only one denied the company of a woman, around him the sons of prosperous families made free with their allowances, buying favors and making friends. The best he could hope for was the use of Abishai’s girl once she was finished with, if she was too tired to protest or too drunk to notice. “I envy you, Abishai, that you have such an indulgent guardian.”

“He indulges me only when it pleases him, and only in those ways that suit him,” said Abishai, and though his interest in the girl was stirring, his hand hiking up her dress and caressing her thigh, still there was a noticeable lack of enthusiasm, as though this was indeed a chore which he might prefer to delegate. “Any indulgences I truly crave my Lord Lovecraft makes it his business to deny me. He takes great pleasure in that.”

Elusai tossed another cord of wood on the fire, even though the room was warm enough to make Abishai’s girl glisten with a fine film of perspiration. He unbuttoned his tunic and bared his chest, taking note as the tart tugged her bodice from her damp breasts. “What is there that Lord Lovecraft denies you? What can be lacking in your life?”

“Adventure, Elusai,” Abishai answered, joining the girl in blowing a cooling draught of air into the gully of her cleavage,

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then pinching a bared breast rather than caressing it, bringing a bleat of pleasure.

“Here in Golgonooza? Real or denied, there is no adventure here.”

“But beyond, elsewhere in the kingdom.” Abishai leant forward, bringing the young whore with him so that her breasts now fell fully free, hanging pendulously as if needing to be suckled. “First Minister van Vogt has commissioned two warriors, my uncle has responded by dispatching a cohort of his own men, all searching out some Hashishim wench. I tell you, Elusai, there is adventure and I am being denied my part in it.”

“Why this interest in some Hashishim creature?” asked Elusai.

“Who cares?” said Abishai, resting his cheek against the girl’s bared shoulder, drawing consolation from her body. “It is a mission, that is all that interests me.”

Each nursing his own particular frustrations, the two young men gazed mutely at the fire while all around there was a soft murmur of contented males, the occasional ribald chuckle or gasp of mock indignation. The surround of the fire they stared at was an ornate thing, fine carvings showing figures coupling and cavorting, but figures of such strange aspect that they sometimes beggared belief. Rumor had it that the craftsman responsible had traveled far and wide throughout the kingdom, had actually witnessed such scenes and been so struck by wonder that he was made dumb.

The legend, whether it had any truth in it or not, served only to compound Abishai’s unrest.

“What way is this for two healthy young men to spend their days?” said a voice, intruding on their reverie, and they looked up, Abishai to see his aunt, Elusai to recognize the beautiful Lady Haggitha. She drew up a stool and sat between them, unclasping her cloak and arranging her skirts as she said, “Such a waste of

youth, that it can find its only pleasures in a place like this.”

“What are you doing here, aunt?” asked Abishai. “Did you come without escort? Does my Lord Lovecraft know you are here?”

“I go many places without escort, and without the knowledge of my Lord Lovecraft,” she answered, smiling at what might have been his concern or his disapproval. Turning to Elusai, she said, “Bring me something to drink, there’s a good boy.”

Elusai snapped his fingers, gesticulating. “Hey, girl! Over here!”

“No. Bring me something,” Lady Haggitha ordered. She rested a hand on his naked chest and he felt a shudder pass through his body, her touch cold but its effect warming, the tips of her fingers smooth with some scented lotion. Lady Haggitha had a skill with cosmetics, could concoct perfumes which might make a holy man swoon, creams which could scorch a man’s flesh while remaining impervious to them herself. Her caress could kill as easily as it could soothe. “You wouldn’t have me tended by a common serving wench, would you, Elusai?” she asked, conscious of the effect of her touch, amused by his dull response.

“Apologies, my Lady,” he said, rising and crossing the room. When he returned, with a fresh flagon of wine and an extra cup, aunt and nephew were close in conference, speaking across the half-clothed figure of Abishai’s whore.

“Take this slut from my nephew,” said Lady Haggitha, accepting the cup of wine, and Elusai opened his arms as the girl was passed across, settling in his lap and twining her arms about his neck. She shifted a time or two to make herself comfortable, soft padded flesh abrading his body. The excitement she caused him was ignored for the moment, though, as he devoted his attention to the conversation between Lady Haggitha and her

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nephew.

“My Lord Lovecraft has sent men out into the kingdom, to search for an Hashishim girl. You know this, Abishai?”

“In order to prevent the interference of van Vogt’s men,” her nephew understood, nodding attentively. “He wishes the girl to be unmolested, free to do as she will.”

“Which is indicative of the man’s stupidity,” said Lady Haggitha, the dropping of her husband’s title indicative in itself of how she felt towards him.

“It is?”

“It is. He wishes the girl to remain at liberty so that she will be free to wreak her mischief, put the stability of the kingdom in jeopardy, encourage conflict so that he and his legions might have a purpose in life.”

“He craves adventure,” Abishai appreciated, his sympathies with his uncle for once.

“He lacks ambition.” Lady Haggitha frowned as she sipped her wine, lips pouting around the taste. She set her cup down on the table, said, “With such a creature as this Hashishim as your target, what would your intention be?”

As Abishai hesitated, Elusai said, “To harness her talents rather than simply set them free.”

“Exactly! Very good, Elusai!” she congratulated him, bracelets striking tinkling melodies against each other as she applauded his thinking. The smile she favored him with was of such beauty that it made the high-priced whore in his lap seem as attractive as a toothless hag. “You might well be the brains needed to complement my nephew’s brawn.”

“In doing what?” asked Abishai, impervious to the insult.

“It is a mission you need, the lack of one what has you whiling away your time in places such as this. So let your mission be this: to find the Hashishim before your uncle or van Vogt can, to bring her to me so that I can direct her ability to my

advantage.”

“But what guarantee have we of success over van Vogt or Lord Lovecraft? Their men have begun their mission, might already have found her.”

“Unlikely, since they look in the wrong places,” said Lady Haggitha, with a look of haughty omniscience, the pity she felt for others so strong that it could wither the stoutest man. “And your guarantee of success, dear Abishai, is that you have me to guide you. Me and Basilides.”

“But Basilides...”

“Was no use to Lord Lovecraft?” She waved away the protest with another elegant musical gesture, a tuneful counterpoint to the grunting acts which still took place all around them. “That was because he was treated like a pet who had pissed on the carpet rather than the man of sensitivity that he is. Lord Lovecraft is a clod, a clumsy boor, he couldn’t coax a tickle from a tart without first putting the fear of god into her. My ways are more subtle, more persuasive,” she said, resting one hand on Abishai’s knee, the other on Elusai’s, and each felt the certainty of her promise flow into them. “Basilides has offered clues not previously forthcoming, which lead me to believe that if you were to head west...”

* * *

For such a pretty inn, even one in such a derelict state, Anna thought that ‘The Stuck Pig’ was a particularly unkind name and her heart immediately went out to the place the moment she set eyes on it. Set a little back from the lane, approached by a narrow dirt track, the quaint stone building seemed to be sulking with embarrassment in the sun, shrinking just as a hare-lipped child might do in a corner of the playground, the victim of cruel jibes and hurtful laughter. It was easy to see why the place had failed to prosper as a business, for all that its setting was the rich Warwickshire countryside; call the inn by whatever name you

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would, make it sound as attractive as you might, it could never have thrived in so isolated a location. There were signs that there had once been cottages nearby, but these had long since been demolished. 'The Stuck Pig' might also go the same way if no one put in a bid at auction. But if someone did...? If someone had the courage...?

If the structure was ever again to house a viable business Anna could see that it would need a great deal of work on it, much money would have to be spent. Such windows as had not been broken were so grimy, so covered with moss and fungus and natural filth that they would have to be replaced; the frames were rotting, paint flaked from rusting gutters and downspouts; the door, though of a solid and ancient craftsmanship, was pitted and battered by the elements. And even then, once the place had been patched and repaired, once it had been made inhabitable, there would be the need for an approach road, the need for a car park, for if 'The Stuck Pig' was ever to resume trading it would have to compete with the steak houses and restaurants which were springing up throughout the county, attract those people who drove out from the towns and cities. It pained Anna to picture the dirty black blanket of tar which would be thrown over the lush grass to one side or the other, floodlit in the evenings, highly glossed saloon cars glittering in the harsh artificial moon-glow. How much nicer, she thought, if someone could simply take the place for a home. How charming it could be. It would take brave people to live there, though, for the location was nothing if not isolated.

It had taken Anna longer to get to the derelict inn than she had thought it would, the country lanes had twisted and turned and there had been one or two points where the gradient had been so steep that she had been forced to dismount her bicycle. The machine was no speedster, it had been bought at a car-boot sale and was built like a tank, had only one gear, and beneath the

patches of rust the steel was still thick enough to deflect a bullet. The ride from the city had exhausted her, but still it was a good day to be in the country, as peaceful as the countryside permitted, the weather clear and fine. She didn't mind that the journey had taken more time and effort than expected, certainly didn't envy Griff and the others cooped up in college.

Wheeling the bicycle along the lane, stretching her cramped legs, the countryside reminded her of home, brought to mind her father and his beloved garden. Since his retirement he had devoted all his time to the garden, diligently tending the swathes of green and coaxing the bursts of foliage. Green was the favorite color, in the garden it was predominant, the few flowers permitted were merely to pacify her mother. Anna had never realized that there could be so many varieties of green, even as an art student she could never conjure as many shades of the same color as her father did from his garden and she smiled to think of him at that moment, pottering about.

There was little time for dreaming, though, there was work to be done before she could let herself surrender to the seductions of the landscape, and she hurried on towards the inn.

Though Anna was a design student -as opposed to a 'true' art student; Griff insisted that there was a distinction- and had been instructed in a variety of its disciplines, her approach to her work had necessarily been influenced by her father's love of nature, was environmentally friendly. The garish images and crude philosophies of the advertising world were not for her, she would not be the one responsible for defiling the land with billboards and hoardings and cheap contrivances. Perhaps Griff was right, perhaps she had opted for the wrong discipline and should have been a painter; but then painters only dreamt that the world was beautiful, their work was all pretence, whereas she felt that she had an opportunity to actually make it so.

Go ahead, Griff! Laugh! But you see if I'm not proven right

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some day!

It was a hope as clear as any creed to Anna, that she might make the world more beautiful. People might have to work in office blocks, shop in supermarkets and find their pleasure in public stadia and auditoria, but there was no reason why these should be soul-less constructions, plastic and Formica encased in glass and concrete; such places should enhance life rather than make something antiseptic of it. Buildings need not be the sterile shells which architects designed, nor the dated eyesores which others demolished; she would like them to be living places of character and warmth, and the old inn, 'The Stuck Pig', this certainly lived, to her mind at least. She was going to show what could be done with such a property, this final project would be the centerpiece of her portfolio, a piece of work so professional that it would ensure her future employment.

It had taken her a while to find the right subject, one which was suitably dilapidated but also held promise. The city itself had a city's customary quota of crumbling buildings, there was the 'wrong' side of town which suffered from neglect and overcrowding, other areas still waiting to be rebuilt, but nothing caught her imagination, there was no place which suggested the showpiece she was after. Then, in the property supplement of the local paper, she had happened upon 'The Stuck Pig'. It had been a poor photograph, it was difficult to see just how derelict the place was, but in the blurred shadows of the print her mind had envisaged the structure clearly, had seen its character and sensed its own particular desire to be reborn. A letter from college persuaded the agents to let her have the keys and they were even obliging enough to supply her with the floor plans and dimensions which would make her task all the easier. All she had to do was photograph the place, perhaps make a sketch or two of any ideas which came to her on the spot; then, back in college, she would set about making something splendid of the crumbling

old building.

Letting her bicycle rest against a splintered gatepost, she circled the exterior, camera slung around her neck, snapping away first with a standard lens and then with a wide-angle. The film was monochrome, which she would be able to process more easily than color and could enlarge to whatever size she chose. She took a notebook from her shoulder bag and jotted down details of the color of the stone, of the woodwork, of how the grounds might influence any view of the structure. Finished with the front of the building, she capped the lens of her camera and went to the door. It was fastened with a heavy padlock and some effort was required to turn the key; the place had been empty and neglected for so many years, though, that even when the padlock was free the door refused to budge, as if there was someone on the other side, leaning against it, and she had to put the whole weight of her body into forcing it open. She was not a slim girl, there was an air of countrified good health about her which sometimes tended towards a fullness of figure which some -like Griff- found attractive, but still there was an effort required of her. Beneath the thudding of her shoulder, though, the door slowly gave way and she was admitted.

Inside, in the shade, she felt a sudden chill on her neck. Thinking that she might tan while she was cycling out to the inn she had her hair tied up and wore a tee shirt which left much of her shoulders bare. The sudden change of temperature on entering the building left goose bumps on her flesh and she rubbed her arms as she stepped forward, looking around appraisingly. The interior was dim and dusty, the single room long and low with bare brick and timber showing. Photographs would be no problem, she had a flash gun, but she was aware that this would show the room in a brutally unreal light. If only she had brought a tripod, she thought, and had the time to spend on longer exposures, then she could capture the true mood of the

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place, show that it lived, or had done, or could do, that it had a history and had not simply died when it was deserted. It had been tiring enough pedaling pounds of rusty steel up and down hills, though, without having the added weight of a sturdy tripod.

She adjusted the aperture on her camera and took shots of each wall, of each nook and cranny, the harsh glare of the flash making shadows leap back as if in fright; she stood behind the solid wooden counter and changed back to the wide-angle lens, to get the whole of the room in a single frame. But for the sharp crack of the flashgun, like the lightning of a distant storm, the place was quiet, eerily so; she could not even hear the gentle creak of shifting foundations which she had thought to find in such an old structure, and even the wooden stairs which led from the side of the bar to the living quarters above were so sturdy that they made no sound beneath her weight. It was a property built with craft and skill and again she thought what a shame it would be if it went unsold, if it had to be demolished, felt sure there had to be the memories of people who would protest.

At the top of the stairs was a long narrow corridor, dark because no windows gave directly onto it, its walls quite flimsy, suggesting that smaller spaces had been made of an area which was once much larger. The only light she saw came from the open doorways to each side -the bedrooms, the sitting room, the bathroom and the kitchen- and she jumped suddenly, startled by her unexpected sneeze. The sound echoed about the upper floor and was quickly followed by a second. It was the dust. She suffered from hay fever, though fortunately not as badly this summer as last, and the years of dust she was disturbing were aggravating the condition. She knew that the sneezes would come rattling as fast as machine gun fire if she didn't hurry about her business and get back outdoors.

There were only two bedrooms, but in one there was a large oak fire surround which caused her to linger; it was beginning to

part company with the wall and she thought of coming back the following day, with Griff, in the college van, to take it for her own. But no, this would be too much like an act of desecration, as bad as the pillage which had been brought about by time and neglect, so she satisfied herself with running her fingers over the ornate carvings, such strange creatures some of them, half human, like gargoyles, joined together in embraces and acts of passion. She paused a while, her mind wandering again, imagining people who might have gathered before it, going back for generations, had to make a conscious effort to drag herself away, as if ghosts were trying to engage her company, finally turned her back on it and moved on.

All the plumbing had been removed from the bathroom, the kitchen was no more than four empty walls, she had the dimensions of these rooms so there was no need to take photographs of them. She went back to the stairs and paused a moment longer, listened to the building, the first person to do so in however many years. Her back was to the umbilical shadow of the corridor and the darkness was icy, it wafted along the upper hall and froze her flesh. She had never really thought of light and dark as being warm and cold except in her work, in association with colors, but now there was no color, just darkness, and without turning to look back along the hallway she could feel its bitter weight cutting into her.

“The poor place!” she finally laughed aloud, her voice echoing through the desolate shell. “It’s been neglected for so long it’s forgotten it exists!”

She went downstairs and out to the overgrown garden, fastening the padlock behind her. Because of the brightness of the summer evening she was unaware of the lateness of the hour as she pedaled away leisurely, free-wheeling down hills she had struggled against on the outward journey, finding other inclines which forced her to dismount and walk. She stopped once or

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twice to finish off the film in the camera, snapping anything which took her fancy, and it was close to eleven o'clock when she finally rested her bicycle in the hallway at home.

It seemed that everyone was already asleep. There were no sounds from the ground floor flat, except perhaps for the creak of a bedspring as Leo tossed and turned, or maybe Jack in the adjacent bed. She climbed the stairs to the first floor, listened at Selina's door but heard nothing, then went along the landing to the flat she shared with Griff. As she opened the door she listened for a moment for sounds from upstairs, from Tulla's attic room; deciding there were none, she entered the flat.

Griff was in bed, asleep, one hand tucked beneath his cheek. She smiled at the sight of him, sleep the only time when he seemed peaceful, when he was not agitated and burning with ideas. She took off her tee shirt and unzipped her jeans.

"Anna?" said Griff, not opening his eyes.

"Yes, it's me," she said, sitting on the edge of the bed, expecting him to turn to her. "Did you have a good day? Get plenty of work done?"

"It was a bloody day," he grumbled. "Will you get me a glass of water?"

He had been drinking, she could smell it, though his face remained turned from her the stale smell of beer wafted around with each breath. He always got thirsty after drinking too much.

"Get it yourself," she told him, standing and continuing to undress, slipping her jeans to her ankles and kicking them away.

"Please, Anna."

"No."

"A glass of water, that's all I want. I'm thirsty."

He pleaded like a child, his voice brittle and dry, but still he lacked the courtesy to open his eyes and face her, to ask with his eyes as well as with that whining voice. It was guilt at getting drunk, she knew. Well sod him! She'd show him! Her eyes

sparkled with mischief as she remembered how she had last punished him, not for his drunkenness but for being lazy and selfish and childish in his pleading. It had been a while ago, he might have forgotten, but he would sure as hell be reminded in a moment or two.

Dressed only in her panties, Anna went to the kitchen which was no more than an alcove in a corner of their two-roomed flat. She ran the tap until the water was icy cold, then filled a glass. Returning to the bed she had to stifle her chuckles; the last time she had done this they had laughed about it after, then Griff had waited patiently for an hour or more, until he was sure she was asleep and he could get his revenge, and this had made them laugh all the more.

“Your glass of water, honey,” she whispered, raising the glass and letting the liquid drip slowly onto his face.

Yet even as the liquid fell it seemed to her to be more viscous than tap water, the drops which hit his cheek clung tackily to his flesh and then started to bite, wisps of vapor rose and there was a sizzling sound. It never occurred to her to pull the glass away, she looked on transfixed, much as Renaissance artists must have done when they first saw the human body stripped of skin to reveal the muscle beneath. Griff’s cheek became pitted like an etching plate in an acid bath -acid from a kitchen tap?- and the skin peeled back like parchment which was so dry that it could burn without flame, bared those muscles which made him smile so sweetly, bared the socket of that eye which he always favored when he winked at her in secret, bared a whole side of his face from the temple right down to the chin.

While the glass still dripped onto the corroding flesh, while Griff’s features dissolved before her eyes, Anna started to scream.

“You know whose fault this is, don’t you?” Griff smiled, now rolling over to face her. “It’s that bitch Tulla’s.”

Chapter 2

The scream traveled throughout the house.

Selina, on the same floor as Anna, was the first to respond, out of bed and along the hall before she could even consider what she was about, the tee shirt which she wore to bed flapping behind her, riding up her thighs. She found Anna standing at the bedside naked but for her knickers, an empty glass in her trembling hand, pale in the moonlight and cold to the touch. She took a bathrobe from behind the door and draped it around her friend's shoulders, forcing an arm into each sleeve as she heard footsteps pounding up the stairs, Jack and Leo coming from their room below. They, too, were pale with the shock of their awakening.

"What the hell was that?" Leo asked.

Selina fastened the robe around Anna's waist and tried to sit her on the bed. She fought back, though, shied from Griff as if from a stranger, for some reason reluctant to be near him, so Selina led her to the stool by the dressing table and sat her there, keeping an arm around her shaking shoulders.

"Well? What the fuck happened?" Leo demanded.

Griff sat up to speak and Anna screamed again, though a little more softly this time, as if catching her breath.

"His face," she said.

"Not a pretty sight," Jack agreed, looking at him with a grin. Griff's hair was dripping wet and plastered to his cheeks, his eyes were bleary with a hangover which would be worse in the morning.

"I'm soaking," Griff said, laughing. "You did it again, didn't you?" he smiled to Anna. "You drenched me with water. And just what did I do to deserve it this time?" he asked, not understanding the look in Anna's eyes, so vacant, like that of an amnesiac. "You do remember the last time, don't you? I stayed

awake half the night, waited till I was sure you were asleep then gave you a drenching in return.”

Anna nodded.

“We laughed about it then,” he recalled, wondering why there was no laughter now.

“Yes,” Anna finally said, “only tonight it wasn’t water I poured over you, it was more like acid.” Her frightened gaze switched from person to person, she was unable to control the trembling which shook her body. “It bit into him, I swear it did,” she told them. “I saw the skin shrivel away and the flesh chew up, I saw the muscle and bone rotting. I swear it!”

No one said anything, no one laughed or smiled with disbelief, no one accused her of lying. Selina kept her arm around her friend’s shoulder; Leo looked at Griff and saw that he was unharmed; Jack started to shiver, wearing only shorts and feeling a cold draught bite at his chest.

“Suddenly I don’t feel very sleepy,” Selina decided. “Does anyone fancy a coffee?”

There were silent nods of agreement and she led the way to her room. It was the smallest in the house, but cozy; as if by unspoken assent they seemed to agree that there would be security in her snug room, sat around on the floor and on the bed, in tee shirts and shorts, draped in robes and blankets, squatting like braves around the pot of coffee. There were anxious looks, but still little was said. Then, as the warmth of the confined room drew them close together, there came a feeling of relief, a sense of safety in each other’s company.

“It’s a funny thing,” said Jack finally, when the silence had become more peaceful than menacing, “but I had a stroke of luck today, actually managed to get to see that Goya exhibition in Birmingham. Remember, Griff, Ted suggested I go?”

Griff nodded. “I remember.”

“So, I came into luck and got a little extra cash. What should

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I do with it, I thought.”

“You went to score,” Griff supposed.

“And I don’t think we need any of your spliffs tonight,” Selina was quick to say.

“Right, Selina, for once I’m with you on that,” Jack agreed. “The thing is, though, I go along to Flash’s place after the exhibition and I swear to God...” He raised two fingers to his lips and kissed them, in that gesture of a promise which his friends rarely trusted. “...I swear on my mother’s life that I hadn’t touched any weed or dropped any acid, I’d had no more than a couple of glasses of beer, I was as straight and sober as I’ve ever been, but suddenly I was seeing the whole Goya thing being played out in front of my eyes. There’s Saturn devouring his children, you know the painting, where he’s chewing up one of his kids, and next to Flash there’s this girl doing the same fucking thing, taking a bite out of his armpit, nibbling away at his fingers like they were savory snacks. I mean... I saw her fucking do it! I knew it couldn’t be happening, but I saw it! I heard the bones crunch and the tendons tear like the gristle you get in a chicken leg, I could hear her slurping up the blood and the juices!”

Calmly, though the others could guess at the effort it took him to keep from shaking, he drank down the last of his coffee, handed around cigarettes and touched a match to each with an uncommonly steady hand.

The only shakiness was in his laugh as he said, “I promise, I saw it happen. I know I’ve been a piss artist and a shit head in the past, but this time I was stone cold sober.”

No one doubted him or challenged him. Instead there were further admissions to follow, first Griff and his tale of the soft watch –the reason for him getting drunk, he told Anna- then Leo and what happened with the desk and finally Selina and her Alice-like trip into her design.

“I reckon Lewis Carroll must have been high himself when

he wrote about that trip,” said Jack, which was an interesting enough notion to raise a smile or two.

“But we weren’t, not a single one of us,” Leo pointed out.

Griff gave a heavy sigh. Anna was now sufficiently recovered from her experience to sit beside him, and they had their hands clasped together. “So,” he said, “one way or another we’ve all had a pretty bad day.”

“And there’s no blaming it on a dose of the flu,” said Selina. “It might be a bug, it might be contagious, but it sure as hell isn’t flu.”

“A common madness?” Jack suggested.

“Something to do with the dope you get us?” Leo said to him. “A recurring trip? Flashbacks?”

Anna stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray before facing Griff. “You told me what it was. Or rather, whose fault it was.”

“I did?”

She nodded. “While your cheek was being chewed up, after I’d poured the water or whatever it was all over you. You said it was because of Tulla.”

“I don’t remember.”

“All because of that bitch Tulla. That’s what you told me, those were the words you used.”

“Why blame Tulla?” Selina asked.

“We know you don’t like her,” said Jack.

Griff shrugged. “I can take her or leave her. She’s a bit strange, that’s all. I don’t know why we wanted her in the house.”

“Because we had an empty room and we needed someone to share the rent,” said Anna, who had been the one to invite Tulla to live with them.

“Still, I’ve nothing against the girl, I’ve no reason to blame her for anything that happened. I don’t even remember blaming her.”

“I don’t know how loud you screamed,” Selina said to Anna,

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“but it seemed that I heard it in my sleep, as if it was in my mind rather than actually in the house.” She looked at Leo and Jack. “How about you two?” Jack said nothing, Leo gave a barely perceptible nod. “Strange, though, that we should all be woken by it and come running to Anna’s room, all of us bar Tulla that is. Do you think anything strange might have happened to her today, anything on a par with the things we’ve all experienced?”

“Let’s get her down here and find out,” said Jack, rising to his feet and leaving the room while the others waited in silence.

He was back in a minute or two.

“Well?” asked Griff.

“There’s no sign of her,” he told them. “The door’s open, the bed’s been slept in but she’s not there.”

* * *

Tulla went soundlessly from the house, even as Anna’s cry still echoed about its walls and roused the others she swept unseen down the stairs and out onto the street. If she chuckled as she went -and she had caused mischief enough to raise more than a smile- then the sound might have been mistaken for the rustle of the breeze through the trees; flitting from halo to halo of the streetlamps she was no more than a shadow, a movement in the corner of the eye of anyone who happened to be about that late. It was a facility she possessed, to be able to pass unnoticed when she chose to, and one which she enjoyed for the confusion it could cause.

For all its contraptions and contrivances this was an arid world in which she found herself, one caught in an arid age, there were so many tools which conspired to make imagination redundant that at first she had despaired of finding minds which were receptive enough to be fed by her, fertile enough for her to feed off in turn. There were always dreams and nightmares, of course, but in the wakeful moments of this age minds were so swamped by stimuli that they had no need to labor, there were so

many images presented by artificial means that there was no need for a person to conjure more. It had fooled her at first, this place alive with invention, but she had quickly learned that it was all artifice and facade, the imaginations she entered were as dull and flat as the television screens which occupied them. She might just as well have entered these entertainment boxes for all the nourishment she received.

And then -why had she not thought of it before?- she had happened upon the artists, a small colony of them in the house on the edge of the city. Their dreams were ones they conjured for themselves, vivid visions which were so obsessive that they could fill every waking moment. She should have remembered the artists, the creative ones, she had driven so many mad before and these should have been the first she turned to.

They were the reason she had come, she now realized.

In the darkened park which led into the city, walking the wooded paths which bordered it, she thought back to the old city of Kristiania, remembering its bohemians. Fertile spirits, they had been. Fecund minds. They had seen anguish in nature for that was an age when nature and the night were all that men had to inspire them. By the banks of silent lakes was where nightmare was to be conjured, among seas of spruce and pine so still and erect that they seemed like cenotaphs; this was where she had tortured artists with visions of nature raging and the sky in torment, shimmering and weeping blood red.

The lights of the city beyond the park seemed to promise so much but afforded so little. Even now, at such a dead hour when there were few people abroad, they blinked and beckoned and washed the night of its mystery. There was no menace in a sky which swam with the city's reflected light, no horror in shadows which were swept by rippling bolts of neon. The streets she entered were so conceited in their intricacy, the product of conceited minds, that she was tempted to reduce them to rubble.

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* * *

Dawn came slowly, only gradually dimming the brilliance of the neon lights around Wenceslas Square, and the flickering legends which sparked against the pale sky stung Elusai's eyes. Garish hoardings advertising a variety of libations reminded him of the booze he had taken from evening through until morning and he felt his stomach give a heave of protest, tasted a cocktail of drinks on his palate and shivered as only a toper will, with that marked lack of resistance to the cold.

There were a few people about at that hour of the morning, but not enough, Elusai guessed, to afford the anonymity his rendezvous would demand. A clock chimed, confirmed the hour, he could have returned to his rooms to wash and don fresh clothes but he chose instead to linger. Pacing the four sides of the square with a measured stride, his arms wrapped tight across his broad chest, his only comfort against the chill morning was the memory of the last two hours spent in one of the pricier boudoirs of 'The Stuck Pig'. Abishai had left with his aunt, sobering quickly and fired by the promise of adventure, his spirit lifted by her perfumed touch; the whore had been paid for and was tired enough, or bored enough, not to complain when she was led to a private room. Her perfume still lingered, overpowering the smell of baking bread and frying bacon, masking all the aromas of a city coming awake; or, rather, Lady Haggitha's perfume lingered. She had commented on the whore's body odor, the stink of drink and perspiration which hung about the girl like a mist, had drawn a small vial from the folds of her cloak and moistened just the tip of a finger with the scent it contained. A touch to the girl's breast, her neck, her wrists, and it had been enough to make her whole body flush, suffusing her with a feverish ardor.

Still breathing in the fragrance, picturing Lady Haggitha as he had done while making love to the whore, Elusai made circuit after steady circuit of the square, each one bringing more people

to jostle until at last they amounted to a crowd. It was then, when there was anonymity in their number, that the figure accosted him.

He came to a halt before the rotund man who barred his way, face shrouded by a drab grey cloak, boots dulled by the dust of the street, resisted the impulse to offer a bow. "First Minister," was the simple acknowledgement he made, whispered softly enough that no other could hear.

"Elusai," the figure returned, spinning him on his heels to fall in step beside him, causing him to retrace his tracks. "So? What do you have for me? What have you learned?"

They slowly wound their way among the people who thronged the pavement, two men strolling leisurely, with no particular purpose in mind other than to enjoy the day. "Lord Lovecraft has sent men in pursuit of the Hashishim girl, as you have done," Elusai told the First Minister.

"I would have expected no less of him," van Vogt smiled. "My two mercenaries have a head start, though, they will already have gained an advantage of leagues."

"Yet are as handicapped in their quest as are Lord Lovecraft's men."

"Handicapped?" van Vogt came to a halt, caught Elusai by the arm, turned to face him. Even though the hood of his cloak still cast a shadow over his face, Elusai was aware of the First Minister's eyes burning into his. "What handicap is this?"

Wincing under the fierceness of the grip on his arm, now worried that information, if bad, might as easily be punished as rewarded, Elusai said, "That both your men and Lord Lovecraft's search in the wrong places, that they follow a futile trail to a misdirected end."

"And how can you know this, Elusai, after a night spent in a tawdry whorehouse?" van Vogt sniffed disapprovingly, exhaled deeply, his breath forming two plumes in the frosty morning air.

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“You have spent the night in a whorehouse, I can smell it, the stink of sluts and perfumed pudenda, the stench of stale booze. Are you trying to tell me that such a place could make a lie of my strategy? That the word of some cheap whore could point to my error?”

“No cheap whore, my Lord,” Elusai told him, and related the circumstances of the encounter with Lady Haggitha, of her conversation with her nephew and her plans for him.

van Vogt walked on at a slow thoughtful pace, his grip still firm as he drew Elusai along with him. He nodded his acceptance of the facts as stated, could well appreciate that Lady Haggitha might have a more sure strategy in mind, a clearer knowledge of the whereabouts of the Hashishim girl, for her ways were cunning, she had an intuition more profound than any other woman he knew and could divine certain truths from the vaguest portents. As Elusai had related it, Lord Lovecraft had been unable to force any insights from the scribe Basilides, but his wife’s gentler ways and cosmetic touch had been more productive. What the First Minister could not understand, though, was why Lady Haggitha felt the compulsion to apply herself to this self-same mission that had both himself and Lord Lovecraft so engaged.

“It is because she sees a greater advantage to be gained from finding this creature,” Elusai told him. “You want the girl found and dispatched so that the kingdom might remain at peace, untroubled by her interference. Lord Lovecraft, on the other hand, would want there to be anything but peace, would aim to either find the girl himself or prevent your men from doing so.”

The informer’s elucidation was thorough but plodding, and the First Minister grew impatient with it. “And Lady Haggitha’s aim in all this?” he demanded. “What exactly is that?”

“Neither to free the girl to be about her mischief, nor deny her the chance to exercise her powers, but rather to harness them

herself.”

van Vogt was momentarily lost for words, stunned by the implications of what Lady Haggitha had in mind. It had not occurred to him -why had it not?- that it might be possible to harness such powers as this girl had. He doubted very much that it was, dearly hoped this was the case, but still felt a blush of shame that he had overlooked the possibility. To have his ambition outdone by a woman, albeit one as wily as Lady Haggitha, was a demeaning thing, not something that he would like made common knowledge. Sensing that Elusai was aware of his shame, he ventured the belief that what she had in mind was surely not possible.

“Even for one as determined as Lady Haggitha it would not be a simple task,” Elusai offered, diplomatically parrying the statement.

“But she believes it might be accomplished,” van Vogt continued, with a soft laugh of scorn for what he regarded as a female’s fanciful dream. “How?”

“The Hashishim’s powers permeate the kingdom from a place beyond, for the moment at least. What Lady Haggitha’s scribe suggests, sensing her influence to be undiminished as it draws closer, is that she brings with her some tool, some instrument with which she can continue her mischief at closer quarters.”

“And her scribe believes that the threat approaches from the west, you say? He has places in mind? Then you will go there with the nephew.”

“Abishai has men to accompany him,” said Elusai, reluctant to agree, for it was gold he wanted, reward for his information, not the adventure which Lady Haggitha’s nephew craved. “It seems to me as futile as any other quest, my Lord. I hardly think...”

“Do not! Do not think! You will accompany Abishai,” van

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Vogt insisted. It was a statement of fact, not a question or an entreaty. “You will accompany Abishai and his merry band and keep me informed.”

* * *

Jack was the first to awaken, later that same morning, roused by the sunlight which broke through a crack in the curtains to etch intricate spirals in the dusty air. He knew he must have had a restless night to stir up such clouds, and just for a moment the reason escaped him; lowering his feet to the floor and sitting upright on the edge of the bed he tried to convince himself that it was too much drink which was the cause. He looked about the room to bring everything into focus, staring hard to stop his world shifting and quivering; it was the way he usually approached a hangover, but this time he knew that drink was not to blame.

The room he surveyed was in a mess, not at all a pleasing sight once the dust settled on it; clothes littered the floor, tracing the routes he and Leo had taken to their respective beds, underpants and socks and shirts with their arms outstretched like limp crucifixions. More clothes were piled on top of the bed in the far corner of the room, a formidable heap, still and somber like a burial mound. He threw a pillow across at it.

“Is that you?” Leo asked in a low grumble, no part of him seen and his words barely heard.

“It might be,” said Jack. “We don’t know for sure, do we? Nothing is certain.”

“Fuck your metaphysics. It’s you alright. Just piss off and let me sleep.”

Sweaty flatulent sounds followed, then a series of belches, and Jack moved before the bedclothes could shift and let the evil smells beneath seep out, gathered up trousers and a sweater and went through to the next room.

This, too, was in disarray, drawings and notebooks scattered

like discarded poker hands across the table in the centre of the room; other sketches, sheets of typed notes and half realized ideas were pinned to the wall with comments and elaborations penciled onto the wallpaper around them. Jack stepped carefully between the debris which littered the floor, went up and down a low staircase of books to the gas ring on the far side of the room. He struck a damp match against a sodden matchbox once, twice, then jumped back cursing, a hand to his groin, as the match disintegrated and sent dangerous phosphorescent flares shooting in every direction.

“Best not be one of those days,” he muttered, trying to put out of his mind all memory of the previous one.

He pulled on trousers and sweater before trying again, lit the gas and set the kettle on top of it. It had been his intention to make a cup of coffee, black -still pretending that he had a hangover- but now he saw that there was none, that the jars which leant precariously from the shelf above the sink, though labeled ‘Nescafe’, were all full of powdered pigments. Tea, then, with a slice of lemon, that would refresh him. He took a teabag from the packet, dropped it into the cleanest cup he could find, then curled his fingers around the lemon which sat in the middle of the breadboard. When he picked up the lemon, though, the breadboard came with it.

“What the...?”

He shook the lemon but the board stayed fast to it, he turned it this way and that and saw that the two had been super-glued together. He threw the lemon to the floor, noting that the board still clung obstinately to it, then turned to that part of the wall which was devoted to work in progress. There, low down on the floor, next to Leo’s ink-blot improvisations, he saw ‘Still Life with Lemon’, a not too accurate pencil sketch of what should have been his morning beverage.

“Fuck it! I’m going into college!” he announced.

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There was no acknowledgement from the bedroom, no farewell, so he slammed the door as hard as he could, stamped along the hallway and slammed the front door after him, too.

After the chaos of the flat the high street offered a soothing sight, so neat and ordered in the early morning light. It was like an illustration from a children's book or the backdrop to a pantomime, a part of a city that could almost be imagined, shops of varied architectural styles glowing rich red and burnt brown in the sun. Though the sky was cold, a faded denim color, the buildings made the most of the light and amplified what warmth there was, reflecting it to calm the mood and clear the senses. He paused in the doorway for a while to bathe in the clear peace of the scene, threw his head back as if in a shower before crossing the road to the bus stop.

It was a pleasant ride into the city, the southerly approach was one of tree-lined avenues leading through prosperous suburbs. He got off the bus before it reached the centre of the city, decided to walk the final mile or so and took a diagonal line across Spencer Park, aiming for the narrow footbridge which crossed the railway. A path had been worn in the grass where none had been intended, a short cut which many people used, and this was the route he followed. A little to his right but still some distance away, close to the footbridge, there was a squat brick building; it was quite small, with no windows, only one door, and no clue as to its purpose. He had always assumed that it was some kind of shed or store to house the tools which gardeners sometimes used around the park, but he could never be certain, he had never seen its door open. Now, as he approached the structure, he saw that vandals had been at work, that someone had sprayed on one wall, in green aerosol paint, the words 'a silly tree'.

In the lazy way that his mind worked, so early in the morning, he associated 'tree' with Griff -who had been doing a

painting of what he called a tree just a day or two before- and he suffered a pang of envy. Why? Perhaps it had something to do with sharing a flat with an animal like Leo, waking up each morning to his noxious eruptions while Griff had the perfumed warmth of Anna to stir him.

Okay, so maybe Anna wasn't the most stunning girl in college, but she did have a particular beauty. She had hair which he would never describe as blonde but rather as pale, remembering moonlight or a weak sun on a hazy morning; it was fine, extremely fine, easily caught by the breeze as she moved but always falling back into place, curled in a caress beneath her chin. This pale curtain framed a face whose bones were strong, whose lips were sharply defined as if chipped from marble, and there was only one flaw, her nose, slightly uneven when seen in profile as if to be a spiteful postscript to the rest of her features. She had damaged it in a car accident, he knew, but he never minded this minor flaw, for he acknowledged that there could be charm in contrast and beauty in imperfection. It was an excuse he often used to dismiss faults in the girls he admired.

Though Jack counted Griff as a friend he was also capable of hating him like an enemy. At the root of this hatred was desire, for while he knew full well what desire was he doubted that Griff ever could. Desire, for Jack, was being unable to sleep because there was an object of that desire; desire was frustration, because the object of that desire was elusive, and desire was cunning, because the person tempted by that desire would stop at nothing to satisfy it; desire was many things, none of which ever seemed to occur to Griff, but most of all it was wanting. Griff would never admit to wanting anything; though there were many things he lacked he never seemed to make them objects of desire and never expended any energy in trying to attain them. Things came to Griff or they didn't and he was content to accept this, just energetic enough to reach out if something should come close but

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always too lazy to stretch very far. He had even come by Anna this way, not by wanting her or straining for her but simply by waiting, and the annoying thing was that there had not even been any cleverness involved, no question of playing hard to get; he had quite simply been unconcerned, prepared to let things happen, with the result that Anna fell in love with him.

“The silly bastard!” Jack cursed, as he crossed the footbridge and descended the steps on the other side, though what he really meant to say was ‘the lucky bastard’.

The steps took him down to a tree-lined row of estate agents, at the end of which, just before the shopping precinct, was a telephone kiosk. This, like the building in the park, had sprayed on its side the words ‘a silly tree’.

Lamenting Griff’s luck and his own lack of it, he took little conscious notice of the graffiti this time.

“He’ll get his comeuppance some day,” were the words he consoled himself with as he passed an electricity sub-station sprayed with the similar emerald green legend. He walked along the shopping arcade which took him to the central square where the city’s buses congregated, turned right, passed the museum and the library. Ahead of him the art school shone in the sun, all concrete and glass, a confusing collage of other buildings reflected in its windows. Mounting the first flight of steps, then a second, he turned towards the main entrance and saw Griff himself at the balcony which jutted out from the second floor common room.

Griff waved.

“Idiot,” Jack muttered, refusing to return the greeting, and remembered the words he had seen sprayed on buildings along the way. He hurried into the building, then, took the stairs two at a time to confront Griff as he was stepping from the balcony into the common room. “It was you, wasn’t it?” he said.

“What was me?” asked Griff, walking over to the coffee

machine, dropping a coin into the slot and tapping out a tattoo on the buttons.

What could Anna see in him? He wasn't just thin but downright skinny, wrists as brittle as twigs and knees like knots in pieces of string; his nose was too big, he had a wispy beard which ran along a narrow fertile line around his jaw, his hair was already beginning to thin at the front.

"You're the stupid bastard who's been spraying 'a silly tree' all over town," Jack accused. "Aren't you? Admit it."

Griff smiled, a cup of coffee in his hand. "But I'm an artist, Jack, not a vandal. What you're accusing me of would be criminal, not allowed, an up-before-the-magistrates job."

"It didn't stop you, though, did it?" Jack sat, slumping heavily into one of the common room chairs. From his manner it might have been thought that they were all his, the post boxes and lamp standards and telephone kiosks he had seen sprayed with green paint. It was not the vandalism which annoyed him, though, but the idea, the fact that the idea was Griff's and the very real possibility that, as childish as it was, it might be greeted favorably and regarded as art.

Art was what Griff would claim it to be.

"It was you, wasn't it?" he asked again.

Griff grinned and walked over to the window. "Go back a thousand years or more, Jack, and there'd be nothing but trees out there, silly things if you're innocent enough to see them that way, all fluffy at the top and gnarled at the bottom, but nonetheless trees as we know them. Now we've got all those other things springing up out of our concrete oasis and they're even sillier things." He looked at Jack, still grinning broadly. "You see my point?"

"You're out of your bloody mind," said Jack. "Off your trolley. Insane."

"Ah, but who's to say who's sane and who isn't? There's

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always that to consider, isn't there? Reality."

"Oh, piss off," said Jack, in no mood for swapping philosophies.

"You just take what happened last night, for example..."

"No, I'd rather not."

"...where was the sanity there? What do you reckon to it all, Jack?"

"I reckon you can stuff your silly bloody trees, Griff!" he said, striding away.

* * *

On the edge of the academic quarter of Golgonooza a clutch of buildings sat squat and solitary, each occupying a single block, dwarfed by the grander structures around them so that they were made to seem insignificant, no more than minor annexes of the University of Golgonooza. The single doors which afforded entrance to each were unprepossessing, there were no fluted columns flanking these buildings, nor flights of stairs approaching them; the facades were unadorned, blank but for the three rows of windows too tiny to see through; the brickwork crumbled in places, the sharply sloping roofs showed missing tiles, pitch black against slate grey, like the cavities in an old man's mouth.

Though there was nothing to distinguish one building from the next, no blue plaque or brass plate to recommend them, First Minister van Vogt strode directly to a selected door, to the building he had decided housed those who might help. He still wore the anonymous grey cloak, he had kept his comings and goings that morning secret from all but his spy, but as the door opened to the rap of his cane he pulled back his hood to reveal himself.

A person could not enter furtively into the School of the Rose+Croix, he could not bring secrets with him though he might well leave with them.

“First Minister,” greeted the man who opened the door, stepped aside to let him enter and then closed it behind him. Though the street van Vogt had stepped from had not been especially noisy a sudden hush fell on his ears as he stepped over the threshold, a stillness so tangible that even his heartbeat seemed to slow.

His voice came in a whisper so unaccustomed that he might have been hoarse. “I would like to see the Master of the School.”

“This way, my Lord,” he was invited, his escort leading the way across an open expanse of floor, passing the foot of a staircase down which there spilled a low murmur of voices, muttering prayers or maybe incantations. Beyond this staircase a second door was opened and van Vogt was admitted to a reception room. “If my Lord would like to wait here, I will inform the Master.”

van Vogt made himself comfortable, prepared for a lengthy wait, settled himself into a deep upholstered chair and took in his surroundings. The room was sumptuously furnished, walls hung with tapestries and silks which deadened all sound, the floor littered with rugs and cushions and all manner of seating. He could not say if its comfort was typical of the rest of the building or not, for this was the only room within the School which he had ever seen, the only room in which an audience had ever been granted him. If it was typical of the general quarters then he would not have been surprised, for it was well known that all the Schools, and especially the School of the Rose+Croix, were possessed of untold wealth; if it was not typical then he would have been pleased to have been treated with such deference, knowing that members of any of the Schools need kowtow to no one, be he merchant, warrior or lord. In fact he would like to have believed that elsewhere within its walls the building was more spartan, for this would satisfy his image of the ascetic and arcane nature of those who belonged to the School, would be the

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reassurance that here would be the place to find the help he sought.

He waited some minutes, more than thirty, less than an hour, guessing correctly that any deference due to him would not extend so far that there would be any haste in attending to him. At length the door opened. The man who entered was as nondescript as a common laborer, walked with a shuffling gait, hands the size of hams held slack at his side, wore overalls whose color was faded or mottled by all manner of stains. van Vogt had only ever seen the man before in his quartered red and yellow tunic, the livery of his School, and had to look twice to recognize the impassive features, the distracted look, the air of being elsewhere. An ashen-grey pallor suggested weariness, onerous responsibilities, a fatigue brought on by tasks more spiritual than physical.

“School Master,” he said, rising and extending a hand in greeting. “My apologies for taking you away from your duties.”

The proffered hand was touched only lightly, rather than grasped in welcome. The fingers then made an irritable gesture, as if dismissing the apology. “Distemper.”

“Distemper?”

“Distemper,” the School Master repeated, and the nails of one hand plucked at those of the other, chipping away at the chalky substance which grimed the cuticles. He turned the hands to examine the calloused palms, the seams of white ingrained in the skin. “Distemper for the dormitory I was helping to decorate,” he explained, enjoying the look of confusion, perhaps of disappointment, which crossed his visitor’s face. “So, First Minister?” he finally said, brushing his hands vigorously against each other to send up clouds of fine white dust. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

van Vogt took a small scroll from the folds of his cloak, gave a slight bow of the head as he handed it to the School Master. “I

would like to make an endowment,” he said.

The School Master broke the seal, noting that it was the First Minister’s own and not that of Parliament, read the contents of the promissory note it contained. There was barely a flicker of the eyes as he read, not even when he saw the sum which was pledged.

“It might help finance some of the School’s researches?” van Vogt hoped.

The School Master slowly rolled up the scroll, knotted the crimson ribbon loosely around it and took it across to a bureau in a corner of the room. An ugly piece of furniture, van Vogt thought, of no particular style but a mish-mash of many, as he watched with patience while the School Master took out a key, unlocked a drawer, put the scroll away and then secured it. When he eventually turned to face the First Minister there was a barely concealed smile of understanding.

“And would the First Minister have any particular researches in mind?” he wondered, gesturing van Vogt back to his seat before taking one facing.

The First Minister sat forward, hands clasped, two index fingers extended like the steeple atop a church. “There have been intrusions, more than usual of late, and now even within Golgonooza itself.”

“We have been aware of them.”

van Vogt nodded. Lord Lovecraft’s scribe, Basilides, might have some skill at interpreting the Catalogue of Intrusions, but he could only work with what the members of the various Schools passed onto him, for it was they who collated the entries, they who had first knowledge of the interruptions, the changes which occurred within the kingdom. They received reports instantaneously -how, van Vogt did not yet know- and then amended the supplementary editions of the Catalogue at their leisure.

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“Parliament is worried about these intrusions,” he said.

“But not as worried as its First Minister?” the School Master guessed, recalling the personal seal on the promissory note. “You know the source of the present spate of intrusions, I suppose?”

“One of the Hashishim.”

“A young girl, by name of Tulla. We have noted her doings, marked her involvement.”

van Vogt’s face brightened, sensing that here was an avenue more promising than any that Lord Lovecraft might have thought to follow, that the expense of his endowment might not have been altogether wasted. “You believe, as I do, that the girl’s antics are cause for concern?” he asked.

“It is not the business of the School of the Rose+Croix to be concerned,” said the School Master gravely, the discipline of his vocation necessitating detachment. “But yes, First Minister, I can understand your concern. The question is what steps your concern will lead you to take, what researches you would wish your endowment to finance.”

“If it is within your remit, then I would dearly like to locate this Hashishim girl.”

“That might be possible,” the School Master agreed, but cautiously, wary of what end might be in mind.

There were any number of alternatives, van Vogt was aware, and the possibilities were increasing in direct proportion to the number of people who became interested in the girl. His own intention of simply preventing the girl being about her mischief now seemed less than adventurous when compared with the ambition of others, when set against Lord Lovecraft’s wish to foment unrest or his wife’s outlandish plan to actually harness the girl’s talent, and though he now felt covetous of either scheme, was actually tempted to outdo both, he knew that it was wise not to admit as much to the School Master. The members of the School of the Rose+Croix might not be averse to making a

profit from their knowledge and skill, as evidenced by the School Master's ready acceptance of his endowment, and indeed amassed as much wealth from this as they did from trade or judicious investment, but they would never compromise their moral code by working against the state or towards another's selfish ends.

"My sole intent is to prevent this girl from bringing harm to Golgonooza," van Vogt assured the School Master, face set in determination to offer more than the unconvincing sincerity of a politician. "Already I have commissioned two men to go abroad in the kingdom, to search out and dispatch her, though I confess I now have little confidence in them."

"They have instructions to dispatch the creature by whatever means?"

"However best they see fit." There was a sad resignation in van Vogt's tone now, acknowledging that a degree of force might be necessary and hinting at his regret. It was always advisable to weave a certain thread of honesty among the fabric of lies. "If the girl must suffer for the safety of Golgonooza, then sadly it must be so."

"Los has sanctioned such measures?"

"I have Parliament's approval."

"But Los?" the School Master pressed.

"Will sanction my actions, when he finds time to appraise himself of the situation."

The School Master nodded, appreciating the politics of working with the ruler of Golgonooza, had experienced the same difficulties himself when dealing with the man. Los was such a solitary sort, so distracted by his own reclusive activities, that his foundries would have to be quenched and his fires doused before he would pay the present situation any heed. It would take such an intrusion into his life to stir him. And, the School Master understood, such an intrusion was by no means impossible, with

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present events pointing to further upheaval.

“You understand I had to ask? I can do nothing which would contravene the wishes of Los.”

“I understand,” said van Vogt. “But what Los has not forbidden?”

“Though not yet actively condoned.”

“You can help?”

“Come,” said the School Master, quickly rising. “First let us see what mischief the Hashishim creature has been up to of late. And then, perhaps, we might decide what can be done.”

The School Master led the way from the room. They crossed the tiled floor of the entrance hall, an urgency now about the School Master’s stride, an eagerness about van Vogt’s, went like conspirators around the staircase and to a door which was set in its wood-paneled flank. It clicked open at a touch, led to a spiral of loose stone steps which took them deep beneath the building, sputtering yellow tongues of gas lighting their way from mantles protruding from the wall at intervals, the slap of their feet echoing about the confined space as they descended one behind the other. At the foot of the stairs was a long corridor, just as dimly lit, just as claustrophobic, its ceiling low enough to brush the School Master’s head, its walls so close together that as the two men walked abreast their shoulders touched. A final door opened onto a circular room, in the centre of which was a rough stone block as large as an altar. A rusted light shimmered about its surface, dimming the gas mantles and casting the wall into shadow.

Stepping cautiously, feeling the bare floor uneven beneath his feet, van Vogt followed the School Master toward the light, blinking against its harsh fluorescence, and as they drew closer the light retracted, its source came into focus like the sun when it has risen, its edges defined rather than diffused describing a sculpted book of burnished yellow. Under their gaze a single page

folded over, verso to recto, as durable as any forged metal yet as fine and elastic as a skin.

The School Master finally permitted himself a smile, recognizing the First Minister's gaze of rapt wonder. "Our noble Los does have his uses, despite what people might think of his preoccupations. The time spent in his foundries is not totally wasted."

"You mean this...?"

"The Catalogue in its purest form, the template for all lesser editions."

van Vogt stretched out a hand to touch, then stopped as the soft yellow light tinted his skin, held it there as if warming himself before a fire. "The real Catalogue of Intrusions," he said in a soft voice.

"Ah, there is reality and there is reality, First Minister. This is the master of all other versions, the source on which they all depend. But real? I don't know that we could ever go that far. A debatable concept, is reality."

* * *

Tulla felt a shudder of delight at the mention of reality. Insanity, that might follow later, but for the moment it was enough to hear someone questioning the validity of the world they faced, doubting that mundane existence which others took for granted. She watched Jack leave the common room, and then Griff, paused behind them when they parted ways. One descended the stairs, the other took the lift to a floor above, and she wondered which she should follow.

Which did she want?

No sweat, she thought, a recently learned phrase of this current age springing to mind. There was time and opportunity now for her to have both, to be with either at any time she chose. She was feeding their minds continually, though neither of them realized it, and she could take back from them whenever she

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liked; it was like a blood bank of the mind, a deposit account of dreams, one gave in order to receive and whatever she offered could be called back at whim.

Satisfied with this knowledge she took the lift to the fifth floor and stepped openly into the painting studio, no longer the spy, no longer the specter hovering unseen at someone's shoulder but a student like the rest. She said hello to Griff as she passed and smiled to see the hesitation in his glance. He wanted to question her, she knew, ask where she had been last night and if she had experienced anything untoward. Her step faltered slightly, as if she would pause and join in conversation with him, give him an opportunity to speak his mind; but then, after a teasingly brief moment, she strode on to the end of the studio, to that area where she worked when the fancy took her, when she felt the need to keep up the pretence.

There was a canvas on an easel, a mirror hanging on the wall just beyond it, and she seated herself on a stool and stared hard at her reflection. Her hair was dark, cropped quite close, but it did not take much effort to lighten it, to make it so pale that it could barely be seen against her sallow complexion. It molded itself against her scalp so that her face became no more than a skull, her skin drew tight against her cheeks just as the canvas had when it dried on the stretcher frame. And then, on the blank canvas, her image appeared just as it was in the mirror, as if the canvas itself was a mirror and she only had to look to see herself there.

“Derivative of Edvard Munch,” said a voice, and momentarily they were both startled, Tulla the student and Ted Baldwin the tutor. His eyes flashed quickly from her to the painting and back again, confused for a moment to see them both so alike; then his gaze settled more comfortably on her and he saw her as he had expected to, saw the painting as he hated to see it. “Yes, much too derivative,” he said again.

It was as polite as he could ever be about any student's work, so Tulla took no offence. Ted Baldwin was a man without a soul, devoid of imagination, he was so driven by logic and reason that his mind -if he could only have realized it- had long since ceased to function.

"And what's wrong with Munch?" she asked, resisting the temptation to add that she had fond memories of dear old Edvard.

"He's old hat. He's dead."

Is he?

She remembered the tale as she had told it to Edvard, the dear sweet madman, and now repeated it for the benefit of Ted: "The First and the Last were man and woman, they lived on the Island and they loved each other. The Last, the woman, Omega..."

Ted grumbled at how trite it was, supposed that the First, the man, would be called Alpha: Alf, for short.

"...Omega loved the animals just as much as she loved Alpha, she loved the bear and the poet-hyena, she could put her hand into the tiger's mouth and stroke its teeth, but because she could not possess all the animals she was sad, she fled on the back of a deer to a bright green country beyond the moon. Alpha remained on the island, alone until Omega's children came to him. They were half human monsters. Alpha was in despair, to think that his seed might be in these creatures, so much so that when Omega returned he killed her, was then killed in turn by her progeny who tore him apart."

"What a load of bullshit!" said Ted, and he might have been referring to the tale, he might have been referring to the painting. It was the canvas he finally settled on, but it was plain that his criticism lacked its usual venom, all he could think to point out was the similarity with the work of the long dead Norwegian artist. "Forget the past, be bold and show some imagination," he

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advised.

“Imagination?” Tulla laughed, and threw a quick glance at the canvas. This was enough to disrobe the painted image and give it breasts which men might dream of, which women might envy. “You’ve got a thing about life studies, haven’t you?” she said, recalling the occasion when Ted the modernist had argued with Walter the traditionalist over that very subject, the merit of painting tits and bums.

“But this...”

Isn’t a life study. This was what he was about to say, for the portrait he had first faced had been fully clothed; quite primly so, in fact. And Tulla, too. She dressed more conservatively than he would ever have thought of an art student.

“Yes, Ted?” Tulla smiled.

He saw the breasts swelling on the canvas, protruding like weapons, and he shook his head and turned, went on to what he hoped might be saner areas of the studio. He had to force himself to ignore Tulla’s laughter ringing after him, dismissed her as one of the less likeable eccentrics of the fine art group.

* * *

The book’s surface was scored with symbols, as each leaf turned and fell van Vogt saw lines of script etched across the fresh page by some unseen hand. It was a language beyond his understanding, though, there were very few characters he recognized, many which seemed to belong to no alphabet at all or had the appearance of icons or hieroglyphs. It would have to be some arcane language known only to members of the Schools, and he looked to the School Master for explanation.

The glow cast by the burnished metal gave the School Master a jaundiced look as he pored over the pages, his complexion turning from ashen to ochre but seeming no more healthy than it had done before, as if he had been about such tasks too long, deprived of the light of day. There was a gleam in

his eye, though, as he interpreted the script.

“There are fresh intrusions, but that it no surprise,” he said, intently scanning the page. “Nothing remarkable here. Nor here. No more than one would expect, understanding the nature of our world.”

“But the girl?” van Vogt prompted, aware that patience was required but for once finding it something of a strain.

A raised hand silenced him, the page turned again and the School Master read on. There was no need to offer interpretations of what he saw, for the intrusions were minor incidents for the most part, a farmer’s account of a change in his small-holding, a traveler’s report of a shift in the landscape interrupting his progress. All a part of every day for the scribes of the School, who would translate the reports as he was doing, suiting the form and the language of each to its source before sending out the scraps and parchments and full-blown theses to those scholars and academics, the cartographers and historians who might have use of them. He stifled a yawn, as if already sharing the tedium and fatigue of his colleagues, was about to turn and offer the First Minister a smile of encouragement when his brow furrowed in deeper concentration, causing the flow of the script across the page to stutter, pause, finally cease like a heartbeat stilled, a breath held.

van Vogt, too, caught his breath in anticipation.

“Here.” The School Master’s voice was hushed, but there was no achievement in his tone, no hint of satisfaction. Instead there seemed to be a concern previously denied as he said, “This can only be the work of your Hashishim girl.”

“Where? What?” asked van Vogt, becoming animated, looking at the printed passage but still making no sense of it.

“Beyond this world, but on the brink, like a pin pricking at a balloon, straining at its surface.” The School Master closed his eyes, assimilating what he saw, a single bead of perspiration

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glistening on his brow. “There is an echo of a previous intrusion. What was once created beyond the kingdom, then intruded into it, is now being recreated a second time. She is there, a part of it. A figure screaming. Two figures on a bridge.”

“Die Brücke. Lord Lovecraft’s scribe saw it in the Catalogue,” van Vogt knew, and was unable to hide his disappointment, having expected more of the Master of a School than the paltry results reported of Lovecraft’s lackey. “The Bridge leads to the Garden of Earthly Delights,” he said, “where we would expect to find the Hashishim.”

Yes, the School Master recognized elements of the intrusion, knew of its location far to the east of Golgonooza and was acquainted with the discord that reigned there, the rule of the Hashishim. In the echo of that intrusion, however, he sensed something more than the malevolence of an anarchic breed, could discern a power accompanying the youngest of the Hashishim which was over and above her own particular talents. This power was creative, it was imaginative and, as worrying as any evil intent, it was innocent, waiting to be shaped by the first formative influence. That influence at present was Tulla of the Hashishim, she was on the verge of returning to Eidolon, and if she had half the wit he credited her with she would bring that power with her.

The page dulled as he turned from it, then sparked as his attention released its hold on it and the script began to flow once more, giving testament to less portentous events. Slowly, with gravity, he described what he had seen to the First Minister.

“But what is this power?” van Vogt asked. “An object? A person?”

The School Master shook his head, that much was unclear, he was aware only of the magnitude of the threat, whether its root was animate or not, understood that it was not enough to wait, to apprehend the Hashishim girl when she returned to

Eidolon. Someone had to venture beyond the kingdom and bring her back.

“Is that possible?” van Vogt wondered, for there was the conundrum that though the kingdom was not infinite it had no boundaries. One could not pass as easily from there to beyond as one could from the plains of Golgonooza to the Temeraire Mountains. “Can a person travel beyond Eidolon?”

“The Hashishim girl was able to,” the School Master stated flatly. “By what means I cannot be sure, but somehow she did.”

With a sly intuition van Vogt marked the School Master’s worried expression, said, “And others can? You, for example?”

“There are certain ways, known to certain people,” the School Master admitted. He turned, paced, turned again, went back to the book to regard the more mundane wonders occurring in the kingdom. He wished he could be a part of them, knew he could not, said, “It seems, First Minister, that your endowment to the School has bought you rather more than you could have hoped for.”

* * *

Griff considered what was to be his ‘magnum opus’. It was not the largest painting he had done, at six feet by six feet it could still be dwarfed by a number of other canvasses, but he had envisaged it as being the centerpiece of his final degree exhibition. Now he was beginning to have doubts.

He had wanted the painting to be ethereal but today it seemed to him to be altogether too spiritual. It was a work of impulse rather than a carefully considered interpretation, done without regard for motive or logic. Why had he wanted it the way it was? He could not remember and he was beginning to doubt that he had given the matter any serious thought, suspected that he might simply have begun the painting without any clear motivation at all. He could now see the validity of Ted’s criticisms, appreciate that there were images which were old hat

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-the soft watches, the wraithlike figures, the half realized figments of the subconscious- could see that the sum of the parts was just as unsatisfactory. What, indeed, was the point of creating a new reality or a novel world when the present world could be so beyond a person's comprehension?

Deciding to leave the canvas for the time being, he turned it to face the wall and started afresh. From the stores he got a length of cotton duck, from Maurice in sculpture he got timber for the frame. The wood was quickly cut and joined, the canvas tacked to it; then he soaked it with water and sized it so that it would stretch taut like a drum skin. This done, there was little else to do until it dried, so he went downstairs for a coffee.

The common room was quite deserted, most people were caught up in the frenzy of hard work which was leading up to the end of term. He considered going to the design studio to see Anna, but then thought better of it, supposing that he would only be a distraction. He took his coffee out to the balcony, sat there drinking and smoking a cigarette, looking out onto the city.

His three years at college would soon be over, and for the most part he had enjoyed them, he would take with him fond memories; memories of the freedom which had come with leaving home, of the friends he had made, of the night he had met Anna. It had been at a party he had intended avoiding, given by Fraser McEwan whose parties were notorious for their absence of music, food and drink, even for the absence of a host, Fraser, who would turn up some time after midnight hoping that everyone was having a good time. Somehow Griff had been persuaded to go, despite his reservations, and in one quiet room he had found three girls just as bored with proceedings as he was. He sat and talked with them, thought first of one girl and then another, finally found himself alone with the third, Anna. Later he walked her home, they slept together at her flat, she in soft pink pajamas and he in his shorts; they slept with their arms

around each other, kissed and touched, but nothing else happened... except that after that night they shared the following two years.

He laughed aloud at the memory of that first evening, flicked his cigarette away, watched it spiral from the balcony to the ground below.

“You look happy and you’ve no right to be,” said Ted Baldwin, sneaking up on him. “Why aren’t you working?”

“I’ve got a canvas upstairs drying,” Griff explained. “I can’t do anything with it yet.”

Ted frowned. “A canvas? Christ, Griff, not another painting?”

“I’m afraid so,” said Griff, his happy smile an annoyance to the tutor.

“But...”

“Sorry, Ted, but it’s too late to change me now. I know how you feel, but I’m a painter and you won’t persuade me otherwise.”

Ted was a conceptualist, he thought there was more merit in the idea behind a painting than in its actual execution. You could talk to him all day about the concept behind a painting and he would be happy, but put anything down in oil or acrylic, on canvas or on paper, and you had an enemy for life.

“Don’t worry, though,” Griff continued, “this canvas will be better than the last one.”

It was obvious that Ted had further protests to make, the arguments could almost be heard clicking into place in the index of the tutor’s mind -painting was a redundant activity, the idea was more important than the image, reason took precedence over expression- so Griff excused himself and went back indoors, crossed the common room and went down to the library on the floor below; there was still time to kill before his canvas would be dry enough to work on.

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The silence of the library seemed so sacred that he felt obliged to contain his good-humored smile. He roamed the shelves, browsed, saw books he would like to take with him when he left college, large glossy volumes which were so expensive that he wondered that anyone other than a librarian could ever afford them. There were books on Surrealism which were especially attractive; though theirs was an outdated style, one which he promised not to plagiarize again, he still quite liked their work. It was so suited to glossy reproduction, with so much imagination and so many intricate visions. He sat at a table and looked through their paintings for a while, then found himself inexplicably drawn to Edvard Munch.

Now there was a strange artist, very much a loner, of no particular school though there were many he was linked with. He was another man plagued by visions. Munch's visions, though, were particularly disturbing because he lacked the technique of traditional Surrealists, that technical ability to make things appear super-real. The Surrealists saw dreams and molded them exactly from soft fleshy substances, whereas Munch saw horrors and chiseled them as if from stone cold carcasses. He was a Norwegian, as Tulla claimed to be, and the coincidence -that he should be drawn to Munch after thinking of her- was one reason he thought he mistrusted her, for coincidence seemed to dog her every step.

He leafed through a couple of books on the artist and saw many frights and visions; the artist was a man disturbed, a man who saw the Madonna as a vampire and the act of love as a surrendering of one spirit to another, the actual consummation of one body by another. He found the painting he wanted -why this one?- the painting sometimes known as 'The Scream', sometimes known as 'The Cry'. How long he sat there gazing at the reproduction he could not be sure. He studied the person from whose mouth the cry issued,

the landscape in turmoil behind, the two dark figures in the distance who might or might not have been the cause of the distress.

When the hand fell on his shoulder he gave a sudden start.

Jack grinned as he sat beside him. "What are you up to?"

Griff needed to give no explanations for avoiding work, no apologies of the kind he had offered Ted Baldwin. He pointed to the open page, to the painting, said, "I was just studying this. I don't know why I was drawn to it."

"Strange," said Jack.

"Isn't it?" Griff agreed.

"No, not the painting. The coincidence."

There it was again! Coincidence!

"Why?" Griff asked.

"Because when I went up to Tulla's room last night and saw her—"

"You said she wasn't there."

"She wasn't. But I saw her, sort of." He frowned, as if he was confusing himself as well as Griff. "You know what her room's like, all those paintings around the walls, well one minute she was there among them and the next she wasn't. I couldn't tell you lot that, though. You'd have thought I was tripping. Anyway, when I saw what I thought was her she was just like that." He stabbed his finger at the page, like a dart into the centre of the open mouth in the painting. "That was just the way she was, for the moment that I saw her, and the room looked like the madman Munch had run his brush all over the place, all over the walls and the window and even the sky outside."

* * *

A blaze of blood red light scorched the School Master's eyes, a pulsing bloom of iridescence which threatened to flood his senses and envelop him whole. The light of the gate he entered throbbed with the heat of a beating heart, it had a life of its own like an

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organ palpating, if it could be said to be a gate then its columns would have to be described as living breathing columns of flesh, pink and slick like a woman's heart which urged a man to enter.

There were four ways into Golgonooza, four gates in its walls which conveniently corresponded with the four points of the compass. To leave the same city, though, other than by these same points, and to reach other destinations, there was a fifth which few people knew of, a gate which was known as the Lubin Gate. By the Lubin Gate a person could leave Golgonooza and find oneself in a place which was not of Eidolon, a place which was neither north nor south, nor east nor west, a place which could only be described as 'elsewhere'. The Lubin Gate offered an exit from the city, but guaranteed no return, it was an avenue which was known only to the Masters of the Schools and was so rarely used that it was seldom spoken of anymore. To venture into the Lubin Gate was to chance one's sanity and dice with one's soul, to risk damnation to a world quite alien, to find oneself in this place called 'elsewhere' and worry that one might never be able to return.

The School Master was quite conscious of the risk he took as he stepped into the thrumming vermillion void, although he had never done so he could imagine it being like surrendering his virginity, offering his innocence as a martyr would offer his life; there could be a reward, there could be a benefit, but none of this was certain. What the School Master did know was that somewhere beyond the Kingdom there was a child of the Hashishim, one of their offspring who could cause mischief from that distance and who threatened much worse on her return. The First Minister laid claim to noble motives, and had quoted Lord Lovecraft's ignoble ambitions, but whether each was honorable or otherwise the School Master could only believe that his own intervention was needed. He had to step beyond that void to see what he could achieve.

But the pain was almost too much to bear! The throbbing beating heart of the gate was so fierce that he worried it might scald him, it was so suffocating that he felt himself gasp for breath, worrying that each one would be his last. Light blurred, his life blurred, all his memories became as one, a dizzying confusion of what he might have been and could have been and the little he might hope to achieve in the future. It seemed that his life was a waste and all he could hope for was to achieve something with what remained of it.

He had spoken with one person who had passed through the Lubin Gate before.

“It is your life in a stolen moment,” he had been told, “a life which was never yours, but which you wish you had been a part of.”

That was how the School Master felt now, that he was entering something he had been deprived of all his life, that he was returning to the womb, the vagina, the omphalos.

The walls of the gate pulsed against him as he tried to force his way through, making him feel that he was being reborn, or ejected like a still-birth, and he feared for his sanity as much as for his life

Chapter 3

Lady Haggitha flinched as a clumsily inserted pin nipped a strand of hair against her scalp, then stifled a soft cry and concealed a satisfied smile. In the mirror, in the glow of candlelight, she saw her hair curled too tightly about her skull, her lustrous copper locks making it seem that she wore the helmet of a warrior, and observed to her dissatisfaction that the sides were unevenly matched, as if that helmet had been knocked askew in combat. Reflected behind her she noted, too, the look of dismay in the eyes of the maid who attended her.

All so perfect. The girl was quite as clumsy as she had expected, quite as gauche as she had hoped when she had her brought from the scullery.

“I am sorry, my Lady,” the sad wench apologized, prizing open the pin between teeth which Lady Haggitha was glad to mark were healthy, the front two a little buckled but otherwise large and firm as a mare’s.

The face of a horse and the mouth of a fellatrix.

The pin gripped the hair more smoothly this time, and the girl permitted herself a cautious smile, rosy cheeks puffing out as if she hid an apple in each. There was more color in her complexion than was usual in a lady’s maid, her hands were less slender and smooth than Lady Haggitha was accustomed to, more suited to tugging at a cow’s udder than ministering to a lady of the court. The rough burr to her voice marked her for the country girl she was as she said, “I don’t know how to dress a lady.”

“And you think this lady doesn’t know how to dress herself?” asked Lady Haggitha sharply, forgetting for a moment the promise she had made to herself to be kind to the girl. The acid tone slipped into her voice, though, as quickly as it was softened with a smile of commiseration it was still felt, that acerbic

disdain which her usual maid had grown so accustomed to.

But her usual maid was confined to bed, plagued by an ugly rash, an allergic reaction to the perfume her Lady had so kindly given her. It was a scent made according to Lady Haggitha's own formula, it would keep the girl in embarrassed confinement for a week at least. And serve her right, too, the vain and beautiful bitch. She was too attractive by far, too likely to catch Lord Lovecraft's wandering eye, and perhaps a little too ambitious for her own good; her kind would sell her soul, her mother and the mistress who had been so good to her for the chance to better herself, would bare her soul to any lord who would take her to his bed. What Lady Haggitha needed for the moment was a plain girl to attend her, and not too intelligent, one who was less likely to interest her husband and more easily manipulated, too innocent to understand the intrigues of her mistress, too dull of mind to take advantage of them.

Lady Haggitha regarded herself in the mirror, tried not to let her dissatisfaction show, turned to face the creature who had made such a mess of her coiffure. She still only knew the girl as the dimwit who had tried to baste Basilides' face with animal fat, banished to the scullery but now summoned back.

"Tell me, dear, what is your name?"

The girl seemed a little distracted, looking around her in slight consternation as she answered, "Jahiliyah, my Lady."

"Jahiliyah, eh?" Lady Haggitha repeated, rolling the name around as if testing its shape. She marked that the girl was now shaking out the folds of her skirt, searching for something, even going so far as to peer into her bodice, casting her eye to the full milky cleavage. "What on earth is the matter, girl?" she asked, annoyed by the lack of attention.

"A pin, my Lady. I have lost a pin."

"A pin? Is that all? Forget it, girl."

"But my Lady, it is common knowledge, to lose a hairpin

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means that an enemy is close at hand.”

“Poppycock!” Lady Haggitha scoffed, and gestured to a low footstool some feet away. “Sit, girl, I would talk with you for a while.”

“But my mother says...”

“Damn your mother! Sit!” Lady Haggitha insisted, thinking how trying it might be to accustom oneself to the girl’s dullness, and now this country lore which she seemed to favor. Taking a pace back, the young girl lowered herself onto the stool, trying to seem demure and composed, more at ease than she felt, but only serving to exaggerate her clumsiness. She rearranged her skirts about her, the material a coarse unflattering cloth, rested her hands one atop the other in her lap. “So, your name is Jahiliyah.”

“Yes, my Lady. Where I come from the name means something akin to ignorance...”

How apt. How promising.

“...though in the sense of innocence, I would like to think.”

“Yes, quite,” Lady Haggitha cut her short. “Now, Jahiliyah, you are aware that my customary maid is incapacitated for the moment?”

The girl nodded, a frown of sympathy for another’s misfortune where others might have glowed with satisfaction that a vain and ambitious bitch should have got what she deserved. “A terrible thing, my Lady. Poor Fitna.”

“Indeed. Poor Fitna.” Lady Haggitha tried to share in the sympathy but it was an effort, she had to contain a smirk of delight, the young cow had been far too conceited for her own good. “As much as my heart goes out to her, though, I cannot wait for her recovery. I have need of a maid now and have decided that you should fill the post.”

“Me, my Lady?”

“I, my Lady,” she was corrected.

“But I have no knowledge of noble ways.”

“You need none. Whatever I think you require to know, I will teach you.” The girl should have been flattered at the honor afforded her, but could show only fear. She had no ambition at all and Lady Haggitha began to warm towards her, said more kindly, “I am a caring mistress, you will find comfort and compensation in serving me. You will accept the post.”

“I...” Jahiliyah hesitated, her mind slow to respond to what could have been a question or could have been a statement.

“You would prefer the scullery to my chamber? The stink of sweat and burning fat to my perfumed world? You will accept the post,” Lady Haggitha decided for her. “You will be ready by dawn, I am leaving the city at first light and you will accompany me. Sort your possessions, bring only what you can fit into a pannier. Keep clothing to a minimum, I will outfit you later, for the moment britches and boots will be advisable since we travel on horseback. You can ride, I hope?”

“I was brought up on a farm, my Lady.”

Lady Haggitha nodded. “It shows, your ancestry is written in your ruddy face. And now, before you ready yourself, one final matter. We need a groom to accompany us. An adaptable man. He must tend to our needs as well as the horses. Who would you recommend, Jahiliyah? Who would you choose, for his looks, for his brawn? Who would you have as a companion?”

It seemed that the question was poorly phrased, an embarrassment to the girl; the newly promoted lady’s maid gave a weak laugh. “None would ever look twice at me, my Lady. I have never had to make such a choice.”

“You will be surprised by what might be achieved once in my company, Jahiliyah,” Lady Haggitha said, beginning to see some merit in the full fleshy mouth, the upper lip protruding slightly where teeth pressed against it, imagining skills in which the girl might be made to excel, tasks which a lady such as she would prefer to delegate. A wicked thought followed soon after, and she

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said, "Let me ask you instead, then, who our unfortunate Fitna might choose. Who would she be attracted to, who would she think to bed in those interludes when she is not trying to be bedded herself by one of the Lords?"

There was no hesitation this time, the answer was prompt. "Gamaliel is thought to be the pick of the grooms, my Lady. It is known that Fitna has an eye for him, as does many another maid."

"He is young? Strong? He would be capable of defending us if the need arose?"

"He is champion wrestler for the last three tourneys, and unbeaten in the use of the quarterstaff and pike."

Hardly a knight paladin, he had probably never held a forged metal sword in his hand, but then a knight would have as much brain as brawn, could prove awkward in the questions he might ask. "Then tell this Gamaliel to ready himself for a journey."

"I, my Lady? He will not take orders from me."

"He does not take orders from you," Lady Haggitha told her sternly. "He takes orders from me, which you will relay to him, and he will have four horses waiting in the stables at dawn, plus a pack mule."

"No carriage, my Lady?"

"No carriage. We travel light. Whatever we need that we cannot carry we will find at our destination." Lady Haggitha regarded Jahiliyah in silence for a moment, challenging her to ask after that destination, to question the reason for a journey being taken in such obvious secrecy. Satisfied that the girl was able to curb her curiosity, she dismissed her. "Be off now, see to our transport and then ready yourself."

Head bowed, eyes lowered to hide any confusion she still might be feeling, Jahiliyah backed from the room.

Alone, the first thing Lady Haggitha did was remove the pins

from her hair, let it fall free about her shoulders and then began to arrange it anew, drawing it back and plaiting it into a single manageable braid, less elaborate an arrangement than the girl's clumsy attempt. As a maid she would have much to learn and Lady Haggitha would oblige in her tuition, but only so far as she deemed useful, for while a little knowledge was a dangerous thing selective instruction could have its benefits. And the groom who was to accompany them? Probably also as dull as dish water, but not too offensive on the eyes, to judge by the fond smile his memory had drawn from Jahiliyah.

Satisfied with her appearance, optimistic about her plans, Lady Haggitha cast aside the thin chiton she wore to don supple leather britches and stout leather boots, a blouse of soft kid and a heavy hooded cloak, packed a satchel with oils and fragrances which were the ingredients of her cosmetics and went from her chamber.

The hall was quiet, the mantles along the wall had been dimmed for the night, the yellow flames softened to a weak red glow which gave a subterranean cast to the house. Silently she strode along to the rear staircase, no guards met for they were always casual about their duties in Lord Lovcraft's absence. A week now he had been gone, seven days since he had vented his anger on the unfortunate Basilides, seven days spent in the company of his whore from the Cabaret Voltaire. And seven more days she felt she could count on before he might return to find his wife and scribe missing. No doubt he would then spend some time in a state of annoyance, peeved that the dutiful woman should not be there at his beck and call, this annoyance slowly mounting to agitation. Finally there would dawn the need to find her. Would he think to look beyond the city? Yes, once all avenues within its walls had been exhausted. Then he would turn to friends she had in the kingdom, to family, her sister in Weimar, perhaps, and uncles a distance to the east, more time

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wasted sending couriers far and wide, fruitless replies from those who chose to answer, insults from others who had no love for him.

And finally, the last place he might look when all other options were exhausted, would be the acres she had always hated most, their estate to the west, at the foot of the Temeraire Mountains.

* * *

Mid morning found Anna in the very bowels of the college, in the photographic darkrooms; her strip of processed film was in a drying cabinet, she had a box of bromide paper placed beside a vacant enlarger and she walked impatiently between the two. It would be unwise to leave, she could not go up to the brighter light of the college above, for there would surely be some discourteous so-and-so who would try to jump the queue and take the enlarger she had reserved for herself.

She stifled a yawn as she waited by the drying cabinet, raised a hand to her mouth, pinched thumb and forefinger together at the bridge of her nose. She felt so tired of late. Even when she thought she had slept well she awoke so weary that she might not have rested at all. It was almost as if sleep itself was a physical exertion, that instead of storing up energy for the day to come she was actually expending even more.

She looked at her wristwatch. Two more minutes and the film should be dry, the emulsion baked. She went through to the darkroom to make sure that no one had taken her enlarger. There were twenty machines in all, of which only two were not being used. As busy as the room was, though, there was little conversation, little noise other than the soft shuffle of feet back and forth and the gentle waterfall of the tank where prints were being washed. The dull red glow of the safety lights made the room seem all the more subterranean; or submarinal.

Seeing that her enlarger was still free she turned, then felt

her heart miss a beat on finding a face only inches from hers.

“Selina!” she hissed. “You scared me half to death!”

“Sorry,” Selina apologized. “I just wondered if you’d seen anything of Tulla yet.”

“Still no sign of her.”

“Only Geoff Saunders is upstairs throwing a fit. She missed an art history tutorial this morning, the third in a row.”

Anna consulted her watch, opened the cabinet door and took out the strip of film which hung there. She examined it for any tell-tale signs of moisture, for dull patches where the emulsion might not have dried. “Where do you think she keeps disappearing to?” she asked, holding the film up to the light.

“Search me,” said Selina. “Wherever it is she goes, though, she’s picked the wrong time for wandering. The end of term’s getting too close to start skipping college.” She shrugged. “I’ll go back upstairs and make some excuses for her.”

In the reflected light from the darkroom her long black hair seemed the color of blood, her cheeks were wan and lifeless.

“Are you feeling okay?” Anna asked her.

“A little tired, perhaps. I suppose it’s all the work. You?”

“Tired, too.”

“Perhaps a beer at lunch might refresh us. Yes?”

“If I’ve finished here,” Anna agreed.

She took her film to the enlarger and made a test strip to decide on the best exposure. Then she made the first print. Swilling the sheet of bromide about in the developing tray, watching the image appear, it seemed fine at first, a reasonable enough enlargement... but then something struck her as not quite right. It was difficult to tell for sure just what, in the weak red bloom of the safety light, but she could not take the print out to a clearer light until it had been washed and fixed. She made a couple more prints from the same negative while the first was washing and being made more permanent, altered the exposure,

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enlarged the image, and on each she saw the same blemish.

The shot was of the interior of 'The Stuck Pig', of the bar with the staircase to one side, and there, midway down the flight of stairs, was a flare of light. She checked the negative beneath a magnifying glass but there was no fault there, she checked the enlarger and the negative carrier but found nothing wrong with them. Just to be sure she made a print on the other vacant enlarger and found the blemish there once again. Furthermore, she realized that on each successive print she made the flare of light moved a little lower, as if descending the stairs; it was a movement for which she could find no explanation.

Hurriedly she snatched the first print from the bath and took it from the darkroom, trembling, not sure that it was excitement which made her shake. She examined the print under a clear fluorescent light. The blemish was not the simple blaze of light she had thought; she now saw, faintly defined but clearly recognizable, the features of a young woman.

She ran to the lift and stabbed at the button to summon it to the basement, looking at the photograph while she waited, then again as she was carried up to the third floor. She ran along the corridor and into the graphics studio, intending to dash straight across to Selina but stopping short when she saw her face.

Her friend was in an obvious rage, livid, her body rigid and her hands clenched at her side. She was standing in the centre of the room, challenging everyone in it.

"Come on? Who's responsible?" she was demanding, her face grim and her cheeks burning with rage. "I want to know which one of you bastards would do such a thing!"

There were half a dozen people in the studio and all were silent, stunned by her anger.

Anna walked slowly over to her friend, the photograph held at her side still damp between her fingers, stood next to Selina as if to say that the two of them were allies, prepared to take on the

world.

“Just look at what some bastard’s done to my work,” said Selina fiercely, her gaze still challenging the others in the room.

Anna looked at the work on the table. On Selina’s design, among the intricate network of leaves and foliage, someone had made a contribution of their own, just a few economical strokes of the pen but executed with the rapid skill of a caricaturist, a competence which made the result easily recognizable. Peering from among the foliage there was the face of a young woman. Anna said nothing, simply held out her photograph for Selina to see; the similarity was obvious and the tirade which had stunned the studio died as quickly as it had flared.

Selina sat down at the table, Anna beside her, as others skulked silently back to their work.

“I can’t believe anyone would do such a thing,” Selina said. “Especially not now, right at the end of term, with the degree show coming up.” She gave a half-hearted laugh. “And I’ll swear the bastard thing is grinning at me.”

Anna looked down at the design, and as she did so a tear formed in Selina’s eye, out of frustration, out of anger, welled up on the tip of her lash and then fell onto the drawing. They both expected to see the gouache smudge, Selina picked up a tissue to blot it away, but then stopped short on seeing a series of ripples radiate out from where her tear had fallen. No running of color, no smearing of lines, just a clear liquid wash which spread out to the edge of the page. The friends exchanged confused glances, Selina waited until the surface had settled, then hesitantly touched a fingertip to the drawing. More ripples came, stronger this time, spilling over the paper and across the table. She turned around, but no one else other than she and Anna seemed to notice, nor even hear the now constant splashing of water onto the floor.

“Selina, come away,” said Anna nervously, for now her

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friend's hand was lost up to the wrist in the agitated swell and she could feel how chilled the flesh had become as she reached out to take her by the arm.

There was resistance, but not from Selina. It was as if someone had gripped the immersed hand, was tugging at it, and with much greater force than the two of them could muster. Now Anna's hand had joined Selina's beneath the shifting surface and such was the numbing shock to her system that her fingers froze, she was unable to unclench her fist, to release her hold on her friend's arm, as she felt the two of them drawn deeper down, and deeper still.

And though the water was cold it burned her eyes, made her vision swim with such searing colors that she thought she would be blinded.

* * *

For all that Lord Lovecraft's strategies were misguided and his ambitions derisory his aim had been true in one respect at least, that depriving Basilides of a goodly portion of his sight would encourage his divinations to be more profound. It was just a pity, for Lord Lovecraft if not for Lady Haggitha, that he had been too impatient to stay and witness the fruits of his ill-treatment.

With one permanently weeping eye giving no more than a blurred vision of the world, offering just enough definition to prevent him from bumping into objects, its shriveled partner afforded so much more than it had ever done. The scribe no longer needed consult the Catalogue of Intrusions in order to divine its content but would run his fingertips across its pages to direct his weakened sight, and what his crippled sense understood would then be with him through every waking moment, even in his dreams, the matter-of-fact accounts of the interruptions occurring within the kingdom permeating his mind until he was aware of much more than words alone could state. At times a kind of delirium seemed to come upon him, he would

rave despite her cautions that he be discreet and circumspect, his visions recounted in an uncontrollable babble. The words he spilled might not be readily understood, but their preponderance would certainly give rise to questions, especially if they came to Lord Lovecraft's attention, and it was this fear which had prompted Lady Haggitha to move the scribe from his usual quarters to a room in the remotest corner of the cellar.

Approaching through a series of doors to which only she had keys, nearing this room, the low murmur of Basilides' delirium slowly swelled, not as loud as it had sometimes been but evidence enough that the visions were still upon him. Unlocking the final door, Lady Haggitha entered the room and found the scribe seated before the fire. The glow of the coals made his face seem as livid as ever, the good eye a glistening bloodshot orb, the patch which covered the other like a pitch black bottomless cavity. She rested a hand gently on his shoulder to still his ramblings, feeling an unaccustomed guilt at the treatment he had suffered, feeling that it was his isolation as much as his feverish divinations which had him such a jabbering wreck.

"Basilides? You are well?" she asked softly.

"My Lady," he responded, not turning his tortured face to her but recognizing her voice.

She pulled up a seat beside him, unclasped her cloak before the heat of the fire, took his hands in hers and drew them into her lap. Her touch was cool, she had washed her hands in a perfumed water which could quench the fiercest fever and he took immediate comfort from its soothing scent.

"So, Basilides, how do events progress?"

The scribe gave a shudder and she squeezed her hands tight around his to still it.

"A young woman," he said, and she thought of the Hashishim girl until he continued: "Two, one dark and one fair, they come, no, they are now here." His brow ran slick with sweat,

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a perspiration not previously brought on by the heat of the fire, and he shivered as if it chilled him. "They are here in Eidolon, lost in a land of shimmering green, so hot that it catches the breath."

"Who are they? Where are they? How are they here?" Lady Haggitha asked, and as fast as her questions came to her, as quickly as she put them to the scribe, so each was met by a shake of the head. "The Hashishim girl brought them?" she wondered.

Basilides shook his head again in reply. "She is near, but not as near as these two. She may be the reason for their coming, but she is not in their company."

"And their point of arrival? This green land you see them in?"

"To the north, and west, near to the coast."

The geography was vague, but still more useful than any which guided her husband's men, meandering aimlessly towards the east the last she had heard, or van Vogt's two mercenaries, presently lost elsewhere in the kingdom. She would have to get word to Abishai, direct her nephew's quest north. A fast messenger would have been expedient, but could not be trusted lest news should reach Lord Lovecraft. A bird, then, one of Abishai's pets, a kite would be swifter than any pigeon and would find its way unerringly to him, wherever he might be. She tore off a scrap from the Catalogue of Intrusions and scribbled out a hurried instruction, slipped it into her satchel and then the most recent pages of the Catalogue after it.

"Come, Basilides, we must leave Golgonooza," she said, pulling the scribe to his feet. He looked around the Spartan room, at the chair, the desk, the cot, as if it were a home he would miss.

"But Lord Lovecraft?"

"Need not concern us for the present," she told him, noting the loyalty the scribe still felt towards his Lord and ashamed of

her husband's treatment of him. "We will contact him later," she lied to appease him, draping a blanket around his shoulders and leading him from the room. "For the moment speed is of the essence."

She locked each door after her, Basilides waiting dutifully as she did so, then took him by the arm and towards the stairs, whispering in his ear to curb the incessant mumblings and her perfumed breath having its effect. Though guards were absent there were already people about in the kitchens, bakers and pastry-makers even now beginning their day before the sun had yet risen. As an added precaution against being overheard she draped a scarf about the scribe's face, sprinkling it with a few drops of oil which would numb his lips and dull his senses, an infusion of cypress leaves to still his tongue, then drew the hood of her cloak low over her brow and kept her head bowed, seeing only the flagged floor at her feet.

A single baker's boy approached, a tray of kneaded dough balanced on his head, but paid them no heed, and they passed freely out onto the yard at the rear of the house.

As empty as the night was, Lady Haggitha kept herself and Basilides in the shadow of the walls, creeping along one side of the yard, then a second, ducking beneath the light cast from the kitchen windows and then through a low stone arch, across the garden and to the stables. In the lightening grey of dawn she made out the shadows of four horses, the slighter form of a mule and two figures standing beside them. She hurried Basilides across the damp cobblestones.

"This is Gamaliel?" she supposed, able to make out little of his features but satisfied with the breadth of his shoulders. "Open the gate, then, so that we might be on our way," she ordered, without waiting for a reply, helped Basilides mount what she guessed was the most docile of the horses -they each gave off a scent suited to their nature- and chose the proudest for herself.

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Jahiliyah hoisted herself a little less elegantly atop another and Gamaliel led the troop from the yard.

“The bird, first,” she said to the groom, and took the scrap of paper from her satchel. “Fasten this to one of Abishai’s hawks and set it free. Then lock the gate after us and follow.”

The groom did as instructed, secured the gate after them as the bird soared and sped across the rooftops, then heaved himself into the saddle before positioning himself at the rear of the file of four, the reins of his mount in one hand and those of the pack mule in the other. Lady Haggitha, the only one of them with any knowledge of their destination, occupied the vanguard, reined her horse to the right and down a gentle incline towards the Tuileries Gardens. This was not the direct route which would take them from Golgonooza, the west gate was the one which would point them on their way, but she preferred to err on the side of caution, to avoid the commercial quarter which would have to be crossed, so open and brightly lit, and then the seamier areas where there might still be people abroad, even at that hour, the one curious pair of eyes which would be all that was needed for word to reach Lord Lovecraft.

Passing from the brightness of the street to the shadows of the parkland, Lady Haggitha’s mount found the main bridle path which cut across it as if by habit. In years past she had ridden this park every morning, though never at such an ungodly hour, had enjoyed many a courtship here, and instigated some, the last being her seduction of Lord Lovecraft.

He had been a warrior, a young warlord just returned from campaigns in the east which had enhanced his reputation in some quarters, drawn envy and hatred from others. van Vogt had been one who had resented his success, more the diplomat than the warrior, and her uncles too, soldiers in arms who had fought beside him and felt they deserved a better share of the rewards. She had been as much amused by her uncles’ chagrin as she had

been attracted by the returning hero's wealth and fame, initially pursued him simply because others did. What had turned her courtship of Lord Lovecraft from a competition with others to a true affair of the heart, however, had been the ambition she sensed in him, the power experienced kindling a lust for more.

She stabbed her heels into the flank of her horse, geeing it through the darkest part of the park where it seemed that the ghost of memory lingered behind every shadow.

The man who became her husband had been thwarted in his ambition, it had been a case of too much success, and too soon, the campaigns he had fought had constituted the war to end all wars. Once a dismal peace descended on the kingdom Lord Lovecraft could only bask in past glories for so long, his achievements were recorded but slowly forgotten, and once the satisfaction of his success faded he began to languish like a man older than his years.

It was a sign of how feeble his ambition had become that, presented with the possibilities an errant Hashishim girl was affording, he could only think to take up sword and lance again in defense of Golgonooza. Why, if he had his wits about him, he could have Golgonooza himself, and a goodly portion of the kingdom, too.

If he lacked the wit, though, she did not. Let dotage take him: she would take Golgonooza.

* * *

Griff had gone for lunch and Jack sat alone at the table, his hands resting to either side of the book as if it was a missal, as if the library desk was a lectern and he was the celebrant of some long forgotten rite. Over Griff's shoulder he had been drawn to the words in the text -'What would you say if I was to come to you?'- and now he read them again.

He knew the phrase. He had never previously heard it spoken, but he recognized it. From where?

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According to the text the words were Munch's, recording 'her' coming to him, spectral and colorless. Her complexion, her hair, the color of her lips, all were blanched by the haze from which she materialized. She wore a white linen slip and she smiled, her eyes were closed and her legs were bare and the thoughts which passed through his mind stirred him, the thoughts gave him pleasure. As she stood before him her arms behind her back thrust her breasts forward, her lifted head raised them more, her body was free to be displayed and touched. In the embrace which would follow their figures would merge, a kiss without lips, an embrace without limbs which would fuse their spirits, and in the kiss there would be no blood-sucking vampirism but the simple clinging of man to woman, the weight of her bearing down on him, into him, a painful crushing grip of love.

It had driven poor Munch mad.

"And what would you say if I were to come to you?"

The words, in his mind, spoken to himself, were like some abstract form of self-abuse, a cerebral excitement, making his penis swell and pulse. He clenched his fists, fingernails digging into the pulpy flesh of the palms, fought to keep from touching himself, for the thoughts which raced through his brain - '...and the thoughts gave him pleasure...' - already had him close to orgasm.

He only relaxed when she rested a hand on his shoulder and bowed down so that her cheek was next to his.

"Tulla? Griff isn't here," he told her, unsure why he did so.

"No. He's gone to Anna. He wants to relive their past, remember the way things were, fall in love all over again."

"Fool!"

"Now, Jack, there's no need to be like that."

"Well!" he said, peevishly. He had still not turned to face Tulla but there was no concealing his rancor.

“Don’t worry, Jack. They won’t be happy. We’ll see to that, won’t we? We’ll spoil things for them, eh?”

“Right!” he agreed.

Her chin was resting on his shoulder, bearing down heavily now. She reached out an arm, almost embracing him, pointing to the reproduction he had been studying.

“People always got it wrong, you know,” she said in a crooning voice, her breath against his face bringing with it a strange fragrance, “when they spoke of that cry and the reason for it.” Her fingertip traced around the lips from which the cry issued, the nail leaving a dull scar across the high gloss of the paper as she flicked dismissively at it. “There were so many excuses for the scream; the threat of the figures in the background, Edvard himself at the easel, any number of apologies.” She gave a sardonic laugh. “Fools. They couldn’t even decide if the screaming figure was a man or a woman. As if that mattered. But should I tell you, Jack, should I tell you the most horrific reason there is for that scream?”

He shuddered involuntarily as he nodded his head.

“It’s me, Jack,” she whispered, her face so close to his that her lips brushed his ear. “Imagine that figure screaming because of me, screaming to see me at dear old Edvard’s shoulder even while he was painting the picture, looking over his shoulder just like I’m looking over yours at this very minute. I affect people that way sometimes, they can’t help but scream. But you won’t scream, will you, Jack? You’re done with all that now, aren’t you?”

The shudders which shook his body were no longer wholly of fear. Her words, so softly sibilant, were like caresses which stirred him.

“...and the thoughts gave him pleasure,” he read.

He tried to turn, he wanted to embrace her though he knew that to do so would also be to surrender to her, but her arms

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closed tightly around him, her hands held his face against hers, keeping his eyes fixed on the book before him, on the face which was contorted in its silent scream.

“And if she comes to you, and you come with me...”

* * *

As dawn came a bloodier red than usual Lady Haggitha and her party left Golgonooza by its eastern gate, traveled well out of sight of its walls before striking to the north, then to the west, skirting the city in a broad sweeping arc. In open countryside Lady Haggitha brought Basilides' mount alongside hers, had Jahilyah position herself on his other flank while Gamaliel continued to bring up the rear, tugging the pack mule along behind him. The scribe still rested easy in the saddle, his mind dulled by his Lady's cosmetic arts, but Jahilyah was patently unsettled.

It was the sky, she explained, its color so vivid that it was surely an ill portent. “It is a fact well known, my Lady,” she said, eyes lowered to the sight, her voice thickening with its country burr as she quoted the remembered words: “Red sky at night and the angels sleep tight, red sky at morning is the Valkyries' own warning.”

“Really!” Lady Haggitha scoffed, making a point of admiring the sunrise. She would have to do something to cure the girl of her country lore, and something about the voice too, the rasping accent which was like glass-paper against the ears, soften it with a tincture to make it a little more cultured. Ignorance was one thing, it was what she wanted in her new maid, but such a common manner really could not be suffered.

She turned in her saddle, looked behind her to regard the groom Gamaliel. He had remained silent thus far into their journey, responding to any instruction with no more than a nod which she preferred to think of as shy rather than sullen. In the now mellow glow of the sun there was an attractive radiance

about him, a healthy hint of bronze about his brow and bared arms; even in the chill of early morning there had not been as much as a single prick of gooseflesh to mar the smooth patina of his skin, for all that his only protection had been the waistcoat he wore and the tight blonde curls which fell about his shoulders. Sturdy stuff, as one would expect of a country boy, and Lady Haggitha looked forward to including him in her training, the groom under one wing and the maid under the other; what novelties she might introduce them to once they were settled in the sanctuary of the estate in the lee of the Temeraire Mountains.

Some leagues on, the morning having passed in anticipation of what might be achieved with her two new protégés, Lady Haggitha spied a settlement ahead, a huddle of buildings first marked by rising plumes of smoke. They were now distant enough from Golgonooza for her to be able to enjoy some anonymity, she would be recognized for the lady she was but not identified.

“We will rest a while,” she decided, canting her horse a little to the left, quietly pleased with the way the others followed unquestioningly.

There were no more than a dozen structures making up the settlement, small dwellings of wattle and daub grouped around a square of bare brown earth, at its centre a clutch of only slightly sturdier buildings, the largest of which was an inn. Lady Haggitha dismounted, helped Basilides climb down from his own horse and handed the reins to Gamaliel.

“See that the creatures are fed and watered and then join us,” she told him. Jahilyah she noted was still astride her horse. “Come on, girl.”

“Inside, my Lady?”

“Inside. You surely don’t expect me to bring your food out to you, I hope?”

Hurriedly the maid tumbled down from the saddle, followed

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with an ungainly stride, her skirt held high to keep the hem clear of the rough powdery earth. Britches, Lady Haggitha had advised her to wear, so let that be a lesson to her.

The inn was as basic in its facilities as Lady Haggitha would have expected in a settlement so small, on no major route from anywhere to elsewhere; there could be no more than a score of people living within a spit of the inn, perhaps a farm or three within walking distance and a couple of travelers passing through each month. For a moment she hesitated on the threshold, regarding the pit of the room which was a continuation of the bare earth outside, the elevated wooden decking which ran along two walls and the simple bar, a length of wood stretched across a series of rough brick pedestals. The entrance of her party was marked by the three men seated on stools in the centre of the room, and by a fourth who leant at the bar, his conversation with the innkeeper momentarily suspended, was greeted with as much interest as if they were a caravan of pilgrims. Their presence noted, their visit would be remembered, recounted to any who might follow later in search of them.

Too late to reconsider now, though, to retreat would only draw more attention to themselves, so Lady Haggitha led the way up two shallow steps to a table in a corner of the room, sat Basilides beside her, directed Jahiliyah to take the seat facing, amused by the caution with which the young girl accepted the invitation, thinking that it was the sort of indulgence that Fitna would have craved, to share a table with her mistress.

As Gamaliel entered, having seen to the horses, so the innkeeper came across to them, so lean that he was hardly a recommendation for his inn's fare, his near bald pate glistening with grease from the kitchen, his hands wrapped in the soiled white apron he wore.

"Yes, my Lady?" he smiled.

"What do you have to offer by way of refreshment?"

“We have pike caught fresh this morning, from the clearest stream this side of the marshes.”

“That will do. And to drink?”

“A full bodied red wine, or a particularly fine ale.”

Lady Haggitha opted for the ale, to the surprise of her maid and the satisfaction of the groom. Basilides, of necessity, with the perfumed scarf still masking his face, could offer no opinion. When the tankards came, brimming with the dark brown ale, foaming heads flecked with a sprinkling of spice, Lady Haggitha took a deep draught, her thirst matching Gamaliel's, marked Jahilyah tip her own tankard with two hands but take no more than a sip. How a lady would take such an unladylike beverage, she guessed the bumpkin thought, not realizing the truth that it was a lady's adaptability, her very unpredictability, that marked her as such.

Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, Lady Haggitha turned her smile to Gamaliel and asked after the horses, for the first time heard him speak, his voice more accented than a native of Golgonooza would allow, but only gently so, as though his tongue, like his complexion, had been honeyed by the sun.

“They are fed and watered, my Lady,” he answered. “A young lad is brushing them down and I have instructed him to drape them with warm blankets sprinkled with rosemary and marjoram.”

“You have? And to what end?” she asked, in a tone which he might take as either rebuke or endorsement, according to his degree of confidence.

“The marjoram will relax the muscles of the beasts and the rosemary perk up the creatures, my Lady. It is common knowledge.”

Not so common, Lady Haggitha knew, a party herself to the science of what could be achieved with herbs and spices and the fruits of nature, but she forced a sceptical look as she said, “The

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rustic lore and country superstition that my new maid has such faith in?"

"The rosemary is a stimulant, the marjoram an antispasmodic, also a carminative which will stem their flatulence," the groom insisted. "It is not superstition."

Lady Haggitha shrugged, as if still distrustful. It would not do to flatter the young man with commendations, it was wise never to openly admit to the recognition of intelligence, for a person who believed he was being underestimated could generally be relied upon to lower his guard.

The innkeeper's wife approached with plates of food, a more hirsute version of her husband, set a whole young pike before each of them, a bowl of mash which might have been turnip, and wished them a healthy appetite. Lady Haggitha removed the scarf from Basilides' face, waited while he started on his fish and then did likewise, forking the flesh from the bone and tasting a morsel, finding it quite palatable. Jahilyah she noticed carefully setting the largest fish bones to the side of her plate, counting each as she did so. Another country superstition, she supposed, and refrained from asking after the reason; they would be used for divination, to bring good luck, to spell out the name of the man who would love her. Gamaliel? The maid and the groom sat side by side, silent, not exchanging so much as a single glance, let alone a word of conversation, he perhaps thinking her a little plain, she believing that any man who could attract the likes of Fitna would not waste a second glance for her. How surprised they might be with each other, once given Lady Haggitha's own peculiar encouragement.

As plates were gradually cleared and tankards drained of ale a blush of color began to spread across Basilides' face, his cheeks filling and blooming, his brow burning as ever it had when Lord Lovcraft forced it before the fire. A low noise which Lady Haggitha first took to be an uncontained belch escaped from his

mouth, followed quickly by a second, but even as she smiled and Jahilyah hid a pout of disapproval she realized that satisfaction with the food was not the cause. His hands shook even as his body grew rigid, the low dyspeptic popping became a stuttering struggle for speech and his fingers traced out an invisible script across the table, as if the Catalogue of Intrusions was open before him.

“She has come,” he said, in a choking voice, and then louder still, like a proclamation which might have been taken for a cheer, “The Hashishim is here!”

Lady Haggitha cast a worried glance about the inn. The innkeeper and his companion had broken off conversation and were staring in their direction, the three men in the pit of the room had frozen in a startled tableau, only fear in their eyes for the moment but the threat of something more to follow.

“Hush, Basilides, be still,” she urged, her hand on his to quiet his trembling, for men as frozen with fear as the patrons of the inn were could sooner or later be relied upon to act in unpredictable ways. Nervously her gaze switched from Basilides at her side to the men across the room.

The innkeeper’s companion slowly straightened, lifting his elbows from the bar, squaring his shoulders. He had a knife tucked into his belt, its handle tarnished, the cloth which bound the hilt tattered and frayed but the naked blade polished and honed. He rested his hand lightly on this as he crossed to their table.

“What business is this of the Hashishim?” he demanded, standing before them, addressing Lady Haggitha directly.

“My Lady’s business and hers alone,” said Gamaliel, rising to his feet, answering for her, his reply prompt even though it could be seen that he was as concerned as anyone by mention of the Hashishim.

A hand swung out with lazy force, dismissing the groom

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without even sparing him a glance, and this was the stranger's mistake. Gamaliel caught the outstretched arm by the wrist, twisted, pivoted his body and had it held rigid against his hip in a single fluid motion, weight bearing down on the locked elbow. A single glance passed between groom and Lady, an imperceptible nod, the merest suggestion of approval in the gleam of an eye, and the joint snapped loudly, the crack of bone and tear of cartilage reverberating about the silent room.

Gamaliel let the man fall to the floor, turned to face the other three drinkers as they were about to rise from their stools and stopped them with an icy stare. Jahiliyah, too, was on her feet, fingers clenched around the table knife as if it might pierce human flesh as easily as fish.

With a satisfied smile Lady Haggitha tossed a coin onto the table, took Basilides by the arm and led him towards the door.

"Thank you, innkeeper, I shall be sure to recommend your hostelry to my friends," she said, and her laugh of manic delight would be recalled as she added, "Such treatment of your guests, such entertainment you afford them."

* * *

Even among the eccentrics who made up the body of the art school the man presented a strange sight. Bowler-hatted, wearing a dark gabardine overcoat buttoned up to the breastbone, starched white collar and thin black tie, he could have been a government inspector, except that even the most staid civil servant would have shied from dressing so somberly.

As still and erect as a monument, as belligerent as a bully, he positioned himself in the middle of the corridor as Griff approached, said, "I am looking for a young woman."

As was Griff, wandering the college in search of Anna, and he danced to the left and the right in an attempt to sidestep the obstruction.

"She may be going by the name of Tulla," the man added,

making no attempt to step out of the way.

“Try upstairs, in the painting studio,” Griff suggested, squeezing past and hurrying on, only then registering the man’s odd dress and turning.

But by then the man had already gone.

And where had Anna disappeared to?

He had tried her studio, and the canteen and common room, and found no sign of her. At the main staircase he stopped, wondering where next. As he stood there deliberating, watching the lights above the lift door flash through their sequence, Leo came up from a lower floor.

“Time for lunch, Griff?” he asked.

“That’s the idea, when I can find Anna. Seen anything of her?”

Leo hadn’t. “Have you tried graphics?”

“Naturally. And the canteen. And the common room.”

“How about the library?”

Griff thought to question what she would be doing there, but stopped himself in time, realizing how unkind this might sound, reinforcing the prejudice everyone knew he had against all but the finest arts. Anna was by no means illiterate, but she was a graphics student, and as such had little need of the library.

Still, he agreed, it was worth a try.

It seemed that there were only staff in the library, no students. Ros Billingham, one of the art history tutors, was seated at a table, behind a barricade of books, while nearby the Principal lounged in an easy chair, a large glossy art magazine in his lap looking as lost as a child’s comic beneath the folds of his belly.

Griff quietly walked the aisles between the enameled steel bookshelves, Leo following, and finally came to the table where he and Jack had been an hour earlier. Jack had gone, but the book was still there, the monograph on Edvard Munch, and still

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open at the same page, the reproduction of 'The Scream'.

"She is not there," said a voice behind them, sharp enough to startle them.

They turned and Griff recognized the bowler-hatted stranger from before.

"Not there," the man repeated. "Not in the painting studio, where you said."

"He's looking for Tulla," Griff explained to Leo, who was regarding the man with some curiosity, taking in the clothes and wondering what such a uniform might suggest.

"Bad mannered bastard, whoever or whatever he is," he remarked, when the man shouldered his way between them to gaze down at the book on the table.

"Not where you said, but there." The man pointed, and against the glossy colors of the reproduction his finger seemed quite monochromatic, not so much sallow as dead. His face, too, was an unhealthy grey, his eyes like black knots in petrified wood. "See. Two figures."

"Yes, two figures on the bridge in the distance," Griff knew, quite well acquainted with the work.

"But look!" the man insisted. "One, Tulla..."

Both Griff and Leo took a second glance at the painting and saw what they imagined to be a clever piece of montage, two new figures replacing the ones they had been accustomed to seeing. Leo scratched a thumbnail across the surface of the page, expecting the two figures to peel away and reveal the originals beneath, but whatever trickery was involved was beyond his understanding, the figures were as much a part of the landscape as the screaming face and the tormented sky.

"It's not possible," said Griff, picking up the book and rifling through the pages, looking for where one might have been removed and another inserted. The volume was intact, though, the pages stitched as firmly in place as they had been when it left

the printer's.

"That is Tulla," said the man, not seeking confirmation but stating it as fact.

"That is Tulla," Griff echoed, recognizing the hair, the dress, even the stance, though her back was turned.

"And the other?"

They had recognized the second figure even before the first.

"Jack. A friend of ours."

The stranger's pallid face seemed to darken a degree as he asked if their friend was an artist.

"Of sorts," Leo joked, but his smile carried little humor, dulled as it was by the ever graver aspect of the man at his shoulder.

"Then we must follow. We must find them. We must stop them."

"Eh?"

"It is important! Come!" said the man, gripping them each fiercely by the elbow.

"Now look, pal, I don't know what your game is but I've had enough," said Griff, shaking himself free. "I'm going to find my girlfriend and-"

"Find? Another has gone?" The man peered closely at the reproduction, angled his head low down to the page as if trying to see beyond the frame of the picture. "I cannot see... no... but I sense..."

"Come on, Leo, let's leave the crackpot to it. Maybe Anna is with Selina."

They left the library, took the stairs to climb two floors to the textile department.

"He's following us," Leo said, glancing over his shoulder.

"You need my help, I need yours," they heard behind them.

Griff stopped a moment to challenge him. "Who the hell are you? Should we know you? Should you be here?"

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“Most people know me as the School Master.”

“Yes? And what is it you teach, Teach? It would have to be accountancy, dressed like that.”

“My job is not so much education as guidance, discipline.”

“Crazy bastard,” Griff muttered.

* * *

Gamaliel felt strangely light-headed, as if he had taken a barrel of ale rather than the single tankard with his meal, and was conscious of a peculiar calm which had first come upon him at the inn and was with him still. He was no fighter, he wrestled for sport, matched weapons with others as a test of skill and nothing more. True violence was a thing he abhorred, conflict a thing he feared and avoided as best he could. He had been a party to brawls before, of course, even in the streets of Golgonooza occasions had arisen when he had been compelled to act in defense of himself or others, but these had always been marked by an initial reluctance and a subsequent regret. He would tremble in anticipation of the violence, and then more violently still to witness its result, would feel such nausea that he would sometimes be physically sick.

He was more suited to loving than to fighting, he would boast to friends, his physique better devoted to passion than to conflict.

In the tavern he had felt no hesitation about causing a man harm, however, even though he shared that man's disquiet at hearing mention of the Hashishim. He should have calmed the man, joined in his concern, questioned why he was there and what he was about, creeping from the city in the dead of night like a fugitive, had he had his wits about him; but wit had forsaken him and it was not even compulsion which took its place, just an unconsidered mindless response.

The memory of his violence had a fragrance about it, and as he sat on the edge of the clearing where Lady Haggitha had

decided they would make camp for the night it returned again, as strong as before, made him feel that he might faint like a man too long without sleep, or that he was struggling through a dream from which he would soon waken.

“Gamaliel? All is well?”

He looked up to see Lady Haggitha standing before him, then gazed beyond her to the forest, to the colonnade of trees which massed around them like a dark cathedral. “All is well, my Lady,” he answered. “The forest is quiet, we are alone.”

“It was your wellbeing I was asking after,” she said, sitting beside him, arranging her cloak about her with a rustle of silk and a breeze of perfume. “You are well? You did not find our earlier altercation too disturbing?”

He had not, which was what worried him, said, “Not at all, my Lady.”

“Good. I am pleased. And what of the mention of the Hashishim?”

“What of it, my Lady?”

“It would trouble some. It troubled that unfortunate man at the inn. And the others there, you saw the fear in their eyes which the very name conjured. Does it not trouble you, Gamaliel?”

“Why should it?”

“You really must learn not to respond to my questions with others of your own, Gamaliel,” she chided him gently. “I will let that pass for the moment, however, and you are right, there is no reason why it should trouble you. The members of the Hashishim have a fearful reputation, and justifiably so, but there is one of them that I would tame, the one my scribe has spoken of. You trust me, Gamaliel? You have faith in your mistress?”

“I do,” he answered.

“Good. And now, before I retire for the night, my braid needs to be undone and my hair brushed.” She turned her back

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to him, drew the plait from the folds of her cloak and tossed it over her shoulder. "Will you oblige me, Gamaliel?" she asked.

Somewhere it was in his mind to say that he was a groom, not a lady's maid, that though he was a servant he was also a man, but he found himself taking her hair in his hands. "Willingly, my Lady."

* * *

When they reached Selina's studio it was empty, the last of its students just leaving for lunch. Yes, Anna had been there, Griff was told, but had left with Selina, who had been in something of a huff. 'Here one minute, gone the next' was how their departure was described, bringing a 'tut-tut' click of the tongue from the stranger which Griff found annoying and Leo ominous.

They stepped into the studio, weaving their way between the tables to Selina's workspace. Exhibition boards enclosed this on three sides, every inch of them covered with sketches, jottings, fabric samples, messages and reminders pinned amongst them but nothing current enough to be of any help. On the table itself was her work in progress, to one side of it a still-wet palette of colors and a pot of cloudy water.

"You'd think she'd have put her work away if she was going off for lunch," said Leo disapprovingly, taking the pot of water and emptying it into a nearby sink. "This is an accident waiting to happen."

"Looks like it already has," said Griff. "See." He pointed to the face which had been sketched onto the design, seeming to peer out at them from behind the foliage. "There's the reason for her going off in a mood."

"There is Tulla again," the one who called himself the School Master told them.

Leo supposed there was a slight resemblance; it was a passable enough caricature of the girl.

"And here, too." The man picked up a black and white

photograph, still damp enough to hang limply in his hand, in which a shadowy figure could be seen descended a bare wooden staircase. "Do you know this place?"

Griff took the print from him.

"From Anna's description I'd say it was the old inn she went to yesterday."

The School Master sat in Selina's place and took up a pose more suited to a pianist, fingertips resting on the edge of the table as if about to coax a tune from it. Silently he regarded the photograph, then the textile design beside it, eventually said, "There is no alternative. We must follow."

"To 'The Stuck Pig'?" said Griff.

"No. Not there."

"Then where?"

Swiveling around on the stool, the School Master took a breath so deep that it was made to seem necessary. "You may find this hard to credit, enlightened young artists though you are," he said, "but your friends have gone. The one with Tulla, your girlfriend, her companion. They have gone. Not out to lunch, not shopping, not absent for a while. Gone."

Leo, looking beyond his shoulder at Selina's design, recalled her account of being drawn in, of visiting some place within it, gestured towards it and said, "You mean, like, in there?"

"That is correct."

"For God's sake, Leo, this is stupid!" said Griff.

"As stupid as soft watches? As stupid as twelve inch deathwatch beetles or girls who chew bits out of their boyfriends?"

There was a whimsical smile playing across Leo's lips, as if he found the idea -and it could only be that, an idea, nothing more- intriguing enough to dwell on. Not so the bowler-hatted gent, though, whose expression was one of serious concern, as if applying himself to more practical matters.

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“You’re saying that we need to follow them in there?” Griff asked him, glancing down at the design.

“Not there, no. Nor the bridge which is the route Tulla and your friend took.”

“Where, then?”

“Yes! Where?” The School Master slapped his hands against the table, crashing out chords which would have been discordant if they had not been silent. “Where? Where? Where?” He looked around him in impatience. “This school of art of yours, it has proper art? Not the things I saw upstairs in your painting studio?”

“In reproduction, like the Munch you saw in the library,” Griff told him.

“Better still, though, if you’ll step this way,” said Leo, and led them from the room.

As they walked along the corridor Griff was perturbed to see that Leo seemed to be warming to their strange companion, accepting his presence and even enjoying it, rather than trying to ignore him as they had done before, the two of them striding side by side while he dallied a few paces behind.

“There we go,” said Leo, taking them into a small room at the end of the corridor. Around the walls were half a dozen computers. “You want paintings, right Teach?” he grinned, sitting before one of the machines, and flicked through a rack of CD-Roms. “And here we are, the collection of the National Gallery. Should do perfectly.”

He inserted the disc into the drive, sat back while the program loaded and the opening credits rolled.

“This is art?” said the School Master, as if disappointed.

“Are you looking for a philosophical debate on the concept, or do you just want pictures?”

“Pictures will do,” the man agreed, though his face puckered a little, as though he found the banality of the word offensive.

“Pictures you have, then,” said Leo, offering him a view of the screen, and the School Master’s eyes widened as he saw paintings flashing before him, paintings obviously familiar to him for many made him smile. “Well, Teach? What exactly do you want?”

“We want a painting and we want to be in it, naturally.”

“Naturally,” Griff mimicked sarcastically, and rapped on the screen with his knuckle. “Open up! Let us in! Or do we just smash the glass and stick our heads through?”

“No need for that, Griff,” Leo told him. “We have technology on our side. The appliance of science. So which do you fancy, Teach?”

“Here, this one,” the School Master decided.

“Claude Lorraine? Very nice. Right, Griff, give me your student union card,” said Leo, taking his own from his wallet.

Griff handed his card to Leo, who leant down low to one side, saying, “Now what we do is scan these, bring them on screen...”

With the mouse he sped the cursor around, bringing up menus, clicking on programs.

“...mask and cut and paste and... bingo! Two figures in a landscape!”

“And suddenly we’re there!” Griff said, with mocking applause.

The School Master almost smiled as he bent close, considering Leo’s technical artistry, said, “Perfect.”

“And really think that...?” Griff began, but then stopped as the landscape seemed to zoom larger, breaking up into a mosaic of pixels. “Here, Leo, stop screwing around with the picture! You’re making me dizzy!”

Chapter 4

If this was adventure then Elusai would have more of it, he thought with satisfaction, gazing beyond the harbor to where the murky waters of the dockside became a crisp fluorescent blue and finding such peace there that he could almost feel his spirit skim the placid surface. Why, this new-found love of adventure might even persuade him to venture that far, were it not for the buccaneers who were rumored to wait just beyond the horizon, and the vessels which trafficked in human life, and the uncharted whirls and eddies and clashing rocks which might send a ship to its doom.

He chuckled, then, drummed his heels against the table on which they rested and called out for another jug of wine. No, this was adventure, and he was content with it.

He had been dismayed at being instructed to accompany Abishai, for his friend's boredom always brought trouble, even in the taverns and brothels of Golgonooza, and to tour the kingdom with a license to search for it, and with a score of men at his command, was surely to court disaster. First Minister van Vogt had been insistent, though, had been persuasive with his offer of gold and derisive in his accusations of cowardice, finally compelling with his threat of imprisonment for offences which all but the two of them had long forgotten.

A serving wench set a fresh jug of wine beside him, cast an admiring look at his weapon and flaunted her breasts as she bowed low, full and firm beneath the thin lace bodice of her dress.

"Will there be anything else?" she asked invitingly, and he considered a moment, then shook his head.

"Maybe later," he offered, knowing that the invitation, once made, would hold good, and the girl retreated slowly, her eyes fixed on his as she glanced over her shoulder.

There had been no end of such invitations, suggested slyly or made openly, once they had left Golgonooza, it seemed that away from the humdrum complacency which its walls contained there was that same craving for adventure which drove Abishai, especially among the young. Passing through towns and villages as they made their way west youths would regard the troop with envy, young girls with lust, there was a respect afforded anyone who remotely resembled a warrior and even the less than handsome Elusai, even the dog-ugliest of the band, had not gone wanting for female company. The women of the pastoral lands had first fired the troop's ardor, farm girls pungent with the smell of milk and girls of the field with their rough abrasive touch; a company of traveling players had surrendered while their effeminate male companions looked on trembling; a dormitory of young novice nuns had been taken while the Mother Superior was held at bay by the point of a sword; at the last small village the Lady of the Manor and her daughter had succumbed to passion, and then to tears of hysteria at being left behind.

Now their trail of conquests had brought them to the coast, to Honfleur, and to a temporary halt.

Two ladies strolled by, a step above the serving wench class, perfumed and powdered and wearing their finery, silk dresses which were full at the back but cut short at the front, baring knees and a glimpse of thigh. As they neared him they slowed, one coquettishly twirling the parasol which rested on her shoulder, its patterned fabric unfolding like a flower in bloom, while the other held hers furled, using it to stab the ground, to flick away the dockside debris from her path.

Elusai gave them a smile, settled his sword more comfortably at his side so that its blade caught the sun, was surprised when they turned their backs on him and crossed to the water's edge. The interest they showed in the vessels which

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lined the quayside was easily seen to be a sham, though, their heads close together in conversation suggested intrigues to be hatched rather than tittle-tattle shared, and from time to time one or the other would glance towards him.

He called for the serving wench, who hurried across hopefully but then left in a sulk when he asked for two fresh glasses. Clean glasses for ladies. These brought, he filled each with wine and waited patiently. Eventually, as he had been sure they would, the two ladies turned from their consideration of the view, from the jammers and cutters and the dhows and sampans which lined the dock, sauntered leisurely towards him.

“A celebration?” asked one, regarding the three glasses of wine.

“Or perhaps the good knight is waiting on company?” the other wondered, and Elusai swung his feet from the table to the ground with a nonchalant grace, gestured that they might join him.

“So sure of himself.”

“Such confidence.”

“As polished as the sword he sports.”

“We admire that in a man.”

They had seated themselves one on either side of him and he repeatedly turned to follow their voices, was drawn by the fair haired lady on the right, her silvered hair intricately coiled in a structure as elaborate as any to be found in Golgonooza, and then by the dark woman on his left, her face still shaded by the open parasol so that all he was aware of was the brilliance of her smile. They spoke in honeyed tongues, their breath was fragrant on his cheek, as if they had learned their cosmetic craft from Lady Haggitha herself.

“And where are you bound, sir?” asked the lady to his left, her voice as dark as her complexion.

He gave a shrug, a man with the world as his oyster,

opportunities without limit. "Who knows where fortune might take me," he said, and then gave a gallant acknowledgement of the company. "But for the moment I am quite content to be here. And what of you two beauties?"

"A charmer," said one, faking a blush.

"A flatterer," the other smiled.

"Or perhaps a man of discerning taste."

A hand touched his tunic, fingered the material. "It would seem so, to judge by his dress."

Like two knights jousting, and he the picket which separated them, the women spoke in turn, the fair one now taking up the dialogue. They were waiting for passage on a ship, she told Elusai, her yawn indicating how tedious such waiting was, the slight stretch of the spine and flexing of the shoulders describing a body grown stiff with boredom.

"You can find no entertainment to distract you here in Honfleur?" Elusai asked, with a sly smile, leering over his glass as he took a sip of wine. His mind was racing to phrase overtures even as his manner suggested sympathy.

"We have exhausted all that Honfleur has to offer."

"The only excitement left us is the anticipation of reaching our destination."

"And where might that lie?"

"Cythera," answered the dark one, making it sound like a shadowy place.

Elusai repeated the name. "Cythera? Do I know it?"

"A well-traveled adventurer such as yourself? Surely," the fair one believed, now returning the flattery, but then decided, "And yet perhaps not. It is some days sailing to the south, an island in isolation. A vessel might be commissioned to take you there, but it is on no established trade routes, is not easy to reach."

"Yet you are prepared to make the effort," Elusai remarked,

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his interest growing. “What does this island have to offer that Honfleur lacks?”

“Ah!” On his left the dark woman moved closer, her parasol drawing him into its shade and bringing a sudden chill to his cheek, while the woman to the left placed the pointed ferrule of her furled parasol on his foot, rested chin on hands atop the handle to bring some weight to bear. Cold steel threatened to pierce the soft leather upper of his boot, it caused him pain but her voice suggested only pleasure. “On Cythera...”

“Elusai?”

The curt salutation broke the spell, the pressure on his foot eased, light intruded and the warmth of the sun returned as the second parasol was withdrawn.

Abishai tossed two coins before the ladies, said, “Take your refreshment at another table. Better still, ply your trade at some other tavern.”

Neither woman touched the coins, but turned to regard Abishai with a cold disdain.

“You think we want your money?”

“Or have need it?”

“That we are common whores?”

“A rose by any other name...” Abishai smiled, bowed low, but there was no courtesy in the action as he sniffed loudly like a foraging animal. “...would smell just as cheap! Now be off with you!”

Elusai’s eyes flashed in despair as first one woman, then the other, rose to her feet and spun on her heels, mouthing curses and offering threats. He watched them stride briskly away and then turned to Abishai. “Why?” he asked.

Abishai sat, took a glass of wine for himself, then gave his friend a pitying look. “Have you not had your fill of tumbling cheap whores yet?”

“They weren’t...”

“Maybe not cheap, to judge by the quality of their dress, but certainly whores. As are all the women you happen upon.”

“The Lady of the Manor?” Elusai recalled. “She was no whore.”

“She was in her middle years, Elusai, she had a daughter of twenty and a husband twice her age. She would have spread her legs for anyone with a length of unshriveled meat between his legs, the sort not to worry about the quality of the poker-work as long as the fire was stoked.” Abishai’s suffering look was a modicum of pity tempered by an obvious reprimand. “We are men, we need to satisfy our urges. I am no different. Caress me and do I not grow stiff? But the mature man must realize that this is not all. The poet finds a greater satisfaction in his verse, the brilliance of orgasm is only fleeting but his true vision lasts. So it is with the warrior. Let him satisfy his desires when needs must, but his ultimate bliss is in his quest.”

Elusai snatched up the third glass of wine, noted that it had been touched and bore a lipstick kiss around the rim but drank from it all the same, the cosmetic tasting of strawberries on his own lips, teasing him that the woman’s kisses would have tasted just the same. He was about to query the nature of this quest they had been sent on, to roam from town to town in search of some creature who might or might not have been in the kingdom, would have doubted its purpose and questioned its sense until he recalled the satisfaction it had brought him.

“Quest?” he repeated then, acknowledging that they had left Golgonooza with a purpose of sorts but hinting at reservations about its worth.

“It still exists,” Abishai insisted. He had been conscious of his friend’s reluctance to join in the expedition, knew that the only reason for his company was the same reason as always, to bask in his peer’s reflected glory, to enjoy a life, and the comforts it brought, which would otherwise be denied him. Elusai was like

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the dog beneath the banquet table, feasting on the scraps. Well now that mongrel was going to have to work a little harder for its favors, and Abishai flushed in anticipation of the hang-dog expression which would greet his news. "The quest still exists," he repeated, "and it now has a direction."

"Yes?" said Elusai, jaw clenched so as not to let slip his disappointment.

"Word has come from my aunt, her scribe has come up with a point of arrival for the Hashishim girl. You will gather the men together. We will leave while there is still light."

"And which direction do we take?" asked Elusai, thinking of the two women who had now left the quayside, of their own journey to an island named Cythera. "South?" he hoped.

"North," Abishai told him, so promptly that it might have been his intention simply to contradict his companion. "North, along the coast, to a region known as the Scented Land."

* * *

They were on a hill, the land rolling away on all sides, and though Griff's fingers were numb and his face tingled he was enchanted enough by the view to ignore his discomfort. Enchanted enough, too, not to question how he came to be there, not to wonder at the odd manner of his entrance, but simply to accept the fact.

The grass at his feet, clipped closely enough that it might have been tended each day by a legion of the most fastidious gardeners, fell away in a series of gentle undulations, a continuous swathe of green unbroken by any other vegetation until, a couple of miles in the distance or maybe more, it was bordered by an expanse of water. Here, wooded copses encroached from both sides as if to deliberately frame the scene, the work of an artist rather than a chance of nature, drawing in the eye and then persuading it further, out across the water -lake, bay, sea, whatever- and to a far-off range of mountains.

"Some place, eh?" he said to Leo, at his side.

“Some trip, as Jack might say.” Leo was rubbing at the back of his hand, as if trying to scrub away a blemish or ease an irritation, saw his friend notice the action and said, “Spots before the eyes, it must be.”

“Must be,” Griff agreed, though he had seen a similar mottling on his own skin, only now beginning to fade as the tingling sensation subsided. Between seeing their images on the screen in the computer room and arriving here in this near flawless land he was sure his body had undergone some sort of change, but preferred not to dwell on the nature of it. He turned around, saw that the School Master was standing some yards away. “So, Teach, you got us here. And wherever ‘here’ is, it looks like a pretty impressive place.”

“I had to consider carefully with regard to choosing a destination,” said the School Master, now walking towards them, his dress seeming even more incongruous than ever in the new surroundings, as out of place as an accountant at a picnic. “I thought it best to opt for somewhere safe.”

“Safe?” said Leo frowning, not comfortable with the connotations of the word.

“Natural, then. Welcoming.”

“Well it certainly seems to be that,” Griff believed, looking around with a satisfied gaze, eyes first squinting against the glare of the sun and then focusing in an effort to pierce the distant haze. “Even the weather is as near perfect as makes no difference.”

Above them the sky was a dusty blue, with scattered wisps of pure white cloud which hung stationary, unruffled by even the slightest breeze. Birds, too, wheeled so slowly that they were almost motionless, as if it was a struggle to search out any currents, and on the still air could be heard a sound of flowing water, so faint that it was like music, the trickle of a weir which fed the larger expanse.

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“Yes, a pleasant enough place,” the School Master agreed. “It does have its drawbacks, though.”

“Like?”

“No transport.”

“You couldn’t have dropped us closer to a motorway?” Griff smiled, imagining the delight which some might derive from running a ribbon of black road across the land before him. “So we walk, I suppose? Which way?”

The School Master pointed.

Directly ahead, beyond the water, the mountains were sharply defined, their peaks crisp against the sky, each facet of their slopes clearly marked and distinctly colored. As Griff and Leo followed the moving finger to the left, though -to the north? the west?- their details became less defined, outlines blurred and colors merged until finally there was only.....

“Colored nothing,” said Griff, eyes narrowing, trying in vain to bring the scene into sharper detail. “It looks like colored nothing.”

“Right. Seems to me like there’s some serious weather over there,” said Leo, and turned for confirmation even as he spoke.

“Yes, I’m afraid that is where we’re heading,” the School Master apologized. “The Temeraire Mountains.”

With that he set off briskly down the gentle incline, Leo and Griff falling into step behind. The grass was so springy that it left no sign of their footprints, nor were there any paths or tracks to indicate that anyone other than the three of them had ever traveled this way before.

“Do you think there are any people around here?” Leo wondered.

“Maybe.”

“I don’t know that I’m looking forward to finding out.” Leo anxiously scanned the land to either flank, then cast a dubious glance to the copses ahead of them. “Doesn’t it worry you?”

Griff shrugged. No doubt there were other people, if not in the immediate vicinity then at some point along their route, but it was not this which had him uneasy, nor the prospect that not all might be as affable as their escort. No. What unsettled him for the moment was the ease with which he and Leo seemed to have accepted their sudden appearance in this strange world, as if this acceptance had been forced on them without their realizing it, instilled like a religion at birth, as much a part of life as the living of it. Even when he made a conscious effort to question his presence it failed to snap him out of his calm acquiescence, time and again he would find his resolve distracted by the landscape, a succession of thoughts –of how Anna would enthuse over its unspoilt beauty, of how her father would be brought to mind by its verdant perfection- crowding out his anxieties.

And still he felt quite comfortable with events when, after three hours of walking, they reached the water's edge and the School Master allowed them a while to rest, pointed them to the shade of a tree. All around its base the ground was littered with fallen fruits which were not dissimilar to apples. Griff stretched out for one as he sat, examined it, saw that it seemed as fresh as if it had just been picked.

“Go on, help yourself,” said the School Master. “They’re safe. And for the moment all we have.”

“No packed lunches?” Griff smiled, took a bite and then nodded to Leo.

As Leo picked up the nearest fruit, and polished it on his shirt, he said, “Tell me, Teach. You said something about choosing this place because it was safe.”

“I did.”

“Is that ‘safe’, as opposed to ‘dangerous’? Is that the context in which you’re using the word?”

“That depends on the context in which you’re using the word ‘dangerous’,” the School Master countered impassively, with no

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hint of a smile to suggest that he might be trying to be clever, but the reply annoyed Leo, it was the sort that Ted Baldwin might have made, and if there was any one way in which that land could be said to be perfect then it was in its lack of Ted Baldwins. He waited, then, teeth fastened on the fruit's flesh, his frown demanding a less evasive answer. "Very well, then," said the School Master. "I chose to bring you to this place because it would present you with less of a culture shock."

"As if bringing us anywhere at all, in the way you did, wasn't a shock in itself?" Leo huffed.

"Point taken," the School Master conceded. "But there are other parts of this world which are not quite so idyllic, not so welcoming and certainly nowhere near as natural, regions we could have arrived in, and might still happen upon, which would have been so alien to you that they might easily have... well..."

"Blown our minds?" Griff offered.

The School Master deliberated for a moment, then decided that the phrase, though unfamiliar to him, was quite apt. "Yes, blown your minds. And perhaps even blasted your souls."

Leo flinched. "That's a bit strong. Certainly stronger than I expected when I hoped for a straight answer."

"Could you elaborate a little?" Griff asked. "So that we might be prepared?"

"Prepared?" The School Master gave a wry smile. "I'm not sure that anything can prepare you for what you might encounter in this world. What you need to understand is that everything here is born of the imagination. Every creature here, and every person too, myself included. I was born of the imagination, I live in the imagination, and in an imagined place."

"We're just imagining we're here?"

"Oh no, you are here," the School Master was quick to correct him, as if this was a doctrine which it was crucial that he grasp. "But in an imagined place. There's the conundrum, the

challenge for you. And if you think, now, of the limits of the imagination..."

"There are none," Griff knew.

"Precisely. And so there are no limits to what you might find here. Think of the worst horrors that your mind can conjure, and then picture them as real as this landscape is to you. That is why we have started here, and left ourselves with quite a trek ahead of us. So that you would meet nothing which would test your reason, so that you might become accustomed to this world slowly."

They paused for a moment, to digest his words; then Leo said, "So we are talking dangerous, then?"

"At times, in places, in a variety of ways."

He got to his feet and was about to lead them on when Griff stopped him. "Just one more thing. The place where my girlfriend Anna has gone. Is that dangerous?"

"Oh no, not at all," said the School Master with a reassuring conviction.

* * *

van Vogt was troubled, but when was he not? The position of First Minister of Golgonooza of necessity brought problems in abundance, but their nature was generally such that he enjoyed the challenge they presented. And of course, the rewards, of which there could be many. Despite what the common populace might like to believe the members of the Parliament did not assemble out of an altruistic concern for the well-being of the city, but for their own self-interests, and it was the task of the First Minister to balance these. It was a game of manipulation, but with no two distinct sides in opposition. Rather there was a continual massing and regrouping of pieces, members switching allegiances and philosophies, forming alliances, drawn first one way and then the other. If van Vogt could keep all members happy, then Parliament was happy that he should remain its

head, and this had always been his skill.

Now, though.....

The youth who nestled against him on the cushioned couch, pillowed by sleeves of satin plump with down, stirred as if sharing his agitation. He was a slim boy, barely past puberty, and had been blind from birth; he could have no appreciation of the sumptuousness of his surroundings other than the touch of silks and pelts against his naked skin, and the perfumed warmth of the body which cradled him, no knowledge even of who it was he lay with, for such occasions were always conducted in near silence, the occasional sigh of satisfaction the only sound to break it. Van Vogt ran a plump hand over the boy's head, through the tight curls, then down to the neck where he pinched hard on a fold of flesh. With the mawkish mewl of a pampered pet the boy shifted in his embrace, his lips blindly brushing a nipple and then fastening onto it. Van Vogt slapped him away, bringing him further awake, he had not had him brought to his chambers to act the unweaned infant suckling at a breast. A hand raised sleepily, fist knuckling a gummy unseeing eye, and van Vogt permitted the boy this moment to compose himself, then grasped the slender wrist, unfolding the fingers to draw them to his body. No further demand was necessary, the boy complied with the unspoken instruction and began to knead the soft hairless body, working with expert fingers into the folds of fat.

How, van Vogt wondered, could he hope to keep Parliament happy when it was the aim of one member to plunge the city into conflict? Certainly some would prosper, war brought with it its own particular economic growth, but at what risk? There was little to be gained in gearing your business for conflict, in arming and provisioning troops, if the whole infrastructure, the whole stability of the city was put in peril. Many of the Parliament would be able to appreciate this, others could be persuaded of its sense, but Lord Lovecraft, he guessed, was not driven by personal

profit. It was glory he was after, a lust for blood, and he was blind to the consequences.

“Ah!” van Vogt sighed, and then growled –“lower”- his voice deliberately taking on a gruffness which would never be associated with the First Minister of Golgonooza, whose piping tones were known the length and the breadth of the city. In his contentment he had almost forgotten himself, forgotten the need for discretion, and he said again, in a voice lower still, in the manner of some coarse ‘nouveau riche’ merchant: “Move lower, boy.”

The youth had an exquisite touch, an artisan if not an artist, one of the academy who, deprived of their vision, could conjure such likenesses as the sighted were incapable of. A student of the academy could run his hands over a person, a creature, an object and then produce a recreation in clay which was of an uncanny likeness; those who later translated these likenesses into stone or bronze were no more than mechanics of the material, their craft a science rather than an intuition. The skill of the students of the academy was in their hands, but it was not just to the aesthetic that this touch might be productively applied.

van Vogt slipped lower on the couch, it was deep enough to support his back and wide enough to let the youth sprawl its length, curled his toes in the deep pile of the rug and flexed them like a fist. Still the tension was not fully eased, though, as much as his muscles would relax beneath the blind boy’s capable touch his mind was still as if afflicted with a cramp, there were knots there, problems which threatened to send his whole person into spasms.

Parliament would be persuaded against war, Lord Lovecraft would stand alone, but still he would do all he could to encourage it. van Vogt knew him of old, knew the ambitions which drove him, and the man still had troops enough at his command to cause mayhem if given the opportunity, men who had grown as

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bored as their leader had with the monotony of peace. If, as now seemed likely, both his own men and Lord Lovecraft's were searching in the wrong places for the Hashishim girl, then he would not have her as his excuse, so for the moment his threat, while still real, could be disregarded.

Now it was his damned wife who was the rogue piece in the game! Haggitha, with claims to be a Lady and now the presumption to become a queen!

A hand crept across his groin and tugged at his penis, found it still flaccid so tugged even harder. With eyes closed van Vogt pictured Lovecraft's wife, her hair like burnished copper, her smile as lustrous but betrayed by the deceit in her eyes, and his penis remained as limp as a piece of well-boiled pasta despite the blind boy's skillful touch.

Damn the witch! The way things stood she was as capable of blighting his life as she was of ruining his career!

"Gerroff!" he grumbled, and a heave of his ample belly was enough to bounce the young boy to the floor. "Gerrout!"

But of course the boy could not, he was blind, stranded in the middle of the floor with no clue as to which way was which. van Vogt padded across the room, tugged on a bell-pull to summon Clod, then pulled on a robe and stood watching the blind boy blundering about the room on all fours. Within the minute there was a discreet tap on the door and Clod entered silently, excused a salutation on those occasions, and only those, when the First Minister was entertaining one of his blind masseurs. van Vogt clicked a finger, pointed at the boy, then jerked a thumb towards the door. Understanding, the equerry took the lad by the arm and led him from the room, returning promptly.

"My Lord?" he said.

"Clod..." The name came out too thickly, the voice still guttural, the need for silence being the worst thing about these

trysts. Van Vogt cleared his throat, said again, more clearly, "Clod. What news is there?"

"None, my Lord," Clod answered softly, as if the fault was his. "The two mercenaries you engaged..."

"A pointless drain on the coffers!" van Vogt interrupted. "Confidence men, they were no more than that. If they ever dare set foot in the city...!" He stilled his trembling, calmed his mood with a deep breath and a slow count. "I doubted that they would be of much use. But what of the School of the Rose+Croix? It is days now that their Master has been gone. Is there no news from them?"

"None, my Lord, I am afraid..." Deeply afraid. "...to say."

The First Minister paced across the room, mumbling, "Cheating bastards, the lot of them."

"The Schools are always honest in their dealings, every one of them," the equerry reminded him.

"Yes, quite," van Vogt acknowledged, pouring himself a glass of clear rum, then sweetening it with currant juice. "Honest, but damnably slow." He sipped his drink, darkening his lips, asked, "And what of Lord Lovecraft?"

"Ah!" Clod smiled, like an examinee given the one question he has crammed for. "Our noble Lord Lovecraft has spent the last week or more at the Cabaret Voltaire and in the apartment of its chanteuse. At one or the other, here and there, it has been a full seven days since he last went home."

"Whoremonger," van Vogt sneered, as if to be such a thing was a failing. "So he will not yet be aware that his wife is harboring rather more ambitious plans than he?"

"It is unlikely that she would freely admit them to him," said Clod, "and even more unlikely that he would be able to beat the truth out of her, as is sometimes his custom, since she too has forsaken the domicile."

"She has what?" cried van Vogt, spinning so violently that he

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upset his drink, spilling a blackcurrant stain down the front of his robe. "How? Why? When?" he asked

"She was seen leaving by the east gate two mornings ago, my Lord."

"And no one saw fit to inform me? You didn't think to tell me?"

"I- I am sorry my Lord. I understood that your concern was with Lord Lovecraft rather than his wife."

The equerry had the effrontery to question his concern? The First Minister blazed, his face like a fruit suddenly ripening, said, "My concern, my concern, is with anyone who shows an interest in the Hashishim girl!"

"But the Lady Haggitha..."

"Shows an inordinate interest!"

"...hopes to harness the creature's talents for herself," Clod finished, with a suffering smile of condescension, intending to belittle her ambition but serving only to further enrage his master.

van Vogt took a quick pace forward and caught the equerry by the front of his tunic, crushing it in his fists. "I have never known the Lady Haggitha attempt anything which she believed beyond her," he spat, giving the man a violent shake. "If she believes herself capable of using this creature's skills to her own ends then I will take that threat seriously! I will not dismiss her ambitions as the idle fancy of some bored lady of the court and I will be kept informed of her comings and goings!" With a final shake he flung the equerry from him, turned his back to pace the room. "So," he said, "the Lady Haggitha left some mornings ago. And secretively?"

There was a low murmur of assent from Clod, but nothing more intrusive, for he knew better than to address the First Minister in any other way than face to face.

"But not so secretively that she escaped being seen leaving

by the east gate. Which tells us what, Clod?" he asked, now smiling as he turned, a finger to his lips to silence any answer. "It tells us that her ultimate goal does not lie east. If anything her route will take her in the exact opposite direction. She would have known that she could not leave the city unnoticed, and so would seek to mislead anyone who might take an interest." The finger against his lips was now tapping out a regular tattoo, stabbing out on occasion to point to a variety of alternatives. It froze, then, pointing directly at the equerry's heart as if to impale him against the door. "Tell me, Clod, does Lord Lovecraft know that his wife has fled the happy domicile?"

"He has been with the chanteuse of the Cabaret Voltaire for the past week or more," Clod reminded his master.

Van Vogt nodded. "Then I think that Lord Lovecraft should be told that his dear wife is missing."

* * *

"Anna? Where are you?" Selina cried out.

Close enough by, but for the moment lost to sight.

Anna looked around, to locate the voice and search out her friend, but no sooner had she brushed the tears from her stinging eyes than they were made gummy with sweat, her vision blurred by a wash of perspiration which ran freely down her brow. She mopped her face with the hem of her tee shirt and immediately it was sodden, its fabric clinging like a warm poultice to her belly. She had never known such a heat, so oppressive, so cloying, when she opened her mouth to answer Selina's call the air was as thick as soup in her throat, threatening to choke her, bringing on heaving gasps of panic. Yet it was not just the air constricting her lungs which affected her with a claustrophobic anxiety, for as she turned a full circle, looking for Selina, she saw that the vegetation was as dense as the air was thick, creepers and vines and tangled branches so closely knit that they were like a cage around her. There was no visible way she could have got into such a restricted

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space, so no obvious way out. She might have been there since some pre-arboreal time, and had the forest grow around her. Or grown with it, forever rooted in this spot.

And forever in this spot I'll stay if I don't make an effort, she knew, and called out to Selina.

"Over here!" came the reply.

She had a bearing now, a direction, but the way was blocked. "I think I may need some help! Make your way towards me!"

She pressed her foot down on the nearest vines, feeling them tough and springy, wrestled with those in front of her face. It took all her strength to prize them apart, all her weight to prevent those underfoot from springing back, and a sharp intake of breath to insert her body inches deeper into the undergrowth. Then, ignoring the panic which threatened as the vegetation closed together at her back, she repeated the process, trampling down as much of the network of creepers as she could, fighting to part the rest, squeezing her body through the slightest of gaps. Her hands became tacky with sap, and her cheeks where leaves the size of dinner plates brushed her face, but slowly she made progress, step by step, inch by weary inch.

Judging by the sounds ahead of her Selina was having a similar struggle with the plant life. But not with as much success, it seemed, for when the two of them finally came face to face Anna saw that she had managed no more than a couple of paces through the undergrowth, that beyond her shoulder was what was a comparatively clear space.

"Well you certainly exerted yourself trying to get me out," she said.

With a sheepish look of apology, Selina stretched out to take Anna's hand, then gave a pout of disgust when she felt how sticky it was, was quick to release it once Anna was clear of the vines.

"It wasn't very pleasant in there," Anna told her, plucking scraps of foliage from her hair, brushing it from her eyes.

“It’s not very pleasant here, period,” said Selina, fluttering her hand about, looking for something to wipe it on, then reluctantly rubbing it against the side of her skirt. “This is the place I came to before.”

“I guessed,” said Anna, recognizing the tropicana which Selina had described. “So, which way?”

Looking around, there were no paths or tracks anywhere to be seen, each direction seemed the same, a confusion of trees, vines, the occasional denser cluster like the one she had just fought her way out of.

Selina shrugged. “How the hell should I know?”

“You’ve been here before. Me, I’m a stranger in these parts.”

Though the ground was clearer than the spot where Anna had originally found herself, still the proliferation of vegetation was such that their view in any direction was restricted to a matter of yards. Overhead, too, there was little to see, the trees meeting in a canopy through which the sky was no more than a mosaic of blue and gold.

“I suppose we take the line of least resistance,” Selina finally decided, having stopped her pirouette and settling on the direction which seemed easiest. “This way?”

It seemed as good as any and they set off on their meandering way, skirting the larger obstacles in their path, weaving between the trees, climbing over fallen trunks.

“You know, if this place wasn’t quite so cluttered and so hot it would be lovely,” said Anna, once the way was easy enough for her to spare some attention for her surroundings. “Just look at the colors. Dad, if you’ll pardon the pun, would be green with envy if he could see all these greens.”

“I’d settle for some boring, matter-of-fact concrete and steel. Nature sucks. Especially when it’s so wild.”

“You’ve got no soul. Don’t you think the flowers are beautiful?”

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“In a florist’s window they might be,” said Selina, dismissing the splashes of crimson and cadmium which had her friend so enchanted. “Jesus, Anna, you’re acting like a bloody tourist. What’s got into you?”

“I... I truly don’t know,” she then realized. “I should be panicking, I suppose. I should be astonished and dumbfounded and saying ‘pinch me, I’m dreaming, this can’t be happening.’ But somehow...” Her voice tailed off, she was silent for a while. Her next words hinted at a touch of anxiety, however, as she said, “There is one thing that troubles me, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, this place is straight out of a Rousseau painting, just as you described it before.”

“Yes?”

“So, I don’t know much about his work, I’ve never been all that taken by it, but there is something that sticks in my mind.”

Selina stopped, turned to face her. “Out with it, then.”

“Didn’t he have baboons and tigers and things in his jungles? You know, fierce-ish type creatures?”

“Bloody marvelous and thanks for bringing it to my attention!” said Selina, with worried looks to either side, and pushed her friend forward. “You go first.”

“I don’t hear anything,” said Anna as they moved on, regretting having spoken.

“No. No birds. No insects. Nothing. It’s like the quiet before the-”

The rain came so suddenly that someone might have upturned a bath over the length and breadth of the forest, fell with such force that it took their breath away and drowned their words. And with such force, too, that all vegetation was momentarily flattened, so that in that brief instant all they could see before them was a gallery, a colonnade of trees, from within which there gazed back at them a tiger the size of a horse.

“Run!” yelled Selina, making a sharp dart to the left and hurdling a tangle of vines, for even as the foliage rose up against the weight of the rain, camouflaging the creature once more, she had seen its haunches tensing, ready to spring.

“What was that?” asked Anna, running at her shoulder, her breath catching in her throat again..

“Your fucking tiger!”

“But did you see the size of it?”

“Yes!”

* * *

It seemed like a perilous region, to judge by what little was shown of it on the maps. The cartographers of Eidolon were always notoriously inexact in their skills, the nature of the kingdom and the intrusions which were continually occurring, its constant state of flux, meant that their science would never be anything but imprecise and there was as much guesswork as there was sure knowledge.

Elusai had traced their route west from Golgonooza, had marked the towns and villages they had passed through, recalled other settlements which the maps did not note, either because they were too small or too recent, his finger finally stopping on the coast at Honfleur. Traveling north from there he saw a scattering of small fishing villages, dotting the coast like beads on a broken necklace, another harbor town of similar size to Honfleur, and then..... nothing. On map after map he found only a void, or at best a smudge, as if the map-maker had been trying to hide his ignorance.

It seemed that adventure might now turn sour, in this region that civilization had forgotten, and less palatable still in the light of Abishai’s renewed enthusiasm. They had parted company at the quayside, Elusai asking for leave of an hour or two in which to put some undisclosed matter in order.

“To bid farewell and crave faithfulness of some cheap

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whore?” Abishai had supposed, and been answered with such a sheepish look that it earned his amused blessing. “An hour, no more, though a minute in the tart’s bed would probably be enough to satisfy you.”

Out of sight of his friend Elusai had veered from the whoring quarter, climbed the streets away from the harbor to the edge of town. Here, where Honfleur broke from a maze of cluttered streets, were the stables and horse dealers, the hauliers and coach companies, and he settled on the first establishment which boasted an encouraging name, chose the ‘Quicksilver Messenger Service’ for the speed it promised. A note was written to First Minister van Vogt, addressed and sealed and its safe delivery paid for. The title of the recipient was enough to inflate the cost, and though Elusai dithered a moment he paid; it would not do to incur van Vogt’s wrath by chancing cheaper delivery for the sake of an extra coin in the pocket, the ‘Quicksilver Messenger Service’ boasted relays across the western kingdom and promised their fastest riders would have the dispatch to him before the week was out.

And please God the First Minister would be acquainted with this place known as the Scented Land, might understand that to go there would be fruitless and excuse Elusai from his mission.

Until such time there was a part to be played, though, and he made his way a short distance across the eastern edge of town, to the tavern where he and Abishai and a number of their company had taken lodgings, and the field at its rear where the horses had been tethered and the rest of the troop had pitched their tents or unfurled their bed rolls.

All were waiting to mount as he got there and he saw that the original score they had been had now almost doubled, that their quantity was greater if not their quality, as mismatched a collection of warriors as could be imagined. Abishai, mounting his horse and urging Elusai to hurry, presented an air of

understated splendor, his jerkin and britches and boots all of the same soft matt leather, dull but expensive. Flanking him and immediately behind him were a dozen men in mail, shields slung over their backs, helmets, crossbows, maces hanging from their saddles. These were the men who had received a commission to accompany Abishai, they all had experience of battle, as the scars to their shields and the dents to their helmets testified. As for the rest..... vagabonds, mercenaries, chancers, all manner of men with all manner of weapons, not there by commission, their only rewards whatever they might make for themselves.

Elusai took up a position at the rear of the ragbag column, like a reluctant guest dragged sulking to the party, and with a grand flourish Abishai gave the order to move off, a glance around him and to the upper windows of the tavern in the hope that his glory was witnessed.

Filing from the field, turning into the street at the rear of the tavern, hooves echoed across the cobbles, horses whinnied and snorted, some skittish on the uneven ground. Drawn by the clatter which filled the narrow street, people came to their doors to watch the troop pass, young children running alongside as far as their parents would permit. And at the head of the procession Abishai sat beaming astride his mount, offering smiles to the left and the right like garlands, acting like some beneficent liberator.

Like a great warrior.

When the only blood that had ever stained his blade had been the result of acts of cowardice.

Elusai was beginning to develop a deep dislike for his friend and wished that he could be rid of his company.

* * *

Griff wondered what the time might be, for they seemed to have been walking for hours, then decided that this might be a redundant question, so asked instead, "Is it getting any darker?"

For a couple of miles now the trio had been skirting the

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water's edge, and the farther along the shore they went the more the landscape lost its clarity. The foliage of the trees which overhung the water no longer sparkled with emerald and viridian highlights, so crisp that it might be thought that each individual leaf could be counted, but had become fudged and faded, the colors so weak and washed out that he was reminded of the scenery in an old Victorian theatre. But there was no actual darkness, he noted, and it was a disconcerting sensation, to see the world fade rather than darken, so unlike any twilight he had known that he began to dread the onset of night.

Sensing his unease, the School Master said, "No, there is no darkness as such. In fact you would probably find that no matter how long we tarried hereabouts there would be no true night."

"Say again?" asked Leo.

"No evening, no gloaming, no dusk. What you might mistake as such is merely a phenomenon of the region."

"So we could stay here all day and...?"

The School Master nodded, as if the concept was a simple one to grasp. "It would remain day, all day. I have always thought it a pretty insipid place, though, so I doubt that you would want to linger long."

Leo felt his shoulders sag and his limbs grow weary, fatigued after the hours of trekking across the landscape. "Where do we go, then, to find some natural darkness and an excuse to sleep?"

"Not much farther. If you have the strength to make it beyond the next rise then we will find an inlet, and our boat. There you will have an opportunity to rest."

"And food?" he hoped.

"All that you need and perhaps more than you would have asked for," the School Master answered, as though he himself would forego food in favor of some lesser comfort.

From the babble of noise which greeted them as they crested the rise they might have expected to encounter a sizeable crowd,

so were surprised to find no more than a score of people. It was their animation which at first made their number seem greater, a constant airy chatter interspersed with excited ripples of laughter, and their ceaseless milling about which presented them as a single blur of color. It was not until they were a stone's throw away that individuals could be identified, seen to break away from the general mass to file aboard the single-masted vessel which lay moored to a short wooden pier.

Pausing a moment to consider the scene, waiting for the School Master to signal that it was safe to proceed, Griff took in the costume of the people before him. In colors and fabrics as light as their laughter, in silks and lace which billowed as they moved, they seemed as skittish and ephemeral as a clutch of butterflies, even the men among them, who wore coats with flared skirts, breeches and flowered waistcoats, soft lace ruffs to their collars and cuffs.

"Selina always did maintain that fashion came full circle," he remarked, taking in the scene. "But this, though -what is it?-eighteenth century court finery? Is this what's back in vogue?"

"I don't know about it being back in vogue," said Leo, casting a critical eye over the assembly. "I think we're probably seeing this in its first manifestation, to judge by the look of that ship. I take it that is our transport?" he asked the School Master.

"It is, so I suggest we join the happy throng before they leave without us."

From his tone it was apparent that he had little fondness for these people; but more important, to Griff's mind at least, the one consolation, was that he showed no fear of them.

There were glances towards the latecomers as they approached the ship, a nudge from one to another, a hand resting lightly on an arm to draw a person's attention, but no comments, perhaps just a welcoming smile or two.

"Don't they think we're strange?" Leo asked, crossing a short

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gangplank to the vessel. "Can't they tell we're different? I'm sure we must stick out like sore thumbs."

"No doubt they've seen stranger sights than the two of you," said the School Master, as if his own appearance among them could be regarded as nothing out of the ordinary. "But don't worry," he added, as he continued to eye the people who milled about the ship's deck, "some will mark you down as different, if not in this company then elsewhere, among those who possess a little more insight and are not so preoccupied with themselves and their desires. Be wary, though, for it is those who recognize you as different who you may need to be most careful of."

The ship seemed to be comprised of nothing more than a cambered wooden deck with a turret-like structure at each end, these so alike in size and shape that it was at first difficult to tell which way the vessel was facing. Only the roseate emblem on the sail, hanging limp for the moment from the mast, gave any clue as to which was the prow and which the stern. Many of their fellow passengers entered one or other of these turrets, presumably to where there were quarters of some kind below, but others were content to stay on deck, trusting they would have no need of shelter and taking what comforts they could find, resting on boxes or bales or against the shallow wooden rail which skirted the deck. Some coils of rope and bundles of sailcloth offered a comfortable enough couch for Griff and he settled his body into it, grateful to rest at last.

Leo, though, had an appetite to satisfy, reminded the School Master, "You mentioned food, Teach. And I don't suppose this ferry would have a bar, too?"

The School Master hinted vaguely at facilities below and led the way to the rear of the ship, though with no apparent enthusiasm.

"You coming, Griff?" asked Leo.

"No, I'm comfy enough here. Bring me something back from

the buffet.”

After Leo and the School Master had disappeared into the bowels of the vessel Griff ran his eye across the people who remained on deck and noticed for the first time that there were no crew among them. But then, it seemed, this peculiar ship had no need of a crew, for as the last of the passengers boarded they drew the gangplank after them and the sail began to fill of its own volition, swelling gently before slowly heaving the ship away from the pier.

* * *

Scrubbed of her make-up, stripped of her costume, Madame le Roy stood naked before Lord Lovecraft and crooned softly, the song she sang a promise to him: “...to catch for thee girls of mild silver or furious gold, I’ll lie beside on a bank and view their wanton play in lovely copulation, bliss on bliss...”

On stage Madame le Roy was alluring, her voice enticing, but in the privacy of her apartment, singing for him alone, she was irresistible. Not in the way that his wife was, whose seductions seemed to have more to do with sorcery than sensuality and left him with a sort of post-anesthetic headache, but in such a primal pulsing way that it brought him alive.

Her song faded to a gentle end, as if its final promise was too sweet to speak, she made a low bow, arms sweeping out graciously to offer him everything and more. “So, my Lord Lovecraft, which of my Daughters of Albion would you lie with? The mild silver or the furious gold? Whose wanton play in lovely copulation would you enjoy?”

He reached out a hand to her, said, “I would have only you, Madame le Roy.”

“Me?” She took a dancing step back to evade his touch, crossed her hands over her bare breasts. “You would have an old maid past her prime...”

“In her prime.”

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“...when you could have one of my Daughters, who are young, lithe, strong?”

“They are vagabonds, thieves and bullies,” Lord Lovecraft laughed, now catching Madame le Roy by the wrist and pulling her to him.

“Yes. Exciting, aren’t they?” said Madame le Roy, settling into his lap and wrapping her arms around his neck.

Her warm body pulsed with a vibrancy which his wife lacked, she did not have Lady Haggitha’s skill with creams and cosmetics and close to it could be seen that her face was lined, but each imperfection only added to her charm, every line spoke of her joy and her experience and to read her face was to become engrossed in her life. When Lord Lovecraft shared a bed with Lady Haggitha the minutes and hours passed in a blur, he remembered nothing of them, could recall only the dizziness of her seduction. With Madame le Roy he lived every moment and remembered each with crystal clarity, the passion they shared was as thrilling as any battle.

He kissed her on the mouth, tasted her tongue, ran his hand over her stomach, across her thighs, still firm for all the years she laid claim to. She did not squeal like a maid nor tut like a wife when his hand slipped between them, but parted her legs slowly, her delight at his touch rousing him further.

“My Lord!”

“My Lady?”

“Your touch could raise a person from the dead.”

“When it has more usually been the instrument which has sent a person to join the dead,” he acknowledged, and his body relaxed, content in her embrace, the warmth of her body flowing through his fingers to suffuse his whole being.

Madame le Roy sensed a melancholy underlying his contentment, knew that it was not so much guilt at the life he had lived but a desire that he might live it again. “My Lord finds life

tedious," she understood.

"With you? Never!"

"But without me?" She nodded, brushing his hair from his face, her fingertips running across his furrowed brow. "Life offers no challenge for you. Your talents will atrophy through lack of application. Why not exercise them by joining my Daughters in one of their escapades? They could afford you entertainment."

"Waylaying travelers and pillaging defenseless settlements? Robbing drunkards as they stagger home from the Cabaret Voltaire, promising them delight but dealing them only death?" He gave a wry smile, appreciating that she cared for his happiness, but said, "No, that is not the warrior's way."

"They are capable of making a fight a fair one," Madame le Roy was quick to add.

"I am sure," he agreed. "But still, no. I am a member of the Parliament, I cannot be seen to condone such activities, let alone be a part of them."

"Then what can we do to ease your boredom?" she wondered slyly, shifting in his lap, tightening her embrace, her soothing caress becoming something more rousing. She reached out for a cup of wine, took a deep draught, then kissed him so that the wine spilled into his mouth.

As if her kisses were not intoxicating enough, he thought, surrendering to the passion, succumbing to the sensations which thrilled him. He felt a cool breeze brush his body as Madame le Roy slipped from his lap to the floor, then worked her way between his thighs.

Then there was a knock at her door. Without bothering to cover her nakedness, nor even permitting Lord Lovecraft to attend to his, Madame le Roy gave the order to enter. Looking over her shoulder at the young woman who entered she said, "Yes, Ragan?"

The Daughter of Albion crossed the room to stand within

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touching distance, a tall statuesque woman, firm thighs seen beneath the short leather kilt she wore, her pale hair the mild silver Madame le Roy had spoken of.

“There is a visitor,” she said.

“I want none. I told you that.”

“It is van Vogt, Madame. First Minister van Vogt.”

Madame le Roy got quickly to her feet to leave Lord Lovecraft’s nudity in full display. He reached out for a silk shawl, draped it across his lap.

“First Minister van Vogt?” said Madame le Roy. “What business does he have with me?”

“It is not you he wishes to see, Madame. It is Lord Lovecraft that he asks for.”

Madame le Roy turned to Lord Lovecraft. “He knows you come here?”

“I imagine so. Van Vogt knows most things that go on in Golgonooza.” There was a little concern, though, as he said, “This is the first time he has ever admitted to that knowledge, however. Why now all of a sudden? I wonder what his motives are?”

“It could be an important affair of Parliament,” Madame le Roy suggested. “Perhaps a crisis in government?”

“If such was the case, then I would be the last person he would think to inform.” Lord Lovecraft gave a nod to Ragan, who was still standing before them. “Do you think you could ask your girl to leave, Madame?”

“My faithful Ragan? But she is a party to all my intrigues, you are aware of that, my Lord.”

“So that I might dress,” he frowned.

Madame le Roy laughed, breasts trembling with amusement, still flushed with his assiduous treatment of them, said to the young woman, “Leave us, dear. Take the First Minister into the parlor, give him something to drink. You might try to entertain him until we come, but I doubt you will have

much success. It is known that First Minister van Vogt finds little joy in the company of beautiful young women.”

Ragan, smiling as if in anticipation of the challenge, turned and left the room.

A short time later, both dressed, powdered and scented to mask the fragrance of their passion, Lord Lovecraft and Madame le Roy entered the parlor to find van Vogt looking distinctly uneasy, perched stiffly on the edge of an upholstered bench and made uncomfortable by the nearness of Ragan. He got hurriedly to his feet as they entered, stepped a distance away from her before offering each a bow.

“Madame le Roy, my Lord Lovecraft,” he greeted them, a little short of breath as if the proximity of the young woman had denied him air.

“First Minister,” Madame le Roy returned, smiling as she dismissed Ragan, and invited him to sit. He chose a single high-backed chair, in case she might decide that it was her turn to intrude on his space, settled his corpulent body in its frame as snugly as a gift in a box.

And he also carried a box, Lord Lovecraft and Madame le Roy noticed, as they shared a settee facing him, a compact wooden chest which now rested in his lap.

“So, van Vogt, to what do I owe the pleasure?” Lord Lovecraft asked, trying to sound as gracious as he might if the First Minister had visited him at home, if it had been his wife by his side and not the chanteuse from the Cabaret Voltaire.

“I had business in the district and thought to complete an errand which has occupied me for much of the week,” van Vogt explained. His pleasant aspect was deliberately false, as much a lie as the mask of comedy or pathos which an actor wore, making his every word seem a deceit. “Your wife,” he went on, “is an elusive woman.”

“My wife?”

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“The lovely Lady Haggitha,” van Vogt nodded, with a glance to Madame le Roy, as if he would draw comparisons. “I have been trying to see her for the past week, have visited your home each day, but without success.”

“To what purpose?”

“A gift.” Van Vogt lifted the small box from his lap, bejeweled fingers making its brass binding seem dull and tarnished, then set it back again, resting his plump hands on it. “I received a shipment from the east a week ago, varied goods, and found among it an amount of rose otto. Such a difficult oil to come by in these parts, but so useful in the choicest beauty preparations, and for dealing with menopausal problems,” he said, with a sly glance to Madame le Roy, then turned back to Lord Lovecraft. “I felt that your wife, with her skills in aromas and cosmetics, would be the one to make best use of the oil.”

He held up the box and Lord Lovecraft reached for it, saying, “Very thoughtful of you.”

van Vogt kept the box an inch away from his grasp, then, said, “But where is the good Lady Haggitha? For two days, three days, I could not catch her at home. Now I find that she is not even in the city.” He offered the box again, noting closely each tick of Lord Lovecraft’s features. “She is visiting friends, family perhaps?”

“She is. Visiting. Family.”

“Then I will trust the oil to you, to see that it finds its way to her,” said van Vogt, finally surrendering the gift. “And now,” he said, extracting himself from the chair, “I must bid my leave. Affairs of state and such, you know how it is.”

“I know,” Lord Lovecraft agreed.

* * *

Anna and Selina put a half mile between themselves and the spot where they had seen the creature, falling headfirst into the mulch of leaves, barking their shins on broken trunks, feeling stray

branches snag at flesh and clothing. They eased from a sprint to a trot when the pain wracked their sides, and while the rain poured it refreshed them, damping down the insufferable heat. It stopped as suddenly as it had started, though, bringing a startling silence and a withering haze as the jungle all around them began to steam. They stepped more slowly then, mindful of the noise they were making, listening out for any sounds of pursuit.

Though the rising mist gave the world a strange luminescence Anna thought that she saw a brighter patch a little off to their left.

“Is that a clearing?” she wondered aloud.

Selina came to an abrupt halt, remembering her previous visit and the sights which had confronted her in that nightmare oasis. “If it’s the same one...”

“It could take us back to the studio,” Anna suggested.

“No, I don’t think so somehow. Not this time. Do you?”

By some intuition Anna was inclined to agree, she didn’t think that finding that same clearing would see them safely back to the studio, but their options were limited.

“You want to backtrack through that botanical tangle and risk meeting up with that creature we saw?” she asked, with a glance over her shoulder. “Even if it’s gone, and the way is safe, I don’t think my limbs could face up to the effort of fighting through that jungle again. Come on, there’s nothing else for it.”

She reached out for Selina’s hand and persuaded her friend along, one cautious step at a time, carefully parting the foliage before them.

“Jesus!” she said, as they stepped from the undergrowth, and beneath the first open expanse of sky they had encountered, the sight which faced them caused them both to gasp aloud. Inches from where they stood the ground fell away abruptly, a sheer vertical drop whose height could only be guessed at for the

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moment. Immediately to either side their view was obstructed by the vegetation, encroaching as far as it could and becoming dense enough to effectively block their way, but looking farther into the distance they could see that eventually this cliff face bent around in a horseshoe shape, then softened into gentler escarpments which tumbled down to the valley below.

Anna squatted down on her haunches, leant gingerly forward and peered over the edge. “Yes, it’s a good few hundred feet at least,” she reported. “It’s not as sheer as it seems, though. About fifty feet down it starts to break up. I can make out ledges, steps in the rock. They should get wider, the lower we go. Then we can work our way around and down to the valley floor.”

“You’re not seriously suggesting we climb down there,” said Selina in dismay, taking a couple of steps back, the mass of jungle behind her the only thing which prevented a nauseating attack of vertigo.

Anna stood, moved away from the sheer edge. “It shouldn’t be too difficult, there are plenty of creepers and vines and they’re so strongly knitted together it’ll be just like climbing down a ladder.”

“A bloody big ladder.”

“It’s the only way to go that I can see, Selina. That valley must lead somewhere, to the coast most probably. It’s our best way out.”

“Can’t you go alone, get some help? Or find an easier way down and come back for me?” There was a nervous panic in her laugh as she said, “I’m not really dressed for mountaineering.”

“Well the first thing you can do is take off those tights,” Anna told her. “They’re shredded to pieces.”

Selina lifted the hem of her skirt, looked at the ribbons of black nylon which hung in tatters from her calves and knees and burst into tears. “I can’t climb down there, Anna! I’m scared shitless!”

“Hey, it’ll be alright, I’ll look after you,” said Anna, taking her friend in her arms, hugging her to calm the fearful sobs. “Come on, get those tights off.” She bent to remove the shoes, waited while Selina pulled off her tights and tossed them aside, then handed them back. “Lucky you weren’t wearing heels today. The skirt’s a bit of a problem, though. It won’t be too easy climbing in something that length. I don’t suppose you’d fancy...” She made a ripping gesture with her hands, and the suggestion was enough for Selina’s tears of fear to be replaced by a look of horror. “No, I thought not. You’ll just have to tuck it into your knickers, then.”

“Eh? Do what?”

“Tuck it into your knickers. There’s no one around to see, for goodness sake.”

While Selina packed as much of the skirt as she could into her underwear, letting the rest spill out so that what had been full length was shortened to mid thigh, Anna eased herself over the rim of the cliff. The vines and creepers were tightly knit, as she had said, and seemed strong, but she tested them cautiously before giving them her full weight. Then, leaning back at arm’s length, she made a pocket between herself and the cliff face.

“Okay, Selina, down you come.”

“Is it-?”

“It’s safe,” she promised. “Just make your way slowly between me and the cliff and don’t look down.”

Selina gingerly lowered herself down until her body was a sandwich between Anna and the rock and they began their descent, Anna climbing down a step or two, then waiting while Selina followed.

It was an hour, and closer to a hundred feet than the fifty Anna had imagined, before the featureless drop offered any relief. Eventually, though, she saw wedges of rock breaking the face to either side, parting the net of creepers, and then felt them

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underfoot, only a few inches deep at first but gradually widening. A little lower, to her left, one broadened sufficiently that she thought it might accommodate them both comfortably, and she began to edge across to it, still guiding Selina in the cradle of her body. The foothold it offered gave enough support to ease the strain on her arms, though she still had to keep them around Selina, and pressed against the rock for balance. Gradually the ledge widened enough for them to be able to walk rather than sidle their way along, and then to be able to move side by side rather than in file, though always with Anna at the outer edge, shielding her friend from the drop.

Nervousness kept Selina quiet on the way down, for the next two hours her silence was broken only by the occasional whimper of fear or sigh of exhaustion. When finally safe on the valley floor, though, the words suddenly came gushing forth as if her relief was a palpable thing.

“Can you believe...? Did you ever...?” She craned her neck to look back at the height which she had just descended and gave a nervous laugh. “I don’t know which I’d least like to face again,” she said, with a smile which was as sickly as it was brave, “that climb, or the family from hell that I met on my last visit.”

Anna had started to move on, away from the cliff wall, taking the only route which was now open to them, down the length of the valley. Plucking her dress from her knickers and following, on legs still a little unsteady, Selina felt secure enough to analyze her fears.

“I think the climb was a purely physical terror, you know... a hell of a way to drop, no safety net, splat! Seeing those... those creatures, though, the last time, I think the fear in that was as much psychological as anything else. It was guilt. I’m never going back home, my fear is that eventually my folks will get to realize it and do their damndest to make me feel bad about it. Aunt Edith risen from the grave like a monster from hell, she was like

a physical manifestation of that guilt. Don't you reckon?"

"It's feasible, a good enough explanation of what happened last time," Anna agreed. "But now? I don't think we're both sharing the same psychological trauma. Somehow this is real."

But at least it was a little less inhospitable than it had been, the incline now no more than a gentle one, and in their favor, and the vegetation scattered enough not to impede them. In the hours since their arrival the sun had passed its zenith and was now chasing across the sky before them. So they were heading west, Anna now knew; they had a direction, if not a clear purpose.

"Is it wrong of me?" Selina continued to muse. "To want to leave my family, to desert them? After all, it's not that I don't love them, just that I couldn't achieve anything living with them. I want something more than the ambitions they have for me."

As low as the sun was, its warmth was still considerable, but cheering rather than oppressive, the prickling on their brows and cheeks no more uncomfortable than they would demand of a holiday in the Med. They could have been taking an early evening stroll down to the beach and Anna thought that might have been the sea she could make out now, a flat peach-colored expanse directly ahead.

"It's selfish, but it's not wrong," she told Selina. "That's what Griff would say. He's exactly the same, insists that any artist worth their salt has to be selfish. Of course," she smiled, squinting against the sun, "he wouldn't call you an artist."

"Thanks!"

"You know what I mean, you know how he regards the work we do, even though we understand that it's no different, that we're each of us no less an artist than he is."

Yes, she decided that it was the coast ahead of them, for she could smell the faint tang of brine underlying the cocktail of other fragrances which assailed them, from the buds which burst

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as they brushed past them, from the grass beneath their feet, from the sap still sticky on their skin after their struggle through the tropical land above the valley. And if the coast lay ahead there was the hope -or was it fear?- that they would find some habitation there.

Selina was still more concerned with the future, though, with her self-justification, than she was with their present predicament. It was a trait of hers, to dismiss today's problems in favor of what might yet be to come. "Doesn't it worry you, this selfishness of his?" she asked

"Not at all. It might trouble other people, but not me," said Anna, now carefully scanning the land ahead as the valley widened and the sea stretched out to fill more of the horizon. "That's why he loves me, because I'm so forgiving."

"I suppose he's noticed you're missing by now. I suppose he's looking for you."

"Probably."

But in the right places? Anna wondered, and wished to God he was with her right now, as she spied the figures off to their right.

* * *

On the step of Madame le Roy's apartment van Vogt paused a moment to take in the splendor of the evening, the sky a rippling mackerel pattern of pink and purple, blazing vivid like a flashing neon announcement of a rosy future. The district where the chanteuse lived was quiet, discreet, the cobbled street was scrubbed and the trees which lined it neatly clipped. Even the air seemed clean, free of impurities, it was just the sort of place where a person might think to take their pleasures in privacy. This had certainly been the case as far as Lord Lovecraft was concerned, he thought his lair was secret, even though his sin might not be, and van Vogt could barely contain a chuckle on recalling the man's face, his expression of thunder on seeing him

there in his whore's parlor, would have given a sack of gold just to have witnessed it minutes earlier, in flagrante with his mistress, his coitus interrupted by the news that he had a visitor.

From the shadows, drawn by the soft peal of laughter, Clod appeared, an escort of four men following behind him, approached the First Minister and was relieved to see the smile of satisfaction.

"The meeting with Lord Lovecraft went well?" he asked. "The adulterer was there, as you supposed?"

"The meeting went very well, thank you Clod. Yes, Lord Lovecraft was there, but not for long, I think." He glanced over his shoulder, to the lights which burned in the windows of Madame le Roy's apartment, then along the deserted street, to the left and the right. "You two," he said, to the men who accompanied Clod, "take up position, one at either end of the street and two at the rear of the building. Stay concealed, watch, follow Lord Lovecraft when he leaves and keep me informed of his every move."

They nodded, parted silently, losing themselves in the shadows. They were good men, they could follow an alley cat across the city and never lose it, never once startle it. Lord Lovecraft would go nowhere without the knowledge of the First Minister.

"A carriage, my Lord?" Clod suggested, once the men had left. "There should be plenty to be had at this hour. The Gare St Lazare is not far away."

"No, I think not," van Vogt answered, sniffing the air and slapping his ample belly, as if the night was a thing to feast on. "I believe I would prefer to walk."

"Walk? At this time of night? And with no escort, nor even a simulation of one?"

van Vogt scoffed at the equerry's caution. "The simulations are useless, the population are wise to them, but what need do I

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have of an escort in any case? Am I not First Minister of this teeming metropolis? Everyone knows me,” he boasted, chest swelling along with his belly. “Come on, Clod, don’t be such a coward. You will come to no harm with me.”

They walked to the end of the street, van Vogt pleased to note that the men he had stationed there remained concealed, turned left onto a broader thoroughfare. The ribbon of lights ahead curved and dipped to skirt the Tuileries Gardens, sweeping in a broad arc to the heart of the city beyond.

“A stroll in the park I think, Clod,” said van Vogt, plodding on at a steady pace.

“If it pleases you, my Lord.”

“It pleases me. The peace of the Gardens will clear my mind and focus my thoughts.”

And sooner or later tire out the obese porker, thought Clod. In the centre of the park, no doubt. There the First Minister would fling himself onto a bench, sweating and panting, and declare that he could go no further, would send Clod hurrying ahead to find the carriage he had earlier declined.

van Vogt sensed the equerry’s impatience, said, “Does it not please you, Clod, to take the night air at a leisurely pace?”

“It pleases me, my Lord, but may not please Mistress Pebble, who will be waiting with my supper.”

“A wife is not a mistress, Clod. A mistress is a source of delight, at least for those who are so inclined. And Pebble, well, a pebble the size of a boulder cannot afford a man much pleasure.”

Clod ignored the insult to his wife, for Mistress Pebble could have been the most svelte of creatures, with thighs as finely sculpted as Doric columns and breasts as sweet as succulent fruits, and still the First Minister would have denigrated her, as he did all women. His silence on the matter pleased the First Minister as greatly as if it had been agreement, the silence of others was always met in such a way and made him all the more

loquacious.

“So Lady Haggitha has flown the nest and Lord Lovecraft has been acquainted with the fact,” he mused aloud, as they reached the ornamental pond in the centre of the gardens and followed the path around its edge. “What have we achieved, Clod?”

“We have perturbed Lord Lovecraft?” the equerry guessed.

“That we have, Clod! And in spades, hearts, cups and wands!” van Vogt rubbed his hands together in delight. “And what more would we hope to achieve?”

“To find the new nest the Lady Haggitha has flown to, guessing that the perturbed husband might lead us there?” Clod supposed, mindful of the four men who had been left to keep vigil on Madame le Roy’s apartment.

“And where, ultimately, does the cleverness of our strategy lie?” he continued, whereupon Clod scratched his head in the manner of bemusement that his master most appreciated. “Think, Clod. Lord Lovecraft will search for his wife, guiding us, but without really knowing why he does so, except perhaps out of chagrin that she has taken leave without informing him. Bear in mind that he is unaware that his wife’s ambitions are somewhat grander than his. His search is as innocent as that of a cuckolded husband seeking a wife to chastise. He will find her and slap her, Clod,” said van Vogt with relish, appreciating the image of a female debased, “he will cast her aside to dwell on her sins and we will be there to pick up the pieces. We will pick up the shamed wife, Clod, and the Hashishim wench she has gone in search of, before the hypocritical Lord Lovecraft can even think what his scheming wife was about.”

“Shrewd, my Lord, very shrewd,” Clod commended his master. “But what if Lord Lovecraft questions the reason for his wife’s departure? What if he learns that the Hashishim girl was at the root of it and understands the better use the creature’s talents

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could be put to?”

“Lovecraft? Never!” the First Minister was sure. “He lacks the imagination. Trust me, Clod, with Lord Lovecraft’s guidance we will have the wife and the Hashishim she pursues. And now,” van Vogt said, settling his frame heavily onto a slatted wooden bench.

“The carriage, my Lord?” said Clod, with a deep sigh of inevitability.

“No, Clod,” said van Vogt, and pointed. “That young boy. The one scavaging at the edge of the pond, grubbing around for the coins people toss in to secure good fortune.”

Clod peered into the darkness, narrowed his eyes against the glare of moonlight on still water, made out a youth knee deep in the pond, elbows immersed, foraging around to pluck out coins and drop them into the satchel slung over his shoulder.

“What of him, my Lord?”

“Get him.”

“But he can see, he has sight.”

“He is not blind. I know that. But all the blind boys are snug in their cots at this hour, so..... get him!”

van Vogt watched as Clod went down to the water’s edge to speak to the boy, noted the boy stand to attention to hear the equerry’s words. He was a slender youth, as he would have to be to attract the First Minister’s attention, a slightly hungered look about him, with little muscle definition about the arms which were bared by the sleeveless waistcoat he wore, or about the legs which protruded from the tattered trousers rolled up to the knees. Standing stick-like in the water he had the awkward grace of a flamingo.

There was a gesture towards the satchel the boy carried, a possessive clutching of it to his side, then a quick glimpse inside permitted, to boast of its contents or lament their paucity. More coin was being offered, van Vogt guessed, and moments later

Clod turned in his direction, gave a slight but discernible nod of the head. With a flick of the finger van Vogt gave the order to proceed and the equerry continued on his way across the park, the boy at his side.

It was some fifteen minutes later that the carriage trundled towards him, stopped abreast of him, the driver's face fixed discreetly ahead. van Vogt heaved himself aboard, inside saw Clod seated to one side, wearing a look of vague disapproval, and the young boy facing him, hands in lap, blindfolded by a black silk scarf wrapped three times around his head. It masked his eyes, his nose, left only the mouth visible, full thick lips which had a permanent pout, as if pinched from clay. van Vogt sat beside him, sidled along the seat until their bodies touched.

The boy relaxed at the contact, rather than tense as some might, said, "Good evening to you, Sir. And what is your pleasure with a poor ragamuffin like me?"

van Vogt rested a hand on the boy's knee, the bone feeling like a piece of ice beneath the frayed trousers, still chilled by the paddling in the pond. His soft fingers felt its shape, then moved higher, along the thigh.

The boy inclined his head, as if he could see, lips parting in a smile. "Ah! The silent demonstrative type, is my Lord?"

Van Vogt caught Clod's eye, raised a finger to his lips to ask for silence, then cast a sideways glance to the youth.

"Shut your mouth, boy," said Clod brusquely. "My master has not engaged you for your conversation."

"Okay. Enough said," the boy agreed, and snuggled close, allowing himself to be drawn into the First Minister's embrace.

In silence they completed the journey, the carriage tracked around to the back of the ministerial palace and entered by a gate at the rear, coming to a halt in the enclosed courtyard. As van Vogt alighted, followed by Clod and the boy, he saw a horse tethered outside the kitchens, its flanks flecked by a snow of

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foaming perspiration, snorting heavily, its breath clouding the frosty air. It had been ridden hard, the man who had driven it to exhaustion sitting on a step close by, sipping at a hot drink.

Clod led the boy to a corner of the courtyard, out of mischief's way, then crossed to the rider. They spoke a moment, before he returned with a small waxed envelope. "A message, my Lord, from your spy who accompanies Lady Haggitha's nephew."

Van Vogt checked the seal, to make sure that it was intact, then broke it and took out the single sheet of paper, quickly scanning Elusai's message.

"Have the boy washed and brought to my room," he instructed Clod. "I will be waiting for him."

* * *

"If you are waiting for your friend to bring you food then you may find he is a little longer than your stomach can bear," said a voice.

Griff turned from the billowing sail and the figure before him was no more than a shadow, silhouetted as it was against the sky. He raised a hand to his face, to shield his eyes from the light, and the figure took a step to one side, offering a courteous apology.

"I am sorry." The voice was darkly feminine, slightly accented. "It is not me who blinds you, I know."

Seen more clearly, the woman still presented a dim and somber aspect, the black silk of her dress of such an odd matt luster that it seemed to covet the light. With swathes of black lace draping her shoulders, and a mantilla covering her head, she stood before him like some mourning flamenco dancer, her upper body turned slightly, her arms crooked at her side, knuckles resting on hips. She was in her mid-twenties, perhaps, with full red lips contrasting her pale complexion and eyes so black that for once black could seem to be a color.

He made to rise, but she stopped him with a quick gesture,

said, "Please, no. But if I might join you?" The fan she carried unfurled with a rasp, like a stiletto unsheathed, pointing to the space beside him, and then just as quickly was returned to the folds of her dress. She sat, arranged her skirts about her with a rustle of silk, then introduced herself. "I am Dona Isobel de Porcel."

"Griff. John Griffin."

She inclined her head as if the name sounded as honorable as hers, said, "So, John Griffin, what takes you to Cythera?"

"Cythera? That's where this ship's going?"

"You did not know?"

"Never heard of the place," he confessed. "I assume Cythera is a place?"

"The island of Venus. That..." The fan came out again to gesture to the sail; snap, point, sheathe. "...that rose is her flower. Cythera is not your goal, then? But no, I should have guessed that when I saw you out here, content enough to take the air, not so anxious to pleasure yourself as others are."

"Down below?" he said, with a quick glance to the door through which Leo and the School Master had passed. "There's a party or something going on down there?"

She laughed, her cheeks coloring. "Your innocence delights me, John Griffin, at the same time that it intrigues me. You did not board this vessel with the same intention that others do."

"Which is?" he interrupted.

"Take a look around you," she told him, her amusement now brightening her eyes and coloring her cheeks. She unfurled her fan slowly this time, used it to mask her lips as she brought them close to his ear. "What you see here might be regarded as preludes, overtures for the movements which are already taking place below."

The handful of people who remained on deck were still in the same gay mood as when he had first seen them, the beaming

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smiles still there, but the laughter and the chatter had become more muted, the touches and caresses he had noticed before were now more intimate. The hand which had previously been draped affectionately around a shoulder now wandered further to fondle a breast, or burrow beneath skirts, or squirm its way into silken breeches, and if words were exchanged it was now mouth to mouth, with lips brushing lips in the most intimate communication.

Griff turned back to Dona Isobel de Porcel and she laughed to see his expression. "But what else would you expect, on the vessel of Venus, traveling to her isle? Why else would anyone be here? Which brings me back to my intrigue. Why are you here, John Griffin, if not for the pleasures which are all that Cythera has to offer? How did you come to be here?"

"By accident, I guess," he said, which for the moment was the only way he could think to describe what had happened. "My friend and I are looking for someone."

"And do you know where, if not on Cythera?"

"Across the water, beyond some mountains." He shrugged, as yet unacquainted with the geography of the land. "We have this strange guy with us who seems to know where he's going."

"And this person you have come in search of? Someone dear to you?"

"My girlfriend."

"Ah." She gave a soft moue of sympathy, there was a quiet sadness in her eyes. "Then as dissimilar as we seem we have at least one thing in common. I, too, am looking for someone dear to me. My husband, Don Antonio de Porcel."

Griff took in the black silk of her dress, the black lace mantilla which framed her face. "I thought..."

"That I am in mourning?" she smiled, her eyes dark with an unfathomable grief. "Perhaps I am. That I am a widow? In the town where I come from I might as well be, for to lose a husband

in such circumstances as I have is a shameful thing, a sign that I was an unworthy wife.”

“Lost? But not dead?”

“Just as you are looking for your girlfriend, and I am looking for my husband, then he is looking for himself. He believes that he is dreaming and that if he can only find himself, his sleeping self, then he will be able to return to that world where he truly belongs.”

“From what I’ve seen of this place so far I could understand how a person might mistake it for a dream,” said Griff.

“But you know it to be real, no matter how strange it seems.” Her eyes were downcast for the moment as she toyed with the fan in her lap. When she looked up again it was as if she had decided that she could trust him. “Do you remember your dreams, John Griffin?” she asked.

“Some. Not many, though, and they’re often vague, always confused.”

Dona Isobel nodded, as if this was the norm, the way most people remembered their sleeping state. Her husband, though, she said remembered all his dreams. “And with such perfect clarity that it was as if he had two histories. At first he was content to sit and languish, waiting for dream and reality to resolve themselves. Not the happiest situation for a wife, but one I could cope with. Then one night he had a dream, only to him it was not a dream but a momentary return. He dreamt of me, we made love, and it was so beautiful that he awoke in tears. I cried, too, for I recognized the episode as he described it, the two of us years before, when we first met. To him the dream was reality, though, and the wife he woke to was the dream which was keeping him from that reality. There was no peace for him from that moment on. He began to wander, first the town, then the countryside around it. Then his searches became more frantic, more widespread, until the day he failed to return.”

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Griff was looking for some words of commiseration, and vainly, when the School Master appeared before them, bearing a platter of meats and fruit and carrying a silver carafe of wine.

Griff made the introductions –“Dona Isobel de Porcel, my friend the School Master”- and was ready with an apology in the event that she should remark on the anonymity of the title. To his surprise, though, she seemed quite respectful, as if the introduction was an honor.

“School Master?” she said, her enunciation of the two distinct words adding a certain gravity to the title. “And of what School are you Master?”

“I have the privilege to be Master of the School of the Rose+Croix,” he answered, executing a bow which also served the purpose of setting the platter of food at their feet.

She had heard of the School and acknowledged it to be a noble one, which pleased the School Master. He sat cross-legged on the deck, looking like an accountant at his yoga exercises, and poured goblets of wine for them.

“Dona Isobel is looking for her husband,” Griff told him, as he helped himself to slices of white meat which he took to be chicken.

“You do not stay on Cythera, then?”

She gave an insulted pout. “Do I look the frivolous type?”

“My apologies, Dona Isobel. That was unkind of me, undeserved. So in which direction does your search lie?”

“The Prado,” she answered.

“The Priory? You’ve had news that your husband is there?”

“No, but if you knew my husband you would accept that it is a likely place for him to run to.”

“An interesting man, then,” said the School Master.

“This Priory, would it be on our way?” Griff asked, thinking that the company of Dona Isobel might make their journey more pleasant. It might also offer a little more insight into the nature

of their guide, who seemed more communicative in her presence than he had previously been.

“No, it is not,” the School Master told him, “but we do both have to make our way to the mainland and this vessel will go no further than Cythera.” He turned to Dona Isobel. “How do you intend to continue your own journey?”

“I have arranged for another boat to be waiting, once I reach the island. It is only small, but should accommodate us all, if that is what it is in your mind to ask.”

“We would be honored and grateful.”

Griff stretched and yawned, wearied by the prospect of another sea trip after this, wondering just how much of a journey lay ahead of them. “Doesn’t it ever get dark around here?” he sighed wearily, sinking back into his makeshift couch.

Dona Isobel removed her mantilla and draped it across his face, so lightly that it could barely be felt, as if it was no more than the whisper of a breeze which caused him to blink, folded it back, and back and forth again until dusk became night for him.

“Sleep, John Griffin, dream,” she said. “But don’t let your dreams confuse you.”

Chapter 5

Like chameleons the figures came out of the trees, as dark a green as the foliage they parted, then the terre-verte and ochre of the ground they crossed, and finally a golden honey color as they were caught by the rays of the setting sun. There were a dozen of them, some naked, none wearing anything more cumbersome than a simple skirt about the waist, male and female dressed alike, it seemed, though for the moment Anna could make out little difference between the sexes, for they were all much the same in stature and shape, none particularly tall, all with the same broad shoulders and hips. It was only when they came closer that she was able to make out the breasts of the women, but so insubstantial that they were only a little more shapely than the chests of their men.

They were smiling, which she found a comfort at first, until she recognized those smiles as the one Griff wore when he went through the door of McDonalds, the smiles of gluttons anticipating a feast.

Selina cleared her throat, as if about to speak, but ultimately said nothing, simply took a step back and to the side, almost hiding behind Anna.

“I hope they’re friendly,” Anna muttered, and in as cheery a voice as she could muster said, “Hello!”

The party stopped some yards away, as if they needed a moment to interpret the greeting, the smiles still there as they formed a circle around the two strangers. Then the smallest of the group stepped forward, a doe-eyed young girl who came no higher than their shoulders. With tentative fingers, muttering words which might not have been understood even if they could have been heard, she plucked at the Anna’s clothing, but so lightly that the material could have been as unfamiliar as silk to a beggar.

“Tehura!” she suddenly exclaimed loudly, with the bravura of a child confronting the terrors of a darkened stairway, and slapped a hand to her bared breast.

“Sounds ominous,” Selina remarked, noting the way the smiling faces had now taken on a sterner aspect.

“Tehura!” the girl said again, this time striking herself harder, like a penitent atoning for her sins.

“A name?” Anna asked Selina, and echoed the young girl’s gesture, though not quite so demonstratively, touching her hand to her own breast and saying, “Anna. I am Anna. And this is Selina.”

Faces beamed as the smiles returned and there was a flurry of animation on every side, a babble of voices all at once accompanied by much touching and clinging and clutching of hands. One among them, who they took to be the eldest, eventually was able to calm things.

“I am Tioka. I welcome you, and thank you for your names,” he said, and as he spread his arms in an incomplete embrace Anna cocked an eyebrow at his strange acknowledgement of their introduction. “An exchange of names is a sign of trust, which is why we offered you our youngest and weakest first,” he explained, placating the insulted pout of the one named Tehura with a pat on the head.

“Women and children first?” said Selina, thinking the tactic a cowardly sacrifice.

“To have the name of the weakest would give an enemy no power; to have the name of our strongest, or our wisest, or our bravest would give him much. But you have shared your names with us, you are no enemies. So come. You will eat with us.”

Hands clutched at their clothes again, persuading them along, bodies jostling each other for the privilege of being next to Tioka and the two honored guests. The young one, Tehura, sidled her way through the crowd and slipped her hand into Anna’s.

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Anna gave the young girl a smile, asked Tioka, "Where are we? Where are we going?"

"And where do we come from?" There was a murmur all around, as if of approval at some hidden wisdom. "This is Noa Noa, the Scented Land," he told her, chest swelling and nostrils flaring as he inhaled deeply.

Anna did likewise. The fragrances of the earth seemed to be withdrawing now, under the last rays of the setting sun, but could still be recalled in the bodies nearest her, in the oils which slicked their skin and made their hair shining swathes of jet. It was a heady perfume, as insistent as that of the vegetation they had fought their way through, not unpleasant, but strong enough that it might make a person swoon. Certainly relaxing enough to make her aware of how tired she was after the day's exertions.

She asked if they had much further to go.

"There is our village," said Tioka, pointing directly ahead, and above the fringe of palms which faced them she saw a plume of blue-grey smoke, rising vertically before momentarily breaking under a sudden breeze to bring with it the most welcome fragrance of all. Food. Cooking outdoors. With eyes closed, it could have been a neighbor's barbecue.

Selina wondered if there might be burgers and cold beers waiting.

"I'll settle for anything," said Anna; then, disconcertingly for her friend, she added, "As long as it's recognizable as food, of course."

The party broke around them to run ahead, dashing along a path through the trees and into a clearing where they formed two ranks, a guard of honor through which Tioka led them.

The village spread itself about a shallow platform of land which ran from the trees down to the beach, coarse grass for the most part but dotted here and there with large clumps of succulents, aloe and sansevieria which Anna recognized from her

father's greenhouse, but on such a scale as would have had him agog. The huts were strewn around the perimeter, shaded by palms, forming a horseshoe to face out to sea, and their walls were of such loosely knitted bamboo that they could see into each as they passed, see figures resting, playing -making love?- going about their customary business until they spied the visitors to their village, whereupon they came swarming out of open doorways to join the procession.

Tioka barked out orders as he led his guests across to the fire in the centre of the clearing, to the women who were baking skewered fishes in its flames, to others who came with mats of woven palm leaves which they lay in a circle around it. Invited to sit, Anna squatted to one side of him, Selina to the other. The mats were thin, but the sandy soil was soft enough not to be uncomfortable, shifting as they did, molding itself to their bodies so that it seemed that they were being cradled by the earth itself, its warmth easing the aches of their day's exertions.

After surveying the activity all around, his head making a slow proprietorial sweep of the clearing, Tioka gave a satisfied nod, then asked how they came to be there.

"There's a forest," Anna said, with backward glance over her shoulder. "Up there."

"And some monster of a thing," Selina added, shuddering at the memory of the creature they had fled. "The size of a horse, the shape of a tiger."

"Ah," Tioka smiled, and gave the creature some unrecognizable grunt of a name. "But you should have mounted it, ridden it. It would have made your way easier."

"You're not serious."

"Perhaps not," he agreed, "for they are willful beasts, there is no telling where you might have been taken. But still, you have not answered my question. How do you come to be here?"

"Before the forest, you mean?" Anna was reluctant enough

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to even dwell on their improbable arrival in this alien land, let alone share it with another, but then thought that people who were comfortable with the notion of a tiger fourteen hands high could perhaps accept anything. “There was a painting,” she said, and in the sand at her feet she drew a rough rectangle with her finger. “A picture? Yes?”

“Yes,” Tioka understood. He pointed beyond the fire to the sea, now a dusty terracotta flecked with flashes of pink, then added his own contribution to Anna’s frame, half a dozen undulating lines, rudimentary waves. “A picture.”

“Yes,” Anna nodded in agreement, but then stopped in amazement when Tioka brushed his fingers across the simple picture, saw it ripple, saw his fingertips disappear, not into sand but into something much more liquid.

“Did I see...?” Selina wondered.

“What...? How...?” Anna asked.

Tioka laughed, scrubbed his hand across the picture to obliterate it, then drew the frame anew. In this he outlined a circle...

“The sun?”

“Or the moon?”

...and then a trio of fluffy scalloped shapes.

“Clouds,” Selina guessed.

“Blow,” Tioka told her.

She looked at Anna, blushing with the embarrassment of a child who thinks she is being asked to do something beyond her capabilities. Tioka shrugged, bent low over the design and puffed his cheeks. Loose grains of sand were dislodged, the outline of one of the clouds beginning to disintegrate, before all three began to move slowly, in formation, from left to right. But even more bewilderingly the sun (moon?) remained in place, a portion of it to be hidden by one cloud, then to reappear, and finally be masked by a second.

“How did you do that?” Anna asked.

“Not I, but the influence of the Afflatus,” Tioka replied.

“The Afflatus?”

“The Afflatus. A manifestation of the Ignis Fatuus, the source, the impulse behind all creativity.”

Anna’s mind was racing, reasoning that a painting had brought them there, had been their door, so perhaps...

“You could go in there?” she asked, looking at the now stationary clouds, one rippling slightly from the pulsing glow of the orb behind it. “We could?”

“To such a rudimentary world?” Tioka asked, not understanding the desire behind the question.

“But somewhere more- more sophisticated?” Selina asked, following her friend’s line of thought, thinking of a twentieth century college of art, or some paved street leading to it, anywhere within the striking distance of taxi or train or public transport.

“Bah!” said Tioka, with a dismissive wave of the hands. “Why should I want to leave Noa Noa? Why should anyone want to?”

Anna gave Selina a quick glance, cautioning her against pursuing the matter, hinting that it was something to be discussed later, in private, when they could dwell on what ramifications there might be in this thing which Tioka called the Afflatus.

Two young boys approached, introduced by Tioka as his sons, Vaiga and Pauluura, each carrying a large polished leaf which was placed in the girls’ laps. There were pieces of baked fish, cubes of roasted meat, a yellowish mash which looked like potato but they were told was breadfruit. Selina hesitated long enough to allow Anna to taste the food first, waited until she signified her approval before following suit. The meat tasted as though it had been marinated in some citrus juice, the fish too

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had a peculiar piquancy, the breadfruit was bland enough to be potato. Wooden tumblers were handed to them, the liquid inside giving off a heady fragrance of fermented berries, and again Selina waited until Anna had tasted the drink, before chancing a sip herself. It was palatable on the tongue, soothing as it slipped down the throat, warming as it settled inside. There was a slight buzz to the brain, too, which was not unpleasant.

“Good, yes?” said Tioka, taking a deep draught from the rather more ornate tankard he had been offered.

“Good,” the girls both agreed.

“And the food?”

“Excellent,” they assured him, and he nodded vigorously, pleased with their approval.

Pauluura had sat himself to the right of his father, adjacent to Selina, and Vaiga on the left, next to Anna. Throughout the meal, which was lengthy, taken leisurely, Anna was aware of Tioka’s son casting repeated sideways glances at her. Finally, when they were finished with the food, he reached out a tentative hand, stopped it an inch from her face, then ran a fingertip lightly along the edge of her nose, feeling the slight indentation of the scar which broke the skin midway. Under the rays of the sun for most of the day, her skin had flushed, the scar was more evident than it would normally have been.

She turned to Tioka with a questioning glance.

“My son thinks you must be a great warrior to be carrying such a wound,” he explained.

“A warrior?” she laughed. “No. It was an accident, that’s all.”

“But one which you bore bravely,” Tioka insisted, and in his stern glance she sensed the admonition that it was wise not to protest, that it would be best to let his son believe what he would, so she bowed her head in what might have been taken to be a humble acceptance of his praise.

At length, when the women began to clear away the remains

of the meal and the men stretched out on the sand, drinking from their tumblers, Tioka said, "We have a tradition in Noa Noa, a gesture of hospitality towards visitors we receive."

"Yes?" Anna smiled, leaning forward eagerly like a tourist keen to learn about local customs.

Tioka frowned for a moment, as if troubled by some dilemma which taxed his wisdom. "Visitors we receive are generally male, Noa Noa is an inaccessible place and none but the strongest find their way here. Rarely, never in my memory, have females found us. But-," he said, slapping his knees as if having come to a decision, "it is our tradition and it is to be maintained. To visitors who have come in the past we have offered our daughters, and to you I offer my sons, to take to your beds so that you might have comfort for the night."

* * *

At her back Lady Haggitha could feel the weight of the Temeraire Mountains bearing down on her, a shifting formless miasma of color. The true structure of the mountains could rarely be discerned, occasionally a plane might be seen to catch the light, glinting like the facet of a jewel, but for the most part the range was shrouded by what was more like an atmospheric soup than a mist. It was this that she hated most about Brynpica, the feel of being cornered, hemmed in, having no route out but the way which lay ahead, facing her now, the valley of Goginan funneled by the foothills, running down to the forests and the plains beyond. It had always seemed to her that here her life was predetermined, that there were no options, that nature and those blasted mountains were governing everything.

Certainly the view ahead, away from the mountains, was picturesque enough, but she had never found much joy in it, for visits to Brynpica had generally been occupied with her husband's hunting, he and his company chasing the length and breadth of the valley for boar and deer while she languished

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indoors with the other bored wives, vacuous and insignificant women for the most part.

But it was her dislike of the place which would not recommend it to her husband when it came to searching for her, as he must surely be doing by now, and she tried to take comfort in this.

Lazing in her seat on the rooftop garden of Brynpica, not taking her eyes from the valley below, she reached out an arm and Gamaliel was there to place a glass of brandy in her hand.

“Thank you, Gamaliel,” she said, her faint smile unnoticed, as unseen as she herself might have been, as far as the groom was concerned.

Since arriving at Brynpica he had been forever at her side, except for those moments when she expressly desired to be alone, but the confusion in his eyes suggested that he was never truly aware of her, that if asked to describe her physically, to put into words her beauty or attraction, then he would fail. She could well have been nothing more than an abstraction, it was her essence he was conscious of, not her form, he was like a blinded lapdog trailing after the scent rather than the person. He followed, he obeyed, he even responded to unspoken requests without ever really understanding why.

The scent which bound him to his mistress and held him in her thrall contained opiates as well as aromatic oils, so that at the same time that it encouraged his infatuation and devotion it also kept him craving for more. And the longer he spent in her company the greater his dependence on her presence became.

The sun was setting now, casting the valley into shadow and bringing a chill to the air. Lady Haggitha shivered and was rewarded to feel a shawl draped across her shoulders. She set her glass on the ground and rose from her seat, wrapping the shawl around her in the same way that she might embrace a lover as crossed the garden to the stairs, pausing as she went to

appreciate the perfumes of the various plants, the base constituents for her oils and lotions. Gamaliel followed quietly, almost timidly, and she thought the mood ill-suited to the man. Perhaps a drop or two of jasmine or bergamot to the perfume he breathed would be of some benefit, to bring him out of his daze and make him more communicative. An obedient man was all very well, but could grow tiresome if he was as dumbstruck as a shop window mannequin.

Tomorrow, though, that could wait until the morning. Tonight she would enjoy the peace of his company and the entertainment of his training.

The groom followed her down to the uppermost floor of the lodge, along the corridor and past the bedchambers, then down again, descending the broad staircase which led directly to the main hall. Basilides was rocking gently in a chair before the open fire, half his face bright pink in its glow, as if fire was a thing he thrived on since his abuse at the hands of Lord Lovecraft, while Jahiliyah was busying herself setting out food and drink on the large banqueting table. Stepping from the last stair, Gamaliel went directly to help her while Lady Haggitha crossed the floor to Basilides, pulled up a low stool and sat beside him, taking his hand in hers.

“So, Basilides? You are well?” she asked.

“Yes, my Lady,” he answered in an even tone. With her nursing and her judicious encouragement of his skills, never demanding too much too often, his manner had calmed, his visions and insights no longer disturbed him but came as peacefully as welcome memories. “All is well, as it was. The strangers to the kingdom make but slow progress. I track them hourly. The power they bring with them is like an intrusion in itself, marking their course.”

Lady Haggitha gently patting his hand. “Good, Basilides. You have done well.”

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Since his first awareness of the return of the Hashishim girl he had noted other sources of comparable force, either in her company or following after. Five in all. As he had marked these with increasing calm, so Lady Haggitha had taken upon herself the scribe's earlier excitement. They could not be mere instruments of the Hashishim girl, at least not yet, for only one was in close proximity to her. Two were far to the north, two others more distant still, across the sea to the west. They were not inanimate instruments then, not tools or weapons, but they did have the potential to be used as such.

"And the strongest emanation you sense?" she asked. "Still to the north?"

"Still to the north," the scribe agreed.

"Excellent. Excellent. That is the direction Abishai takes. But tell me, Basilides, if or when my nephew happens upon these creatures which the Hashishim has brought trailing in her wake will he recognize them for what they are? My worry is that he might pass them by and continue in his search for the Hashishim herself."

Basilides turned his blinded eye towards her, might have smiled if the taut puckered skin had permitted his face some expression. "What they are? My Lady, I do not know that myself. They might be man or beast or something more. I believe, however, that even your nephew could not pass them by without being conscious of the power they wield."

"It is that great?" said Lady Haggitha, eyes bright, lips moist like a glutton salivating before a feast.

"The Hashishim girl could wreak havoc on the kingdom while apart from it, from a distance could cause intrusion upon intrusion until the very fabric of our world crumbled. But what sense is there in destroying her home? So she returns, and from within the kingdom her powers are limited, are no more than you would expect of any of the Hashishim, an ability to manipulate,

confuse, bring madness or death. With these strangers something of the reverse is true. They have limited powers in their own world, but here they can be as mighty as the Hashishim would like to be.”

Or Lord Lovecraft.

A scraping of oak on parquet flooring announced that food was ready, Gamaliel had drawn back the chair at the head of the table and was standing behind it, awaiting Lady Haggitha. She rose from her stool, let Basilides take her arm, and they crossed the floor to their places.

“It looks delicious,” she said, letting Gamaliel settle her in her seat, regarding the country fare Jahiliyah had prepared which consisted mainly of things that were dug from the earth or had fallen from trees, root vegetables and fruit, nuts and berries, the only concession to any blooded sustenance a brace of hares. The few fresh provisions the larder held had been exhausted within a day of their arrival at Brynpica, but thankfully there was an ample supply of wines in the cellar and Lady Haggitha poured herself a generous cup, cleansed her mouth with the mellow ruby liquid before turning to the food before her.

The four of them seated at the end of a table which could accommodate forty seemed like a detention of schoolchildren late for supper, lost in the refectory, sullen in their mood.

Lady Haggitha chewed on the flesh of a hare, washed the dry meat down with more wine, picked up a knife and began to pare an apple.

“I think, Gamaliel, that we will have to send you out hunting for fresh meat,” she said, quartering the apple, slicing it into thin crescents. “You can use a bow? A spear? You at least have the brawn to wield a stick and club some beast into submission?” He nodded slightly, to each or all of her questions, and she cursed his dumb tongue, turned to Jahiliyah who was hunched over her plate, still ill at ease to be dining in the presence of a lady. “What

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do you think, Jahiliyah? If Gamaliel provides us with fresh venison is it in your capabilities to prepare us a feast?"

"If it pleases my lady," the maid answered softly, barely articulating the words.

"It pleases me! As much as anything in this cursed place pleases me!" Lady Haggitha skewered the remains of her apple with the knife, fixing it to the table. As a child she would have complained that she was bored; as a grown woman she should be above such tantrums. She kicked back her chair and stood, strode across the floor to a more comfortable seat where she could curl up, her feet tucked beneath her. "Gamaliel, bring my wine," she ordered, with a snap of her fingers. "You, Jahiliyah, make yourself comfortable on the divan. Take your fruit with you."

Jahiliyah went across to the broad divan which faced Lady Haggitha, a bunch of black grapes cupped in her hands like a dowry she had to offer. Gamaliel brought cup and carafe to Lady Haggitha, set them on a low table by her side.

"Make yourself comfortable, I said," she told Jahiliyah, seeing the maid perched primly on the edge of her seat, waited until she had relaxed more easily against its cushions and then directed Gamaliel to join her. "And now, Jahaliyah," she said, when groom and maid were side by side, "feed the man a grape."

Jahaliyah plucked a grape from the bunch, offered it to the groom's lips, then quickly snatched her hand back.

Lady Haggitha smiled. "And another. But this time let your fingers linger. He won't bite you, not until you ask him to. And you, Gamaliel, eat the fruit delicately, don't gobble it whole."

His teeth broke the skin of a second grape, its juices burst to darken his lips, the maid's soft fingers stayed where they were, resting gently against his mouth like a silencing gesture.

"Feel the juice between your fingers, Jahaliyah," her mistress encouraged. "Smear his mouth with it. Taste it with your own mouth. Now!"

With no more than a cautious glance at her mistress Jahilyah touched her lips to the groom's, was ready to see him repulsed, for never had she been so intimate with a man, could only have dreamt that one as handsome as Gamaliel would ever permit this. Rather than repel her, though, Gamaliel softened against her. The kiss lingered, her eyes closed, when contact was finally broken and they opened again it was as if not just the room but the whole world had darkened about her.

"What...?" she wondered, first regarding the acquiescent form of the man beside her, then turning to Lady Haggitha.

"What magic is this?" Lady Haggitha grinned. "It is no magic, my dear, no sorcery. Simply the astute application of cosmetic craft. The right fragrances, the right blend of oils, can tie a man to you for life or damn him for eternity. Yes, continue," she encouraged, seeing the maid's gaze turn once more to the groom, regarding him with a lust and a triumph she had never known before.

They kissed again and Gamaliel began to stir, as if he was a prince awakened.

"No need always to be so tender, though," Lady Haggitha counseled. "Soft lips can stir a man but if you would really fill him with fire then the teeth are admirably suited to the purpose. And such lovely teeth you have, my dear. Go on. Nip. Bite."

Jahilyah's lips drew back, her teeth fastened on the groom's lower lip for just a moment. And then again a second time, baring a flash of white like a horse which whinnied, plucking at Gamaliel's mouth, his cheek, his neck. The groom began to thrash like a man with a fever as Jahilyah bore down on him, roaming his body, bruising it.

"Enjoy," Lady Haggitha said, rising lazily, smiling sleepily, as if it was she who was sated by their passion. "Sleep well. Dream much."

* * *

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“He sleeps well, with such composure,” Dona Isobel commented, regarding the prone body of Griff with envy, for the rise and fall of the ship was too unsettling to permit her any sleep. “Like a child, like an innocent, as if he has no responsibilities.”

“Ah, but if only he was aware of them,” said the School Master, following her gaze, his regard not quite as envious. “He might not rest so easy then, your innocent who sleeps with such composure.”

“He has to find his sweetheart, which may take time but is surely not such an onerous task,” Dona Isobel believed, but then recognized the frown which had crossed the School Master’s face. “There is something more?” she guessed. “Something he is perhaps not yet aware of?”

“He thinks he is here to look for his girlfriend, yes, that is all he knows for the moment. However...” The School Master hesitated, for what he was about to say would have seemed so insignificant to the sleeping form they were discussing. He felt sure that Dona Isobel would appreciate the gravity of the matter, though, as he said, “He is an artist.”

Her dark eyes widened, as if aroused from the sleep which she was being denied. “Here?”

“And the one below, his companion.”

“But here?” Dona Isobel repeated. “On their way to Eidolon?”

“Artists both,” the School Master nodded. “Not accomplished in their craft, they may be lacking in skills as yet, but they have the imagination.”

“And here they are, in the world they created.”

“In the world of their imagination,” the School Master nodded gravely. “You see my dilemma, then? To make them fully aware of what they are, and where they are, it would be... well, the only analogy I can think of would be to tell them that they are Gods in their own world.”

“Creators. Could they cope with that?”

“They are still unaware of the powers that entails, I have managed to keep them in ignorance for the moment.” He gave a weary sigh, said, “It is enough for me -and quite a strain on my own abilities- that they are able to accept their presence here.”

“The ignorance of one could wreak chaos on these lands,” Dona Isobel knew. “But two? That is a recipe for disaster, absolute recklessness. They will have to be told or they will have to be returned. One or the other, sooner rather than later.”

The latter of the two not being an option, the School Master promised, “They will be told everything. Soon.”

“But what were you thinking of, to bring them here?”

“It was unavoidable,” he told her.

“And the girl he looks for?” Dona Isobel now remembered Griff’s quest, supposed, “She is an artist also?”

“And the friend with her.”

“Four of them!”

“The two females are out of harm’s way,” he said, gazing out across the swell of water as if to search them out, as if needing to avoid Dona Isobel’s eye. “However...”

Dona Isobel allowed herself a laugh of incredulity as she exclaimed, “You mount disaster upon disaster, School Master, if you tell me that is not an end to it!”

“There is a fifth,” he confirmed, “and perhaps the real cause for concern, the true reason for the presence of the rest. He was taken -brought here- by one of the Hashishim; Tulla, by name.”

“I know of the Hashishim, of course. But this one? Tulla?”

She shook her head.

“An inconsequential creature, I would have said. An adolescent. Mischief would have been the height of her ambition if she had never found her way out of Eidolon. But somehow she did, she found fertile imaginations and a world of potential was opened up to her. It is not what is that we must fear most, Dona

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Isobel, but what might be. What can be. If you mix the mischief of the adolescent Hashishim and the evil of her adult kin with the burgeoning imagination of a fledgling artist then you have your cocktail for catastrophe, your recipe for disaster.”

“You think the young Hashishim brought the artist here for that very purpose? To visit catastrophe on the land?”

“If she did not originally have this intent in mind I am sure that its feasibility will soon be made apparent to her. The chances are that she brought him with her simply because she found that she was able to. No doubt he was easily seduced, and she found that flattering.”

“He must be returned to his own world,” Dona Isobel insisted.

“And by this sleeping innocent and his friend,” the School Master agreed. “Only they can have the power to effect it.”

“But he comes looking for his girlfriend.”

“And before we reach Golgonooza I must persuade him otherwise, convince him that he has a greater mission. If he happens upon his girlfriend on the way, then all to the good, for four of them will stand a better chance of combating the errant fifth, who is no doubt already being corrupted by the ways of the Hashishim. But however things transpire he must be made to see the importance of the task he has been brought here to accomplish.”

“That will not be easy, for it is love that presently drives him,” Dona Isobel warned, her tone such that she might have guessed the School Master to be ignorant of the emotion. “Love is a powerful impulse. I know, for it is what spurs me on my crusade. Elsewise, if it were not so, I might even be tempted to join you in yours.”

The School Master sighed heavily, nodding, understanding the truth in what she said. “Fortunately,” he went on, “it is not my crusade. I was sent to search out Tulla, yes, commissioned by

the First Minister of Golgonooza, but finding that she had returned to Eidolon, and under what circumstances, I saw my subsequent course of action had to be to bring these people here in pursuit of her. I will escort them to Golgonooza, Los and the First Minister will be appraised of the situation, and then it is their crusade, our artist friends, Griff and his companion.”

* * *

Lord Lovecraft had received no word of his wife, not the slightest clue as to where she had gone, let alone why. By questioning the household he had accounted for her movements during much of the seven days of his own absence, her timetable as predictable as ever a bored wife's was, and the only hours left unaccounted for were the last twenty four before her furtive departure by the east gate of the city, a day and a night during which neither hide nor hair had been seen of her. There had been no demands made of the kitchen staff, none of the customary berating of cooks or cleaners or those members of the household whose sole purpose was her amusement. It seemed that she had simply withdrawn - as if sulking over his absence? knowing who he was with?- and then later departed. In company, he learned. And yet without a maid, for Fitna had been the first of the household he had questioned. Generally such a commendable girl, and so obliging that she would bare her soul and anyone else's for a kiss, he had found her inexplicably stricken, laid up in bed in such an ill humor and raddled by all manner of rash and pustules that a man would rather kiss the back end of a mule.

No maid, then, but two, perhaps three companions thought to be with her as she left under the shadow of night. And one of them Basilides, it would seem, since he was the only other member of the household conspicuous by his absence.

God damn the woman and whatever plot she might be hatching!

If only his nephew was about then he might have taken up

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the search for her, but Abishai's boredom had driven him from the city even before Lady Haggitha's departure, to hunt or whore about the country with his friends, and all Lord Lovecraft could do was wait with impatience and increasing ill humor for responses from the messengers he had dispatched to all the likeliest places.

In the south, in the sultrier climates his wife favored, there had been no sight of her since their visit of some months ago, when they had forsaken the stifling city for refreshing sea breezes. From the north, where the air was crisper, and perhaps too cold for her comfort at that time of year, he had not been surprised by the lack of news of her. East, where her family lay, he had been even less surprised that his enquiries should be met with an undisguised lack of cooperation, from some quarters blatant hostility even. The more he dwelt on the matter, the more his ire was roused by her family's attitude towards him, the more he felt that this was the direction her flight had taken her. Cosseted with one or other of her family, each encouraging the other's dislike of him, he could feel their hatred draw him like a magnet.

To the east.

But first, before he took off to whichever point of the compass, he would need to rid himself of the two pups who had been dogging his every step for days now, ever since his visit from van Vogt.

Pulling on a cloak of the darkest wool, strapping a sword about his waist and tucking a long thin stiletto into his boot, he went downstairs to the kitchens, to the refectory which overlooked the rear courtyard. In addition to the household staff who worked there, and those who relaxed there when the break from their duties was too brief to permit them to venture further afield, he could always count on there being a number of his men present, those who had called in passing, to eat and drink and

slap and tickle the maids, too broke to afford any richer entertainment, or to lazy, or simply as bored as he was by the purposeless life which had been forced upon them. At the door, at the head of the short staircase, he surveyed the room, picked out faces he recognized. Some looked up from their wenching or drinking and caught his gaze, but there were no salutes offered and none expected, for except for the subservience demanded of the kitchen staff there was no standing on ceremony here. The refectory was the nearest thing to a battle camp that remained in his life, rank existed and was acknowledged but above and beyond this was a respect which bordered on equality.

Spying two men in a corner of the room, hunched silently over a table, a single mug of ale before each where others might be boozing by the bucketful, he crossed the floor towards them, exchanging greetings as he went, slapping the buttocks of a girl or two, offering advice to younger men who fumbled clumsily with bodices and basques. At the corner table he sat without invitation, shook the hands which were extended.

“Phicol. Mattathias. How goes it?” he asked.

“Bloody,” said Phicol, his boredom evident, like an anger which had to be contained, seen in the way his knuckles blanched as he closed a huge fist tightly around his mug of ale.

“Or not bloody,” said Mattathias, in explanation of the boredom he shared.

“Then you are in the mood to cut a throat or two?”

“My own, if life has nothing better to offer,” lamented one.

“If we could,” said the other.

“I think it might be arranged,” said Lord Lovecraft, glanced over his shoulder to regard the room, then leant close to the two bored warriors. “Pick out a couple of men, the most sober, ones you trust. Phicol, you will take one and precede me, and Mattathias the other to follow after. Keep a discreet distance, both before and behind, but always keep me in your sight. Be

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alert.”

“To what?” asked Mattathias. “With what end in mind?”

“Pick your men and I will explain.”

Phicol and Mattathias hurried about the refectory, examined a face or two for sobriety, met Lord Lovecraft in the courtyard with two keen men in tow. There Lord Lovecraft outlined his route to them, an evening promenade he would take, across Camden Town, where the cheap boarding houses were, and the streets nearby where inns and taverns flourished and there would be people enough for him not to be too conspicuous. Eventually, as he wandered off the busier streets, cut through a back alley or two, Mattathias and his companion might notice two men trailing him.

“In the quietest alley I will stop and accost them,” he said, a glint of steel now in his eye. “You men make sure that no one else enters the alley, that there is no one to witness their deaths.” Noticing Phicol’s look of disappointment, he laughed, that hollow mirthless laugh which had once rung about the battlefield. “I will chastise them, Phicol. You may be responsible for their ultimate demise.”

At that Phicol brightened and the five men set off with enthusiasm for their task.

* * *

The sea was still a peach color when Anna woke the next morning, rising some hours after the sun did. Selina still slept. They had managed to decline Tioka’s offer of ‘hospitality’ without causing offence, Selina hinting that Anna’s warrior status necessitated her spending some time in a celibate purdah, a discipline which the chief approved of with some gravity, even hinting to his sons that it was a creed that they might benefit from subscribing to.

Leaving her friend to sleep a while longer, then, Anna walked down the gently sloping beach, acknowledging the smiles

of the villagers as she went, and knelt at the water's edge. Its color was no effect of the light, she now saw, no reflection of the sun which was still some distance at her back, rising over that abominable jungle. The color was such a thick fruity peach that the water had no transparency whatsoever. Cautiously, not knowing what might lie beneath its surface, she dipped a finger. A single ripple broke, grew slowly, spread out in isolation, none following after it, and once it had passed beyond the range of the human eye the water was placid again, as still as a mirror, as smooth as slate.

"Strange place," she remarked, getting to her feet, brushing sand from her knees and seeing the sparkling grains bounce on the beach before finding a comfortable place among the trillion others.

As she walked back to the village she wondered if the magic might not be in the sand, in the sea, in the land itself, rather than in this strange creative impulse which Tioka had called the *Afflatus*. The folk of the village seemed a primitive people after all, lacking in science, and anything they failed to understand they would credit to some indeterminate source, just as others had linked insanity with the moon or thunder with Thor. Whatever the source though, whatever the cause, she had witnessed the magic, and long before her senses became fuzzed by the tumblers of drink with which she had been plied. A simple entertainment, Tioka had seemed to regard it as, and with the limited talents and scant resources of these people of the Scented Land it would probably remain nothing more.

But elsewhere, in a more sophisticated culture, if such existed, might there not be people more adept at this 'entertainment'?

When pressed, Tioka had simply shrugged.

Returning to the hut where she had spent the night, Anna found Selina sitting outside, her skirt bunched in her lap to bare

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her thighs, fingering the tattered hem in dismay.

“Look at it,” she lamented, offering up the garment like a thing which had already been sacrificed. “One of the best things I ever made. It was going to be a part of my degree show.”

“We’ll be lucky if we ever get back in time for that,” Anna remarked, sitting beside her.

“Great!” said Selina, but her dismay was still more to do with the present state of her skirt than with any worries of the future. Spying the child Tehura walking across the clearing she shouted to her, beckoned her over, asked, “Do you have a-?”

What?

A sewing machine?

A stapler?

She held up her tattered skirt, gave a moue of dissatisfaction at its condition, made stitching motions in the air at which the child nodded enthusiastically, ran off, and came back a minute later to hand her a shiny steel needle and a reel of cotton.

Selina looked at the items with the same astonishment that a tiger the size of a horse had warranted.

“What did you expect?” Anna asked, seeing her surprise. “A fish bone and a length of cat gut?”

“I don’t know. I suppose so. Yes.”

“Me too,” Anna confessed, with a grin.

Selina went into their hut, came back out a half hour later with the skirt looking revived, as if it had come fresh from her machine in the fashion studio. “Right, what next?” she asked, noticeably brighter now that her dress was repaired.

“Let’s walk, see, search,” Anna suggested.

“For a way out?”

“It’s what we need, though I don’t think we’re going to find a railway station anywhere near this place. It would be useful if we could get from here to somewhere a little more developed, though.”

“If such a place exists.”

They took a path which had been worn between two of the huts, cutting a meandering way between the palms and the clumps of foliage, came to a grove where there was a bamboo structure which was no more than a canopy, four stout poles supporting a woven roof. In its centre, on a carved dais of dark wood, sat a crude effigy of a woman, the figure squatting with legs crudely parted to bare her genitalia, and around it a handful of young men were on their knees, their brows touching the earth and their fingers splayed before them.

“A temple? A shrine?” Selina whispered.

“Something like that,” Anna supposed, and they moved on.

Working in an arc around the perimeter of the village they came across half a dozen more such groves, each with a different effigy to be worshipped, each with a different generation or sex or mixture on their knees before it. At the last they saw the pubescent young girls of the village bowing before a figure which had a cock as thick as a thigh.

“To each their own,” Selina remarked, as their walk brought them back to the beach and the water’s edge. She looked around, gave a sigh of resignation. “It seems to me that there’s nothing surrounding this place but that bloody big cliff face and that bloody thick jungle beyond.”

“Inaccessible, like Tioka said,” Anna reminded her, gazed out across the expanse of water which faced them and nodded to the horizon. “So that is the only way out.”

Selina looked at the sharply defined line where the peach of the sea met the blue of the sky, blinked at the garish clash of colors and asked, “But how? I don’t see any ferries chugging back and forth.”

“We ate fish last night, though, and there’s no one knee-deep in the water, casting out nets, so they must have boats, rafts...”

“Pedalloes?”

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“...something. Come on, we’ll look a little further,” said Anna, leading the way along the shoreline.

It was just beyond the point where Anna had dipped her finger into the viscous sea, after clambering over the trunks of a clutch of palms which overhung the water as if parched by thirst, that they found the rickety pier. It protruded no more than a dozen yards out, was made of such flimsy material that it was fortunate there was no ebb and flow of tide to dislodge it. There rested against this pier a number of woven canoes of so fragile a construction that all but the bravest would have shied from using them.

“Even Thor-fucking-Heyerdahl wouldn’t get in one of those things,” said Selina.

“Nonetheless, they must serve their purpose,” Anna was sure.

“For why else would they be lying here unused?”

Anna thumped her friend on the arm, as if to beat the sarcasm out of her, stepped onto the edge of the pier where there were stacked a dozen or so large baskets. Selina followed and they looked inside the first, saw the silver skinned fish, that morning’s catch, some still alive and kicking.

Actually kicking!

As they looked on one fish summoned some supreme effort and leapt from the basket, ran along the pier and hurled itself into the water.

“Jesus Christ! Mutant mermaids!” said Selina, almost gagging, seeing that the fish in the basket, although fish for the most part, did not have tails but instead had legs like a toad’s. “Is that what we ate last night?”

Anna, not liking to dwell on the matter for fear of becoming nauseous, said, “Come on, we’ll speak with Tioka. There must be some way out of this place.”

* * *

“My men are murdered?”

van Vogt held the note in a hand which trembled with rage. The bare bones of the matter would have done, that the men he had set to follow Lord Lovecraft were dead, but the note detailed the full circumstances of their passing, as complete as any surgeon’s post-mortem report in describing the beating and bludgeoning they had suffered, the wounds from knife and sword, the mutilation and evisceration. That they had met their end in the alley they did could be seen as inevitable, for the district was known for its thuggery and crime; the manner in which they had died pointed to this being no drunken brawl or back street robbery, however.

“This is Lovecraft’s doing!” van Vogt understood, crumpling the note and tossing it aside. “The brutality is as good as a signature, he has signaled his intent and put his name to it for my benefit!”

“My Lord. The boy,” said Clod, standing at the side of the bed.

“It is a challenge! He has the effrontery to confront me openly!”

“The boy,” the equerry repeated. “I beg you to be cautious in what you say, my Lord.”

The boy who lay in the bed beside the First Minister was the same young urchin who had been drawn from the pond in the Tuileries Gardens some nights earlier. His eyes were closed, he may have been asleep, but he was neither blind nor deaf nor dumb, and Clod felt it unwise of his master to rant so openly in the lad’s presence.

van Vogt fell back heavily against the bank of pillows. The bed shook, the mattress undulated, but the boy did not stir. He touched a hand to the lush lips, ran a finger along the clean line of the jaw, pressed its tip to the dimple on the chin like a priest anointing a child.

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“Sweet thing,” he murmured, took the boy’s hand in his and stroked it fondly.

“He is a liability,” said Clod. “Let me do away with him before he can compromise you.”

“Do you know, Clod,” van Vogt continued, now tracing the lines of the boy’s palm, “this young man could teach a thing or two to those boys from the Academy. Such an exquisite touch he has, such artistry there is in these hands. You would never think that they had grubbed through all manner of muck and mire to eke out a living. They are chafed by the cold and scorched by the sun, but believe me, Clod, they still have it in them to bring a corpse to life with their caresses. Do away with him?” he said with a start, as if only now conscious of the proposal. “Never!”

“Then at least let us have him blinded. Cauterize his tongue. Bung up his ears with molten wax.”

“But his tongue is capable of such wonderful things,” said the First Minister dreamily. “And those eyes are such a perfect blue that it would be a crime to cloud them, to dim their luster. It would be like blotting out the sun or painting over the stars. You really have no feeling for beauty, Clod, which is perhaps why you find yourself married to Mistress Pebble.”

Clod gave a sigh, as if regretting his lot as much as he did his master’s infatuation. He picked up the crumpled note from the floor, smoothed out the creases, folded it into a neater parcel, his fingers agitated, his whole being ill at ease and wanting to be away, out of the bed chamber and into a clearer air, less sullied by the steam of passion that had been denied him for years.

At length van Vogt turned from his appreciation of the sleeping form beside him, asked, “What do I do, Clod?”

“I..., er..., ahem....”

Annoyed by the equerry’s dithering, understanding the reason for it, he then said, “For heaven’s sake, Clod! Very well! Let us be discreet and adjourn to my study, lest this ragamuffin

who has no more wit than to dredge a pond for coins might eavesdrop on some political intrigue which is beyond his comprehension.”

With Clod’s help he extricated himself from the bedclothes, slid his feet into silken slippers and wrapped a robe around him. It was when he had shuffled from the room, and closed the door behind him to afford the privacy his equerry felt was needed, that the boy in the bed opened his eyes.

* * *

Dispiritedly the School Master looked out across the water. The night Griff craved had still not fallen, it was a world of weak colors and vague shapes, waves as blurred as clouds, the horizon a smudge in the distance which melted sky into sea, everything seen as if in a half sleep. The School Master may have dozed, he could not be sure, his mind drifted lazily, as if evasive of the duty which faced him. Dona Isobel did not sleep, now as troubled by the news the School Master had imparted as she was by the queasiness which the gentle bobbing of the vessel continued to occasion. At length there was a sound of movement from below, people began to file out of the turrets at each end of the deck, yawning and stretching and sniffing the air like lycanthropes. They looked worn and weary, their costumes, so brightly vivid when they boarded, now as faded as if they had suffered a generation of use and misuse.

“The revelers are stirring,” said Dona Isobel to the School Master, and raised her head to peer over the deck rail. “Yes, there lies the isle of Cythera. They can scent its corruption from a league away and more.”

There was a hint of disapproval in her observation which the School Master could only concur with. She would have joined them on their crusade, if she had not had a quest of her own? Well he believed he would have welcomed her, thought the young artists would have gained strength from her company. He

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watched her lift the black mantilla from the sleeping figure beside them, then stroke a fingertip across his brow to wake him.

“Where are we?” Griff asked sleepily, eyes blinking even in the muted light of that place, then the more pertinent question, “Where am I?”

“Cythera,” the School Master told him, firmly, with an insistence that he accept the fact, that he not disbelieve or dismiss his presence as a dream.

“Ah, yes, Cythera,” the young man remembered. “Island of Venus. Sounds intriguing.”

“Forget any curiosity you might have about the place, John Griffin,” cautioned Dona Isobel, “for we will not be tarrying there. I have a boat waiting on the other side of the island and we go directly to it. Now, stretch the sleep from your limbs and find your friend, that we might be ready to disembark.”

Griff got to his feet, walked stiffly across to the aft turret of the vessel and descended the dozen wooden stairs. The air which rose to meet him from below decks was thickly perfumed, sweet and pungent, but still could not disguise the underlying aroma which assaulted the sinuses. Sweat, sex and passion was what it brought to mind, recalling that peculiar fragrance which came of sleeping with a woman for the first time, of having her naked, of having close contact with her steaming genitalia. The room he entered was a chiaroscuro mixture of light and dark, lanterns and tapers and stinking kerosene lamps casting a confusion of shadows about the place. Standing on the threshold of the single long room, Griff peered in, trying to distinguish shape from shadow. A twin-backed beast turned and disunited to gaze Janus-like at him, a smile of pleasure to one side and a weary sob of fatigue to the other, then parted the one from the other like a moth from a chrysalis, a woman rising slowly to her feet in a rustle of silk and chiffon, leaving a dry husk of a man behind.

“Jesus!” whispered Griff, gingerly inching his way along,

now wary of each shadow he saw, each shape he stepped around, conscious of other figures coalescing in the gloom and moving forward into the light. "Leo! Where the hell are you?" he grumbled softly, scanning each face as it passed, noting the look of drugged delirium in the eyes of all.

At the far end of the room he saw a final clutch of figures, the last passengers left below decks. Approaching warily he was able to make out two, three women, then two men, not distinguished as such at first because of the clothes they wore, the tight hose and tunics which flared from the waist, loose fitting shirts and voluminous blouses. And finally he was able to make out a sixth figure in their midst, hands bound behind, some kind of harness of black leather braces about the chest, a collar around the throat to which was fastened a long leash.

It was Leo, being tugged along by one woman, prodded and goaded by the other two.

"Here! What are you doing with him?" Griff shouted, hurrying towards the group.

The women laughed over their shoulders, Leo smiled dreamily, the two men turned to face Griff, feet planted wide. He came to a halt just in time to avoid the gleaming stiletto, which flashed in a wide arc, inches from his eyes.

"Leave your friend with us or join him," said one of the men.

"Or else perhaps die," said the other, also drawing a long slim blade from the sheath at his belt.

They took a menacing step forward, Griff a worried step back as Leo was led up the stairs to the deck.

"Hold!" a voice commanded, and Dona Isobel appeared at his side.

"Leave him be!" ordered the School Master, at his other flank.

The two men exchanged smiles, dismissive of the threats, continued to advance until the School Master's fist caught the

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first on the brow, knocking him to the floor to leave him gazing glassy-eyed at the ceiling. Dona Isobel was not so restrained in her response. With a quick flick of the wrist she snapped open the fan which hung from her waist on a silken cord. The blades which protruded from the delicate black lace caught the light as she swept the fan across the second man's midriff, slicing through silk and cotton and flesh. The man clutched his hands to his stomach, looked down in horror as he cupped them to try to keep the entrails from spilling out. Then, slowly, he slumped to his knees.

"Bloody hell!" gasped Griff, just as stricken with horror as the dying man.

"Where is your friend?" Dona Isobel asked him.

"Blood-ee hell!" he said again.

"John Griffin! Your friend! Where is he?"

With an effort Griff dragged his eyes from the man who spilled his steaming guts onto the floor, said, "He, er, he went off with their women."

"Then quickly! We must reach him before it is too late!" said Dona Isobel, hurrying to the stairs, the School Master close after, Griff last of all, still trying to get over the shock of what he had witnessed.

When they reached the deck they found the vessel deserted, saw the last of the passengers some way off, just cresting the brow of a hill.

"He seemed to go quite willingly," Griff said.

"He would," the School Master nodded gravely. "Seduced. Bewitched. We should never have left him alone."

"His hands were tied, though, he was bound..."

"That is their entertainment."

"...but he still seemed quite happy to go with them."

"They will have taken him to Schloss Nymphenberg," Dona Isobel guessed, her eyes fixed on the hill, her gaze broody, her

manner thoughtful.

“And that is where we must go,” the School Master told Griff. “We must get him out of there before he is corrupted beyond hope.”

“You must do so without my help, School Master,” Dona Isobel said with reluctance. “I must go directly to my boat before the oarsman becomes impatient.”

“I understand,” he nodded with regret.

“I will wait for you as long as I can, in the hope that you are successful.”

The School Master bowed, said, “Thank you for your assistance, Dona Isobel de Porcel.”

“Assistance?” said Griff, as Dona Isobel took her leave of them and descended the gangplank. “She just split a man’s belly open and never even batted an eyelid!”

“Yes, a remarkable woman,” said the School Master approvingly, his eyes following her along the shoreline. Then he turned and frowned at the hill which faced them. “Now to Schloss Nymphenberg. Come.”

“Are they likely to be dangerous, the people we might meet in this Nymphenberg place?” Griff asked, thinking of the stiletto blade which had come within an inch of popping his eyeballs.

“Not if you do not hesitate,” the School Master replied, striding purposefully up the hill.

“The way Dona Isobel didn’t hesitate?” Griff supposed gloomily, his stomach still unsettled, recalling the stench of steaming entrails.

“Exactly.”

* * *

It was true in part what the fat man had suggested, that Goomer did not have the wit for appreciation of political intrigues, for the motives behind it and the machinations which powered it were beyond his understanding. He did have wit enough, however, to

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put to best use any tittle-tattle which came his way, be it in the market or the tavern or some rich man's bed. He also had the gumption to know when he was onto a good thing.

Three nights and two days he had been there now, in the fat man's bed, on the fat man's couch, beside and immersed in the fat man's spacious bath. For all that his movements had been restricted to a suite of half a dozen rooms he had quickly come to appreciate how much wealth there might be around him, in floor upon floor above and below his sumptuous cell. There would certainly be more money than could ever be dredged from a stagnant pond in a public garden, better food, already tasted, than could be grubbed from the leftovers of Camden Town's boarding houses.

The voices beyond the door kept him faking a cautious state of semi-sleep as he considered his options which had previously been without limit but had now become severely restricted by the chance of sudden wealth. In the years since his parents had effected what they called a disenfranchisement but he saw as desertion -the last in a line of ten, there was no money to spare for food, no milk left in his mother's breast- he had come to look upon the city as some polygonal oyster with a pearl in each corner. He could roam where he would, find profit where he might; the options were great, though the rewards might be meager.

Now the options were quite simple. He could stay or he could go.

There was a lull in the low murmur of conversation beyond the door, a hiatus in whatever was passing between the fat man and his toady. He closed his eyes again, stilled his body and slowed his heartbeat lest they return, but his mind continued to race, weighing one against the other the chances which were so suddenly limited.

Burn out his tongue? Block his ears with boiling wax? Gouge

out his eyes or make him otherwise blind? These were the threats which told him to run.

Fine food and rich wines. Silken sheets and perfumed baths. These were the temptations which told him he would be a fool not to stay.

As he tossed in the bed, his uncertainty making him restless, he heard the voices draw closer and froze as the door opened, adopting an inviting pose, sheets in disarray crumpled across his groin, one protruding leg bent at the knee. His chest was bare, his arms flung wide, offering himself like a martyr on a bed of sin. Footsteps approached, as soft as kisses on the carpeted floor, came to a halt by the bed.

“See?” he heard the fat man say, his voice a whisper thick with emotion. “He lies there as beautiful as a fallen saint.”

A throat was cleared, there was a cough of reluctant acknowledgement, and then a hand slapped his knee. “Come on, boy! Wake up!”

He opened his eyes to see the two faces gazing down at him, one with admiration and the other with disdain, wiped the sleep from his eyes, yawned and licked his lips. The smile he offered he diplomatically shared between the two of them.

“Get up and put that on,” said the disapproving one, tossing him a robe. “You are to come with me.”

Rising slowly, offering his nakedness without shame or modesty, Goomer drew the robe around him. A snap of the fingers beckoned him forward and as he passed the fat man he felt a hand linger a moment against his buttocks, rubbing the silk of the robe across his rump to trace the contours.

“Have your wife fit him out with clothes, Clod. Tight britches, loose shirts. You know the sort of thing.”

“Yes my Lord.”

Outside the fat man’s chambers Goomer had his first confirmation of the sumptuousness he had guessed at, the

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corridor as thickly carpeted as the bedroom, hangings lining the walls of such fine work that they were more 'trompe l'oeuil' than tapestry, candles of colored tallow burning in gold sconces.

"I think I will like being here with your master," he had already decided, looking about him as they went.

"Your master," he was corrected. "He is my employer, I am his equerry."

"Ah. Of course. Your name is Clod."

"Master Clod."

"And his Lordship? What do I call him?"

Clod regarded the boy suspiciously. "You do not know? You are ignorant of who he is?"

A wealthy man. A lonely man in need of comfort. A man who bore an inexplicable hatred for Lord Lovecraft, the greatest warlord that Golgonooza had ever known. But no, Goomer did not know who the fat man was, merely what he was, and so shook his head.

"Then 'his Lordship' will do for you," said Clod, once he had assured himself that the boy's ignorance was genuine. "That is how you will think of him and that is how you will address him."

"And you as Master Clod," Goomer recapped, with a nod of obeisance, but as they descended staircase after staircase to the lower levels of the building he never once let his attitude of deference and attention distract him from the study of his surroundings.

A duplicitous boy, thought Clod, leading the way past the kitchens and pantries, past the refectory and on to the annex at the rear which housed the quarters of himself and his wife. The lad might have no grasp of politics but he did have a politician's knack of speaking of one thing while there was something totally contrary on his mind.

Bundling the boy through a door, he ushered him into the parlor to introduce him to his wife.

“Mistress Pebble, this is...” He demurred from giving the boy a title, simply offered a warning. “Watch him.”

* * *

They reached the top of the hill, looked down to see a wood ahead from the centre of which rose a number of baroque towers and turrets.

“Schloss Nymphenberg,” said the School Master, regarding the scene, then turned to Griff, standing less than enthusiastic at his side. It was time for the young man’s instruction to begin, time he was made aware of what he was capable of and what would be required of him, now that he was in the kingdom of Eidolon. “Now there is something you must understand, my young friend, something you need to understand, before we reach the castle.”

“I understand very little about the whole bloody thing,” Griff said miserably.

“I appreciate that, and what I am about to tell you now might be the most difficult of all to comprehend. The fact is that here in this land you have considerably more powers than you have previously been accustomed to.”

“Powers? What powers? I can’t say that I’ve noticed any.”

“You are an artist,” The School Master continued, “and here in the Kingdom of Eidolon that is a vast power in itself. You have imagination, and if you have the courage to exercise it you can accomplish remarkable things.”

“You’ve lost me,” Griff confessed, for this was as clear as any of Ted Baldwin’s talks on logical positivism. “I don’t have the faintest idea what you’re talking about.”

They had been walking slowly down the hill but now the School Master stopped, looked around, considered. “Imagine,” he said. “Imagine something..... something vivid.”

Involuntarily there came to mind a sudden image of the two dandies who had threatened Griff, and of the damage Dona

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Isobel had done to one, vivid in its horror. And for an instant that image flashed before his eyes, for a brief blur of a second he saw the eviscerated man spilling his innards out onto the grass before him.

Griff blinked, rubbed his eyes. "Did I just see...?"

"You did. Evidence of the power of the imagination here in Eidolon," the School Master confirmed. "You have it, we do not. We who live in Eidolon, the buildings we inhabit and the land we walk, are nothing more than the products of it." He afforded the young man a moment to assimilate this, then said, "Now, imagine again your assailant, and imagine how you might have reacted if you were a warrior."

The man was before Griff again, looking more substantial and permanent this time, waving his blade, and so real was the threat, so great was the fear, that Griff felt his cheeks flush with anger, felt a bolt of hatred burst from him which was strong enough to send the man reeling, disintegrating in a shower of light.

"I did that? I can do that?" Griff marveled.

"With practice, yes, if you exercise the power you have over the matter in this world," the School Master nodded enthusiastically. "Just remember this much when we enter the castle. Imagination, anger, no hesitation. Just exercise your will freely."

"Imagination, anger, no hesitation," Griff repeated glumly, like a child learning by rote.

They continued on their way, reached the wood and entered, avoided the broad gravel track which cut directly through it and approached Schloss Nymphenberg stealthily from the rear, shielded by trees. It stood as silent as a shrine in the middle of the clearing.

"They will be about their debaucheries, I doubt there will be anyone to spy us," said the School Master, regarding the back of

the large building, seeing candlelight flickering in the windows, shadows dancing back and forth. "Come, let us rescue your friend and be away."

"We just walk right in?"

"They keep open house at Schloss Nymphenberg, welcome anyone and everyone and then enslave them with their ways."

In a crouch they ran across the clipped lawn, flattened themselves against the wall. Chancing a glimpse through the nearest window, Griff saw bodies sprawled over settees and divans, no person denied the contact of another, some grouped in clutches of three or four or more.

"What are they up to?" he whispered.

"Debauchery, as I say. That is the *raison d'être* of those who frequent the isle of Venus. Now remember..."

"Imagination, anger, no hesitation."

They crept around the corner of the building, came to a door more modest than the vast oak portal they had seen at the front, and the School Master quietly eased it open. Again there was the stench that Griff had met when he entered the hold of the vessel, the acrid smell of perspiration, the cloying perfume of scents and oils.

"You say your friend was bound?" he was asked.

"And happy to be that way, it seemed."

"Then they will have him below stairs," the School Master decided, and led the way across the stone floor of what Griff now saw to be a kitchen. A pig roasted on a spit, meats cooked, pans bubbled, but there was no one in attendance. A door in the corner opened onto a stairwell, its walls rough, damp. Silently they descended, stepped into a long low corridor.

The first room they came to was hung with silks, thickly carpeted and strewn with cushions, across one of which a man lay, his bare buttocks raised and presented to the woman who was about to insert a large black replica of a penis; in the next

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two women wrestled, hurling each other against the padded walls, neither gaining supremacy, both seeming to prefer surrender; in a third room a woman lay crooning while two men suckled at her breasts like hungry infants.

It was in the fourth room, this one more starkly furnished than the others, that they found Leo. He still wore his harness of black leather, his hands were still tied, but now to a frame which had his arms stretched to their limit. At his rear one woman was slapping a whip back and forth across his buttocks, facing him a second was pinching her fingers across his chest, raising vivid red welts, while a third lay on the floor, his foot in her hand, working his toes into her groin.

The School Master flung back the door and burst into the room. "Release him!"

The three women spun, the one who held the whip immediately swinging her arm to direct the tapered length of plaited leather at the School Master's face. He caught it easily, wrapped it once in his fist and tugged her to him, yanking her forward with such force that their heads met with a resounding crack, his brow bursting her nose and splitting her lips.

"Imagination, anger, no hesitation!" he barked at Griff, who turned to the second woman, the one who had been teasing Leo's flesh. From a chain around her neck she plucked a medallion in the shape of a star which she flung at him.

Imagine!

He pictured the missile deflected.

Anger!

The missile was returned.

No hesitation!

Two of the star's six points embedded themselves deep in her throat and she fell back, bounced against Leo before dropping to the floor, blood from her wound like a red scarf around her neck.

When Griff turned he saw that the third woman was already unconscious, the School Master's foot on her throat causing her to black out.

"Quickly! Untie him and let us be away!"

Griff loosed the bonds which held Leo, unbuckled the collar around his neck and the harness about his chest. The dimwit still smiled at the abuse he had received and he felt like slapping him, imagined he did and was startled to see Leo flinch, his eyes fluttering and blinking open as if only now aware of where he was and what he had been subjected to.

"What the fuck?"

"There's the operative word, you randy turned-on bastard. Come on, we need to get away from here."

"Dressed like this?" said Leo, looking down to see that he was wearing nothing more than his boxer shorts.

"Stark bollock naked if need be! Now come on!"

Seeing that Leo had been released, the School Master lifted his foot from the throat of the woman on the floor, saw her darkened eyelids flutter but knew that it would be a while before she revived. Together he and Griff pulled Leo forward, each with a hand in a sweaty armpit. As they left the chamber where Leo had been teased and tantalized, stepped into the corridor, they saw a trio of young men standing tensed before them, barring their way.

"Remember!" the School Master encouraged Griff.

"No hesitation," he knew, and this time was gratified rather than surprised to see the floor ripple beneath them so fling all three back on their behinds.

"Jesus Christ, Griff! What have you been taking?" Leo asked, noting Griff's hard gaze and associating it with the men who sprawled senseless on the floor.

"I'll explain later. For the moment let's just piss off out of here."

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“I don’t recognize the phrase but I appreciate the sentiment,” said the School Master. “Yes. Let us leave.”

* * *

Jahiliyah’s teeth, of flawless construction but imperfect alignment, were ideally suited for the teasing of a man’s member, like an unyielding sheath of ivory they held Gamaliel in a debilitating grip, kept him both wanting to move and fearing that he might. The lipstick Lady Haggitha had supplied her with had numbed his flesh wherever they had touched, and where they now were fixed, so that all he was conscious of, the only sensation he had, was the vise of her teeth and the soft warmth beyond.

As close as a spectator could get to the couple, Lady Haggitha trailed fingertips across his brow and against his ear, her touch as much an irritation as it was a caress so that he squirmed slightly, then gasped as he moved within Jahiliyah’s mouth.

The maid’s eyes lifted, the lids shaded more darkly than she would previously have permitted, and her mistress recognized the smile of wonder they held, wonder at the power she had learned she could wield. Perhaps not quite a virgin before, but a girl of limited experience, she had proved to be such an able and enthusiastic pupil. And so plain in her looks, with a face like a farmyard animal and a body more robust than lissome. It was this which recommended her to Lady Haggitha and this which would bewilder men, that with such an ordinary countenance she could still hold them in her thrall. Under the continued tutelage of her mistress she would be a match for a whole cohort of men, and capable of causing just as much mayhem.

Jahiliyah was delighted, then, as much as she herself was a source of delight, and Gamaliel was transported.

But Lady Haggitha...

For all the entertainment the maid and the groom afforded

her, and for all the exercise of her cosmetic skills they permitted, still she felt bored, a prisoner of circumstance here in the lodge at the foot of the Temeraire Mountains. The security she enjoyed in their first days here had now become a wearying thing and she missed the freedom of the city, the intrigue and the machinations of its society. She needed news, and there was none to be had now that her life was spent in such isolation.

Gamaliel gave a cry, Jahiliyah choked back a chuckle, and Lady Haggitha rose, crossed the room to gaze out of the window where the setting sun sent a series of violet shadows rippling along the valley. Her sojourn at Brynpica was serving its purpose in as much that Basilides' divinations had become both more prolific and more coherent. No longer did he rant, no longer did she have to worry that others might overhear him for he was discreet in his disclosures, would only repeat what he had learned when in her presence. She was now better appraised of the situation, of the nature and the location of the intrusions into Eidolon, than either van Vogt or Lord Lovecraft could hope to be. What was needed now was to put her knowledge to better use, and as day mounted upon day she understood that Brynpica was not the place to do this.

If only she could have contact with Abishai, then she would be better able to direct his efforts. If only she was aware of the mood and movement of her husband then she would know best how to thwart him.

If only!

She turned from the window, strode past Jahiliyah and Gamaliel who were still locked together on the couch, went along the corridor to the room where Basilides had made his quarters.

He was seated at a small desk, his good eye closed and the other covered by a patch of black velvet, his hands resting on a leaf from the Catalogue of Intrusions. As she approached she saw that what she had taken to be a ruddy glow from candle or fire

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was actually emanating from this single sheet of parchment, a pulsing rosy bloom as if it might suddenly ignite.

“Basilides? What is it?” she asked, crossing to him.

“The Afflatus, my Lady, it has flared. Strongly. With purpose and direction. It is almost as if someone is using it as a weapon.”

“Where is this?” she asked eagerly.

Basilides gave a backward nod of the head, indicating the window behind him. His room faced the mountains, their blurred abstraction a focus for his mind, offering no distraction. “Beyond the mountains,” he answered. “South of here. Off the coast there is an island named Cythera.”

“South?” she responded with dismay. “But Abishai heads north.”

“And not without purpose, my Lady, for the Hashishim’s instruments are present there also.”

“Stronger? Weaker? As potent as this latest occurrence?” Lady Haggitha wanted to know, but the scribe could only shrug. “The devil take it!” she cursed. “What am I to do? Which way am I to turn? For all the advantage your talent affords me I feel so useless here.” She sat down beside the scribe, drew his attention from the parchment before him. “I would have your advice, Basilides. Not divination, nor sorcery, but honest common sense. Speak to me as a friend and tell me how to proceed. Should I return to Golgonooza and suffer Lord Lovecraft’s tantrums?”

Tantrums for Lady Haggitha would be tortures for him, and he shuddered at the thought of being returned to Lord Lovecraft. “It would be to your advantage to be kept apprised of events in Golgonooza, my Lady,” he conceded.

“But?” she prompted. “There would be disadvantages?”

“The threat of your husband’s own ambitions, for one, and the danger that he might thwart yours.”

“But my ambitions mean nothing if I am unable to put them into effect, to bring them to fruition. And in this godforsaken

place, with only a groom and a maid and a half-blind scribe-” She rested a hand on his, lest he felt his worth demeaned. “You see my dilemma, Basilides? Knowledge counts for nothing if it cannot be put to good use. I am almost tempted to return to Golgonooza and share that knowledge with my husband, to take him into my confidence so that we might work together.”

“And would Lord Lovecraft respect that confidence? Would he treat you as an equal?” Basilides knew as well as Lady Haggitha did that he would not, that he would take what advantage he could for his own selfish ends and have no regard for anyone else. As if it was the common sense she asked for, rather than a fear for his own safety, he said, “No, do not go back to Golgonooza yet my Lady, not until you can take with you power as well as knowledge, until you can take with you the instruments this Hashishim girl has brought to the Kingdom.”

“And when might that be, Basilides? How might that be? Hell might freeze over or the fires of Los sputter and die before my bumbling nephew’s meandering about the Kingdom can show any result. And for the moment, sad to say, he is the only hope I have. Bah! To think I put my trust in him!”

“And what of Gamaliel, my Lady?”

“What of him?”

“Do you trust him?”

Lady Haggitha gave a mocking laugh, as if asked a question to which there was only one answer. “I trust no one Basilides, not even you. You know that. Though I have faith in your divinations, and take some comfort from your loyalty, I would never be so rash as to admit to trust. But Gamaliel, well, he is a malleable enough man and I believe I can count on him, now that he has spent some days in my company.”

Days, Basilides understood, in which the man had been both dulled and intoxicated by her craft, so tied to her perfumed presence that anything could be asked of him. The Lady

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Haggitha's persuasions could bind a man that strongly to her.

"You have a journey in mind?" Lady Haggitha guessed. "If not for us then for the groom?"

"At the foot of the valley, and then a day's journey to the north, midway between Golgonooza and the coast is the town of Arken."

"I know the place," Lady Haggitha nodded. "It thrives more on the people who pass through than on any natural assets of its own. The people have no craft, no true trade."

"And will do anything to fill their purses," Basilides reminded her. "Have Gamaliel go there and see what knowledge he can glean. Let him take with him the money to buy information, perhaps engage a man or two to search it out for him. News travels as freely through Arken as any man or beast or caravan."

Lady Haggitha considered. What the scribe suggested was a safe compromise between continuing to live in isolation and actually going to Golgonooza for the knowledge she needed to further her plans. Her thoughts then turned to Gamaliel and the maid in the adjacent room. "But what of Jahiliyah's training?" she asked.

Basilides offered an abashed smile as he answered, "Send her to my chamber, my Lady, if you would have her practice the skills you teach."

* * *

As Selina was tugged along by Anna, back down the beach and then towards the village, she muttered, she cursed, she let spill all manner of dissatisfactions, finally letting slip the words which caused Anna to prick her ears.

"A way out or a way in."

"Eh?" asked Anna, wondering at the cryptic logic, not expecting her friend to say anything that was less than obvious, and Selina pointed.

Some ten yards ahead the slim willowy figure of a young woman was preceding them into the village, her arms swinging, her movements fluid, her manner relaxed. But more remarkable than her confident attitude, as Anna now noticed, was the skirt she wore, not the simple fabric favored by the rest of the villagers but new and unfaded denim. And on the back of it, in the hollow of the dimpled spine, was a manufacturer's label.

"Now where did she get that?" Selina pondered. "Either she went out shopping or traders came in. A way out or a way in." She turned to Anna. "Whichever is the case, it could be what we need."

They followed and it transpired that the fashionable young woman had in mind the same destination as they did, for she made her way to Tioka's hut, climbed the two shallow steps and entered, nodding to the two sons who were sitting outside. Anna and Selina followed her.

"Ah! Good morning!" Tioka greeted them. "Permit me to introduce my daughter, Fayaway."

Anna smiled, Selina glanced at the skirt the girl wore, read the name on the label: 'Arnolfini & Co. Golgonooza'.

They were encouraged to sit, offered drink, their health was asked after and if they had rested well without the comfort of male company. There was amusement that they had been able to forego their pleasures, but underlying this a respect, as if he did not expect such discipline of the female of the species. They suffered his humor and his admiration and then, once the pleasantries were exhausted and the mood relaxed, Selina quizzed Tioka's daughter about the skirt she wore. It was unlike anything worn by the rest of their people, Selina remarked, and wondered where the young girl might have got it; adding, by way of flattery, that it was a very becoming garment.

The girl blushed at the complement as she answered, "San Romano."

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“A town a little less than a day’s travel from here,” Tioka elaborated, and explained, with the patient smile of a suffering parent, that Fayaway was the one of their tribe who was plagued by wanderlust. It was a trait that pained him at times, that she was not content with life in the village, but it also served its purpose, for in her wanderings she was able to bring back goods which would otherwise be unavailable to the village.

“Do you think...?” Selina began, then turned to Anna.

“Do you think you could take us to San Romano, Fayaway?” Anna asked the girl.

“You are not happy to stay here with us?” said Tioka with a little dismay, but his daughter was already interrupting, her cheeks now flushing with enthusiasm.

“Oh please, Father. May I?” she asked, clasping her hands together, eyes wide and entreating.

Tioka regarded his daughter as any indulgent father would, then turned to Anna and Selina. “My daughter has the wanderlust, and you have the warrior’s lust,” he understood. “You crave adventure, you seek crusades and quests and the adventure which is not to be found in Noa Noa.”

“May we leave, then? This very day?” asked Fayaway, putting the question which Anna would have liked to, had it not sounded so impolite.

“Whenever our two friends like,” Tioka agreed.

Fayaway turned eagerly to Anna, who said, “As soon as pleases you, Fayaway. As soon as you are ready.”

Tioka laughed as he rose from his sitting position. “My daughter is always ready to roam,” he said, putting an arm around Fayaway’s shoulders and leading her from the hut. “If her feet stay in one place too long they begin to itch, she fears she might take root.”

Abreast the four of them walked to the pier, Tioka giving his daughter a leather pouch of gems which he told her to barter

wisely, and not just waste on fripperies for herself. She nodded at his instructions with the forced patience of a child anxious to be away, gestured to Anna and Selina to climb into the first canoe, then unwound her denim skirt and threw it in after them.

“Goodbye!” Tioka called after them, as Fayaway began to push the canoe from the pier. “May you find the adventure you seek!”

Fayaway continued to push the canoe out from the pier until the water began to lap her fuzz of pubic hair, then climbed aboard, took hold of the paddle at the rear to steer them away from Noa Noa. As if the water offered no resistance, the canoe continued forward under its initial momentum, gliding across the water like a puck across ice. After some minutes, and numerous minor adjustments to their course, Fayaway asked Anna to take hold of the paddle. Cautiously, precariously balanced in the narrow hull, they changed positions and Anna took the paddle to hold their course steady. Fayaway, picking up her skirt and folding it, then stood in the centre of the craft and held the garment above her head. Immediately a wind came from nowhere to fill it, sending them surging forward at a faster clip.

They traveled in silence for an hour or so, no land in sight, no cloud to spoil the sky, not the slightest blemish on the sea save for the single ripple cut by the bow of the canoe.

“What’s that?” asked Selina, another hour on, and pointed to their left, to where a thin line of color sparkled like a necklace in the distance.

Fayaway turned, said, “Ah, that will be a procession of the Doge’s gondolas. It is always seen hereabouts.”

They watched for minutes on end but the procession never seemed to draw any closer or become any more distant, as if it was some permanent kind of feature of the seascape. A second hour passed, and then a third, and still the Doge’s procession lay motionless on the horizon like a discarded item of jewellery, and

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Anna became restless with what seemed to be their lack of progress. Nothing changed around them, nothing else was seen, the single ripple spread out from the bow but there was neither a bird nor a craft nor the approach of land to break the monotony. It seemed that time itself was becalmed, its passage interrupted, and finally Anna she asked how much longer they had to travel, how much further they had to go.

“Just there, a little beyond the river’s mouth,” Fayaway answered, and when they followed her nod of the head to the right they saw that a shoreline had crept upon them unnoticed.

“That was sudden,” Selina remarked, for minutes before there had been no land in sight in any direction.

“Such is the way of things in Eidolon,” Fayaway told her. “You become accustomed to it.”

“Eidolon?”

“The kingdom of Eidolon, of which Noa Noa is a part, and San Romano, and countless other places too numerous to name. There is nowhere which is not of Eidolon,” she said, with a patriotic pride.

* * *

“There is a passion in your love-making, my Lord,” said Madame le Roy, her breast heaving, Lord Lovecraft’s head rising and falling with it.

“Is that not always the case?” he murmured into her body, exhaustion in his voice, satisfaction in his sigh.

No, not always, there were times when it seemed that Lord Lovecraft was driven more by duty than by enthusiasm, but she was too diplomatic to mention this, said, “A greater passion than ever, such that I worry that it may be too much even for me.”

Lord Lovecraft laughed, returned the flattery. “I doubt that any man could ever be too much for you, Madame.”

She held the hand that chafed lewdly against her breast, closed her fingers tightly around it. “Still. Some minutes rest,

perhaps? A moment's respite for this ageing body?"

"Not ageing, never that, but as you wish," he agreed, and moved his head to rest it in the hollow of her shoulder.

"I believe I know what fires you with such ardor," Madame le Roy told him, as she stroked his burning cheek, for she could recall those occasions when his passion had been at its greatest, not born of obligation or need or desire but something much stronger.

"It is perhaps your body?"

"Or perhaps the two dead ones that you left in an alley at the rear of 'The Moon and Sixpence'?" She continued to caress him as she felt him tense, smiled knowingly as she said, "The passion you have in you is of the kind that once filled you after battle. Do not try to tell me that it was not you who was responsible for the death of two of the First Minister's men. The smell of their blood was on you that night and it lingers still."

After a silence he said, "You are too astute. I could never deceive you, Madame."

"If you did it would be at your peril, my Lord," she cautioned, pinching his cheek between thumb and forefinger.

"If that is a promise or a threat I still find it exciting," he responded, his body stirring against hers, but she quickly disengaged herself, slipped easily from the bed, telling him that it was time she readied herself for the Cabaret. He rolled onto his back, chin resting on his chest to watch her walk naked to the dressing table, her body as lustrous as marble in the candlelight. "If your body ages, Madame le Roy, then it does so like a fine wine, it becomes fuller and more intoxicating with each passing day."

"Fuller?" she repeated, sitting before a mirror and brushing her hair, casting him a sly look in the glass. "Are you saying I am becoming fat, my Lord?"

"I would no more say that than I would think of deceiving

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you,” he answered, raising his hands as if to surrender.

“Good,” she smiled. Her lips moved slightly as if she counted each brush stroke, then pursed as she set the brush aside and applied some color to them, sealing it with a stick of gloss. Her eyes were on him all the time, flicked back to him continually as she outlined them with kohl and darkened their lids. At length she said, “Your hatred of van Vogt is now such that you would kill his men? Has this something to do with the news he brought of your wife?”

“It was prompted by his visit to your apartment,” Lord Lovecraft admitted.

“You miss her, then?”

He rose from the bed, crossed the floor to stand behind her, his hands resting on her shoulders, his body pressed against her bare back. “When I have you? No, I do not miss her, but I would like to know where she is, what she is about. And if van Vogt sees fit to bring me this news of her, then he too is intrigued to know what she is up to. He hopes to find out by having me followed, by having me lead him to her.”

“But you still remain ignorant of her whereabouts?”

“There is no certainty, if that is what ignorance amounts to, but I feel sure that she has headed east. She has family there, they have no love for me, that my enquiries among them have met with silence or insult points to the likelihood that this is where she hides.”

“And you will go there?”

“Now that van Vogt’s men no longer dog my every step, yes, I believe I will.”

Madame le Roy turned around, cupped her hands at the back of his thighs, running them gently up and down to feel the hair as thick as a pelt. “Then let me come with you,” she said.

“Why?” he asked, his knees buckling slightly beneath her caress.

“To be with you.”

“And perhaps to witness the humiliation of my wife?” he guessed.

“It is no more than she deserves. She has shown no loyalty to you, no faithfulness. It is time you had done with her.” Her hands rose to cup his buttocks, kneading them, weighing them like fruit. “Learn what purpose she had in mind by departing the city with your scribe, and then you have no further need of her.”

Lord Lovecraft broke from her embrace, crossed back to the bed to retrieve his clothes, Madame le Roy’s gaze never once leaving him. She understood how little he felt for Lady Haggitha, his disregard for her would grow with each consecutive night spent away from the marital home, but always it seemed that there was something which bound him, some scruple or moral or vestige of affection which prevented him from giving a true demonstration of his feelings. He dressed silently, and she did not press the matter but continued with her own preparations, pinning her hair, sprinkling herself with perfume, putting on rings and draping necklaces and bracelets about her body. When she had chosen dress and footwear suited to the Cabaret she offered her arm to him.

“Will you escort me, my Lord?” she asked.

“A privilege,” he replied, and with arms linked they left the apartment.

The street was no quieter than Lord Lovecraft would have expected it to be, a couple much like them were strolling leisurely ahead, a carriage was waiting some houses away, its driver dozing, whip in hand. Quieter than this, and he might have been cautious, more crowded than this and he might have been alert to the faces who passed. They took a turn or two towards the centre of the city, accustoming themselves to seeing more people as they went, hearing the gentle hubbub of people in bistros and restaurants they passed, the louder babble which issued from

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inns and taverns and the cries of merchants from their shops, street vendors from their stalls, persuading passers-by to buy their wares. It was the sudden silence as they turned the last corner before the Cabaret Voltaire which caused Lord Lovecraft to halt.

“My Lord?” asked Madame le Roy, but even as she spoke he was turning, drawing his sword, even before she could ask what was amiss he had driven it into the belly of the man behind. “My Lord!” she cried, thinking that she was a party to cold-blooded murder.

The pierced man slumped to the ground and in an instant Lord Lovecraft had his foot on his chest, giving him purchase to draw back his sword, had it leveled again as two more men came forward from the shadows, then a third on his left flank, a fourth on his right. The tip of his sword described a wavering figure-of-eight in the air, as if to entrance their would-be assailants, as he asked, “Who is to be first?”

Looks were exchanged, nods given, it would be all four, an assault from three points at once. He took a step back, ushering Madame le Roy to the rear of him, readied himself for the attack.

“Now those are somewhat unkind odds,” said a voice, at the same instant as there was a flash of steel through the air and the man to Lord Lovecraft’s right fell to the ground, a six-pointed star embedded in his throat.

“A little more fair, now,” said another voice, and a second of the assailants fell, a garrote of plaited silk wrapping around his neck to cut off his cry. “And now yet fairer still.”

Lord Lovecraft did not bother to identify the voices, nor search out their owners, he thought he was already familiar with the dulcet tones of one as he lunged forward with his sword, withdrew, stepped and lunged again to leave the last two men spilling their blood on the ground. He wiped his blade on the body of one, regarded the other, saw the life force pumping from

each and knew that they were dying. Slowly, he hoped.

He returned his sword to its scabbard, drew Madame le Roy to him, then said, "Advance." The golden haired woman who came forward smiling, furling the silken cords which had just throttled a man, he knew as Estrild, one of the Daughters of Albion. "And would it be your sister Ragan with you?" he supposed.

The gleam of a pale head caught in the moonlight announced the second young woman as she stepped from the shadows.

"Mild silver and furious gold!" Madame le Roy laughed, clapping her hands, and turned to Lord Lovecraft with a look of triumph. "Did I not say that they are formidable young women?"

"And have I not always agreed with you? But did you think we had need of an escort through the streets? Am I not to be trusted with the safety of your mistress?" he asked the girls.

"It was well that we met you, but that was not our intention," Ragan replied, bending to retrieve the star of sharpened steel from the target it had found so unerringly. "We were on our way to your apartment, Madame, we brought news," she said, casually wiping the blood from the weapon and then slipping it into a purse at her waist.

"News of what?" asked Madame le Roy.

"Of Lord Lovecraft's wife, the Lady Haggitha."

"Where? What of her?" Lord Lovecraft demanded.

"A group of the Daughters were, ahem, entertaining themselves, there is an inn in a settlement a half day's ride to the west. There they heard tell of travelers who had passed through previously, a lady, a scribe, a groom and a maid."

"There was something remarkable about these travelers, that they should be remembered?" said Lord Lovecraft.

"The scribe, it seemed, threw a kind of a fit, raved, ranted about the Hashishim," Ragan told him. "Your scribe, Basilides?"

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And the Hashishim the one you seek?"

Lord Lovecraft nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "My scribe, Basilides."

"But to the west?" said Madame le Roy. "When you had persuaded yourself that it was to the east that she fled."

"Yes, to the west. To Brynpica," he now realized.

"So what do you propose to do, my Lord?" asked Madame le Roy.

Lord Lovecraft regarded the bodies which lay around them, for a moment saw his wife among them, her tongue tortured to loosen it, her body mutilated, her beauty gone, and he felt a rage build within him of the kind that had driven him to battle.

"This is van Vogt's doing," he said, clenching a hand to stop it trembling. "First he must be dealt with."

"Then perhaps we might help?" Madame le Roy offered, beckoning Ragan and Estrild forward, putting her arms around them to draw them into her embrace. "My Daughters of Albion and I?"

* * *

As they entered the estuary Fayaway put on her skirt and took the paddle from Anna, steering them upriver. The water had muddied, turned from peach to aquamarine and now to an earthy umber, began to lap gently at the sides of the canoe where previously it had been so still. It was ominously as if the world was becoming less settled, less idyllic. Fayaway pointed over their heads, and as they turned a bend in the river they saw burnt sienna rooftops come into view, buildings whose walls were painted in a variety of pale pastel colors. They drew closer, finally pulled into the riverbank, but it was as if they were still some distance from the town, for there was something about its scale which seemed almost doll-like. Leaving the boat, mounting a slight rise, they looked down on the town and saw that few of the buildings were much taller than the height of a man, that the

various campaniles and domes which broke the line of the rooftops did not reach much higher.

“A town of midgets?” Selina wondered.

Apparently not, for as they watched they saw figures stepping out or entering, figures roaming the streets who were some three quarters of the height of the buildings around them. It seemed to Anna that the scale of things, of man to building, was in accordance with some hierarchy; that man, of necessity a more complex thing than the structures he invented, would have to make his supremacy obvious in some way.

They entered the town, traversed a number of streets thronged by colorful figures, people wearing smocks of every hue, brightly dyed leggings and broad brimmed hats of soft velvet, finally crossed an open piazza to approach a powder blue house at its farthest corner. A figure was just about to enter and Fayaway called out: “Caspar! Caspar, it is I! Fayaway!”

The figure turned, scanned the three of them until he identified Fayaway, then waved.

“Greetings again, Fayaway,” said Caspar, awaiting them at the door to the house, and made a welcoming gesture with his hands, extending them to her and then drawing them into his heart, to touch his breast.

“Greetings Caspar,” Fayaway returned, and introduced Anna and Selina. “These are friends, visitors, adventurers.”

“And they are welcome too,” Caspar said, repeating the same gesture, his hands to them and then to his breast.

The girls said their hellos, feeling that words alone were a little insignificant but not comfortable enough to be as demonstrative as the man who greeted them.

“And what brings you here to San Romano this time?” Caspar asked Fayaway, gesturing to his own house and the other buildings around them.

“My friends do,” she answered. “They are... they have... Oh!”

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“Come eat and drink,” Caspar said, with actions to mimic the invitation, a gesture of taking food to his mouth, taking drink to his lips. “With a full stomach and a lubricated mind you may be able to put into words the thoughts which are in your head.”

The sweep of an arm directed them on, invited them into his home, they had to bow their heads to pass through the door but inside found the room more spacious than could have been guessed. Directed to sit, they sat. Urged to make themselves comfortable, they tried to, but the manner in which every word was accompanied by a sign of the hands made it difficult.

Only Fayaway seemed at ease.

“Caspar can help you,” she said, “if only I could explain to him the nature of the help you need.”

Anna considered, caught Selina’s encouraging nod, said, “We came here, to the kingdom which you call Eidolon, from a place which is not of Eidolon.”

“Not of Eidolon?” said Fayaway, in wide-eyed disbelief. “But that is not possible! There is nowhere which is not of Eidolon!”

“There you are mistaken, Fayaway,” Caspar interrupted, coming into the room to set bowls of fruit on the table around which they sat. “For all the knowledge that your wanderings have brought you, for all the experience which is the greatest of any of your tribe, there is still much that you are not aware of.”

The young native girl still found the concept difficult to grasp. “That there are places which are not of Eidolon?”

“That there are indeed places which are not of Eidolon,” he confirmed, smiling like a teacher with a secret knowledge, left the room momentarily, then returned with a flagon of drink and joined them at the table. “So where is this place you are from?” he asked Anna and Selina, his hand drawing a circle in the air to describe a world. “This place which is not of Eidolon?”

“England?” Anna said hesitantly, wondering if he would know it.

He nodded, said, "A distant place indeed. Not easy to find a way from there to Eidolon. So how did you manage it?"

We fell into a picture, Anna would like to have had the courage to tell him, but instead said, "Might I ask you a question first?"

He opened his arms, gesticulated, offering himself body and mind as he said, "Please, feel free."

"We stayed with Fayaway in her village, were welcomed and fed-

"They are a welcoming people, those of the Scented Land," Caspar agreed, his arms extended again in an embrace, as if to describe the fact.

"And Fayaway's father, Tioka, demonstrated the influence of something he called the Afflatus. He drew a picture in the sand and then was able to affect it, interact with it, even suggested that he could become a part of it."

"Yes, that is the Afflatus," Caspar nodded. "The essence behind creativity, more powerful than many people think creativity can be."

"So," Anna now ventured to say, "might we have found the way from our own world to this under the influence of the Afflatus? Could we have become a part of an image in our world, just as Tioka suggested he could in his?"

"But of course," Caspar agreed, "for surely it is the only way you found yourselves here. People do not consider that while they are related to one obvious world through the senses, so they may be related to another, not quite so obvious world, through the imagination. They think that only the visible world has reality and structure without ever considering that the psychological world -that of thought, of feeling, of imagination- may also have a real structure, exist in its own space. As the eyes are the windows of the soul, so paintings can be doors into another world. Whatever is created by the mind in your world, in your

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England, becomes a reality in this world, in our kingdom of Eidolon.”

“And to return to our world we might take the same route, the same means which brought us here?” Anna hoped.

“It would probably be the safest way, perchance the only way, but it would have to be under the guidance of someone who has a greater understanding of the Afflatus than I have. The Prado is where I suggest you try, in the mountains to the east, where the Society of Dilettante have their base.”

“And is there someone here in San Romano who could lead us there?”

Caspar shook his head, smiling sadly, said, “Unfortunately no, we lack the wanderlust of Fayaway and venture but a little distance out of our town. If you had the patience you could wait here until the next traders visited, but that might be some time. If your need to return whence you came is urgent, then you will have to make your way alone. I can give you directions, I can give you supplies in exchange for two or three of Fayaway’s gems, but that is all.”

“Please,” said Anna.

“You must make your way east from the town, around the Forest of Biomorphic Abstraction or through it, according to the degree of urgency...”

* * *

Mistress Pebble was the size of a boulder, had a face with all the character of a weather-beaten crag and knuckles as vicious as ice-capped mountain peaks. From the moment of their introduction she had taken an instant dislike to Goomer and at every opportunity would rap him sharply over the back of the head, stab a stubby forefinger into his belly or kidney, flick his nose so viciously that it would bring tears to his eyes. She was always careful not to mark him, of course, she understood the reason for his presence and would no more think of marring him than she

would any other of her master's treasured objects. In a way, though, her very look could be as bruising as her physical assaults and Goomer had to exercise as much craft in avoiding her as he did in pleasing the fat man in his chamber, to which he was summoned most nights.

In the fine clothes Mistress Pebble had outfitted him with he could pass as freely about the palace as most of the household, once she was about her daily business he was easily able to slip away -she would assume he was with Clod, Clod would suppose that he was with Mistress Pebble- and no one questioned either his presence or his purpose but would merely cuff him if he got in the way or boot him in the rear if he strayed too close to private quarters or to one of its guarded exits. He was as accepted as he had ever been, and for all that he was a prisoner, having as yet found no permitted escape from the building, he enjoyed a paradoxical freedom. In his careful avoidance of Mistress Pebble he had been able to acquaint himself with much of the layout of his new home, and a warren of a place it was, a whole basement devoted to the provisioning of the household, with kitchens and larders and laundries, cellars below where scullery girls would meet with baker's boys, grand halls and parlors above where better people would be entertained in finer style. Libraries, chambers for music and dance, gymnasia and saunas, room mounted upon room, floor upon floor like a stack of cards until, at the very top, beneath the flat roof where a garden had been cultivated and fountains bloomed, were the quarters of the man for whom everything else existed.

First Minister van Vogt, head of the parliament of Golgonooza, greatest asset of our leader Los.

Yes, of course Goomer had learned who his fat patron was, it was difficult to keep his name secret when the place swarmed with a hundred people or more who openly paid him respect or whispered his name with disdain. He still feigned ignorance

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around Clod and his wife, though, who were the only ones of the household to know the nature of the service he provided for the First Minister, or the only ones who felt a need to keep this secret. He understood, now, why the equerry had wanted him blinded, that he forever remain in ignorance of the identity of the fat man whose bed he shared. And just as they were cautious never to speak van Vogt's name in his presence, so he watched his tongue while in theirs, for while the respect which many paid the First Minister might sometimes be tempered by dislike, or born of duty, it seemed that that of Clod and his wife had its root in a genuine care for their master.

Mouth shut but eyes open, ears pricked, that was the way it had to be. Goomer had long been acquainted with the multiplicity of the world and had often been able to use it to his advantage. The question now was how he might best do this in his new environment, an alien one to begin with but becoming more familiar to him by the day. Failings and weaknesses around him he recognized as being the same, for all that his surroundings had changed, the greed and the ambition, the sadness and the loneliness and the naïve trust of people was there to be exploited regardless of the clothes they wore or the manners they affected. The noble man was no less vulnerable than the beggar, the poor man could be persuaded to part with his last brass coin as easily as a rich man could be conned of his fortune. Except, up until this moment, he had not had ready access to any rich men. And now they were all around him.

In the Grand Hall where Goomer sat people awaited audiences with secretaries and under-secretaries, begged appointments of clerks and receptionists, none sparing him a moment of their attention for they were all so caught up in their own needs. Across a marbled floor, through a vaulted arch, he had a glimpse of a further throng of people, those seeking entry to the palace, and he was so tempted to try to join them, to return

to the streets he knew. A tally lifted from a petitioner's pocket would have identified him as one of them, would have gained him exit when surrendered to the guards at the door. Or in desperation he could run, he was nimble enough that he might hope to dodge the oafs who thought they might bar his way, but once out he could never hope to return, and seeing the people who begged entrance when he had been granted it so freely was the one incentive he needed, that he should stay where he was and take advantage of his situation.

The bench he was seated on formed one of a number of octagonal upholstered islands which were scattered about the centre of the vast hall, and people occupied all of its eight sides. Two rough hewn men to his left had come to seek a license to legitimize a mine they had begun in the Temeraire Mountains, and it seemed to Goomer that they had been too long in that region already, digging for diamond or copper or whatever it was, their features as blurred and smudged as he understood that range to be. To his right a man and his four wives had come for planning permission to extend their house into a brothel, and attractive young tarts the women were, so much so that Goomer developed a crick in his neck through straining to catch their conversation, and perhaps their address, and breath deep of the perfume they exuded. And there were others, behind him, before him, all around him, each with their own petition, each with their own office or department of the palace to submit it to.

What was entertaining enough to listen to, though, was not going to profit his purse or enhance his situation, and at length he rose, made a noble bow to the four wives cum whores, and went to roam the hall, to circulate, as people did in society. It was as he reached the furthest corner of the hall, walking with a swagger and flaunting his finery, strutting that people might see him, that he spied the young woman in the cloak. She was as tall as any man there, seemed taller still in the way that she held

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herself so erect, and despite the shapeless garment she wore he could guess at how fine was the body beneath, strong but supple, with enough cushioned parts to make a young man happy. She had just departed an office where annulments of marriage were considered and her stride suggested that she was satisfied enough with the outcome of her petition. But perhaps there was a little regret there, a little loneliness now, a need for consolation. She did not make her way to the arch which would take her out onto the street, but moved deeper into the palace, and so he followed.

A first turn took them to a corridor which led to the library and hall of records, a second turn onto a lesser corridor where there were private rooms in which scribes could work uninterrupted. She was searching for seclusion so that she might grieve in secret, he guessed, as they reached a remote part of the palace where there was no one to intrude and he saw her seat herself in an alcove. There, as he spied from a distance, she unfastened and parted her cloak, revealing a body which had all the strength and beauty he had imagined, each contour clearly defined by the tight leotard she wore. Attractive, he thought, but an unusual garment to wear for an audience at the palace, more suited to a visit to the gymnasium. And she wore belts, more than one, he now noticed, thin sashes of some supple material which she drew from around her waist and began to knit together into a single item. Intrigued, he watched; beguiled, he saw the muscles in her arms flex as she tested its strength, saw her breasts bulge and the tendons in her neck accentuate. Then she stood, twirled the plaited belt around her head, reached forward to let one end snake out to a statue on the opposite side of the narrow corridor. It wound itself once, twice around the marble neck, she caught the free end again and pulled it taut like a scarf, the fabric tightening so viciously that it bit into the stone with a cough of dust.

Hell's teeth! Goomer swore silently. This was no lost divorcee but an assassin! And who could be her only target?

He turned on his heels, crept back along the corridor, once out of sight of the woman sprinted along the next, and a blur of others until he reached Clod's quarters.

"Clod! Mistress Pebble! Quickly!" he cried, charging into their kitchen. "The First Minister...!"

Mistress Pebble was before the fire, she held an iron in its coals, a poker of wrought metal which glowed white hot as she withdrew it and turned. "I told you, Clod," she said. "The boy is not stupid. He knows."

"...van Vogt!" Goomer gasped.

"He speaks the First Minister's name!" Clod's wife growled, and advanced with the poker. "Now will you accept it? Out with his tongue! Out with his eyes!"

"The First Minister is in danger!" Goomer yelled, stepping back from the poker and into Clod's arms, having to fight against his grip. "Don't you understand? There is an assassin in the palace!"

Chapter 6

There was a fragrance on the wind of exotic fruits and pungent plant-life. It came not from the sea but from beyond the crop of rock which faced the troop, a mass of limestone of such formidable size that it had brought their progress to a halt and caused them to consider their options.

“What do you say, Elusai?” Abishai mused aloud, craning his neck to take in the height, and the gradient, which was gentle enough to begin with but became steeper with each meter. “Do we build rafts to take us around the obstruction?”

“Maybe, if we could be sure of being around the thing quickly. Who can say how far the mass extends, though? We might be at sea for hours, and in all honesty I must confess that I do not like the look of that water.”

Over the past few hours the color of the sea had changed, even before the sun had begun to dip in the sky the aquamarine had darkened, thickened, shifted through a number of indeterminate shades until it had settled on its present peach tint. And it had become so still, there was not a ripple on its surface, not a fleck of foam or a single breaker, it neither ebbed nor flowed but simply rested viscously against the shale shore.

“I shudder to think what creatures might lurk beneath its surface,” Elusai said. “To be adrift on a raft out there does not appeal to me.”

“I must admit to sharing your trepidation, Elusai. But what of the climb? Can our horses make it? Can we make it?”

“Perhaps if we tracked inland a little the gradient might be easier,” Elusai suggested.

Abishai nodded. “We will send two men ahead to scout the way, to make use of the last hours of daylight, while the rest of us camp here for the night. Inform the troop, Elusai.”

The troop now numbered closer to four score than to two, at

each village and hamlet they had passed through more men had joined their company, and these were now strewn across the beach in a disorganized sprawl. As Elusai walked among them, passing the word that they would camp for the night, he saw that they were a more motley group than ever, a microcosm of a society. Those with money to do so, primarily the men of the original troop who had come from Golgonooza, had been able to buy provisions along the way, replenishing their supplies at each town and village. They were the ones who had tents to pitch, who had food to hand and the wherewithal to prepare it, they had guessed there would be no further progress that day and were already setting up their bivouacs in a circle around a common fire. Others had nothing more than their natural craft, they were the farmers and fishermen, the hunters and gamekeepers who had joined the company out of a weariness with their lives and were now forced to survive by catching or snaring their own food, at first each man for himself but more recently pooling their talents, working for the common good. Lastly there were the thieves and brigands who had neither money nor craft, unless guile be counted as such, men who robbed and cheated as they went, taking what they could in whichever way they were able, stealing from the towns they visited but eventually, Elusai feared, from each other as well. Already he had noticed the tossing of dice become a popular pastime in the evenings and worried that what began as an entertainment would quickly become something more corrupting.

Satisfied that the camp was settling down in whatever comfort it could muster he finally directed two, young enough and enthusiastic enough for the task, to track inland to scout a way across the rock which barred their progress, to travel as far as the light would permit and then make camp themselves.

“Camp is set?” asked Abishai, when he returned to the tent his friend graciously permitted him to share. “All are settled?”

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“Camp is set, but I am not sure that all are settled,” Elusai answered, helping himself to a leg of roasted fowl, filling a cup of wine and sitting cross-legged on his bedroll.

Abishai, seated on a folding chair which had something of the look of a throne, its wooden legs ornately carved, the canvas seat decoratively stitched, said, “What do you mean by that, Elusai? What troubles you?”

Elusai shrugged, not because words failed him but because of a fear of giving utterance to them before Abishai. “This is such a ragbag collection of men that I worry that they can ever be settled in each other’s company,” he finally confessed.

With a condescending smile and a patronizing tone Abishai said, “An army by definition is comprised of a general, lieutenants and ranks. And if you are ever to become a general, Elusai, then you should not be so haughty as to look down with disdain on the lower ranks.”

“Eighty men make an army, do they?” Elusai responded, the sarcasm he felt unfortunately not disguised, for it pricked at Abishai’s fragile temper.

“These men are the kernel of my army!” he spat with sudden rage. “I will have my army! This ragbag collection of men, as you call them, will be the captains and sergeants of a force of thousands! And if you would be a part of my kingdom you would do well to appreciate this!”

A troop grown into an army? An army begetting a kingdom? A need for adventure becoming a lust for power? Abishai’s outburst had surprised Elusai and he was quick to placate his companion. “Abishai, my friend, I see that what you say is true. But I see, also, what peril there is in our present situation, that the lack of visible purpose might threaten the unity of your force.” He was relieved to see Abishai’s temper subside, continued, “Without a common purpose men of such disparate backgrounds will be at each other’s throats.”

“Without throats to slit they might slit each other’s,” Abishai nodded, giving his own interpretation to the suggestion.

This was not quite the unity of purpose Elusai had in mind, but he agreed. “They way you were just tempted to go for mine.”

A wry grin was the only apology offered, after which Abishai fell silent.

From time to time Elusai would chance a glance at his friend, note the distant look, the furrowed brow, the mouth set grim as if in dissatisfaction. In Golgonooza –how Elusai wished he was back there now- this would have signified a tedium felt, presaged some means of alleviating it whose severity would vary according to the mood. Abishai could have been content with the diversion of a prank, or not satisfied with anything less than murder or rape, such were the extremes that boredom drove him to.

Departing Golgonooza, it had first been an adventure simply to be away from the city, to have men joining his ranks and following; now Elusai feared that Lady Haggitha’s mission would not be enough for her nephew.

* * *

Perhaps Dona Isobel had waited as long as she could, but when they reached the far side of the island there was no craft to be seen, neither small nor large, nor even any flotsam which might serve as a raft.

“What now?” wondered Griff.

“We wade?” said Leo, for they could see the mainland which seemed to be no more than a hawk and a spit away.

“Not unless you wish your toes to provide the fish hereabouts with a tasty snack,” the School Master told him, “or have leeches the size of household pets fasten themselves so fiercely that the only way to peel them off is to take the skin with them.”

“Okay, point taken,” said Leo, shuddering at the thought,

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and then again more violently. “Jesus but it’s cold! And my feet are getting sore!” he grumbled, for he still wore nothing more than the boxer shorts in which they had found him.

“You would hope for a store? A gentleman’s outfitters?” the School Master smiled at his discomfort, exhibiting an unaccustomed humor. “Well there are none between here and Golgonooza.”

“You mean I’ve got to travel all the way dressed like this? I’ll die of embarrassment if I don’t die of hypothermia.”

“There is one way,” the School Master suggested, turning to Griff and giving him what might have passed for a knowing wink, if it had come from any other person, but seemed no more than a tic on his expressionless face.

“Imagination?” Griff guessed, and the School Master nodded, telling him that he may forego the anger on this occasion.

Griff imagined Leo as he had been at the last art school ball, his costume that of a Chinese mandarin, a heavy gown of mock silk which reached to the ground, slippers with curling toes, a hat the shape of a domed pill-box.

“What the hell?” said Leo, feeling the sudden weight of the garment draped around his shoulders. He held out his arms, looked at the hands engulfed by the full sleeves. “What is this? The emperor’s new clothes? Am I imagining this?”

“Imagination has something to do with it,” the School Master agreed, but would say no more. “Your friend will explain as we go.”

“You’re responsible for this?” Leo asked Griff, who gave a guilty grin. “Then for God’s sake give me something a little more suitable!”

“If I can remember how,” Griff promised, and explained the nature of the instruction he had been given by the School Master.

Leo listened as attentively as at a lecture and then,

struggling to come to terms with the notion, said, “You mean that whatever we imagine in our world becomes actuality in this?”

“Everything created by every artist,” Griff agreed. He had had more time to accustom himself to the idea, and was now reasonably comfortable with it. “Recall the landscape we found ourselves in, when we first arrived?” he said. “Reminiscent of Claude, don’t you think? And the mountains we saw in the distance? Some so clear in their definition that they were straight out of Caspar David Friedrich, others blurred and fractured, more Cezanne.”

“Everything by every artist?” Leo repeated. “It would have to be one hell of a big world to hold all that.”

“It grows all the time, it has no limits,” the School Master confirmed. “It is not infinite but it has no boundaries.”

“And now that we’ve brought our imaginations here we can affect this world? You were able to do this?” Leo said, looking down with distaste at his gaudy costume. “I might be able to? How? Show me.”

“It’s as the School Master says. Imagination. The exercise of it. Simple as that.”

As they continued on their way along the shore, looking for some means by which they might cross the narrow expanse of water, Leo fell silent, was noticeably contemplative, his brow furrowed. Obviously exercising his imagination, Griff guessed, though in what way, to what ends, he refrained from asking. Then he grinned, some minutes on and some distance further, when he saw the costume he had dressed his friend in disappear, to be replaced by leather trousers of the kind Leo had always wanted but never been able to afford. His upper body he covered with a soft silk shirt and a leather jerkin, his feet with stout biker’s boots.

“Very smart, very sartorial,” Griff congratulated him.

They took a breather while the School Master considered

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their next move, sat gazing at the mainland which was so tantalizingly close, at the range of mountains which began as Cezanne and then become something altogether more atmospheric. Leo's gaze focused, there was a rapt concentration in his eyes which prompted Griff to wonder what his friend was up to. Then there appeared before them one of the women who had abducted Leo, swaying invitingly, her fingers touching her body, parting her skirts, baring her breast.

"Oh, for goodness sake!" said Griff, and the creature disappeared in a flash of embarrassment..

"Practice makes perfect," said Leo apologetically, but then almost immediately two more figures appeared, female again, but this time completely naked, stepping from the water, one wringing her hair, arms raised to flaunt her body, the other showing some attempt at modesty, one arm across her breasts, the other hand covering the groin.

"Stop it!" said Griff.

"Nothing to do with me this time," Leo promised.

The School Master rose to his feet, gave a smile of recognition. "Veni," he said, his arm raised in a salute.

"Who?"

"Veni. The plural of Venus? Cactus, cacti; Venus, Veni?"

"Seems logical," Leo conceded.

"The one who feels no shame in being naked is Venus Anadyomene," the School Master told them. "The one who is rather more modest about her state is Venus Pudica. Come. Perhaps they may be able to help us."

"Give us piggybacks across?" Leo hoped.

"Treat them with respect," the School Master admonished him, "for they are Goddesses, after all."

The two naked women stepped from the water smiling, one openly, the other shyly, two putti in attendance at each, small winged cherubs hovering at their shoulders, puffed cheeks

blowing gently to dry them. It was the first of the two women who spoke.

“Greetings, School Master,” she said. “It is many a day since we have seen you in these parts. What brings you to our shore?”

“A need to get across to the other side,” he answered. “I must get my two young friends here to Golgonooza. We were meant to have transport, a boat, but unfortunately we missed it. And unlike you we are not impervious to the menaces which the channel harbors.”

“I pity the weakness of mortals,” said Venus Anadyomene to her silent companion. “But I think perhaps there is a way you might cross,” she told the School Master.

“Imagination?” Griff wondered.

“Stuff that!” said Leo quickly. “I’ll trust it to keep me clothed, but not to keep me afloat on a sea of carnivorous fish. Not till I know a little more about it, at least.”

Venus Anadyomene gave the School Master a quizzical look, at which he shook his head, said, “They are learning something of the Afflatus, of the power of the imagination. Tell me, Venus Anadyomene, what is this means by which you think we might cross?”

“There was an intrusion into the world quite recently, close by here, a man the size of four men with a child perched on his shoulder. All day he crosses and recrosses, passing from one shore to the other. I would guess that he had the strength to bear three more burdens comfortably enough.”

“Then that is our way,” the School Master decided. “I thank you for your guidance, Venus Anadyomene, and your sister, Venus Pudica.”

“It is our pleasure,” she smiled. “May you find your destination safely.”

Griff and Leo nodded their farewells, which were met by a smile and a blush, and followed the School Master along the

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shore. It was a mile further on that they saw the figure in the middle of the channel, the water lapping the hem of the knee-length tunic he wore. It was only as he moved towards them that they were able to appreciate his height, as tall as a house, and make out the tiny figure on his shoulder.

“Jesus!” gasped Leo.

“Christopher,” Griff recognized.

“You know this person, this giant of a man?” the School Master asked them. “You might explain the need we have of his services?”

Leo shook his head. “He is a fable of our world, what some would pass off as history. You do the talking.”

The figure reached the shore, was about to turn and make his way back when the School Master called out to him, his head craned back, his hands cupping his mouth to make himself heard.

“Sir! We need to reach the far shore!” he called. “Can you help us?”

Silently the figure nodded, indicated that they were to cling to his tunic, which was so voluminous that once they were hold of it they were able to lay in its folds as comfortably as if they were cradled in hammocks. Gently they swayed with his movements as he made his way to the opposite shore, slapped against his thick thighs, at one point fell dangerously close to the water level, where Griff thought he saw fish with razor teeth just below the surface, salivating at the scent of human flesh. Slowly they were lifted clear of the lapping waves, though, as the sea bed rose, and were finally deposited on dry land.

“Thank you!” the School Master called, but their ferryman was silent as he turned from them, his single eternal passenger serene.

“Might our way be a little easier now?” Griff hoped.

“There is transport, of sorts, though how comfortable you

might find it I cannot guarantee. It has the effect of making some people quite nauseous. It lies ahead, there," he pointed.

Towards nothing.

* * *

Though the path the two scouts had found was gentler than the way that had originally faced the troop it still took much of a day to negotiate it, to scale its height and see the land which lay beyond. The track was narrow, winding, there were precipitous drops in places and the ground underfoot was of loose rock. Elusai would have favored moving still further inland but Abishai was impatient and insistent, would settle for no way but forward, with the result that a dozen horses and mules were lost, some carrying men and others provisions. Further supplies were lost when crossing a fast-running stream which proved to be deeper than it was wide and there was barely a man among them who had escaped unbruised or unscarred, their horses jarring them against the rough rock faces as they struggled their way to the top. But now they had gained the summit and stood beside their scarred and bleeding mounts, regarding the land which was spread before them.

The rock fell more gently on its northern side, an easy gradient of compacted ground which ran for a mile or so before giving way to a carpet of green which continued as far as the eye could see. The troop remounted, rode on, and it was not until they had traveled some distance that they realized that the carpet was actually a canopy, that the swathe of green was not a sweeping open plain but forest, the tops of the trees knitted so tightly together that they presented a single emerald mass. Drawing closer still they saw that the floor of the forest was not as dense as they might have feared, that the towering trunks of the trees offered space enough for them to enter, if not definite tracks to follow. The canopy, too, though blocking out the sky, admitted enough light through the mesh of leaves that the way

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was not dark but rather washed with a strange aquatic translucence. They might have camped another night, but Abishai favored pressing on, and within moments of entering the forest it seemed that they were swimming through the light, the air rippling around them.

“Might we not lose our way?” Elusai feared, but Abishai had a compass and was confident that they would not.

Nonetheless Elusai drew a dagger from his belt and scored every sixth tree as he passed, feeling that if they were going to travel in circles he would prefer to know sooner rather than later.

“Do you not sometimes miss Golgonooza?” he ventured, some way on, for it seemed to him that he had been away from the city for an age.

“The women perhaps, with their fine clothes and subtle ways,” Abishai replied. “Those we have met since leaving the city have lacked sophistication. But then all women are exotic in their own particular ways, it is their differences that recommend them.”

“And is that all? There is nothing more that you miss?”

“Other than a soft bed and a cozy tart? Well, I would admit to missing mulled wine and chilled pilsner, a slice of beef cooked with cream and peppercorn or a honeyed pig stuck with cloves.”

“You would miss these things enough to return?” asked Elusai, now more forcibly than ever struck by a sickness for home.

“Hell no, Elusai!” Abishai laughed. “But I look forward to enjoying them when I return in triumph!”

Hail the conquering hero, thought Elusai, and then snapped his head sharply to one side, thinking that he saw the bark of a tree scored by a blade. But no, in the blur of a moment that it took his vision to focus the imagined scar was just as quickly gone.

Night might have begun to fall by now, they had been

traveling long, but it seemed to have no effect on the light beneath the forest canopy, it could have been the sun, the moon or the stars which shone above but all around them the air still shimmered a translucent green. Some men were heard to complain of fatigue, of saddle-weariness, of hunger; others felt it unwise to continue traveling through the night, even though the light still refused to fade, and some were fearful of what might lurk in the undergrowth. To all Abishai had the same response, that they could fall back if they wished, sure that they would not.

The faith he had in himself as a leader of men was beginning to trouble Elusai.

“My Lord?” said a voice, and he ignored the greeting, not thinking that the salutation might be addressed to him until it came again. “Lord Elusai?”

He turned in the saddle, recognized the man who had ridden alongside him, neither knight nor brigand but one of those honest men who had grown weary of making a living at his trade. A woodsman, if he remembered correctly.

“Yes? What is it?”

“I have noted you scoring the bark of trees as you pass.”

“So that we might not retrace our tracks,” Elusai explained with patience, thinking the reason obvious.

“Quite,” the woodsman understood. “A wise precaution in a forest such as this. Except I have also noted the trees repairing themselves within moments of the touch of your blade.”

“Repairing themselves?” Elusai laughed. “Your eyes deceive you, or weariness has your mind befuddled.”

“I assure you it is true, my Lord. I have been following some twenty feet behind you and I have seen it. Let me show you,” the woodsman offered, and danced his horse to the left so that others might pass.

Elusai steered his mount after, following the woodsman to a tree whose trunk was broad and towered straight and true above.

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“Score it as you did the others,” he was told, and he drew his dagger, cut a scar inches deep into the bark. A viscous green sap began to flow from the wound, but within seconds started to congeal. No more than a minute later it had hardened, crystallized, fallen and left the tree seeming as untouched as before.

“Well I’ll be damned!” he said, returning his dagger to its sheath.

“And we may be lost,” said the woodsman, to which he had to agree. They might well have been traveling in circles, for all his craft. “You will tell Lord Abishai?”

“I will try to persuade him that we rest a while,” said Elusai, and cantered his horse to the head of the column.

As he reached the vanguard, however, from where Abishai led, the troop was coming to a halt. He reined his horse alongside Abishai’s, saw his friend craning forward, eyes narrowed to peer ahead.

“Quiet, Elusai. The forest thins ahead, I see movement.” There was the singing of a sword or two behind them as they were drawn from scabbards, crossbows were cocked and other weapons readied, but he raised his hand to demand silence. “Charge someone with keeping the bulk of the company here,” he whispered to Elusai. “You and I will advance with a dozen others, while the rest follow at a distance. They are not to rejoin us until they hear my clarion call.”

Elusai carried out the order, selecting a dozen of the nobles to make up the advance party, another experienced man to keep the bulk of the company in some semblance of discipline. Abishai then led the way forward, cautiously guarded by a man on either side, horses moving at walking pace, as quietly as possible through the undergrowth. A flash of movement ahead confirmed the direction they were to take, others followed at intermittent intervals, sometimes off to one side or the other but always a

little ahead so as to allay the fear that there was a conscious move to outflank them.

Still Elusai worried that they might be being drawn into a trap; the towns and settlements they had encountered previously, though unfamiliar, had all been a part of a charted land, the majority of them marked on maps, and there had never been the fear of a hostile reception. Now, however, they were in an alien land, unknown to them, and there was no telling what type of men might people it.

For another hour they advanced -were drawn?- forward, with still never anything more than the briefest glimpse of their quarry. And then the forest which had been thinning progressively came to a sudden end, they were at its edge and looking out onto an open valley which was washed in a rosy twilight, a narrow corridor of green which was funneled by the trees, down to a distant beach where the sea was a vivid color, still glowing from the last rays of the setting sun. At the head of the valley a handful of people stood facing them, waiting expectantly, everyone of them bare-chested, men and women alike, some quite totally naked.

“Savages,” one of the party remarked.

“Cautiously now,” warned Abishai, and reined his horse forward until he was only feet away from the waiting group, his men advancing with him and aligning themselves on each side.

There was a moment's silence and then a girl separated herself from those facing them, the youngest of them, stepped forward confidently and raised a hand to her breast. “Tehura,” she said.

Abishai and Elusai exchanged a curious glance, others regarded the naked body with looks which varied from distaste to delight.

“Tehura!” she said again, louder, striking her breast to bring a blush to the honey-colored skin.

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“Tehura?” Elusai repeated, and now it was the turn of the natives to show confusion, and perhaps some amusement, turning to each other and grimacing, shrugging and shaking their heads as they repeated the word.

“We have come from afar,” Abishai pronounced.

“We are weary,” Elusai added, and a second of the natives broke from the group, came forward to put an arm around the younger girl’s shoulder.

“I am Tioka and you are welcome,” he said, but there was no hint of hospitality in his tone, no smile to say that the welcome was sincere.

Elusai returned the greeting with the same gravity -‘I am Elusai of Golgonooza’- and it seemed that perhaps a formality had been fulfilled for now the expressions which faced them softened, the one who had introduced himself as Tioka turned to his companions and nodded his head vigorously, whereupon they all advanced amid a babble of voices.

“Welcome indeed!” grinned Tioka, as their horses were caught by the bridles and urged to move. “Come. You must eat with us, rest with us.”

“The remainder of the company?” Elusai whispered to Abishai, as their mounts were jolted forward.

“Not yet,” answered Abishai. “We will wait and see what transpires.”

They were hurried along the valley, some natives tugging at their horses, some slapping their flanks, others running ahead before veering to the right, over a shallow sandy crest and through a colonnade of palms, leading the party into their village.

“Welcome to Noa Noa,” said Tioka. “Enjoy our hospitality and its traditions. Take comfort for the night.”

* * *

“Are you sure we want to go this way?” asked Selina, looking uncertainly at the forest which faced them, the trunks of trees

which were too smooth to seem natural, the leaves which were so varied in their shape and color that they had not the slightest uniformity, the matt green of the floor which was so featureless and even.

“This is the shortest way to the Prado, so Caspar insisted.”

“The shortest way is not always the quickest,” said Selina, the pithy little aphorism making her sound like a prophet of doom.

“Very profound, Selina, but this is the way he directed us and this is the way we’re taking.”

Caspar had sketched out a rudimentary map for them, which might have been more detailed if it had not been for Fayaway’s impatience to set about bartering her gems, or less confusing if it had not been for his own habit of accompanying every direction with an extravagant wave of the hands. What they had, ultimately, was the instruction that they go due east until they reached the Forest of Biomorphic Abstraction, then travel across it as quickly as possible to find the Prado waiting for them on the other side.

The Forest of Biomorphic Abstraction was what they now faced, and in one way at least it seemed unintimidating enough. The trees which constituted the forest were quite widely spread, for one thing, there was ample room to step around them, they were not so closely grouped as to present impregnable shadows and worrying crannies and the ground which separated them seemed reasonably even. In another respect, though....

Trees were what made a forest, but these were trees the like of which Anna had never seen. There was little in them that was either green or natural, nothing that her father could have conjured from his garden or greenhouse. They had trunks which had the silky patina of silver or gold, trunks which had the color and texture of pewter or steel. She could not imagine anyone ever able to take an axe to them. From some there hung no more than

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a dozen leaves, or maybe pieces of unidentifiable fruit, and each was a different color -black, red, blue, orange- each a different shape. No, there was nothing natural about these trees.

And in some of the branches, if she could call the twisted contorted limbs such, she was sure she saw things move, creatures whose shapes shifted with each twitch, now like a bird, now like a worm, now like some sluggish amoebic bacteria. She urged Selina forward at her side, before her friend could demur at entering, stepped cautiously between the first trees, towards the heart of the forest. As scattered as the trees were, they had a view some distance ahead which never dimmed or faded, every object just as clearly defined, no matter how close, no matter how distant. Some of the growths they passed were so thin and fragile that they might have been spun of spider's silk, some so crude in their construction that they might have been the armatures of incomplete sculptures, others so sharp and pointed that they might have been forged of steel; one was covered with leaves of varied geometric shapes, of garish primary colors, as if they were crude paper cut-outs which had been pasted or pinned there, while from another there hung small pear-drop shaped fruits or berries, tapered ends flicking in the breeze like sperm seen through a microscope, like tadpoles in a pond, more living than vegetation ever is.

"This place spooks me," Selina whispered, her voice as low as it needed to be, intimidated by the silence which was all around them.

"At least it's more negotiable than the jungle we arrived in," Anna said, trying to find some consolation which would offer her friend encouragement. "We'll soon be through it."

"How soon?"

"A half a day, perhaps a little longer, Caspar estimated. We should be out of it before nightfall."

"We'd bloody well better be! I wouldn't fancy being here in

the dark!”

They walked for an hour, two, weaving through the obstacles in their way, subconsciously keeping as far away from each as they could, and in all that time it seemed that no two trees were ever alike, no two shrubs ever of a kind. At times they were faced by blazes of color which caused them to blink, then by areas of such pale pastel grays that it was as if a fog had descended. There was no sun, there was no sky, there was no horizon for all that the way ahead was clear, the matt green ground beneath their feet fading to a steel grey in the distance and then arcing overhead to form a dun featureless canopy.

Selina worried over how they could be sure that they were going in the right direction, marking that there were no landmarks to guide them, no paths to follow, no clues that anyone had passed this way before, at least not frequently enough to leave a trail. For all its haphazard aspect, the forest might have been a carefully constructed maze.

“We can’t be sure,” Anna was forced to admit. “I think we’re still traveling due east, I think we’ve managed to keep on a more or less straight course, despite all the meandering between the trees. Whatever,” she shrugged, “we’ll come out of it eventually.”

“Please God not back where we started,” Selina sighed.

“Tired?” Anna asked, hearing the sigh.

“Not so tired that I want to stop around here.”

“Five minutes? Just for a bite to eat?”

“No,” Selina insisted. “We can eat as we go.”

Anna rummaged in the canvas sack which was slung over her shoulder, took out pieces of bread and cheese which Caspar had supplied them with and handed some to Selina. The bread was coarse, the cheese crumbly, as much spilled onto Selina’s blouse as found its way between her lips and she irritably brushed the scraps away. The last morsel of bread she threw over her shoulder.

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“More?” asked Anna, delving into the bag again.

“No, but I could do with a drink,” Selina answered, “to wash down that ploughman’s lunch that even a farm laborer would turn his nose up at. How many of Fayaway’s gems did that cheating sod sting us for?”

It was as Anna was removing the flask of wine that they heard the twittering behind them, spun around to see Selina’s discarded scrap of bread being fought over by half a dozen featherless creatures which looked like a child’s crude interpretation of a bird, their bodies simple oval shapes, jet black and featureless, with a rudder of a tail protruding at a sharp angle, V-shaped beaks of brilliant yellow, stick legs which forked into three frail claws.

Anna laughed but Selina was horrified, asked, “What the hell are those things?”

“Hungry birdies,” smiled Anna, taking out another piece of bread, breaking it and scattering it on the ground.

The birds, as Anna had interpreted them, went into a wild delirium of a dance, dashing back and forth, pecking the ground greedily for the crumbs of bread.

Selina skipped back, away from them, said to Anna, “Will you stop that! Don’t encourage them!”

“What’s wrong? They seem harmless enough to me.”

So they did, as harmless as any child who had drawn them would believe a bird to be, but then two fought over the same crumb, one stabbing at it with its beak to fling it over its head and then the other giving chase, and there was neither the patience nor the wit to share the morsel. The first hurled itself at the second, pecked forward at the other’s eye to produce a soft ‘pop’ and a bead of blood, then climbed its chest to bury its needle thin claws deep in the throat. Its head moving as fast as a woodpecker’s, it feasted off its victim with markedly more relish than it had fed off the scrap of bread.

“Harmless, huh?” said Selina with a shudder. “Come on, let’s get away before they get too much of a taste for blood.”

With a last glance over her shoulder, Anna followed Selina, the twittering behind them slowly died, silence fell once more. Another two hours passed and still there seemed no end to the forest, still there seemed no end to the variety of its vegetation. Fortunately there was no sign that night was drawing close, or even twilight, their way was still as vivid as when they had first entered. But they had to find a way out soon, Anna knew. She was growing tired, was sure that Selina was too, they needed to be out of the forest to find some place where they could rest comfortably. At one point Selina gave a sudden gasp to feel something brush her cheek, saw that a leaf had fallen onto her shoulder and brushed it away. It was as thin as a leaf, though perhaps of rather too simple a shape, and too bright a crimson. Unlike any falling leaf they had seen before, though, this one did not simply remain where it had fallen but arched its back like a caterpillar, inched its way back across the ground to the parent tree, pulled itself to the base and began to climb, inch by painstaking inch. Despite their urgency to be away they paused to watch, saw it reach a branch and crawl out across it, finally to hang there contented, a brighter crimson than ever before.

“Ugh! This is a hateful place!” Selina said

* * *

Gamaliel felt an itching in his loins, a restlessness pervaded his whole body and there was a twitching of the muscles which would not permit him to be still; he had not slept for six full nights, his hands were forever agitated, his fingers fidgeted like an old maid knitting with invisible needles and as he walked the streets he sniffed at the air, as if searching for some narcotic borne on the breeze.

The burning irritation which affected his groin he was sure was due to Jahiliyah, thinking that it was a need for her he had

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slept with a dozen whores and sundry others without satisfaction, worried that it might be an infection he had caught from her he had covered his parts with all manner of salves and lotions but to no avail. The fire still burned and he wondered: why Jahiliyah? She was a plain girl, and that was to be kind to her, her body was more stout than sensual, her face unremarkable, her teeth too big and her mouth too broad. In the house of Lord Lovecraft, back in Golgonooza, he had never given her a second glance, could not even remember her as having been a part of the household, but now her memory was with him all the time, and accompanying that memory was a desperate need.

And then there was Lady Haggitha. She had offered him none of the comforts that her maid had, she had barely touched him, let alone favored him with an embrace or with open physical affection, and yet his need for her was as great as his need for Jahiliyah. Greater, perhaps, in view of its abstraction. He could not say why, but he felt certain that it was she, as much as her maid, who had him shivering and sniffing as he went, trembling like some dipsomaniac deprived of drink. When he returned to Brynpica he would be fine again, he understood this as surely as he understood the truth that the sun rose in the east and set in the west, grasped its certainty without knowing the science behind it. But he could not return to Brynpica, not yet, his instructions had been to spend a full seven days in Arken and it was as irrefutable as any law of nature that he would adhere to them, as much as his spirit longed to return his body was bound to obey.

The sun was setting above the rooftops of the town, a last sleepless night was facing him, and despite the shadows which fell the air was still sultry, despite the cloying heat he continued to shiver. He had no appetite, had barely eaten since arriving in the town, but his condition had brought with it an unquenchable

thirst and so he followed the street ahead until he came to a tavern. He had spent much of his time in such places, trying to satisfy his thirst or ease the fire in his loins, and it was as if everything was by design, for the taverns were the best places to find the information, the gossip, that Lady Haggitha had required of him. Arken was a town awash with chatter, it was more cosmopolitan even than Golgonooza, people passing through on their way from east to west, from north to south, bringing with them news from all corners of the kingdom. It seemed that in Arken everyone was a stranger with a story to tell.

The inn he entered was no different to any other he had visited, it teemed with a variety of people in a variety of dress, offered drink and food to cater to all tastes. He took a stool at the end of a long table where a dozen people were all talking at once, each anxious to become acquainted with the other, their voices such a babble that it would be an effort to understand them. A serving wench came to him, he asked for a large pitcher of ale, and she offered him a bewildering choice, to which he shrugged, said he would settle for the coldest they had.

“A long journey, friend?” asked one of the company nearby.

He nodded wearily. “It seems that I have been away forever.”

“From where?”

“A place where the women are so beguiling that they could make you lose your mind,” he answered, offering a vague enough truth as his drink was placed before him. He poured himself a cup, drank it down in a single draught and replenished it.

“Ah! A southerner,” the stranger guessed, and nodded sagely. “There is something about the air to the south which makes the passion ooze from a woman’s pores, though I have visited places far in the east where the women clothe their bodies from head to foot, leave only their eyes visible. And do you know, friend, they are the most beguiling I have ever met. It is as

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though every ounce of sensuality is focused there in their gaze.”

“What about the women of Weimar?” another interrupted with his opinion.

“Too cool,” said the first, with a dismissive shake of the head. “Like ice they are, and haughty with it.”

“Sophisticated. Cultured. They have an air about them which only a connoisseur could appreciate.”

“Bah!”

“Pigs!” said a woman, further along the table. “If it is the seductiveness of the body you would talk about then what of the men of the central plains? So lithe,” she crooned, wrapping her arms around her body as if clutching someone to her. “So supple in their limbs that they could wrap you in an embrace that would make you melt,” she said, and pretended to swoon.

The men in the group laughed and jeered, the women among them clapped their hands in appreciation of their sister’s appraisal, and Gamaliel got to his feet, took his drink to a corner of the room where people were gathered in smaller groups, to where there might be conversation rather than ribaldry, the news he needed to take back with him to Brynpica. He had snippets of information already but was not sure of their usefulness to Lady Haggitha, could only hope that they would distract her, if not fully satisfy her. One such snippet had actually come from her own household, no less, a night spent with some other lady’s maid bringing news of Lady Haggitha’s own maid. This was the unfortunate Fitna, always the most beautiful of the lower household but now marred by the scars which had been left by an inexplicable rash.

There had been news from the coast, too, rumors of a troop of warriors growing into an army, and of men joining along the way as if to embark on a crusade. There were those who read something ominous in this, alarmists who saw threats of war or even of invasion, but after the piecing together of a number of

accounts Gamaliel guessed at the truth, that the man at the head of the troop was none other than Abishai, Lady Haggitha's nephew, engaged on the mission he had heard her speak of. No army, then, simply a bored young whelp seeking adventure, but it was possible that Lady Haggitha would welcome news of his progress. Other information he gleaned was of events from further afield, from lands he was not familiar with, of peoples he had never heard mention of before, and though he could make no sense of it, nor decide on its importance, it all stayed with him, to be repeated on his return to Brynpica.

And it seemed that there would be no more of any interest, to himself or to Lady Haggitha, until the two young women sat at the vacant table beside him. He had noted them enter, tall enough to stand out among the crowd, one with hair as golden as his, so that she might have been his twin, and the other with short tresses of burning red which seemed to lick about her head like tongues of flame. Their bared legs still bore the dust of their journey, their arms and faces too, giving their skin a burnished bronze glow, and though they had the aspect of warriors he saw that neither carried a weapon. They surveyed the room, settled for the same quiet corner that he had, and called for a pitcher of ale to share, quenched their thirsts when it came, smearing the grime across their faces as they wiped their mouths with the back of their hands.

Gamaliel heard weary sighs, muttered oaths, curses that their journey had been so arduous.

"And who knows how many more leagues lie ahead of us," said the one who might have been his twin.

"A day or two here in Arken might not be amiss," said the other. "A bed, a hot meal, a little comfort would be welcome after days in the saddle."

"Welcome indeed, and though Lovecraft might grow impatient if we linger..."

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Gamaliel looked up at the mention of the name, his eyes meeting those of the flame-haired girl.

“...I think his escalating feud with van Vogt might keep him occupied enough for the time being.”

The golden-haired woman took another drink, the redhead’s eyes were still fixed on Gamaliel, and it was she who said, “Our conversation interests you?”

Her companion followed her gaze, regarded Gamaliel a moment before saying, “This is Arken, Gwendolen, you know that people here thrive on conversation. It is their nourishment, their food and drink.”

“Well I would prefer it if he did not grow fat on my conversation,” said the one now known as Gwendolen, addressing Gamaliel directly, a fire in her eyes as well as in her hair.

“My apologies,” Gamaliel now said, “but it was your mention of Golgonooza that caught my attention. I, too, am from that city.” Such a coincidence would not be remarkable, there would probably be many of its citizens traveling through Arken, and he added, “I know of Lord Lovecraft, I was once of his household.”

“You are in his employ?”

“Was,” he repeated. “But no longer.” Then, in case these women sided with one faction or the other in this feud they mentioned, he said, “I have no love for Lord Lovecraft, and little knowledge of the First Minister. I have no regard for any Lord and prefer my freedom to servitude.”

“Brave man,” said Gwendolen’s companion.

“Or a rash one,” ventured Gwendolen herself.

“But is it true? There is a feud between the Lord and the First Minister?”

“If you are really from Golgonooza you would know that the one has always hated the other.”

“He was in service, Gwendolen, a menial, you cannot expect

him to have knowledge of politics or court intrigue,” said the more affable of the two women, excusing his ignorance. She gave him a kindly smile as she brushed the golden hair from her face, said, “The hatred they have for each other grows greater by the day, so great that it can no longer be contained but must find its expression in acts of violence.”

“To each other?”

“Eventually, most likely. For the moment the men of one come to an untimely end, then the men of the other, tit for tat, an eye for an eye. It can only be a matter of time, though, before they are truly at each other’s throats.”

“Truly?”

“Truly!” she promised, and broke into laughter. “But look at the innocence, Gwendolen, that he is almost incredulous that such violence could exist!” She reached out and took his chin in her hand, turned his head slightly to study him, then let her hand slip to feel the swell of his biceps. “What is it that you did in the service of Lord Lovecraft?” she asked, and when he offered no more than a shrug for an answer said, “Something physical, to judge by your build. Perhaps it was your duty to service the good Lord’s wife.” She turned to her companion, grinning. “For we know, do we not, that the poor lady finds no joy with her husband. What do you say, Gwendolen? Should we put this young man’s talents to the test? See exactly what it is that he did in Lord Lovecraft’s household?”

Gwendolen gave a tut of disapproval, a sigh of impatience, said, “You really are incorrigible, Ragan.”

* * *

The mountains which had been so distant when -when?- they first arrived in that alien world were now much nearer, but none the clearer for that. Bad weather was still what they reminded Griff of, colored nothing, a blur of cloud and light and fog, all of nature’s worst elements combined. They climbed towards it,

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were soon a part of it, so lost in it that Leo had to hold onto Griff's hand, and Griff onto the School Master's, if they were not to be parted. It was not uncomfortable, there was no stinging wind or lashing rain. There was just.... nothing. Nothing to see, nothing to feel, nothing to touch.

"Here we are," the School Master finally said, bringing them to a stumbling halt, after a mile or more of climbing had brought an ache to their calves and a pain to their chests.

"Where?"

"Sit."

"On what?"

"Just sit," the School Master said. "Trust me, you will find support."

Their feet met a shallow step, which they climbed, then squatted cautiously, first Griff, then Leo, felt a solid wooden surface beneath their buttocks, at their backs.

"Comfortable?" they heard the disembodied voice of the School Master ask.

"As comfortable as a blind man must be in an unfamiliar room," said Griff, still able to see nothing but a blur of colors, no matter which way he looked.

"Just great," Leo concurred, then covered his ears as a whistle shrieked, moved his hands to grip tightly onto his seat as they surged forwards.

Within minutes Griff was able to understand how some people might find the experience nauseous, for his world became more of a blur than ever, there was a sensation of speed but nothing to see which might give a clue as to its rate. It was like a roller-coaster ride through fog, each bend and dip coming so unexpectedly that it made the stomach lurch.

"Everything fine?" asked the School Master.

"Wonderful! Which way is out in case I want to throw up?" Leo asked, and as he turned to his right he felt his shoulder brush

another's which he knew not to be Griff's. "Here, there's someone next to me."

"There is," said a voice he failed to recognize. "So please refrain from sticking your elbows in my ribs."

"Inevitably there's someone next to you, this being the main route into Golgonooza from the south," the School Master told him. "Many people take this train across the Temeraire Mountains."

"We're on a train?" said Griff.

"What else did you think we might be on, that we can hurtle along at such speed?"

Griff was about to search for some sarcastic answer when he felt his stomach heave, felt that hurtling speed increase as whatever carriage it was that held them dipped down a steep incline. And then climbed again

After what seemed a miserable hour or more a voice finally remarked, "Almost out of the mountains now."

"I see the air clearing," said another.

"Wheee!" cried a child, delighted with an exhilarating final plummet.

The air did indeed seem to become a little clearer as their journey leveled out and their speed eased up, became not so much blurred as fragmented, stuttering images flashing by in rapid succession so that a single tree seemed to offer a half dozen repeated images before it had passed, its foliage a mosaic of leaves which echoed each other; or a house, only vaguely recognized as such, would repeat itself in a flickering futurist way, like a succession of still photographs. Slowly, though, the world beyond the carriage -and they could now make it out to be a carriage, could see the shadows of the people they shared it with- slowly the world outside began to compose itself and make sense, cuttings flashing by to fill the compartment with steam, bridges passing overhead, vistas opening up to show first fields,

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then farms, and finally a jumble of rooftops.

At last the train came to a halt, one of a dozen which rested line abreast, gasping smoke into the air, steaming and hissing, and a voice announced, "Gare St Lazare. End of the line. This train terminates here. Please be sure to take all your belongings with you."

They stepped down onto the platform with scores of others, all seeming to be the same bluish-grey color in the smoking steaming air, regardless of how they were dressed. It was only when they strode from the station that their surroundings took on any more varied color.

"Right, I will establish you in some lodgings and then there are people I must see to appraise of the situation. Taxi, hansom or rickshaw? Which would you prefer?" the School Master asked, pointing to the variety of carriages arranged on the station's forecourt.

"Would you mind very much if we walked, if it isn't too far?" said Leo, still feeling a little queasy after their giddy journey across the Temeraire Mountains.

"Not at all," agreed the School Master. "It will be a thirty minute walk to Camden Town, a chance for you to see a little of our city."

What struck Griff and Leo immediately was the diversity of the architecture and the strange juxtapositions which were contrived. They would walk along a dirt track flanked by towering steel and glass structures, reminiscent of Mies van der Rohe or Le Corbusier, then turn onto the most ornately paved thoroughfare where the buildings were little more than wattle and daub. A reasonably modern red brick house might have a thatched roof; a mud hut, impossibly tall, have an external elevator, the polished glass tube so incongruous against the primitive structure. In some streets gas jets hissed and spluttered, in others walls were ablaze with sparking neon

decorations, making their retinas smart with their harsh fluorescence.

“It’s like the place was put together by a madman,” Griff whispered to Leo. “By a kid with some sophisticated Lego set.”

“Weird,” Leo agreed.

They reached Camden Town, which looked.... much like Camden Town must have done decade or two before Leo and Griff were born, they supposed. Some buildings might once have been grand, some once humble, but now all were alike in their common disrepair, their brickwork crumbling, their window frames peeling, what might have been petals of blossom outside each actually a dandruff coating of flaking paint.

“It is comfortable, clean, I promise you,” said the School Master, finally stopping outside one building. He knocked on the door which was opened by a tub of a woman whose breasts, belly and thighs were all a part of a single column of flesh. “I have guests for you, Mrs. Molloy,” he told her, “honored guests. They are here at the invitation of the School of the Rose+Croix so you will treat them with the deference that any member of that School deserves. You will not cheat them.”

His words seemed to carry some weight, for the woman bowed as best her bulk would permit and led them up a twisting flight of stairs to a first floor, a second, on to the uppermost floor where she said the air would be a little clearer and more fragrant.

“It will suffice,” the School Master decided on behalf of them, quickly inspecting the room, taking in the two shallow cots and the low table which separated them, then the tiny window beneath the eaves of the house which would at least open, would let some fresh air into the tiny attic room. “And you will feed them? Whatever they wish?” he said, his words more a command than a request.

“I will feed them,” the woman agreed, her grubby fingers drumming against each other as if anticipating the money she

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would demand. "Whatever they wish."

"Then I will leave them in your care," the School Master finally accepted, and to Leo and Griff he said, "I will see you in a day, maybe two, to let you know what your next move might be. The concierge will give you tokens, at the expense of the School of the Rose+Croix. You can exchange them anywhere, for anything, you need want for nothing until I return. And worry not, for Golgonooza is a welcoming place. You will find few threats on its streets. But if you should, just remember-"

"Imagination, anger, no hesitation," Griff recalled.

"Eh?" asked Leo.

"Just something to bear in mind," Griff told his friend.

* * *

"Where are my girls? Where is that blasted Ragan?" demanded Madame le Roy, anxiously pacing the floor. "I ought to have heard from her by now. She should have reached Brynpica and completed her mission, sent news that she is on her way back."

At the bar Lord Lovecraft sat silently, his gaze following her movements, any anxiety he felt for the moment masked by the impassive expression. They were in the central room of the Cabaret Voltaire, empty but for a couple of the more trusted staff, the doors locked and guarded while the situation was assessed and options considered.

Madame le Roy continued to worry aloud. "Damn that Ragan! If she has thought to make a jaunt of her mission, taking her entertainment as she goes, then I will draw her fingernails out slowly, one at a time!" She turned to Lord Lovecraft. "Can she not sense that she is needed? Can she not feel it in her waters that one of her sisters needs her?"

"It is unlikely," said Lord Lovecraft calmly. "Even had Ragan been psychic she could never have guessed that you would have sent one of the Daughters of Albion to make an attempt on the life of the First Minister."

“I thought to do you a service, my Lord,” said Madame le Roy, sensing his disapproval.

“You thought nothing, Madame, or little that was sane. When I agreed to your help it was enough that you send Ragan to Brynpica to retrieve my wife. I did not expect you to commission one of your girls to assassinate van Vogt.” His face darkened at the further failing as he said, “Still less did I expect the girl to be taken.”

“Dead,” Madame le Roy lamented. “These girls are more than my Daughters, they are my family. And now one is dead.”

“Perhaps,” agreed Lord Lovecraft, “if she had the wit to sacrifice herself, to fight against capture to the end. Otherwise she is tortured, stretched and torn, pierced and scored, her limbs loosened from her torso, her tongue loosened in her mouth.”

“She will not speak,” Madame le Roy was sure

“She will,” said Lord Lovecraft, equally certain.

“But she cannot be traced back to you. You were ignorant of her intention.”

Lord Lovecraft gave a mocking mirthless laugh. “van Vogt and anyone allied with him will have immediately suspected my involvement. The man may be obese and obnoxious and have a penchant for young boys, but the one thing he is not is stupid. If he stumbled on the stairs or tripped in the street he would seek to have me implicated.”

“But if there is no proof...” Madame le Roy began.

“None is needed if his only wish is to wage a war of vengeance against me.” He gazed with dissatisfaction around the room, now so tawdry in the daylight, stucco seen to be flaking from the walls, the bar and tables strewn with pitchers and tankards, empty bottles and stained glasses. The air was stale with the smell of the previous night’s excesses, a cocktail of pungent perfumes and bodily odors which made him wrinkle his nose. “I will be damned if I will make this place my prison,

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though, I will not be intimidated. If I was to languish in isolation that would be satisfaction enough in itself for the venerable van Vogt.”

“Then what do we do?” asked Madame le Roy.

“We?” he repeated, then smiled and opened his arms to her, beckoning her forward. She approached cautiously, letting him fold his arms around her but not yet softening in his embrace. “Yes, ‘we’, I suppose it is still ‘we’. You have failed me, I must confess, but I still have some affection for you. I would much prefer your failings, born of a love for me, to my wife’s selfish indifference.”

She kissed him, gently on the cheek, let her body rest more comfortably against his, asked again, “So what do we do?”

He ran his fingers across the necklace she wore, as if they were prayer beads to focus his thoughts, said, “Firstly we must hope that Ragan returns promptly with my wife. Once her knowledge is prized from her we can have the power of the Hashishim with us, and then need no longer worry about van Vogt.”

“But we do not trust in hope alone,” she knew.

“No, Madame, we do not,” he agreed. “We remain vigilant, of course. My home would be safer than your apartments, I think, so we will move there. I will have men of mine with me at all times, and you, if you still have faith in your Daughters of Albion-”

“I have.”

“Then you will have them in your company whenever you venture into the city. As for the Daughter you have lost, Estrild.... I fear, Madame, that if she is not already dead then we must try to arrange her demise.”

As Madame le Roy nodded regretfully a voice said, “No need of that, Sir.”

They turned to see two of the Daughters at the door and

standing between them a young man, as slightly built as a street urchin but wearing the fine clothes of a rich man's squire. He had initially addressed Lord Lovecraft, but was now gazing with admiration at the women who flanked him, shifting slowly from foot to foot, swaying slightly as if he would rub his body against theirs.

"Who is this?" asked Madame le Roy. "You were told to guard the door, to let no one in."

"He asked to see the Daughters of Albion, Madame. Said he had news of one of their company."

"Estrild. That's the name, isn't it?" the young man smiled.

Lord Lovecraft regarded him with suspicion. "He has been searched for weapons?"

"He has," one of the guards answered, and the young man grinned, a flush to his cheeks as if he would welcome being searched a second time.

"Then bring him forward, let him speak."

The guards ushered the young boy forward, stood him out of striking distance of Lord Lovecraft and Madame le Roy.

"So, young man, what brings you here?"

"I came to speak to the Daughters of Albion," he answered.

"Then you speak to me," Madame le Roy told him, and he gave her an appraising look which bordered on insolence, as if the title – 'daughter' – had been misappropriated by a woman her age. "To me," she insisted, as sternly as the mother he had probably never known.

"What do you know of Estrild, boy?" asked Lord Lovecraft, concealing his amusement.

"I know that she is presently held by First Minister van Vogt, that she is in chains in a dungeon beneath the ministerial palace."

"She lives?" asked Madame le Roy.

"How do you know her to be Estrild?" Lord Lovecraft

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pressed. “The First Minister keeps many people incarcerated in his dungeons.”

“She told me,” the boy answered simply. “Her name was Estrild, she said, she was one of the Daughters of Albion, and would I get word to them at the Cabaret Voltaire.”

“And how is it that you managed to get access to her in the First Minister’s dungeons?”

“The First Minister is, er, rather fond of me,” the boy explained, as bashful as such a cocky young lad could be. “I have become quite well acquainted with the palace, can gain access to most of its nooks and crannies.”

“You come and go as you please?”

“I have –how shall I say?- assured him of my loyalty.”

“You share the First Minister’s bed?” Lord Lovecraft guessed.

“But van Vogt takes only the blind boys from the Academy,” Madame le Roy pointed out. “He thinks their blindness ensures discretion, keeps his habits secret.”

“That used to be the case, but I am a person of exceptional talents,” the boy boasted, his chest swelling proudly.

“Accepting that all you say is true, why are you here? A person of exceptional talents such as yourself, a cocksure little runt if you will pardon my candour, it cannot be simply because someone who might be Estrild asked you to come.”

“You are as astute as I am cocksure, my Lord,” said the boy, effecting a respectful bow. “I am here in the hope that I might make a profit. Fine clothes and a comfortable life are all that the First Minister offers for my services. Now if you were to give me gold, then I might take you to Estrild so that you might deliver her from her unfortunate torture.”

* * *

They must have reached the forest’s centre by now, Anna supposed, the most fertile part of it, for not only had she noticed

that the trees were clumped a little more closely about them, but she had also become aware that there was more movement in them, around them, above them. Nothing that could be easily identified, nothing as obvious as the birds she had fed the bread to, but shapes which shifted continually, as if searching for some comfortable form. Above their heads a clutch of bright blue lozenge shapes flew across the treetops, things of such a simple geometry that they could as easily have been paper darts as birds. Five hours, she estimated, give or take a little, since they had first entered the forest. And if they were only just passing its centre she now began to worry that they would never be out of it before nightfall.

Selina, she sensed, was troubled by the same concern, and unconsciously they both picked up their pace, were stepping forward briskly at a rate which belied their fatigue when they were suddenly pulled short by a piercing screech of a bird call.

It echoed and died as they scanned the trees, but then came again, was repeated louder still; or, more worryingly, returned, for the second cry had not come from the same direction as the first. Yes, returned, Anna realized, for a third call came from another direction still. They looked around in panic as the piercing screeches filled the air.

“There!” said Selina, pointed directly ahead, and Anna turned to see a creature hop from an upper branch to a lower one, cock its head and peer menacingly at them.

It was the size of a vulture but the shape of a Stealth bomber, harsh and angular, so asymmetric in its form, with one folded wing so much larger than the other, the pointed head not central to the body, that it seemed unlikely that it could ever fly. It obviously could, though, for a second swooped over their heads to join it, then a third swept in from their right to make up the trio, this one noticeably smaller, probably the offspring of the larger two.

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A chick the size of an eagle!

“We walk around?” Selina said, in a hushed voice.

“A little way, not too far,” Anna agreed. “We don’t want to get lost.”

“Lost?” Selina laughed scornfully. “When were we ever not? We’ve been lost since the moment we came into this damn forest!”

Her voice had risen, her derisive laughter had echoed, and this seemed to stir the creatures in the tree ahead, they took up their cries again, orange tongues warbling in the pitch black maw of their beaks. Then one of the larger pair slowly rose from the branch, lifted itself to treetop height, gave one final screech and swooped down towards them. Selina returned the bird’s cry with a scream of her own, crouched to the ground and covered her head. Anna was frozen with fear.

As the bird fell slowly, lumberingly, towards her, a huge black polygon of a thing which defied the laws of flight, she felt her fear build, thought ‘this is it, I’ve had it’. But in those few brief seconds which separated the creature from its target she thought also of her family, her future, Griff, and felt the fear replaced by an indignation which burned like a fever, burned so fiercely that it was impossible to contain. In that instant, when she felt her whole body flush, her cheeks burn fiercely and her brow pulse with a feverish heat, the bird crumpled in mid air, fell to the ground yards from them, wings twitching, feet clawing the air.

“What the hell did you do, Anna?” Selina asked, peering through her knitted fingers.

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” Anna confessed, as Selina got to her feet, stood beside her and gripped her arm.

They were both trembling.

On the limb of the tree the two remaining birds were silent. Then the smaller of the two, the chick, dropped to the ground

and hopped across to the injured one, circled it, cocked its head to the left and to the right. Then it looked back to the tree, cried, "Mama, Papa is wounded!"

"Bloody hell it spoke!" Anna gasped.

* * *

Elusai kept some distance behind Abishai, losing himself in the ranks of the company as he dwelt on the calamity their offer of hospitality had brought on the people of Noa Noa, still shocked into silence by all they had suffered because of their innocent friendliness.

He and Abishai and the others of the advance troop had been welcomed into the village, greeted as effusively as the heroes Abishai would pretend they were, invited to share in their food and drink.

And more.

The chief of the village, Tioka, had recognized them as warriors and afforded them respect, asked enthusiastically after their mission, their crusade, the adventure which had brought them to that remote corner of the kingdom. Abishai had been vague in his answers, preferring questions of his own which had been obliquely phrased. It was when he remarked on the isolation of the village, and the lack of contact it must have with strangers, that Tioka mentioned the two young women. They had been warriors too, he said, though on what kind of mission he could not imagine, for they had shown interest in the Afflatus, the source of all creativity, had professed an interest in discovering it when he had sensed that it was already with them.

Strange, he had thought, and hinting at some sublime mission.

Pertinent to their own quest, Abishai understood, and decided that these two recent visitors to Noa Noa were the quarry they had come in search of, the way to the Hashishim creature Lady Haggitha's scribe had spoken of. He had questioned the

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chief further, but other than the information that they had headed for a town named San Romano he had learned nothing more, the old man's tongue so loosened by drink that he would prefer to babble rather than to speak of serious matters.

It was then, when all were mellow with the village's potent brew, that the atrocities began.

"Our tradition in Noa Noa," said Tioka, "our gesture of hospitality towards visitors we receive is that we offer our daughters to them, so that they might have comfort for the night."

"Then I will take this one," Abishai laughed lustily, reaching out to grasp the young woman who had bent close to replenish his drink.

Tioka shook his head slowly, smiled politely. "She is already someone's mate."

"I will take her!" Abishai insisted, pulling her into his lap with one hand, drawing his sword with the other.

If the woman's husband was among the company, her father or son, brothers or uncles, then all were too stunned by the action or too dulled by drink to respond. A silence bore down heavily on the clearing, Abishai's challenging gaze tracked around the circle of men who were gathered about the fire, then settled on one of the troop nearby. At a nod from him the call of a horn broke the night, a high-pitched piping tone which sent the birds squawking from the trees, and as Abishai thrust forward with his sword to pierce the belly of Tioka other men drew weapons, striking out blindly, and there was a thunder of hooves as the rest of the troop burst from the undergrowth. The men of the Scented Land were no warriors, naked or semi-naked as they were they seemed all the more vulnerable and were easily cut down, many where they lay in a drunken stupor. The women put up more resistance, the fiercest killed as quickly as their men had been, others wounded just sufficiently to incapacitate them, to

leave them vulnerable to whatever manner of rape was preferred.

In the mayhem Elusai felt dizzy, there were naked bodies in profusion, and if he had contact with any, as he surely must have done, then to his shame he could not recall the circumstances of it. That shame was still with him as dawn broke, as the rising sun brought a blush to the faces of the troop which was of blood-lust and the most perverse kind of passion. The sea was still its same strange color of peach, but now the honeyed gold bodies of the natives and the raw ochre of the ground on which they lay were tinted by the same dull blood-red, as if the village and its people had been tarnished overnight.

He did not have the courage to take a glance back as they rode away from the village.

“And now we march on San Romano,” said Abishai, his horse moving forward with such high dancing steps that it seemed to be invigorated, as full of pride as a champion of dressage.

“March on?” Elusai was troubled by the choice of phrase, said, “I thought we were going to San Romano with the intention of searching out these two young women the chief spoke of.”

“That is so, yes, but we will meet with resistance. The men need to be met with resistance. They have the taste for conquest now, you see how it unites them and fills them with passion.” He spurred his horse on, it reared, pranced forward some steps on its hind legs, and he laughed. “You see, Elusai? Even my mount is filled with a joy for our quest!”

San Romano, they had been told, lay to the north-east. What they had not been told of, however, was the geography of that corner of the kingdom, of the mass of rock which enclosed the valley of the Scented Land, rising to the north and the east just as it had on their approach from the south. Less than an hour’s ride brought them facing its sheer height, for hours after that they were forced due east, then slowly in a broad arc until they were

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once more south of the village. It was only with some effort, and some good fortune, that they found the approach to the forest by which they had entered the valley, and there, guided by Abishai's compass, they blundered their way north through the eerie green gloaming. They did not make camp, but slept where they could when they decided that weariness announced the onset of night, the company scattered amongst the trees, resting against the trunks.

Another day on and finally the forest thinned, the canopy dropped, the trees grew sparser and they advanced from its gloom to see a sparkling savanna unfold before them. Far off to the west they could make out the sea, once more a reassuring aquamarine color, and from this a ribbon of water which pierced the coast and meandered its way slowly east, cutting a lazy route across the land. They geed their horses into a gallop then, down a gentle incline and onto the plain, enjoying the freedom its open expanse afforded after the claustrophobia of the forest, whooping and yelling as they went, like children charging an imaginary foe. Soon they were strewn across the savanna, a swarm of men a mile broad and a mile deep, veering direction as the folds of the landscape dictated, looking like a field of wheat caught by a shifting wind.

And yes, Elusai felt that there was exhilaration, elation, and that he should be susceptible to it was as troubling to him as the memory of the atrocities it had compelled Abishai to commit in Noa Noa.

They slowed as the plain began to rise, came together in a dark blot on the landscape, forming themselves into some semblance of a troop as they reached the crest of an escarpment. Reining to a halt they looked down on the river at a closer proximity, still wide enough to be navigable, still winding lazily, and at a broad bend, where the water seemed in two minds as to whether it should continue inland or return to the sea, they saw

the sienna rooftops and the pastel walls of the town they took to be San Romano.

“What are your orders, my Lord?” asked Elusai. “Do we send men in advance again? A small group to search out the two women?”

Abishai sniffed the air like a predator as he regarded the town. “No,” he decided. “We will make camp. Here on the escarpment. Build fires so that we might be seen.”

Elusai was at a loss to understand the strategy. “Why?”

So that with daybreak the town, forewarned of their presence and concerned as to their purpose, had assembled a force of men at their gates, a gaudy group of soldiers and squires sitting stiffly on their mounts, polished breastplates gleaming in the sun, pennants of all colors flying from their lances, plumed helmets waving in the breeze.

“They look like knights from some pack of playing cards, with the King of Swords at their head,” laughed Abishai derisively, giving the order to advance.

And San Romano was routed.

* * *

“My mood grows bleaker the closer we get to Golgonooza,” said Ragan glumly, her temper now nearing a nadir of depression for the city was just beyond the next rise.

“And my ass grows sorer,” Gwendolen complained, shifting uneasily in the saddle. “And my thighs and fanny and every damned bone in my body. My teats are raw, my lips are numbed and every inch of my flesh feels abused. That freak of a stable-boy, or whatever it is he was, he took me every way he could.”

“And me too,” Ragan reminded her, unable to contain a smile at the memory. “Delirious, wasn’t it?”

“Punishing,” Gwendolen preferred, knowing that they might be liable to yet more punishment when Madame le Roy learned of the fruitlessness of their mission. “Where did the man get his

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stamina? Passion drove him like a beast unbridled, if passion can be used to beautify such a fire of possession as he showed. I must confess, Lord Lovecraft's wife must have a constitution of iron and genitalia of granite if it was ever that young man's duty to service her."

Indeed. It would take a woman with a body cut of the coldest marble to endure what Ragan and Gwendolen had suffered during that single night in Arken. They had awoken, bruised if not quite bleeding, in the early afternoon, only to find that their bed-mate had vacated the room hours earlier. In a hurry, the tavern-keeper had told them, as if stung by hornets or chased by devils, driven by demons or drawn by something stronger. They had gone on their own way more slowly, only gradually recovering their strength after the passion of the night, had taken most of a day to cover the leagues between Arken and the valley of Goginan, and then a portion of the evening to travel more cautiously to its head, to where Brynpica lay at the foot of the Temeraire Mountains.

There was neither man nor beast to be found at the lodge, though there were signs that the place had only recently been vacated, food left uneaten on their platters, glasses of drink half empty, rooms left in disarray as if guests had left an inn over worries about meeting the charge.

Lady Haggitha....

The scribe, Basilides....

A maid....

And recollection of a groom in their company brought to mind to rutting beast of a stud who had so sated two of the Daughters of Albion that they were sent into a stupor while he went gleefully on his way.

Both feared Madame le Roy's wrath, both found themselves blaming their mounts' slow progress on their own weariness, but eventually, inevitably, they crested the last rise and saw

Golgonooza before them.

It was a place Ragan had always known as home, she was familiar with every corner of it and was always filled with excitement whenever she returned, no matter how brief her absence. To come upon the city in the evening, as now, was like stumbling on of precious stones, encased within its walls the lights sparkled amid the darkened plain, the fires of the foundries of Los burned bright at its heart, the dome of the parliament building caught light from every angle, like a prism broke it into a rainbow of colors. She could follow the necklaces of light which were the city's winding streets to trace her life in Golgonooza, and an eventful one it had been.

"Come on, Madame awaits," said Gwendolen, breaking into her friend's reverie, digging heels into the flanks of her horse to spur it forward.

"Madame awaits," Ragan agreed, the joy of her homecoming somewhat dulled on this occasion.

They stabled their horses by the west gate, not really believing that they might have to leave the city in haste but perhaps troubled by an unconfessed trepidation, entering the city on foot to defer that moment when they would have to face Madame le Roy. It was rare indeed that a Daughter of Albion failed in her task, they could not recall the last instant when Madame le Roy had been disappointed with any of them, but they had witnessed her anger over other matters and hers was not a temper to be suffered lightly.

"She can hardly blame us for Brynpica being deserted," said Gwendolen.

"She can accuse us of tardiness," Ragan knew. "Our time away from Golgonooza would be seen as proof of that."

"We scouted the region around the lodge, the valley, the foothills, looking for traces of Lady Haggitha and her company."

"Even if that were true, she would not be happy with the lack

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of results," Ragan frowned, then let spill a curse, of anger with herself. "I'll be damned if I will let a man's lust better me again!"

Gwendolen gave a wry smile. "I am sure that it is the first time you have been bested in bed, Ragan. And I am just as sure, too, that I pity the next man whose misfortune it is to tangle with you."

Ragan acknowledged the compliment silently, for the moment of the view that she would face any rutting creature, man or beast, in preference to Madame le Roy, and her mood was not lifted by the gaiety they found on entering the Cabaret Voltaire.

Tzara was on stage, reciting one of his more lyrical poems which had a portion of the audience joining in as if it was an anthem, a quartet of guitarists were extemporizing around the rhythm of the words, the whole place was vibrant with happy distraction, but as tempting as it was to linger a while, to draw comfort from the company, Ragan knew that it was best to delay no longer and crossed directly to a door at the side of the stage, Gwendolen following close behind.

Through the door there were rooms where artists changed or rested, the kitchen which served food for both customers and staff, sundry storerooms, and finally, at the rear of the building, the staircase which led to the upper floors. Cordella stood at the foot of these, Ragan saw, stepped aside to let them past, while at their head was Cambel, another of the Daughters of Albion. Both wore grave expressions, alert as sentries, offered no more than a nod of acknowledgement.

Why the apparent vigilance? Ragan wondered, turned to Gwendolen, but she had only a shake of the head to offer.

Pausing before a door, Ragan took a deep breath and squared her shoulders, knocked once and then entered the room where they would generally expect to find Madame le Roy.

The room was as broad as it was long, it occupied much of

the first floor of the building, but for all its space it seemed crowded. Lord Lovecraft was there with a number of his men, Madame le Roy with others of the Daughters of Albion, and seated in the centre of the group they formed Ragan finally saw Estrild. Saw her, rather more sprawled than seated, but did not immediately recognize her. Her silver hair had been shorn, now sprouting in tufts like the uneven pelt of a dog with mange, her clear complexion had dulled to the color of tarnished pewter and her eyes were two bleak expressionless voids. Her hands, held still in her lap, were black, her fingers stiff, as if petrified, and darker still, like charred embers.

“Estrild?” she said, her eyes fixed on the lifeless hands, hands which had once been so elegant, so graceful. “Estrild? What has happened?”

“Torture by fire,” said Madame le Roy. “If we had not liberated her then her limbs would have been charred to stumps by now.”

Aware of Ragan, Estrild tried to speak, but all that came was a lispng sibilant sound.

“Her tongue, too, cauterized at the tip to cause her pain but permit her speech. She said nothing, though, which is to her credit. That she failed in her mission, however-” Madame le Roy now turned to Ragan, said, “What of Lady Haggitha and her scribe?”

“Fled by the time we reached Brynpica,” Ragan answered without excuse or prevarication, guessing that Estrild’s would be the greater failure, for all that she had suffered on account of it. “Why they should have fled, where they might have gone, I cannot say.”

“A pity,” was Madame le Roy’s only response. “To add the Hashishim’s power to our arsenal would be useful, for this is no longer simply a feud with van Vogt. I will see the city torn in two before I will have my satisfaction.” She turned to Lord Lovecraft,

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fixed his gaze with a look of chilling determination. “And you, my Lord, will match your wrath to mine? The First Minister will feel our common anger?”

“On account of what he did to Estrild? No,” he answered, regarding the brutalized Daughter of Albion more out of curiosity than compassion. “But yes, he will be a victim of our common anger. The parliament of Golgonooza will cease to exist, there will be but two sides in this city and those who choose poorly will perish.”

Chapter 7

The Great Hall of the Ministerial Palace had become almost as entertaining a distraction as the city itself for Goomer, at times was more like a market than a place of administration, teeming not only with petitioners and supplicants but with vendors and hawkers and people who, regardless of the excuses they had used to gain admittance, embarked on the most nefarious of activities once within its walls. Prostitutes plied their trade, forgers sold licenses and certificates to those who had been denied by officialdom, sham shamans offered blessings that people's petitions might be successful. Even the weather found its way into the hall, the air clouding a hundred feet above where the ceiling arched, shimmering with heat or misting with frost, dust storms blowing across the floor on the driest days or running with rivulets of water when the rain swept in from the city.

And even now, though security within the palace had been tightened since the escape of the First Minister's would-be assassin, he could spy vagabonds of all types circulating among the crowds, pickpockets and purse-snatchers and tricksters who used all manner of ruses to part people from their money.

Once Goomer had raised the alert to the presence of an assassin in the palace, and been instrumental in her capture, he had been regarded with more sufferance by a number of the household, his prompt action had been praised by the master of the guard and had been seen by Clod and his wife as a demonstration of his loyalty to the First Minister. The consequence was that he was afforded yet more liberty to roam the palace, though not the freedom to leave at will, the opportunity to search its darkest remotest corners. It was thus that he had found the tunnel leading from the cellars, his escape from the palace when the rest of the household slept, rumoured at first as the exit which was used when people needed to

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'disappear', finally stumbled upon when he guessed that those fated to 'disappear' would have spent their last days in the dungeons deep below the palace. And it was thus, too, that he came upon the Daughter of Albion.

She did not know him as the one responsible for her capture, would have been hard pressed to recognize her own mother, so feeble was her state after the tortures she had suffered, saw him only as one last faint hope of escape and begged his help. He was hesitant, of course, it would be foolish of him to risk undoing the good his reputation had gained in bringing about her capture in the first place, and it was only the mention of a reward of gold, a more valuable commodity than respect or reputation could ever be, which finally persuaded him. That Lord Lovcraft was among those who she mentioned might work towards her rescue was also a deciding factor, for he had come to appreciate the hatred the First Minister felt for the man and understood how it might be to his advantage to side with both, to assist each in their feud with the other.

The gold lined his belt now, a dozen coins tucked into its lining, fair pay for an undemanding evening's work, taking Lord Lovcraft and his men to the tunnel which led to the dungeons, guiding them out again with the barely conscious Estrild, then returning to the First Minister's chamber to share his bed for what remained of the night.

The gold was a comforting weight about his body, and he settled the belt low about his hips as he sauntered the hall, happy that for once he had the wherewithal to buy whatever was for sale, even the priciest of the tarts who had found their way into the palace. It was best to be circumspect about his newly acquired wealth, however, in the palace at least, it would take only the merest word, the slightest suspicion of misdemeanor to find its way back to Mistress Pebble and she would be after him with red hot irons again. After dark, then, when the palace slept,

when the First Minister was sated or had hopefully decided to forego his pleasures for once, under cover of night he would take the tunnel to the city beyond, there take his own pleasures amid Golgonooza's scurrilous society of moondogs and vagabonds, of guttersnipes, gamins and ne'er-do-wells.

Money was a joy to have, yes, but there was an even greater joy to be had in the flaunting of it.

In anticipation of an evening at large in the city he went to the rooftop garden, there to watch the sunset and bide his time until the palace was silent enough for him to leave.

* * *

Griff and Leo slept until early evening, woke to discover plates of cold meats and a jug of beer on the table between them, a leather pouch which they found to contain coins sitting beside it.

"Well there's looking after us and there's looking after us," said Leo, swinging his feet to the floor, stretching and yawning. "Room service is one thing, but I don't expect it to be brought in while we're still asleep. Where's the privacy? We could have been robbed in our beds."

"Quit grumbling and get stuck in," Griff told him, folding what he hoped was a slice of roast beef into a tiny parcel and popping it into his mouth, then pouring out two tankards of beer. "Ah, that's good," he said, taking a drink and enjoying the bitter taste on his palate, a taste which seemed long forgotten. "When did we last go out for a beer, Leo?" he asked, trying to recall another time, another world which now seemed so distant.

"Seems like a lifetime ago."

"Too right it does."

They cleared the plates of the cooked meats, emptied the jug of the beer, belched and lay back satisfied for a minute or two, hands behind their heads, gazing at the ceiling.

"So," said Griff at last. "What do we do now?"

"The School Master won't be back for another day, maybe

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two. I suggest we go out for that pint we've been denying ourselves. I assume they must have boozers of some sort in this place."

"Good idea," Griff agreed, and crossed the floor to where there was a washstand in the corner of the room, filled it with water from a bucket, then washed his hands and face. The water was cold, more refreshing than cleansing. "Christ, I could do with a shower though."

"A sauna?"

"Nothing naughty, just a good sluice down," Griff said, knowing the way Leo's randy inclinations might want to lead. He pointed to the water in the basin, asked, "Do you want this?"

Leo shook his head, grinned, "I've just imagined that I'm clean. I'm beginning to get the hang of it."

"Liar."

They descended the corkscrew flights of stairs to the ground floor, but could find no one there who might offer them directions, any hints as to where they might find the entertainment they wanted. They would explore then, they agreed, and stepped out onto the street. Above them the sky was a pale yellow, brightening to cadmium as they looked to their right.

"Bright lights big city, do you reckon?" suggested Leo, regarding the sulphurous glow which could have hung over the centre of any large town. "That'll be where the action is?"

"I reckon," Griff agreed, and they walked off down the street, as much at ease as any tourists might be, remarking on the people they passed in all their various costumes, on the buildings they saw, in all their hotchpotch of architectural styles.

Crossing a broader thoroughfare, which back home might have been a busy dual carriageway of a ring road but here was deserted save for a rickshaw to their right and a horse and cart to their left, they entered the narrower streets of the city proper,

saw buildings devoted to business, commerce, finance, any manner of human occupation. Shops, closed for the moment but some with their windows lit, offered a variety of goods for sale, clothes, foodstuffs, furnishings and fabrics. One displayed an interesting assortment of weaponry, swords and cutlasses, bows and maces, daggers of steel and gold and crystal, and Leo, lingering a moment before this window, said, "Do you think we ought to be armed? I've noticed some people are."

"Use your imagination," Griff told him, and it took a moment for his friend to appreciate the joke, to break into a broad grin.

"Right. Imagination," he said, and glanced sideways to watch a streaking naked woman run past, drawing the looks of other passers-by, some disapproving, some amused.

"Was that you?" Griff frowned, as censorious as many of the onlookers.

"Practice."

Rounding a corner, entering a cobbled square which was flanked on three sides by buildings which had an Alpine aspect about them, they saw a neon sign sparking in the dusk.

"Cabaret Voltaire," Griff read. There was a welcoming glow cast across the pavement from its open door, the sound of music and a hubbub of voices coming from the building. "Should we give it a try?" he asked.

"Why not?" said Leo, but even as they crossed the square to approach the building the merry murmur from within died down and a single voice rose above it. "A political meeting? Stand-up comedy?" he wondered.

Entering, they saw a man in a tuxedo spotlighted on a small stage, caught the last words of his declamation.

"....this summer the roses are blue, the woods are glass.

The earth in its verdure looks to me rather like a ghost.

To live and to cease to live are both imaginary solutions.

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Existence is elsewhere.”

Leo moaned, said, “For fuck’s sake not poetry night. That would be just our luck.”

While they hesitated in the doorway, considering whether to stay or find somewhere else, a ripple of applause ran around the room, a whistle or two, which the man acknowledged and then silenced, announcing, “And now our resident chanteuse. Madame le Roy.”

The music which introduced the woman onto the stage promised something altogether more funky. This boded much better, they agreed, and crossed the floor.

“What will it be, Sirs?” asked the man behind the counter, fat, bald, like a barrel big enough to offer them any tippable they chose.

Griff looked at the taps which lined the bar, the bottles and kegs behind, saw some names he recognized –Ricard, Pernod, Bells- and others whose very language defeated him.

“Do you have beer?”

“Warm ale or cold pilsner?”

“Cold pilsner, please. Two.” He took a couple of coins from the purse which the concierge had left them and placed them on the bar. “Is that enough?”

The barman regarded him curiously, slowly pushed one coin back to him and then added a dozen smaller ones.

“Methinks you made a boob there, Griff,” said Leo, as a drinker along the bar cast them a sideways glance, eyes fixing covetously on the coins which littered the counter.

The barman nodded his agreement as he poured their drinks. “A grave one indeed, if you let the wrong people see you have coins of that currency, and in the number your swollen purse suggests. You are strangers in town?”

“Strangers, yes, you could say that.”

“Well I suggest you be a little more circumspect until you

become accustomed to our city and its ways.”

They nodded their agreement and took their drinks to a table in the far corner of the room, from where they could watch rather than be watched, sipped their drinks while the chanteuse went through her repertoire. She was dressed like something from Isherwood’s Berlin, a cross between Sally Bowles and Marlene Dietrich, but her songs were more doleful than decadent, a hint of negro spiritual about them. When she finished she was replaced by a quartet of balalaikas, who in turn gave way to an accordionist.

“A varied bill they have here,” Griff commented, sipping at his cold beer.

“I suppose it would have to be, looking at the customers,” said Leo, for the people who filled the room were in a variety of costumes, of a variety of ages; a variety of costumes from a variety of ages, in fact, presenting in living form a comprehensive history of fashion through the centuries. There were people unnervingly like those they had shared the journey to Cythera with, men in medieval tabards and Victorian frock coats, women in oriental sarongs and ancient togas and the full voluminous skirts of ballroom dancers.

And a mixture of races, too, it seemed.

Golgonooza had to be the most cosmopolitan city either of them had ever visited.

* * *

Immediately on emerging from the Gare St Lazare the School Master had been aware of a change in the atmosphere about Golgonooza, even while escorting his two visitors to their lodgings he had been conscious of an unsettling air about its streets, an intuition that all was not well, or at least not as he had left it. It was as if a storm approached and the air was charging with a static electricity, prickling the hair at the back of his neck, as if Golgonooza itself was about to become another intrusion

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into the fabric of Eidolon, was a thing of as yet unfulfilled potential, latent, dormant, simply awaiting the catalyst to fire it. A Master of a School was not a mystic or a mage, but he was sensitive enough, in a way that others are not, to be among the first to realize when something was wrong.

His first impulse, then, after seeing Griff and Leo safely accommodated, was to go directly to the School of the Rose+Croix, to question his brethren there as to what might have transpired in his absence; his second thought was that the change he sensed might actually have been occasioned by his return to the city, and more particularly by the very nature of the people he had brought to Golgonooza; his final realization was that no matter how things might have changed they were as nothing when compared with those which could be wrought if Griff and Leo were not dispatched to retrieve their friend from the clutches of the Hashishim, to return him and themselves to their own world. It was with this final preoccupation taking precedence that he made his way to see First Minister van Vogt at the Ministerial Palace.

The business of the day was drawing to a close as he arrived, a stream of people was departing the Great Hall, and he fought against their flow, witnessing their moods of happiness or disappointment, their elation or their despair, envying them the simple aims and desires which governed their lives. Crossing the hall, free of the throng, he was challenged by a couple of guards.

“I am Master of the School of the Rose+Croix,” he introduced himself, as they barred his way. “I must see the First Minister.”

He expected the customary bureaucratic delays, having to wait while word was passed from secretary to secretary, his request handed on through ascending levels of the palace hierarchy. What he did not expect was that even before this process began he would have to submit to a search. His

displeasure was plain despite his attempt at patience, he never took vain pleasure in asserting his status as some would, but still his mood was noted.

“We have to search everyone who seeks entrance to the inner palace,” he was told.

“For what?” he asked, trying to retain a tone of compliancy.

“Weapons.”

What paranoia was this, that First Minister van Vogt should see fit to make a fortress out of his palace? As the School Master submitted to the search he considered the options, could settle for only one: that van Vogt felt himself to be in danger. From whoever, or from what quarter, that did not matter for the moment, for that same intuition which had told him that all was not well in Golgonooza now persuaded him of a link with the First Minister’s caution, convinced him that the very presence of artists in the kingdom, drawn by the Hashishim girl, was already threatening the stability of their society.

Searched a second time, then a third, he was finally received by the First Minister in the roof garden above his chambers, guards positioned out of earshot about its perimeter, there to have his fears confirmed.

“There was an attempt on my life by Lord Lovecraft,” the First Minister stated simply, offering excuses even before they were requested. There was no apology for the treatment of the School Master as he said, “I can trust no one.”

“It was Lord Lovecraft? That is certain?”

“The fact that I have no proof is certainty enough for me. He was behind the attempt.”

“Why?” asked the School Master. “Why should he risk so much for so little gain?”

The First Minister was trembling slightly, from concealed rage or the cool evening breeze, as he said, “He has long nursed a hatred for me, that is common knowledge.”

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“And you for him,” the School Master knew, but suspected that there was more to this than the long-standing animosity of one man for another. Lovecraft had tried to have the First Minister assassinated? So what had van Vogt done previous to this, to warrant such drastic measures? Perhaps himself initiated an attempt on the other’s life? It was useless to press the matter, though, no culpability would be admitted to, any insistence would only encourage lies and half-truths which would further cloud the issue.

The first of those came now, without compulsion. “But our hatred for each other? Pah!” van Vogt waved his hand dismissively. “That is as an adolescent spat when set against what has grown from it. Lovecraft would have the power of the Hashishim, that is at the root of this escalation, that he fears I will thwart him in his anarchic ambition. So what of the Hashishim, School Master?” he asked wearily, as if it was a duty to know rather than a personal ambition.

“Already back with her kin in the Garden of Earthly Delights, I fear,” answered the School Master, then paused a moment to see if the First Minister was relieved or disappointed that she might be out of reach. “Her influence is negligible, the danger she presents remote for the moment. Lord Lovecraft can expect no immediate advancement of his ambition from her.”

Though the First Minister’s back was turned, though he gazed out distractedly across the city, the School Master saw him stiffen, catching the judicious choice of words. “Remote... for the ‘moment’?” he repeated. “No... ‘immediate’ advancement? Meaning what exactly, School Master?” he asked, now turning again, putting his question directly. “I detect that there is still concern in your voice. Over what?”

“Over others she has brought with her, First Minister, both in her immediate company and following in her wake. They present a greater cause for concern than the bitch herself, have

abilities which she might put to more monstrous use than Lord Lovecraft could ever have dreamt of.” He outlined briefly what he had learned while beyond the kingdom, described those who had made their way back to Eidolon and their locations as best he could guess, the one with the Hashishim, most probably already in the Garden of Earthly Delights, two some distance to the north, in one of the less accessible areas of the kingdom.... and finally: “The last two I have brought with me.”

“They are here? In Golgonooza? Where?” demanded van Vogt.

“I have accepted your vigilance, my Lord, suffered being searched

without question, respected your need for caution.” The School Master offered an apologetic smile, spread his hands in apparent supplication though there was really no question that he would beg his case. “I would now ask that you afford me that same respect if I say that I would rather their whereabouts are not made public.”

“Public?” van Vogt bellowed. “Public! I am asking you to confide in your First Minister! Not gossip with some fishwife or share pillow talk with your mistress!”

“The Master of a School has no mistress, my Lord,” the School Master responded equably, “and I mean no insult to you if I insist that the whereabouts of these two young visitors remains known only to me.”

“But if Lord Lovecraft should find out...”

“He will not find out from me.”

“But you think that I...?”

“You surround yourself with a large household, my Lord, in which rumor can be contagious and gossip can travel like a plague.” As the First Minister looked around in exasperation, taking in the guards who were their only company, each one with his back turned, looking out beyond the garden, the School

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Master reminded him: "You told me yourself that you trust no one. That was the excuse for your vigilance, for the scrutiny with which you now regard everyone. If you cannot trust your household, then how can you expect me to?"

"You think I might babble in my sleep?" asked the First Minister petulantly, but then said, "Very well, School Master. What is it that you propose?"

"To send the two I have in my care from the city at the earliest opportunity, to find their friend who is in the company of the Hashishim so that all may return where they belong. Only then will Eidolon be safe."

"And Lord Lovecraft? What of his plans?"

"I am sure that the spat which has grown into something more will provide enough of a distraction to keep him occupied," the School Master replied, fearing the consequences for Golgonooza.

* * *

When Griff went to the bar to refill their glasses he was careful only to slip into his palm a couple of the smaller coins this time. The chanteuse was at the bar, talking to the barman, and she turned to smile at him as he asked for two more drinks. Close to she was older than she had first appeared, perhaps in her mid forties, her stage makeup creased and cracked around her smile, but in a not unattractive way.

"I understand that you are new to these parts," she said, swiveling on her stool and crossing her legs so that the short skirt of sequined silk slipped into her lap, baring a thigh which was still slim and firm.

"That's right," he replied.

"Then may our city make you welcome and may you enjoy it," she said, her greeting overly prosaic, as if she was still performing for an audience.

"Thanks," he said, and then as an afterthought asked,

“Would you like a drink?”

She mentioned a name which escaped Griff. He nodded to the barman and saw a slim flute of something the color and consistency of mud placed next to the two beers.

“And in return for your drink I will sit with you and your friend,” she pronounced, slipping from her stool and striding across to their table.

“This is my friend Leo,” Griff told her, following.

She shook his hand, held it a moment before releasing it, then turned to Griff, asked, “And you are?”

“Griff. John Griffin, actually, but you can forget the Christian name.”

“Christian?” she said, smiling as she raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think I know the word.”

“Forget it. Just call me Griff.”

“And I am Madame le Roy,” she introduced herself, with a gravity which suggested that they should be honored. She paused a moment in silence, as if to give them time to acknowledge the honor, then asked, “And what brings you, Leo, and you, Griff, here to Golgonooza? Where have you come from?”

Griff puffed his cheeks, Leo gave a heave of the shoulders, finally said, “We came from beyond the Temeraire Mountains.”

“Ah, so you are Southerners.” Actually Griff was from Lancashire, Leo from Yorkshire, but wherever those counties might now lay they could well be to the south of Golgonooza, so they nodded, agreed, yes they were Southerners. “I once traveled south of the Temeraire Mountains, toured around Weimar,” Madame le Roy recalled, but by the frown which creased her pancaked brow it was obviously not a fond memory. “I found the people there to be without soul, without rhythm, without any appreciation of music. Sorry.”

“That’s alright,” said Leo. “We enjoyed your singing.”

“It is delicate of you to say so,” she said, with a slight bow of

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the head.

“No, really, we did,” Griff insisted. “Not all Southerners are without appreciation of talents such as yours.”

“You obviously picked the wrong gigs,” Leo added.

“You are too kind, and so unlike the Southerners I met,” Madame le Roy laughed gaily, and clamped one hand on the thigh of Griff, the other on the thigh of Leo, squeezing so hard that her viridian varnished nails threatened to pierce fabric and puncture flesh. “If I had met gents as gallant as you there-! Well! I might have been tempted to linger!”

The man who had been on the stage when they entered now returned, beckoned to another, introduced as Tzara, to join him. Side by side, the two of them began to recite.

But each a different poem.

“Bah!” said Madame le Roy, tossing back her drink, chewing on its thick texture before taking it into her gizzard. “I hate this drivel they call simultaneity! How would you two gents like to escort me to a quieter place I know, more intimate, less raucous and devoid of poetic pretensions?”

At the mention of intimacy Griff was hesitant but Leo quite eager, and it was Leo who said, “Yes, why not? Let’s hit the town.”

Sensing Griff’s hesitancy, Madame le Roy pouted, said, “The idea does not appeal to you, Griff? My company bores you already?”

“He has a girlfriend,” Leo explained.

“But what the bitch does not see the puppy need feel no guilt about,” she laughed, and reached out to tickle him under the chin.

He jerked back from the contact, got to his feet, with no hint of humour said, “Very well. Let’s go.”

“I will just get my wrap,” Madame le Roy told them, and crossed to a door beside the stage where the two poets were still

competing with each other loudly, disappearing through it..

“I’ll tell you one thing,” Griff then warned Leo. “If this place she’s taking us to looks anything like a knocking shop then I’m out of there.”

“Boring fart,” his friend responded, the same challenge which had persuaded Griff to many places he had later regretted, during the years they had known each other.

Madame le Roy returned with a crocheted shawl draped about her shoulders, held so tightly before her that the stiff shoulders and tensed arms made her breasts swell and her cleavage deepen. Inserting herself between the two friends, she nudged them towards the door, casting farewell smiles to a variety of people as she went. Outside, on the street, she gave an exaggerated shiver, remarked that the night had grown chilly. Griff thought not, but still she threw her arms around their shoulders, draping the shawl around all three of them and drawing them closer, letting them feel the warmth of her body, smell her perfume.

Griff began to sweat, Leo to grin inanely.

The fool’s hoping to strike lucky, Griff thought, and resolved that if the place they were being taken to was indeed a knocking shop then Leo was on his own.

The bar was two streets away, the door was so low that they had to duck to pass through, even Madame le Roy, who was some inches shorter than her escorts, and when Griff straightened and his eyes became accustomed to the dim red light he was disappointed to see that there were a dozen women sprawling about the room with not a single man. Even the person behind the cocktail bar was a woman, an Amazon of a thing, muscular arms planted firmly on the counter.

“That’s it...!” he began, before feeling two hands in the small of his back propel him forward, one belonging to Leo, the other to Madame le Roy.

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Then Leo's arm gripped him about the neck in a fierce embrace of camaraderie as Madame le Roy strode across the room, he bent his head close and whispered, "Just a beer or two, that's all, then you can get off and leave me to it."

"You're a randy bastard," Griff grumbled. "Will you never learn?"

"We learn by our mistakes," Leo grinned, and led him over to the bar which was just wide enough to accommodate the three of them, hip to hip and thigh to thigh.

Madame le Roy had already ordered drinks, beer for them, the same flute of dark muck as before for her.

"These are meat," she said in a soft voice, to the young woman who had served the drinks, and Griff threw her a quick glance, straining to catch her words. "Meet my friends, Ragan," she continued more clearly. "One named Leo, the other Griff."

The barmaid thrust out a hand and Leo hurried to meet it, felt his knuckles crunched in an iron grip. It if was a greeting, then it was the fiercest he had ever encountered from a woman, and when his hand was released he had to flex his fingers to bring some feeling back to them. Griff, for his part, simply smiled his greeting, avoiding any physical contact.

Perhaps because of Anna, the girlfriend unnamed, Madame le Roy began to devote her attention to Leo. Each comment, question and pleasantry was accompanied by a touch, to the hand, to the knee, to the face, and each remark he made was met with more amusement than it deserved.

Griff finished his drink quickly, hinted that they should leave, but Leo demanded three more.

Madame le Roy smiled at him, said, "What is it, John Griffin, who denies that he is a Christian? Do you not enjoy my company?"

"I've been afforded little of it," he remarked acidly.

"Then perhaps you would like-?" she said, gesturing to the

women about the room, and he turned to see them tense, each and every one. One seated nearest approached him, rested a hand against his thigh, and though she smiled her face seemed expressionless, though the hand which touched him was so warm it burned he was conscious that the fingers were as stiff as a corpse's, dry and blackened to the tips.

“Okay! Enough is enough!” Griff decided, slapping the hand away and yanking Leo from his stool, but even before he could drag his friend towards the door Madame le Roy had snatched him back.

“This one is mine, Daughters of Albion!” she announced in a loud voice, and pushing Griff forward said, “The other, the one with the purse... meat!”

The women who had sprawled so languorously about the room were now on their feet, spread across the floor to block Griff's way, fists clenching, biceps flexing. The one nearest reached for him, but her disfigured hands would give her no purchase and he was able to shake himself free, flinging her to the crowd of others.

Imagination! He thought, seeing the women arrayed before him, all slim, all supple, all more muscled than they were voluptuous.

Anger! He encouraged, seeing his friend drawn into the fierce embrace of Madame le Roy.

No hesitation! He determined, casting his eyes back to the blockade of women, running his gaze across them, from left to right, and as he did so chairs flew, tables upturned, glasses and bottles and heavy pewter tankards became missiles which rained down on them. Each toppled in turn, as easily as dominoes under the flick of a finger.

Finally he turned his gaze to the aged chanteuse who held Leo clutched to her breast, her legs wrapped around his waist, her skirt hitched up her thighs, and he regarded her more with

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pity than with anger, such pity that no weapons were needed to subdue her, such a withering look that she wilted beneath it, relaxed her hold and sank to the floor like a punctured doll.

“Right! We go! Now!” he said to Leo, grabbing him by the arm and dragging him between the stunned bodies. “And for fuck’s sake curb your randy instincts if we’re ever going to survive in this world!”

* * *

Perhaps it was their flight from the birds which lent them speed, or maybe they had been further through the forest than Anna had thought, but within an hour they were clear of it, were faced now with a stretch of coarse grassland about fifty meters across. To Selina’s dismay, though, it then ended abruptly in a sheer cliff face.

“Not another!” she said, craning her neck back to peer up at what seemed to be an infinite height. “I’m not climbing that!”

“We shouldn’t have to,” Anna believed. “Caspar said that there was a way in, a route easy enough for carriages and caravans and even mobile libraries. A well-read people, the Society of the Dilettanti, so he said.” Her eyes followed the cliff to the left, to the right. “This way, do you think? To the south, away from the cold?”

“Any way but up,” Selina agreed.

They moved on, keeping closer to the cliff face than to the forest, casting frequent glances to its perimeter, on the alert for any threatening movement. The clearing they trod remained the same constant width, if the cliff face bulged then the forest receded, if the wall of rock was indented then the line of trees would swell accordingly. Slowly at first, and then more sharply, the cliff began to bend to the left, so that after an hour they were once again traveling more to the east than to the south. Then, as the curve leveled out, the height of the cliff began to diminish rapidly, its summit at last came into view, fell by a meter for

every meter walked, until at last they came upon the entrance Caspar had promised them. It was the width of a mall, a track of coarse gravel rising gently, then curving sharply. They began to climb, soon found themselves on a switchback of bends connecting straights which became increasingly steeper. The air began to thin, their breathing became labored, the temperature dropped and it was only the exertion of their climb which kept them from shivering. Eventually, as their legs began to grow heavy and their calves began to ache, the way started to level out and the rooftops of what they took to be the Prado came into view, then its facade, a broad neoclassical structure with modern wings to either side which seemed a little incongruous. They climbed its steps to approach the large double doors, three times the height of a man, found them locked. Anna rapped on the cast-iron knocker.

Instantly a grille slid open and a voice asked, "What business have you at the Prado?"

"We are looking for help, were told we might find it here," Anna answered.

"Would that be of a spiritual, a material or an aesthetic nature?"

"We are hoping to find someone who is conversant with the *Afflatus*. Were told that at the Prado we might find him."

The grille snapped shut, there was a minute's pause which worried them, but then they heard locks click and bolts draw back, had the doors opened to admit them.

The figure who greeted them was not what Anna had expected of a member of the Society of the *Dilettanti*. 'Dilettante' suggested a fop, a dandy, someone of extravagant dress, but this man looked more like a monk, wearing a hooded gown of some coarse grey material, belted at the waist with a length of rope.

"There will be someone here who can speak to you of the *Afflatus*, but not immediately, not this evening, maybe not the

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morrow,” they were told, seeing nothing more than the movement of lips in the shadow cast by the hood. “You are welcome to enjoy the hospitality of the Society of Dilettanti until such time as they can attend to you, though.” The man ushered them into the building, bolting the door securely after them, said, “What you must understand, however, is that the Prado is a place of learning rather than entertainment, and you may find its facilities a little basic. For that the Society apologizes and begs your pardon.”

As they acknowledged the courtesy, however, Anna felt that the hall they entered seemed to promise anything but basic facilities, the tiled floor and grand staircase, the vaulted ceiling, the sumptuous hangings and detailed tapestries were more evocative of wealth and luxury than any Spartan regime. Taking a broad flight of stairs to an upper floor, entering a long carpeted dormitory which contained a dozen large beds, she got the impression of a cross between a Youth Hostel and a Holiday Inn.

“There are few visitors to the Prado at the moment,” their escort told them, “so you may take your pick of any cot but the end one. And further apologies, but if you wish anything to eat we have only the refectory in the basement. So please, rest, relax, roam, what you will. When someone can speak to you of the *Afflatus* they will come to you.”

He joined his hands at his breast in a prayer or a salute and then took his leave of them.

Selina threw herself onto the nearest bed, bouncing on the sumptuous mattress, said, “Cots, did he call these? Beds like these belong in a knocking shop.”

“You’d know that, would you?” Anna smiled, sitting on an adjacent bed, feeling its softness tempt her.

“I imagine,” Selina said, and there was a brief fizz of light which caused them both to turn, think they saw a thirteenth bed intrude into the dormitory, a brief blur of figures coupled on it.

Then, as quickly as the vision had appeared, it was gone.

Anna rubbed her eyes, felt the tiredness and felt the hunger, wondered which she should surrender to. "Eat or sleep?" she asked Selina.

"I need to sleep but I think some food might help. Should we search out this refectory, even though it'll probably be spotted dick for pudding?"

"School meals?"

"Yuck!"

What they actually found, in the refectory in the basement, was a cold buffet of such variety that they piled their plates with more than they could possibly eat. With no one to demand payment of them, they turned with their loaded trays, saw that there was only one other diner in a room which could have accommodated a hundred, a woman seated by a window, gazing distractedly at the sunset beyond the mountains.

"Should we join her, see what we can learn while we're waiting to learn more?" Anna suggested.

"I don't know," said Selina, regarding the single diner uncertainly. "Seems to me like she's in mourning."

The woman wore a dress of heavy black silk fringed with lace, had her head covered with a black mantilla, and was wafting herself with a fan, as though her misery was a fever which could be eased.

"So perhaps she needs cheering up," Anna thought, and walked across to the only occupied table. "Do you mind?" she asked, dipping her tray but not yet setting it down. "I know there are plenty of vacant tables, but—"

"Company would be welcome," the woman smiled, and gestured with her fan before snapping it shut with a click. "Please. Feel free," she invited them.

Anna sat, then Selina beside her, and before they set about their food they introduced themselves.

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“And I am Dona Isobel de Porcel,” the woman responded, taking one of their hands in her right, the other’s in her left. Releasing them, letting them start on their food, she waited a while before asking, “What brings you to the Prado, at this time of year when few have the stamina for the journey?”

“We are looking for a way back home,” Anna replied, pausing as she brought a morsel of meat to her mouth, “and the suggestion has been made that our best means centers on an understanding of something called the Afflatus.”

“Ah, the Afflatus,” Dona Isobel nodded.

“You know of it?”

“I had once only heard of it, it might have been a fable, but recently I have learned its truth, have met people who have the skill of it, and I know it to be very powerful, more powerful than many might think the impulse behind creativity can be. I also know it to be a disease called erysipelas,” she added, “a fever which can burn as fiercely as any of the frustrating impulses which drive one to creativity.”

“Sounds heavy,” Selina thought, eating steadily to dull the edge of her hunger.

“But effective?” Anna hoped.

Dona Isobel gave a slight nod of the head, asked, “In what way would you hope it to be effective?”

“We come from a place which is.... let us say a place quite distant. We came here by a surprising route.”

“No trains or boats or planes for us,” Selina interjected, offering a boast to hide her confusion.

Seeing that Dona Isobel had neither smiled nor frowned nor shook her head in disbelief, Anna said, “We came here through a painting, in fact, a picture. Then, in a village on the coast, we saw a man draw a crude picture in the sand, saw him dip his hand into it, hinting that he could even step into it if he desired to.”

“Yes, that is the power of the Afflatus,” Dona Isobel agreed,

as if the science of it was all too familiar to her, not at all a cause of wonder.

“So what we’re thinking, what we’re reasoning, is that there lies our route back home,” Anna continued, taking hope from the possibility that manipulation of the Afflatus was a science, and not the magic it had first seemed. “That is why we are here at the Prado. We were told that here we might learn more of the Afflatus.”

“You will find knowledge of it here among the Dilettanti,” Dona Isobel nodded. “And perhaps a little from me which might satisfy your curiosity until one of their members can spare you time. You came here by way of a picture or painting, you say. One of your own making?”

“Mine,” said Selina, recalling the design which began as William Morris and ended up Douanier Rousseau.

“So you are artists?”

“Griff wouldn’t say so,” Anna smiled, and found that she was speaking his name softly, as if their separation involved something more than mere distance between them. “But yes, we think we are.”

“I know the name Griff, and guessed that it might slip from your tongue eventually,” Dona Isobel then startled them by saying. “I know the man, and a friend of his by name of Leo.”

“They’re here?” said Anna, setting down her knife and fork.

“I saw them on the isle of Cythera, not too long ago, and hopefully, with a little fortune, they have now made their way a little deeper into the Kingdoms of Eidolon.” Dona Isobel explained the circumstances of their meeting, the nature of their parting, offered the certainty that all would be well for they had an accomplished guide in a Master of the School of the Rose+Croix. “They will be heading for the city of Golgonooza,” she ended by saying.

“Then how do we get there?” Anna was anxious to hear, her

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hands on the table, as if ready to leave that instant.

“Stay,” said Dona Isobel, stretching forward to rest a hand on her shoulder, preventing her from rising. “I happen to know that they will not remain long in Golgonooza. The School Master will direct them to the Garden of Earthly Delights, and that is the way you must eventually take, for it affords the best route back to your home world. And no, I will not tell you how to get there,” she smiled, anticipating Anna. “Not yet, at least, for there are things you need to learn here in the Prado, skills which I think your love Griff might already be mastering.”

Persuaded to finish their meals, they then returned upstairs to the dormitory with Dona Isobel, witnessed her prayers muttered by the side of her bed, offered to an absent husband, before all three fell into a deep and peaceful sleep.

* * *

The young whelp whose loyalty was so fickle was proving to be an expensive ally, and Lord Lovecraft smiled approvingly, might have been tempted to ruffle the lad’s hair in an avuncular gesture of affection until the image came to mind of van Vogt doing something similar, under rather more sordid circumstances. He settled instead for a manly shake of the hand, said, “You have done well once again, young Goomer.”

“Young Goomer,” said Madame le Roy, reclining on a couch nearby and spitting out the name along with the pip of a grape, “young Goomer is doing quite well out of you, my Lord.”

“He is deserving of his reward,” said Lord Lovecraft, counting out coins and offering them to the boy, approving of the way he accepted them cautiously with his left hand while the right rested casually on the hilt of the dagger he wore.

“He is a rogue and a cheat who has happened upon an easy way to earn money,” Madame le Roy maintained. “He is not to be trusted. He would betray his own mother for much less than gold.”

“That may well be, but we will surely not condemn him for betraying van Vogt.” Lord Lovecraft smirked in mockery of her unexpected display of scruples. “And as for trust,” he added, turning back to the boy, “well I trust him as much as he trusts me. And he knows that he can expect to suffer, suffer most horribly, if he should ever think of betraying me. Right, boy?”

Goomer nodded, his natural bravura an excuse for true courage. “You are a more generous man than the First Minister, my Lord, and I would be a fool to disregard the fact. Madame may disapprove,” he said, offering a courteous bow, “but my loyalty can be bought.”

“And the information you bring us is appreciated, the news of the artists welcome,” he was assured.

“The artists who must surely be the same...” Madame le Roy began, but was cut short by a raised hand, a single digit ticking like a metronome to silence her as Lord Lovecraft continued to address his young informer.

“Your further loyalty will be demonstrated, and rewarded again, by letting me know where in Golgonooza these artists are hidden.”

“Only the School Master knows that, my Lord,” said Goomer, “and he could not be persuaded to divulge the information.”

“But First Minister van Vogt is a persistent man, he will be as anxious as I am to learn where these two strangers are. If the School Master returns to the Ministerial Palace you must make yourself available, be attentive to whatever might pass. And now,” he said, cynically bringing the audience to a close, “you may return to the embrace of your obese lover. Enjoy his company, cherish his benedictions, attend to his every desire and be attentive to his every thought. My men will escort you from the building.”

“My Lord,” Goomer acknowledged, backing towards the

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door. "And may Madame's recovery be swift and total," he added.

"Scurrilous young scamp!" she called after him, flinging a piece of fruit.

"Better scurrilous and young than clapped out and ageing!" he laughed, taking advantage of Lord Lovecraft's good favor, ducking and departing.

"You brat!"

Lord Lovecraft turned, smiling as he approached Madame le Roy. "And now, my dear, you were saying...?"

She frowned at the door through which the boy had gone, looked petulantly at Lord Lovecraft. "I was about to say that the two artists must be the same strangers who were met at the Cabaret."

"The same, to be true, for no two ordinary men could best all twelve of the Daughters of Albion and leave you so incapacitated." He enjoyed her embarrassment, her shame, her anger at being reminded of her defeat; though her temper was high her face was still wan and drawn beneath her make-up. For the moment she seemed more like an invalid than an ally, and though he was amused by her encounter he was also critical. "Let this be a lesson to you, Madame," he said, a stern edge to his voice.

"From which I will learn what?" she asked peevishly, plucking at the fruit in her lap, scoring skin and piercing flesh with a manicured nail.

"That there are more important affairs to be addressed than the simple entertainments that yourself and your Daughters of Albion have been accustomed to. You saw two strangers you took to be innocents and thought to have fun, to take advantage of them for meager profit." He had seated himself on the edge of the divan, taken her hand in his as he spoke, and now he squeezed it tightly to demand her attention. "Let it be understood," he insisted, increasing the pressure on her slim fingers, feeling

knuckles grind against each other, “that your plotting now may have but one of two aims in mind, that it should either lead to the location of my errant wife or bring about the ultimate defeat of van Vogt.”

“But now there is a third aim, surely?” she responded, not fighting against his grip, not admitting to the pain he caused her but seeking to remain composed, as reasonable as he would demand. “What of the two artists? The strangers in our strange land?”

“Good! Very good! You have learned from your lesson already!” he congratulated her, releasing his hold on her and now gently caressing the hand where the knuckles had blanched through a deprivation of blood. “Yes. The two artists. They are the allies I want. Theirs is the power I would have.”

Theirs were the hides Madame le Roy would have, flayed from their backs for the indignity they had caused her, but she kept her chagrin in check as she asked, “And how would you find them, my Lord? Will you have your men search the city?”

“No, that would be of no use. I could have all the men at my disposal scour the city from now until then and still there would be no sign of them.”

“The School Master, then?” Madame le Roy suggested. “Might he not have them with him, at the School of the Rose+Croix?”

“Possible,” Lord Lovecraft accepted, “but perhaps a little too obvious. On the off-chance I will have the School watched, but no, I hold out little hope in that quarter, believe that our best chance of finding these two strangers is once they have left the city.”

“At the gates? And risking that van Vogt might find them first?”

“Beyond the gates, and taking assurance from the fact that van Vogt has not the faintest idea where they are. They will make

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their way to the Garden of Earthly Delights, will travel to the east, and once out of sight of the city walls my men will intercept them.” Lord Lovecraft nodded with satisfaction, pleased with his strategy, said, “And now, Madame, will you be performing at the cabaret tonight?”

“No, I think not, my Lord. My ordeal still has me fatigued,” answered Madame le Roy, and she sprawled back against the cushions, affecting a languorous pose. “I feel the need to be comforted and cosseted,” she mewled. “I feel the need for tender consolation.”

“Then I will send Mattathias to see to you,” said Lord Lovecraft, turning quickly on his heels and striding from the room. “You know how I so dislike a sickly woman.”

* * *

“The Garden of what?” asked Griff.

“Of Earthly Delights,” Leo echoed the School Master, having caught his words at the first instance and almost drooling over them, relishing their exotic promise.

“But why do we have to go there?” Griff wanted to know. “What concern of ours are your political intrigues? I came here to look for Anna, not go gallivanting off on some half-assed crusade. I’m a lover, for God’s sake, not a fighter.”

“Bloody hell,” said Leo, grimacing with disgust at the trite romance of the sentiment.

“The Garden of Earthly Delights is where your girlfriend will head for,” the School Master told him. “Ultimately, eventually, when she learns that there lies your surest route back home.”

The School Master had returned to their lodgings two days after depositing them there, his gabardine coat and bowler hat now exchanged for more colorful regalia, a quartered tunic of red and yellow, tight fitting breeches of tan suede. He had consulted with First Minister van Vogt, he said, head of the Parliament of Golgonooza, and the consensus of opinion was that the two artist

strangers should go directly to this place named the Garden of Earthly Delights, that it was for the good of Golgonooza as well as for their own benefit.

“There you will find a people known as the Hashishim,” the School Master told them, “and also a friend of yours, Jack, who must be freed from their influence before it is too late.”

“Jack is here too?” said Griff. “How?”

“Why?” asked Leo, more pertinently.

“He was brought by a spawn of the Hashishim who you might know by the name of Tulla. Too long in her influence and he can wreak havoc in Eidolon, will be persuaded to, for that is the nature of the Hashishim. They are an anarchic breed whose ambition to cause unrest has only been limited by the extent of their powers, never insignificant but not so great that they would be persuaded to venture far from their homeland. Their malevolence has always been a worry, but never a direct threat to us here in the west. Now, if they are able to make use of your friend’s potential, it will no longer be a question of political intrigue but something more crucial, the safety, the very existence of our Kingdom. Your friend must be returned to your world and you are the only people who can do that. You have the power, you have mastery of the Afflatus.”

“What kicked ass when you and Griff got me away from Schloss Nymphenberg?” Leo asked. “What got us away from those thieving whores the other night?”

“Yes,” said the School Master, frowning at their near indiscretion with the woman from the Cabaret Voltaire. “You both have it in you. You just need a little tuition in its use. Its judicious use,” he stressed, for Leo’s benefit, conscious of the levity with which the young man might regard the power. “Your instruction will begin and you will pay careful heed to all that I tell you.”

* * *

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First Minister van Vogt had so many working for him, either under commission or under threat, for his good or for the good of Golgonooza, but not one of them had been worth a jot of use to him. The two mercenaries he had engaged had not been heard of since, were either lost in the Malterre Marshes or had simply absconded with the retainer he had paid them; Elusai, in the company of Lady Haggitha's nephew, somewhere in the Kingdom, had obviously not felt the threat of blackmail to be binding enough to warrant his co-operation; and the Master of the School of the Rose+Croix, his scruples were his particular failing, he was so dedicated to the safety of Golgonooza that he would not even trust in its First Minister, would prefer to gamble on the risk of Lord Lovecraft finding the artists rather than surrender them to the safety of the Ministerial Palace.

"I tell you, Clod, the Kingdom is in peril," said van Vogt, elbows resting on the wall which edged the roof garden, chin cupped in hands, feeling as ineffective as a spectator as he looked down on the city. "And there are people out there who would make the situation worse. I feel that everyone conspires against me. I can feel their faces in the shadows."

Beside him Clod commiserated, hands clasped, wringing them as if he shared his master's anguish. "Such is the burden of your station, my Lord, that you are exalted by some so that others would see you fall,"

"But it is not a matter of self-glorification," van Vogt insisted. "I care not one iota for whether I am regarded as a failure or not, a good First Minister or merely a competent one. My concern is not for my reputation, but only for the safety of Golgonooza."

"The people understand that," Clod was sure.

"The people understand little, Clod, and Parliament grasps even less, and certainly not the peril which threatens." His exasperation was evident, his concern seemed sincere and his

regret genuine as he said, "This feud which builds with Lord Lovecraft will tear Golgonooza apart, Clod, it is a distraction but it cannot be ignored. Already sides form, loyalties are being divided, and while the city involves itself with this childish spat the Hashishim will be able to march through its gates unopposed."

It was not a part of the remit of Clod to console his master, but he felt an impulse to put his arms around the man, to embrace his body as best he could and draw him into an embrace which said that they -the two of them- would stand firm against the world

And then First Minister van Vogt said, "I honestly believe that my only friend is the rapsallion Goomer"

"You can think that?" said Clod, in such a whisper that it might have posed a threat to his own station.

"Eh?" asked van Vogt, distracted from his survey of the city streets below.

"You think.... what?" asked Clod, fighting to remain composed.

"I think, Clod, that I have need of an ally," said the First Minister, turning around and presenting a face which was now set grim with determination. "An ally who will be a little more effective than the ineffectual wasters who have thus far sided with me. An ally with some clout, Clod, one who is as selfish in their ambition as I am selfless in my concern, one who will match my desire ounce for ounce."

"You cannot mean...?" said Clod. "You surely are not thinking of allying yourself with Lord Lovecraft?"

"Hell no, Clod!" First Minister van Vogt laughed. "What I am thinking of is an alliance with the Hashishim themselves, with the venerable Grand Odalisque no less."

* * *

"The Afflatus is a manifestation of the Ignis Fatuus, the source,

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the impulse behind all creativity, and mastery of it is a simple skill, but one granted only to a few. Imagination is at the core of it. Exercise the imagination and you can accomplish more than you would ever believe.”

Selina and Anna listened intently to the cowed figure who sat before them, giving him the attention which a favorite teacher might command, while in a corner of the library Dona Isobel de Porcel sat and nodded, adding her silent agreement to every other word.

“What is imagined in your world becomes a reality in ours, by virtue of the Afflatus it becomes more concrete than mere image or fancy. I myself and all my brotherhood, Dona Isobel, the very building in which we gather, all were the dreams of someone in your world before they took on actuality in ours. Such is the way of Eidolon, such has always been the case, our Kingdom is continually being invented. But now,” said the Dilettante, his voice taking on a graver tone, his brow furrowing as if even he had trouble coming to terms with the situation, “the people who create us are no longer remote. We find that they are among us. You, Selina, and you, Anna. And your friends who are elsewhere in the Kingdom. Coming to Eidolon, you bring with you the power to affect the Afflatus. To refer to a mythology of your own world, it is as if a God had come among you, the creator a part of the thing he created.”

Selina smiled at the comparison which was drawn, Anna felt embarrassed by it, would rather there had been a less profane parallel made. “I understand the nature of the Afflatus, then, or think I do,” she said. “But this power that it gives us, this skill you say we can master? In what way does this manifest itself? What exactly does it permit us to do?”

“What your kind have created, your kind can interact with,” the Dilettante explained patiently, understanding the difficulty they might have. “You can revise our reality, recreate it,

embellish it or even destroy it. Yes, destroy. The creature which attacked you in the Forest of Biomorph Abstraction, that was destroyed by your power over the Afflatus. On that occasion it was a reflex, an impulsive reaction to the danger you faced, but with further mastery of the skill it can be used at will, and to far greater effect.”

“And you are going to show us how?” Anna feared.

“I must, if you are to use it for good, and without danger to yourself. Imagine that you are sad,” he said, “that you feel pity for a person such as might make them wilt and wither.” The Dilettante set a long stemmed rose on the table before them, upright in a thin tube of glass, said to Anna, “Here is that person, that subject of your pity. Now imagine. Pity the thing.”

Anna did not know why she ought to feel pity for a flower, but the Dilettante’s silence demanded that she should, and slowly she was aware of the emotion building within her, of a warmth to her face, a flush to her cheeks, a tingling at the temples as if a headache threatened, and as she looked at the flower she was surprised to see its stem crumble, its petals wilt and fall to the table.

“Good!” said her tutor, and turned now to Selina. “You imagine, now. You feel not pity but remorse, sadness for what your friend has done. So revive the unfortunate thing.”

Selina looked, imagined, and within moments saw the rose regain its color and structure and fragrance, blooming as it had from a bud.

“That,” they were told, “is the power of the Afflatus, the power you must take with you to the Garden of Earthly Delights.”

Chapter 8

The bridge they found themselves on was built at a ridiculous

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angle, it reared too steeply before them and narrowed so sharply as to defy the rules of perspective. More disconcerting for Jack than its dizzying aspect, though, were the two shadowy figures who were stationed ahead, not the vague shapes of the painting they had somehow entered but now tall and darkly menacing men. Even as he and Tulla approached he could discern no features, they were both a total matt black color, their clothing, their armor, their helmets, even what little he could see of their faces.

One of them thumped the ground with the large pike he held, demanded, "Who is it who wishes to cross Die Brucke?"

"And which Dark Guard is it who has the temerity to challenge Tulla of the Hashishim?" Jack's escort responded haughtily, half his size but great in her own importance.

The guard peered forward, so that Jack could see the dull grey eyes, the gleam of grey teeth in the black maw of his mouth, a red tongue which seemed to be of raw pulsing flesh. "Why yes!" he laughed. "It is young Tulla! What mischief have you been up to this time?" he wondered, and looked at Jack, asked, "What souvenir have you brought back with you?"

"Just be about your duties and let us pass," Tulla insisted, and barged her way between them.

Jack followed quickly at her heels, casting repeated nervous glances over his shoulder until they had put some distance between themselves and the guards. Once they had rounded a bend, and were out of sight beyond the line of trees, he asked, "Are we going to meet many more like them on our way?"

"It is a day's journey, maybe a day and a half," she estimated. "We may meet a patrol or two of Dark Guards."

"You make it sound as though this place is under the rule of martial law," he said uncomfortably.

"No. It is under the rule of the Grand Odalisque."

"And who's that when he's at home?"

“She,” Tulla corrected him. “And you will meet her. She will demand that you meet her, when she learns the nature of the person I have brought.”

“My reputation precedes me?” he grinned nervously.

“No. But your potential will commend you to her.”

After they had been walking for a few hours, climbing steadily all the time, Jack was disconcerted to notice night begin to rise. Not fall, but rise. First the ground at his feet began to dim, to darken; then a heavy gloom spread out before them like an ink stain to be soaked up by the trees around them, there to rise up the trunks and fill the canopy of leaves overhead; finally this darkness suffused the sky from which night, in any reasonable world, should have fallen. He made no comment about the nature of this darkness, though, which Tulla seemed to take so much for granted, simply remarked that it was upon them, that their way was becoming increasingly difficult.

“Yes, will we rest soon,” she said, not lessening her pace. “We will find some shelter not far ahead.”

It was no more than a hut which she eventually led them to, coarse planks of unplanned wood which fitted together so poorly that the wind could whistle through, the night creep in unwanted. The trees which surrounded it seemed more furtive than sheltering, crouching curiously over its roof, hunching like an audience of petrified spectators. Inside, a lamp Tulla lit cast flickering shadows, its flame agitated by the numerous draughts; a fire she started, in the open hearth in the middle of the floor, gave out more smoke than heat, fogging the single room and biting at the back of Jack’s throat before it rose slowly to the tiny hole which had been cut in the roof. He squatted before the fire and held his hands out to it, shivering, trying to draw some warmth from it.

“Cold, Jack?” asked Tulla, regarding him with an interested smile. “Or perhaps you are troubled?”

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“Cold. And troubled. And hungry.”

She crossed to a rickety cabinet in a corner of the room, took out a stone jug, two canvas sacks.

“The bread may be a little stale, the cheese a little pungent, but it will fill you for the time being,” she said, joining him before the fire, sitting cross-legged beside him. “The wine will help swill it down, though, and will warm your belly.”

He broke a cob of bread, peeled the discolored crust from it to get to the less stale parts. It was like cotton wool in his mouth and he had to take a drink from the jug to force it down. The sweating cheese had a soapy taste to it, and again he needed a drink.

Tulla laughed at his discomfort, warned, “Go easy, Jack. Too much of our wine will give you nightmares.”

“I feel as if I’m in a waking nightmare already,” he grumbled. “Where the hell are we?” he asked, though the question which really troubled him was ‘how the hell did we get here?’

“No, not hell,” she answered. “We are a half a day’s journey from my home, the Garden of Earthly Delights.” Seeing the spark of interest in his eyes as he turned to her, she said, “Yes, the Garden of Earthly Delights. You will like it there. An altogether more comfortable place than this crude traveler’s refuge, and full of such interesting things, such wonderful creatures as you would never believe.”

“But I thought you came from Scandinavia,” he said, recalling how she had introduced herself when Anna had invited her to take the vacant room they had.

“I come from many places, but this is my home. Have you had your fill now?” she asked, gesturing to the bread and cheese.

“Enough to make me feel quite sick,” he nodded, and she returned the food to the sacks, the sacks to the cupboard, left the jug of wine with him. She came back with an armful of blankets

of such rough material that they might have been woven from the hair of some beast of the forest, spread some out on the floor, folded others into pillows, then stretched out beside him and drew the last ones across their two bodies.

“These stink,” he said, pulling one of the coarse blankets up to his chin, smelling the mustiness of disuse, or something worse.

“Imagine that they don’t,” she whispered, moving closer to him, pressing her body against his, her warmth offering some shelter against the draughts and some comfort against the chill of the room. “Imagine you are already in my home, lying among scented sheets, soft quilts and cushions, a wonderful warmth caressing your body and a heady perfume dulling your mind. Take a sip more of the wine and I will tell you about my home,” she said, handed him the jug and then began to caress his temple, as if to make her memories his, “I will tell you about the Castle in the Pyrenees, the chambers of the Grand Odalisque, the pit where the Ghost of a Flea lies....”

* * *

Lady Haggitha moistened a square of cotton with rose water, pressed it gently to each eye in turn to ease the irritation which she was sure was all of the mind, rather than having any actual physical cause. They had been traveling through the Temeraire Mountains for two days now, far enough into the foothills that they might be hidden from any pursuers but not so deep into the soup of the peaks that they risked losing their way. The world about them had been a blur of shifting color for much of those two days, they could recognize each other only as silhouettes, the way ahead was forever vague, and though the air in the Temeraire Mountains was not the storm that it seemed to be, still her eyes felt gritty, red-rimmed with the effort of focusing on nothing.

When Gamaliel had returned from Arken his agitation had been more to do with his need for her and his lust for Jahiliyah,

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that dependence which had been occasioned by her cosmetic craft, than it had to do with the import of any news he brought. Satisfying his need but slowly, having him relate every hour of every day he had spent away from her, to repeat verbatim each conversation he had heard, she had immediately recognized the two young women he had spent his last night with, known them for what they were, two of the Daughters of Albion, vagabond acolytes of her husband's mistress.

So Lord Lovecraft had finally guessed where she was, had sent Madame le Roy's bitches after her. All her craft and her powers of persuasion were of no use against this breed, she knew, her only options were to fight or to flee and she had opted for the latter course, had her company leave within the hour, taking the only avenue of escape which Brynpica afforded, into the gloom of the Temeraire Mountains.

Jahilyah was anxious about the route they were to take, worried about country tales of what manner of perils lay hidden in the mountains, had to be dulled by a cocktail of calmatives before she could be persuaded to venture forth. Still she was ill at ease, convinced that the air shimmered with will-o'-the-wisps, was agitated by restless spirits, she was unable to accept that the atmosphere within the mountains was a natural phenomenon, a hindrance to their easy passage but no threat to their mortal souls, and at each break in their journey, to rest for a while or make camp for the night, she would take a sewing needle from her satchel, embed it in the ground so that the eye of the needle might draw any spirits through it and cause them to disappear. This she did now, as the party dismounted and Lady Haggitha announced that they would rest for the night, setting a steel needle in the earth and sitting some feet away, watching the air swirl about its tip.

"What do you see, Jahilyah?" Lady Haggitha asked, sitting on the ground beside her, but the question brought only a

shudder in response. Gamaliel brought a pannier from his horse, took out biscuits and cheese which he broke and passed around. The cheese was greasy and had a carbolic taste, the biscuits hard, and Lady Haggitha grimaced with dissatisfaction. "I believe we will venture out of the mountains tomorrow. We need nourishment, sunlight, I don't think I can suffer this murk much longer. Will that please you, Jahiliyah?"

"It will, my Lady," the maid answered, taking her eyes from the needle at last. She had never questioned their destination once since leaving Brynpica, had only fretted that their route took them through the Temeraire Mountains. Now she asked, "Where would you take us to, my Lady?"

"In view of the fact that my husband has set the Daughters of Albion on our tails I feel it no longer wise for us to remain in solitude. There is no place that they cannot track us to, however remote, so it would be better if we had the security of people around us." She looked around, at the murk which grew no darker, although night was surely falling. "Yes, I believe that in the bosom of my family is where we would be safest, so tomorrow we will go down to the plain and make our way east. My cousin, the Marquis of Dos Aguas, will see us safe. You think the climate would be healthier for us there, Basilides?" she asked, turning to the scribe.

"I think that your family's hatred of your husband would afford us the best security we could hope for," he concurred. "But what of the instruments of the Hashishim, my Lady? What of the harnessing of their power? That was our original goal when we absconded from Lord Lovecraft's company."

"So it was and so it remains," Lady Haggitha remained adamant. "But perhaps a little remote for the moment. I take it their progress still describes the same route?"

Basilides nodded, gazing as far into the distance as a blind eye and the peculiar atmosphere of the Temeraire Mountains

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would permit. "They travel east, as we now intend to do, though much further to the north. There is no sure indication of where their destination might lie."

"But it is thankfully not Golgonooza, so it would seem, and for the moment they grow no more distant. I fear that for the present my ambition must be held in abeyance, until such time as we are secure enough in ourselves to continue the quest. Hopefully my husband and van Vogt will not take up the same search with any great resolve, will remain in Golgonooza. You say the feud grows more bitter between them, Gamaliel?" she asked the groom, and he agreed that this was what he had heard in Arken, what he had gleaned from the daughters of Albion and from other travelers. "Good," she smiled approvingly, maliciously. "If I know the two as well as I think I do then even the slightest tiff will have them preoccupied to the exclusion of all else."

The situation was as satisfactory as she could hope for under the circumstances. They had evaded the Daughters of Albion who had been sent after them, neither First Minister van Vogt nor Lord Lovecraft was any closer to finding the Hashishim than she was, and lacked the intuitions of Basilides to point them in the right direction. Her one disappointment, the one thing she shied from asking Gamaliel for confirmation of, was her nephew's rumored behavior. What was the young man thinking of, swelling his company to an army? She had sent him from Golgonooza with little more than a dozen men, a discreet enough number that he might achieve his purpose without drawing too much unwanted attention, yet if reports were to be believed it seemed that that number had swelled at each village and town he had passed through. She feared, now, that she had underestimated his need for adventure. What had at first recommended him for the task was in danger of becoming an impulse of megalomaniac proportions.

“Give a youth a taste of power,” she sighed aloud, but left the regret unfinished, drew Jahiliyah to her with one arm, the groom with the other, said, “Gamaliel has missed you so over the past few days, my dear. He has missed the comfort of your caresses. Should we help the poor man?”

Jahiliyah smiled, like a glutton invited to a feast she ran her tongue across her lips, moistening them, grinned more broadly to bare her teeth.

* * *

“I will have my palace here,” Abishai stated, flatly and without preamble, his gaze fixed ahead and challenging anyone to question his ambition or doubt his intent. “I will have walls constructed around the Doge’s residence, all buildings within an arrow’s flight will be flattened and you will see to it that any maidens of acceptable years are housed in the seraglio which will occupy the top floor.”

“Maidens? Of acceptable years?” Elusai wondered if any still remained in San Romano, seeing the figures who were spilled lifeless in the dust or who staggered bow-legged and bleeding about the streets.

“If there are none remaining then send a troop to the nearest town!” Abishai ordered. “Scour the settlements hereabouts! Have them bring back women who are intact and unsullied! I will have my palace here!”

“But what of Lady Haggitha’s instructions?” asked Elusai. “Ought we not continue our pursuit of this Hashishim?”

“No, Elusai,” said Abishai, his temper subsiding, his mood of resignation. “It is a fruitless task in all respects. If we were ever to find the creature it might still be to no purpose, my pampered aunt will have found a new preoccupation to drive her by then. And what need do I have of this alien power in any case, when with eighty men I have just vanquished eight hundred?” He turned to his friend, his face ablaze with triumph, his glazed eyes

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reflecting fires which still smoldered about the streets of the town. Here and there plumes of black smoke drifted above the rooftops, gathering in a cloud which seemed to cast its pall across the land. “Just think how mighty I might be when my own force swells to eight hundred, to eight thousand. I will be invincible, Elusai. Even the Hashishim will cower before me.”

Abishai led the way from the Doge’s residence, through its charred and shattered gate, striding like the conqueror he believed himself to be. Around him those who had put up the most valiant resistance to his force were having their wounds dressed, that they might offer their allegiance to him, while the weakest lay with throats cut and limbs broken, waiting to be incinerated.

Abishai pointed to a building directly ahead, of a scale and grandeur that it could compete with the Doge’s residence which was now to become his palace. “That must be the first to go,” he ordered, regarding it critically, as if its design offended him.

“But that is our library,” said a citizen nearby, crouching to tend to one of the wounded. “It is our history.”

In an instant the blade of a sword was at the old man’s throat, Abishai holding the tip trembling a touch from death as he said, “San Romano has no history other than the history which begins with me. Understand that?”

“I understand.”

“My Lord! I understand.... My Lord!” Abishai insisted.

“I understand, my Lord.”

“And what is it that you were in your previous life, old man?”

“A priest. My Lord.”

“A priest, eh? Serving who?”

“The priests of San Romano serve only the people.”

“Well the priests of San Romano now serve only Lord Abishai,” he was told, and the tip of the sword lifted inches to

trace the initial of the man's new master on his brow. "Let that be their mark," said Abishai, wiping the blood from his blade, feeling its texture between finger and thumb, touching it to his lips to taste it.

Elusai offered the priest a pitying look as they moved on, as much compassion as he dare show. Lifelong friendship had forged a bond between him and Abishai, but he was aware of its limits, knew that there was a certain dumb loyalty demanded, that there could never be any criticism, whether spoken openly or suggested by manner.

It was with a certain hesitancy, then, that he ventured, "Might it not be possible to send a small force to continue the quest, my Lord? Your army has grown, will no doubt continue to do so in the light of your latest victory." Men would join out of fear, he knew, Abishai would see to it that his merciless reputation was broadcast across the region. "With a handful of men, no more than half a dozen, I could travel quickly enough to feel sure of success."

"A half dozen men?" Abishai considered, a fingertip still to his lips. "Yes, a force so compact would travel more swiftly than an army. But led by you?" He smiled, rested a hand on his friend's shoulder and squeezed tightly, fingers digging hard into the flesh. "No, Elusai. I think not. I need you by my side."

"But the force would need to be led by someone you trust," Elusai reasoned, not flinching despite the pain he felt and the seed of fear which was sown.

"Trust, Elusai? But I trust no one, and especially not when they recommend themselves to me." Abishai's fingers worked like a baker's kneading dough, like a potter's working clay, grinding sinew and muscle and cartilage against bone, trapping nerves to numb Elusai's fingers. "Could it be that you want to be free of my company, Elusai? Are you anxious to get away? Is that why you offer yourself to lead this elite force?"

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“No, my Lord,” Elusai promised.

“Have I not brought you the adventure which has brightened your life, given you power and glory and more women than you could ever have dreamed of?” Abishai laughed, though there was no joy in the sound, nothing of amusement about the tone. “Certainly more women than ever brought comfort to your nights in Golgonooza.”

“That is true.”

“It is. Coin was the currency which bought your solace then, a currency which you were often lacking. Power and conquest are what buy their favors now, and with me you have this in abundance.” Abishai nodded his head vigorously, in approval of his own wisdom. “So it is settled. You will select six men, find someone who -how did you phrase it?- someone who can be trusted to lead them. I trust you to send them on the right course and then your duty will be fulfilled, you will be free to stay here by my side, to lay the foundations of my palace, my kingdom, and share in the rewards it brings. See to this and then rejoin me at the palace, where we will allocate quarters and share out women.”

Elusai gave a bow of agreement and watched as the friend who was becoming a fiend continued on his way through the vanquished town, strolling as casually as a tourist in a foreign land, gazing about him with a detached curiosity as if he did not even notice the blood and viscera which flecked the walls of the pastel buildings, as if he seemed oblivious to the wounded who were strewn about the place like crippled beggars. Once he had passed out of sight, Elusai continued on his own way.

Instructed to stay in San Romano with Abishai, his concern now was to get word to First Minister van Vogt of what had happened thus far, and what might threaten to unfold. Mulling over his problem, he entered a square which had been cleared of the debris of battle, which seemed never even to have been

touched by conflict. A group of men were seated outside a tavern, drinking, laughing, as at ease as if they had no consciences. He sat a little apart from them, accepted a glass of wine which was offered with no request for payment.

“Is ours not a famous victory?” he mumbled, cupping his goblet in his hands.

“Ours is not a famous victory,” answered another solitary drinker, seated nearby.

Elusai turned to the man, cautious for the moment not to agree with anything that Abishai might deem treacherous, said, “Do I know you?”

“Harding,” the man introduced himself, dragging his stool closer to share Elusai’s table, offering his hand. “The woodsman. It was I who pointed out to you that the trees were healing themselves.”

“Ah, yes,” Elusai recalled, accepting the greeting. He took a sip of his wine, said cautiously, “So you think there is something hollow about our victory, that it will not go down in the annals of history?”

“As you do, I suspect, my Lord.” He looked at the happier men around them, shook his head sadly. “I have spilled blood in the past, but always with good cause. These men, this army of your friend’s, they had no cause at all to do so. You saw the men who opposed us, as ineffectual a bunch as ever I have encountered, we could have breezed through them without so much as raising a bruise to their pasty complexions. Where was the need for so much bloodshed, my Lord? Can you tell me?”

Sadly, Elusai could not. The two men drained their wine, but had appetite for no more. Elusai rose, said, “Will you walk with me, Harding?”

The woodsman rose, accompanied him from the square to quieter streets where there was no sound of the joy of victory, just the occasional sob from a house they passed, the sound of

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crying through an open window.

“Lord Abishai’s victory sickens you as much as it does me,” said Elusai after a while, unable to stop his ears to the dirge-like sounds which described defeat. “And yet you stay?”

“I doubt that few would be rash enough to leave Lord Abishai’s company, once having been welcomed into it,” said Harding, looking about him with distaste, with the despair of a prisoner who can see no escape. “Already he has men stationed about the perimeter of the town, for the purpose of vetting who leaves as much as controlling who enters.”

“But if you could leave freely, without hindrance?” Elusai wondered. “Then you might?”

“Although I feel that I can trust you, it would be foolish of me to admit as much,” the woodsman smiled.

Elusai understood. “Let me offer you a commission, then, with Lord Abishai’s approval, and you may take what advantage of it that you wish. I have been instructed to send a force of half a dozen men to continue with our original mission. If you were to find yourself a part of that force do you think you might get a message to First Minister van Vogt in Golgonooza? An honest message, a sincere warning?”

* * *

“Garden of Earthly Delights, eh? Sounds promising,” said Leo, and Griff gave a low groan of disappointment, guessing at the promise that his friend might read into the name, the appeal which it would have for his carnal nature. There was a time and a place for everything, he knew, but he very much doubted that their destination was either the place, or would afford them the time.

“There is nothing at all delightful about the Garden of Earthly Delights, and do not go there in the hope that there may be,” the School Master sternly cautioned, offering the warning that would hopefully carry more weight than if it had come from

Griff. "Go there with your wits about you," he insisted, "your imaginations fired and your determination resolute." He allowed a moment for his words to penetrate, then said, "Now, you will need supplies, food, maps..."

"Weapons?" Leo hoped.

"If you wish them," the School Master humored him patiently, "though you will find that your imaginations are your greatest weapons. And you will need horses."

"Horses?" said Griff. "I've never ridden a horse in my life."

"No worry. You will find that you are able to."

"But horses?" Leo echoed Griff's dismay, perhaps hoping for transport more contemporary with his own times. "We came here by steam train, or something that approximated one. Why not again?"

"The route which brought us here is the only one such route."

"Then why have your people never thought to extend the system?" Griff asked.

"You still have not grasped the nature of Eidolon, have you?" the School Master sighed. "The railway is there, it has always been there, crossing the Temeraire Mountains. We did not make it, it was the dream of one of your kind. We can use it, but we cannot change it. So," he insisted, "if you are to cross the Malterre Marshes then on horseback is the only way. The ground is clinging, the marsh creatures bothersome, horses will keep you clear of the mire." The School Master dipped his hand into the satchel he carried, drew out an envelope which he passed to them quickly before either could question him about the particular perils of the Marshes, saying, "In here is a letter outlining the nature of your journey and the nature of your needs. Take it to the premises of Arnolfini and Co, hand it to Arnolfini in person. If it occurs to him that you require any provisions other than those I have listed then he will make his suggestions." He

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considered a moment, then nodded, permitting himself a wry smile, said, "Yes, Arnolfini will certainly add to the list, if only to mount his profits. No matter, though. With the letter is included an order of payment made out by the School of the Rose+Croix. It will cover the cost of whatever you need. Just be sure to check the man's sums before you put your mark to any receipt. And now, come, it is time for you to begin."

As if they were already some way into their journey they rose on weary legs and followed the School Master from their lodgings. He escorted them part of the way into the city, offering them further cautions, then gave them their final directions. It was when he shook their hands in turn, offering his good wishes, that each felt the encouragement flow into them, the confidence with which to be about their task.

"And never forget!" he said in parting.

"Imagination, anger, no hesitation!" Griff grinned back.

The School Master turned, went on his way. Leo watched him go, then said, "Jeez! What have we got ourselves involved in?"

"Dunno," Griff confessed, a slight doubt returning now that their mentor had left. "I'm not sure. I do know that I should be scared shitless and the one thing that scares me most is the very fact that I'm not."

"The bastard's brainwashed us, that's what it is," Leo believed, feeling much the same conflict of emotions.

And it was with this courage which neither of them could comprehend that they crossed the city with such swagger and confidence, found themselves before the premises of Arnolfini and Co. It looked like any department store in any city they had ever visited, a classical facade fronted by stout Doric columns which promised strength and reliability. The glass doors they approached swung open as they neared them, causing them to take a step back in surprise, for the road they had come by had

been of coarse black earth, suggesting no such sophistication, the buildings on the other side of the street ramshackle mock Tudor constructions which leant precariously forward. But then such were the contradictions which were to be found in Golgonooza, it was what they were coming to expect. The doors closed, then opened again to admit them at their second approach, and a cocktail of perfumes greeted them as they entered, the islands of counters on the ground floor given over to the beautician's arts, a variety of creatures offering henna for the hair, kohl for the eyes, glosses which could make the lips so brilliant that they smarted the eyes and would sting any mouth they kissed. They wound their way between these isles and stations and desks, made their way to a broad staircase which rose to an upper floor, there consulted an index of departments which was written in gold Gothic on a board of matt black.

"Accounts and Admin, Fourth Floor," Griff read, and they climbed a switchback succession of staircases to the top of the building, noting the departments that passed beneath them, the fabrics which covered every ethnic variety, the furniture which ranged from classic simplicity to an equally simple Bauhaus modernity, the gentlemen's floor which including clothing and armor, the sports department which offered a dazzling array of weapons.

Stepping from the final stair and reaching a reception desk they were confronted by a young woman who had all the expression of a geisha, her painted face totally impassive, her tailored suit as stiff as her posture.

"Yes?" she said, her glossed lips barely moving, and Griff told her that they were there to see the man named Arnolfini. "You have an appointment?" she asked, thumbing rapidly through the diary on the desk before her.

"No, but we have an introduction," he replied, and handed across the School Master's letter.

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She scanned it quickly, her eyes flicking back and forth, folded it neatly and rose to disappear along a corridor to her left, instructing them to wait there, and as quickly as she strode away her steps were still silent on the carpeted floor.

“Sullen bitch,” Griff remarked.

“Coldly efficient,” Leo agreed.

Two minutes later the young woman returned, a forced smile now on her face, as if her features had been rearranged during her absence, her makeup reapplied. She bowed, gestured, said, “This way, please.”

They followed her down the same corridor, were ushered into a room of minimalist elegance, and there saw the man they took to be Arnolfini, standing beside a large desk of glass and chromium. He could have been the director of any firm, the chairman of any company, if it had not been for his dress being so at odds with his surroundings. The coat he wore was a pleated velvet smock, his hat was like a wide-brimmed pot atop his head, his legs were clad in tight breeches ending in pointed slippers, he was an anachronism in that temple to modernity.

“Welcome,” he said, his hands extended to take one of theirs in each and squeezing limply. He pointed them to chairs facing his desk and then took a grander seat on his side, towering above them even though he was inches smaller. “I have your introduction,” he acknowledged, picking up the School Master’s letter and perusing it, “and the list of your needs and the method of payment.”

“And-?” Griff prompted, after a moment’s silence.

“No can do,” Arnolfini said, with a slow shake of the head.

“Eh? But the School Master said that the order of payment would cover any costs.”

“And so it does, the School of the Rose+Croix can be trusted to honor any note,” the businessman agreed. “But still... no can do.”

“Why not?” Leo demanded.

Arnolfini regarded the letter a second time, then folded it carefully, set it on the desk and leant forward, his elbows planted firmly on the polished glass surface. “I have read of your requirements, can guess at your journey, and so have an inkling of the type of people you must be.” Neither Leo nor Griff responded, admitting nothing, giving no clues as to what they were about. Arnolfini smiled, said, “Regard the painting behind me.”

They looked at the framed panel which hung on the stark white wall above his head, the second antique anachronism, in it saw Arnolfini himself, and beside him a woman of similar height, dressed in similar style; the couple were depicted in a narrow room, a scruff of a dog at their feet, a convex mirror at their rear reflecting the scene. There was a certain skill about the execution of the painting, but that was all, there was nothing else about it which would recommend it to either Griff or Leo.

Leo gave it no more than a perfunctory glance; Griff said, “Yes? So?”

“That is a testament to my marriage, what makes my marriage to my wife Giovanna binding. You note the words the painting contains?” Griff peered at the script around the frame of the circular mirror, but it was too ornate to decipher, or in a language he was unacquainted with. He shook his head. “It simply states who executed the painting,” Arnolfini told him, “but it is this which constitutes the license which links me to my wife. Now I wish that marriage to be dissolved. If you are the artists I suspect you to be, then you can accomplish this for me.”

“But how?” Leo asked. “We may well be artists but we’re certainly not divorce lawyers.”

Arnolfini gave a patient frown, as if the simplicity of the matter had escaped his two customers, said, “The painting witnesses my marriage to Giovanna, and so unites us. If it was to

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witness our separation then we would no longer be united.”

“Ah. Gotcha,” Leo now understood.

Arnolfini rose from behind his desk. “Good. I will see to the things that you require, then, while you apply yourselves to annulling my marriage.”

“This is one hell of a way to get a quickie divorce,” Griff commented, when the man had left the room.

“But logical enough, when you think about it,” thought Leo, going around to desk to regard the painting. “So how do we go about it?”

“With imagination?”

“And no hesitation,” Leo nodded.

“Well he can let go of her hand for a start,” Griff said, joining Leo, and in the instant that he pictured it so the figure of Arnolfini released his wife’s hand.

The man and the woman inched slowly apart.

“We’ll get rid of the pooch, too,” Leo decided, regarding the mutt of a dog with distaste; it was the type of dog to yap at a person’s heels, the type he always had to resist the impulse to kick. “It’s obviously hers, the sort of lap dog a wealthy woman would have. Where it goes, so will she.”

He gazed at the painting and, as Griff watched, the dog cocked a leg, peed on the floor, then trotted out of view.

“Was there any need for that?” Griff asked him. “You could just have made the thing disappear.”

“More fun,” Leo grinned. “And now, what about Mrs Arnolfini? Does she go too?”

They considered a moment, before Griff said, “No, I don’t think so. We need to show that they’re separated. We’ll just have her turn away a little, to suggest that she’s no longer a part of his life...” The woman turned from her husband, her expression sad, a hint of a tear in her eye. “...and finally a signature to witness the happy event,” he concluded, as the figure of Arnolfini broke into

a broad smile, and their names were printed out around the frame of the mirror. "There. Our first collaborative work."

"Not bad. Not bad at all," Leo nodded with approval, and they returned to their seats to wait for Arnolfini to come back. When the man finally entered the room he beamed as delightedly as his image, looked appraisingly at the painting for a while, then turned and congratulated them on their work.

"Well done. Very well done indeed. And now, if you will accompany me downstairs, I have ready everything that you require."

They took the staircases down to the basement, went along a corridor and out to a loading bay where there were stacked leather panniers full of food, skins filled with water, thick woolen jerkins and quilted bed rolls. Even the weapons Leo had hoped for, crossbows and swords and knives with blades as slim as needles.

"Your horses are waiting at stables on the edge of the city," Arnolfini told them. "My driver will take you there."

They loaded their things onto the waiting cart, shook hands with Arnolfini, then climbed up beside the driver.

"Goodbye, good luck with your journey and thank you for your services," said the newly divorced Arnolfini as the cart set off.

* * *

A half a day's ride across the open plain and already the merciless sun had become as abrasive to the spirit and as tiring to the body as had the air in the mountains. The land they crossed was a sea of faded gold, its horizon distant, the parched yellow grass was in need of moisture and rustled like paper as their horses strode through it, at a canter for a league or two to bring a welcome breeze, then at walking pace for a while through air which tasted scorched and dry. And as sure as eggs was eggs any rain, if it came, would only be a momentary benediction, any

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relief it brought from the heat would just as soon be seen as yet another discomfort to be suffered. The central plain was an inhospitable place, there was no shadow where they might rest, the single occasional trees which broke the landscape were no more than skeletal growths and Lady Haggitha was beginning to doubt the wisdom of the route she had chosen, was only driven on by the fear that the two Daughters of Albion might still be searching for their trail. If there was any comfort to be had from that featureless place it was that pursuers would be seen a distance off; if there was anything more depressing than the stifling heat it was the knowledge that they themselves were as obvious as blots on the landscape.

The horses had slowed to such a pace that they might be about to fall asleep in their tracks and Lady Haggitha geed her mount on, asking a final effort of it, prepared to ride it to exhaustion if that was what was needed to be out of the place. Abreast of her the others matched her speed, Jahiliyah at least happy to be out of the mountains, and Gamaliel too with a contented expression, his need for the company of his mistress and her maid now satisfied. Basilides, he sat expressionless on his horse, his immobile face as impassive as always.

“It cannot be far now,” Lady Haggitha said, though she doubted that anyone was listening, expected no one to answer. “If my geography of the region serves me correct we should be nearing the route to the south, and that marks the end of the plain. The land will rise, the air become cooler. There will be people there, shelter and refreshment.”

A distance on she told herself this again, leant forward in the saddle to pat her horse, as if to reassure the exhausted creature, then rested her cheek against its sweating neck, feeling just as exhausted herself. Her eyes growing heavy, her energy failing, it was a while before she became conscious of the slackening pace, slapped her heels weakly against the beast’s flanks and

murmured a word of encouragement. It had no effect and she braced herself to dismount, fearing that the horse was about to collapse, looked to the ground to choose the spot where she would fall and only then realized that it was not exhaustion that had brought them to a near standstill but rather the incline they had started to climb.

“There!” she croaked, with an attempt at triumph, though it was not a destination reached that she was announcing, simply the end of the damnable plain. She allowed the horse to crest the rise at its own pace, then climbed down from the saddle to wait while the others caught up with her. The incline behind them was so shallow that she had not noticed that they must have been climbing it for an hour or more, over a distance of leagues it rose no more than a hundred feet. But now, before them, the landscape rippled and folded, in the gloaming of twilight was broken by the darker masses which were woods and forests, rocky protuberances and shallow defiles. She peered ahead while the horse rested, eventually made out the gravel grey ribbon which wound across the land, the main route to the south. “Yes, there,” she smiled.

They led their horses until they reached water, let them drink, refreshed themselves, and even the dumb creatures seemed relieved that the plain was behind them, for once remounted they took them forward at a happier clip. At the road they turned south, veering from the direct line to her cousin in Dos Aguas, Lady Haggitha deciding on a detour which would take them by the quickest route to the nearest town, accepting that tonight they would need rest and refreshment as much as the security of her family. If her geography was still accurate that town would be Felpham, a place much like Arken, its location such that it served as a parting of the ways for travelers from all quarters, offering a shifting population in which they might lose themselves.

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Night had finally fallen when the walls of the town came into view, a dark curtain rising before them behind which rays of colored light were thrown into the evening sky, the radiance making its crenellations seem like the silhouettes of blunted teeth. For all that it had the aspect of a fortress, though, there was no difficulty about gaining admittance, the road taking them directly to an open gate which was broad enough and high enough to let the largest of caravans through. Entering, drawn into the light of the city, they saw that commerce was still busy despite the hour, at every turn there were wagons, pack mules, all manner of transport spilling out goods and people and livestock onto the streets. Many wares were offered for sale on the spot, business was instant, with none of the delay of storage and redistribution; they saw cattle slaughtered where they were unloaded, butchered and gutted and presented to the passing populace even before the blood had dried in the dirt. People, too, were available for purchase, as much a commodity as the silks and spices, the precious metals and colored stones, and often just as exotic, mocha-colored youths from the south and sloe-eyed girls from the east, all available for a price.

Lady Haggitha thought she caught a glint in the eye of Jahiliyah as they passed these markets in human meat, a flash of interest in the bodies displayed which sparked and flared to take in their variety. And it was not just the males of the species which the maid was drawn to, she noted with approval.

“Hungry, Jahiliyah?” she asked ambivalently, and the maid turned to her, her cheeks flushing. “Then have patience. We will soon find a place to rest for the night.”

Ordinarily she would have made her way to a quieter part of the town, to an establishment where people of wealth would find the comfort they were accustomed to. Under present circumstances, however, it would be wiser to have the anonymity of being a part of the crowd rather standing out as a person of

privilege, more prudent to welcome the security of people around her, however base they might be. It was perhaps a compromise, perhaps an impatience to search too long, that she led the way into the courtyard of large premises in Felpham's main square, a hostelry less grand than she would have frequented with her husband and their entourage but still too close to expensive for it to encourage any low life. Stable boys took their horses, a man in a frock coat greeted them and escorted them through to a reception hall of faded Baroque splendor where Lady Haggitha requested a compact suite of rooms sufficient for the comfort of the four of them.

The accommodation was comfortable, securely situated at the end of a corridor on an upper floor, the sitting room large enough for all four to gather, the three bedrooms sufficient that whatever sleeping arrangements she decided on there would be a soft mattress for each, welcome after days in the saddle. The fact that the toilet facilities were basic was an inconvenience, just cold water and a commode in a closet, but in the basement she had been told there was a hot pool, masseurs if needed and people skilled in the use of aromatic oils.

She took her own oils, had Jahiliyah accompany her, was ready to brook no protest, expecting some country bashfulness at the prospect of disrobing before a bath full of strangers. She was pleasantly surprised, then, proud of the change she had wrought in the girl, when the maid stripped with a ready enthusiasm, showing no shame at all in displaying her robust body.

"This is the way you expected the life of a lady's maid to be, I'll wager," said Lady Haggitha, as they sat immersed to the breasts in the warm soothing water, feeling the pores open and cleanse, using cloths of soft cotton to wipe the perspiration from each other's brow.

"This is more as I imagined, my Lady," Jahiliyah agreed.

"Poor girl. There must have been moments which were hard

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for you, for all that you come from stout country stock. But still, occasions such as this make it all worthwhile, do they not? You have no regrets about accompanying me?”

She had been offered no choice, but said, “No, my Lady. I have no regrets.”

“No regrets, but you do have Gamaliel. In the palm of your hand, so to speak, whenever you wish. Is he not a dear young man?”

“He is, my Lady,” Jahiliyah smiled, the curve to the lips as much of wickedness as of fondness.

Lady Haggitha reached behind her, to where she had arrayed a number of vials of oil at the side of the pool, unstoppered one and poured an amount into her cupped hand. “Turn to face me,” she said, wringing her hands to spread the oil evenly. “Let us make you even more desirable to the groom, and me more indispensable still.”

Jahiliyah turned, stood so that her upper body was bared, and Lady Haggitha began to work the oil into her with a rhythmic kneading movement, seeing the girl’s nipples crisp, her eyes sparkle and mouth grow broad in a hungry leer. Adding more oil, she began to massage her own breasts, let Jahiliyah embrace her to work it into her shoulders, her back, down to the dimpled spine.

The vapors which hung about the pool, the perspiration which misted their eyes, made vague shadows of the people around them, shapes which shifted like spirits lost in limbo, and Lady Haggitha did not notice the figure approach, wading waste deep through the water.

“Well, what a touching demonstration of Sapphic love! Or could it be subservience?”

Lady Haggitha looked beyond Jahiliyah, was first startled by the voice, then shocked to see the person who spoke. “Lord Lovcraft?”

“Would you two ladies care to join me for refreshments once you are dressed?”

* * *

Tulla’s crooning voice and soothing touch brought sleep, and the wine, as she had warned, brought nightmares, though Jack was never allowed time to dwell on the substance of them, for the instant he became restless her caresses would calm him. And when he woke, roused by the dusty beams of light which pierced the fabric of the hut, he was surprised to feel quite refreshed, as if he had indeed slept in the palatial comfort she had described to him, dined on something more satisfying than stale bread and cheese. They breakfasted on more of the same, and this time he found the taste more palatable.

“Ready to continue on our way?” Tulla asked, folding the blankets and returning them to storage.

“Ready,” he agreed, and there was an enthusiasm there which was enough to surprise him, sufficient to please her.

“Good, that’s the spirit,” she smiled, and held out a hand which he took. “It makes me so pleased that I brought you here, Jack. Now, if we make a steady pace we can be at our destination by afternoon.”

She kept hold of his hand to encourage that pace as they left the hut and resumed their climb, the morning air fresh enough to hurry them. As the sun rose above the trees and gained height it began to warm them, and gradually their pace slowed a little, but then they were at the peak of their climb, the way ahead leveled out, then began to drop. And then, turning a bend in the road, Jack caught his first sight of the Garden of Earthly Delights.

Some few hundred feet below them, still far off in the distance, a large open plain spread out, as flat as a sea of baize, gleaming emerald and viridian in the sun, at its furthest edge glittering more brightly still in a blaze of other colors, vermilion and cadmiums and an azure ribbon of what might have been

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water.

“The Garden of Earthly Delights begins here, at the foot of these hills,” Tulla told Jack, “but my home lies there, on the far horizon.”

The incline helped them pick up their pace again and by the time the sun reached its zenith they were at the plain, crossing its vast open expanse. Here and there were scattered copses, and they circled any of these which lay in their way, but otherwise their direction was straight and true. It was some miles on, when they joined a narrow road which cut across the plain from their left, that they came across the first people, a group of a dozen standing a little way from the road. That they were naked was no surprise to Jack, for what else was to be expected in a place named the Garden of Earthly Delights? It was the fact that they gained no delight from their condition which shocked him. Among the group were a number of musical instruments, of such a size as to be unplayable, dwarfing the people. On one, resembling a huge double bass, a man and a woman were impaled, as if crucified on it; another man had his arms and legs threaded through the strings of a large harp, held immobile by the steel mesh which scored his flesh; a third, a woman, had been penetrated by a violin, its neck buried deep in her groin. All were making a low keening noise, and it was impossible to tell if it was of discomfort, or if this was indeed their delight.

“What’s happening here?” Jack asked Tulla.

“The musical instruments are representative of love and lust,” she explained matter-of-factly. “The people crucified on them are those who indulged in the pleasures of the flesh.”

“And this is your Garden of Earthly Delights?” he asked, shocked at their suffering.

“It is certainly the Garden of our Delight,” she said, with a laughing disregard for the agonies they witnessed.

They continued on their way, never straying from the path,

Jack noting that no one else seemed to stray onto it. His horror at what he had seen must still have been evident for Tulla gave his hand a squeeze of encouragement, told him not to look so aghast, for there was happiness there as well as horror. "See, ahead," she said, and pointed.

He followed her finger, to the right this time, saw that the ground dipped gently away, down to a shallow hollow where a broad lake gleamed in the sun. It must have been artificial, he could see no river or stream feeding it, and in its centre a fountain spouted, a tall slim structure like a Gothic gazebo. People cavorted beneath it, splashed knee deep between it and the shore, one man rode a large fish around it, the size of a dolphin but the shape of a bream. Others sprawled at the water's edge to take the sun and a short way off, in the shade of a tree, a group of naked women flaunted their bodies while young men rode around them on the backs of giant birds, goldfinches and kingfishers and hoopoes whose fine plumes caught the breeze, men exhibiting the machismo of a chapter of motorcyclists, flashing their grins and flexing their bare limbs. Elsewhere the sexes had paired off, in couples or as parts of larger groups, were stroking and caressing each other and feeding each other fruits of a ridiculous size, raspberries as large as apples, strawberries as big as melons, smearing their bodies with the bright sticky juices.

"The Adamites are happy, if no one else," said Tulla with an approving smile. "For the moment, at least."

"Adamites?" Jack questioned.

"They hope that by the sexual promiscuity of their rites they will achieve Adam's state of innocence before the Fall."

"You have religion here?"

"We have many things here, Jack, some of which people will excuse as religion."

"And will they? Achieve the innocence they hope for?"

"It is unlikely," she said, with a malevolent grin, and called

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out her encouragement to the crowd in passing, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth! And have dominion over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth!" She returned the salutes which some offered, then brought her mouth to Jack's ear to say, "Poor fools."

Her whispered words brought with them a slight smell which was at once offensive, like the stink of a sickroom, and attractive, like the fragrance of patchouli. The scent lingered only a moment, before being dissipated by the breeze, but still it caused him to shudder.

A second group who resembled the Adamites in their languor, in their contentment, then came into view, again feasting on the oversized fruits, and in the minute or so it took for them to pass the crowd he felt certain that each and every one began to bloat noticeably.

"Plucking fruit," said Tulla, spitting out the words as if they signified some carnal sin. "Gluttony, sloth, avarice, lust, they are all much of a oneness, they bring with them the same peculiar punishments."

"You punish people for their happiness?" Jack asked.

"We punish people for..." Tulla began, but then pointed, clapped her hands, cried, "See! The hunters hunted!"

A stag had broken over a slight rise, came charging towards them, was no more than a meter or two away when it made a sudden dart right, tossing its head. Its shoulders were broad, its hooves made the ground shake, its antlers were huge and impaled on the branches of each was the gored and bloody body of a man.

"The hunters hunted," Tulla repeated more softly, as if here was a punishment which was merited.

Jack wondered about the philosophy of this place, of the ethics which ruled, as the crowds were seen to thicken ahead. A

woman approached, beautiful, naked, no more than a couple of feet away, closer than any had yet come to their path which cut across the plain. Like any admiring man who passes an attractive woman on the street, he turned to look after her, saw that from the back she was no more than a rotting corpse. Even as he gazed after her some strange monster came giving chase, its green scaled head sprouting from its rump and limbs so broken and awkwardly bent that it seemed to scuttle like a crippled crustacean. He turned to Tulla, saw the flare reflected in her eyes, looked ahead to notice that they were now faced with something that might have been a land afire.

The viridian plain was now broken by flashes of carmine and crimson, ant hills like tiny volcanoes spurted flame and burning rock, cracks broke in the earth to either side of them, briefly burned and blazed and then fused shut. And everywhere among this inferno of earth and fire were jumbles of figures, difficult to distinguish one from the other, then impossible to comprehend even when they eventually could be distinguished. A man being roasted on a spit had some hideous creature beside him, her belly bloated, reaching out to baste his body with spitting fat; a woman holding a pan the size of a truck tire was frying things which at first seemed to be joints of meat but were soon recognized to be dismembered limbs; a blue-skinned bird-headed monster devoured people live, then defecated, spitting them out stinking from its anus into the pit beneath the chair in which it sat so magisterially; a blacksmith-devil in a leather apron hammered a body on an anvil, striking sparks from every bone, then cast it aside to pick up another body and begin to shod the bare feet with hot steel and cold nails, as one might do a horse; a giant toad chewed on a man's genitals; a slug-like creature had another man's jaws prized apart to an impossible degree, was forcing itself down his throat.

And then there was the music, a cacophony of it which

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drowned any human lament. Creatures with noses like hunting horns blew and blasted; others had musical instruments thrust into their hindquarters, farting out tunes which filled the air with a noxious smell; another played bagpipes which looked like human genitals, one phallus in his mouth, the other in his hands, the sac which held the testicles being pumped vigorously beneath his arm.

Jack fainted as Tulla said, "And here we are, home at last."

* * *

Her first impulse was to flee, as she and Jahilyah hurriedly towed themselves dry Lady Haggitha could only think of leaving the city on the instant, of resuming their journey east with all possible haste. In the moments spent dressing, however, fumbling with skirts and petticoats, with laces and clasps, her agitation began to calm and her thoughts became more composed. To have put his invitation to join him so calmly Lord Lovecraft would have to have considered the possibility of flight, he would probably have men covering all the exits from the building, men who would recognize her even if she did not recognize them; there would be no evading them. It would be wiser to face him then, she decided, rather than to trust in reckless flight, to confront him in order to understand his intentions and then hopefully use her guile to outmaneuver him. And she was curious, too, to learn how he had found her.

"Jahilyah," she said, once they were dressed, "go up to our rooms and stay with Basilides. Have Gamaliel come down to me and then lock the door, do not open it to anyone but me."

"Yes, my Lady."

"And Jahilyah..."

"My Lady?"

"Stay as close to the scribe for the sake of his safety as you do to the groom for the sake of his passion."

Jahilyah hurried to the staircase, Lady Haggitha waited in

the reception hall, casting anxious glances through to the room where people dined, drank or simply waited, as she did, for others who would resolve their fates. She saw her husband alone in a corner, his back to her but easily recognized by the spare frame, the narrow shoulders, the dark hair which was grey at the edges where it curled against his neck. From her purse she took some scented water, a fragrance she knew he particularly liked and was sometimes effective in soothing him, rubbed some into her neck, her wrists, the lobes of her ears. The flush of fear she felt would make the fragrance all the more pungent.

Gamaliel appeared at her side.

“Stay by me, say nothing, do nothing unless I command it,” she instructed him, leading the way forward.

“And?”

Quite. What use did she hope the groom would be against Lord Lovecraft? “Just stay by me,” she repeated, and they went through the door from the reception hall, wound their way between tables and couches to where her husband sat.

“You...” she began, walking around the table to face him, but then stopped short. “You are not...”

“Your husband?” the man smiled up at her. “No. But I thought that if I appeared to be then that would guarantee your attention, and your attendance at my table. Which is welcomed, by the way,” he added, and gestured to a seat. “I am honored to be graced by such charm and beauty.”

Lady Haggitha took the seat, directed Gamaliel to the one beside her, sat stiff-backed and erect before the stranger. She saw no resemblance at all to her husband now, and even the fog of the baths could not account for the mistaken identity. He was older, his face was fuller, in his eyes there was a hint of amusement which Lord Lovecraft would never have permitted. A glass of wine was poured for her, offered across the table, but for the moment she refused it.

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“It would be courteous to know whose hospitality I am enjoying,” she said calmly. “Who are you?”

“My name is Tharmas,” he answered, with a slight bow of the head.

“That means nothing to me. Perhaps it would be better to ask what you are, that you could make me believe that you were my husband.”

He grinned, his eyes so bright that for an instant it seemed that they had no color. “It was a trick of the light, that is all.”

“No. It was more than that.”

“A trick, then.”

She finally accepted the wine which had been poured for her, raised it to her mouth, but barely moistened her lips with it. “So tell me why you would wish to introduce yourself by means of such a trick? Why would you wish to introduce yourself to me at all?”

Tharmas cast a glance towards Gamaliel, said, “Your companion does not say very much.”

“Such is his role.”

“And what he hears?”

“He repeats before no one but me.” Lady Haggitha rested a hand gently on Gamaliel’s arm, but the pat she gave was as much to reassure herself as the groom. “His discretion is assured, his loyalty guaranteed, he is a faithful attendant with a patient nature. I am not so patient, so you will please tell me what it is you want of me.”

“To help you in your quest, to support you in your ambition.” He spread his hands in a gesture of innocence; see, nothing up my sleeves. “Nothing more than that,” he promised.

“And what quest is it that you think I am about? What ambition drives me?” asked Lady Haggitha, giving a simpering smile of innocence which was borrowed from one of the more ingenuous ladies of her acquaintance. “I am simply a lady of

court traveling east to visit her family.”

“And coincidentally there are others also traveling east,” he said, an eyebrow lifting. “People of power. I believe that your interest lies as much in them as in your family.”

Lady Haggitha drained her glass of wine and pushed it forward that it might be refilled. Though the words were vague the meaning was plain, that this man Tharmas must know of the power of the Hashishim and the presence in the land of those who could wield it. As her glass was filled she took a fine lace-trimmed handkerchief from her purse, shook a few drops of oil onto it and held it to her face.

“So stuffy in here,” she complained, sniffing daintily, then wafted the handkerchief before her, filling the air with its peculiar scent.

Tharmas took the handkerchief from her, raised it to his nose and inhaled deeply. “An exquisite fragrance, Lady Haggitha. One of your own concoction, I’ll wager.” He wrinkled his nose, sniffed again, more loudly, like a man who thrived on narcotic delirium, nodding with satisfaction like a connoisseur identifying the composite scents. “Jasmine? Bergamot? Ylang ylang? I am not sure what you are seeking to do to me, my Lady, whether it is to excite me, seduce me or send me to sleep, but I fear your cosmetic crafts will have no effect on me.” He smiled as he folded the handkerchief into a neat parcel and returned it to her. “A potent mix, but not quite potent enough.”

“You seem to have some great knowledge of me,” Lady Haggitha accepted, slipping the handkerchief into her sleeve. “Of my husband, my crafts, my mission. I take it this knowledge is not without its purpose?”

“No knowledge is without its purpose. As I said, my purpose is to help you,” he sought to convince her.

“Yet you are still evasive, sir. There must be a reason behind any purpose. What is yours? It cannot simply be that you would

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enjoy my charm and beauty, for which compliment I thank you.”

“It was no compliment if it was the truth, if anything its understatement was an unkindness to you.” He smiled a charming smile which might have disarmed many another woman, saw that its effect on her was as negligible as the effect her perfume had on him and understood that honesty would be his best ploy. “But yes, there is another reason for offering my assistance. I would see you succeed in your mission, Lady Haggitha, in snatching this alien power from the Hashishim, for this would bring about the success of my own, the downfall of Urizen.”

“The Ancient of Days?” said Lady Haggitha.

“The same. The Patriarch of the Hashishim.”

“But I was always given to believe that he was more fable than fact. A figurehead.”

“Fable. Fact.” Tharmas gave a see-saw motion of the hand. “He shifts between the two, but the hatred I have for him is real enough.”

Lady Haggitha considered his words, his expression, felt that this hatred he spoke of was of the kind which could only exist between people tied by blood. “The hatred of a brother for a brother?” she guessed. “You are related?”

“Related, yes. But brothers? No. Something much closer than that.” He raised a hand, before she could speak again, said, “And before you ask, as any woman would, the reason for my hatred is my own concern, it is of no importance to you. I do not want these tools the Hashishim has brought to the kingdom, you are welcome to them, to do with as you wish. All that matters to me is that Urizen should not have them.”

“And so you would help me?” Lady Haggitha was prepared to believe. “How?”

“I could say that the fact that I do not kill you is help enough in itself,” he said gravely, saw the groom tense at her side and

stilled him with a withering look. “But there are other ways, more constructive. You mark your groom, Lady Haggitha? The way he sits rooted to the spot when you would hope for him to be leaping to your defense? Ask him what he sees.”

Lady Haggitha turned to Gamaliel, touched his shoulder, his hand, found him as unyielding as a rock. “Gamaliel? What is it that you see?”

His lips barely moved, teeth clenched as if fighting some fierce pain. “I see... I see...”

“He sees what he fears most,” Tharmas answered for the groom. “He sees his greatest nightmare as you saw your dearest husband and that is what has him incapacitated, as ineffective as a cherub cut from marble.” His expression softened and Gamaliel relaxed, shoulders slumping, blinking slowly as if coming awake from a dream. “That is how I can help you.”

“Magic? Or more trickery?” asked Lady Haggitha.

“All magic is trickery,” he told her. “If people see a man in a roadside booth trick them with cards they call it prestidigitation; if they cannot explain away the trick they call it magic. It is effective, though, for all that it might be a trick, as you have just seen demonstrated.”

“You would put your talent at my disposal then, Tharmas?” said Lady Haggitha, preparing to accept his offer.

“Oh no, my Lady!” he laughed, throwing his head back in delight. “I would not be as subservient to you as your groom and maid and scribe! But I will see to it that your mission is productive. You have the promise of Tharmas on that. And now, will we dine, enjoy rest and recreation before we continue on our way in the morning?”

* * *

The horses, when they found them, were of a size that they could have drawn a brewer’s dray each, and once mounted they plodded along slowly, their speed further hampered by the

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sleeves of thick leather which covered the lower parts of their legs. They were as easily managed as the School Master had promised, though, Griff and Leo were as comfortable in their saddles as if they had been equestrians since childhood.

Repeatedly, annoyingly, Leo would draw his sword from its scabbard and slash at empty air, like a child with a new toy, only desisting when Griff threatened to turn the weapon into a wilted flower.

“The power’s going to your head already, is it?” Leo sulked at the reprimand, but then realized, “I could change it back again.”

“And then once more to a limp tulip,” Griff countered, with a warning glance at the weapon, making its steel blade shiver in the afternoon light.

“And back again.”

“Back and forth.” Griff gave a shrug, of boredom, of unconcern, said, “It would pass the time, I suppose.”

“Okay,” Leo at last conceded, sheathing the sword, and they passed the next few miles in a plodding silence.

Slowly the landscape beyond the city changed, the paved road became a dirt path, then petered out completely; lush green grass gave way to a barren land of sodden brown earth which became more spongy with each step of their mounts. Soon the horses’ legs were sinking inches deep into something which had the consistency of treacle. The Malterre Marshes, Leo assumed, as the slurping ground beneath them was hidden by a shallow swirling mist, and it certainly did smell like the ‘terre’ was ‘mal’, for each step that their horses now took was accompanied by a stench which was as if the ground itself was farting.

Griff had caught the offensive smell and took a scarf from one of the panniers which were slung over his horse’s haunches, wrapped it about his face as an outlaw would. Leo did likewise, after a cough and a snort and a spit, and again the conversation died, they traveled on once more in silence. The marsh beneath

them never deepened more than a foot or so, sufficient to hamper a man but not the stout beasts they rode, and their progress, though not speedy, was at least steady. At one point Leo's horse whinnied and reared, but he was easily able to calm it, with an expertise which surprised him. He bent low by the horse's flank, peered into the mist to look for what had startled the beast, then jerked his head back smartly when he thought he saw a blunt head the size of a cricket ball, a maw of a mouth with rows of needle teeth snapping.

"What the hell is down there?" he wondered, with a worried glance to Griff.

"Best not to dwell on it," Griff answered. "Just be grateful that we're up here, out of harm's way."

"Hopefully out of harm's way. I just pray there's nothing hiding in that muck that can jump."

"I doubt it," Griff said optimistically, surveying the ground around him. "The marsh looks like nothing more than primordial soup to me, not the sort of environment that you'd expect could support any sophisticated life."

"We're sophisticated, aren't we?" Leo said, rounding on his friend as if taking umbrage, as if his own worth was being diminished, and Griff agreed, yes, they were, but they did not belong in these marshes. It was not a sense of insult which had roused Leo, though, but a worrying possibility. "So perhaps there are other things, other people, that don't belong here too. We may not be alone," he said, with a theatrically portentous rumble.

"Oh for God's sake, Leo, just try and think positive for a change."

"Be prepared, that's my motto," Leo replied, and rested his hand on his sword, his eyes alert, flitting back and forth.

When they grew hungry they ate in the saddle, not stopping, still continuing their steady progress across the marsh, slaked their thirst with a drink or two from one of the water skins, then

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wrapped their scarves about their faces once more to ward off the putrid stink of the land. A time or two their mounts would give a shiver of unease or discomfort, troubled by whatever lay hidden in the marsh, but there was never anything to worry their riders, no creatures to be seen above the level of the mist, no birds to break the monotony of the drab grey sky. Once they had become accustomed to the occasional agitation of their horses, and to the smell, which from time to time would grow stronger, penetrate their scarves when a particularly pungent pocket was disturbed, there was only the boredom of the landscape, not a single shrub or tree to offer the eye relief, no clearly defined end to the marsh, just a blurring of grey into grey where the earth joined the sky.

“Much longer, do you think?” Leo asked, his voice muffled by the folds of cotton which masked his face.

“Dunno,” Griff answered wearily. “Seems like we’ve been traveling for hours. And God knows how many more hours yet.”

“I hope it’s not going to be much longer. I don’t know that I’d trust myself to sleep in the saddle and I want to see what’s underneath me before I lay me down to rest.” He stifled a yawn which loosened the scarf over his mouth, knotted it again as he asked, “Do you think the girls will have learned where they need to be heading for yet? Do you think they’ll be on their way?”

“They’d better be. And with a little luck having an easier journey of it than we are. I’d like them there and waiting for us when we arrive. From what the School Master hinted about the place, I don’t fancy lingering long in this Garden of Earthly Delights. I just want to find them, find Jack and be away.”

“As easy as that, is it going to be?” Leo tone suggested a smile beneath his mask, obviously having his doubts that it could be. “Regardless of what else we find there, the chances are we’ll have a problem with Jack. You know what a contrary bastard he can be at the best of times. If he’s been seduced, tempted, by one of these- what did the School Master call them?”

“Hashishim.”

“Right. Well. Give him a whiff of power or a flash of fanny and he’ll be hell to budge.”

“There’ll be four of us,” Griff offered. “Only one of him.”

“The girls will be able to do everything we can?”

“They’re sure to have the same power we do. If no one’s shown them how to use it yet, then we will.”

“This is a bit of a turnaround for you, Griff!” Leo then laughed.

“What is?”

“You crediting them with being artists. Usually they’re just designers, lackeys of commerce, devoid of soul. If only Anna could hear you, even hinting that she might be as creative as you. She wouldn’t believe her ears.”

“Well, I suppose there has to be something creative about what they do,” Griff said grudgingly, geeing his horse along, though he knew his heels digging into the creature’s flanks would make not the slightest bit of difference to its speed.

He certainly hoped there was some spark of creativity in them, for the help of Anna and Selina might be crucial in the task which faced them, but it was not just this need of support which prompted his thoughts to dwell on her, nor the need to have her with him, missing her and wanting the comfort of her company. His frequent dismissal of the work she did, though mentioned with amusement by Leo, he now understood to be altogether too unkind. She always responded with patience when he criticized her discipline, with a calm concordance when he lauded his own fine art, but it was not because he was right that she offered no argument, but because she was so forgiving of what others would regard as his arrogance. Suddenly, urgently, he wished she was there beside him now, so that he could apologize, for a moment thought he saw a glimmer of her figure appear from the mist and considered the possibility that he might simply be able to wish

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her beside him.

But there were surely limits to the power of the Afflatus.

“You know what I reckon the biggest handicap will be, in trying to persuade Jack to come away with us?” said Leo, interrupting his thoughts, disturbing the promise he was making.

“No. What’s that?”

“His hatred of you.”

Griff’s head snapped sharply to the left, as if to catch the word. “Eh? Hatred, you say?”

“Yes, hatred. You’ve never noticed?”

No, Griff had not, and he was surprised by the very notion. Not because he thought himself so wonderful that it would be impossible for anyone to hate him, but because he found it hard to believe that he could encourage strong emotions of any kind, except perhaps for the singular love Anna felt for him. He went through life smoothly, easily, he made no waves and rattled no cages. So why?

“Hatred? What is there to hate about me?” he asked, hoping that the question did not sound conceited.

“Well for one thing you’re a lucky bastard,” Leo told him, not being critical, simply honest.

“I am? How? In what way?”

“Things seem to happen without any effort on your part, as though there’s someone watching over you, doing it for you. You’re the most prolific artist in the college, the most imaginative, and it all comes so easily. The rest of us have to sweat over every piece of work, but with you it just comes gushing out in an endless stream, like diarrhoea. Okay, some of it is shit,” Leo said with a grin, “but the majority of it, generally... Well, it’s going to get you a first class degree. You’ll probably end up at the Royal College of Art or the Slade.”

Griff considered his life as described, and his future as projected, saw the truth in some of what Leo said. Yes, ideas did

come easily to him, sometimes too easily, in so great an abundance that he could never hope to give expression to them all. But a cause for hatred? Envy, maybe. But hatred?

“And then there’s Anna,” Leo went on.

“What about her?”

“Jack’s jealous of your relationship with her. And what probably makes him feel even more bitter is that it was all a question of luck again, she came to you as easily as your ideas do. You didn’t chase her, you didn’t set out to charm her, the two of you just drifted together and hit it off.”

“So he envies me?”

“Hates you,” Leo insisted. “And wants her. I sometimes hear him speaking Anna’s name in his sleep.”

“Is anybody else aware of how much he...” Griff hesitated a moment, still refusing to admit to the notion of hatred. “...aware of how much he dislikes me?”

“One or two might have remarked on it.”

“So why didn’t anybody mention it to me?” Griff wanted to know. “If other people have noticed, why haven’t I?”

“You?” Leo laughed. “You’re too caught up in your own little world, the world of your ideas, to notice anything that’s going on around you. Some might find it endearing, like Anna. Others find it amusing or annoying to varying degrees, I know I do, sometimes. Others might eventually hate you for it. Jack already does.”

“Well you live and learn and isn’t that a fact?” said Griff, trying to force a laugh.

Leo did not return the smile, though, said, “Just bear in mind, Griff, that if Jack can do what we can, now he’s in this crazy place, and if he hates you as much as I suggest.....”

His voice trailed off, the rest left unsaid, left to the fertile imagination he had described his friend as having.

* * *

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“Can you not feel the freedom which power brings, my friend?” said Abishai, standing on the hill from which they had first seen San Romano, his arms held wide as if he would bring down the blessing of the gods, or would arrogantly take all that they had made for his own. “To quote a poet I was weaned on, I feel that but for the sky there are no fences facing me.”

Elusai gave him a curious glance, said, “Quite.”

“It means, Elusai, that there are no limits to what I can achieve, no restrictions to where I can go or what I can do. The sky,” he pointed, “is the only fence which bars my way, and that is so infinite that it offers no restriction at all.” He gave a satisfied sigh, regarding the town before them, then said, “Come, Elusai. Let us tour the domain. Let us see what can be made of it.”

They walked leisurely down the hill, Abishai as at home in this country as if it was his from birth. But then birth did offer privileges for such as him, Elusai accepted, tasting that bitterness which had always underlied their friendship to some degree. Flattery, envy, a desire for what would otherwise have been denied him, all these things had drawn him to Abishai. But always the bitterness, over what Abishai had and he had not. And now there was fear, too.

Following a gentler incline, veering a little away from the town, they approached a wooded area, the land undulating like an unmade bed, the treetops an uneven blanket. Entering the fringe, seeing how quickly the wood deepened, the vegetation thicker and the trees more closely grouped, Abishai thought it might be necessary to fell the lot. There was too much cover for a force to creep unseen upon the town.

“A pity,” said Elusai, entering the dappled shade and feeling a cathedral calm descend, a peace which had been lost to San Romano since their apocalyptic arrival.

“Yes, a pity.” Abishai could not deny the beauty of the glade they walked through, but what Elusai saw as colorful he saw as

camouflage, what for one was cathedral was sepulchral for the other. "The timber will be useful for the reconstruction of San Romano. We will need carpenters and stonemasons, engineers. No city will ever rival Golgonooza, but I will have a city that Golgonooza fears." He fell silent for a while, lost in his grandiose dream, his eyes glazing like a man caught in a delirium. Finally snapping from it, he smiled, said, "But I am not totally without soul, Elusai. Let us walk a little further into this charming wood, enjoy it while it still stands."

The dappled air seemed to resonate with music, bird cries were all around them, the chatter and click of creatures in the undergrowth, the trill of a stream nearby washing over a stony bed. And then, in human counterpoint to the song of the woods, they heard voices.

Abishai raised a finger to his lips, drew his sword silently. Elusai slipped a dagger from his boot, held it ready at his side, and the two crept quietly through the undergrowth. The sound of the voices rose and fell against the rippling of the stream, drew slowly closer as Abishai and Elusai edged cautiously on. They stopped where the trees did, at a bank of earth above the stream.

"One," Abishai mouthed silently, raised a single finger and pointed.

On a rock at the edge of the stream a young woman sat cross-legged, her skirt folded back in her lap to bare her thighs, her breasts also bare as she washed the shirt she had worn in the running water. She spoke softly as she wrung out the garment but they could see no second person, now heard only the one voice.

"I like the way her breasts firm as she wrings the cloth," said Abishai loudly, stepping forward, his eyes on her but his sword moving from side to side to search out a second body. The girl's head spun, long black hair heavy like silk lashing her body, and though her mouth gaped in surprise it was only slowly that she

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raised the wet garment to cover her breasts. “Who were you talking to, woman?” he asked her.

“No one.”

“We heard voices.” He nodded to Elusai, that he should search the immediate area. “There was a second, other than yours.”

“I was talking to myself,” she insisted.

“That is either a sign of madness or a sign of loneliness. Which is the case with you?”

“I am never lonely, for I am never alone,” she answered, and he looked around, again to search out another companion, heard movement in the undergrowth but saw only Elusai returning.

“There is no one else. She is alone.”

With a flick of his wrist and a tilt of his sword Abishai directed the young woman to stand.

“If you will turn your eyes, so that I might dress,” she said.

“I will not.”

The woman stood, letting her skirt fall to her ankles, twisted the shirt a time or two more to wring the last drops from it, her eyes fixed on Abishai all the while. Finally she pulled on the shirt and laced it, but would have been as well not to have bothered, for the damp fabric molded itself so nicely to her breasts that she could have been naked.

As dressed as she could manage, she then let her hands rest loosely by her side.

“So, young woman, where are you bound? Where are you from?” asked Abishai, circling her, looking her up and down. He saw the label at the back of her skirt, touched it with the tip of his sword. “Golgonooza? I see you shop at Arnolfini’s emporium. She has a wealthy father or a grateful master,” he smiled at Elusai.

“I am bound for San Romano,” the woman said.

“These are perilous times to travel such parts. You know that San Romano has just been taken, that it is now a state in

transition?”

“I know that it is now the centre of a land of promise, that great things lie ahead.”

“You do?” said Abishai, nodding to Elusai as if here he found confirmation of his own beliefs. “And how do you know this?”

“I- I know,” she said, and lowered her eyes for the first time.

“The spirits speak to her, theirs were the voices we heard,” said Elusai mockingly, but Abishai regarded the young woman with growing interest, as if she was more than just a perfectly formed body.

“She claims to be neither mad nor lonely, for all that it seems that she speaks to herself. So the spirits might, the spirits could, for how else would she divine what I already know?” He stepped forward, took the hand which hung limply at her side. “My friend and I are going to San Romano. It could be a perilous place for a woman alone. Will you let us escort you? You will be safe with us.”

She regarded him a moment, not resisting the hand which held hers, not flinching at its touch. “There is more strength in your eyes than in an army of warriors,” she finally said, and allowed herself to be led forward with a calm acceptance, with no acknowledgement of a favor granted nor any sign of fear perceived.

“What is your name?” Abishai asked, helping her up the bank, away from the stream.

“Fay...” She seemed to stutter over the answer, then said again, “Fay.”

Chapter 9

“You will still go to the celebration of Arnolfini’s divorce, my Lord?” asked Clod as he fussed about, agitated fingers brushing away specks of dust, nervously tugging at folds to see that robes hung correctly, flicking with a soft cloth at the medallions and insignia which were pinned to the First Minister’s breast.

“I will, if only to find out how he brought about the annulment of what I had always understood to be the most binding of all marriages in Golgonooza.” van Vogt regarded himself in the mirror before him, turning a little to the left, a little to the right, running bejeweled hands over the paunch which was sheathed by a broad satin cummerbund. “Not too understated am I, Clod? I look the part of the First Minister of Golgonooza?”

“You look as magisterial as would be expected of you,” Clod assured him, but it was not his master’s appearance which had him so agitated, but the wisdom of attending the celebration. “Do you think it is safe to go, my Lord? Bearing in mind the present situation which exists between yourself and Lord Lovecraft, you will still attend, knowing that he is sure to be there?”

“I will,” van Vogt insisted. “Even Lord Lovecraft would not be so foolhardy as to make a move against me openly, to bring our feud into the public domain.”

“But your feud is already public knowledge, my Lord, it has the city divided.” Clod wrung his hands, fretting like the wife van Vogt had never had. “A third of the people side with you, a third with Lord Lovecraft, and the remainder wait to see which way the balance of power will shift. It is not a stable situation, it can only bode ill for the future.”

“Stop fussing, Clod. It may be public knowledge, but it is conducted in a private manner, as gentlemen would.” van Vogt laughed at the equerry’s caution, saying, “For heaven’s sake,

man, this is a gathering of noblemen we are talking of, the wealthy and the influential, the pinnacles of Golgonooza's nobility! Not a shindig in a Camden Town tavern where too many scoops of wine might lead to fisticuffs!" Satisfied with his appearance, he then undid all the care Clod had devoted to it by distributing about his person all manner of weapons, secreting knives and knuckle-dusters, tucking them in every pocket and lining. "But then, to be forewarned is to be forearmed," he smiled slyly. "See that my guard assemble in the main hall."

Clod left the room to run ahead, clucking like a disapproving wife. Van Vogt, having inspected himself in the mirror one final time, peered around the door to his bedchamber. The young boy Goomer lay sprawled across the bed, belly down, his naked body a subtle honey color but for the buttocks and the tops of his thighs, which were marble white and blushing in places from the playful spanking he had received. He looked over his shoulder at the sound of the door opening, eyes blinking sleepily.

"Stay there, boy," van Vogt told him softly. "I will be back by midnight and may need to unwind."

Goomer nodded, buried his face in the pillows.

Sweet boy, thought van Vogt, leaving his chambers and striding along the corridor, so obliging in all respects, so skilled in the relief of so many frustrations, a balm to his soul or the butt of his anger. But not to be trusted, for all that he had raised the alarm to the assassination attempt. People of talent never were to be trusted, only used.

His escort was waiting in the grand hall, a dozen men decked in regalia but armed to the teeth, their finest weapons, as much a decoration as they were a danger. And outside, at the gate to the ministerial palace, there were a dozen more, mounted, lances held high flying pennants, the plumes of their helmets flowing in the evening breeze, bronze breastplates glittering like pools in the light of the setting sun. Van Vogt mounted his own

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horse, a stallion of the purest white with a plaited mane and silver stockings, nudged it forward at walking pace, its hooves lifting high as if sharing his pride in the spectacle they presented. With riders flanking him, and foot-guards flanking them, they moved from the palace at a processional pace. There were no crowds gathered on the street, the occasion was not one of state and had not been announced, but there were still plenty abroad at that hour, about their business or their pleasure, and to a man they stopped to look on with something like reverence as the entourage passed, beaming back as the First Minister offered them nods and smiles of benediction.

Already the night was a victory, van Vogt felt, if Lord Lovecraft believed that he would cower in fear of the feud which grew, would skulk about the palace like some timid animal, then he was greatly mistaken. The people of Golgonooza could see for themselves that their First Minister feared no man.

Arnolfini was to hold his celebration at his mansion, a grand palladium with the presumption to pretend that it was a palace. A broad mall ran straight and true from its gate to its door, trees lining either side which gardeners had somehow contrived to make identical, equal in height, equal in girth, equal even in the spread and number of their branches. Lanterns illuminated the way, held by fair-haired maidens, their faces decorated with gold leaf, wearing ivory-colored togas, and where the mall broadened out, at the foot of marble stairs which fanned from a colonnaded portico, frock-coated men in powdered wigs waited to greet the invited guests.

“Arnolfini must be delighted to have his divorce at last, to put on such a show,” van Vogt chuckled quietly, then smiled again with satisfaction as the clatter of hooves on gravel suddenly fell silent in startling unison. The mounts of his party stood in perfect stillness, not one flicking a tail or tossing a head. Four captains dismounted first, to form an escort, then the First

Minister, who led the way up the flight of steps.

Arnolfini himself was there to greet the First Minister, as was befitting, but made only a small bow before extending a hand in greeting, as if his wealth made him an equal.

“So glad that you could come to my little celebration, First Minister,” he said, effusive in his enthusiasm, conscious of the honor.

Graciously van Vogt took the man’s hand, shook it limply. “Delighted to share in your good fortune, Arnolfini,” he replied. “You really must tell me how it was achieved. I always thought that your marriage was as confining as a corset.”

“A corset I could cope with,” Arnolfini laughed, patting a belly as ample as the First Minister’s, partly concealed by the customary smock he wore. “It is when marriage becomes as inhibiting as a chastity belt that something must be done.”

van Vogt shared in his laughter, allowed the merchant to lead him into the building.

Free of the restrictions if a niggardly wife, each step into the bowels of the Arnolfini residence made it evident just how much expense had been lavished on the occasion, which was not just a celebration of the man’s freedom but also of his wealth. In one room supple saltimbanques contorted about the floor, their acrobatics so fluid that their limbs might have been no more than wisps of smoke; fire-eaters fogged the air in another; jugglers, tumblers and mummers crowded others. And everywhere there was such a variety of music and song that it threatened to become a cacophony, such a display of foods in each room that there was a danger of the air becoming nauseous.

“You have excelled yourself,” van Vogt congratulated Arnolfini, accepting a flute of wine of such thin glass that he worried it would shatter in his fingers. He raised the flute to his lips, tasted the cold liquid, realized that the vessel was made of ice not glass and toasted his host. “A clever touch,” he

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acknowledged, putting down the glass, wiping the icy dampness from his fingers. "And now tell me. How did you effect the divorce?"

Arnolfini leant close in confidence, his breath sweet with the scent of some confectionary, fragrant with violets or something of the like. "You recall that it was an artist's testament which bound us?"

"You did not somehow manage to destroy it?" asked van Vogt, knowing the difficulty this would involve, and the crime incurred if ever this should be achieved. Those things which were a creation of the Afflatus could not be tampered with.

"Better still," smiled Arnolfini. "I was able to have the image manipulated, altered."

van Vogt understood in an instant. Only those with a mastery of the Afflatus could do such a thing, ones such as the instruments the Hashishim had brought back to the kingdom with her, not tools nor even objects of magic but living breathing people. Ones such as the artists the School Master had returned with. And Arnolfini knew where they were, here in Golgonooza.

"Artists," he whispered softly. "Artists?"

"Indeed, and accomplished young men they were, quite talented in what they were able to achieve. As I was saying to my friend Lovecraft, just moments before you arrived..."

"You have spoken of this to Lord Lovecraft?" van Vogt hissed, looking around like a conspirator, and even as he spoke the name so the man appeared through the crowd, making his way towards them. "I beg you, Arnolfini," he said urgently, "mention the matter no more, not in his presence, not until we have had a chance to speak in private."

"What is it that you would have kept secret from me, van Vogt?" asked Lord Lovecraft, as if he could have read his lips or divined his thoughts.

"My Lord," van Vogt bowed in greeting.

“First Minister,” the other acknowledged, with a similarly exaggerated courtesy.

“Gentlemen,” said Arnolfini cautiously, sensing the tension between them, and they turned as one to their host, each wearing the innocent mask of the politician, wondering at his concern. “Not at my celebration, please,” he pleaded. “No trouble, no scandal, I want only joy and peace on this memorable occasion.”

“And joy and peace you shall have,” van Vogt assured him, taking the initiative.

“Joy and peace in abundance,” Lord Lovecraft promised, and then took the initiative himself by adding, “If you could give the First Minister and I a moment alone.”

van Vogt cast Lord Lovecraft a suspicious glance, at the same time that he caught Arnolfini’s troubled look, would have liked to consider his enemy’s intentions but had little time to dwell on the matter. On impulse he said, “Would there be a private room somewhere among this riot of celebration, where Lord Lovecraft and I could talk in privacy?”

Arnolfini was beginning to sweat, the make-up which had been used to exaggerate his joy was beginning to run, so that it seemed that his eyes were streaming with tears of misery. “There is my library...”

“That will do.”

“...but please, my Lords...”

“There will be no trouble.”

“We will converse as gentlemen would, our conduct will be as befits a library, not a boxing pit.”

Arnolfini’s glance flicked from one to the other, like a merchant doubting the credit of his client. Finally he shrugged defeatedly, led the way through the crowd and to a wrought iron staircase which spiraled up to a gallery. There, after a quick consideration of the crowd below, he opened a door of studded quilted leather and gestured them through.

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“Should I post a guard?” he suggested.

“For your safety or for ours?” asked Lord Lovecraft, turning to the First Minister.

“I feel as comfortable in your presence as you do in mind,” van Vogt responded.

“No guard, then. We have faith in your guarantee of privacy.”

It was convenient that the door was broad enough to allow them both to pass through abreast, neither needed to turn his back on the other, and the last words Arnolfini heard were van Vogt saying, “You wish to talk, my Lord?”

And Lord Lovecraft countering with, “As I believe you do, my Lord.”

How easier were the intrigues of trade when set against those of politics.

* * *

After two days of instruction from a number of Dilettanti, with further assistance and guidance from Dona Isobel, Anna and Selina had come to some understanding of the thing which was called the Afflatus. Moving from simple exercises to more complex constructions they learned that they were able to revise reality and even create it afresh, that using the matter of Eidolon as their raw materials there was little they were not capable of. By the morning of the third day it was felt that they were ready to leave the Prado.

“I would dearly love to come with you, if only to see you exercise your powers further,” said Dona Isobel, as they gathered their things together in the dormitory. “But I still hope to get news of my husband. I must stay here a while longer at least.”

“We understand,” said Anna.

“But perhaps, if there is news or if there is no news, our paths may cross again.”

“We would welcome that.”

Dona Isobel, smiling at the courtesy, accompanied them from the dormitory, down the broad stairs to the refectory where further provisions were waiting for them. After packing these into their bags they went to the steps of the Prado where they took their leave of Dona Isobel, each embracing her in turn.

“May you find your home,” she said to them.

“And may you find your husband,” Anna returned, and they set off down the winding road by which they had approached the Prado.

Selina had dressed them for the journey, the imagination of the fashion student only reluctantly tempered, after Anna’s insistence, by a required practicality. Heavy boots of suede and sheepskin cushioned their steps, trousers of flannel tucked into them, loose enough for comfort but thick enough for warmth. Above shirts of knitted cotton they wore the hooded cloaks of the Society of Dilettanti, garments voluminous enough that they could hang loose and free when the weather was mild, could be wrapped and draped like shawls against the chill of the night. Selina had tied her hair back with a patterned silk scarf while Anna wore a scarlet bandanna about her brow, keeping the fringe of blonde hair from her eyes. Both had long daggers slung from their belts, unnecessary weapons, they had been assured, but a useful caution to any strangers who might consider challenging them.

They had been advised that their way lay south, that a couple of hours at a comfortable pace would bring them to the River of Discontinuity which, if they were careful not to be misled by the erratic nature which gave it its name, would lead them to the Garden of Earthly Delights. A little less than an hour brought them to the foot of the range which harbored the Prado, and to their right they saw the border of the Forest of Biomorphical Abstraction, its parodies of trees flying their foliage like colored bunting, breathed a sigh of relief that they were not required to

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enter that place again. Keeping a cautious distance from it, they struck due south, emerged from the shadow of the hills into morning sunlight warm enough for them to loosen their cloaks, let them billow behind in the breeze created as they went.

“This river...”

“Of Discontinuity?”

“Right,” said Selina. “If it’s as erratic as people make out, if it can shift and change, from day to day, from hour to hour, then how can we be sure that it’s going to take us where we want to go?”

“We just concentrate on not being deceived by it,” Anna said, repeating the advice already given, that if it did something unexpected they should disregard it, that if it took a course which seemed illogical then they were to ignore it, stick to the way that they thought was logical. It was all down to imagination again, which seemed all important in this land, in the ability to picture the river as it should be and not as it seemed to be.

“Sounds complicated to me,” said Selina.

“To me too,” Anna was forced to agree, the discipline of the notion as challenging as any she had encountered. “Think of it as being no different to designing a dress. You know how it’s supposed to hang, how it’s supposed to flow, even before you put pencil to paper, before you cut out a pattern or stitch together fabric the first pieces of fabric. That’s how I envisage it, though I suppose we’ll understand better when we reach the thing.”

It was an hour later that they saw the ribbon of water curving to meet them, seemingly placid enough, maybe fifty meters wide, flowing gently to the south. They approached the bank and matched their way to its course. The Forest of Biomorphic Abstraction had now receded, to give way to a broad flat plain which misted in the distance; on the opposite bank the landscape was much the same, flat and even, but with a suggestion of white-topped hills breaking the horizon. Their way

was straightforward enough for the first mile or so, but then there was the first abrupt interruption to the river's course. What initially seemed to be a succession of shallow weirs was soon seen to be a herringbone zigzag switch of direction, no drop in the level of the river's course but a startling alteration to its logical flow.

Selina was about to change direction accordingly when Anna caught her by the arm, said, "No, don't go where it seems to go. Go where you think it should go."

Selina stayed beside Anna, continued in the direction which the geography of the landscape would dictate, and within a matter of no more than a dozen steps the river had disappeared, then to reappear beside them just as suddenly, back on its true course, no trickle of a stream swelling into a river but a sharp crisp transition of green grass to clear blue water.

"I begin to see what was hinted at," Selina said. "It's the strangest river I've ever come across."

"Strange isn't the word for it."

Over the next six hours there were many such interruptions to the river's course, some quite obvious -at one point it seemed to rear before them like a part of some amusement park attraction- but others so subtle that they had to pause a while to consider which way they should go. With the concentration demanded of them, and the miles they had trekked since leaving the Prado, they grew tired even before the sun had set.

"Rest up for the night, do you reckon?" Anna finally suggested.

"Here?" asked Selina doubtfully, looking around, seeing that there was only the plain, the river, the further plain beyond.

"There's no shelter in sight, no sign of habitation ahead, and no way I can go a step further," Anna said, slipping her bag from her shoulder and dropping it to the ground, then falling in a heap beside it.

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Selina sat down next to her, first checking that the ground was clear of ants or bugs or anything that moved. As she watched Anna take out food from her bag, fruit and cuts of cold meat, cobs of bread, she said, "If we're going to spend the night out here in the open we could really do with a fire."

"Using what as fuel?" Anna asked, fashioning a crude sandwich and passing it across.

"Right," said Selina, regarding her meal and then chewing glumly, jaws working slowly.

As it happened they had no need of a fire, for as the sun set and the sky darkened, as night drew in on them and the air grew chilly, so the cloaks they had wrapped around them became warmer, as if they had their own source of heat woven into the fabric. Having eaten, and taken a sip or two of what might have been wine or what might have been spirit, they lay back on the ground, hoods pulled over their heads, and once they closed their eyes to their surroundings they felt so comfortable that they might have been bedded in a guest house rather than open to the world.

"Do you think Griff might have found his way to this Garden of Earthly Delights by now?" Selina wondered aloud.

"If he has he'd best behave himself until we get there," Anna answered curtly.

"With randy Leo in tow?" Selina recalled some of the escapades Griff had been a part of, until Anna's love had had its sobering effect on him. "He's going to need the resolve of a saint if he's not to be drawn into temptation."

"And he'll need the balls of a brass monkey if he succumbs," were Anna's last threatening words before she fell asleep.

* * *

Tharmas refused the suggestion of a horse but walked on foot beside them as they made their way through the city streets. No longer taking upon himself the dress of her husband, Lady

Haggitha repeatedly cast a downwards sideways glance at his clothing, doubting its suitability for the journey ahead. His feet were shod in simple sandals; his trousers, of the thinnest material, left inches of ankle bare; he wore no jacket or cloak, but only a shapeless shirt which hung loose about his body. Nor did he seem to have any other clothes in his possession, not even a bed roll, no baggage to speak of save for a large woven satchel which was slung crosswise about his body, slapping rhythmically against his hip as he walked, apparently empty.

As they reached the gate which would take them from the city into open country Lady Haggitha asked again if he was sure that he could manage in foot.

“Quite sure,” he said, smiling up at her. “I prefer not to be a burden to either man or beast. I will cope quite well.”

“We have a long journey ahead,” she cautioned.

“I have greater journeys behind me.”

They went through the gate and some distance beyond the city, past barrows and makeshift stalls where vendors were offering travelers a final opportunity to provision themselves, selling maps of dubious worth, battered pans and patched tents, goods which would be more of a hindrance than a benefit to any journey. The crowds slowly thinned, finally petered out, the way ahead was empty and behind them the walls of the city receded.

“I will wander from the trail for a while,” Tharmas decided. “Stick to your path and I will meet you some way on.”

“Is that wise?” Lady Haggitha asked, for the woods to either side, though not dense, offered no easy trails.

“It is best. If you continue to match your horses to my walking pace it will take an age for you to reach Dos Aguas. Trot on,” he told her, giving the rump of her horse a gentle slap, and with that he stepped from the trail, was soon lost to sight among the trees.

“And he proposes to help us?” Lady Haggitha commented to

the others, kicking her horse into a canter. "Precious little help he'll be if he loses himself in the woods."

They continued at a brisk pace for an hour or so, the way rising and falling gently, winding a little at times, to skirt a hill or some other obstruction, but generally continuing on its way due east. Towards midday they dismounted and walked their horses for a while, to rest them and exercise their own cramped limbs. They had covered a fair distance and as Lady Haggitha scanned the woods to either side she felt sure that Tharmas had been left far behind, was surprised, then, to see him come striding through the trees to fall in step beside her.

"Tharmas? How?"

"The most direct route is not always the quickest way," he told her, "the speediest transport not always the best. As I say, I prefer not to be a burden to man or beast, nor to be burdened by them. I make better progress alone."

He stayed with them for the next hour, then disappeared into the woods once more when they remounted. And so the day passed. Each time they slowed, or paused to rest, he would reappear; whenever they picked up their pace he would make his own way. On finally halting for the night, however, as Jahiliyah prepared food and Gamaliel put together a shelter, his expected reappearance did not come about.

"What do you think, Basilides?" Lady Haggitha asked the scribe, once they had eaten and were settled for the night with still no sign of their companion. "Is he lost to us? Are we to do without his help, the worth of which I doubted from the outset?"

"I think, my Lady, that Tharmas is an individual of a singular kind."

"By definition, Basilides, an individual is singular."

Basilides frowned at the pedantry. "We are individuals, each of us one of a kind. The individual who is Tharmas, he is one. I doubt that you would find another. There is the difference."

“He is a will-o’-the-wisp who has followed us from the Temeraire Mountains,” Jahiliyah believed, taking out a needle and inserting it in the ground at her feet.

“But he claimed some relation to Urizen,” Lady Haggitha recalled, ignoring the maid’s superstition.

“Who you thought was no more than fable. I could claim kinship with the sun, the moon or the stars. It might well be that he is related, though,” Basilides agreed. “That does not negate his unique individuality. There are races who worship three gods who are one, people who possess multiple facets to their nature.”

“Madness,” Lady Haggitha scoffed. “It is all in the mind.”

“Madness to us maybe, but not to others. And what is in the mind is just as real as anything else, in certain realms. All that is in Eidolon is no more than a figment of the imagination in one world, but quite real in this.”

Lady Haggitha shook her head. “I have not known you to be so loquacious for a long time, Basilides.”

“Tharmas affords much food for thought, endless opportunity for conjecture,” he answered, then fell silent, as if her remark had been a reprimand.

The night darkened. Gamaliel had constructed a screen of fronds and branches which protected their backs and rose in a canopy over their heads, and the fire before them cast their shadows dancing against it, each dividing into two or three or more as the flames shifted in the breeze, making it seem that there was a whole troop of wraiths massing behind them. Jahiliyah repeatedly cast nervous glances over her shoulder.

“Be still, girl,” said Lady Haggitha, becoming annoyed by her restlessness. “Tharmas will not come now. If he is not lost he will be bedding down for the night, as we ought to be.” She unfurled her bed roll, lay out upon it, stared hard at the girl until she did likewise. “Now sleep,” she ordered. “We still have some days’ journey before we reach Dos Aguas.”

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There were moments of silence, broken only by the shifting of bodies making themselves comfortable, further silence deepening until Jahilyah whispered, "The shadows. They are still there."

"Jahilyah!" Lady Haggitha grumbled, but craned her neck to look back, saw that the shadows were indeed still dancing across the walls of their shelter, no longer cast by the fire before them but now by the full moon behind. She got slowly to her feet, the others too.

From the shadows beyond the dying embers of the fire they heard a voice. "Sorry to disturb you, we had hoped to kill you in your sleep."

Lady Haggitha and Gamaliel stepped forward, Jahilyah and Basilides stayed back in the lee of the shelter, and once their eyes had become accustomed to the dark they made out the silhouettes of three figures facing them. Others came from behind, to form a semicircle facing them.

"Who are you?" Lady Haggitha demanded, trying hard to conceal the tremor in her voice. Faced with a dozen men she could not hope to charm them all, neither with craft nor cosmetics, could not expect Gamaliel to take more than two or three, for all his brawn.

"Humble men trying to eke out a living in this hard world," came the answer, and the one who spoke stepped forward, into a beam of moonlight. He had a peasant's face, unshaven, with heavy brow and piggy eyes, gave off an unwashed smell, as if the woods had been his home from time immemorial. "So what do you have that might make our lives a little more comfortable?" he asked, and held out a hand. "Your purses first, and no doubt a lady such as you would have her jewel casket with her."

"We have nothing but a few provisions," Lady Haggitha told him, "our horses..."

"We already have those."

“...and the clothes on our back. We are humble travelers, on our way to find a new life.”

“Don’t lie to me! You have all the airs of a lady, all the fragrance of one.” He came closer, brought his face up to hers, sniffing at her like a beast. “And a very nice fragrance it is, too,” he said, and closed his eyes in appreciation, as if he might swoon with the scent. But then they snapped open, glinting with malice in the moonlight. “Your coin and your jewels first, and then we will see what else we can take from you.”

It was as he raised his grubby hand to her face, as she tensed, ready to offer some futile resistance, and Gamaliel braced himself to put up some ineffectual defense, when his fingers were no more than an inch from her cheek that there was a whistling in the air, a long sharp sigh as if the night itself had exhaled. A bolt pierced his hand, entering below the knuckles, its barbed head protruding from the centre of his palm. He turned the hand to look at it in surprise, raised his eyes to look once again at Lady Haggitha but never met her gaze. Two bolts piercing his throat had him creasing his face in pain, a third and a fourth, one behind each knee, brought him slumping to the ground. From the shadows one of his companions stepped forward, then a second, and the night exhaled again with a sigh of death, each fell with barely a cry. Any others who advanced were felled within a stride, the rest who chose to flee were allowed to do so.

Lady Haggitha regarded the three bodies which lay lifeless at her feet, then peered into the gloom of the woods. “Tharmas?” she called.

He stepped from between the trees, as he had done at other points along their journey, still calm and composed and in no way fatigued, the empty satchel slung across his shoulder the only thing he carried. There was no sign of a weapon, no sign of anyone accompanying him.

* * *

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Jack heaved himself from the bed and stumbled to the window, looked out across the ramparts of the Castle in the Pyrenees to the Garden beyond. The land still seemed to be aflame, there were fountains of brilliant red bursting everywhere, and silhouetted against each the shadows of figures who might have been dancing or might have been dying.

When he had taken his last few steps with Tulla through the Garden of Earthly Delights, and momentarily passed out on witnessing its final horrors, he had come around to see the walls of the city before him, each entrance and gateway a wall of flame.

“How do we get through that?” he had asked.

“Just believe that you can,” Tulla told him, and they passed through with barely a shiver of sensation, crossed a street or two and were then faced by the Castle in the Pyrenees.

It was a castle, and it sat atop an outcrop of rock which was solid enough that it might have been a mountain range, but between the base of the rock and the flat of the earth was a gap of a dozen feet or more.

“How...?” he was about to ask, wondering how they would get up there, but then guessed that the answer would be much the same as before, that belief was all that was required.

And now he found himself in Tulla’s chambers, a sprawl of six rooms which filled an uppermost corner of the castle. He had been here two days, three perhaps, but he thought no longer than that. The problem was that the passage of time had become confused. They had arrived at the castle in the evening, he had been fed, invited to bathe and then found himself in the scented silken sheets that Tulla had encouraged him to imagine when they took their refuge in the ramshackle hut. He slept soundly, then, relishing the comfort, but when he eventually awoke Tulla had suddenly been beside him, naked and lissome, her hands stroking him, her warmth soothing him and her fragrance causing him to swoon, her whispered words dulling his senses so

that soon he was asleep again. And so it had gone for the past two -or three?- days, her ways so skilled, in either a sexual or a sensual way or a soporific way, that he slept from early evening until late afternoon, never having the energy to venture from her rooms.

Which was what she intended, why she tired him so? He didn't know.

As he leant out of the window, gasping for fresh air but aware of only her cloying perfume, he was conscious of her presence even before he felt her hands on his hips.

"The Grand Odalisque is ready to see you now," she said, her cheek against his, her breath hot against his skin.

He felt some trepidation at meeting this person with the strange title, but as Tulla's hand took his he was compelled to move, went with her like the meekest of lambs, down a succession of staircases and along an arcade of a corridor to a door at which two Dark Guards stood sentry. The door was opened at Tulla's nod and she led Jack into a large spacious chamber, the polished floor of chequered tiles, the vaulted roof of ornate decoration, the only furniture the throne at the end on which sat the Grand Odalisque.

She was broader than either of them, taller, with small firm breasts which Michelangelo might have crafted for her, her features as clearly defined as in any portrait by Ingres, and despite her size she was of such perfect proportions that there was nothing in the least cumbersome about her. At first Jack thought that the statuesque woman was naked, then that she wore a diaphanous gown of some translucent material which allowed her breasts to be seen, her belly, her navel, her pubis with the trim delta of hair. It was only when she moved that he realized the truth, that what he had taken to be a fabric of some kind was actually a membrane, as much a part of her skin as the folds beneath her chin might become, if this woman ever grew

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old. When she moved, shifting in her seat and crossing her legs, the scalloped hem of the membrane actually climbed, not slipped, rode back over her knees, arranged itself into folds in her lap like a creature making itself comfortable, baring her sturdy thighs.

She smiled at Jack's obvious astonishment, then turned to Tulla, said, "So this is your trophy? Your artist?"

"My artist," Tulla agreed, with a proprietorial pride.

"Artist, create something for me," the Odalisque abruptly commanded, fixing him with a stern gaze.

Jack looked around the empty room in confusion, said, "Create? With what?"

"Bah! This one is no use!"

"He has little training as yet, no knowledge of what he might achieve," Tulla apologized for him.

"No, that much is apparent," the Odalisque stated with disapproval. "But his friends have."

"Friends?" queried Tulla.

"The ones you shared lodgings with."

"Griff and Leo are here?" said Jack.

"And the two bitches?" Tulla supposed, with a hateful frown.

"The two males are in Golgonooza, out of reach for the moment," the Odalisque informed her. "The two females, though, I tracked them to the Forest of Biomorphic Abstraction, sent a family of Krike after them. Only the mother and the chick returned."

"They were able to kill a male Krike?" gasped Tulla in surprise.

"Evidently. Whether by accident or intent I cannot be sure. Whatever the case, they have the power of the Afflatus within them and it can only be a matter of time before they learn more of its nature, come across someone who will instruct them in its use. One of the Schools, perhaps, or the Dilettanti. And so must

your trophy be made to understand its use, be given instruction which will be to our benefit.” The Odalisque pointed to her feet, to the shallow step which led to her throne, said, “Here, Artist. Kneel.”

Jack approached, knelt where she directed, felt the stone cold through his trousers, and the skirt of the Grand Odalisque crept back across her thighs, slipped down her legs to wrap itself around him, thin and translucent like the apron of a jellyfish. He felt a slight prickling sensation, then a more violent shudder as she leant forward to take his face in her hands.

“You wish to help, don’t you, Artist? You wish to serve the Grand Odalisque? Or would you prefer to join the unfortunate ones who have never been offered the invitation, out there in the Garden of Earthly Delights?” He nodded weakly as she held him, yes, no, his befuddled mind searching for the right answer. “Good. Serve the Grand Odalisque well and you will be rewarded well. Now take him, Tulla, he is yours for the moment,” she said, taking her hands from his face, and he fell back as if beneath a blow.

Tulla caught him by the shoulders, helped him to his feet. “But what of the others?” she asked. “His friends?”

“Yes, his friends,” the Odalisque pondered, a finger to her lips, and the folds of her sleeves, the hem of her skirt, all rippled in agitation. “The two in Golgonooza, they must wait for the moment. But the others, those who killed the Krike... I will send the Ghost of a Flea after them,” she decided, with an evil gleam in her eye.

“The Ghost of a Flea!” Tulla laughed delightedly, while Jack could only wonder what manner of creature this might be.

“Before you begin your trophy’s tuition, Tulla, take him to the Ghost of a Flea, so that my pet may get the scent of the humans from him. Then I can dispatch him.”

Tulla nodded, took Jack by the arm to lead him from the

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room. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw the Grand Odalisque's living skirt rearrange itself as she rose from her throne, hiking up at the front to bare her thighs in a provocative way, falling low at the back to sweep the floor. It was only when he was out of the room, removed from her presence, that he came to his senses.

"The Ghost of a Flea?" he said to Tulla.

"A wondrous creature," she told him. "The two bitches won't be rid of him as easily as they were the Krike."

"Do I have to see him?" he worried.

"Just long enough for him to get their scent from you," Tulla insisted. "The Grand Odalisque demands it of you. You heard what she said. Serve her well and she will reward you well, and in ways you could never envisage."

They left the interior of the castle, stepped out into its walled grounds. With no sight of the fires of the Garden of Earthly Delights the air seemed clear, the sky blue, as pleasant a place as could be pictured. They walked washed gravel paths between clipped patches of lawn, rounded fountains and passed beneath arches of sculpted hedge, finally came to a low wall of stone, perhaps twenty yards square, three feet in height. Peering over, Jack saw only a gloomy pit, a narrow flight of stairs descending each side in turn before disappearing into shadow.

"Down there?" he asked.

"Down there," Tulla nodded, leading the way, tugging him along behind her.

As the pit grew darker so the air grew damper, fetid, the walls slick as though they were sweating. In not quite total darkness they reached the bottom, stepped onto a floor of soft earth, peered into the gloom, saw darker shadows to either side, portals cut into the stone.

"Flea!" Tulla called out, her voice echoing. "Where are you, Flea? We have someone for you to sniff! Quarry for you to hunt!"

From somewhere deep in the pit there came a shuffling, a snuffling, slow and labored, only gradually growing louder. Then the Ghost of a Flea stepped out, hunched at first, stooping to pass through the portal, but then straightening to its full height. It stood three feet taller than Jack, seemed to have been flayed of any skin, pared down to knots of flexing muscle. Hands ended in slender fingers of horned nails, feet in toes which were more like talons, clawing and clutching at the damp earth, scratching it back behind him as he moved. But most frightful of all was the head, coal black and glistening like a bluebottle's, with a snout which dripped with some vile-looking mucus and multi-faceted eyes which must have afforded a dizzy view of the world.

"Sniff!" said Tulla. "Sniff and then chase the scent!"

The Flea bowed slowly and Jack tried to step back. Tulla held him firm, though, and he had to suffer the dripping snout across his clothes, against his cheek, then thrust directly in his face. He had to fight back the impulse to vomit, hold his breath as long as he could and then satisfy himself with only the briefest snatch of air.

Eventually, mercifully, Tulla said, "Enough? Sufficient?"

The Ghost of a Flea straightened once again to its full height.

"Then go search out the bitches!"

With a long loping stride, taking six stairs at a time, the Ghost of a Flea climbed from the pit and Jack was able to breathe easily once again.

"Do you think I could have a bath, a change of clothes?" he asked, regarding himself with disgust.

"I will bathe you, I will dress you, I will feed you," Tulla smiled, with something that might almost have passed for endearment. "My trophy, the Grand Odalisque called you. Did you hear that, Jack? My trophy. Isn't that wonderful?" she said, holding his hand more tightly than ever.

* * *

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“You have the First Minister in a quandary,” Goomer told Lord Lovecraft, sure that the news would bring satisfaction and reward, his palms already itching with anticipation. “He cannot think what to do.”

“He accepts that there is little cause to perpetuate our feud, now that the reasons for it have left the city?” Lord Lovecraft hoped, pacing steadily about the room, hands clasped behind his back and head bowed, as if his deliberations were weighty things.

“He is conscious that many people have died because of it, and feels that he has suffered more than you,” Goomer elaborated.

“So he would have them continue to do so, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth until the score is balanced?” Lord Lovecraft turned to Madame le Roy, his arms spread wide to offer himself as the one who was sinned against. “You see how petty the man can be, my dear? Like an actuary with his abacus he tots up lives as if they were no more than commodities. The man has no feeling, he is heartless and selfish.”

“No reason to show him mercy, then, best that you continue with your feud until he is cowed into submission,” she said, not understanding why he should wish to come to some truce with his worst enemy, but Lord Lovecraft silenced her with a dismissive wave of the hand.

“He would welcome a cessation of the hostilities between the two of you, I have heard him confide as much to his equerry,” Goomer told him. “He is simply wary of the reason why you have suggested it, my Lord. He knows you to be a warrior, believes it uncharacteristic of you and suspects some hidden motivation.”

“It is to be hoped there is,” grumbled Madame le Roy.

“Good! Good!” Lord Lovecraft wrung his hands together in delight, resuming his pacing at a faster rate, striding about the room like a man on the cusp of some great revelation. “Let the man worry! Let the man fret! And what of these strangers to the

kingdom who Arnolfini entertained? He worries over them too, I trust?”

“He does, oh he does,” Goomer confirmed, enjoying the Lord’s excitement, for excited men were more easily parted from their money. “He fears that they have now slipped beyond his reach. But by the same token,” he added, “so have they slipped beyond yours. Is this not true, my Lord? The First Minister believes this to be the case. It is the one comfort he finds amongst all the intrigue which confuses him.”

“They have departed Golgonooza,” was all that Lord Lovecraft would agree to. “van Vogt’s only option now can be to join with me in defense of the city against the threat which they must ultimately pose. At the very least, he can no longer feel justified in opposing me, Parliament will never sanction it. Once again your news has cheered me, young man,” he said, stopping before Goomer and claspng him by the shoulders. “Go, now. Mark van Vogt’s mood and manner and be sensitive to anything that might signal his intentions. Any further snippets or insights will bring you your reward.”

Goomer frowned, his brow furrowing, an eyebrow cocking to question the abrupt dismissal. “But my reward for the moment, my Lord?”

“Ah!” Lord Lovecraft smiled, and turned to Madame le Roy as if on cue. “My dear lady believes, and I have come to agree, that the purse you received on the last occasion was more than sufficient reward for your efforts.”

“But my Lord!”

“Madame le Roy is, among other things, a shrewd businesswoman...”

Goomer cast her a bitter glance, challenged her smile with a look of hate as he muttered to himself, “Among other things.”

“...she is skilled in the motivation of people, knowledgeable in how to get the best from them.”

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Madame le Roy rose from her seat and came to Goomer, brought her face so close to his that he could see the lines clearly etched beneath her make-up as she explained how the best motivation was achieved. "If your reward comes too easy, young man, your efforts become half-hearted, less productive," she told him, her enunciation slow, like a patient schoolmistress, as if this was an education from which he would benefit.

Lord Lovecraft clapped him on the shoulder as the two of them together led him to the door. "Madame is right, Goomer, it will be to the advantage of all of us. If your way is too lax then van Vogt might become suspicious that there is a spy in the palace."

"The First Minister might see you for what you are," said Madame le Roy, and though her tone spoke of concern there was no hiding the threat which glinted in her eyes. He understood it only too well; do as he was told or she would be the one to denounce him to van Vogt.

"Let the last purse you received be seen as a retainer," Lord Lovecraft suggested, with a final squeeze of his shoulder, his intimacy in contrast with the intimidation of his aged paramour. "To add to that, Goomer, there is your incentive. The more useful the information you bring, the greater will be your reward. Off you go now, boy, take pride in your work."

He was bundled through the door and it closed quickly after him. At the end of the hallway there slouched the customary guards, two of Lovecraft's finest, leaning against the wall as if it was a teetering thing which required their boredom to support it. For all that Lord Lovecraft had proposed a truce with First Minister van Vogt he was not trusting enough to lower his defenses, and his residence still bristled with armed men. Goomer paused a moment by the door, straightened his tunic, straightened his hose, then knelt to unlace his boots and fasten them again more tightly, his ear to the door and his breath stilled

so that he could catch the faintest whisper.

“Hey, boy! What are you doing?” one of the guards demanded, finally noticing him.

“Just taking my leave of Lord Lovecraft,” he answered, knotting a lace one last time and then standing.

“Then be off with you! Come on! Let’s have you!”

Goomer sauntered towards the guard and his companion, tipping them a salute as he approached. “A fine man is our Lord Lovecraft. An honor to serve him. He pays you well, I trust?”

“He pays...” began one, but the other swung a boot at his behind, telling him to be gone.

“He will pay even more if he believes he can get away with cheating me,” Goomer vowed, under his breath.

* * *

It was not the unnatural warmth of the cloak which had Anna sweating when she stirred some hours later, nor the morning air which made her shiver, but the dream from which she had just awakened. Already its memory was vague within seconds of waking, she could recall none of its content, just the emotions it had conjured, a sense of malevolence, of evil, a feeling that the dream had been not so much a flight of fantasy as an intrusion into her mind, a molestation of her soul. She felt dirty and soiled. Unwrapping herself from her cloak, her body unfolding like a moth from a chrysalis to feel the warmth of the morning sun, she stood, stretched, offered herself to the welcome rays, then walked down to the river bank, knelt to dip her cupped hands into the icy waters and splashed the sleep from her eyes. She thought about taking a drink of it, decided against, settled instead for simply moistening her parched lips. Sitting back on her haunches she felt the ground damp with dew, looked across the river to see it more like a frost, a prelude to the cold blue mountains in the distance.

Turning to her left, in the direction from which they had

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come, she saw the river as disjointed and fragmented as ever; turning to her right to check what lay ahead of them, expecting there to be more confusing interruptions and preparing to plot a course through them, she marked that the river ran as true as the land dictated, straight as a die to the town which was little more than a mile or two away.

The town which had not been there the afternoon before, when they broke their journey to rest.

She ran back to Selina, shook her friend awake.

“What’s the matter? Where are we? Is it time for college already?” Selina gabbled, her eyes fluttering at first before opening wide enough to take in her surroundings, realizing where she was. She yawned. “I thought it was a dream. Every morning I wake and think it’s a dream. But we’re still here, aren’t we?” There was a note of disappointment, as if dreams were preferable to the strange reality which had been inflicted upon them; as if, like Dona Isobel’s husband, she would rather believe in her dreams. “Nothing changes, does it?” she said.

“Oh yes it does. Look.”

Selina followed the pointing finger, rubbed her gummy eyes, smearing the last of her makeup which had slowly faded over the days they had spent in Eidolon. She looked like a panda, and Anna quickly repaired the makeup, knowing how particular her friend was about her appearance.

“That wasn’t there yesterday. The Dilettanti didn’t mention there being any towns between here and the Garden of Earthly Delights. Another example of the river’s discontinuity?”

“Maybe,” said Anna. “Or perhaps the town really is there. It’s worth a look-see.”

They gathered their things together and followed the river, ignoring a sharp ninety degree change in its course, and came to the outskirts of the town. Although not wholly contemporary, its buildings were at least more modern than any they had yet come

across, more solid than the bamboo huts of Noa Noa, of a more recent style than the Renaissance houses of San Romano or the Baroque splendor of the Prado. The buildings which lined the main street were low, two storeys high, what seemed to be shops and offices with living accommodation above, and they walked slowly along, identifying premises through the unshuttered windows or by the peeling sign-writing above them. A barber's shop, a lawyer's offices, ice cream parlor, Anna noted, and thought they might be American.

"We've had South Sea islanders and Renaissance Italians, so why not Yanks as well?" said Selina with a shrug. She looked up at the sun, which was well into the sky by now, casting sharp shadows along one side of the street. "Must be Sunday morning, for the place to be so deserted."

All the buildings were closed, there was no sign of life in any, but as they reached the end of the block, stepping down from the pavement to cross a dusty side street, they saw ahead a bleached clapboard house, a man outside on the porch, bobbing back and forth in a pine rocking chair.

"Good morning," Anna greeted him, when they drew level.

"Morning ladies," he responded, then hawked and spat, a thick black tarry substance which fell in the dust at his feet, only slowly being absorbed by the parched wooden decking. He wore denim dungarees, a bib at the front fastened over one shoulder, falling loose from the other, the paunch of his belly splaying his legs wide, giving him an air of slothful contentment. He scratched his chest, scratched his groin, spat a second time and smiled.

"Could you tell us where we are?" Anna asked him. "What is this place?"

"Seventh Avenue."

"New York?" she immediately thought.

"No. Seventh Avenue. Didn't you hear?" he said with a

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frown, as if annoyed by what he took to be her stupidity, her slowness.

Ignoring the curt response, she asked, "So would Seventh Avenue have a place where we might find something to drink, something to eat?"

"Unlikely, not at this hour, not on the God's day," he said, and gave a kick to his chair, rocking it a little harder. It was as they were about to walk on, to search out someone more keen on conversation, that he said, "Although..."

"Yes?" said Anna.

"Another block along there's Hopper. He has a boarding house. He might squeeze you in for some breakfast, if he hasn't got too many lodgers."

"Thank you," Anna said. "Hopper, you say?"

"Hopper," he repeated, with a patience which seemed to demand that she pay more attention.

"Miserable bastard," Selina grumbled, when they were out of earshot; then, looking around, she remarked, "The place looks American, he looked American, but he didn't sound it."

"No," Anna agreed, for there had been no suggestion of country, region or dialect in the man's brusque tone. "I can only think, since the Dilettanti didn't warn us about this place, that it must be one of those intrusions they described, something only recently imagined in our world which has become a reality in theirs."

"You think so?"

"It's an explanation. There's the aspect of a particular time, a particular place, but none of the manner. That sullen bloke was created as an image, not a character in a play, so though he looks the part he doesn't act it."

"Insightful," said Selina.

"Thank you," grinned Anna.

They reached the next block along, passed a number of

detached houses of the same faded clapboard, eventually came to one outside of which a sign hung announcing: 'Hopper's Board and Lodging'. Climbing the three shallow steps to the door they found the bell, of the pull variety rather than the push, and Anna gave it a tug or two, they heard the hollow tinny ring indoors. Moments later a curtain was peeled back for a blur of a face to regard them, fell back into place and then the door was opened. The man who greeted them was a younger version of the sloth in the rocking chair, might even have been his son, wearing the same dungarees, sporting a crown of thinning hair which suggested that baldness was not very many years away. His belly was not so much a paunch as a pot which would obviously never be reduced.

"Yes ladies? What can I do for you?" he asked, his smile radiant, his teeth even. "Is it board and lodging you're looking for?"

"Well..." Selina began.

"We don't know if we can stay," Anna explained.

"But we would really appreciate something to eat, a hot drink maybe, if you could oblige."

"Surely. No problem," he said, stepping aside to admit them. "We only have two lodgers at the moment, plenty of room at the table. Clarissa!" he called out. "Two more places for breakfast!" With a sweep of the hand he beckoned the two girls forward, said, "It'll be half an hour before food's ready. If you'd like to freshen up, there's a free room upstairs."

"Freshen up?" Selina whispered, as they followed him up to the first floor. "Now that does sound American. Midwest hospitality."

"But more Oldham than Oakie," said Anna, for the offer, though made generously, had been stated in a flat expressionless monotone.

The room they were shown into was chintzy, cute, ruffled

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curtains at the window, patchwork quilts on each of the two beds, a framed sampler on the wall between them.

“Don’t forget. Half an hour, the food’s ready,” they were told, as their host closed the door on them.

The facilities with which they were invited to ‘freshen up’ proved to be nothing more than a basin and a jug of cold water, but at least the towels were soft and fluffy. Selina washed first, by the time Anna had followed suit was sprawled out across one of the beds, her body sinking into the soft quilt of feather and down.

“I could sleep again,” she said.

“I need food,” said Anna.

“After we’ve eaten, though, do you think we might stay? Just one night, at least?”

“We’ll see. Let’s grab something to eat first.”

Selina dragged herself from the bed, they went back downstairs, followed the smell of food until they found the dining room. Hopper was setting a couple of pots of coffee on the chequered tablecloth as they entered, maneuvering space for them between the plates of pancakes and waffles, the salvers of crisp ham and fried eggs and slices of wholemeal bread.

“Sit! Sit!” he urged them, pointing to a seat on one side of the table, a seat on the other. There were six places set in total, and Selina and Anna took ones facing each other. Hopper took a captain’s chair at the head of the table, his wife Clarissa, coming through from the kitchen to take a subordinate one at the other end. Hopper began to pile plates with food from every dish and salver, his wife poured cups of steaming coffee and passed them around.

“What about your other two guests?” Anna asked, with a nod to the vacant space beside her, to the empty chair next to Selina.

“They will be here... Ah! Here they come now,” Hopper smiled, and began to heap yet more plates with food. “They always come when they smell breakfast. Clarissa’s cooking is

better than an alarm call for our two warriors.”

The two who entered the room were obviously not Americans, even before they spoke that much was plain. They wore skirts of pleated leather above legs which were bare and bristled with hair; breastplates were of a stouter unresisting leather, their calf-high boots too, and each had a heavy sword slung from his waist, the shorter of the two also having a crossbow strapped across his back.

“This is Auberjonois and this is Siddig,” said Hopper, from the head of the table, then realized, “But I don’t know your names.”

“Selina,” said Anna, gesturing across the table to her friend.

“And Anna,” said Selina, returning the introduction.

The one named Auberjonois got to his feet and gave a courteous bow, his long hair shrouding his face as his head dipped, his hand first taking Anna’s and then Selina’s, touching no more than their fingertips as if he was all too conscious of his strength. His companion, the one introduced as Siddig, half rose to give the briefest shy nod, his eyes never once lifting from the table.

As plates of food were passed around there was silence for a while as the edge of each hunger was dulled. The two lodgers especially addressed themselves to their food with gusto, shoveling it in so quickly that there could be no enjoyment of its flavor, simply a need for the fuel it provided. Slowly, though, appetites were satisfied, the breakfast was taken more leisurely, cutlery was actually set aside from time to time while a flavor was savored or a future was pondered.

At last their host, Hopper, asked, “So what brings you two young ladies to Seventh Avenue?”

“Chance, nothing more,” Anna replied. “We weren’t even aware that this place existed, were given no clue that it might. The people who guided us in this direction gave us no inkling of

it.”

“And who were they?” asked Auberjonois, his plate already empty, his belly full, sprawling back in his seat with a cup of coffee in his hands.

“The Society of Dilettanti, in a place north of here called the Prado,” she told him.

His coffee spilled as he set his cup down and leant forward with interest. “You came from the Prado? You have visited with the Dilettanti? And where is it that they are directing you to?”

Anna cast Selina a cautious glance, wondering if it was wise to answer, decided for herself and said, “To the Garden of Earthly Delights.”

The name meant nothing to Hopper and his wife, but this was obviously not the case with Auberjonois and his partner, who tried to hide their concern with a cough and a splutter and a slurp of coffee which was now growing tepid.

“And what business have you there?” asked Auberjonois, his faked nonchalance not quite hiding his anxiety.

“We are looking for someone.”

“As are we,” he agreed.

“A friend of ours, and a companion who has tempted him there, a young girl by the name of Tulla.”

“The same!” said Auberjonois to Siddig.

“The same!” Siddig nodded, and their expressions were grave, their manner suspicious, as Siddig, the less friendly of the two, asked, “She is a friend of yours?”

“No, an acquaintance but nothing more,” Anna said, seeing his body tense, sensing that there might be nothing affable about their interest in Tulla. “The one who accompanies Tulla is a friend, though, and our worry is that he has been distracted by her, seduced. Whatever the case we have to find him, free him, take him back with us.”

“So Tulla is not your friend?”

“No, she is not,” Anna insisted.

“All to the good, then,” said Auberjonois, “for it is our mission to find this whelp and dispatch her, to your world, to another world, to any world but Eidolon. We were on our way to the Prado in the hope of getting news of her, but now, after what you tell us- Perhaps we might help each other in our respective tasks?” he suggested.

Selina, who had been quiet up to this point, said, “You think we need your help?”

“You are women,” said Siddig disdainfully, before Auberjonois could offer any more diplomatic an answer.

“Then damn you!” Selina spat, and Siddig was flung from his seat, hurled against the wall with such force that a clatter of plates fell about his head from the shelves above.

Hopper and his wife served more coffee and pancakes, seemingly oblivious to what had happened.

* * *

“You call yourself Fay. Why is that? Are you ashamed of the name your people gave you?”

“I am incomplete without my people, now that all my people are dead,” Fay said, and bowed her head over the stream, so that her tears might fall into it and be washed away with its waters, tears so bitter that if they had fallen on the ground they would have poisoned the earth rather than nourished it.

“So what will you do?” she was asked, the voice a distant echo, soft and grave, its sadness unmistakable. “Will you live a life of mourning? Deny yourself? Deny who you are and where you come from?”

“I could never do that,” she sobbed softly, her hair hanging about her face seeming to enfold her in her grief.

“But you have already done so, child, to the murderer Lord Abishai. A native of the south you told him you were, gave your name as Fay, not the Fayaway I sang of as I danced you on my

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knee as an infant.” The voice was as ethereal as the breeze through the trees, as dull as a dirge, but the disappointment it carried could not be hidden, the hurt not disguised. “Why do you deny yourself? Why do you deny us?”

“So that I might avenge you, spirit of my father,” said Fay, wiping the tears from her eyes and looking up, her sorrow now replaced by a steely resolve. “So that I might avenge you and Vaiga and Pauluura and Tehura.... So that I might avenge the deaths of all my people. I want the murderer Abishai to suffer the way they have, the way you have. I do not want him simply dead. I want him damned. For all eternity.”

The woods around her were filled with a scintillating color, sunlight fractured through the leaves and danced before her eyes as if the spirits of her people were celebrating their joy. The bubble of the stream was like a soft ripple of applause, a gentle murmur of approval for the promise she made.

The spirit of her father, though, said, “It pains me that my daughter should feel this way.”

“I am sorry, father.”

“You were born to be happy, it is all I ever wished for you, and it tears my heart to think that your life should now be one of such bitterness.”

“It can be no other way,” Fay said sadly. “Forgive me, father.”

“Forgive you? But what is there to forgive? It pains me, my daughter, as your father I am saddened to see what has become of you. As one of your people, though, I can take nothing but satisfaction from your intentions. As strong as my sorrow is, there is also pride.”

Fay’s eyes filled with tears again, for a moment the only thing she could feel was love. But then she was conscious that there was no one to be embraced by that love, she ached to feel her father’s arms about her, to feel her arms about him, the

beating of his heart against hers, and the sadness descended once more, as dark as night.

“I must go,” she said, getting to her feet and drying her eyes one last time. “May the spirits of my people help me avenge their deaths.”

“We will be with you always,” she heard as she walked from the woods, bringing herself erect, holding her head proud.

Elusai was waiting for her on the fringe, to return with her to Lord Abishai’s palace, and fell in step beside her. He said nothing, she looked directly ahead as they walked and could read nothing in his expression. But still she was aware, after discourse with the spirits had sharpened her senses, as if they had passed on some of their acuity to her, still she was conscious of an air of embarrassment about him, as if he was not sure whether his role was to be her minder or her keeper. Lord Abishai, certainly, maintained that his friend escorted her for her own protection. But was this the one motive, the true reason? Or was his worry that he might lose her, when he thought her to be such a precious thing, a person gifted with a divine insight?

As they approached the city Elusai finally broke his silence, stirred by the sight of the shanty town of makeshift dwellings which was now spilling beyond its walls. “It was such a colorful place when we came upon it,” he said, smiling faintly at the recollection. “Like a jewel nestling in the crook of the river, it was. Now it takes on the aspect of a sore on the landscape, with all these ramshackle places the people are throwing up.”

“They have to stay somewhere, all those who would join Lord Abishai and share in his glory,” said Fay, still not looking at him, as if his conscience was a sin she could not admit to.

“They do not join to share in his glory,” said Elusai, with as much disdain as despair. “They come out of fear for themselves and their families, believing that it is safer to live a life of subjugation in the shadow of the conqueror.”

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Fay permitted no flicker of expression to betray her as he spoke, for if these were the words of a true friend they were either foolhardy in their honesty or were meant to entrap. If what Elusai said was sincere then she could not risk allying herself with such a man, and if his intention was to elicit some sympathy which would then be reported to Abishai she would not be tricked. And so she kept her gaze fixed ahead, seeing the town as he did but persuading herself not to notice it.

“And these pale pastel walls,” he continued, as they passed through the gate, “see how they are scorched and bloodied by battle.”

“That will be remedied,” Fay told him without emotion. “Abishai is to give the order to have them painted. Black.”

“Black?” said Elusai, looking around to imagine the scene, his laugh, even as he choked it back, one of incredulity. “And will he level the woods, poison the streams, scorch the fields until they are no more than a mat of charred stubble?”

“No. The woods will stay.”

“At your request,” he supposed, and as it was not phrased as a question she surrendered no answer. “You are called Fay,” he remarked.

“I am.”

“That same Fay which is a fairy, a sprite, a peri?” He nodded at her continued silence. “It is as much a description as it is a name, at least that is what Abishai believes. By your flattery you have charmed him, and he believes you to be charmed yourself. Still, at least the woods remain, and that is one blessing.”

“It might just as well be a graveyard, as black as he would have the town,” she said, and quickened her pace, striding ahead of him towards the palace.

* * *

Jack was returned to Tulla’s chambers and during the following thirty six hours never once ventured outside again. The lack of a

fresh breeze, the thickly perfumed air and sultry warmth of the chambers, the spiced foods and heady wines he was fed, all combined to dizzy the senses, and it was then, when he was at his most vulnerable, that Tulla's caresses were at their most effective. She bathed him as she had promised she would, and then took him to her bed, but if there was any lovemaking then its memory escaped him. She touched him, yes, her skin seeming to make his prickle with static at every contact, there were croons and caresses and whispered words which were like incantations, but if there was any penetration of the kind he was accustomed to then he could not remember. All he knew was that he awoke feeling as sated as he had ever done before, his limbs weary and his head aching, awoke to Tulla's smile regarding him still as a trophy, as a pet.

It was then, in his now dulled state, that he was made to sit on the floor for his training to begin, at her feet, his back to her, she on the bed behind him, her legs to either side of him and her hands pressed tightly against his temples, as if the pressure she exerted might focus his attention. But all it did was make his head ache.

"So who do you hate, Jack? Think hard! Picture him! The target of the greatest hatred you have ever felt!" Tulla encouraged, and his headache grew worse, throbbing between the temples, beating at his skull. "Hatred!" she demanded of him. "Who is it you hate most?"

His head throbbed more painfully as the concentration demanded of him combined with the cloying atmosphere of her room and the suffocating anesthesia which her nearness threatened, seemed that it might be about to burst and that the only hope of preventing this was to let the hatred spill out. It was when it did, like a sudden exhalation, and the thickness in his head was replaced by a chill vacuum, that the image of Griff appeared in a corner of the room, sparking, shimmering,

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coalescing into something quite solid. He wore a loin cloth to bare his scrawny body, his hands were tied behind his back, his mournful eyes were cast to heaven as arrows appearing as if from nowhere pierced his chest and legs.

“Very good, Jack! Very good!” Tulla congratulated him, taking her hands from his head to clap them together in delight.

“No. Too bloody saintly, like a martyr,” he said, and his disappointment with the image caused it to flicker and die.

“But you see what you can do,” she said, bending forward to hug him. “You see what you are capable of. Now, imagine-”

“Again?” he moaned, feeling weary with the effort that had already been required of him.

“Just a little longer. It gets easier, believe me.” Her palms were against his temples again, insisting, “Imagine the distance which separates you from the target of your hatred, and that you are too lazy to cross it, or so powerful that you have no need to. How would you pierce him with arrows then, or inflict whatever punishment? What agent would you send to do your work for you?”

The headache came again, a buzzing between the temples as though there was some current flowing through Tulla’s hands, passing from one to the other; he let it build as much as he could bear before spitting it out forcefully, like a thing which disgusted him, some foul bile which his body was unable to stomach.

There was something of the Ghost of a Flea in the figure which appeared, in the beetle-brow and the bug-eyes, but the slick muscled body was now covered with plates of shining black armor like a carapace about his broad chest and back. He carried no weapons, but then his natural power seemed such that he would have no need of any.

“Wonderful!” Tulla applauded once more. “Wicked and wonderful! If ever there could be a creature more evil than the Ghost of a Flea, then this might be it.”

“Do I send him now? After Griff?” Jack asked.

Tulla smiled and ruffled his hair, like a mother placating an over-eager child. “No, not yet. The mastery of the Afflatus is not yet strong enough in you to be so effective. Soon, though. Soon,” she promised.

The creature faded from sight, a look of disappointment registering as it did so.

Jack rubbed his temples where Tulla’s hands had rested, easing away the last of his headache. “I’m tired,” he complained.

“Of course you are. Education is nothing if not exhausting, if it is to be effective, especially the education I have in mind for you.” Tulla got to her feet, offered him her hand to sit him on the bed, then pushed him gently back among the cushions. She did not join him, though, as he hoped she would, but regarded him with a glimmer of an approving smile, her arms folded and head cocked, her weight on one leg to slant her hips. Finally she asked, “How would you have me, Jack?”

“What do you mean?”

“How would you dress me? Picture me as you would like me to be. Imagine, just one more time.”

Tulla still wore the clothes which had made her a part of his world, the tee shirt, the paint-stained jeans, the scuffed boots, and as he looked at her the image formed almost involuntarily, without effort, with no accompanying headache. The jeans were replaced by a tight leather skirt and sheer black stockings, the boots by shoes with improbably high steel heels; her breasts, fuller than he remembered, were barely contained by the brief vest of soft black kid and around her neck she wore a studded collar, had bracelets of supple leather around each wrist. Her chewed nails were now tips of bright crimson and she looked at them admiringly, buffed them against her vest.

“Oh, Jack, you have a wonderful capacity for wickedness,” she said, climbing onto the bed, crawling towards him like a

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predator. "So this is what your subconscious craves," she smiled, reaching out to pinch his nipple through the thin shirt, her fingers closing so hard on the nub of flesh that it made him gasp. "I must take you to the isle of Cythera sometime. You would like it there, I think. So many people who love to hurt, and be hurt in return."

She lay her body beside his, her head propped on one arm, her other hand pinching him again, slapping his hand away when he tried to prevent her, then scratching at his face, nipping at his belly. He twisted in torment but she would allow him no respite. When his struggles became too great she knelt up, caught his hands in hers and wrapped her bracelets around them both, tying his hands to hers.

"Now your hands go where I say," she told him, leading him to her hips, her belly, on to her breasts. "Good?" she smiled.

In a burst of frustration Jack's hands snapped free and he saw Tulla's flung out, her arms outstretched as if crucified, held by some invisible force. If he had some of the power of the *Afflatus* within him, though, then she had the strength of will power, was slowly able to draw her arms forward, lower them to stroke his cheek.

"We will accomplish great things, you and I, Jack," she said, now tender rather than tormenting. "The Grand Odalisque will be proud of us."

He turned away from her, rolled onto his side, his body aflame, his mind teeming with possibilities. It was then that Anna appeared beside him, naked, bound, looking about her in mute confusion.

"Oh good! A guest!" said Tulla, peering over Jack's shoulder, her body tight against his as she regarded Anna's helpless form. She leant across him to slap the bared breasts, watching them redden. "A *ménage à trois*. There were three in the bed and the little one said.... roll over, Jack. Forget the frigid bitch."

She gripped him by the shoulder and spun him around, drawing him to her, smothering his face in her abundant breasts so that his muffled ears could only just catch the words:

“Well! What do we have here?”

Tulla released Jack from her embrace, the mattress bouncing as she sprang up and exclaimed, “Urizen!”

Jack turned, thinking that he might be the object of curiosity, saw a tall elderly figure with flowing white hair in such profusion that at one moment it seemed to belie his age, the next seemed to exaggerate it. Body lean and gaunt beneath the flowing garment he wore, the man stood at the foot of the bed and gazed keenly. The object of the man’s attention, though, was not Jack, nor even Tulla in her decadent dress, but the flickering image of Anna, still just bright enough to be discerned, and obviously appreciated.

“Urizen, Ancient of Days, I am honored that you should visit my chambers,” said Tulla, with a deference never before exhibited, not to the Dark Guards nor the Ghost of a Flea nor even to the Grand Odalisque. “This is...”

“Insignificant!” Urizen snapped, his voice brittle and coarse but reverberating with the authority of his years. “And you, Tulla, young slut that you are, and attractively garbed as you may be for a change.... insignificant! What draws me is this image that rests between you and your mate,” he said, his eyes lingering on the shimmering form of Anna. “It is an image, I take it?”

“Conjured by my mate, my trophy,” Tulla agreed. “He has some mastery of the Afflatus, will learn yet more.”

The wizened old man cast Jack a briefly interested glance, then began to divest himself of his garment, baring a skinny body which still threatened some unexpected power. Slowly he lowered himself onto the bed, the frail substance of his form merging with the incandescent image of Anna so that they became one.

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Tulla looked on in fascination, sprawled on the bed, her face as close to the copulating bodies as she could get.

Jack closed his eyes, fighting to contain the scream he felt building inside.

* * *

While Lady Haggitha slept, and Gamaliel and Jahiliyah lay wrapped in each other's arms, Tharmas questioned Basilides as to the whereabouts of those the Hashishim had brought to the kingdom, probing and prompting though it seemed that he did not listen too intently, for his attention was fixed on a square of cloth he had unfolded in his lap. While the scribe spoke of the information he had gleaned of the visitors, of the intrusions he had sensed which marked their entrances into Eidolon and their routes thereafter, Tharmas would run his index finger over the unmarked surface of the fabric, as if he was writing but without leaving an imprint.

"The two females, the two males, and a fifth," he repeated, his finger describing a circle for each, gazing as intently at the cloth as a traveler would at a map. "North and east and yet further east."

"Tharmas?" said Basilides, wrapping his cloak about him to ward off the chill of the night.

"Yes, Basilides?"

"The cloth."

"This?" Tharmas smiled, with the affection that some might reserve for a pet or a favorite child. "This is my 'tabula rasa'. It helps me compose my thoughts."

He held up the cloth for Basilides to see, and the scribe was surprised to note that it did indeed now resemble a map. From top to bottom a jagged line ran, about a third of the way across the fabric, like a broken coastline indented with bays and inlets and secret coves. To the right of this line the ivory surface of the cloth had become mottled, taken on a texture as if it had been

crumpled, giving an illusion of relief, and across this suggestion of a landscape ran three separate lines which pulsed like arteries.

“The cloth was blank,” Basilides was certain, though the light was poor, the only illumination coming from the embers of the dying fire.

Tharmas nodded. “On the ‘tabula rasa’ I compose my thoughts and my thoughts become concrete. For what use would thoughts be if they could not become so?”

“Is that how you were able to travel so quickly, matching your progress on foot to ours on horseback?” asked Basilides, arching his good eyebrow as if he already suspected the truth. “Is that how you were able to kill those brigands who waylaid us, simply by making your thoughts become concrete?”

“Well really, Basilides, that is a quite fanciful notion!” Tharmas laughed. “So fanciful that it delights me! What you suggest is tantamount to magic.”

“But still...?”

“Never underestimate the power of the mind, my friend, nor the importance of thought. And if you were to witness what the visitors to our land are capable of, then perhaps you might not,” he said, and returned the cloth to his lap, gazed at it again, his attention rapt, his eyes flicking back and forth across its surface as if he saw much more than Basilides could ever hope to.

“You are indeed a singular individual,” the scribe commented. “So why, I wonder, should you offer your assistance to the Lady Haggitha?”

Tharmas grinned, not taking his eyes from the cloth. “It is as I told her. I would wish to see her succeed in her ambition.”

“But to what gain of your own?”

“Her success would be Urizen’s failure, they are one and the same thing. That is my only concern.”

“You hate this Hashishim named Urizen that much?”

Tharmas did not answer, but tapped a finger against the

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cloth. “The one who is already in the Garden of Earthly Delights, he is the danger, the one your Lady would do best to win to her side. Once Urizen learns of the power this man is capable of wielding it can only be put to evil intent.”

“There are others of his kind who are closer to hand,” Basilides reminded him. “Might our efforts not be better expended in intercepting them? From the evidence I have sensed of the intrusions they have caused it would seem that all are possessed of much the same power.”

“Yes, we might intercept them,” Tharmas agreed, “but if we did so it would only be as a means to an end. Our ultimate goal must be to snatch the fifth from the clutches of the Hashishim, and from Urizen in particular.” He sighed, but it was difficult to say if it was with satisfaction for the task which lay ahead or an acceptance of its futility. About to fold the cloth away, however, he then paused, his expression darkening, his eyes narrowing as much with hatred as with concentration. “Urizen,” he whispered, and this time the very mention of the name seemed to fill the night with silence.

“What is it?” asked Basilides, craning his neck, trying to peer at the cloth. “You see him? He has the young man? What is it?”

“Yes, I see him, and yes, he has the young man,” Tharmas confirmed, and then broke into a smile. “As I see Urizen, however, from a distance, so he sees another in just the same way, distant, remote, out of reach for the moment.” He beamed as he folded away the cloth and returned it to his satchel, then brought his hands together slowly, in a prayer of thanks or a gesture of applause. “You are right, Basilides, we can intercept one of the parties who are closer.”

“We can?” said Basilides, wondering at the change in Tharmas and what divination might have brought it about.

“Yes, for though Urizen has this fifth stranger to our world he already realizes that it is not the one he wants. The one he

wants, the one he sees as if in a dream, is one of the female of the species.”

“But why? What difference does it make if they are all possessed of the same power?”

“The why is not important, Basilides, all that matters is what Urizen wants, and that he should be deprived of it.”

* * *

As first Griff, then Leo, steered their mounts the last few strides from the drab grayness of the marsh they were surprised to be faced by darkness. Reining his horse to a halt, Griff cast a glance over his shoulder. Still grey, he saw, and turned back to face pitch darkness.

Leo came alongside him, said, “Night?”

“Night,” Griff confirmed, for slowly the scene before them began to resolve itself into degrees of darkness, vague forms suggesting rocks, trees, undulations, and above them stars began to blink brighter and more numerous as their eyes adjusted.

“But not back there, behind us.”

“No. Strange, but not to be unexpected. Nothing surprises me about this land anymore. So what do you reckon?” Griff asked, leaning forward to peer ahead. “Plod on a little more, get away from the stink of the marsh before we rest up for the night?”

“I reckon I could manage another thirty minutes,” Leo believed, and they rode on, a little longer than the half hour he had agreed to, stopping only when the Malterre Marshes were no more than a faint luminescence in the distance.

Wearily they dropped down from their horses, stretched, did knee-bends to bring blood back to cramped limbs. Noting Leo take a bedroll and unfurl it on the ground, Griff told him to see to his horse before he saw to his own comfort.

“Jesus! Fucking frontier man!” Leo swore, unbuckling the saddle and taking it from the creature’s back, struggling with its

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weight, his arms stretched to their limit to reach what must have been two dozen hands high. He mopped the horse's sweating flanks with its blanket, following Griff's example, draping it over a bush to dry. "Okay?" he asked, a little grumpily, having done everything that Griff had.

"Fine. Now you get a bit of wood together for a fire while I dig out some food."

Leo stamped off, fumbling in the dark to snap limbs off shapes which he hoped were combustible, lost himself for a moment in the gloom but eventually returned to find Griff waiting with skewered cuts of meat.

"Kebab Arnolfini okay?" he asked, planting the skewers in the ground while he made a pile of kindling and set a match to it. From either side they blew gently to make the fire catch, adding more fuel to the pyre until the flames were fierce enough for him to angle the skewers into them. "Back to nature, eh? What do you think to it?" he asked, leaning forward to breathe in the fragrance of woody smoke and charring meat.

"I think you can stuff going back to nature, and just you make sure that meat's cooked through to the middle, not a hint of pink flesh or blood."

"Just what Anna would say if I took her out for a steak," Griff recalled, with a momentary sadness.

"And when did you last take her out for a meal? When could you ever afford to?"

"A fair while ago," was the guilty admission, as Griff twisted the skewers around, roasting the meat on all sides. "Dig out something to drink," he said, "and I don't mean coffee or tea."

Leo rummaged among the panniers until his fingers found something which felt more like a bottle than a jar or caddy, pulled it out and unplugged it. "Wine, I think," he said, taking a drink and then passing it across.

"Beer," Griff felt sure, after chancing a taste.

“All things to all men, perhaps? What either would prefer?”
“It’s possible.”

After some minutes Griff plucked a morsel of meat from the end of one of the skewers, juggled it in his hands until it had cooled enough to hold, then took a bite of it. “Seems all right,” he thought. “The blandness of chicken with an aftertaste of something curried or marinated.” He popped the rest of it into his mouth, said, “It’s edible, at least. Filling enough.”

Leo pulled the second skewer from the ground, waved it around in the fire a final time, and then began to nibble at the scorched meat, gasping at air to soothe his burning palate, flapping a hand before his face to stop his lips from blistering. A bite and a drink, a bite and a drink, a little more food when it had cooled enough for them to gorge on it and soon they felt sated, their bellies full, the fresh night air such a contrast to the stench of the marsh that it soon began to work its soporific effect. Griff banked up the fire and then followed Leo’s example, worming his way into his bedroll, making sure that the bottle of what one took to be ale and the other took to be wine was within easy reach of each.

“I couldn’t half use a cigarette, though,” said Leo, following a deep belch with a gasp of dissatisfaction.

“We should have mentioned it to Arnolfini, put it on our shopping list,” said Griff. “I’m sure we’ll find something we can smoke, though, somewhere in this land.”

“I’m sure Jack already has,” Leo said, and the suggestion was enough to cause their sleep to bring with it nightmares.

Griff pictured Anna with a man more muscular than he could ever be, a hulk who she would have scoffed at in the past but now seemed so enamored of that all she could do was draw him into her arms, embracing his bulk, her body pressed against his broad back. He tossed restlessly, frowning in his sleep, and the hulk became a haggard man, aged and brittle, snow white

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flesh and snow white hair, his body so bleached that as he bent over her it seemed that he needed to bleed her of every ounce of vitality, his blanched shadow descending over her, penetrating her.

It was not disgust at the violation of the one he loved which caused him to start awake, though, nor even the sad jealousy that it was not he who violated her, but the sudden convulsive scream which came from Leo at his side. His body coiled on the brink of sleep as Leo's did, knees to belly and hands to ankles to offer the simplest most primeval defense against whatever might assail them, a frightened fetal position.

"It was Jack..." said Leo.

"Anna..." Griff recalled with horror.

"...he was violating..."

"...she was violated."

Leo came slowly awake, sat upright and wiped away the sweat brought on by nightmare. "We shared the same dream?" he wondered.

Griff shook his head. "It wasn't Jack violating her."

"It wasn't Jack I saw. Though in a way it was." He shook his head, trying to cast off his confusion, clear his mind. "I don't know. He seemed somehow darker. Not dark in shadow, but dark in mood. He was dressed in black, now I think of it, but still, it was more than that." He shuddered at the image, at the fear it had caused. "What do you think he's up to?"

"Search me, but the sooner we find him the better," said Griff. He kicked himself free of his bedroll, stood, let the damp dew of dawn refresh him as a shower would, washing away the fear of the night. Still he shivered, though, and could not be sure that it was simply from the cold.

Leo, when he was finally able to rise, trembled even more violently. "What the fuck happened?" he asked. "Did anything happen, or did we just dream it?"

“If our imaginations are linked with the reality of this world, then our dreams may well be too,” Griff proposed, none too happy with the notion, and set about saddling his horse.

Within minutes they were on their way, breakfasting in the saddle on biscuits of dried oats, their eyes scanning the land ahead as the grayness of dawn lifted. The cloudless blue sky which brightened above was welcome after the drab featureless landscape of the marshes, the coarse grass underfoot short enough not to harbor any hidden threats, and for a while their progress was speedier than it had been the day before. The land was continually rising, though, and slowly the grass became more sparse, gradually gave way to a rockier terrain. Two miles on, and still rising, the horses began to skid on the uneven ground and they felt it best to dismount, felt safer leading the creatures by their bridles. But for the clatter of hooves on stone there was silence all around, not the slightest sound of any other life, and they too kept their silence, as if taking comfort from the belief that where there was no sound there was no threat.

Eventually the way began to level out, and then to descend gradually in a series of gentle undulations, still rocky but soon offering here and there a scattered clump of grass. Cresting a rise, the land then dipped more steeply, showing some distance ahead the tundra encroaching once again, breaking up the rocky landscape to offer more manageable paths and trails.

“Which way now?” Leo wondered, when they were able to mount their horses once again, looking at the splinter of trails which faced them.

“It’s past midday, the sun will be moving to the west,” Griff assumed. “So if we keep it on our left we should be heading south.”

“Lead on then, pathfinder,” said Leo, permitting himself a wry grin, feeling more comfortable now that he was back in the saddle again.

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Griff dug his heels into his horse's flanks to spur it on, steering it on a meandering route between the outcrops of rock which grew larger as they grew scarcer. At no point on the winding trail now could they see more than twenty yards ahead, then less than that as the way grew more tortuous, steep, descending into a narrow twisting ravine. The air grew chilly as the sun dipped from view, a cold blue shadow filled the ravine.

"Must lead somewhere, looks like it does," said Griff optimistically, glanced over his shoulder to Leo for agreement and saw his friend's look of wide-eyed horror. "What...?"

"What...? What is that?"

The horse stopped abruptly as Griff spun in his saddle, almost throwing him.

A darker shadow had formed in the cold blue light of the ravine, could be seen scrabbling for purchase on the rocky surface as it tried to reach two men who were fortunately out of reach for the moment, one who was raining down a hail of boulders which bounced ineffectually from its shoulders, the other who was piercing it with bolt after bolt from a crossbow, but again with no apparent effect.

Hearing the skittering of their frightened horses the creature turned, decided that here was easier prey and stepped forward slowly, a little clumsily, to show itself to them. It had some of the aspect of a man, stood erect on two legs, had arms tensed at its side, but each muscle, each tendon was so clearly defined that it was as if the creature was only half a man, incomplete, unfinished. If the God who had created this thing had had any compassion then he would at least have clothed it, have covered it with skin or fur. And given it some semblance of a face instead of the bug-like protuberance atop the shoulders which swayed slowly from side to side, emitting a soft sniffing sound. The creature took a single pace forward, feet like talons digging into the ground, and in that instant Griff felt a blast of fear from

behind him, a bolt of anger which made the air crackle against his cheek and he saw the creature stumble a couple of steps back.

“Shit!” Leo swore, for in his impulse to defend himself he had pictured the creature on its back, incapacitated, if not dead.

Even as Griff understood what had happened the creature had darted forward, snarling angrily, and swung out an arm, razor-sharp nails drawing blood from his horse’s breast. It reared, threw him to the ground, tried to bring down its forelegs in retaliation, but even before it could connect the hands were flashing again, once, twice, three times in quick succession, such a blur of movement that it was a moment before they realized that the poor beast was lying on its flank, its belly opened along its full length, spilling out its steaming entrails.

Leo’s mind burst with anger again, but to little effect, stunning the creature but achieving little more. The two men who had been its first prey had now clambered down the side of the ravine and were continuing their assault on it from the rear. But from a safer distance, and their efforts seemed no more than an irritation, for the creature continued its advance unhindered.

“Come on, Griff! Help!” said Leo, grabbing his friend by the collar, tugging him to his feet, drawing his sword and flashing it before them. “Imagination! Anger! No hesitation!”

Side by side with Leo, Griff swung his own sword and pictured their assailant as it might pose the least threat, saw the blade connect from an improbable distance as an arm first raised and was then suddenly ripped from the shoulder in a tearing of muscle and sinew. The dismembered limb fell to the ground beneath his gaze, twitching, dripping blood, and even as it fell the second arm reached out, was inches from their faces when a flash of steel tore it from its socket. But still, unbalanced though the creature was by the loss of its limbs, it came on, mouth snapping, first one foot kicking, clawing the air, and then the other. Under the dual blaze of their fear, their anger, their flashing blades and

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their hatred, it was broken like a wishbone, like a brittle twig, with its legs gone it fell on its back, eyes gazing dully, mouth working slowly.

Coming at a run, the two others vented their anger on what remained of the creature, pounded its torso with boulders, kicked out at the scattered limbs, spitting curses which were as much of relief as of rage. Leo shook with emotion, too, his whole being sparked with the power of the Afflatus, shaking the limbless torso like a doll, making the earth quake and crack all around it, until Griff shook him to his senses.

“Come on, calm down, it’s dead,” he said.

“Dead,” one of the strangers repeated, his chest heaving with the effort it took to compose himself. He turned to Griff, said, “You acquitted yourselves well in tackling that creature.”

“You did,” the other agreed. “I was beginning to doubt that there was any way to kill that monster. We owe you a debt of gratitude,” he smiled, and extended a hand. “I am Mattathias, and this is my friend Phicol.”

Griff took the hand briefly. “If it is not discourteous, I think we could save the introductions until later. I’d like to get out of here in case there are any more of those things about.”

“I doubt there could be two creatures like that, but yes,” said Mattathias, turning. “Our horses are at the mouth of the ravine.”

“Let’s get,” Leo agreed, heaving himself onto their sole remaining mount, giving Griff a hand to climb up behind him, and as the nervous horse was spurred past what remained of the creature, on down the ravine, Leo glanced back to see an arm still twitching, horned fingers curling.

Beseeking?

Threatening?

In the last throes of death, he prayed.

* * *

“What is wrong with you, boy?” Mistress Pebble demanded,

having twisted Goomer's ear fiercely and noted that he neither flinched nor blasted her with one of his colorful street urchin's curses. All morning he had mooched about the kitchen, not avoiding her as he usually did but seemingly oblivious to her presence. She gave him a slap to the back of the head, but not hard, using the open palm rather than a fist of knuckles, asked, "What is it? Are you sickening for something?"

"I am..." He hesitated, to search his vocabulary for the right word, scratching his head to demonstrate how difficult it was. "I am in something of a quandary," he said, offering the weakest of smiles, as if the choice of word pleased him.

"A quan-dare-ree, eh? Well there's a sophisticated state of affairs for a scruff such as you to be in. The company of cultivated people must be rubbing off on you, for you to come out with such a word. And what is it, young Goomer, that has you in this quan-dare-ree?"

He looked up at her bashfully and she noticed how long his eyelashes were, how large his eyes, brown and beseeching like those of a young foal. There was no enjoyment in persecuting him in his present mood, if neither her blows nor her cutting words had any effect on him, so she sat at the table facing him, wiped her hands on her apron and placed them palms down before her as a clairvoyant might.

"Come on, boy," she insisted, not quite with tenderness but with a little more patience than usual. "Out with it. What ails you?"

"For the first time since my mother died, Mistress Pebble, for the first time in many a year, I feel the need for someone to confide in." He smiled shyly, lowered his eyes, brushed a finger idly through the dusting of flour which had settled on the table following Mistress Pebble's baking and confectioning. "There, I have said it," he acknowledged. "The cocksure Goomer, with nous beyond his years, with all the craft and guile of a street

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urchin, he has need of advice.”

“And you would turn to me?” said Mistress Pebble in surprise.

“I can think of no one else,” he said, his eyes brimming, and as he knuckled them dry the vinegar he had dipped a finger in made them sting all the more, red-rimmed and doleful. “Oh, I know you do not like me, Mistress Pebble, and I have not always afforded you the respect you deserve. But I do respect your sagacity.” He smiled brightly, as if at a fond memory, caught her eye briefly for a moment before continuing. “I once heard a man refer to a woman as a ‘sage-femme’. It signified some medical station, he suggested that she was the one he depended upon to deliver him from whatever ailed him. You, Mistress Pebble, I believe to be such a ‘sage-femme’.”

“Well, the phrase has other connotations in other cultures, I know, but if I understand you correctly...” She took a deep breath, inflating her breasts, then reached quickly across the table and grasped him by the wrists, dragging him around and towards her, towards the flour-dusted swell of her bosom. “Unburden yourself to me, young Goomer,” she said, clutching him to her. “If that is what is needed, then feel free to make use of me.”

Her bosom had a fragrance of freshly-baked bread, the air about it was thick and suffocating like the heat rising from an oven and he tasted flour and cinnamon as he licked his parched lips.

“I have been raped,” he said, speaking into her breasts, and she thrust his face from her, looking at him first aghast, and then with a whimsical smile, as if to wonder where was the trauma in that. “I have been abused,” he continued solemnly, and forced a tear to fall. “Used as the First Minister uses me, yes, but without the love, and so it is abuse. They hurt me, Mistress Pebble, where First Minister van Vogt only pleases. Even when he spansks me,

or pinches me, still he pleases me, and I live only to give him pleasure in return.” He sobbed, sniffed, had the artistry to let a dribble of snot pop from a nostril. “I love him, Mistress Pebble, not as much as you do, or Master Clod, but I love him as best I can and my worry is that he will reject me when he learns how I have been soiled.”

“Oh! My poor little urchin!” Mistress Pebble exclaimed, wiped his nose with her apron and rubbed his cheeks vigorously between her palms, as if she was back at her baking, kneading dough into a malleable consistency. “Then he shall not learn of it,” she promised.

“But there is more,” he said sadly.

“More?” she asked, wondering at the suffering one motherless boy could be subjected to.

He nodded. “More. As these men took their turns abusing me I heard them talking, through my pain and shame heard things which the First Minister should know, must know.”

“Then tell me, boy, and we will decide what to do for the best.”

He leaned slightly forward, so that she was persuaded to draw him to her matronly bosom once again, said, “The men were Lord Lovecraft’s, they spoke of his plans, he is not being honest with the First Minister in his reasons for ending their feud.....”

When Goomer had finished his tale, truths and untruths lost in the vast chasm of her cleavage, Mistress Pebble took him to the cot which was his when his presence was not required in the First Minister’s bed and there applied a stinging poultice to his behind, to draw out any poisons and demon seeds. Then, seeing him comfortable and settled, she said that she would go directly to the First Minister, to pass on this information herself.

“Please, Mistress Pebble...” Goomer said.

“I will say nothing of how the information came to me,” she

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promised him. “He will believe me, though, he will trust in me, and one day he will thank you for the love you have shown to him.”

Chapter 10

“But is it not what you wanted, my Lord, that the power the Hashishim brought with her should be given free rein so that you might mobilize your forces?” Madame le Roy reasoned, witnessing Lord Lovecraft’s agitation as he busied himself about the stables, checking on tack, saddles, the armor his mount might need, ill-humouredly flinging aside items which did not match up to his scrutiny. “Is this not the very end towards which you have been plotting, that you might lift the boredom which is the bane of your life and find fulfillment in battle once again?”

“Of course it is what I want,” said Lord Lovecraft, snapping taut a bridle with such force that the crack of leather startled the grooms. He tossed it in their direction, telling them that it lacked suppleness, that it needed to be oiled. “It needs to give, not break, when my horse spins in battle I would like my butt to remain firmly fixed to its back.” Aware of Madame le Roy’s patient attention to his mood, he then turned to her. “What worries me, Madame, is why van Vogt should want it, too. Why should he be so obliging, when he has previously expended every effort in denying me? Why is he so suddenly in favor of me mobilizing my forces, to such an extent that he actually requests it? Not simply agrees to my request, you mark, but actually pre-empted it.”

She took him by the arm, linking hers through his and nodding to the grooms to continue about their tasks as she drew him gently from the stables. Crossing the courtyard, passing through a low stone arch into the enclosed garden, she said, “Van Vogt perceives a threat to Golgonooza and it is his duty as First Minister to defend the city.”

“But there is no threat,” Lord Lovecraft complained, not easy with her arm entwining his and straining against it as an unbroken horse would against the bridle. “Not as yet. The two

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with the power over the Afflatus have left Golgonooza, passed beyond the reach of any of us.”

“That is what you suggested to van Vogt, my Lord, as an excuse to cease your feud,” Madame le Roy acknowledged, holding him close to her as they walked through the garden, his arm snug against her breast, walking at the leisurely pace which was needed to calm him. “But what if he knows that you intend to intercept them?” she suggested, her grip on his arm becoming imperceptibly firmer. “What if he knows that you have already dispatched Mattathias and Phicol with that very purpose in mind? He might then think it propitious to have you gone from the city also. With the Malterre Marshes separating him from your army he would feel free to plot his own intrigues.”

“But how?” Lord Lovecraft wondered, his step forced to match hers, slowing his pace and muting his temper, actually pausing in mid stride at one point to take in the fragrance of an aromatic bush, one of his wife’s own cultivations. “If what you say is true, it would account for his latest ploy, but how can it be true? How could he have learned about my plans without there being a spy in my camp?”

“There is a spy in your camp,” Madame le Roy reminded him gently, cautiously, her voice almost a whisper as she named him. “The young whelp, Goomer.”

“But he is my spy!” Lord Lovecraft insisted, coming to a halt, standing still and rigid like a petulant child exclaiming over his possessions. “My spy!”

“Who you never trusted.”

“Never trusted, no, but threatened well enough. I filled him with fear sufficient to ensure his loyalty.”

Madame le Roy smiled sufferingly, her hand caressing his shoulder, stroking the bicep which in his temper was made to feel as full and firm as it would in combat. “You have been too long in the company of warriors whose loyalty to you is unquestioning,

my Lord. If you had a few more mercenaries in your troop you would appreciate what a marketable commodity loyalty can be. A greed for gold can overcome most fears. Perhaps van Vogt outbid you for the boy's services."

His shoulders slumped a little, with a brief sigh his body seemed to relax, and she took the opportunity to urge him gently on, drawing him with her across the garden, around the pond at its centre, on to the raised piazza to sit in the shade of the house. A snap of her fingers brought a servant with wine, the staff of Lovecraft's household already as responsive to her as they had been to Lady Haggitha.

"This is why I want the warrior's life again," Lord Lovecraft now said wearily, accepting the wine she poured for him, sipping it sullenly. "It is a straightforward life. There are strategies and subterfuges, yes, tactics and feints, cut and thrust and parry." He frowned, as if even such ploys were distasteful. "But it is a world I am familiar with, I know who my enemy is and how best to defeat him."

"Then leave any deceit to me, my Lord," Madame le Roy urged softly, as if offering out of kindness to take on a labor she would otherwise have preferred to forego. "Go and defend Golgonooza as you are bidden, cover yourself in the glory you deserve. The politics of the city will be safe in my hands. Trust me."

He turned to her, smiling at her consideration even as he said, "As I trusted Goomer?"

"I would expect nothing more, my Lord," she countered, returning his smile.

"As wily a response as I would suppose of you," he congratulated her. "So you would see to the politics of the city?"

"With my Daughters of Albion I will see to it that van Vogt is kept distracted," she promised. "He might think that with you gone from the city he will have a free hand, that the way will be

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made easy for him to manipulate Parliament, but we will be able to put enough inconveniences in his way that it will be as if you had never left. And the beauty of it all is that with you absent from the city, at his command, he will no longer be able to direct the blame at you. His failings will be seen to be his own, he will have no scapegoat, he will have no excuses to offer but his own incompetence and inability to govern.”

Lord Lovecraft regarded her face, with its expression of resolve, and then the garden as it was laid out before them, too ordered a landscape, too clipped and planned and artificial. Closing his eyes for a moment he could picture the open plains of Eidolon, infantry advancing in file upon file, hussars and cavalry swarming at speed; he could hear the rumble of war machines and the clash of steel, hear the cries of an enemy in agony and smell the bitter-sweet tang of their blood on the air. Yes, that was where he wanted to be, where he needed to be, his spirit free rather than dulled by the soporific scents of his wife’s perfumed garden.

“You will do this for me?”

“I will do this for you,” Madame le Roy vowed, and for the first time since receiving van Vogt’s commission Lord Lovecraft laughed, took Madame le Roy’s face in his hands to turn it to him and kiss her deeply.

“It was not a question, my dear, but a command,” he told her. “You will do this for me. You must not expect the same free hand that van Vogt is hoping for in my absence, however. You will conduct yourself according to my instructions.”

“Which are?” she asked, doubtfully.

“Not too confining,” he promised her. “The deceptions you delight in can be of your own devising, since such things are, in truth, more suited to your nature than to mine. All I ask is that I have my revenge on the disloyal Goomer...”

“Yes!” she agreed with enthusiasm.

“...and that any news from Mattathias be forwarded to me immediately. If he and Phicol should return here with the two artists then I must be told without delay.” His hands still against her face increased their pressure slightly, so that she could not turn from his scrutiny. “You will not, Madame, you will not dream of trying to use their power to your own advantage, as my conniving wife did. Understood?”

“Understood,” she tried to nod, but found herself unable to. “I would not know how to take advantage of their power, in any case.” Her gaze never flinching from his, her eyes continuing to meet his to promise her sincerity, she then said, “And while we speak of your wife, Lord Lovecraft... what if she should return in your absence, find me established in your house?”

“Then kill her,” said Lord Lovecraft quickly, releasing his hold. “Kill her, but not Basilides. He can be kept safe until my return, so that he can be made to realize that my methods of persuading his divinations from him can be just as effective as hers.”

“It will be done as you say, my Lord,” Madame le Roy assured him, and taking him by the hand she led him into the house. “And in the event of there being occasions when there is nothing else to occupy me,” she added, looking around as they walked the halls to his bedchamber, “I believe I will spend those moments having this place redecorated.”

With a loud roar of delight, happier now with his prospects, Lord Lovecraft slapped her hard on the buttocks and drove her along the corridor.

* * *

Anna sat behind Auberjonois, Selina behind Siddig, the girls riding pillion on the warriors’ strange mounts. The creatures were the size of horses but as sleek as greyhounds, narrow hindquarters swelling into a barrel of a chest, their slim snouts so streamlined that they suggested speed even when at rest, thin

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legs so brittle-looking that Anna had taken some convincing that they would not fold and snap under the combined weights of two riders. Auberjonois assured her that they had limbs of steel, the strength of oxen.

He had been amused by Selina's reaction to the offer of help in their quest, Siddig at first stunned, then impressed. When he had recovered himself, soothed the bruises to his body and his pride, he had regarded her with something like awe, the look in his eyes that of a young man infatuated with an older woman.

"You can do this too? You have this power?" he asked Anna, massaging his shoulder, and she simply smiled, as if to challenge him. "Very well, you don't need our help," he understood, with a wry grin. "You are well able to defend yourselves and I regret ever having doubted that. You don't need our protection, but you might well find our guidance useful."

Auberjonois, though surprised by his partner's composed acceptance of the assault he had suffered, could only concur. "We have a similar aim in mind," he reasoned, "and it seems to me that you might help us in our task. As to what we might offer in return, well, we know this land, we have traveled its length and breadth and have knowledge of its people and its ways. And of any creatures you might encounter on your way." He paused a moment before asking, "Have you met any yet, during your time in the kingdom? Any that have been unfamiliar to you?"

With a shudder Selina recalled the bird which had attacked them in the forest, described it.

"Krike?" said Siddig to Auberjonois.

"Krike," Auberjonois agreed, told the girls, "There are many more such creatures in these lands, some stranger, some even more dangerous. We know the nature, the threat and the weakness of most."

So it was, after conferring in private, that Anna and Selina agreed to share their journey with the two warriors, found

themselves riding one behind each on their disconcertingly fragile mounts.

Anna still clung fast to Auberjonois, two hours into their journey she could still not relax enough to sit comfortably; her arms were wrapped tightly around him, hands clasped to the stiff unyielding leather of his breastplate.

“Tell me, Auberjonois, have you ever been to the Garden of Earthly Delights before?” she asked.

“Some weeks ago,” he answered, half turning so that his words would not be snatched by the breeze. “A hell of a place. Fire, brimstone, pain and punishment. Happy only for the Hashishim. We met none of them, did not stay long, left once we learned that Tulla was not there.”

“And these Hashishim. Who are they? What are they?”

“Assassins. Hashish eaters. An indeterminate number but we know of four. The Grand Odalisque is the Matriarch, the Ancient of Days is the Godfather, also known as Urizen. Tulla is the whelp. Others may exist, yet more may be about to exist, nothing is ever certain with the Hashishim.”

Anna, understanding how useful the guidance of these warriors could be, hugged Auberjonois yet more closely as his steed gave a whinny and a lurch, its delicate hooves seeking purchase on an uneven patch of ground.

“Sorry,” she said, excusing the embrace. And then, not consciously knowing why: “I have a boyfriend.”

“I understand,” he responded, his smile hidden from her. “And worry not how close your body comes to mine. I am a mature warrior, beyond matters of jealousy or covetousness. You may approve, you may not, but it might set your mind to rest if I tell you that when my lust needs slaking then I pay a whore to do it.”

Anna neither criticized nor condoned, but asked, “And what of your friend Siddig?”

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Auberjonois laughed, never even bothering to cast a glance aside, to where the second beast followed them, a pace or two behind. He knew that his younger partner was enjoying the nervous embrace of the young woman who clung to him, was relishing the warmth of her body and the scent of her perfume, all the more so because it had cost him no coins and demanded no foreplay.

“Siddig is young and, I think, enamored of your companion. Young, but also honorable. He will do nothing that your friend does not encourage.”

Anna cast a glance over her shoulder, to see if there were signs that any such encouragement might be forthcoming. She saw none, but this signified nothing, for Selina was secretive about her emotions. Her one college romance had simmered quietly for some months before she became in any way demonstrative of her affection, then raged so fiercely that it seemed inevitable that it would burn itself out within weeks. Her work had been the excuse she gave, her ambition. But now, in this strange land where ambition was limited to survival, to escape? Her worry was that any response was understandable, no matter how out of character it might seem.

Ever since leaving Seventh Avenue they had been following the flow of the river, not always in its sight but never very far away, but Auberjonois had said that eventually they would have to ford it. Now was the time, he decided, as its bank came in sight once again.

“Is it safe?” Anna worried, recalling the unpredictability of its nature which had given it its name. “Can we be sure of reaching the other bank once we enter its waters?”

“It will be safe enough,” Auberjonois assured her, as he canted their horse down the final slope to the water’s edge. “The further south it goes, the closer to the sea, the less erratic it becomes. At this point it will present itself as little more than a

mirage, nothing worse. It will not be the contradiction of logic which it was when you first met it.”

Siddig drew up alongside them and Anna saw Selina, her hands on his shoulders, peer over at the water with the same trepidation she felt. The river was broader at this point, and lapped lazily at its edge as if it had become tidal, though Auberjonois told them that they were at least a couple of days ride from its mouth.

“It reaches the sea at Dos Aguas,” he said, “just at the point where it joins with the River Estraval. If we travel too far south it becomes too wide to ford, if we had attempted to cross it too far to the north we would have had to contend with its discontinuity. Here is the most suitable point.”

“Are there no bridges?” Selina asked, looking upstream and downstream and seeing that the river’s course seemed true enough, but still a little doubtful about entering its waters.

“A day to the south, perhaps,” Siddig answered. “As the river draws nearer to the coast there are bridges serving the villages thereabouts, then others at intervals on the way to Dos Aguas, where you can barely see the river for the bridges that span it. Auberjonois and I favor crossing here, though, if we are to make speed to the Garden of Earthly Delights.”

“It will not be hazardous, a little wet, that is all,” Auberjonois promised, and began to walk his horse into the water. “Hold tight.”

The river bed fell gradually, steadily, ten meters from the shore it lapped against the horses’ bellies, another ten meters on and it had crept to Anna’s knees. She gave a gasp of alarm, then, as the horse lurched, lifted its feet and surged forward, kicking out for midstream.

“Okay?” asked Auberjonois, over his shoulder.

“Fine,” she answered back, clinging on tightly to him, the glances she chanced to left and right showing the river as a

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shimmering ribbon which reflected the light, much like the mirage he had described. Oddly enough she felt happier to be crossing it, rather than traveling its length, for some distance upstream it seemed to shimmer into nothing. A trick of the light, perhaps, or just as probably yet another example of its discontinuity.

In the middle of the river the current caught them, she could sense the beast beneath her fighting against its pull but still they were carried a way downstream, and by the time they had struggled free of it to find purchase on the bed of the far bank they had been carried perhaps a mile off course. Reaching dry land they dismounted, walked the horses a distance from the river and tethered them to trees to let them rest.

“That was not too difficult, was it?” Auberjonois smiled, sitting on the grass and removing his boots to empty them of water.

No one answered, but followed his move, removing boots and emptying, taking off stockings and wringing them out, turning the ground to mud with the river they had brought with them. Shamelessly Selina removed her trousers and wrung these out, hanging them on a branch which caught the sun. Siddig gawped as Anna followed suit, Auberjonois laughed and peeled off his own sodden britches.

“Siddig?” he asked. “Are you not uncomfortable?”

He was, in more ways than one, but shook his head and grunted, “Barely damp.”

Selina could not understand the laughter which passed between Anna and Auberjonois.

They rested for an hour or two, while the fiercest of the midday sun baked their clothes dry, took a drink and something to eat, then dressed and remounted.

“And now,” said Auberjonois, with a slap of the reins, “we do the same thing all over again.”

“Eh?” asked Anna, tugging on his shoulder.

“I told you,” he reminded her, “on reaching the coast the River of Discontinuity joins with the Estraval. Where we are at present they are perhaps a six hour ride apart. We will reach it by nightfall.”

“But cross in daylight?” Anna hoped.

“In daylight,” he agreed. “Do not worry, Anna. The Estraval is a much gentler river, we will have no problems.”

* * *

As Jack grew more adept in the mastery of his art so he gained the confidence, was given the freedom, to venture from Tulla's chambers. Her trust in her pet pupil, her pleasure with his progress, allowed him the liberty of the Castle in the Pyrenees, of the streets within the city walls, even of the Garden beyond where he was now able to take delight in the pain and torture he witnessed there. His greatest pleasure was to take a few pipes of the weed which was freely available in the cafes and taverns which surrounded the Castle, or a whiff of the hallucinogenic ether which was sold, never minding the expense for he was able to conjure coins at will from the basest elements. In a corner he would sit, getting quietly stoned, listening with amusement to the boasts of the Dark Guards around him, or of the ruffians, mercenaries and vandals who found their way into the city. Finally smashed enough, his imagination racing, he would then mock their arrogance, with a quiet smile at first, then with spoken words of outright disdain, provoking people until they had no alternative but to challenge him. He had killed six in one night, broken the limbs of many more, disguising his alien art with what his victims took to be an accomplished fighting skill, equally capable with sword or fist or whatever came to hand, a stool or bottle or spittoon.

It was when his kills neared a score that Tulla suggested he curb his aggression, said, “Not the Dark Guards. They are our

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visible defense. We need them.”

“I can make more,” he argued, for he had already pictured a squad of more formidable men and seen them fill the main courtyard of the Castle.

As Tulla pointed out, though, his ability was not yet strong enough to make his imaginings effective. “So please,” she insisted. “Not the Dark Guards. If you need to take your pleasure in this way then do it out in the Garden, where lives matter less.”

The sad creatures he found out there offered little sport, though, he could enjoy their torture and compound it to an infinite degree but there was no satisfaction in any challenge they presented. His only exercise, then, was to join fledgling Guards in the gymnasium, to train with them in their choice of weapons, whatever they felt best able to better him with, halberd or pike, staff or mace or sword. He would toy with them to give them confidence, but they never could defeat him, no matter the numbers they massed against him.

“You grow stronger by the day,” Tulla said, having witnessed him bruise and bleed a dozen of the most promising cadets. “They may ache tonight but one day they will thank you for the exercise you gave them.”

“I just wish that I could break their skulls rather than simply dent their egos,” said Jack, dissatisfied with the manner in which he had to moderate his talent.

“Soon, Jack, soon,” Tulla placated him, her hand on his arm to still his agitation as she led him from the gymnasium, along a corridor hung with weapons and arms and diagrams of figures in fighting postures. “It will not be long before your craft is fierce enough to turn against the Dilettanti of the Prado, the Schools of Golgonooza, even Los himself.”

“And Anna?” he wondered.

“The Ghost of a Flea will have her by now. Bound, tethered, yours to do with as you wish. As I speak he is bringing her to

you.”

“As you lie he is not!” a voice echoed along the corridor behind them, and they turned to see the Grand Odalisque striding towards them, her skirt bristling about her as if to give expression to her rage. “The Ghost of a Flea is bringing back no trophies for it has returned as no more than that, a mere Ghost!”

“What?”

“Bleached and bled and broken, as insubstantial as an empty husk,” the Grand Odalisque said, and lunged at Tulla, her glare so fierce that it sent the younger Hashishim staggering back. “You gave him the scent and he tracked down the two male artists, who were strong enough to defeat him.”

“I gave him Jack to scent,” said Tulla, cowering in a heap on the floor.

“And so he searched out creatures of like sex. Did you not suspect he would, you fool? And you...!” the Grand Odalisque spat, now turning to Jack, her skirt creeping out to enfold him, drawing him to her, pulling him to his knees. “You will now apply yourself to mastering your skill rather than playing with my Dark Guards. I want creatures such as you had never before envisaged, powers with which to snuff out these upstart friends of yours. And then,” she smiled, the sleeves of her gown caressing his cheeks, “you might just enjoy your Grand Odalisque’s gratitude.”

Her steps sounded down the tiled corridor, she passed through a door and only then was Tulla able to rise. She snatched Jack by the wrist and dragged him to his feet, pulled him along after her, directly to her chambers.

“Not...?”

“Your tuition continues,” she said without compassion. “Play is over. We will persevere until your head bursts and your mind warps, until we have results to satisfy the Odalisque.”

A day passed, and longer he felt, his head throbbed with each beat of his heart as Tulla pressed her hands against his

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temples in a grip as fierce as a vice. His imagination was stretched, his mind felt bruised as he was persuaded to envisage such creatures as would at one time have been beyond his comprehension.

“I’ve smoked, drank, popped pills and dropped acid,” he said, weary enough to sleep if only Tulla would permit him. “None of it ever prepared me for this, though.”

He saw horned, scaled, armed creatures flickering into life before him, saw them gain substance so that even he, with all the power of the creator, felt feared of them.

“But you have the capacity,” Tulla encouraged him. “I sensed it the moment I met you. Anger, hatred, you have everything we need.”

The Grand Odalisque came to Tulla’s chambers on the second day after her tirade, informed them that the Ghost of a Flea had revived, had taken once more a solid form. Then she regarded Jack, slumped against the bed, held in Tulla’s embrace, and was obviously pleased with the fatigue she saw in his features.

“He is progressing?” she assumed.

“Progressing,” Tulla agreed.

“So will it be the Ghost of a Flea that I return to these people or can your pet offer something better?”

“Something better, I think,” Tulla smirked, with the smugness of a teacher who believes she has unearthed a prodigy.

“Then show me,” the Grand Odalisque demanded.

“Demonstrate,” Tulla commanded Jack, and though his skull threatened to split with the pain he somehow summoned the required effort.

A thick shadow filled the room, threatening to crowd them out, a dark regiment rather than a gathering of individuals, a hulking mass of black and grey and evil. The Grand Odalisque gave a slight nod of the head, as if approving of the image, but

then cocked an eyebrow to suggest that she had doubts about its effectiveness.

A sear of pain torched Jack's brain as Tulla nudged him, prompting him, and the legion of shades drew weapons, took stances, advanced on the matriarch of the Hashishim. She was able to repel their assault, but was impressed by the effort required of her.

"He can sustain this?" she asked, as the shadows paled into the distance.

"He can," Tulla was certain.

"Then you will prepare his legions for the morning. After that, send him to me. The Grand Odalisque always keeps her promises." She then gave an evil chuckle as she turned to leave, saying, "And I think I might persuade him to even better things."

Throughout that night Jack was made to work, conjuring creatures who would fill the room and then be dispatched below to the courtyard, there to await their orders. In their dozens they appeared and in their dozens they left, to form rank and file below.

"Enough?" he finally hoped, close to exhaustion.

"Enough," Tulla agreed, mercifully releasing her hold on him, letting the pressure ease from his skull. "And you know their target?"

Jack pictured Griff, the object of his hatred, some paces behind saw Leo, the coward that he had always been. He nodded, said, "Send them!"

"Send them!" Tulla echoed, peering out of the window to see the newly created legion march off into the early morning gloom. "And now you must go to the Grand Odalisque," she told him, with no hint of loss or jealousy. "I am sure she will be as grateful as she promised."

* * *

Their progress was in no way diminished by Leo's mount now

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having to bear two riders, but continued at the same steady plodding pace. Mud, marsh, grass or gravel, the ground had no effect on its speed and they had the opportunity to take in the country at leisure, to ruminate and anticipate as they traveled.

With Griff at the reins, Leo took out a flask and unstopped it, drank from it before passing it over Griff's shoulder. "What do you think of our two fellow travelers?" he asked, shifting uncomfortably, his legs splayed wide by the horse's broad hindquarters.

Griff drank from the flask, silent for the moment, his gaze fixed forward. Their two companions had gone ahead of them, their horses were of a slimmer swifter breed and from time to time they would canter into the distance, out of sight, return later at a trot. Scouting the way ahead, they maintained.

"I don't know," Griff finally said, returning the flask. "It's a comfort to have some company, someone who knows the land, I suppose."

"But?"

"They make me uneasy," he admitted with a frown.

"Tell me about it," said Leo. "Let's see if we agree."

Without further prompting, as if the thought had always been with him, Griff wondered aloud, "Why were their horses tethered beyond the ravine? Why had they entered it on foot? It's as if perhaps they knew what waited there?"

"And would willingly allow themselves to be trapped by such a creature?" Leo asked doubtfully, for anyone aware of such a beast as they had encountered would surely go out of their way to avoid it. "Or perhaps it could be that they intended to wait themselves, for something or someone they expected to pass that way. An ambush," he stated flatly.

Griff showed no surprise at the suggestion, but nor was he yet ready to fully accept it. "It sounds like an outlandish notion. Why us?"

“We’re on our way to get Jack from the Hashishim, to return him and us to our own world. The School Master wants this, and others he mentioned. So perhaps there are yet others who are of a contrary mind. It’s the way of the world, any world, you know that as well as I do. What one person wants, the next man opposes. There’ll be reasons, there always are, but it isn’t necessary to understand them, simply to be aware of the opposition.”

“The ambush, if that’s what it was, could well have been nothing more suspect than two robbers chancing their luck. It’s an acceptable enough motive.”

Leo nodded his agreement as he saw two trails of dust come over a crest and travel towards them. “Acceptable enough, yes, but for the moment I think we’d be wise to keep open minds. Whatever the motive, whatever the intent, I don’t think we should trust these two men.”

The dust settled around them as first Mattathias and then Phicol reined their horses to a halt, wheeled them around to flank Griff and Leo. Phicol’s crossbow was hanging from his neck, resting in his lap, and a number of bolts protruded from a pocket of his jerkin.

“The way ahead is clear, the going easy,” Mattathias told them, matching his horse to their pace. “Also, Phicol killed a small boar some way ahead, it is already skinned and gutted and is basting. An hour’s journey and there will be food ready for us.”

“Good,” said Leo, shifting again to try to make himself comfortable, his weariness with the journey growing by the mile. “I’ll look forward to a rest as much as a hot meal.”

“You have traveled far?” asked Mattathias conversationally, his expression showing some sympathy for his discomfort.

“We have a few days journey behind us,” Leo answered vaguely, mindful of his own caution that they should not be too trusting in these two strangers.

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“Golgonooza would be a couple of days distant, traveling at your speed,” Mattathias remarked, and Griff cast him a questioning glance, for no mention had been made of any point of departure. Catching the look, understanding it, Mattathias smiled. “Traveling in a direct line, across the Malterre Marshes, Golgonooza is the first city of any note.”

“And we traveled across the Malterre Marshes?”

“Why else would you have such a lumbering mount?” Mattathias continued to smile with an annoying omniscience. “Although you would have been as well to have found speedier mounts such as ours. You could have circled the marshes and been leagues ahead by now. Perhaps already at the end of your journey?” he prompted, his eyebrow lifting to pose the question which Griff declined to answer. He laughed, then, said, “You might be warriors, to judge by the skill with which you vanquished the creature in the ravine, but you are not seasoned travelers, that much is also evident. At a guess I would say that somewhere there is a duplicitous horse-dealer rubbing his hands with delight at having sold two nags which are suited to nothing better than pulling a plough.”

Arnolfini, thought Griff, but would not allow his annoyance with the man to be seen, dismissing the matter by saying that such horses were all that were to be had, thus sewing the doubt that they could have begun their journey in Golgonooza.

“But not to worry,” Mattathias said. “A half day’s journey tomorrow and you can find yourselves better mounts. By noon we will reach the first of the two rivers where the route divides. South, following their flow, will take you to Dos Aguas on the coast. Ford the first, continuing east, and there is Orasula.”

“There are rare horses to be found in Orasula,” Phicol interjected.

“And rarer people,” Mattathias added, with a secretive smile to his partner. “Which route will you take?” he asked Griff.

“We’ll see how the land lies when we get there,” Griff answered. “We have no fixed destination in mind. Our way can suit our mood.”

They continued in a silence which was uneasy, as if each was thinking of how to outwit the other, as if each was conscious of the other’s secrecy. As evening drew close they saw a plume of smoke rising from woods a way off to their left, silver-grey in the twilight, climbing vertically in the still air. Entering the woods, the gloaming deepening around them, a lick of flames then appeared between the trees, from a clearing ahead, and with it there finally came the fragrance of roasting meat.

“Dinner is served,” Mattathias announced, trotting the last few yards into the clearing and dismounting, drawing out a knife as he went directly to the roasting boar. By the time the others had climbed down from their mounts he had already hacked off slices and was piling them on the battered tin plate he had taken from his saddle-bag. “Drink?” he asked Griff and Leo. “I hope that whichever cheat provisioned you thought to supply you with something stronger than tap water.”

Their one remaining water skin had been lost in the attack by the creature in the ravine, but there was still a second skin half full of wine, a number of smaller sacks, a flask or two of more potent drink, and once the variety of their contents had been sampled in sufficient quantity the taste became quite palatable, the effect quite welcome. Sitting on their haunches around the fire, then sprawling on bed rolls and blankets spread on the ground, they filled their bellies with the meat of the roast boar until they were bloated, let it soak in the drink they poured down after it. As the night darkened, so the fire dwindled and the carcass of the boar fell into its ashes, spitting burning embers at them, and they laughed as they kicked them away, stamping them out where they scorched their blankets. The satisfied appetites allowed the company to lower their defenses a little.

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“Tell me, Mattathias,” said Griff. “This place you spoke of, Orasula you called it, you said that there were rare horses to be found there?”

“Indeed,” Mattathias nodded, his head heavy. “Finer even than those of the central plains.”

“But also rarer people. What did you mean by that? What is so rare about the people of Orasula?”

Mattathias laughed, Phicol gave a loud belch as if he thought that this would be answer enough. “The people of Orasula have strange ways, too peculiar to themselves for the liking of some people,” said Mattathias, with a bow to Phicol’s pronounced dislike, which was echoed once again by a loud eructation. “They eat no meat or fish, which is one thing that meets with my friend’s disapproval. They respect all four-legged creatures, which perhaps accounts for the fineness of their horses, indeed for all their livestock.”

“A praiseworthy attitude, I suppose, if it reaps its rewards,” said Leo. “They can’t be damned for that. Some of my best friends have been vegetarians.”

“There would be more, then, to mark them as particular, peculiar, whatever?” Griff guessed.

Mattathias shrugged. “They have customs, habits, foibles. Only the old or ugly women are permitted to wear make-up, for example, or to coiff their hair in an elaborate fashion or wear jewellery. Consequently the majority of women take upon themselves an air of natural beauty.”

“And are they?” Leo hoped. “Beautiful?”

“Dogs!” Phicol spat.

“Some are,” Mattathias conceded. “But then most of these are spoken for, since it is a tradition in Orasula that most men marry before the age of thirty years. If a man is a bachelor after that age then he is obliged to surrender most of his civil and political rights. A man has to be the most dedicated of

misanthropes if he is to avoid the company of a woman in Orasula.”

“A peculiar place, then, rather than a perilous one?” Griff offered as a summary.

“An appropriate description,” Mattathias agreed. “Do you think you might take a peek at their strange lives?”

“Perhaps. And what of you and Phicol? Does your way lie in that direction also?”

“Hell no!” Mattathias exclaimed. “Phicol has too great a preference for painted women and red meat to agree to visit Orasula. No, I believe we will be heading south, towards Dos Aguas where the regime is less rigid, where life offers more variety.”

* * *

As Auberjonois promised, the Estraval presented no problems, although it was as broad as the River of Discontinuity the land around it was flatter and it flowed sedately enough to permit an easy crossing. On its far bank within minutes of the sun having risen, they did not pause to rest or to dry their clothes but struck off across the plain, towards a distant line of hills.

“I suspect Siddig is relieved at not having to witness your friend’s disrobing once again,” Auberjonois commented, watching the glee with which his young companion spurred his horse on.

“He is that shy, that easily embarrassed?”

“Shy? No. Nor is he easily embarrassed,” he said, and Anna felt the rattle of a chuckle shake his chest as her arms embraced him, “for he has witnessed some of the lewdest entertainments that Eidolon has to offer, and taken part in many. No, I think it is not so much that he is shy, as that he is smitten.”

“Please God he’s not,” Anna prayed.

“You would not approve?”

“It’s not a question of approval, Auberjonois, your

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companion seems like a pleasant enough young man.”

“For someone who has lived a life of violence?” he smiled back at her, and she frowned at the prejudice he was crediting her with.

“A warrior would be more faithful than most, I imagine, even mercenaries such as yourselves must have developed a sense of duty, of loyalty,” she said, adding acidly, “for all that it might first be bought by whoever pays for your services.” She gave him a dig in the ribs, to make her point, with a softer note of apology continued, “But no, it is not a question of Siddig’s honor. There is just no time to coax Selina through any romance. There is too much to do to permit any such distractions. Another time, another place, in other circumstances...”

“For the moment your concern is with getting to the Garden of Earthly Delights,” Auberjonois understood, “with freeing your friend from the clutches of the Hashishim and reuniting yourself with your own love. You miss him?”

“Not being sure that I will ever see him again, yes, I do, miss him like hell.”

“You will meet him again, I am sure of it.”

“But Eidolon seems such a big place.”

“And getting bigger all the time, but that is no hindrance when you have such as Auberjonois and Siddig to guide you on your way. The ultimate pathfinders, that is us. I could find a needle in a haystack, and Siddig, well...!” he laughed. “Siddig is more accomplished still. Blindfold he could pick out a courtesan in a convent.”

Anna joined in his laughter, squeezed his arm to thank him for his kindness and then slapped the horse’s haunch to speed it along, trusting in his certainty. Auberjonois permitted her, and the mount, a few moments of joy, galloping spiritedly a distance across the grassland before returning to a walk to conserve the beast’s energy. Crossing the last leagues of the plain he then

persuaded her to talk more cheerfully about Griff, of how they met and how their love had grown, interrupting from time to time to quiz her about aspects of her world which were alien to him, and so adept was he in his persuasions, so skilled in drawing memories from her that that they came to seem quite real, almost as satisfying in themselves as actually having Griff there beside her.

When she mentioned this he nodded, said, "You should never despair, you always have your memories and they can be as real as life itself, when you know how to evoke them. You have your whole life to relive, over and over again."

She brought her face close to his, asked, "And what of you, Auberjonois? What memories do you relive, over and over again?"

He turned his face slightly, his cheek touching hers, and she caught the wink of an eye as he said, "Secret, for the moment. It is you we are trying to cheer. I am quite content with life."

"Truthfully?"

"Truthfully."

Talk of truth prompted her to ask, "Auberjonois, do people believe in anything in this world of yours?"

"There are as many beliefs as there are people," he answered. "Where Vishnu reigns the people believe in him, where anarchy rules the people believe in that. I believe in my steel and my strength."

"Nothing more? I find that hard to credit. Is there no universal belief? I think you are a good man, Auberjonois, and that goodness must come from some source."

"I am not good, Anna, I have killed men for gold," he told her, a coldness in his voice as he stared ahead, refusing to meet her eye. "And as for universal beliefs, well, a belief has its root in truth, but there are no certain truths. All we can do is trust that things are as they are, which is not always easy in a world such as

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Eidolon.”

The land began to rise, trees encroached on the open plain, thickened like tonsures about the bald crowns of hills which broke the skyline, and a half hour into this altered landscape they caught up with Siddig and Selina. They were seated on the ground near a narrow stream, shoulder to shoulder, their backs against a fallen tree.

“What kept you?” asked Selina, looking up at their approach. There were skewered fishes baking over a fire, a flask of drink at their feet, she and Siddig seemed as content as children at a picnic.

“We thought it best not to tire the horse,” Anna replied, allowing Auberjonois to take her by the arm and swing her to the ground.

“It is always best to conserve a beast’s energy for when it is needed,” Auberjonois concurred, dismounting after her, offering a quick glance at Siddig, as if in rebuke, as if to remind. “Now that we have crossed the Tigris it would be prudent to stick together.”

“For fear of what?” Selina grinned, pressing down with a finger on the neck of the flask as Siddig poured out wine, to see that her cup was filled to the brim. “We saw deer a while back, didn’t we, Siddig? And birds so colorful they dazzled, beautiful, nothing at all like those mutations we met in that loathsome forest.” She took a sip of her wine, smacked her lips with satisfaction. “I have to say, Auberjonois, that this is a charming land you have brought us to.”

“Yet all the while we draw closer to the Garden of Earthly Delights...”

“Our goal,” Anna reminded her friend.

“...and there is nothing which is charming about that place,” Auberjonois cautioned.

He and Anna ate the fish which had been saved for them,

but took no more than a single cup of wine apiece, just enough to invigorate them, to revive them sufficiently to continue their journey. Auberjonois and Siddig consulted about the route they should take. They had last approached the Garden from its western border, and the nightmares they had witnessed, which they did not speak of, they thought might be too distressing for the girls to suffer. South, Siddig recalled, was also rumored to be a teeming playground for the Hashishim, and they finally decided on approaching from the north.

“There will be fewer defenses there?” Anna asked, as they rose, kicked out the fire, gathered together their things and remounted.

“The Hashishim have no need of defenses,” Auberjonois said, offering her his arm, lifting her easily back up onto the beast. “Anyone may enter the Garden of Earthly Delights at will.”

“So we just ride in?”

“We...” He faltered, as if to hint that the matter was not so cut-and-dried. “We ride in,” he stated, without emotion.

It was left to Siddig to give voice to his friend’s concern. “Anyone may enter the Garden of Earthly Delights, but not everyone may leave.”

No more was said of the matter as they set off, though there were questions Anna would pose she would rather remain in ignorance for the moment and she sat silently behind Auberjonois, her arms around his waist, her cheek resting against his broad back. When the journey began to grow tedious—hill, vale, wood, stream, repeated with such regularity that the landscape became no more real than theatrical scenery—she closed her eyes to the world around her, not sleeping, not dreaming, but letting her mind roam where it would. And, as inevitable as the sun sinking in the sky ahead, her thoughts were drawn to Griff.

Auberjonois had spoken of the power of memory and now

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she recalled an occasion with Griff, a clear spring day when they had decided to take the day off college. They took a bus-ride to a countryside much like the one she now traveled through, strolled hand in hand in solitude. With no other person to intrude, no audience to embarrass him, Griff spoke of his love for her, and she of her love for him. They had both felt the need of a break from work, but still he had his sketchpad with him, and as they sat in a glade which he said was more idyllic than anything Claude had ever painted he began to do a drawing of her. Griff had always been more accomplished with ideas, which his tutors encouraged, than with their actual execution, which they actively discouraged, and he was dissatisfied with his effort, tore out the page and began again. Attempt after attempt he made until there was a litter of crumpled paper at his feet, until he finally despaired and said –would he feel this way now, having learned of the nature of Eidolon?- that there was nothing of true reality in the work of any artist.

He was doubting the worth of what he did, as was often the case.

“Do you want to see the real you, the true expression of what you are to me?” he asked, turning to yet another fresh sheet.

“Yes please,” she said patiently, and he bowed his head over the pad as if in prayer, gazed at it with such a fixed concentration, unblinking, that his eyes pricked and filled, swelling with tears until one fell..

The tear soaked into a corner of the thick white cartridge paper, he waited for a moment and then tore out the page to hand it to her, saying, “That, Anna, encapsulates everything that you are, everything that you mean to me.”

She looked at it for a while, seeing the tear dry to a stain, then asked, “But why a tear?”

“Joy, delight, ecstasy, despair. You are all these things to me.”

A sadness suddenly filled her, like a contraction of the heart it caused her pain, but then just as quickly it was replaced by an overwhelming feeling of joy which caused her to gasp so sharply that Auberjonois felt it transmitted through his body. He turned in the saddle to ask if she was alright.

“Fine, I think it was just a memory becoming real,” she said, and the notion which came to her was as much one of desperation as it was of originality, the idea that if what was created in her own world, those figments of the imagination, could become real in this land of Eidolon, then why not other fancies of the mind such as memory?

She was conjuring a whole catalogue of recollections, and trying to make of them something substantial, when she felt her body swept by the sigh. It was no louder than the one she had earlier emitted, but somehow stronger, as if the world itself had exhaled, a sudden deep aspiration which caused her to catch her breath.

“What is it?” she asked, her grip tightening around Auberjonois as he brought them to an abrupt halt.

“An intrusion, an emanation, an interruption into the fabric of the land. Call it what you will. That is what it is.”

As their mounts stood rock-steady they saw the air ripple and fold before them, there was a crackling as if of electricity and hills faded, fell, reformed, colors flashing through a spectrum of changes. It lasted no more than seconds, culminating in a soft clap like distant thunder, and where before there had been the sylvan landscape that Selina had praised there now lay before them a barren landscape of ochre earth and slate-grey rock.

“I have witnessed intrusions a time or two before,” Auberjonois remarked, “but never so close to hand.”

“And what if we had been closer still? What if we had been in the middle of that..... whatever it was?”

Auberjonois shrugged, his heavy shoulders heaving. “If

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people have ever been caught in an intrusion they have never reported it. I cannot say.”

As he nudged the horse slowly forward Anna laid a hand on his shoulder. “Is it safe?”

“These things are stable almost the instant they occur,” he assured her.

Buttes and bluffs and mesas interrupted the otherwise flat landscape, some hundreds of feet high, some low and squat and a mile in breath, some so slim that they seemed to be nothing more than stalagmites. The sun, which had been setting only moments before, was now back at its zenith. Or had it progressed to a subsequent noon? The phenomenon which made Eidolon what it was had previously been explained to them, by the Society of Dilettanti and by Dona Isobel de Porcel, but it was only now that they could appreciate the complexities and implications it brought with it.

Had their journey now been made longer by this intrusion which had occurred between themselves and their destination? Had this new land inserted itself into the one which had previously been there, or had it simply replaced it? With the sun shifting in the sky, did this mean that not only space but also time had been interrupted? Again there were questions which Anna wanted answered, but was too fearful to pose.

The land, as Auberjonois had said, did seem quite stable, and though there was a prickling in the air she put this down to the altered sun and the subsequent heat. They traveled for an hour beneath its scorching rays, skirting the outcrops of rock, seeking shade but never quite finding it. Anna unwound her cloak but there was no breeze to cool her, she pulled the hood low over her brow but still perspired beneath its shadow. The sun never seemed to move, but remained permanently overhead, and the sweating foam which flecked their horses' flanks repeatedly dried to a powder until it seemed that their coats were dappled

grey.

“It looks like there is habitation ahead,” Siddig finally said, peering through narrowed eyes to pierce the haze and the sweat which stung, pointing as they rounded yet another knuckle of blunt rock.

* * *

Summoned to the Grand Odalisque, Jack had no need of an escort, for even if he had wanted to, even if this posed the greatest fear he had ever faced in his life, he could not have refused the call. As he had no escort, so he had no need of a guide. On leaving Tulla’s chambers he strode through the halls and corridors of the Castle in the Pyrenees with the assurance of one who had lived there all his life. There were Dark Guards everywhere, and others of varying degrees of rank and caste and importance, but none challenged him, the only ones to offer a glimmer of recognition a group of cadets who stepped aside to let him pass, in reverence of his reputation. The hairs on his neck bristled with his own importance, he trembled a little with anticipation but as yet would admit no fear.

What was there to fear? He had done all that the Grand Odalisque had asked of him, had produced a force of men who could make the Dark Guard blanch with terror, and already they were marching west to search out his reward: the lovely Anna. But in the meantime there were more immediate rewards, the thanks and favors of the Grand Odalisque.

He traveled the long corridor to the throne room, passed unchallenged by the two guards stationed at the door. He was not surprised to find the throne room empty, but strode purposefully across the chequered marble floor, intuition leading his steps to the door on the far side of the room, the door through which the Grand Odalisque had exited following their previous audience. He passed through room after room, some empty of people, others in which men and women loitered in silence, a stillness

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hanging heavy in the air as if they had been drugged, or were in awe of the nearness of the matriarch of the Hashishim, finally reached a door beyond which he knew he would find her.

“Come!” she called, when he was still a pace away.

He opened the door, entered, and suddenly all his enthusiasm for the audience was gone, his excitement was dulled and the nervous trepidation he had felt was replaced by a sensation which was quite overwhelming, sapping his of life and bringing him to his knees, then to the floor, curling up into a ball and crying like a baby. It was as if every despair he had ever suffered was revisited upon him, every sadness and melancholy disillusionment, every ache and hurt he had ever suffered, and the sum of them was as disabling as any physical blow. His body shook with sobs, his arms wrapped tight around him were unable to still them and every muscle in his body spasmed with a sadness which seemed terminal. His cheek against the floor was wet with tears, they coursed down his face and soaked the rug around him.

“I sensed you coming, artist, could feel your elation. It was very presumptuous of you to come expecting reward.”

He looked up, through eyes blurred with tears could make out the Grand Odalisque. She was seated at the head of a large bed, her knees drawn up and her arms wrapped around them, her chin resting on them as she regarded with a smile which mixed humor with pity, curiosity with disdain. He was unable to wipe the tears from his eyes, his arms wrapped around his body were locked so tightly that it was as if he was clinging on to life itself, and as he tried to blink them away he saw her body shimmer. It was not just his tears which were the cause, he knew, it was the membrane which was as much a part of her body as it was a covering for it, shifting in a gentle agitation, pulsing with color and heat as if excited by his condition.

“You should expect nothing of the Grand Odalisque,” she

told him, in a voice which was dark and distant. “That way, whatever she gives you will seem to be more of a benediction. Come a little closer, artist, and I will tell you a little about it.”

He tried to rise but lacked the strength, the will, had to drag himself forward on elbows and knees, his hands bunched in fists before him as he summoned every ounce of energy. Nearing the bed, she disappeared from view, and she told him to climb up, come closer still, said it was irreverent not to meet her eye to eye when she was granting him an audience. He heaved himself up, like a parched man weakened by thirst, in sight of water, he had to draw on hidden reserves of resolve and determination to pull him forward inch by inch. On the bed, it felt so soft beneath him that he feared he might drown, swamped by the silk covers, the soft fabrics, the textures so subtle that they were like gossamer against his face. Arching his back, straining his body, like a creature of the sea stranded on a beach he struggled his way clumsily forward, lurched forward once, twice, before exhaustion took him.

The Grand Odalisque, seemingly an impossible distance away, stretched out a leg and with a toe smeared the tears across his cheek. Then she placed her foot beneath his chin and lifted his head. Like something more liquid than elastic the membrane flowed over her knee, down her shin, wound around her foot and then around his neck like a scarf. It pulsed slightly, flushing pink and red, and pricked his skin like a thousand tiny needles. The warmth of its caress, the soft but unyielding hold it had on him drew him closer still, until his face was level with her waist. It slipped beneath his shirt, then, stinging his chest, chafing his belly.

“You should never expect anything of the Grand Odalisque,” she said, her back against pillows and cushions, gazing down at him as he strained to look up at her, his head at an uncomfortable angle. “You can never expect anything of her for

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she is so unique that she is beyond anyone's expectations." She rested a hand on his head, wound a curl of hair around her finger. "You expect delights? Of course, for they were what the Grand Odalisque promised you. But you can never have the slightest inkling of their nature, their power, their force. To have expectations of the Grand Odalisque is to underestimate her, to demean her worth." She tugged at the curl of hair she held, her finger hooked around it. "Do not make that mistake again."

"I... I won't," he managed to say.

He heard a tearing of cloth, felt his shirt rip to bare his back and his chest. Then he was rolled over so that he lay looking at the ceiling, felt giddy with the height which towered above but could not close his eyes to it. The Grand Odalisque shifted beside him, turned her body towards him to look down on him, her cheek supported on the knuckles of one hand, the other hand coming across to rest on his stomach. Her sleeve fell, so that it spilled like a gelatinous pool about her hand, and where it was warm the touch of her fingers felt cool.

"I will not ask what delights you expected," she said, her hand moving around in a slow circle, making the hairs on his belly prickle and spark. "But perhaps we might begin with what delights you usually enjoy. What.... 'turns you on'? Is that not the phrase you used with charming young Tulla?"

She brought her face slowly forward, down, her could feel her breath on his face as she spoke, and then her lips gently touching his brow. The contact made him convulse, where her mouth touched his skin scorched, then stung as if her kiss was vinegar on an open wound. He drew his head back sharply, but just as quickly brought it back, for though there had been excruciating pain there had also been limitless bliss, in that single short moment, that one brief contact, as much ecstasy as he had ever known.

"Delight?" the Grand Odalisque smiled. "You have never

known it until now.”

He trembled at the thought of her next kiss, wanting it but also fearing it, but now, as he thought to evade it, to draw his head back even before it came, he found himself held tightly to her. It was as if he had become a part of her, that they had both been encased in the same cocoon, her skirt had wrapped itself around his thighs and her sleeves had completed their embrace of him. His body tingled all over as the membrane molded itself to every inch of his body.

He flinched as the Grand Odalisque said, “And what more sensitive parts to the body are there? If a kiss to the brow can fill you with such bliss.... Well! Do you have any expectations, artist?”

“No,” he trembled.

“Good boy.”

He tensed, eyes closed, body rigid, as she brought her face close once again, but then there was a knock on the door to her room. She showed no annoyance at the interruption, however, but laughed, said, “As if I had arranged it, to prolong your delight. Or is it torture. Come!” she called.

Jack did not look up, but kept his face, eyes closed, inches from the body of the Grand Odalisque. He heard the apology for the intrusion.

“No matter. What is it?”

“An emissary, Odalisque. From the First Minister of Golgonooza.”

“Really? Since when did people send emissaries to the Hashishim? They regard us with fear or disdain, but rarely do they afford us such a courtesy. Show him in.”

“Here, Odalisque? In your chamber?”

“Yes, why not? It might afford some entertainment, for him, for me, for my young artist here.”

Jack listened to the footsteps cross the room, heard the door

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open and shut, open again. A second set of footsteps approached, lighter than the step of the Dark Guard.

“Grand Odalisque...” There was a rustle of clothing, perhaps a bow being made. “I come from Golgonoosa, from First Minister van Vogt.”

“Yes, I know that. What does he want? Be brief and to the point, if you please. As you can see, I am entertaining.”

“The First Minister proposes an alliance, Grand Odalisque.”

“With me?” She laughed, showed an almost human delight of her own as she hugged Jack tightly to her. “Why how wonderful! How flattering! How suspicious! And who, precisely, would the First Minister and I be allied against?” Her tone had grown progressively lower, darker, threatening like a storm. Before the emissary could answer, she said, “This is no alliance. An alliance is a compact between two parties, for their mutual benefit, to guard against a common fear. I would gain no benefit, and your First Minister’s only fear are the Hashishim themselves. That is why he wants an alliance, for the sake of his own skin and nothing else.”

“But Odalisque...!”

“Silence!” she snapped, and there was a palpable tension in the air, her whole body bristled and there was a spill as if a spear of ice had shot from it. The emissary was hushed, she said in a soft voice, “Come, my darling young artist. See the damnations the Grand Odalisque can bestow, along with her benedictions.”

As she rose from the bed her was drawn with her, still held in the embrace of the membrane so that it was as if they were both wrapped in the same shroud, her arm around his shoulder as the living skirt was around his waist. Now able to see the emissary, he saw the man pressed rigid against the far wall of the room, his arms stretched out as if crucified by some invisible force, wanting to tremble but unable to, all his fear focused in his eyes.

With Jack beside her, she stood before the terrified man, her face inches from his. “Your visit is opportune, emissary,” she smiled into his unblinking eyes, “for my artist friend here has created a force of such power that it really will have the First Minister quaking in his satin slippers. That is the reason for van Vogt wishing for an alliance, I would guess. He knows of the ally I already have, does he not? He fears the power I might now be able to wield? Answer me!”

“He does,” the emissary was able to say, through teeth clenched against his pain and fear.

“Which now strengthens my resolve. I wondered about how effective your troops might be, Jack, if Golgonooza might have defenses to match them. Now the First Minister’s supplication has persuaded me that it does not, my troops have their goal, their target.” Jack did not see her smile, but still it chilled him, as if it froze the air around them. “You will take my answer to the First Minister,” she told the emissary. “You need not fear about remembering it, dear man, nor trouble yourself about repeating it. It will not take a man of great literacy or insight to understand my intentions, for on the parchment of your hide I will spell it out in the simplest of terms.”

As the emissary screamed out in his agony the Grand Odalisque kissed Jack on the cheek, making him shudder with such delight that he thought that he too would die.

* * *

“It’s to be Orasula, then, and not Dos Aguas?” said Leo, watching Mattathias and Phicol galloping into the distance, heading due south.

“Orasula,” Griff confirmed. “I know Dos Aguas must be more appealing to you, after what you learned from those two, but wouldn’t you prefer to be rid of them, even if we didn’t have to make our way to the Garden of Earthly Delights?”

Leo shrugged as the riders finally slipped from sight. “I

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would have preferred to have learned exactly what their intentions were, before they took their leave. You were as suspicious as I was, about the way we met them, or the way they contrived to meet us. They stayed in our company a day or so, and now they've gone. They haven't robbed us, they haven't killed us in our sleep. So why? What was it all about?"

"Search me," said Griff, kicking their horse forward. "I just know I'll rest easier now they've gone."

"You don't think we might have done them an injustice, then, been a little unkind in misjudging them?"

"It's behind us, they've gone, it doesn't matter. It's too late to apologize now, ask them to be our buddies."

They plodded on in silence, as if they did indeed miss the company of the Mattathias and Phicol, followed the land as it rose and fell, its folds gentle enough not to interrupt their way due east. They had been advised that Orasula lay a little less than a full day's journey ahead, that they should be there by nightfall, even allowing for the slow pace that their mount made. The horse may not have been speedy, but it did have stamina, there was no need to rest it and they ate in the saddle to save time, stopped only when they needed to relieve themselves, making good time. Orasula came into view just as dusk was falling, the land unfolded before them in the twilight and they saw the town beneath them like a stone rose set in a shallow dark green dish, its walls describing a perfect circle perhaps a couple of miles across, its streets concentric circles connected by narrower alleys which radiated out from a domed building which sat like a hub in the centre.

"Unusual civic planning," Griff remarked.

"Tidy, neat, regimented like Mattathias said the people were," Leo reminded him, showing an artist's distaste for any regime. "I don't fancy lingering long in this place.

"Long enough to eat, rest, swap this nag for some decent

horses,” Griff agreed. “We’ll move on in the morning.”

As they approached they saw that there were gates at regular intervals, all open, none guarded, and they entered by the nearest. The buildings were all much of a likeness, differing only in size, signifying what Griff guessed might be their importance in the structure of the city’s society. Dwellings appeared to be the smallest of these, squat featureless blocks of drab grey brick which occupied the outer circles of the city, arrayed in ranks and files. There were people at the doors of some, others strolling the streets, all wearing toga-like tunics of the same plain cloth, their legs bare, their feet shod in sandals so that their lower limbs, like their homes, were grey with the dust of the street. Moving closer to the centre of the city, buildings became fewer as the streets converged, but at the same time became larger, taller, communal buildings which could have served a variety of purposes. It was here, too, that they found a little more variety among the people, splashes of color among the uniform grey clothing, some wearing saffron-colored tunics, robes of rust and pastel blue; and women, now, who had made some attempt to decorate themselves, who wore jewellery about their necks and from their ears, women who had colored their faces with garish cosmetics. All old women, as they had been warned.

Leo looked at one as he passed, grumbled, “Mutton dressed up as lamb, eh? Let’s find somewhere to rest the night, grab a few hours kip, then get up and get out.” He caught his friend’s amused glance, protested, “It’s not what you think. It’s purely aesthetic. These women are offensive to my artist’s eye.”

“They’re ugly?”

“Right.”

They dismounted and walked their horse along, continuing along the narrow street, at regular intervals crossed the broader thoroughfares which arced to their left and their right. There seemed to be more people frequenting these streets, and they

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turned into the next they came to, walked a way along it until they came to two men dressed in purple tunics, asked after somewhere to stay for the night.

“Surely, friend,” smiled one. “You will find the hostelries two circles further in to the city.”

“There and only there?” wondered Leo.

“Where else?” said the second.

They turned right into the next street, crossed the first of the broad concentric avenues, stopped at the next to look along its length in both directions. It seemed no different to the others they had crossed, the buildings were constructed to the same pattern as ever, rectangular in shape, windows and doors the same, basic and angular, with no decoration or variation about them.

“You notice the doors?” Griff remarked.

“What about them?”

“All the same color, all the same shade of green,” he pointed out. “In the last circle back they were a different color, and the circle before that a different color still. The first buildings we saw, when we came through the gate, their doors were all grey.”

“Color coding, is it?”

“Makes sense, I suppose, once you get used to it.”

“We won’t be staying long enough for that. Come on,” said Leo, his only enthusiasm for resting and then being away. The buildings in this part of the town were of a size that they were grouped in blocks of three, and he crossed the street to the first, peered in a window and then waited by the door while Griff followed with the horse. “What about the nag?” he asked.

“Leave it here for the time being,” Griff supposed. The impression they had been given by Mattathias and Phicol was that Orasula was a law-abiding place, and the creature was docile enough, tired enough by its journey not to wander. “Yes, leave it here for the moment, it’ll be safe,” he decided, and touched his

fingertips to the door, gave a gentle push.

The door opened easily and they stepped through into a bright spacious hall. People were seated off to their left, some in groups and some alone, most wearing the now customary tunic or toga, the only distinction being the color. The small handful who were not dressed thus, who wore more distinctive clothing, they guessed to be travelers like themselves; the boots, the cloaks, the jerkins of leather and the shirts of thick wool suggested as much.

As they stood regarding the room and its occupants a woman strode towards them, not young but handsome enough not to need make-up, smiled a greeting as she stopped before them, her hands clasped as if eager to please.

Griff asked if she had a room for them for the night.

“Certainly,” she replied, gesturing them to follow, leading them to a staircase in a corner of the room. “If you turn left at the first landing you will find a vacant room at the end of the corridor. The beds are clean and comfortable, there is water to wash, and there are robes hanging on the back of the door.”

“Robes?” said Leo.

“This is your first visit to Orasula?” she asked, and nodded as they did. “It is the custom in our city that if you wish to stay any length of time, to go abroad in its streets, then you dress as we do. So, the robes are provided.”

“We will only be staying the one night,” Griff said.

“As you wish,” she agreed. “The robes are there should you need them.”

“Also, we have a horse outside,” he told her.

“Just the one?” she remarked, considering them curiously for a moment, then said, “I will have a boy stable it. Rest well. We can offer you food and refreshment down here when you should have need of it.”

They thanked her and climbed the stairs, turned onto the

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landing she had pointed them to and found the room. There was a neatness, a cleanliness about the place which immediately made them long for the rustic tat of the lodgings they had shared in Golgonooza, for the impression which was given was that of the comfortably appointed cell of an ascetic.

“It’s only for one night,” said Griff, dropping bags to the floor, testing the bed, then rising again and crossing to the window. Already the room made him feel restless, uncomfortable.

Leo examined the robes which were hanging on the back of the door, fingered the thin material, saw that their length would cover little beyond the knees. No sandals or slippers about the place, he noticed. A dress such as Caesar’s wife might have worn, matched with heavy biker’s boots? He thought not.

“I’ll be buggered if I’m desperate enough to go out dressed in this,” he said.

“A couple of drinks downstairs, then?” Griff suggested. “A bite to eat?”

“It might help us sleep,” Leo agreed. “I doubt this town has anything better to offer.”

“Just remember, no meat or fish,” Griff reminded him, as they returned downstairs.

The only drink on offer was a weak-looking wine, paler than pink, and the only food a baked mash of seed and cereal, served with a sauce that seemed to be made from berries. Both had enough flavor for them to enjoy, though, they asked for another jug of wine, accepted a bowl of fruit which was offered them. The wine seemed to have little alcoholic content, but as the evening wore on Griff felt himself grow maudlin, dulled by that depression which drunkenness sometimes brings.

“Okay, so it’s not the sort of place I’d come for a holiday, or even for a stag night, but for God’s sake cheer up,” Leo told him. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I was just thinking about Anna,” Griff said glumly.

“And...?”

“Worrying that I might never see her again.”

“Of course you’re going to see her again. Isn’t she heading towards the same place we are? Isn’t she one of the reasons we’re going there, why I’ve passed up the bright lights of Dos Aguas for this dump?”

“Still...” Griff drank down a tumbler of the pale pink wine, refilled it, gazed at the liquid like a mystic divining his future. “She once hinted we might part, you know.”

“She did?” said Leo in surprise. “I always thought you two were inseparable.”

“I don’t think she was quite serious.” Griff smiled, a fondness and a sadness in his recollection, said, “We were discussing the future, what would happen at the end of term, once our courses are finished. I wondered what would happen, when she was a success and I wasn’t. We all know she’s going to do well, she’ll go to London, where the work is, but for me, the future for a fine artist isn’t as easy.” He sniffed, as if to fight back a tear. “She said we’d probably go our separate ways.”

“The selfish cow,” said Leo.

“Until one day, in the distant future, I’d be shuffling along New Bond Street, somewhere like that, hawking my work around the galleries, and she’s see me.”

“And...?”

“She’d take me home with her, to her plush pad, to her comfortable life, and we’d start all over again.”

“Well there you are!” said Leo cheerfully. “No problem.”

Griff shook his head and let it fall, a tear came, he said, “I don’t think I’m ever going to see her again.”

Embarrassed by his friend’s melancholy Leo sipped his drink, averted his eyes, gazed around the room. One or two people were taking notice, with curiosity or compassion, amused

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or anxious, and across the room he saw their hostess watching them intently, marking every mood. He whispered to Griff to buck up, to stop the tears, he was drawing attention to them, but his only response was to let his head sink lower, fall to the table, as if he would cry himself to sleep there and then. Two men crossed the floor, seemed to be leaving but then made a detour to pass their table.

“Too much drink?” asked one with disapproval, pausing to look down at Griff. He was a large man, muscular, a full beard not quite hiding his cynical grin, not a native of Orasula for he wore a sheepskin waistcoat which bared his heavy chest.

“A woman, no doubt,” said the other, “and no longer pretty enough to walk the streets unadorned. She probably has a face like a painted dog.”

Leo gave them a patient smile, said, “Please, leave us alone.”

“They want to sob in solitude, fling their arms around each other and comfort each other like pitiful castratos.”

“Please. Go away,” Leo repeated.

“Or what? You’ll drown us in your tears? Wash us away with your weeping?”

They laughed and one caught Griff by the hair, lifted his head to look at the streaming cheeks, the red-rimmed eyes. He spat out a curse of disgust and then let Griff’s head fall back to the table with a hard thump.

A flush of anger swept through Leo and he jumped to his feet. A knife was drawn and pointed at his chest, but with a quick upward sweep of the arm he deflected it, heard knuckles crack as it was knocked from the man’s grip. The second man was around the table in an instant, one large hand gripping Leo’s wrist to pull him forward, the other swinging with a menacing flash of steel/

“Leo! No!” cried Griff, looking up and blinking away his tears, wiping his face. Beyond his friend, even as he shouted out his warning, he saw their hostess at her customary station, and

beside her Mattathias and Phicol. All three were witnessing the altercation, but showing no signs of intervening. "Leo! Careful!"

The blow was parried but bodies met, arms wrapping in a tussle. The first assailant had recovered, had retrieved his dagger, threw himself back into the fray, and even as Griff rose in defense of his friend he watched in horror as the blade stabbed forward, and then in confusion as it was buried not in Leo's belly but in that of the other man, sank to the hilt and was then drawn up to the heart. The two of them stepped apart as the third slumped to the floor in a pool of blood and immediately the room was filled with a rush of men in dark red tunics, all wielding spears, circling Leo at a safe distance, their points leveled at his throat like a necklace of steel.

Mattathias and Phicol approached, the woman a little behind them. "These are the ones?" she asked. "They came riding a single horse."

"This is the one, Sheriff," Mattathias nodded, to a man wearing a tunic of darker red than the rest. "The cold-blooded murderer I warned you of."

"But it wasn't Leo! It was him!" Griff pointed, and even as he took a pace forward there were more spears, now raised against him, pricking his back, pricking his chest, enclosing him like a cage. "You all saw it!" he appealed, to the other people in the room.

"I have witnessed for myself the unwarranted taking of a life," the Sheriff lied. "I am placing this man in custody. Move!"

Spears prodded, some drawing blood from his throat and neck as Leo was coaxed across the room in short shuffling steps. Others held Griff at bay.

"I would suggest that you blindfold the man, Sheriff," said Mattathias. "The source of his power but is beyond my understanding, but I have seen it wielded, suspect that what he cannot see he cannot harm."

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“It will be done,” said the Sheriff, taking his hand and shaking it. “Thank you for your service to the city of Orasula.”

The spears were only lowered from Griff’s chest once Leo had been escorted from the room, but still held ready as the men backed away from him. He watched them leave, could do nothing else for the moment, then turned to Mattathias.

“This is your doing,” he said, feeling the anger within him but having to keep it in check. “You had no intention of going to Dos Aguas.”

“With you on that miserable nag of yours, we were always going to get here before you.” Mattathias smiled. “A cunning stratagem, I have surpassed myself. Lord Lovecraft will be delighted.”

“Lord Lovecraft?” said Griff, not sure of the name. “And what is the purpose of all this? Why?”

“There is no harm in your knowing, there is little that you can do. Lord Lovecraft was aware of the power you have, wanted it for himself. Once I had seen you wield it against that creature in the ravine, though, I knew that to capture the two of you might be beyond Phicol and I. And seeing that power, too, I understood that just to have one of you would be sufficient for Lord Lovecraft. So-” He held out his hands like a conjurer delighted with his deception. “My plan, which worked a treat.”

“But Lord Lovecraft does not have Leo,” said Griff, and he bristled with rage, felt his hatred build inside and held it in the clenched fist he brandished. “Nor will he have me.”

“Careful, friend Griff,” Mattathias cautioned him. “Two murders is more than I planned for. To kill me would serve you no purpose.”

“But Lord Lovecraft does not have Leo,” said Griff, through gritted teeth.

“Do you know the penalty for murder in Orasula? I would imagine not.” Mattathias smiled, as if here was the final

denouement to his devious plot. "It is to be locked away in a cell, for seven days, with the body of the victim." He paused a moment, to allow Griff to appreciate the horror of the punishment. "And then-

"Yes?"

"A life sentence working in the mines."

"What good will that do Lord Lovecraft?"

Mattathias laughed, with a final manic delight. "Why, who else do the mines belong to but Lord Lovecraft, of course! The spoils of war from his last great campaign. Your friend will be there for him, whenever he is needed." He clapped his hand on Griff's shoulder, a victor commiserating with a loser, as if it was all no more than a game. He felt the body tense beneath his touch, recognized the anger there, said, "I doubt that I could kill you, feel sure that you could kill me if you chose to. But what purpose would that serve, friend Griff? It would simply condemn the two of you to seven days of horror and then a lifetime spent in the mines. Go on your way," he advised. "Neither I nor Lord Lovecraft have any need of you."

* * *

White structures like pueblos came into view as they rounded a low bluff, walls harsh in the sharp light, tiled roofs a burning umber beneath the sun, simple buildings which, in their haphazard distribution, looked like a child's toys scattered across a sandy floor. As they approached they saw no sign of life, neither human nor animal, and they advanced slowly, cautiously, not able to make a diversion around the buildings for they filled the whole expanse of land between one area of high ground and the next, presenting a barrier of perhaps a mile in width. But then there was also their curiosity, to see what there was in this settlement which they were probably the first to visit, and also the need to replenish their water-skins, even if there had been another way they would have been unable to resist the

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temptation to continue forward.

“Not so much a ghost town as a new town not yet occupied,” Auberjonois remarked, looking at the first buildings they passed, regarding their condition which seemed so pristine in the light.

Windows, arched doorways, the shadows cast by porticos and patios were so black that they seemed to shine in contrast with the bleached white walls, and the shadows of the buildings themselves were so sharp and clearly defined that they seemed to have been painted on the dusty earth. Anna was surprised to see statues and sculptures filling some of the larger spaces between buildings, classical figures who might have been gods, cut from stone and marble, and then still-lives, bowls of fruit of an exaggerated size and petrified bouquets flowering from alabaster urns. Surprised, because these were the first approximations to art which she had seen in a land which people had persuaded her was itself a product of some eternal art. Where buildings had been placed carefully enough to form a square they often found fountains, but they were as much a decoration as the other sculptures they had seen, they ran dry, or, at very best, offered nothing more than a sculpted interpretation of water.

“Seems like there’s nothing here,” said Siddig, as they neared the centre of the silent settlement.

“Perhaps in one of the buildings?” suggested Selina, surprising Anna with her bravery.

“Perhaps,” Auberjonois agreed, and they dismounted, tethered their mounts to a marble figure’s extended hand, entered a low flat hacienda of a building.

Inside it was cool, clean, but as empty as if it had just been built and was awaiting occupation. The rooms were nothing but shells, there was no furniture, no fittings, no sign that there had ever been anyone there before them. A second building was just the same, a third too. There was nothing for them to do but move on, said Auberjonois, and hope they were through this intrusion

soon.

Returning outdoors, though, about to remount, Selina let out a cry, pointed. "There!"

Ahead of them, from around the corner of a building, a shadow extended, as clearly defined as any of the other shadows, but this one plainly of a man. Auberjonois and Siddig drew swords, stepped forward silently, stealthily, then sprang, brandishing their blades. There was nothing, no sign of who or what had cast the shadow. Except that at the next corner of the building another shadow protruded, much the same as the first. They repeated their tactic again, a stealthy approach and then a spring, knees bent in a defensive posture, swords held in both hands ready to attack or defend, but again with the same result. The reason for the shadow had gone, a second shadow had appeared ahead. They split, then, Siddig and Selina circling the building in one direction, Auberjonois and Anna in the other, but neither party found any sign of life, any reason for the shadow, searched the building itself but found it to be just as empty as the others.

"Time we were going," said Siddig, not fearful, but nervous that what he could not see he could not fight.

The others were in agreement, they returned to their horses and continued on their way. From time to time they saw similar shadows, chased one or two, but fruitlessly, and reaching the far boundary of the settlement they looked back, saw it as dead as it had ever been. Auberjonois took out a square of cloth, a rough map he had made of the progress of Siddig and he across the kingdom, marked a cross where he estimated their location to be.

"And how do I describe the place?" he asked.

"City of Shadows?" suggested Anna.

"Evocative enough," he smiled in agreement, noting down the name before folding the cloth and returning it to his saddle bag.

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Crossing the newly named City of Shadows had brought them to the limit of the latest intrusion into the kingdom of Eidolon, it seemed, for before them the desert quickly began to break into scrub, parched grass grew lusher and the air less humid as the land rose in a series of steps, each one a darker shade of green, until they were once more returned to the verdant landscape of before.

“Water, first,” said Auberjonois, sniffing the air as if to scent it. His ears pricked too, attuned to the faintest sound, finally decided that he caught the distant babble of a running stream. “This way,” he said, tugging on the horse’s bridle to steer it towards a forested expanse of land to their left.

Their horses abreast, Selina cast Anna a sidelong glance, questioning the man’s instinct, but all Anna could do was answer with a shrug, to say that they had no alternative but to put their trust in him. She and Selina were passengers, after all, they went where the warriors directed, and so far their guidance had been true. If there was any doubt in her mind it was finally dispelled when she recognized the ripple of water -even thought that she could smell it- which Auberjonois had hinted that he heard.

It was broader than a stream, faster than a river, a shallow but fast-flowing cascade which broke over rocks as if in delight with itself, and the babble of water was like the laughter they felt within as they leapt from their horses and threw themselves down on its bank, bathing their faces, dousing their heads, cupping their hands to quench their thirsts and then drench each other.

The arrow which came from the opposite bank ricocheted off a rock, the head striking sparks from its surface, flashed inches before Anna’s face and embedded itself in Selina’s shoulder. Even as she was thrown back by the force of its impact Siddig had unslung the short crossbow from his back, had it cocked and aimed at the undergrowth, Auberjonois had his sword drawn and

had risen to a crouch. A flush of anger ran through Anna's body and as her eyes searched out the source of the attack the bushes nearest the opposite bank crisped and burned, but with hardly any flame, the foliage blackening and shriveling.

"There!" whispered Auberjonois urgently, seeing bodies retreat from the scorched undergrowth, and advanced through the shallow water, moving at an angle to his left as Siddig moved to his right, both keeping low to present as small a target as possible.

Climbing the facing bank they heard the crashing of footsteps ahead, broke into a run to give chase, gambling that their attacker was now more keen on fleeing than on standing to fight. They hurdled fallen trees and low boulders, Auberjonois cutting a swathe through the vegetation, following a slalom course to match their direction to that of their quarry, permitting no obstacle to hinder them in their pursuit. The footsteps ahead faltered, as if whoever they chased had stumbled, picked up their pace again, then slowed once more and grew quieter. Auberjonois and Siddig were already pulling to a halt as they broke from the cover of the trees and came into a clearing.

There were four people facing them, some twenty paces away, across the open space. A man, two women, a child, perhaps a family group, they wore simple clothes of hide and skin, the man had a cloak of matted fur draped about his shoulders. Their arms and legs were bare, their clothes hung loosely, but it was immediately apparent that it was no feeling of coldness that had them trembling. Rather, it was fear, stark terror. Behind each one stood the silhouette of a figure, as close as a shadow, as dark as a shroud, the only brightness about them the light reflecting from blades held against stricken throats.

"Dark Guards," said Auberjonois softly.

"Welcome, friends, join the celebration," came a voice from the shadows. "But first let slip your weapons."

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“A poor choice of words,” muttered Siddig, and let loose a bolt, shooting from waist height, unsighted, but knowing that it would fly straight and true to the lips which had mouthed the greeting. With hard steel pinning a tongue to the roof of a mouth there was no opportunity for a cry, yet even before the bolt had reached its target he had let the crossbow fall by his side and drawn a dagger, with a deceptively lazy flick of the wrist had flung it the twenty yards which separated him from a second Dark Guard, burying itself in the bridge of his nose so that he first looked cross-eyed in alarm before falling to the ground.

“Release those women,” said Auberjonois, his sword leveled at the guards and their final two captives. A blade was drawn slowly across the throat of the older of the women, just breaking the skin, but Auberjonois noted with approval that she never even flinched. “They are of no use to you as hostages, their scrawny frames make pitiful shields, and believe me, my friend and I would kill them just to get to you. After which,” he smiled, without humor, “you would suffer a death such as you could never imagine.”

The old woman staggered and tumbled to the ground as a fist in her back punched her forward, the Dark Guard leaping over her as she fell, charging with his sword raised. Siddig’s first bolt pierced his kneecap, bringing him down, the second his throat just below the chin, pinning him to the earth where his panicked thrashing about brought death on all the more quickly.

“Such death as you could never imagine,” Auberjonois repeated coldly, and began to walk slowly forward towards the last of the Dark Guards.

Mere seconds it would have taken, to sever the throat of the woman he held, but the Dark Guard understood that those same seconds were all that he had left, and as Auberjonois approached so he retreated, drawing his prisoner with him to the fringe of the forest, pausing there a moment before turning and diving

headlong into the undergrowth, swallowed from sight in an instant.

Though released, the woman did not move, she stood as rigid as the statues in the City of Shadows, hands clenched at her side to still any trembling. Her companions rushed to her, the man embracing her, the older woman taking her hand, the child wrapping its arms around her thigh, all three sobbing, finally giving expression to the terror they had felt. The man turned to Auberjonois to offer his gratitude, but his tears and sobs made him incoherent. He offered his hand but Auberjonois dismissed it, saying that thanks would have to wait.

“One of our party is injured,” he said, turning as Siddig did, and they raced back to the river, splashing across to find Selina still lying where she had fallen.

Anna was kneeling at her friend’s side, her hands on her shoulder, wrapped around the polished grey shaft of the arrow. Selina was a deathly pale, she made no sound, no movement, her breath was barely discernible.

“We have to get this thing out,” said Anna, tightening her grip on the arrow.

“No!” Auberjonois turned to see the old woman coming from the stream, her family hurrying after her. “The Dark Guard’s arrows are barbed! To draw it out will cause more harm than good!”

Anna looked up at the woman without seeing her, turned back to her friend, her shoulders slumped, her head bowed low. She gasped sharply, as if she could feel the pain, began to breath heavily as if she would take it all herself. She could sense the arrow buried in flesh, cold, but burning, and slowly her whole body became diffused with a poisoned heat. Auberjonois repeated the old woman’s warning, but touched only fingertips to her shoulder to ask her to desist, and though she would have taken no heed of his caution she did not yet try to draw out the

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arrow. Instead she tightened her grip on the shaft, squeezing her hands tightly around it, her face flushing brighter and her brow burning fiercely as if with the effort.

As they looked on, Auberjonois and Siddig, the old woman and her family, it seemed that Anna took on the aspect of someone praying, her eyes closed, her breathing slow and regular where moments before she had been panting heavily. The tension in her fists eased, blood returning to whitened knuckles, and slowly she took her hands away, let her fingers open like a flower unfolding to show that she held the arrow, the wooden shaft darkened by Selina's blood, the head a dull blunt stub of steel.

"But it was barbed," said the old woman.

It was, Anna knew, and as Selina groaned and rolled onto her side, to vomit copiously on the ground, so she felt her body heave and retch, fell forward onto all fours like a sick dog, spat out a bitter taste. Auberjonois took a length of clean cotton from his saddlebag, folded it into a wad to press against Selina's wound, while Siddig crouched by her side, brushing her hair from her sweating brow, murmuring words of unpracticed tenderness. The old woman took the wad of linen from Auberjonois, sniffed at the blood which stained it, looked at the wound, inspecting it closely.

"It is clean," she said, pressing the cloth gently back in place. "But the arrow was poisoned. And barbed." She turned to Anna. "What did you do, girl?"

Anna shook her head, as fatigued as she had ever felt, said weakly, "Don't know."

As she shook her head and leant forward again to spit out more acid bile a chain slipped from the neck of her shirt, hung loose below her, a small medallion of matt grey swinging from it. The old woman reached out a gnarled hand, touched it with her fingertips, let it rest in her palm.

“What is this?” she asked. “Where did you get it? What material is it?”

“Slate. Common enough where I come from.” Anna’s breathing was still labored, words came with an effort. “My father gave it me.”

“But the inscription,” said the woman, tracing the letters which were etched into the surface, speaking them singly. “A. E. L.”

“My name. My initials. Anna Elizabeth Louise.”

“Art Eternal Light,” the woman whispered, offering her own translation. She touched Anna’s cheek, her brow, drew her fingertips back as if they were scorched. “You are burning up, girl, burning up with the Afflatus, the Ignis Fatuus.”

Anna couldn’t have given a damn if she was burning up with cholera, yellow fever or green monkey disease. She managed to raise an arm, held it out for Auberjonois to take. He helped her turn, then laid her on the ground beside Selina.

“The wounded one needs rest,” said the old woman. “She needs to be taken to a place where she might convalesce in comfort. Out here in the forest is no place for that, nor days spent in the saddle.”

Auberjonois got to his feet, took the old woman by the arm and led her a short distance away. “Never mind the wound, I know how to tend to that,” he said, speaking softly in her ear. “What of the other one? Anna? You regarded her like a freak of nature.” And then, before she could explain, he asked, “Who the hell are you, old woman? Why did the Dark Guard take such an interest in you?”

The old woman glanced to her family, who were being solicitous about the two stricken girls, turned back to Auberjonois to say, “We are Nabis.”

“Prophets?”

“Could you not tell that by our dress?”

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He shook his head, admitted his ignorance. "I have heard of the Nabis, but you are the first that I have met. I can understand why the Hashishim might value your gifts."

"My family and I were on our way to the Prado, to the Society of Dilettanti, when we met the Dark Guard."

"And to meet them filled you with understandable terror," he knew. "But then to meet my companion you were stricken by something more than that." He tightened his grip on her arm, fingers closing on the wasted muscle and brittle bone. "What is it, woman? Tell me. I saved your life so you owe me that."

* * *

It was a sight to stir the soul and confirm the glory of Golgonooza, to see Lord Lovecraft's forces assembled outside the city gates, converging from the north and south like a pouch of jewels spilled onto the plain, resplendent in their tunics and armour, pennants and banners flying, lances held aloft bearing colors which showed their allegiance to one or other of the generals. There must have been three thousand men on foot, another two thousand on horseback, chariots and wagons and siege machines ranked behind them.

"Look upon it, young Goomer," said van Vogt, his arm around the youth's shoulder, drawing him close in a hug of delight. "Is it not wondrous to behold, to see Golgonooza's greatest hero once again back where he belongs?"

"At the head of his forces, my Lord?" said Goomer, acknowledging the majesty of the scene. He and the First Minister had climbed to the highest point of the city walls, the fat man laboring and panting with the effort but determined to have the best vantage point, to follow Lord Lovecraft's departure as far as the eye could see.

"At the head of his forces, yes! Astride his fine stallion! Departing the city to face perils uncertain!" He hugged Goomer tighter, his arm slipping around the lad's neck so that he could

bring his hands together in delighted applause. “Oh, the joy! The joy! Lovecraft thought to outwit me, did he? Proposed peace and understanding between us while he was still plotting against me? Well we’ll see how effective his plotting can be when the walls of Golgonooza and the whole expanse of the Malterre Marshes separates us!”

Such was the First Minister’s delight that he turned Goomer to him and planted a wet kiss on his forehead, this despite the fact that there were others about, others who had found the enthusiasm to make the climb, whose station permitted them access to that rarified height. Some turned to look at him, surprised as much by the open demonstration of affection as they were by his unbridled cries of joy.

He smiled in response to their curious glances, called out, “All hail to the valiant Lord Lovecraft!”

Those nearest took up the salute -“All hail the valiant Lord Lovecraft!”- and like a contagion the cheer quickly spread, to left and right, spilled down through a hierarchy of levels until the whole of the eastern wall of the city was reverberating with the praise. Like a tide of sound it rose and fell as the army settled itself into its ranks and files, then swelled to an even greater crescendo as a silver grey steed draped in grey steel mail came through the gate.

“All hail the valiant Lord Lovecraft!”

“Glory to our greatest warrior!”

“May the spirits of our fathers guide him in his mission!”

“And may you return from it safely,” van Vogt chuckled softly, so that only Goomer heard.

Lord Lovecraft pulled his mount to a halt and turned in the saddle, looked back to take in the people who called his praises, his eyes tracking back and forth taking in tier upon tier, his gaze searching up and up until they fixed on the highest battlement. He could not fail but see van Vogt, who wore his finest regalia,

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the threads of gold catching the sun's light. He glared fiercely for a moment, as if the light dazzled him, as if there were none but the two of them in that crowd, then drew a finger slowly across his throat.

The people cheered, interpreting the gesture as they would, as he wheeled his horse around and galloped to the head of the assembled force.

"Brave man," said van Vogt, with a pretence at admiration, and others around him nodded as a clarion call pierced the air and thousands moved forward as one, the first single step, of man and beast alike, kicking up a cloud of dust.

Cheers came again, a resounding storm which made the air quiver, but then slowly grew increasingly muted, the clamor of acclaim eventually dying to a ripple of conversation, then becoming softer still. By the time the army was nothing more than a cloud of dust in the distance van Vogt and Goomer were the only two left on the ramparts, but still the First Minister insisted they stay, would not be persuaded to move until the dust melted into dusk and evening turning to night brought with it a chill.

Goomer shivered, van Vogt embraced him and thanked him for his attendance. "For your attendance and your company on such a momentous occasion," he said.

"I am pleased to be of service, my Lord."

"And whoever did me the service of betraying Lord Lovcraft's intentions deserves my thanks, too," said van Vogt, as they turned from the battlements and began to make their way down to the city. "Since Mistress Pebble insists on remaining secretive about her source, however, we will have to toast our benefactor in his absence. Come, Goomer, let us celebrate."

"Openly, my Lord? In public?" asked Goomer, for he had become accustomed to conducting their affair discreetly.

"The whole of the city will be celebrating this evening, the

people will be in too good a temper to take any notice of us," the First Minister believed, leading the way through the streets, and the taverns spilling their customers onto the pavements were proof of the fact. Some way on, entering a square, he smiled, said, "And where better to celebrate Lord Lovecraft's departure than in his very own drinking den?"

Goomer followed van Vogt's gaze across the square, to the brightly lit building and its flashing neon sign, said without any enthusiasm, "The Cabaret Voltaire?"

"Perfect. That croaker of a chanteuse who calls herself Madame le Roy might need some cheering now that her lover has gone." He tightened his grip on Goomer's arm, urging him on, fighting the resistance which marked his reluctance. "Come on, boy. I know it is not a place we would normally frequent, but tonight we will make an exception."

"But Madame le Roy..." Goomer tried to protest.

"Will be as timid as a kitten now that Lovecraft has gone," van Vogt told him. "It will be fine, we will be safe."

Head bowed, chin on chest and hair falling about his face, Goomer permitted himself to be led into the Cabaret Voltaire, heard the place to be full but did not look up as they crossed the floor, weaving between tables, praying that van Vogt would not sit them in too open a view. The First Minister had said that Madame le Roy would now be as timid as a kitten, but he did not believe this for one minute, even kittens had claws; he knew that the woman disliked him, and it had only been his usefulness to Lord Lovecraft that had prevented her from slitting his gizzard.

Finally seated, he chanced a look up, took some consolation from the fact that they were seated to the side of the room, not directly in front of the stage as he had feared van Vogt might have preferred. Madame le Roy was there now, her face like a tragic mask in the harsh lights as she sang some dirge about a warrior-lover gone to war. Her voice quavered with emotion, her

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expression was one of pathos, what he first took to be the glint of a tear he then saw to be a jewel pasted onto her cheek. She was milking the moment for all that it was worth and as she reached her final note the audience applauded, as if the experience had exhausted her she made a dramatic bow which brought her to her knees. She made a weak smile as she rose, squinting against the stage lights until she stepped from their glare. Her eyes scanning the room as she crossed the floor, here and there offering nods of recognition and thanks, she finally caught sight of van Vogt and Goomer. The smile faded, returned, her features seemed unstable as her expression described a whole gamut of emotions, burning, chilling, cutting through the air like an icy dagger before she disappeared through a door in a corner of the room.

“Admirable woman, putting on such a brave face,” remarked van Vogt, and snapped his fingers, called for drink, food, soon had their table littered with such a feast that the two of them could never hope to clear it, a banquet which would make it plain to everyone just what a cause for celebration this was.

It was some minutes later, as the music from a quartet of mandolins filled the room and Goomer picked glumly at the food before him, that Madame le Roy reappeared. Two women, two of the Daughters of Albion, followed closely at her shoulder as she approached their table.

“First Minister van Vogt, how honored we are,” she smiled. “And young Goomer, too.”

“You are acquainted with Madame le Roy?” asked van Vogt, turning to him.

“From the days of me, er, previous career,” Goomer answered, hinting that the acquaintance was only now being resumed after a lengthy hiatus and hoping that Madame le Roy would say nothing to contradict that impression.

The First Minister nodded. “An establishment such as the

Cabaret Voltaire, it must be a magnet for every chancer and scoundrel in the city. And will you sit with us for a while, Madame le Roy?" he asked amicably. "As you can see we have food and drink aplenty."

She sat facing him, her shoulders square, her body held erect, the two Daughters of Albion taking seats to either side. The one nearest him Goomer recognized as the First Minister's would-be assassin, the one whose escape he had engineered, and he made a point of not meeting her eye. The second Daughter, however, the one he faced, was regarding him as if she too had been as much a victim and a beneficiary of his services. He began to grow increasingly uncomfortable and wished he could be away.

"So," van Vogt continued, "Lord Lovecraft has departed in glorious defense of the city."

"I understand that it is not so much for the defense of the city that you have sent him away, as it is concern for your own self-defense." Madame le Roy's hands were on the table, black lacquered nails pointed towards him like weapons, all the more threatening because they were still and showed not a tremor of agitation. "And it is right that you should be concerned about the defense of yourself, First Minister. Lord Lovecraft is a warrior, and so to be feared. I, on the other hand, am a woman, and that is something to be feared even more."

van Vogt gave a cough of a laugh, meeting her gaze, not intimidated by the undisguised threat, and the two regarded each other silently. It was the Daughter of Albion facing Goomer who broke the silence, her eyes on him all this while.

"Is the First Minister's companion not a handsome young man, Estrild?" she said.

"That he is," answered the young woman beside him, lifting a hand from her lap. "Such soft skin, such clear eyes, such sweet lips."

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The hand which touched his cheek was charred, stiff, the fingers flexed with difficulty as they brushed his skin; he could imagine them marking him like dry sticks of charcoal. Swallowing deeply, he felt a heavy weight on his thigh and looked down to see her other hand moving across his lap, into his groin, driving between his legs like a stake hammered into the earth. He cast an appealing glance to van Vogt, whose laughter came weakly.

“Well! What contradictions this place offers!” said the First Minister, slapping his hands on the table in readiness for pushing himself to his feet. “There is either a bounty of affection or an absolute dearth of it, enmity or endearment. Is there no middle way, Madame le Roy?”

“For you, First Minister, there is not,” she answered coldly.

He rose slowly, Goomer more quickly, slapping away the insensitive hands which pawed him, stepping sharply away to stand beside the First Minister.

“Goodnight, good lady,” said van Vogt in parting. “I hope you do not find your bed too big without Lord Lovecraft.”

“Goodnight, young man,” said Estrild with a smile, her voice a thick lisp, as if the words were clotting on her palate. “See you again soon.”

The chill of the night made Goomer perspire when they left, a cold flush made his brow run slick with sweat, and on the steps of the Cabaret he paused no more than a moment, to take in two or three deep breaths. Then he was keen to get away, tried to hurry the plodding First Minister along the street.

“Where is the panic, boy? Where is the rush?”

“That woman strikes me as something of a menace,” said Goomer. “Her minions are probably arming themselves to the teeth right now, ready to give chase.”

“Nonsense. She would never be so reckless,” van Vogt said, insisting on a slower pace. “She is right in one respect, though, as

a woman she is to be feared, and not for any sword she wields or arrow she notches. She will not be as crude in an offensive as would be Lord Lovecraft. But not to worry," he assured the boy, as he turned them towards the Tuileries Gardens, "we will be cautious for a while, but then we will have the alliance with the Grand Odalisque confirmed. The guile of one woman pitted against another. What a sight that will be."

"The Grand Odalisque?" said Goomer. "Of the Hashishim? You have proposed an alliance with the Hashishim?"

"Quietly, boy," the First Minister cautioned, looking around though the park was deserted. "No one is to know of it yet. No one will know of it until she rides through the same gate from which Lord Lovecraft has recently departed."

"She is coming here?"

"Must you keep stating what is already given? Yes. She is coming here. At my invitation. Then let Lord Lovecraft even dream of returning to Golgonooza."

They skirted the darkest part of the park, stuck to the paths which were lit, not brightly, but well enough illuminated for them to comfortably see their way. Still Goomer was nervous, though, jittery, kept glancing around and over his shoulder as if expecting the Daughters of Albion to leap out at any time, as if feeling those petrified hands of the one named Estrild falling on his shoulders, her cheek against his and her lisping voice in his ear promising retribution. For what? For betraying Lord Lovecraft, if perhaps that betrayal had been guessed. For being instrumental in her capture, even though he had also been instrumental in her escape. Retribution for any number of things which would all be flimsy excuses for the entertainment she would take from his torture.

van Vogt was patient with the boy's unease, as solicitous as any mentor or guardian, did his best to calm him. He pointed out the lake where they had first met, spoke of the life he had had

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before and how it must have changed since, stressing that it was for the better and promising that it could only get better still; he remarked on the peace of the park at night and how it was theirs alone, theirs and no one else's; he pointed to the stars and spoke lyrically of their infinity. His patience snapped, though, his poetry counted for nothing when the boy, still looking anxiously in this direction and that, suddenly let out a piercing scream and flung himself to the ground at his feet, cowering, trying to hide beneath the skirts of his silken robe.

“For the heaven’s sake boy!”

“Look!”

“Get up! You’re an embarrassment to me!”

“But...! LOOK!”

The First Minister turned and the sight which met his gaze was of such horror that it made his own scream catch in his throat, as if he might choke on his terror. Darker than the night, vaster than the sky, with a sigh as if the whole of the cosmos had exhaled at once, a shadow fell towards him. He ducked, but only slightly, for he felt that even if the earth swallowed him whole and folded itself around him like a mother’s arms it would not be enough to save him. There was a rush of air which chilled him, like a vacuum it seemed to draw his breath from him, and he sank to his knees as the shadow passed, seemed to spill across the sky as it turned, came back and settled on the ground before him.

The bird, for that was what it most resembled, towered above him, wings folded back and hunched so that they seemed like a cowl casting it into even darker shadow. The naked body of the man it released from its talons was drained of blood, skin bleached white except for the cuts which scored his chest, row upon row of them spelling out the Grand Odalisque’s reply to the First Minister’s proposal of an alliance.

Goomer got to his feet as the bird took to the hair, looked

with morbid curiosity at the body before saying, “Perhaps it is just as well that Lord Lovecraft’s forces have been sent from the city. They will be able to meet her.”

van Vogt shook his head slowly, feeling a sickness in his stomach. “No they will not. The emissary will have told her of my intentions. I instructed him to, as a gesture of my sincerity.”

Chapter 11

Dos Aguas seemed to rise to an impossible height, confined as it was to the narrow wedge of land which was formed by the two rivers converging, spilling into the sea at the same point on the coast. Towers and turrets climbed one on top of the other like a troop of acrobats, joined by buttresses and supported by arches, twisting and curling as if their limbs were entwined, and shooting out from this conglomeration of a city were bridges of every design, narrow footbridges which were no wider than gangplanks, arcing down gracefully from the highest levels, at the lower levels broad avenues suspended by ribs of steel which could accommodate a troop of soldiers marching abreast, ornate cantilevers and simple structures of rope and wood. Like arteries they spread out from the heart of Dos Aguas, crossing to the east and to the west to draw the outskirts closer, bringing them in from every direction, along each river bank, along the coast, the shanties and hamlets and sprawls of dwellings, to gather about the soaring citadel as would attentive children at the feet of a favorite mistress.

The city was as beautiful as Lady Haggitha remembered it, rising like a natural growth, as much a part of the landscape as ever a fabrication of mankind could be, and the waters which lapped against its seaward walls were like a skirt of shot blue silk which spread out to the horizon. Jahilyah looked on with as much awe at the sea as Gamaliel did at the city, both stunned into silence at the sight of each, the groom intimidated by the glory of the place, the maid worried by her first ever glimpse of the sea, overcome by its vastness. The ships which lined the docks, or rested at anchor farther out from shore, she regarded as a convict would a cell, or a dying man a tomb, with a terror which would prevent her from ever boarding vessels of such a size that they could never possibly float.

In file they descended the headland which formed the western limit of the Bay of Dos Aguas, following a switchback trail, and the nearer they got to sea level the more the citadel seemed to tower above them, by turns conceited and aloof, as if taking pride in its own beauty. The only one of their party who seemed unaffected by the sight was Tharmas, who had been awaiting them at the top of the headland, having made his own way for much of that day, taking the accustomed contradictory detours. Walking at the side of Lady Haggitha's horse, head a little bowed and sandals scuffing the ground lightly as he went, he seemed as interested in the earth at his feet as he did in the panorama before him.

"You have seen grander places, Tharmas?" Lady Haggitha asked, looking down from the saddle, a little annoyed by his silence. "Is that why you pass no comment?"

He looked up at her, regarded the city before them. "I have seen many sights in my time, my Lady, visited many places. Some you would call grand, some even your maid and your groom would call hovels. All have been a source of wonder to me. It is a facility which comes with old age, to see wonder where others miss it, to see a world in a grain of sand." He smiled at her, then cast his eyes back down to the ground. "It was not a disregard for your cousin's magnificent citadel, I was simply the ants scurrying about beneath our feet. Fascinating."

Lady Haggitha sniffed dismissively as they approached the outlying dwellings of Dos Aguas, frail buildings of poor construction at first, but quickly giving way to structures of brick and streets of cobble, and for a moment she saw the people moving between them much as Tharmas saw the ants, shot him a glance and was annoyed to see him smiling at her again.

He bowed quickly, deeply, swept his hand along the ground and snatched up a daisy to offer to her. "Heaven in a wild flower," he told her.

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“You are toying with my perceptions,” she chided him, though taking the flower and threading its stalk through her horse’s bridle. “I do wish you wouldn’t do that.”

“It can be confusing,” he nodded, “to see the world as others do, rather than as you think it is. I will desist.”

She did not believe him, but accepted whatever apology it was that he was offering, guided them along a broad avenue which gradually began to rise, climbing towards the citadel until it became a bridge spanning the first of the two rivers.

“So many bridges,” commented Jahiliyah, looking to her left and right, above and below, taking in the web of structures which crossed back and forth. “I wonder that you can find your way, with all these to choose from. I would worry that I would be carried across and back again without actually ever reaching the other side.”

“You will soon become accustomed to which bridges you can use and which you cannot,” Lady Haggitha told her.

“Different people use different bridges?”

“Different bridges serve different purposes, and the purposes are suited to the people,” said Tharmas. “You see the spans beneath us?” he pointed, to wooden bridges which rattled with the traffic, wagons and people passing back and forth in a constant cross-stream. “They serve the Citadel, allow entrance for everything that is needed. And egress for those things that are no longer wanted.”

“So the lower bridges are for servants,” Jahiliyah understood, though no longer thinking that that was where she belonged. “What of this bridge, Tharmas?” she asked, for the span they crossed was grander, broader, though not as busy.

“For visitors of status,” Lady Haggitha answered for him, a pride in her tone, a sudden regal air about her posture in the saddle. “We will only use this entrance a single time, though. Once established in the Citadel, then we will come and go by the

upper bridges.”

“For those whose status is without question, the greater the altitude the more important the person you find there, until there are some who live on nothing but the thinnest air,” said Tharmas, as Jahiliyah craned her neck to take in the dizzy height.

“Then that must be a very important person indeed,” said Jahiliyah, seeing a figure who seemed to be no more than a mote of dust, peering over a bridge as slender as a web, but as Lady Haggitha followed her gaze they came into the shadow of the Citadel.

A portcullis barred her way, there were guards there, a captain came forward and saluted before asking formally who sought entrance into the Citadel of Dos Aguas.

“I am Lady Haggitha of Golgonooza, cousin to the Marquis of Dos Aguas, of the same bloodline, the noble House of Chirico. Is the marquis in residence?”

“He is,” the captain answered, giving a signal for the portcullis to be made. “I will escort you into the Citadel, send word ahead that you are here.”

There were as many streets within the Citadel as they had seen on their approach, narrow alleys which opened into squares which were shaded from the sun, or sometimes into halls, neither indoors nor out, enclosed around and above by ornately decorated walls and ceilings. Domes of glass made halls as bright as summer gardens, walls of a vertiginous height made open squares as dim as cellars, torches and gas mantles lit narrow streets while other passages were so broad and bright that they dazzled the eyes. Eventually they came to a square of such a size that there seemed to be a heat haze, a vast quadrangle whose mosaic floor was criss-crossed by a pattern of paths of clean white gravel. Even as people passed back and forth, some with urgency and some quite leisurely, there were others already raking the gravel after them. All around them galleries climbed

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tier upon tier, balconies jutting out where people could be seen gazing down, taking in the comings and goings. The captain leading them across, they reached the far side of the square and were invited to dismount before a colonnaded portico.

A man stepped forward from the shadows, regarded the five travelers for a moment, then asked, "Which of you is the Lady Haggitha?"

"I am Lady Haggitha, cousin to the Marquis of Dos Aguas." She stepped forward as if to challenge the man, looking him up and down as if his dress was overstated, as if his regalia of gold and silver and finest satin was an offense to the eyes. "Do you doubt it?"

"If there is any doubt it will be confirmed before you come within even an arrow's flight of the Marquis," he answered haughtily, but then felt the power of her withering look. "You must beg my pardon, but your clothes do not recommend you as a lady."

"Clothes can be nothing more than a disguise, the brightest packages can conceal the basest contents. My companions and I have traveled far, and not without event."

"I understand, my Lady. If you will follow me."

He led them up a shallow flight of steps, his head held high and his nose pointing the way, through hall after hall, climbing staircase after staircase, along corridors and lobbies and sometimes arcades which were much like malls, having them wonder if they were once again outdoors. Windows they passed gave clues as to the height they had climbed, offering changing aspects to the west and north and east, each switch in their course bringing a different view from a greater height.

By Lady Haggitha's side, Tharmas said, "You spoke of us coming and going, once we are established in the Citadel."

"I did," she agreed. "What of it?"

"And is that your intention, that we should come and go. Or,

rather, what is your intention, now that we are here?”

“You tell me, Tharmas. All along you seem to have known as much about my intentions as I have done. What do I do next, now that I have found the sanctuary of Dos Aguas?”

“It is not for me to say, my Lady,” he said, with a pretence at humility. “It is not seemly for one such as I to seek to instruct one such as you.”

“But it is in your interest that my intentions should tally with yours. My success is your success, so you would have me believe. So what do I do next, Tharmas, to help us both in our ambitions? I would rather you told me directly, rather than influence my actions in some underhand way that I might never be aware of. Be honest with me, Tharmas. Or as honest as you can. That is all I ask.”

Their escort had brought them to a halt at the head of a long broad corridor, had then proceeded ahead to confer with a second man of similar dress at the far end. Windows lining the left wall offered views out to sea, confirming for Lady Haggitha that they had now traveled around to the south side of the Citadel, to the Marquis’ Inner Palace.

“Speak to me, Tharmas,” she said. “We will soon be with the Marquis.”

“The young woman who Urizen shows an interest in, she is the nearest of the five who have come to the Kingdom. Now that we are in Dos Aguas, she draws even nearer still, to judge by your scribe’s intuitions and my projections.”

“So we simply wait here and she comes to us?”

“We wait here as she comes closer, wait here until the time seems opportune for intercepting her.”

The conference at the end of the corridor had finished, their escort was returning, and Lady Haggitha gripped Tharmas’ arm fiercely, as near a threat as she dare with the man. “It is not simply because of Urizen that we make this girl our target?”

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Promise me that. That we take this course not simply because of your hatred of Urizen.”

Tharmas gently uncurled her fingers from his arm. “That Urizen shows an interest in this particular young woman is a sign as sure as eggs that she is the most powerful of the five. That, and the fact that she is nearby, is the reason why we make her our target.”

Their escort faced them, a little more respect in his tone as he announced that the Marquis would see them, turned with dignity but perhaps with a little disappointment that Lady Haggitha’s credentials had been confirmed.

As she followed she whispered to Tharmas, “I do not offer this as our excuse for being in Dos Aguas?”

“For the moment, it might be wise not to,” he agreed, as large doors of carved oak, inlaid with patterns of brass, were opened onto a room which was brilliant with light.

The wall before them seemed to be a single sheet of glass, windows interrupted by only the most slender of columns offering a vista of sea and sky, and from this wash of radiant blue a figure hurried forward, arms extended, long robes flapping as though he was a brightly colored bird falling from the sky.

“Haggitha! Welcome to Dos Aguas! This is delightful! It has been so long!”

“My Lord Marquis,” she managed to acknowledge, before being swept into his embrace.

“My Lord? Marquis? Is that any way to greet a favorite cousin after all this time?” he laughed, hugging her so tightly that he might squeeze the breath from her. “Have you forgotten my name is Vergara? Such you will call me. Though not in public, of course.”

“Vergara. Please?” she gasped, squirming in his arms. “A little breath of air before I swoon in your arms.”

Still laughing, he gave her a final squeeze before releasing

her, caught her by the hand and dragged her across to a couch to sit her beside him, held the hand in his and patted it enthusiastically.

“Vergara. My friends?” she said, drawing his attention to her companions, who still stood in silent witness to the reunion.

“Must call me Lord Marquis, of course.”

“But may they sit in your presence?”

“Of course! Of course!” he said, flapping his free hand about to wave them about the room, to lose themselves in its vast space. “Now tell me how you are. How have you been? It has been such a long time that you must stay with me for at least a year!”

“A while at least,” she smiled. “We have had rather an arduous journey of it since leaving Golgonooza.”

“But what brings you here after so long an absence?” he asked, a frown darkening his face and dulling his good cheer, then decided for himself. “It is that husband of yours, Lovecraft! He has harmed you! He has upset you!”

“I would rather be away from him for a while,” was all Lady Haggitha would admit to.

“I will send an army against him!” the Marquis said, striking a fist against the arm of the couch, scowling when he saw the upholstery give a little cough of dust.

“No, Vergara, there is no need for that, he has not harmed me,” said Lady Haggitha. “If we could just enjoy your hospitality for a while.”

“Of course. Forever. As long as you like,” he said, rising, drawing her with him. “You will have the finest suites the Palace has. And your companions...”

“Will stay with me.”

“They will?” He regarded the others, Jahiliyah and Gamaliel, Basilides and Tharmas, dusty and disheveled from the journey, their appearance suiting them more to the lower levels of the

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Citadel than its present heights. "As you wish, Haggitha."

"Thank you, Vergara. You were always my favorite cousin."

He beamed brightly as he led her to the door. "If the laws of incest had not prohibited it, I really think..."

"Now, now," Lady Haggitha cautioned. "We were but children then."

"Happy days," he remembered fondly. "But I really think..."

"Yes?"

"I will send an army against Lord Lovecraft. If he has not harmed you yet, he will surely do so in the future."

* * *

Griff left Orasula under cover of night. Though Mattathias, in advising him to leave the city, had suggested that there would be no hindrance to him doing so freely he did not feel trusting enough to believe him, realized too late that he should have put more faith in his original instincts. There would be caution in everything he now did, he decided, he would not let the man witness his departure nor even know of it. Everything he had, and all of Leo's possessions too, he left in his lodgings, departed the building while everyone slept and skulked like a thief through the empty streets. Also, leaving by dark helped hide his shame at deserting Leo.

Leo had been taken to a secure cell, he had learned, bound and blindfolded and under a heavy enough guard that any skill or guile or mastery of esoteric arts would serve him no good at all. In the morning he would be removed to a second cell, more secure still, to spend his seven days with the body of his victim before being transported to the mines in the north. Griff had thought hard, though not long, there was not the time, and decided that he could best help Leo by making his way alone to the Garden of Earthly Delights, to find Anna, find Jack, and then return to intercept him as he was taken from Orasula to the mines. Seven days. He hoped it was enough. Only a week, but for

Leo a week spent with the rotting carcass of the man he had killed. He hoped his friend would understand.

Traveling on foot, unburdened, he had put maybe half a dozen miles between himself and the city by the time the sun rose, hunger began to creep up on him and fatigue make his legs feel heavy. He had been told that there were no shortage of farms and ranches in the countryside around Orasula and he veered a little from the trail towards the first he came across. There were horses in a paddock, sleek steeds like the ones Mattathias and Phicol had ridden, and other beasts grazing freely, heifers and oxen, bullocks and buffalo and creatures which might have been hybrid creations. As he skirted the paddock and came to the house, a long low structure of logs and clay and thatch, two dogs came from its rear, yapping and snapping towards him. He threw them a stick which they sat and savaged, thinking that it was a bone.

“Useless curs,” said a man who followed. “Must be going senile. They aren’t usually so easily distracted.” He regarded the dogs with disapproval for a moment, then Griff. “What brings you to my land, stranger?” he asked, looking him up and down.

“A horse. Or rather, a horse didn’t bring me to your land. I’m in need of one.”

“Walked far, then?”

“Far enough that I’d prefer not to walk anymore,” Griff answered.

The man spat into the dust at his feet, kicked the thick spittle around with the toe of his boot. “What happened to your last mount?”

“It died on me.”

“And your provisions? Panniers, bags, saddles? Did they all die on you too, all rotting in the earth even as we speak?” He nodded when Griff offered no reply, was aware of the caution exhibited but did not question it. “You need a horse,” he agreed,

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turning to walk towards the paddock, “and supplies of various sorts, food and bedding and the like if your traveling any distance.” He leant against the fence which enclosed the paddock, pointed. “The dappled mare there, she has stamina enough for any journey, a good turn of speed when it’s needed. It’ll cost you, of course. You understand?”

Griff understood, appreciating that the circumstances of his appearance, on foot, with only the clothes he stood in, would necessarily inflate any price. His hand in his pocket was already sorting coins.

A click-click of the tongue brought the mare trotting over to them. “Strange ways they have in Orasula, I can’t abide them,” said the man, stroking the horse’s chin. “Give me my beasts any day. More faithful, more forgiving in every way.” Without turning to Griff he said, “I suppose you offended one or other of their contrary ways?”

“Will you quote me a price for the horse, and anything else I need?” was all Griff said, admitting nothing, and a price was agreed, the horse was drawn from the paddock, taken back towards the house to be saddled and equipped.

“You travel far?” the man asked, taking provisions from a store at the side of the house, salted meat and biscuits, a blanket and bed roll.

“I am heading east.”

“Away from Orasula, naturally.”

“So my best route would be what?”

“Why east, of course!” the man laughed, heaving panniers onto the horse’s flanks, waited for Griff’s patient smile before continuing, “But if it is advice as to your easiest route that you’re after, then I would suggest you track south a while first, then follow the coast. There is less trouble that way.”

“And what trouble lies east?” asked Griff, checking that the saddle was secure, doing those things which he expected an

experienced horseman would do.

“Depends on how far east you want to go. There is the Garden of Earthly Delights. Avoid that place if it is at all possible. And before that, the String of Pearls can be a hindrance at times.”

“The String of Pearls?” Griff repeated.

“A series of peaks which curve down to the south east, their summits the color of the pearls which give them their name, the air around them of such a strange opalescence that some believe they are inhabited by spirits.”

“Is that what you believe?”

“I believe that I would not venture too far up their slopes. There are tracks which wind through them, but if the weather should fail then be careful, it is all too easy to stray.”

“Thanks for the advice,” said Griff, as the last of his purchases were loaded.

“Thanks for your gold,” said the man, cupping hands for his foot to boost him up into the saddle. “You could have haggled, you know. We could have bargained. You took some of the fun out of the deal.”

“Sorry for spoiling your enjoyment,” Griff apologized, settling himself astride the horse.

“But you are in too much of a hurry, I know, to offer an old man entertainment.” He offered his hand, which Griff shook. “I won’t say have a pleasant journey, for I don’t believe it will be. But I hope you have an uneventful one.”

Griff moved the horse forward at walking pace, denying the urgency the man had imagined, waited until he was out of sight of the man and his beasts before risking a trot. After riding the lumbering carthorse which Arnolfini had sold them, the change of pace seemed perilous at first and it took some time for him to become accustomed to it, to put his faith in the beast beneath him and his own ability to control it. Gradually, though, he began to take some delight in the speed, enjoyed the rush of air in his

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face, the exhilaration as it caught his breath and made him gasp.

The joy of speed carried him leagues which passed in a blur, the landscape around him misting as the rushing breeze bit at his eyes, causing tears to course down his cheeks. The salt of the tears made his face sting, irritating the scratches brought by hurtling breakneck through woods with barely a slackening of pace; his hands and arms were also scored, and he was soaked from the waist down by the numerous streams and fords he had splashed through.

But was it exhilaration which drove him, he then thought, or was it something more akin to panic? He let the horse slow in its own time, sitting upright in the saddle as its speed eased, looked around at the landscape as if it was new, as if he was wondering for the first time how he came to be there. He was filled with an overwhelming feeling of solitude and realized that his tears still ran freely, not brought on by the buffeting breeze but those same weeping tears which had affected him in Orasula. He wiped his face dry, scratches smarting on hands and cheeks where the tears were smeared into them, breathing long and deep to stem the flow of more and promising that he would not cry again until he found Anna, would then permit himself only tears of joy when they were reunited.

When?

If!

Weeks spent apart from her in the past now seemed as nothing and he cursed that land of Eidolon for the conflicting emotions it seemed to occasion in him, now joy and now despair, now anger and now fear, and each one amplified to such a degree that fear made him quake, despair made him weep, anger made him....

The anger flared so quickly that it surprised him, stronger than before when there had been some physical catalyst to explain it, an assault or a threat, some palpable danger. Now

born of pure emotion it sent through his body a flush of heat so fierce that he could feel his damp clothes spit and steam, the air around him crackled and hissed while the land before him shivered. Even after he had dried his tears, cleared his eyes, the landscape around him had seemed as misted as before, as if someone had drawn a veil over it, dulling the colors and softening the shadows. As the air snapped with a sharp crack that veil was torn and with a flash of dazzling clarity, such as a poet might lay claim to, he saw the range of the String of Pearls before him. And around him. And behind him. It was as if his horse, slowed from a furious gallop to a sedate walk, had suddenly leapt more leagues than its legs could physically carry them, transported them from one land to another in a single instant.

He reined his horse to a dead halt, stopped to look around. He could see no track which had led him here, no track which pointed a definite way ahead, just shallow troughs of land such as the one he was in, slung like hammocks between the peaks, the ground rising gently at first at the base of each before rising sharply, a sheer climb to summits which were blunted, bald, rounded like the pearls which gave the range its name, each glowing with an eerie opalescence. There was no sun to guide him, the wispy cloud above offering an overall light but no specific source, and nor was there any sense of time, no notion of hour of the day or of the hours which had passed.

He nudged his horse slowly forward, following the trough around one peak, then curving to follow another, a gentle switchback like a river meandering, always keeping to where the land found its lowest level, never tempted to cut short a corner by taking the higher ground from one trough to the next. Though the light did not dim the air seemed to grow cooler, as if night was drawing near, and he shivered, rested forward in the saddle so that he could feel the heat of the horse rising beneath him, told himself that the tremors which now shook his body were

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nothing more than a physical response to the fall in temperature. They were nothing to do with fear, nor despair, nor loneliness.

But even as he tried to convince himself of this he longed to feel Anna's arms around him, or even just to touch her hand. All this he understood to be true loneliness, the sudden realization that so many days or weeks or months had passed without touching another person, to be denied the confirmation of one's self which contact with another gave, and he hugged the horse's neck tightly, closed his eyes to his sorrow, felt the String of Pearls close in around him and wrap him in their mist.

The chill numbed him, his solitude wearied him

* * *

"Will you explain, now that we are alone?" said Anna to Auberjonois, reaching around him to put her hands on his, to force him to pull back on the reins, slowing the horse to a walk. "What did that woman say to you?"

"She simply advised that Selina needed rest if she was to recover from her wound," Auberjonois answered, but his lie was not convincing.

"I heard that much," Anna said. "I might have felt sick to my guts and as weak as a baby, but I caught that. It's what was said after that I missed. You took her aside, you spoke, when you came back it was like you were looking at me in a new light."

"I was concerned for you," he said, looking ahead to the left and right, his head tracking slowly, but it was not out of vigilance, she could sense this much. "It seemed that you had taken on Selina's sickness, was sharing it with her. I was worried."

"No, Auberjonois. What I saw in your face was more like fear. Whether it was fear for me or fear of me, I don't know, but there was a stricken look in your eyes." She tightened her grip on his hands, drew the horse to a standstill. "Be honest with me. What did that woman have to say?"

Auberjonois disengaged his hands to help her dismount, climbed down from the saddle after her. He was silent for a moment, looking around, then led her to the shade of an oak tree, invited her to sit with him.

“She and her people are Nabis,” he finally began. “The word means ‘prophet’, as best it can be translated.”

“They foretell the future?”

Auberjonois stroked his chin, some days’ growth of whiskers rasping under his touch. “I am a warrior, not a man of letters or learning, but as best as I can explain it they do not so much foretell the future as understand the past and explain the present. They have a knowledge of all manner of sciences and superstitions, have committed to heart any number of books and histories, catalogue and codices. It is by their interpretation of these that they hope to guide the future rather than foretell it, offering clues rather than certainties.”

“And does anyone take their guidance seriously?” asked Anna, recalling the appearance of these Nabis, their dress, making them seem more like wild creatures of the forest than people with any divine sort of calling.

“They were on their way to the Prado, where you have come from, to see the Society of Dilettanti. The Society would consider what they had to say, would debate it at great length, and if they gave the Nabis any credence then so would others.”

“So what did the old woman have to say?” Anna took her medallion from inside her shirt, held it spinning slowly on the end of its chain as if to mesmerize him. “It had something to do with this, didn’t it? Once she saw this she regarded me differently, as if I was special.”

“Even before then,” Auberjonois said. “You were too distracted to notice, but even before she saw that she knew you to be special. You answer me a question, before I say more. Just what did you do to Selina?”

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“I took the arrow from her shoulder.”

Auberjonois shook his head. “No, Anna, it was more than that. For minutes you were bowed over her, your eyes closed, your hands around the arrow, over the wound. It looked like you were as stricken as she was, there was a blush of fever about you.” He let her recall the sensations which had affected her, but if she remembered them she said nothing. “The old woman was right,” he continued, “that arrow was barbed, and most probably poisoned. That is the custom of the Dark Guard, to arm themselves thus. If you had simply removed the arrow then you would have torn out great chunks of Selina’s shoulder.”

Anna thought of explanations, that they were not Dark Guard who had attacked, that they were Dark Guard who did not use barbed arrows, that the barb had broken as the arrow ricocheted off the rock before striking Selina, but Auberjonois would accept none of them. Somehow, he said, she had fused that arrowhead as efficiently as if it had been held in the flames of a forge, molded its point from a honed blade to a dulled bulb of metal.

“So I have some talent which is denied the people of Eidolon,” she accepted. “It doesn’t explain why that woman should look at me like a savage would look at a scientist. What shook her?”

Auberjonois pointed to the small disc of slate, even as she slipped it back inside her shirt. “Art. Eternal. Light.”

“Anne Elisabeth Louise!”

“There is a mention which the old woman has committed to memory...”

“A prophecy?” Anna scoffed.

“...a mention of one in the Kingdom who seeks for a joy without pain, a life without death, a solid without fluctuation.”

“That seems like a harmless enough aspiration,” she said.

“No, Anna, it is not,” he contradicted. “You must have

realized by now that it is the very nature of Eidolon that it is constantly changing. It is the nature of any world that there should be opposites. There can be no joy without pain, no life without death, no solid which is without fluctuation. If that was the case then that world would be dead. Yet this is how one person would have it, this is the threat -the divination, the prophecy, however you would have it- this is the warning that the Nabis were taking to the Prado, so that it might be made common knowledge.”

“And my part in this?” Anna asked hesitantly.

“There is one who will come who will banish the threat,” said Auberjonois, repeating the words of the old woman as best he could recall them. “She is Art. She is Eternal. She is Light.”

“I am art?” Anna laughed, aware that he was referring to her. “Well Griff would never have accepted that! And eternal? It makes me sound like some sort of goddess!” She smiled at Auberjonois, wanting him to share in her amusement, but he regarded her with even greater gravity. “Oh, for heaven’s sake! It’s coincidence, pure and simple! There must be hundreds, thousands of others with my initials!”

“But none with your power,” he stated simply, his gaze challenging her to argue. “You cannot deny the power you have in Eidolon. I have seen you wield it.”

“And its only purpose for the moment is to find Griff, to get us out of here and back to where we belong. Griff, me, Selina and the others, we don’t belong here, Auberjonois. We can’t be a part of your half-baked prophecies if we’re not meant to be a part of your world.” There was no humor in her voice now, no amusement, as she vowed, “I will find Griff, we will return for Selina and we will leave.”

Auberjonois rose silently, walked some paces away, stood with his back to her. He shook his head slowly, no, just the once.

“Are you saying that I won’t find Griff?” Anna demanded.

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She stood, strode quickly over to him, pulled him by the arm to face her. "You promised you would help me, Auberjonois."

"I will help you all I can. I am a man of my word."

"But?" she prompted. "What other notions did that old woman poison your mind with?"

"I would never hurt you, Anna," he promised, and there was a tear in his eye, the single tear which was all that a warrior could shed. "It is only out of kindness that I tell you."

"Tell me what, Auberjonois? Out with it."

"You may find Griff, but you can never be with him, you can never return with him."

Anna stared at him coldly, not permitting any tears herself, waiting silently for an explanation.

"What most people call 'intrusions' into the Kingdom, other more knowledgeable people, such as the Dilettanti, and the members of the Schools, call by another name."

"They refer to them as 'emanations'," Anna knew, from her days of instruction at the Prado.

"Emanations, yes," Auberjonois nodded. "The landscape around us is an emanation of something in your world, as is the Prado, Golgonooza, the Garden of Earthly Delights. In the same way a child can be an emanation of its mother, evil an emanation of good, night an emanation of day. Emanations are counterparts of each other, opposites; neither can exist without the other, but nor can they either be the same thing, the same single entity." He sighed, his shoulders slumped as if he bore the weight of a problem which he could not resolve. "As I say, I am a warrior, not a learned man, but as best I can understand it, both you and the one you love are emanations."

"If you mean that we came into this world from a different one, then yes, we are," said Anna, quite comfortable with that notion.

"I mean more than that. I mean emanations such as the

counterparts I spoke of, opposites in more ways than just your respective genders. It is as if you are of this world and your friend is of the other...”

“I am not of this world!” Anna protested, but it was as if Auberjonois did not hear.

“...you cannot exist without each other, but you can never be one. That is what the old woman told me.” He turned sharply away, as if he hated himself for what he was repeating to her, began to walk slowly back to the horse. “You and he will never be one, it is an impossibility as irrefutable as night coexisting with day, as dark coexisting with light.”

* * *

The stink of the Malterre Marshes still hung about Lord Lovecraft, as he stood waist deep in the river it seemed to color the water around him, dulling it to a sulphurous muddy brown. He waded deeper out into the current, let the water take him, jack-knifed down to immerse himself fully, trying to rid himself of the scent of contamination.

Given his commission, he had struck straight out from the city, eager to fulfill it with the least possible delay, had led the mounted troops across the Marshes while the chariots and foot soldiers, the wagons and all the rest of the army’s retinue had detoured around, traveling the easier southern route. Now he had made camp on the western bank of the River Estraval to await their arrival, to set up his defenses along a five mile length of its course. Breaking the surface when his lungs began to ache for air, he trod water and looked back to the land, to where the bank rose, gently at first but then a little more sharply to form a shallow ridge no more than a few hundred yards away. He would have his archers and crossbowmen positioned there, catapults behind them, just out of view of the river, foot soldiers before them, at the foot of the slope. For the men he had at his disposal to be able to spread themselves a full five miles there would have

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to be gaps, of course, and he would group his force in battalions, block after block lining the ridge in every direction, and where there was a space between each there would be a squadron of cavalry or chariots ready to sweep through and down to the river. An opposing force would lose many men trying to cross it.

Yes, he decided, as he strode slowly from the river, shaking himself like a dog after a swim, the formation would suffice. After all, what would it have to face? What would it have to defend against? van Vogt's fancies that Golgonooza was under threat? No, not even that. He knew there was no threat, they both did, the stratagem which had been forced upon him was as much of political expediency as military necessity. He and his troops were sentenced to kick their heels here until he could think of an excuse to return to Golgonooza.

He returned to the bank and pulled on his britches, picked up his tunic, then climbed the rise to the land beyond which was hidden from view of the river. The first wave of his army was still busily making camp, settling horses securely, putting up tents, digging latrines, and the men he passed were all in good humor, more happy than he to be away from the city, enjoying once again the routine of army life which had been denied them for so long. But how would they feel weeks from now, or months, with nothing to occupy them but maneuvers, training, the occasional foray across the river as part of a small scouting party? They would become bored, sooner rather than later, and he saw that van Vogt had been cleverer than he had first suspected. Not only had he rid himself of Lord Lovecraft and his army, but he had also presented them with a situation which would ultimately lead to their demoralization.

His smile was forced as he exchanged greetings with his men, winding his way between them as he made his way to his tent, his amiability masking his concern, his attention focused on finding excuses to break camp even before the whole of the force

had assembled, needing not so much to defend Golgonooza as return there as soon as possible.

“Any news of the rest of the force?” he asked his aide, who was overseeing the arrangement of his quarters. One man was setting up a cot in a corner of the tent, another was polishing armor and oiling leathers, a third setting out his weapons. A table had been erected, on which were maps and writing materials.

The aide turned from his task, said, “The chariots should be here by late afternoon, my Lord, the infantry and the wagons within the same hour. By nightfall all should be assembled and settled, we will have everything we need.”

“Cooks and carpenters, wheelwrights and whores.” Lovecraft nodded. “Very well, adjutant, go and make ready for their arrival. See that the men already here are settled themselves and able to assist when the remainder arrive. I want our camp complete by the time the sun sets.”

“Yes, my Lord,” the adjutant said, bowing and leaving, the three others finishing with their tasks and following quickly after.

Alone, Lord Lovecraft lay down on the cot, switched off his mind to all that troubled him, to all of life’s dissatisfactions. He dozed fitfully but it passed the time, was roused in the late afternoon by the trundle of wagons and the slapping of feet, stepped from his tent to see a cloud of dust slowly clearing as the rest of his banished army came to a halt. At least there would now be decent food, he yawned, rather than dried meat and biscuits, and he ordered for some cattle to be slaughtered directly, set the butchers and the cooks to work before all else. Foot soldiers unshouldered their packs, began to erect their conical tents in ordered ranks and files; horses were unhitched from their chariots and tethered next to the cavalry’s mounts; wagons were unloaded, workshops and forges set up. A little towards the western perimeter, farthest from the front line of defense, he saw the green and white stripes of the surgeon’s tent,

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and then the frilled red canopies of the whores' settlement. Predictably they were among the first to be ready, and as he approached he could smell the fragrance of their perfumes, the sticks of incense they already burned.

And they could smell him a distance off, it seemed, for they came from their tents in their finery, in skimpy blouses and short chemises, in fuller dresses of more subtle charm for those who wished to be more cleverly alluring or were keen to conceal their true age. Twining themselves about the tent poles, trailing painted fingers along the guys, they called to him as he passed, their comments as ribald as he would have expected, and he smiled at their innuendos and crude overtures, promised that he would return, though he would be more likely to have a couple of the girls brought to his own tent.

As he passed their compact village of harlotry, and the girls returned to their waiting and preening, one slipped away from their company to follow him. She was not discreet enough to be hoping she might trail him unseen, but did not directly accost him, so perhaps she was simply nervous. He walked a distance away from the camp, to where a stream branched off from the river, stood as if contemplatively, to give her a chance to approach. Finally he turned.

The sun had now fallen low in the sky and through the thin material of the dress she wore her figure was silhouetted, the full hips, the slim waist, the broad shoulders which hinted at a copious bosom. Long hair hung about her shoulders like a cowl and her features were hidden by its shadow and by the radiance of the sun setting behind her.

"You have followed me long enough, girl," he said. "Step closer so that I might see you."

She walked forward as elegantly as any whore, her hips swaying, her arms swinging gently at her side, stood before him with her head cocked a little to one side, her posture part

submission and part challenge. He reached out and took her hands, turned her so that he could see her more clearly.

She might have been beautiful at one time, there was an attractive proportion to her features which echoed the perfection of her figure, but in the orange glow of the sunset he now saw that her complexion looked like the surface of a distant planet, pocked and cratered and offering barely an inch of smooth skin.

He released her hands, asked, "What is it you want, girl?"

"You will be summoning one of the women to your tent tonight, my Lord?"

He would, it was one of the few things which made days between conflict bearable, but said, "And what business is it of yours if I am?"

"Then I would like to be that woman," she stated flatly.

It was only with an effort that he stopped himself from either laughing with amusement or grimacing with distaste. The caravan of whores always carried with it its quota of the old and the ugly, there for the comfort of the butchers and the carpenters and the lowest of the troops, but for each plain girl there would be two who were pretty and three of superlative beauty, choice enough to satisfy the most particular tastes. He regarded her with interest, then, that she could accost him with neither shame nor embarrassment.

"Do I recognize you?" he asked.

She smiled, excusing what might have been a lack of tact, for a face such as hers, once seen, would never be forgotten. "My name is Fitna," she told him.

"Fitna. Fitna." He stroked his cheek as he repeated the name, trying to place it.

"I was once the maid of your wife, the Lady Haggitha."

"Ah, yes," he remembered, happier now that he could fit face to name, but still confused by her approach. "So what is there to recommend you to my bed?" he asked.

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“My hatred of your wife,” she answered boldly.

“What?”

“Lady Haggitha did this to me,” she said, raising an elegant hand to touch a ravaged skin. “It was her cosmetics, her cruelty and evil which left me like this.”

He nodded with some sympathy, that a once beautiful face should be left so scarred. “But what do you hope to achieve by sharing my bed for the night.”

“It would be my first act of revenge, to sleep with her husband.”

The last sliver of sun had sunk over the horizon, there was silence for the moment until the night creatures awoke, when the owls would hoot and the insects chatter. Lord Lovecraft broke that silence with a loud laugh, it rose from his belly and filled his chest, echoed across the night like a call to arms.

“Then you shall have your revenge!” he said, caught her wrist and pulled her to him, wrapping his arms around her to hug her with delight. “Come! I have summoned you!”

“You will look at my face as we make love?” she asked, allowing herself to be led to his tent, letting her body rest heavily against his. “You will not turn away in disgust? You will meet me eye to eye to see my hatred?”

“I will be privileged to.”

“It will make your enjoyment all the greater,” she promised, and now she made promises with her hands too, touching him, caressing him. “To be left like this is a handicap I have had to overcome, I have learned to compensate in other ways. There are few who have learned the name who will now shy away from Fitna.”

“You were a Lady’s maid and now you are a whore,” Lord Lovecraft remarked, but she seemed to regard this as no great change of fortune.

“Once I whored for Lady Haggitha, now I whore for myself.”

“My dear Fitna, your hatred of my wife already has me in a high state of arousal,” he chuckled, then choked back his amusement with a sigh as her hand cupped his groin, her touch as soft as a velvet pouch around a jewel.

Two guards positioned at his tent each kept their gaze fixed straight ahead as he escorted Fitna inside. Immediately he poured two cups of wine, turned with them to see that she was already unlacing the top of her dress. With a shrug of her shoulders it fell free, falling about her waist.

“You have beautiful breasts,” he said, the cups of wine still in his hands, the surface of each rippling slightly.

“But it is not my breasts you will look at, is it my Lord?” she smiled, and tossed her long hair back from her face. In the tawny light of the lantern her scars seemed more like stains, a regular pattern like a tattoo inked on her skin, as attractive an embellishment as any cosmetic which might have caused them. He set down the cups of wine and went to her, ran his fingertips across her brow, down her mottled cheeks, took her face in his hands to kiss her.

He closed his eyes as their tongues met and instantly she told him to open them.

“Meet my gaze, see my hatred,” she demanded, and regarded him coldly as she backed towards the cot with him, falling back on it and lifting her skirts to draw him to her.

And throughout their lovemaking his eyes never left hers once, he witnessed her passion, lived every second of his as if it was a minute, every minute as if it was an hour, his energy never waning for he was locked into her hatred. Even when he finally rolled from her, after orgasm upon orgasm had shaken his body, she rolled with him so that his eyes never left hers.

“You will summon me to your tent again, my Lord?” she asked, guessed.

“I will,” he answered weakly. “That I will.” He wiped the

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sweat from his brow and she caught hold of his hand, licked the perspiration from the tip of each finger. He smiled at the gesture, then said, "You do realize, though..."

"That you cannot, that you would prefer not, to be seen with me in public," she understood, and hushed him with a finger to his lips. Sure of his silence, she then kissed him and rose, began to fasten her dress. "I can share your bed, you can share my passion. That is enough. Rest easy, Lord Lovecraft, I want nothing more, and certainly do not wish to be the painted puppet who decorates your arm on civil occasions."

She strode proudly away, pulled back the flap of the tent. "You have another visitor, my Lord," she said, before disappearing into the night.

Lord Lovecraft followed, rearranging his clothing, which his passion had never permitted him the time to remove, and dragging his fingers through his hair, sweeping it back from his face. Fitna was already long gone, and in her place, awaiting his attention, he found Mattathias.

"Well, friend, I wondered when I would see you again, if ever," said Lord Lovecraft, taking the man by the hand.

"My apologies, my Lord. I had to travel all the way back to Golgonooza, before finding that you had departed." Mattathias frowned. "At the First Minister's instigation, I understand?"

"Correct, but talk of that can wait. Do I judge by your haste in searching me out that you have news?" He led his captain into the tent, going to the wine which had been poured but not touched. "You found Arnolfini's two artists cum lawyers cum whatever?" he asked, passing Mattathias a cup. "You have them?"

"I have one," said Mattathias, draining the cup and then gratified to see it refreshed. "He is presently in custody in Orasula, will soon be transported north to the mines."

"Only one? What of the other?"

“Was given his liberty. If I might explain, my Lord.”

“Please.”

“Phicol and I intercepted them to the west of Orasula, within minutes were witness to the power they can wield. It is awesome, my Lord,” he said, and explained the circumstances of their encounter, described their battle with the beast and how the two strangers were able to defeat it in minutes when it had held himself and Phicol trapped for hours. “We understood immediately that we could never hope to take the two of them, understood also that with just one as your ally you would be well nigh invincible.”

“Take more wine, Mattathias,” Lord Lovecraft invited, sitting on the edge of his cot. “Tell me more.”

Mattathias crossed to the table to fill his cup a third time, drew up a seat facing Lord Lovecraft and described his entrapment of the one now in custody, goaded into a crime which would incur the inevitable sentence.

“I felt certain that the provocation they were subjected to, from the men he had hired, would be too much for one or the other to suffer. Though they have power, they have little control of it. They are like spastic children wielding razor sharp blades.”

“You have done well, Mattathias, your strategy was as near perfect as any I would have opted for myself.” Lord Lovecraft rose from his cot, called for the guards, his adjutant, anyone to attend him, paced impatiently about the confined space until a face peered around the tent. “Adjutant. See that the men are bedded down for the night, all but the sentries. We are breaking camp at first light.”

“My Lord?”

“Do it!”

The adjutant hurried off and Mattathias smiled, recognizing Lord Lovecraft’s eagerness, that impulsiveness which had so often directed his decisions in battle, and with such success that

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it could rarely be faulted.

“You wish to go after this young man immediately?” he supposed.

“Immediately.”

“Even though he is secure enough for the moment?”

“Even though. And if I am to go to Orasula for him I would prefer to be behind my own line of defenses. The army will move across the river tomorrow.”

“That would take us closer to Dos Aguas, my Lord,” Mattathias pointed out. “Might it not seem that we are marching on the city?”

“Who cares?”

* * *

“Will your cousin really send an army against Lord Lovecraft?” asked Tharmas, his brow creased with concern, or perhaps simply troubled by the glare of the sun striking the glass canopy overhead. “I really do not think it would be appropriate at the present moment. It is enough that we are away, safe from your husband. We do not need to attract his attention.”

“Have no fear on that count, Tharmas,” Lady Haggitha said. “Vergara is full of enthusiasms which grow bright like the sun but then fade as soon as it sets, but it is never the same sun which rises every morning. Today, tomorrow, he will soon be fired by some other fancy. It is best to let him be, to enjoy his hospitality and the comforts he affords us.”

And her cousin had afforded them great comforts in the short time since their arrival, had seen them established in a grand suite of rooms on an upper floor of the Citadel, had supplied them with wardrobes of clothes of such numbers that they could have changed dress every hour of every day for the next month and never exhausted their variety. Lady Haggitha felt like a woman renewed, to be wearing silk and lace again, Jahilyah looked almost like a Lady in the dress she wore and

Gamaliel, though uncomfortable, seemed quite the beau. Only Tharmas had declined the opportunity of a change of dress, within an hour of settling in his room had stripped his clothes to wash and dry them, and now wore them still, the shapeless linen shirt and trousers, the open sandals, the woven satchel slung about his shoulders. The only comfort he seemed to enjoy was culinary, Dos Aguas offered a host of cuisines and he delighted in their variety, one moment enjoying the simplest food in the basest eating house in the bowels of the Citadel, and then, even before it seemed that he could have digested this, sampling the most refined epicurean orgies which the upper levels had to offer.

He grumbled softly as they strolled along an arcade, Lady Haggitha beside him, Jahiliyah and Gamaliel following behind, they were incoherent words of obvious discontent which escaped his lips but he slapped his flat belly and said that it was this which was complaining.

“Now over there,” he pointed, to where the present arcade met a number of others in an open square, “if my geography serves me correctly there is a bistro which has been highly recommended.”

“And what does it serve?” asked Lady Haggitha, cautious of his tastes at the same time that she was amused by his appetite, for some of the food she had tasted in the eateries of the lower levels had been of a curious provenance.

“The finest sea food imaginable, if rumors are to be believed,” he answered, licking his lips. “Mussels, whelks, rose, prawns the size of catfish.” He turned to address Jahiliyah. “You will not have tasted sea food, will you, this being your first visit to the coast? It will make your palate dance with delight.”

“Or your stomach tumble with torment,” Lady Haggitha added.

“Not in Dos Aguas, and not in this establishment,” Tharmas told her, striding enthusiastically into the square. “The sea food

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here is so fresh that it is trying to leap off the plate even as you try to stab it with your fork.”

The square was broad and open, there was a clear uncovered sky above and the alleys and arcades which fed it were so engineered that breezes were drawn in from the Citadel's outer walls, shifting all the time so that one moment there was the clean fragrance of open prairie, the next the sharp tang of the sea. A mixture of people promenaded about the square, travelers and visitors to the Citadel mixing with the local populace, the level it was situated at offering a middle ground where the lords and ladies from high could taste a somewhat simpler life while those with the money or the courage could momentarily elevate themselves a step or two up the hierarchy to sample its comforts. Tharmas found the bistro he wanted situated beside an ornamental pond and seated his party at a table close to the edge. Mallards and swans glided sedately across its waters, dragonflies and water boatmen skimmed its placid surface, skipping around lily pads and darting between clumps of rushes.

“Isn't this charming?” said Jahilyah, now settling to the life of comfortable ease after so many days of deprivation and discomfort. “And aren't the swans lovely?” she commented, her country upbringing having her more accustomed to creatures which lived for a purpose rather than simply for decoration.

“Very tasty, when cooked with a caper sauce,” said Tharmas, and laughed at her obvious horror. “What troubles you, girl? You ate beef, mutton, pork where you were raised, did you not? I'm sure you saw them trotting happily about the land before they were slaughtered.”

“Yes, but these things, they seem too pretty to eat.”

Tharmas tutted at her fixed preconceptions of what constituted food. “The first enjoyment to be gained from any feast is in its aesthetic appeal. Now if you saw one of those things plucked and gutted and roasted, the curve of the neck as it sits on

the platter, the neck left just for show, of course, you don't eat that-

Lady Haggitha laughed as her maid's horror mounted, said, "I think you had better still your gourmet appreciation, Tharmas, before you ruin the poor girl's appetite."

He frowned at what he saw to be a philistine attitude to food, said, "I take it that I would be advised not to order starfish or sea horses, then."

"Best not," Lady Haggitha agreed.

"No pickled jellyfish?"

"No."

"It looks no more offensive than tripe."

"Spare the girl," Lady Haggitha asked nicely, seeing the girl's face growing increasingly paler.

She called for drink, a carafe of chilled wine which was the color of honey but as light as a morning dew, poured them all glasses while Tharmas selected from the menu which was offered, turning to her for approval of each choice he made. She nodded her satisfaction with the final selection, he shrugged as if to say that it would have to do.

While they sipped their wine and waited for their food Lady Haggitha asked him if he had any fresh intuitions regarding the whereabouts of the girl they sought.

Looking down his nose, scanning the square and people who passed back and forth, he said, "I do not have intuitions, my Lady. It is Basilides who has the intuitions. I make projections from the possibilities he offers, employ science and good sense to make something more certain of them."

"Science?" said Lady Haggitha, raising an eyebrow. "Was it science which dealt with those brigands who waylaid us? Was it science which made your journey here so easy when compared with our arduous trek? Come no, Tharmas, that seemed more akin to magic."

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“The magic of yesterday is the science of today,” he said, with a wink and a smile. He took from his satchel the parcel of cloth which he consulted every day, unfolded it on the table for her to see. “Take this, for example,” he said, tracing his fingers over its surface.

“A map?”

“Of sorts. That would be the easiest way to describe it. It is based on the intuitions which your scribe first gave me. You see where the five strangers first made their appearances in Eidolon?” He pointed, once, twice, three times. “And where Basilides has sensed intrusions which suggest their presence. From these it is a simple matter of science to project their progress, thus.” As he passed his hand over the square of cloth its surface shimmered and pulsed. “A simple application of science, geometry, logic and chance which projects their movements.”

“Logic? Science?” Lady Haggitha repeated, with the doubting tone of a skeptic. “Where is the science when I see lines drawn even though your fingers do not touch the cloth?”

“A quibble,” said Tharmas dismissively. “A petty detail. Why must women always pick up on petty details?”

“Because men so often overlook them,” she responded, certain in her belief. “So tell me. Where does your science and logic and geometry and chance point to this person being now?”

“She is...” Tharmas began, but then fell silent, his eyes no longer on the cloth before him but on the throng around them, his gaze tracking slowly, steadily, as if trying to fix on just one among the crowd.

A waiter came with the food he had ordered, set down on their table bowls steaming with boiled shellfish and baked fillets, with portions of fish cut into strips or rolled into parcels. Despite her earlier uncertainty Jahiliyah began to help herself, finding her appetite returned, and fed morsels to Gamaliel seated beside her, but Tharmas ignored the feast for the moment. Lady

Haggitha, noticing, followed his gaze, her eyes tracking back and forth as his did until she thought she spied their target.

Through the crowd a couple approached, crossing at a tangent, the man standing tall and erect, of a proud physique and with the bearing of a warrior. He matched his stride to that of the young woman beside him, whose steps were slow and deliberate, like those of a convalescent only recently free of her sick-bed. His manner was protective, attentive, while hers suggested a weak and weary attitude. He drew back the seat of an adjacent table, held it steady while she sat, then took the one next to her, his shoulder touching hers as if she needed his support.

“Tharmas? What is it?” asked Lady Haggitha, but he silenced her with a quick tick-tock of a finger as he regarded the couple intently.

The man ordered bowls of fish broth, muttering something about it being useful in building up the strength of his companion. Her complexion was pale, there were dark circles about her eyes, and she nodded slowly, too fatigued to thank him for his consideration as he rearranged the shawl about her shoulders, drew the table an inch or two closer, fussed quietly and gently as if she was a fragile artifact.

He caught Tharmas’ gaze upon him and frowned.

“You have traveled far?” said Tharmas, with an understanding smile, and Lady Haggitha noticed a glint in his eye even though his face was in shadow, a warmth she recognized from their first encounter, when he had been so persuasive in his offer of help.

Science or magic, he was exercising some charm on the stranger, who answered, “A fair distance.”

“Then fish broth is just what is needed for reviving the spirit.” Tharmas plucked a shellfish from the bowl before him, cracked it open and picked at the flesh, but never once let his gaze loose its hold on the man he addressed. “Would you care for

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a glass of our wine while you wait for your broth?" he invited, and without any prompting Lady Haggitha found herself passing across the carafe of wine.

The stranger accepted willingly, though he seemed confused that he should do so, poured a glass for himself and the young woman, who now spoke for the first time, offering a quiet 'thank you' as she raised the glass to her lips with both hands.

"The journey seems to have taken its toll on your lady friend," Tharmas commented.

"It had its difficulties," the man acknowledged, and when Tharmas nodded it was as if he was encouraged to elaborate. "We met up with the Dark Guard," he said. "My friend was wounded, caught an arrow in the shoulder."

Tharmas' eyes widened, with a surprise which could have been real or could have been faked. "But I was given to understand that the Dark Guard always used arrows which were barbed and poisoned. The young lady seems to have coped with her injury remarkably well. She is weakened, but alive."

"She has her friend to thank for that. It was fortunate that she was there."

"Fortunate indeed," said Tharmas. "But here, your broth is coming. We will talk again, after you have eaten. I am Tharmas, by the way, and this is Lady Haggitha, in the company of her maid and groom."

"Siddig and Selina," the man returned, before setting to his broth.

Tharmas gave a low bow of acknowledgement and turned to Lady Haggitha, whose expression was enough that she had no need to put her question. "She is one of them," he told her.

"The one we seek?" asked Lady Haggitha hopefully.

"No. The lesser of the two. It is the other, the one who nullified the effect of the Dark Guards' poison, who I seek."

Lady Haggitha caught the subtle but deliberate phrasing of

the words, said, "You seek? Do I detect some shift of intention here, Tharmas? What was once something we sought has now become something that you seek? I hope you are not contemplating betraying me."

"Not in the least," he assured her. "You seek one of those who can wield the power of the Afflatus. Well you have her, seated at the table beside you. Oh, I know she might seem pasty, weak, as frail as a woman in her dotage for the moment. But if she did not have the power of the Afflatus she would be long dead by now." He took her hand, his eyes burning with that persuasive warmth of his. "Believe me, her power will be strong enough to satisfy your needs."

"But not yours?"

"When will you trust me, when I say that though our goals share a common interest they are not the same? I do not want any of these creatures, simply wish to ensure that Urizen does not get his hands on the one he has taken a fancy to." He squeezed her hand, his gaze intent, said, "Now if you could charm the young warrior who calls himself Siddig..."

"You seem quite able to do that without my help," she remarked, minding how obliging Siddig had been in responding to questions disguised as conversation.

"I would like to quiz the woman, there are things I would know, so if you could keep her escort happily distracted-"

Whether she trusted Tharmas or not Lady Haggitha turned to Siddig at the next table, a scented handkerchief in her hand. "Such a balmy day, is it not?" she smiled at him, wafting the handkerchief and perfuming the air.

* * *

A buzzing of insects woke Griff and he opened his eyes to see a woman seated opposite him, the dark sheen of her dress reflecting the light in a shimmer of iridescent blues and greens, her pale complexion catching an afterglow of color. In her lap, its

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similar color almost camouflaging it, there was a beetle the size of a kitten, and as she stroked it it gave off a rapid ticking sound, so soft that it was almost like a purr of delight. She smiled down at the creature, tapped a tattoo on its back with fingernails as dark and shining as its carapace, then returned her gaze to Griff, lying prone on a bed some feet away.

A fly buzzed past his face and he swatted it away with a lazy gesture, with an effort raised himself on one elbow.

“So you live. You are awake.”

From the woman’s ear a tiny scarab of vivid green hung on a thin gold chain, swinging gently with the movement of her head, then slowly coming to a stop. As she inclined her head to regard him, though, and the scarab brushed her pale neck, he saw it crawl across her skin, over the line of her jaw, onto her cheek as far as its fine gold leash would allow it. He tore his gaze from the living jewel, from the monstrous beetle which was cradled in her lap like a pet, looked around the room in which he lay. It was a simple room, dark, but made bright by woven rugs and hangings, filled with plants and flowers which teemed with life, grubs and caterpillars inching across leaves, flies and bees and even a tiny humming bird hovering about the colored cups of almost every flower. Bouquets of herbs and dried flowers hung from the rafters of the low ceiling, and through an open window off to his left butterflies and dragonflies came and went at will. A loud buzzing by his ear made him flinch and he heard the woman chuckle softly.

“There is something about my lodgers that upsets you?” she asked, waving her hand as if to conduct the choreography of the insects which filled the air.

He shuddered. “Bees. Wasps.”

“Harmless,” she told him, snapped her fingers and immediately there was silence within the room. A single large bee settled on her knuckle, stayed there until she waved her hand,

then flew to the window, leading a migration of creatures from the room. She set down the beetle which had been in her lap, gave it a pat which sent it scuttling across the floor to the open door. "You must be hungry. Would you like something to eat?" she then said, rising from her seat.

She was a big woman, perhaps a head taller than him, but not fat, her large frame moving with an easy grace as her dress swayed about her ankles in heavy folds, its iridescence dazzling. His eyes followed her as she crossed the room, then settled on the open window as she continued to a table at the far end of the room. The landscape outside was clear, bright, too much like a spring day to resemble the country as he remembered it around the String of Pearls.

"Where am I?" he asked, as the woman took fruit, berries, nuts and grapes from a bowl and set them in a shallow wooden dish.

"Casa Borboleta, my home," the woman answered, over her shoulder.

"And who are you?"

She turned, came to him, her large frame making her seem like some earth-mother, like some attendant at a bacchanal as she brought him the dish of fruit. "My name is Janas," she said, offering him the dish, then standing there and looking down at him, as if insisting that he eat.

He took a plum, bit into it, felt the sharpness of its juices burst on his tongue. With a satisfied smile she sat, then, on the edge of the bed, setting the bowl down within his reach.

"Your name is Janas, this is Casa Borboleta. That still doesn't tell me where I am."

"You are at the eastern base of the String of Pearls, about two thirds of the way along its length." She leant forward to wipe a drop of juice from the corner of his mouth, rubbed it between her fingertips as if testing its texture. "You were wandering

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aimlessly between one peak and the next,” she said, slowly tapping her index finger against the pad of her thumb, feeling the juice tacky to the touch, then sucking her fingers dry. “You might have been wandering still if I had not come across you. You were asleep across your horse, your arms embracing its neck as if it was your dearest friend, your only friend.” He had finished the plum and she took the stone from him, tossed it through the open window and then selected a nut from the dish beside him, offered it to his lips. “Here, try one of these. You will find them revivifying.”

He bit delicately on the nut as she held it, felt her sharp nail scratch his lower lip, tried to move back, move away, to raise himself in the bed, but found himself lacking the strength.

“Yes, embracing the horse like it was your only friend in the world,” she recalled, smiling as fondly as a mother picturing her child in the cot. “But it is not, is it?”

“What?” he said, trying to clear his head, for there was a soft burr to her voice, a drone which seemed to dull his senses as effectively as a balmy summer day.

“Not your only friend. The horse. A sad state of affairs that would be. I was cheered to hear you speak of your loved one, though, in your dreams or your delirium you spoke her name often as I led you back here. Anna.” She spoke the name as a snake might hiss a threat, soft and sibilant, a lisping cadence. “Anna, I need you.... Anna, I miss you.... I am coming, Anna....,” she mimicked, and though she still smiled there was something bitter about it, as though she was tasting unripe fruit. “There is something so touching, so endearing about the love of a man for a woman,” she said, clasping her hands to her chest.

Her face flushed and the bright green scarab did an agitated dance across her cheek, as if scalded by her skin.

“Yes, I must get to her,” he said, but floundered in the bed when it was his intention to rise from it.

“Of course. But not just yet. You don’t have the strength.” She stood, said, “Rest a while, I will leave the fruit beside you, go pick vegetables to make you something hot and nourishing.”

The room dimmed as her large frame filled the door, her dress rippling in the light so that she passed like a wraith, like a spirit dematerializing. Alone, he gathered the energy to move, could lift himself on his elbows but no further. His legs felt like lead, the muscles fatigued, but something more than this too, as if they were unable to summon up not just the energy but also the motivation. Pivoting from the waist, which was all that he could manage, he reached behind to stack pillows and cushions against the wall, then fell back against them, exhausted by the effort. A small spider, lagging behind the rest who had departed at Janas’ instruction, skittered across the foot of the bed, then dropped to the floor. He scratched his thighs, wondering what there might be lurking beneath the bed, felt his skin tingle as the irritation eased.

So there was sensation below the waist, he was not paralyzed.

Just tired.

His eyes grew heavy. Like an aftertaste of medicine the texture of the fruit he had eaten still lingered on his tongue and he dozed, then fell into a deeper sleep, dreaming that he heard Anna’s name spoken, though it was not in his voice.

When he awoke the door was closed, though the window remained slightly ajar, and moths fluttered in to dance around the flames of the candles which had been lit. Janas had her back to him, was in an alcove, at a stove, and the smell of herbs filled the room, the aroma of stocks and simmering vegetables. She heard him shift in the bed and half turned to smile at him as she tasted from a wooden spoon.

“Almost ready,” she said, dropping the spoon into the pot and then turning fully to face him, her hands on her hips. She

had folded her sleeves back to her elbows while she cooked and the pale skin was in stark contrast to her dark dress, as white as her face, as white as the soft underbelly of a forest reptile. "You will eat at the table?" she said, her question presented as directly as a statement of fact, and came towards him, extending her hand. "Come, I will help you, you still seem a little weary."

Her hand took his, then slid the length of his arm from the wrist to the elbow, offering her support. Her own arm felt as smooth as silk, but chill to the touch, as if the blood ran cold through her veins, and though the arm was slim there was strength in it, it took his weight easily and levered him from the bed.

"Janas, what is wrong with me?" he asked, feeling weary in both body and spirit as she helped him cross to the table like a nurse leading a doddering geriatric.

"Fatigue, that is all," she said, seating him at the table, nudging him forward so that he was snug against its edge. "Who knows how long you were lost in the String of Pearls, but another day more, perhaps even an hour, and I doubt that you would have found your way out alive."

Satisfied that he was comfortably settled, she returned to the stove to stir the pots a time or two more, took pinches of herbs which she crumbled and sprinkled, then proceeded to ladle out the hot food. She set before him a bowl of some steaming pea-green liquid, a plate of baked and roasted vegetables which were covered with a red berry sauce, returned again with food for herself and sat facing him across the table.

She picked up a spoon, offered one to him, was about to begin but then said, "You don't need meat, I hope."

He shrugged, and she took this to mean that he didn't, leant across the table to take his hand. Her grip was strong or his was weak, her fingernails pressed against the flesh of his palm until it seemed that they might pierce the skin.

“Good,” she said, after moments in which his eyes seemed unable to leave hers, entranced by the flecks of brown and blue and amber. She released his hand, picked up a bottle of opaque glass. “Some dandelion wine? You will find it refreshing.”

It was more clear and sparkling than he would have expected, its taste burst brightly on his tongue, and it was the last thing he remembered of the evening.

* * *

Auberjonois could tell her no more, what little of her prophecy the Nabis woman had related to him he had accepted without questioning, and perhaps with little true understanding. The more Anna quizzed him the less clear the matter became, he permitted no arguments nor brooked any debate but offered only the clouded convictions of a zealot. When she scoffed at the notion of prophecy he did not deny her mockery but wore the look of a martyr pitying a pagan, nodding as if he respected her views at the same time that he would refuse to be shaken from his, and it surprised her that he should have any views for he had previously given the impression that he put all his trust, all his faith, in his sword and his strength. Now the vaguest prognostications of an unkempt old woman seemed to have shaken the warrior’s credo to its foundations at the same time that it had laid the grounds for some deep seated superstition.

They traveled in silence for much of the day, which Auberjonois seemed to prefer, having developed something of the attitude of an ostrich, thinking that if a thing was no longer spoken of then it would cease to be a problem. He seemed happy just to let Anna dismiss the old woman’s words as she would, as nonsense or superstition or whatever. His reticence simply served the purpose of letting her mind wander, though, hoping Selina was recovering, that Siddig was keeping her safe and well, and wondering where Griff might be at the moment. There was no fear about their future together, not in the way that the so

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called prophecy had hinted, but there was an acceptance that there were handicaps in its way, hazards, that even once they had met up, which she was sure they would, there was still the task of rescuing Jack, of rescuing themselves, from this strange new world.

“Auberjonois?”

“Mm?” he responded dully, not turning, still shying from conversation.

“You have visited the Garden of Earthly Delights before. Will it be easy to find Jack, to get him out of there?”

“To find him, well, he will no doubt be in the Castle in the Pyrenees. That will narrow our search somewhat, but it is still a large place, more of a city than its name would suggest. If he has powers to match yours, though, then I am sure they will lead us to him.”

“And getting him out?”

“There are the Dark Guard, other minions, the Hashishim themselves to contend with. It will not be easy.” He turned, his face softening into a smile of encouragement, happier to be dealing with matters that were familiar to him, said, “But softly softly, Anna, and we will catch your monkey. Stealth and slyness will serve us best.”

“Perhaps Griff might already have beaten us there, might already be returning with Jack,” Anna suggested, and Auberjonois just nodded, perhaps, spurring the horse forward at a faster clip as he lapsed into silence once again.

Still a little weakened by the encounter with the Dark Guard, by the shock of Selina’s injury and the pain she seemed to have shared, she dozed from time to time, Auberjonois reaching an arm behind to hold onto her on each occasion he felt her body relax against his. It was only when the air began to grow chill, with the sun falling low in the sky, that she came fully awake and saw that the landscape had closed in around them. In each

direction she looked the ground rose, drawn up to the sky as if by an unseen hand so that peaks surrounded them, their summits ultimately so sheer that they could never possibly be scaled, their rounded tips catching the setting sun so that each seemed to glow like a beacon.

She tapped Auberjonois on the shoulder, to let him know that she was awake, asked, "Where are we?"

"The String of Pearls," he told her. "It is a line of mountains which runs roughly north to south."

"Is there no way around them?"

"Not now that we are in them. We could have detoured south, to follow the coast, but that would have added days to our journey."

"There is at least a way through?" she hoped, for the eerie light of the peaks and the solemn silence of the valleys made her feel uncomfortable.

"Eventually."

"And how long is 'eventually'? It will be getting dark soon."

"We have crossed a little more than halfway," Auberjonois estimated. "If we rest with the sun, move even before it rises, we might be out of the range by tomorrow afternoon."

There was perhaps an hour of light left and he spurred the horse on to make best use of it, their way never direct but curving and winding, following the valleys, occasionally cutting across the gentler slopes to save a little time. The sun had not quite sunk, the last of its rays were fractured and splintered by a peak ahead when they its light pick out a dwelling some way up the slope to their right.

"We could rest up for the night, do you think?" said Auberjonois.

"Do you think?" she asked him. "Are the natives friendly hereabouts?"

"To be honest I didn't realize that there were any people of

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so solitary an inclination that they would live out here.” He slowed the horse to a walk, his eyes glancing to the building as he considered. “I would rather ask hospitality of a single household, than chance entering a village I was unfamiliar with.”

Pulling on the reins, he canted the horse to the right, climbing from the valley, mounting the gentle slope at a trot, then slowing back to a walk as the gradient grew steeper. The house was a single whitewashed block, its roof tiled, smoke curled from an ornate chimney, blue grey against the early evening sky. The land sloping away at the front seemed less fallow than lower down the slopes, but was more cultivated than ornate, a veritable market garden of root vegetables and vines, bushes of berries and clumps of herbs becoming discernible as they drew nearer. The fragrance of the garden reached them then, followed soon after by the drone and buzz of the insect life which swarmed about the shrubs and flowers.

“Must have green fingers, whoever lives here,” Anna whispered to Auberjonois, as he stepped the horse delicately forward, picking a path through the profusion of plants. “They can’t be all that bad, if that’s the case,” she added, associating a talent for horticulture with her father’s benign nature.

“It would require something more than green fingers to persuade such a variety of flora out of this landscape,” said Auberjonois, reining the horse to a halt a cautious distance from the house. The door was shut, but a window beside it was slightly open, its shutters thrown back against the wall, and a flickering light could be seen within. “Hello inside!” he called, and his voice echoed from the slopes beyond the house, rang across the valley to the facing peak.

A shadow of a figure appeared at the window and Auberjonois repeated his greeting, but there was no immediate acknowledgment.

“We were wondering if you could perhaps offer us some

shelter for the night, some food," he explained. "My friend and I are weary."

"Your friend and you?" The voice, female, had a rough nasal quality about it; a mimicry, it seemed to Anna, of the buzzing of the hornets around a nest, just below the eaves of the low roof. "And do you and your friend love each other?"

Anna gave a low laugh, Auberjonois said, "Well I hardly think..."

"Do you?" the voice persevered, rising to cut short his protest. "Do you, girl, have the love of that man? Do you?"

With an unaccustomed embarrassment, smiling weakly like a schoolgirl challenged over an infatuation, Anna said, "I would like to think that I have the love of everyone. I treat people as I would have them treat me."

"Pah!" spat the voice, its owner still no more than a shadow at the window. "That is not the same thing. The love of a man for a woman is a precious thing, it is not some universal benediction to be shared willy-nilly. Do you have his?"

"We are friends, nothing more," Auberjonois said, beginning to grow impatient. "Now can you afford us shelter for the night?"

"No. Be gone."

"Then perhaps you could at least direct us to the easiest trail?"

"You can take a trail direct to the Luban Gate for all I care! Be gone!"

Anna felt Auberjonois bristle, as her hands rested on his shoulders she felt his whole body tense as if he would leap down from the horse and storm the house. Then the horse snickered, took an uneasy step back as a bee settled on its face. A second whinny was of pain as it was stung, another bee pricked Anna's hand so sharply that she cried out and a third left its mark on Auberjonois' cheek before he could swat it with the flat of his hand. He glared at the house as the shutters were pulled closed

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and bolts were drawn, then wheeled the horse around before it could be panicked by the bees which began to swarm. He showed no regard for the garden as he cantered them back down the slope.

Anna found herself laughing nervously, relieved that they had been denied the hospitality of the strange woman. "Was that some kind of curse, telling us we could go to the Luban gate for all she cared? It sounded much like someone in my world telling us we could go to hell."

"Hell?" Auberjonois repeated. "Yes, perhaps. The Luban gate is a portal which leads from this world. To where, exactly, it is hard to say, for I have never met a person who has passed through it and returned. Yes, perhaps hell."

"But it exists? Where?"

"In Golgonooza, someplace, which suggests that the reluctant hostess back there has not always been the solitary recluse she seemed. She must have some knowledge of the world to know of the Luban Gate."

* * *

"Golgonooza is there to be taken, I tell you. Its First Minister is so eager for an alliance that he has sent the army from the city, sent all the competent fighting men to set up a line of defense on the far bank of the Estraval. A few thousand men at most, they cannot present too broad a barrier. We could easily circle them to the north or south, leave them there in their ignorance, defending against a threat which has already bypassed them while we are knocking on the gates of the city."

"And those gates will open freely, in panic and in fear, once they see the force that Jack has created," said Tulla, adding to the arguments of the Grand Odalisque with an enthusiasm which was not appreciated.

"Quiet, slut," said Urizen, barely sparing her a sideways glance.

Jack winced at the insult, so cutting in its brevity, felt Tulla's anger flare and shared it with her. To one side of him she seethed in silence, to the other the Grand Odalisque stood impassive, like a sculpted idol accustomed to homage, while before them Urizen exuded nothing if not boredom, sprawling across a couch, as settled as if he might never venture from it. His room was a Spartan room, situated at the highest point in the Castle, no tapestries or hangings covering the bare white walls, no rugs or carpets covering the floor of polished wood, the furnishings minimal; the only things to break its simple monotony were the broad high windows, four of them to face each point of the compass, each filling much of a wall. The view they presented was a giddying thing.

The accumulating silence finally demanding a response of Urizen, he asked the Grand Odalisque, "Where is the reason?"

"Fear in itself is the reason," she pleaded her case, her voice even and without passion. "If someone is in awe of us, in terror of us, we must not disappoint their expectations," she said, as if the logic was simple, its outcome inevitable.

Urizen yawned, plucked at a loose thread hanging from the sleeve of the shapeless garment he wore. He looked like an old man hospitalized, an invalid awaiting death who had been dragged protesting from his sick bed. There was unconcealed threat in his voice, though, as he said, "The people of Eidolon have always been in fear of us, but you have been content with your lot. Why the discontent now? Why do you suddenly take it into your head to venture forth to conquer?"

"Because now the people will have more cause to fear us than ever before. With the power Tulla's pet can wield there will be no one capable of resisting us."

Jack frowned to hear himself described as a pet, guessed that though Tulla might smile at the indulgence afforded her she would also be peeved by the way he was belittled. Who was this

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old man, that they were so in awe of him, that they would allow him to insult them this way? Ancient of Days, did they call him? More like a dazed ancient to Jack's way of thinking.

Suddenly he was in the grip of a pain so fierce that it brought him to his knees, feeling that an unseen fist had closed on his heart and twisted it, wrenching not just the organ but also his very soul. He gasped for breath, was so stricken that he could not even cry out in his agony, felt Tulla's hand rest on his head, the Grand Odalisque's on his shoulder, either a comfort or a caution as Urizen said, "The pup needs to learn discipline and respect. The young man might have mastery of the Afflatus but the old man has mastery of all else." Without even deigning to look at Jack, he said, "This is what you would have march on Golgonooza?"

"Why are you being deliberately obstinate, Urizen?" the Grand Odalisque asked, the first to question him, and Jack winced with the pain he felt, braced himself for worse. The old man simply smiled, though. "Reason," she pressed. "That is everything in your life. So what is the reason?"

With only a little deliberation needed, he answered, "You are right, of course, there must be reason and yet there is none." He smiled, as if he was craving her indulgence, as he said, "Perhaps it is an old man's foibles, fatigue, weariness with light. I no longer have the enthusiasm I once did."

"But is it right that this should hinder our ambitions?" the Grand Odalisque argued.

"New challenges would revive your enthusiasm," Tulla said, and recalled Urizen interrupting her lovemaking with Jack, joining in, drawn to the image Jack had conjured of Anna. "A younger woman is what an older man needs to reawaken his love of life. You remember Anna?"

Urizen did remember her, Jack saw the memory brighten his watery eyes and he fought against the pain and the hands of

those on either side which kept him on his knees, summoning every ounce of strength and determination to protest. Anna was his! Tulla and the Grand Odalisque had promised her to him!

Urizen flinched briefly, a sharpening of the features like a man struck with a toothache, then smiled even as he felt Jack's anger and returned it, accompanied by a lance of pain.

"He is a feisty one, this young pup of yours," he acknowledged. "And if the young woman Anna can match his grit then yes, perhaps she is the new challenge I need." He gave Tulla a nod of congratulation, heaved himself up from his couch and stretched, bones and joints popping like firecrackers as he flexed his body. "You speak some sense for once, Tulla. Perhaps you are maturing more quickly than I gave you credit for."

"Then we have your blessing?" asked the Grand Odalisque. "You will accompany us?"

"You have my blessing," he answered, his back to them, standing before the high arched window which offered a view across the Garden of Earthly Delights, the glow of its fires making his slim silhouette ripple and shiver, as if he was no more than an illusion. "But no, I will not accompany you. I have faith in the force your young pup has conjured, so go muster them. I will see you again."

His hand raised lazily to dismiss them.

Once Jack had been led pet-like from the room, hands taking his to help him walk at a crouch, still doubled breathless by the pain he had suffered, Tulla said, "The old worm will sniff at our heels all the way. He will interfere when he is least wanted."

"Do not underestimate him, Tulla," the Grand Odalisque cautioned the young woman. "The power of the Hashishim does not diminish with the years, but like knowledge and wisdom grows stronger. Urizen's frail frame wields more power than ever your young buck could. You saw that demonstrated for yourself."

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“Yet even Urizen, for all his power and persuasion, could not hold sway over a force of thousands such as hope to defend Golgonooza. My Jack’s legions can, though,” said Tulla, and slipped her hand from his to take hold of him by the chin, yanking him upright so fiercely that he thought his spine would snap. “Tell her, Jack, what your legions see, what your eyes see through theirs.”

“I see...” He fought against the vision, closed his eyes to it as the words spilled from his lips again. “I see...”

“What do you see?” Tulla demanded, her fingers at his throat to choke out the answer.

He saw that Anna was at the reins of a sleek horse, a figure behind her no more than a shape, a dark angel hovering at her shoulder. They had descended from a range of peaks which glowed faintly in the distance...

“The String of Pearls,” the Grand Odalisque recognized.

...were following the gradient of a shallow open escarpment down to a wooded valley where there could be heard a rushing of water.

“They are approaching the river. Where it flows into the lake, north of Die Brucke.”

Where the hybrid Dark Guard waited, the advance force of that monstrous regiment which Jack had created, and he shuddered with delight even as he sobbed with despair, seeing Anna approach as he heard the Grand Odalisque say, “It is beginning. Come. We will leave.”

* * *

Mistress Pebble had embarked on a baking marathon, the air in her kitchen fogged by flour, thick and exotic with the scent of spices. The large table in the centre of the room was covered with trays bearing tarts and flans and meringues, pastries puffed and flaky, all manner of confectionaries which were sticky and sweet. It was a treat of a feast to tempt a sulking child and like a

despairing mother she had put every grain of her love into its preparation.

“You think this will cheer the First Minister?” Goomer asked her, reaching out to sample a pastry and receiving a smart slap to the wrist.

“If he can bring himself to taste but a fraction of this he will be too bloated for another of his fits of trembling panic,” commented Clod.

“Or perhaps will manage to quiver even more like a jelly,” added Goomer.

“Have you no compassion?” Mistress Pebble scowled, dusting the trays with sugar, adding as much decoration to each confectionary as a rich man would to his palace. She set the sugar-sifter down hard on the table to send up a fine white cough of saccharin dust. “I thought we all cared for the First Minister.”

“We do,” her husband agreed.

Goomer nodded.

“Then where is your compassion?”

“Mine has worn thin,” said Clod. “His dilemma is of his own making, and his manner a result of that. I advised him against even considering an alliance with the Hashishim, but he would not listen. Now his very fear has him living in a state of siege, of trembling anticipation, even before any move has been made against Golgonooza. He has the gates of the city guarded, the gates of the Ministerial Palace, every door to his chambers barred to all but a few.”

“And will the Hashishim move against us, as he fears?” asked Mistress Pebble.

With a calm reason which belied any fears he might have himself, Clod said, “He has sent Lord Lovecraft’s forces from Golgonooza and told the Hashishim as much. The only people left to defend the city are the First Minister’s own private guard, competent enough to defend one man but offering no hope for

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the safety of an entire city. The Hashishim will probably also have guessed at this, and if they have any wit they will also guess at where Lord Lovecraft has located his forces. The First Minister has been so accommodating in his offer of an alliance that he has more or less offered them an open invitation and they would be fools if they declined." Clod nodded slowly. "Yes, my dear, I fear the Hashishim will march on Golgonooza."

As if she only now believed what was rumored when she heard it from her husband's lips, Mistress Pebble wrung her hands, her face as white as the flour which dusted them. "So what is to become of us, Clod? What are we to do?"

"Gather together your trays," Clod told his wife. "We will feed the First Minister and cheer him..."

"He hasn't eaten for days," Goomer knew.

"...we will give him a love of life and a reason to enhance it."

"The fat man's only love is for himself," Goomer continued, "and the mere continuation of his life will be enhancement enough of it."

"We will shake him out of his lethargy, at least, so that he might apply himself to how best he might continue it!" Clod announced, with admirable resolve and brittle temper, then turned on Goomer. "And you...!"

"Yes?" Goomer cowered.

"Stir yourself and take some of these trays! You cannot expect Mistress Pebble to handle them all!"

"I..."

"Had something else in mind?" Clod guessed, his body both rising and falling so that he hung over the youth like an italicized question mark.

"Thought I might take my leave of the palace. I am grateful for the hospitality shown by yourself and your good wife..."

"And the comforts of the First Minister's bed?"

"...but I feel I might have outstayed my welcome, no longer

serve any purpose here.”

Clod caught him by the throat, less kindly even than Mistress Pebble would twist him by the ear, tightened the grip of his scrawny fingers to yank him to his feet. “You have enjoyed the First Minister’s favors and now comes the time to return them. Take the trays, walk before us and do not even think of bolting back to the guttersnipe scum who were once your peers. You will cheer the First Minister as enthusiastically as we can, you will kiss each profiterole before you feed it to him, you will soften each cheese straw for him with your own sweet saliva.”

“I will! I will!” Goomer agreed, breaking free of the equerry’s grip to comply, stacking trays along each arm like a boy born to the trade of waiting on people.

Clod’s boot prodded him forward, he helped his wife gather up the rest of the trays and they filed from their quarters.

The palace seemed as busy as ever, despite its master’s own inactivity, the corridors around the kitchens and laundries buzzing and bustling, the office of the scribes and secretaries beyond, the workshops of those who maintained the palace as much caught up with their business as ever. At each turn, though, on each corridor and in each hall, the First Minister’s private guard were in evidence, standing a head above most others with their caps of polished leather and steel, scarlet capes providing a splash of color and a note of warning. They regarded all who passed with the same suspicion, even Clod and his party, few affording the equerry even a nod of recognition. The security was just as evident on the more private floors of the palace, their numbers no less, and perhaps even seeming greater, there being fewer people about to conceal their presence.

Two men guarded the landing leading to the First Minister’s chambers, two more the corridor, and a final two were stationed at the door. Their scrutiny was cold, but they said nothing, made no challenge as Clod opened the door to usher Goomer and

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Mistress Pebble through.

They had to pass through a number of chambers before they found the first Minister, even took to looking behind curtains and screens before they came across him in the remotest corner of his suite, in a tiny attic of a room entered by a door so nondescript that it suggested there was nothing more than a broom closet behind it.

He was seated in a bentwood chair, rocking gently before a window through which was afforded a view beyond the city walls. In his lap lay an ornate knife, blade pointed towards him. On a table beside him was a carafe of wine and a crystal goblet, beside it a tiny stoppered bottle of opaque glass. While Goomer and Mistress Pebble arranged their trays on a larger table, Clod crossed to take up the small bottle and pull the cork from it.

“What is this?” he asked, sniffing and then wincing as the bitter-sweet fragrance stung his sinuses and made his eyes smart.

Without turning his gaze from the window First Minister van Vogt said, “At the first sight of the Hashishim hordes I have my dagger, my wine and my poison. The wine will blur the pain of the dagger and make sweet the taste of the poison.” He turned, now, his eyes red-rimmed from tears or from lack of sleep. “They will not take me, Clod.”

“You will surrender without even a fight? No!” said Clod angrily. “Not even surrender! You will have your name go down in history for something even more cowardly than capitulation?”

“Eidolon has no history.”

“But one day someone will write it. And if you surrender, what of the people?”

“To hell with them.”

“And what of the Parliament?”

“To hell with them, too. To hell with them especially.”

Clod nodded to his wife, who came forward with a plate of selected confectionaries with which to tempt the First Minister,

rolling them in her fingers to describe their textures, breaking crumbs beneath his nose so that he might scent the subtle combinations of spices, their cocktail describing the host of worlds which constituted the Kingdom of Eidolon.

Clod then beckoned over Goomer, said, "Feed the First Minister a rose flavored pastry, so that he might be reminded of the kingdom he surrenders."

"I have no appetite," said van Vogt, as his young lover approached.

"My Lord might be tempted to give up the ghost," said Clod, "but I am sure his stomach might prefer to kiss goodbye to this world feeling full, his palate prefer to be tantalized one last time before it bloats and blackens and sticks to the roof of his mouth. Go on, young Goomer," he encouraged the boy, "feed the First Minister his final pleasure."

Goomer presented the small pastry to the First Minister's mouth, touched it to his lips.

"Perhaps just a taste," he agreed, nostrils twitching at the pungent mixture, and took the tiniest of bites. Feeling the pastry melt on his tongue, he smiled his thanks at Goomer. "You are a good boy, faithful to the last."

Clod drew up a chair, so that Goomer might sit beside the First Minister, said, "Feed him another."

van Vogt licked the chocolate from a profiterole which was offered him, then took it whole into his mouth. "The situation seems desperate, does it not?" he mumbled, swallowing the first and quickly taking a second.

"I have known happier times in your service, my Lord," answered Clod diplomatically.

"Still, nihil desperandum. Are those red berry tarts I see, Mistress Pebble."

"That they are, my Lord," she answered, quickly bringing across another tray, and the First Minister had one in his mouth

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and another in his hand before Goomer could even attend to him.

“Well at least his appetite seems to be returning,” Clod whispered to his wife.

“I would have expected nothing less, and would hold out hope for a great deal more,” she responded, with a secretive smile.

Clod took her by the arm, drew her a short distance away from the feasting First Minister, recognizing the expression and wanting to know the reason behind it. “What are you up to, Pebble? What have you done?” he asked. The First Minister was now tucking into the confectionaries she had prepared with all the voracity of a child at a party. “You have added something to the recipe?” he guessed.

“Just a few extra ingredients,” she grinned. “I made use of some tips I picked up from Lady Haggitha’s pastry cook.”

“Sorcery?”

“Just the judicious use of some natural oils and spices, harmless pick-me-ups. I trusted in my own confectionary skills and the First Minister’s innate greed to revive his appetite, then added a little melissa to alleviate his fears, a touch of lemongrass to sharpen his enthusiasm and a dash of rose otto to bolster his courage.”

“It seems that you might have overdone the lemongrass, wife,” Clod commented, regarding the First Minister again, who was slopping wine into his goblet with one hand, scooping up tarts and pastries with the other. “I hope you have something in mind that might later calm him down.”

“A full belly will quieten him,” she knew, but then frowned as she said, “As long as I did not overdo the melissa.”

“Why is that?”

“I used it to ease his anxiety, but it is also an excellent remedy for menstrual problems,” she answered, her expression grave until she caught her husband’s eye, whereupon she joined

him in a fit of laughter.

The First Minister turned, waved a hand lazily, like a bored monarch, to orchestrate their amusement. Unheard over the noise, perhaps drawn by it, the door opened and a guard appeared.

“My Lord?”

“It is nothing. Go away,” said the First Minister.

“You are...?” the guard began, but then turned to Clod, asked. “The First Minister is well? He is able to see a messenger?”

Clod dried the tears of laughter from his eyes, nodding. “I think my Lord is in a mood to accept any visitor at the moment. Who is it? Is it important?”

“A man who says he comes from a person named Elusai, brings news of Lord Lovecraft’s nephew Abishai.”

“My Lord? Will you see him?” asked Clod.

“Have him brought,” answered the First Minister. “See that he is shackled and bound, for safety’s sake, then bring him here. In the meantime, Mistress Clod, the wine has revived my appetite. What else do you have to tempt me with?”

His lap was littered with crumbs, his cheeks sticky with jams and frosted with sugar when the shackled man was brought before him, as indignant at his treatment as he was offended by the sight of the man who was the reason for it.

He stood sullenly silent when the First Minister asked what news he brought, hands bound behind him, a guard gripping each arm.

“You must pardon our treatment of you,” Clod apologized to the man, noting his pride as he refused to strain against his bonds, “but the First Minister has made an exception in receiving you personally, he must be cautious at the moment, with the palace being on high alert.”

The man smiled cynically at the courtesy as he said, “Then

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you already know, you have no need of the warning I bring from Lord Elusai.”

“Know what? What is this warning of Elusai’s”

“That he fears that the army Lord Abishai is assembling will soon march on your city.”

van Vogt heaved himself from his seat, leaving it to rock madly once spared his weight, turned to look at the messenger as he spilled crumbs on the floor around him. “First the Hashishim to the east, and then young Abishai’s brigands to the west?” Clod feared a new onset of panic, but the First Minister simply laughed, a full burst from the belly as he exclaimed, “How delightful! Clowns to the left of me and jokers to the right! And here I am, stuck in the middle!”

Chapter 12

The city had become like the shadow of a cancer, renamed Romano for Abishai had said that there would no longer be anything saintly about the place, and it spread colorless across the land, a featureless grey penumbra darkening towards the centre where his tar-black palace seemed the focus for all that was diseased. The walls of the palace were the darkest pitch, the rooms inside the bloodiest red, and Abishai's own quarters he had furnished in ebony, had carpeted and curtained with swathes of blazing vermilion so that each room seemed like a festering angry wound.

The spirits of Fay's ancestors would not venture anywhere near the city.

"It is as if he has built a hell for himself in the Kingdom of Eidolon," said Tioka, the air shuddering softly with his words.

"Which will be as nothing when compared with the hell to which I will dispatch him," vowed Fay, with quiet but bitter resolve, kneeling in the grass at the water's edge, her head bowed and her eyes closed, the white gown which Abishai had asked her to wear spilling about her.

A distance away Elusai could hear only the soft trill of the stream and the muted murmur of what he took to be her devotions. As always he afforded her as much privacy as his duty would permit, close enough to defend her if the need arose, discreet enough not to intrude. It was just one instance of the kindness he showed her, his attentiveness to her needs not self-serving, as Abishai's was, but born of what she sensed to be a genuine concern. In other circumstances she might have trusted him, have made him her confidant or at least offered him her friendship, but the pain which was still in her heart prevented this, her single determination to see Abishai damned overpowering every other emotion.

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“So what of hell, father?” she asked softly, the word not one which she had had much occasion to use before.

“It is the home our murderer deserves,” came the answer. “When he dies he will be judged, and certainly found guilty of his sins.”

Fay’s shoulders heaved, as if a silent sob escaped her. “But there is no certainty, father, not even in death. There are too many Gods who are compassionate, too many Gods who are forgiving. The true God I want must become as we are, that we may be as he is.”

The voice of Tioka became like a sigh of regret and above Fay’s head the trees swayed gently in the breeze, bowing like mourners, like priests at their prayers. “Vengeful?” he asked sadly.

“That, and more,” she agreed. “So tell me where hell is, point me to it and I will take Abishai there.”

“We have little knowledge of it here.”

“Father!” she insisted, her voice rising as her head lifted. “Tell me!”

“Hell is a journey as much as a place,” her father answered, “the manner of that journey and the route one takes is what will ultimately determine the destination. The road of excess can lead to the palace of wisdom, but it can also lead to a charnel-house of despair. It is the nature of one’s actions along that road that determine one’s reward. Or one’s punishment.”

“A place!” Fay demanded, with an impatience unlike any her father had previously witnessed.

“A place?” The breeze sighed again, the woods seemed to darken though the sky remained bright. “I have heard of gates where the spectral dead wail, which when burst down pour torrents black upon the earth and from which blood falls down incessant. That is hell as I understand it.”

“Where, Father? Where?”

“I know there to be one such gate in Golgonooza,” answered Tioka, and Fay whispered her thanks, clasping her hands together in an attitude of prayer as she got to her feet. “But remember, daughter,” his voice added as it died, “it is the route one takes which is as important as the destination.”

“Have no fear, father, I will be patient, I will take Abishai far along that road of excess before I open the gate for him,” vowed Fay, and strode away so quickly, with such silent resolve, that she was past Elusai and heading towards the city before he could realize it.

“Your prayers have been answered, your devotions rewarded?” he asked, as he caught up with her.

“My meditations have shown me the way,” she answered, her gaze fixed ahead.

“To peace?” he hoped.

“There will be peace for some.”

People stepped aside as she entered the city and passed through its streets, averted their eyes as Abishai had instructed them to, spying her coming from a distance for her white dress announced her, as bright as a torch passing through their drab lives. Those of no account wore rags of filthy grey or joyless brown, the pleasant pastel of their previous lives soiled by their subjugation, while those with the advantage of some status within the hierarchy, the engineers and the men of science, the warriors and the warlords, sported the scarlet and black which was a testament of their allegiance to Lord Abishai. Gone was the ragbag following that had first allied itself with Abishai, and in its place was the New Order of the Romanese Army.

A number of their rank saluted as Fay climbed the steps to the palace, each right foot slapping the ground, each right arm crossing the chest to clasp the left shoulder, the men now drilled in ceremony as well as in combat. Elusai returned the salutes with a certain unease. Fay simply ignored them as she stepped

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into the dark gloom of the building, her dress reflecting as it brushed the black marble floor of the main hall making her seem like an elegant feathered creature gliding across an inky lake. She ascended the broad staircase at the far end of the hall, Elusai a step or two behind her, climbed again and again, making her way to the top of the palace, to the seraglio where she guessed she would find Lord Abishai.

There were no windows there to admit the day, the room glimmered with light from torches, lamps and candles, shimmering against the satins and silks, making the walls seem to pulse like the lining of a womb. Women lounged, dozed, conversed quietly or paced nervously, some defying Lord Abishai's instruction to regard her with open hostility, others glancing slyly with lowered eyes, in awe of her, in fear of her, or simply envious that she should remain inviolate while it was their fate, their duty, to be used and abused.

There was no sign of Abishai among the score or so of women.

"Best you wait here," she said to Elusai, and wound her way across the room, between the couches and divans, to the door which led to a private chamber.

She did not announce her entrance, she had no need to, but opened the door and went directly through. Abishai was sprawled across a bed of pillows and cushions, half-dressed, a long diaphanous gown of gold spreading itself like wings to either side of him. He glanced over his shoulder as he heard her, smiled as he drew himself to his knees, wrapped the gown around him loosely before rising and coming to greet her.

"My treasure, my precious," he said, kissing her on the cheek, the only contact he would ever permit himself with one who was in touch with the spirits. "How goes it? How does my life unfold?"

The body which lay on the bed was bruised and chafed, a

trickle of blood seeping from the corner of the mouth, fear in the eyes which was barely contained though the young woman knew better than to give voice to it, to permit her self so much as a sob or a tear.

Fay regarded her coldly, betraying neither pity nor compassion, said, "The girl is with child."

Abishai spun in surprise to look at the girl, now seeing in a new light the body he had so recently abused, turned again to Fay. "Really? A bastard child for me?"

Fay nodded. "The second time you took her," she confirmed, knowing Abishai's passion and supposing that he had taken the poor girl at least a half dozen times.

"A nurse for the girl!" he shouted, striding quickly across the room, opening the door onto the outer chamber. "One of you bring a nurse!"

"She has no need of a nurse just yet," Fay told him.

"She must be cared for," he said, snatching up a length of cotton sheet, gesturing the girl to sit up and then draping it around her shoulders.

"You spoil her, my Lord," she said, a hint of disapproval in her tone, a mark of disdain in her look as she watched him fuss over the girl, helping her to her feet, winding the sheet more snugly about her.

"A bastard son, the first, the first I know of," he muttered, holding the girl by the shoulders, leading her to the door. "Is that really so, Fay?" he asked, gently shepherding his ward to the door.

"It is really so, my Lord," she answered, and the girl gave her a smile of thanks as she passed, a knowing smile which Fay was careful not to recognize or return.

Once the girl was surrendered to the care of a nurse Fay went with Abishai from the seraglio, perhaps noting further expressions of quiet gratitude in the eyes which followed her,

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thanking her for her interruption, but again maintaining an air of aloof isolation, her head erect and her gaze fixed, as if she saw beyond them all.

“You bring wonderful news, Fay,” Abishai said, congratulating her as they went below to his quarters, his hand occasionally touching her elbow and then withdrawing tentatively, making her conscious of the sanctity with which he regarded her. “And do you have anything more for me? A direction?”

She permitted him to open a door for her, went through into his chamber before saying, “East.”

“East?” He had been so used to vague clues which kept him in an uneasy state of equilibrium, promises like the words of an accomplished temptress which augured much but actually presented very little, that his eyes suddenly took on a sparkle of hope. “East, you say? I am to go east?” he asked, hurrying into the room after her.

She crossed to the window, looked out across the black expanse to the rolling green hills in the distance, the blue cast of the mountains beyond, the clouds which danced across their peaks as if to celebrate their freedom. “Through the orient gates of the eternal day from where torrents black and red pour down upon the earth.”

“More vague prognostications?” he pouted suspiciously.

“The black and red of your army, my Lord. You must march them to Golgonoosa, the gate to the eastern world.”

“March? Now?” he said with delight, like a child deprived of amusement for so long. “March!” he cried, and charged excitedly back to the door, throwing it open. “We march, Elusai! Assemble my generals! Call my men to arms!”

* * *

Wearing a black frock coat and a tall black hat, his complexion as wan as his dress was somber, Siddig thought that Doctor Tulp

presented more the aspect of a mortician than a physician. His grave expression permitted no smile, his brow was permanently furrowed as if all problems were beyond him and his narrowed eyes showed no glint of joy or love of life. Tharmas had praised his skills, though, Tharmas who seemed knowledgeable in so many respects that he had to be trusted, who had shown them so many kindnesses since their meeting that whatever he suggested could only be for the greatest good of Selina. And the gold the generous Lady Haggitha had counted out as payment for the services of the doctor were surely indicative of the highest standards.

It was three days now since he and Selina had arrived in Dos Aguas, found lodgings where she might rest and recover, then been invited to share the more comfortable quarters of Lady Haggitha and her party. For all the attention and cossetting, for all the rich food and fortifying drink, Selina had seemed to grow no stronger. Listless, she would lay on a couch or in her bed while Lady Haggitha and her maid took turns soothing her feverish brow with sweet scented oils, and eventually Tharmas had ventured the opinion that there might still be some traces of poison lingering in her wound, offered the name of Doctor Tulp as the one best able to speed her recovery.

In the Doctor's well-appointed rooms they gathered around the upholstered table on which Selina lay, Siddig and Lady Haggitha to one side, Tharmas and the Doctor to the other. The shelves around them were stacked with bottles and jars, with sachets of powders and boxes of desiccated substances, with organs and entrails hanging not quite motionless in flasks of syrupy preservatives. Cloying fragrances thickened the air, now sweet now bitter, now as crisp as antiseptic and now as putrid as something decomposing, the incense which burned from brass thuribles in each corner of the room not quite masking the scent of the surgeon's craft.

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Doctor Tulp undid Selina's blouse and slowly peeled it back to just above the breasts, baring the injured shoulder. The wound was puckered like a nipple, like an eye winking the skin around it had tightened in its attempt to close and knit, but still at its centre the raw pink flesh was weeping. The Doctor bent low to sniff at it, touched a fingertip to it and then to his tongue, grimaced at the taste and spat into a silver dish on the table beside him.

"There is still poison?" asked Tharmas, seeking confirmation of his own diagnosis.

"A vestige of it," the Doctor agreed, wiping his lips on a clean white cloth, then his furred and yellowed tongue. He swilled his mouth from a glass of clear pink liquid, gargled and spat again. "No more than a grain or two, perhaps, but while it remains in her system she will not recover."

"You can help her?" asked Siddig anxiously, and Lady Haggitha touched his arm to reassure him as the Doctor nodded.

"I think we can draw it from her, but slowly, we do not wish to take anything from her which is not diseased. Do we not?" he smiled at Tharmas.

"We do not," Tharmas smiled back.

"A salve first, then, to soothe the inflammation and to open the wound," Doctor Tulp decided, and crossed the rummage to rummage among the shelves, returned with a small earthenware pot no bigger than an eggcup. Scooping from it a pat of ointment the color and consistency of butter, he spread this around the wound. "No more than a minute, no more than a moment," he said, stepping back and waiting.

As Siddig looked on the puckered skin slowly parted, formed a perfect circle which pulsed rhythmically like the orifice of some submarine creature.

"You see how the flesh is blackened within?" Doctor Tulp said to him, and the warrior bowed to look but briefly before

turning away, would have walked from the room if it had not been for Lady Haggitha keeping a firm hold of his arm.

“What is the matter, Siddig? Are you not well?” she asked. “You have surely seen much worse on the field of battle.”

“That I have, my Lady, but never have I known the smell of such disease.”

“Here, sniff these salts,” she offered, uncorking a tiny phial beneath his nose. “They will clear your head.”

“With the wound open, we now draw out the poison,” Doctor Tulp continued, and with long metal tweezers fished around in another jar, huffing and tutting before producing from it a tiny squirming creature, the length of a maggot, the color of a bloodworm. “You see the mouth?” he invited, holding the grub up to the light, and Tharmas and Lady Haggitha peered forward while Siddig felt his face grow pale, his legs grow weak. “That is all the creature is, a mouth and a digestive system.”

“You are going to put that inside her?” asked Siddig in horror, as the Doctor lowered the creature, angling his hand and the tweezers he held to present the writhing creature mouth first to the open wound.

“Have no fear, young man,” he grinned, as much to himself as anyone else. “Our little parasite is very selective about what it feeds on, it will take the poison from your friend and break it down. In doing so it will sacrifice its own life for that of the young woman.”

“It will die? Inside her?”

“There will be nothing left that can harm her,” Doctor Tulp promised, but Siddig turned away, overcome by a revulsion which bordered on nausea, sickened by the smells which pervaded the surgery and the idea of that parasite eating its way into Selina. He tried to break free of Lady Haggitha’s grip, but she held fast, turning to look at Tharmas.

“Perhaps you might take our friend outside,” he suggested.

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“He looks quite unwell.”

“Yes. Come, Siddig, let us leave. A cool drink will refresh you.”

“But Selina...” he hesitated.

“Will be fine in the hands of Doctor Tulp and Tharmas.”

“It will be a while before she is rid of the poison,” Doctor Tulp told him. “Go with the good Lady. Tharmas will bring you news of your friend’s recovery.”

“I have seen worse,” said Siddig, trying to persuade himself, to excuse what the others must see as his weakness, but no longer resisted as Lady Haggitha led him from the room.

They passed through the remainder of the Doctor’s chambers and out onto the street, where Lady Haggitha made a show of wafting her hand before her face, easing his own guilt by remarking on how stuffy the air had become in the surgery, saying that she thought they might both benefit from a drink of something clear and cool.

“Fresh air will suffice for me,” he said, though the deep draughts he took seemed to do nothing to ease his nausea or alleviate his giddiness. If anything each breath only seemed to make him even more dizzy and he made no protest as Lady Haggitha, both arms wrapped around his, walked him through the upper levels where Doctor Tulp, of necessity, had his expensive practice.

As they strolled the streets and avenues, crossed halls and cut through arcades, descended broad staircases of marble and stone or climbed gentle curving inclines from one level to the next, so Lady Haggitha distracted him with a constant stream of chatter. She questioned him about his life as a warrior, embellishing his brief answers with memories of her husband’s own campaigns, ran her fingers along the scar which ran the length of his forearm, not asking after the circumstances behind it though she guessed that to do so would have caused him no

great trauma. Siddig had all the proud bearing and cold detachment of a professional warrior, he was a strong man who would wear his wounds with dignity and honor. And at the same time, at the present moment, he was as weak as a child who had been driven to exhaustion.

They found themselves at the open square where they had first met, where the avenues and arcades converged and the ornamental pond sparkled at its centre, led him to a table and ordered them drinks which were cold, sparkling, fortifying. Too strong for a man in his fatigued state, weakened by the sickness brought on in the Doctor's surgery, dulled by the salts which she herself had administered.

"Do you remember, this is where we first met?" she said, sitting close beside him, persuading him to drink, and she spoke as a young lover might, fondly recalling the start of a romance. "I was at this table, you at that?"

He nodded. "And Selina."

"She will be fine, she is in good hands with Tharmas and Doctor Tulp." She touched her finger to the scar on his cheek, feeling the hard ridge of skin, said, "You care for her? Well a day or two from now she will be back with us, when she has convalesced. Not yet strong enough to satisfy the passion of a warrior, though," she grinned.

"She is not-" Siddig blushed, stammered. "We are not-"

"Not lovers? Your love for her is not of that kind? Or perhaps you would like it to be, but Selina resists, she is not as demonstrative with her feelings as you would wish. Yes," she smiled her understanding, "there is something virginal about her which appeals to you, a shy chastity which prevents you from approaching her as you would most other women."

"Please, Lady Haggitha-"

"But it is quite alright, dear boy. You must not be embarrassed. Such a love can inspire a man, can encourage a

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warrior to perform great deeds. But it cannot appease his passion, can it? I would guess that since you met the fair Selina you have not slept with a woman. Am I right?"

He offered no answer but looked away, taking up his glass and drinking the strong liquid.

Lady Haggitha leant her body against his, dropped her hand to cup his genitals, squeezing softly. "Your balls are swollen with your seed," she told him, whispering in his ear, drowning him in her fragrance. "If we do not draw it from you it will be as debilitating as the poison which infects Selina. Come, Siddig, let us attend to it," she said, taking his hand and pulling him to his feet.

During the brief walk to their quarters her tongue was never still, speaking words of encouragement and justification, her body never left his, the contact never broken, one hand clutching his, the other gripping his arm to hold him to her, her hips chafing his with every step they took.

"I feel bruised," he said. "My body aches."

"Not just your body but your spirit, your heart," Lady Haggitha told him, pushing open the door to their quarters, leading him by the hand through room after room until they reached her bedchamber.

"My spirit, my heart, yes," he said, saw Jahiliyah in the room, rising from a window-seat, and smiled at her.

"There is something ailing Siddig," Lady Haggitha told her maid. "Make him comfortable while I ready myself."

His fingers felt suddenly chilled when Lady Haggitha released them, his whole body shivered, and as he saw her cross the floor, to sit at a stool before a mirror, her cosmetics arrayed before her, he felt as if he had been left adrift in a vast open space. The ceiling an impossible height above, the walls an impossible distance away, he stood rooted like one suffering vertigo, affected by the overwhelming infinity of space, began to

sway gently, shallow circles becoming wider until he thought that he might fall.

Jahiliyah came forward and caught him in her embrace, an arm around his waist, the other around his back, clutching him easily to her as she walked him backwards to Lady Haggitha's bed. He sat heavily, was lowered gently, the maid sat on the edge of the bed beside him and began to unbutton his tunic, loosen his britches. Turning his head on the pillow he saw Lady Haggitha at the mirror, darkening her eyes, coloring her lips, painting her face as pale as death. Turning again he saw Jahiliyah's smiling face bent low over him, her own cheeks flushed, lips parted to reveal teeth which might gobble him whole.

"My Lady has him in a high state of excitement," she remarked, tugging his britches to his knees, bending lower to kiss his flat belly. "Might I-?"

The touch of her lips scorched his skin, the caress of her hair filled his body with fire.

"Not this time, Jahiliyah," Lady Haggitha answered, regarding them in the mirror as she applied a final dusting of powder to her cheeks. She stood and turned, came slowly towards the bed. "Make room, girl," she said, and Jahiliyah shifted a short way along the bed, sitting by Siddig's feet from where she could gently run a hand up and down his thigh.

Lady Haggitha did not disrobe, which was a tease, a disappointment, a worry for Siddig, but raised her skirt only slightly so that she could sit on the bed beside him. She kissed his brow, his eyes, his lips, drew her face back slightly to present her cheek to him.

"Kiss me, Siddig, you know you need to," she encouraged him. He raised his head from the pillow to bring his lips to hers, but she turned them from him, angling her head. "No, not the lips, not yet. Kiss my cheek, Siddig."

He did as he was told, tasted the face powder on her cheek

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and felt it parch his lips. Like the dusting on a piece of confectionary he licked it away, and his tongue fizzed with a sherbet tang, there was an effervescence which made his whole mouth tingle. He kissed her cheek a second time, and then again, was soon caught up by such a passion that he was covering her face with frantic kisses. As Lady Haggitha clutched him to her, pressing his face against her neck where he sucked and slavered, the door was heard to open, there were footsteps across the floor and Tharmas came into view, looking down critically at the tableau before him.

“I thought it would be finished by now,” he said.

“I take pride in my work,” Lady Haggitha grinned up at him, her hand cupping the back of Siddig’s head, holding it fast against her.

“An inordinate pride, my Lady. I have never known a woman take so much delight from someone’s suffering.”

“You think the young man is suffering?” she asked, but then released Siddig so that his head fell back against the pillow. “But yes, I believe you are right, I believe he is suffering.”

Siddig’s lips were as cracked and grey as ancient parchment, scored by cuts too dry to bleed, his tongue was swelling visibly to swell his mouth and his complexion was pale where it was not snow white from her face powder. His eyes rolled in their sockets and he gasped for breath.

“There, it is finished now,” she announced, standing and gazing down at him. “The passion of a warrior, Siddig, can be his greatest weakness. You should really beware of painted women, for there is really no telling how subtle their cosmetic craft can be.” She drew a finger through the powder on her face, regarded it a moment before wiping it on his bared chest. “A poison so quickly ingested through the mouth will only slowly seep through the pores, death for you but delight for me.” She turned her back to him, then, said, “So tell me, Tharmas, while I cleanse this

muck from my face- how did it go with Selina?”

“Tulp’s parasite has taken root, found itself a new home,” Tharmas told her. “She is yours now, to do with as you will.”

“No!” cried Siddig, but his final breaths were wasted on the protest.

Lady Haggitha turned to look at him one last time, gave a disappointed shake of the head as if disappointed that he had presented so poor a challenge. “You may take him now, Jahiliyah, enjoy him for the few minutes he has left.”

Jahiliyah crawled up the bed, like a primate moving on knuckles and knees to come astride Siddig, her salacious smile blotting out his world.

* * *

Rising from the depths of sleep a tantalizing level at a time -or was it being banished from dream?- Griff was aware of a tickling sensation about his groin, not so much an irritation as a delight. As if enfolded in a pulsing velvet glove he felt his body respond, his genitals tightening, swelling, glowing with a heat which brought a flush to his face. He opened his eyes to see Janas lying beside him, smiling down at him, one hand cupping her chin and the other resting flat on his chest. If it was a nightdress she wore, then it seemed little different from the dress she had worn the previous evening, of a dark iridescence reflecting greens and blues and mauves as she shifted in the light. Where it touched his bare thigh it felt slick, and slightly cold, in contrast with the increasing warmth which wrapped his groin. The tickling sensation increased, now like a deliberate caress, even though her hands did not move, and he raised his head a little to look down the length of his body.

“Jesus!” he gasped, his body shocked rigid to see that his lap was a mat of shining black beetles, a single compact body of them crawling over each other and over his flesh.

Janas smiled at his horror and slid her hand slowly down his

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chest, across his stomach to rest at the fringe of his pubic hair, her black-tipped fingers spreading to either side of his penis to enter the agitated mass. The beetles swarmed over her fingers, across her hand and up her wrist, every last one vacated his body until it seemed that her hand was sheathed in a gauntlet of polished black leather. She held this before her face, turning it around in the light to regard it a moment before kissing her lips to it, at the touch of which each carapace began to part, wings began to unfold and the beetles took to the air a dozen at a time. They gathered overhead before moving towards the window and there were so many of them that it was a full minute before the last had swarmed outdoors. All this while he looked on with morbid fascination, unable to take his eyes from them, fearful to do so in case they should return.

“Good morning,” Janas finally said, returning her hand to his chest and kissing him on the forehead with the same soft touch that she had kissed that living gauntlet. “Would you like breakfast? Or,” she guessed, “might it be a little while yet before you find your appetite?”

“I have to go,” he said.

“A while yet, then,” she decided, and made herself comfortable beside him, the touch of her dress against him feeling cold and greasy, as if stagnant pond water slick with oil was washing against him. “So in the meantime let me tell you a little more about the love of a man for a woman.”

“I must go,” he repeated, trying to inject some urgency into his voice, though in truth he still felt so weary. “There is not much time.”

She rested her face next to his on the pillow, her voice a dull drone in his ear as she said, “Yes, Anna....., I miss you, Anna....., I’m coming, Anna.”

“And Leo,” he remembered. “I must get back to Leo.”

“Ah! First we have the love of a man for a woman, and then

we have the comradeship between two men.” Her tone suggested that there was disapproval of either, of both, the smile he caught he could imagine being occasioned by memories which were as bitter as they were fond. “The comradeship between two men will deny the love of either for a woman, and the love of a man for a woman will deny him any comradeship with one of his own sex. Is that not one of life’s most perverse jokes?”

“Please, Janas,” he begged, but now it seemed that even though she looked at him she was somehow unaware of him.

The rasping hum of her voice brought insects gathering at the window as she continued: “My mother had the love of a man, and that man the comradeship of another of his sex, and together the two emotions conspired. The man who pretended comradeship took the woman who had no love for him, then man she loved then spurned her when he learned of what had happened. Love destroyed by comradeship, then comradeship denied by love. Can that be love, that drinks another as a sponge drinks water?” Her eyes focused on his, though still not quite seeing him. “The love that a man has for a woman is a dangerous thing, and that is why I will spare Anna the love you have for her.”

“No,” he first entreated her, and then asked, “You will spare her? How?”

She kissed the corner of his mouth, then held her lips there. “I do you as much a favor as I do Anna. I will spare you the pain of ever hurting her, the way my mother was hurt.” As she spoke he felt the soft movement of her lips against his skin, a gentle irritation against his cheek. “My jewel, my scarab, my shiny green gem,” she said, and he realized where the irritation came from, could just make out, in the corner of his eye, the movement of the fine gold chain which hung from her ear.

He felt the scarab crawl across his cheek, along the line of his jaw. “What is it? What are you doing?” he asked, stiffening as

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he felt the creature tickle at the lobe of his ear.

“My poisonous little pet will help you forget,” she told him, and the scarab circled his ear, following the folds and gullies of the skin as if it was caught in a maze. “It will work its way through to your memory... do you feel it yet?”

“Please, Janas, don’t do this,” he begged, as the fine hairs which guarded the outer canal were slowly parted, making what had been an irritation now an excruciating agony.

“It will work its way through to your memory,” she repeated, with the calm detachment of a surgeon describing his procedures. “Do not worry, though, Griff. It will be selective in what it takes from you, it will erase only what I wish, you will be left with memory enough to make you suffer.” Her voice blurred as the scarab plugged his ear like a wad of wax, her words as dull as a narcotic. “It is taking Anna from you, Griff.”

“No! Don’t do this!” he cried, trying to struggle from the bed, but his legs were heavy, his face was held firmly against hers as the chain was drawn like a straining leash across his cheek.

“You will be tormented by love without ever remembering who the object of that love is, that is the suffering. Time and again you will find yourself returning to me, begging me to tell you, and your only release will be with me, when I feel compassionate enough to ease your frustration.”

“I must go to the Garden of Earthly Delights!”

“The Garden?” She drew her face slowly away from his, only inches, so that she could look into his eyes, but enough that the chain drew taut. The itching in his ear eased for a moment, as the scarab was held firm. “And why are you going to the Garden of Earthly Delights?” she asked him.

She unhooked the gold chain from her ear and fastened it instead to a ring on her index finger, bending it slowly as if beckoning, as if playing a fish on a line, drawing the chain tight and then letting it go slack. The torture of the scarab working its

way into his head abated as she halted its progress, only to continue afresh each time she flexed her finger. He wanted to writhe with the torture, to claw at the irritation, tear it out with his bare fingers, but all he could do was lie there transfixed by the lacquered tip of her finger, the sparkle of the ring, the glitter of the chain which bound him to her.

“So?” she asked again. “Why do you go to the Garden of Earthly Delights? Would you ally yourself with Urizen?”

“Anna,” he said. “I must find Anna.”

“Would you ally yourself with Urizen?” she repeated, and this time it sounded not so much like a question as a request. A request he could ill afford to refuse. “Would you?”

“If I could go to Golgonooza, yes,” he said, and once more the chain grew taut as the scarab was held firm, straining against it, nudging at his memory.

“You will still forget Anna,” she told him.

“But if I forget Anna then I have no reason to go to the Garden of Earthly Delights,” he reasoned, and as Janas tapped a finger to her lip, considering his logic, the scarab was drawn back just a fraction enough to afford him some relief. “I will go to the Garden, ally myself with this Urizen for whatever purpose you wish, but I must find Anna.”

Janas withdrew the scarab fully, held it dangling before his face long enough for him to see the honey-yellow wax which coated it, then hooked it once more onto her ear, letting it fall against her pale neck. She got up from the bed, passed out of his sight, returned with a cup to sit beside him again, a hand behind his head lifting his lips to the brim.

“Drink,” she told him. “You must build your strength, you have a way to travel and much to do.”

“I will go to the Garden?” he said, and though the drink tasted bitter on his tongue he smiled to feel his energy returning.

“You will.”

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“To do what? Who is this Urizen? If I am to ally myself with him, then how, and to what purpose?”

“You will understand that when you meet him, he will understand when he sees you.” She set the cup on the floor beside her, but did not yet release him, instead squeezed more tightly so that his head ached. “But bear this in mind, young friend, do not think to deceive me. You will forget your dear one, the love of a man for a woman will be damned if you think to leave the Garden without presenting my message to Urizen.”

* * *

“Hush!”

Auberjonois clamped a hand over her mouth, the spread of his palm large enough to cover much of her face, while with the other he reached around her to take the reins and draw the horse to a halt, whispering again in her ear for her to be quiet.

When he took his hand from her face Anna turned to him, mouthed the question: “What?”

Auberjonois pointed. The trail rose ahead of them, winding as it climbed, and at the crest of the hill the sun setting behind silhouetted a line of trees, stray rays piercing the upper branches but casting all else into deep shadow. Anna narrowed her eyes against the dark, tried to pierce the gloom, but could make out nothing. Auberjonois, though, could discern movement, knew they had been seen, in one quick movement he swung Anna behind him in the saddle and drew his long sword. Stealth was of no use now.

“They have us at a disadvantage,” he told Anna. “They have the sun behind them and the upper ground in their favor.”

“Who has?”

“I can’t say for sure, but bearing in mind that we are nearing the Garden of Earthly Delights I would hazard a guess at them being more members of the Hashishim’s Dark Guard.”

“Many of them?” asked Anna, drawing Auberjonois’ second

shorter sword from the scabbard at his belt and holding it ready at her side.

“Difficult to say.”

“Then how do we take the advantage from them?”

“By getting beyond them, to the crest of the hill,” he said, and with a soft click of the tongue he walked the horse slowly forward. “Brace yourself. If you see a shadow, swing at it. If you can think of anything more damaging, then feel free to let rip.”

“They might just be footpads, robbers,” she said, more in hope than expectation, her eyes anxiously scanning the track ahead to the left and the right.

“They might. But prepare yourself for worse.”

They had climbed halfway up the gradient before she saw the first movement, a shifting of a shadow off to their right, moving slowly to meet them, as if coming in greeting rather than to cause them any harm. Then the shadow parted, she saw two, three, four distinct shapes moving an arm’s length apart from each other. Though they appeared hunched they were still of a formidable size, as tall as Auberjonois and then some, shoulders broad, thighs as solid as the trees from which they emerged. Helmets made blocks of their heads, like battering rams, with a shirt thick horn protruding from the brow of each, the armor which protected the chest and arms and legs fitted so snugly that for a moment it seemed that they were covered in scales, naked, stripped to their shiny metallic skin. When they were only paces away Anna saw their eyes, perfectly round, bulbous, but faceted, too, like the eyes of an insect.

And each one was looking beyond Auberjonois, she saw, looking directly at her. As if they recognized her, she thought.

“Strike!” cried Auberjonois, kicking the horse forward, his sword cutting sweeping figure-of-eights over its head while Anna’s swung hers in an arc to protect their right flank.

The figures were still a pace beyond her reach, she had

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intended merely to keep them at bay, but a blur of steel seemed to extend from the sword as she brought it around, its light parting the gloom and splitting the face of the first before continuing on across the chest of the second, rasping like a mechanical saw as it sliced through armor, flesh and bone.

As Auberjonois spurred the horse forward a third Dark Guard lunged from the rear and Anna quickly switched her grip on the sword, stabbing backwards and feeling it sink as easily into flesh as into soft sand, cracking armor like an eggshell, striking sparks as it sawed through a ribcage. The sword withdrew as the body fell away and she brandished it aloft, ready once again, seeing blood and steel on the blade, bright in the light of the setting sun.

Some fifty yards on, just before the top of the incline, more Dark Guards loomed, not coming from the trees this time but lined abreast across the trail, barring the way.

“You to the right and I to the left!” Auberjonois cried, not easing up on the horse’s gallop as he switched the reins in his hands, his sword swinging viciously from right to left.

The horse met the dark barrier which blocked their way, was jolted almost to a halt by the shock of the impact, and again the shadowy enemy parted, more this time, a half a dozen to either side and a similar number facing. Auberjonois reared the horse back on its hind legs and it kicked out with its hooves, cracking skulls with such force that Anna feared that its spindly legs must surely break. Arms reached up, hands in gleaming black gauntlets grasped and clutched, snatching at the reins, tearing at the saddle and ripping open panniers. One hand was severed as Anna swung her sword, hung dripping from the horse’s bridle, and with a single subsequent blow she tore open three midriffs, shocked by the ease and the gore which spilled but too caught up by fear to consider her actions.

At the horse’s other flank Auberjonois was hacking with all

his strength, bludgeoning the enemy into submission since his blows would not pierce the Dark Guard's armor as easily as hers, stabbing for faces when they offered a target, striking for the sensitive undersides when arms were raised or backs were turned.

With elegantly high steps the horse danced over the bodies before it, trampling the Guards it had felled, and to Anna's side the assailants fell back, dead or simply bloodied and beaten. Auberjonois drew his sword across an upturned face as he slapped the reins against the horse's neck, dug his heels into its flanks, and Anna saw what for a moment seemed like a beseeching look part as easily as a swollen purse, dripping fluids into an anguished mouth. Then the horse surged on, crested the top of the hill, lowered its head to dash breakneck down the reverse gradient.

The net flew up some yards before they were clear of the trees, snapped taut before them and then folded around them, pulling the horse's head lower still, buckling its forelegs, pinning Auberjonois' sword arm fast to his side.

"No!" Anna cried in frustration, enraged to be caught when she thought they were free, her whole body flushing with fury, and where the net touched it crumbled to ash as quickly as it grew taut. Not questioning how or why, she reached around and beyond Auberjonois to grasp at the net which held him fast, feeling it part as easily as dead cobweb.

"Go! Go!" she said, seeing dark shapes converging from either side, slapping Auberjonois' back, bouncing on the horse as it kicked itself free of the last scraps of the net.

They did not ease their pace -she doubted that the horse would have allowed them to- until they had put miles between themselves and what remained of the ambush of the Dark Guard. The sun had set by then, the sky had darkened through purple to black and dusk had been drowned by night when Auberjonois

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finally slowed the horse to a halt.

“We must rest, the horse must rest,” he said, helping Anna to dismount, then swinging himself down after her and leading the horse from the trail. “This outcrop of rocks will provide us with cover, will conceal us provided we do not light a fire.”

He released the reins to let the horse graze freely, knowing that it would not stray, took panniers from its back and dropped them to the ground, to cushion their backs against a large boulder, other boulders on a circle around them forming a windbreak and a defense. With no fire to cook by there was only salted beef and biscuits to eat, and he took these out, spread them out on a cloth and shared them with Anna.

“You acquitted yourself well back there,” he said, when her was chewing on a tough strip of beef.

“I hardly knew what I was doing,” she admitted.

He nodded. “The instinct of the warrior. But also something more, I think. No matter how well I have wielded that short sword in the past it has never struck with such effect. It cut through those Dark Guards as easily as a hot knife through butter.”

She recalled the blood which had been so casually spilled, said, “And we came away with not so much as a scratch. That had nothing to do with my skill with a sword, nor even yours.”

“No,” he knew. “So why do you think it was? How?”

“When we came upon the Dark Guards their gaze, their attention, was fixed on me. They looked beyond you to me, Auberjonois, as if they recognized me, as if they were looking at me through eyes which knew me. I think they wanted me. Not dead. I think they wanted to take me alive.”

“And so they still do,” said a voice.

Though the moon was no more than a sliver in the sky, and the stars were dimmed by a layer of cloud, the figure which entered the clearing seemed clear and distinct in its own light.

“Siddig?”

“Yes, Anna, they want you alive. Or the one whose instructions they follow does.”

“Siddig?” said Auberjonois again, still uncertain, his hand resting on his sword.

“Do you remember in Weimar, Auberjonois? There was a woman, the wife of a magistrate?”

Auberjonois rose to his feet, Anna too, he said, “You cannot be Siddig, or you would not mention that in front of another, yet you must be Siddig or you would not know of it. So who are you?”

The face he thought he recognized aged in the briefest of moments, the physique of the warrior grew more spare, the battle dress replaced by loose clothes of thin linen. “I am Tharmas,” said the elderly man.

“The what of Siddig?” asked Anna.

“Safe in Dos Aguas with your friend Selina. She is still recovering from her wound, but says that she is looking forward to rejoining you soon. It will be a celebration to match the last birthday you shared, she says. Do you remember that, Anna?”

In her silence, Auberjonois intervened. “You have given us a name but you have still not answered my question. Who are you?”

“A friend,” Tharmas smiled. “I offer knowledge of your companions which could only come from friendship.”

“Or be extracted by torture.”

“Perhaps. But while you decide which is the case do you think I might share your food with you?” Tharmas asked, flicking his eyes to the cloth which Tharmas had spread, to the roast duck which was there where before there had been nothing more appetizing than cold beef and hard biscuits.

“What magic is this?” Auberjonois frowned.

“No magic. A trick, that is all,” answered Tharmas, squatting on the ground and using his thumbs to split the duck apart at the

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breast. "You can trust me."

"I cannot," Auberjonois countered, but the smell of the cooked duck, whether it came from trickery or magic, was too tempting to resist. He sat facing Tharmas, had Anna sit beside him.

"Good," said Tharmas, signaling for them to join him, smiling as each tore flesh from the bird. "It is a start."

They ate in silence for a while, enjoying the first hot food they had tasted in days, Tharmas making no more than a token gesture of joining them, plucking at scraps of meat.

At length Auberjonois said, "If Siddig and Selina do indeed have your friendship, and I am to believe all that you say, then why do the Dark Guard wish to take Anna alive? On whose instructions?"

"His name is Urizen."

"Sometimes known as the Ancient of Days?"

"The same."

"And what does he want with me?" Anna wanted to know.

"It is a combination of both fear and fascination. You terrify him at the same time that you tantalize him."

At the risk of seeming conceited Anna did not question the attraction she might have for this person, but asked instead, "What is there of me to fear?"

"The prophecy, the lore, what has been written or passed down by word of mouth," said Tharmas. "You wear the medallion," he told her, and she raised her hand to touch it, to feel it beneath her shirt, against her breast. "It names you as Ael, she who is mentioned as the symbol of art, eternity and light."

"This is too much!" Anna protested. "Why do people in this land make so much of what is no more than coincidence?"

"That is the very nature of prophecy, that it draws on coincidence. It is the coincidence that people believe in, not the prophecy. You will see it as coincidence but the people of Eidolon

will see it as fate, that you will either glorify Urizen or bring about his downfall. That is the fate that he is aware of.”

* * *

“She has broken through the Dark Guard?” The report from Jack had the young woman pacing about the floor of the tent like a seasoned campaigner, the rush matting beneath her boots crackling like an angry fire. “But this is folly,” she insisted, “to try to take her alive when it would be so much easier to kill her.”

The Grand Odalisque, more controlled, reminded her that this was not what Urizen wanted.

“It is not what I want,” said Jack, but so quietly that neither of them paid him any heed.

“Then if we are to take her unarmed we must mass more forces in her way,” Tulla believed. “Overcome her and her companion by sheer weight of numbers.”

“And reduce the force we send against Golgonooza?” The Grand Odalisque shook her head at Tulla’s suggestion. “No, We cannot do that.”

“Why not? It will not take an army to overwhelm the city. Once we have bypassed Lord Lovecraft’s forces we will find a city without defense, can be safe within its walls before he realizes what has happened.”

“We must be seen to conquer, Tulla, not just have it thought that we marched in unopposed. Fear is a contagion which we must encourage to spread.”

As the two of them argued their strategies Jack went from the tent. The army had made camp on the far side of Die Brucke, on the western shore of the lake, taking much of the day to cross the bridge and assemble. So many fires had been lit that it was as if the Garden of Earthly Delights had been created again, they ran in each direction along the shore, mirrored in the lake’s black waters, fanned out before him for a mile or more. He wound his way between them, through the silent figures of the Dark Guard

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who squatted around each, marveling that so many thousand men could remain so quiet, so sullen. The silence only seemed to amplify their threat and the night was as still as the figures were, as if holding itself tense in anticipation.

The Grand Odalisque wanted to be seen to conquer, did she? Spread fear like a contagion? Well the force she had assembled would surely do that and even he, who had been as much its creator as anyone, felt in awe of it.

The silence which surrounded him was not one he could enjoy, it was not a silence of night but rather of nightmare and he needed to be away from it for a while. There were horses tethered nearby and he swung himself up onto one, still kitted in its battle armor, walked it beyond the camp unchallenged before easing it to a trot, towards the facing hills. He climbed for an hour, two, picking his way by the light of the moon, only stopping when it seemed that he could feel the weight of the sky bearing down on him. He dismounted, then, sat down on a rock and gazed out on a world so pitch that it was like a blackboard on which he could make his thoughts visible, blurred chalk sketches appearing before his eyes, of Anna approaching through luminous banks of clouds, as ephemeral as a spirit, as graceful as a sprite.

He would have her for his own. Griff would not. Urizen had designs but would somehow be thwarted. Now cloud and now substance, her image came so close that he could almost embrace her, folding around him and chilling his flesh with delight, only slowly turning to morning mist as the dawn broke.

The sun rose over his shoulder, climbed slowly as if with an effort, casting his shadow before him, down the mountainside, darkening the land like a portent, like the shadow of a man who had the capacity to become a giant. Far below, from a greater height than he believed her could have ridden the previous night, he saw Dark Guards massing, understood that Tulla and the Grand Odalisque must have reached some understanding over

their strategies for the army was dividing, an advance force peeling off under the leadership of one or the other, striking south towards the coast to bypass the mountains. Like insects they swarmed, order coming from their chaos as they formed into a file a quarter of a mile wide, moving like a single lumbering creature, giving rise to a cloud of dust which threatened to darken the sky.

“A stirring sight, you must be proud,” a voice congratulated him, and he turned to see Urizen standing behind him. “But you should be down there, Jack. It should be you leading them, not Tulla. They are your creation.”

Jack shook his head, looked around for his horse, but the ground was too broken, too jagged for any four-legged creature to have carried him here, before him it dropped too steeply, around him it rose and fell like a petrified chalk-white sea. He clambered a few feet higher, searching for more even ground, stepped into the shadow of the peak which reared above him and shivered as Urizen followed at his shoulder.

“What happened to the blood-lust Tulla promised us, the rage she said was within you?” asked the old man, keeping pace with him, striding just as surely despite his age. “Replaced by the lust which you feel for the girl, Anna? That is all it is, Jack. Lust. Forget about her. I will not say that she deserves something better, but she is surely destined for something greater.”

The uneven ground leveled into a narrow trail which hugged the side of the mountain, winding down and around, wide enough for Urizen to walk beside him.

“It is written, Jack, it is spoken of by those blessed with insight, passed down from mother to daughter through generation upon generation of wise women.”

“I don’t give a jot for your prophecies,” said Jack.

“But you should, Jack. They are the reason you are here, to bring them to fulfillment. You, and your friends. Five of you. Five

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senses. Those which light the caverned man and it is threatened will enclose me.” He grasped Jack by the shoulder, turned him, so that their eyes could meet. “They will enclose my brain into a narrow circle, and sink my heart into the Abyss till from all life I will be obliterated and erased. That is what is foretold, Jack.”

“So you will kill me? You will kill us all?”

“Eventually, it might be necessary,” Urizen answered, but with no threat, as if it was no more than a harmless aside. His gaze was lost in a hazy distance, unfocussed, looking beyond what the eye can see. “She comes,” he whispered. “A mild emanation like a pale cloud arising from the arms of Beulah’s Daughters, a vision of light flanked by two warriors.” He was smiling when he turned back to Jack, his eyes bright with a fevered anticipation. “You know the word ‘emanation’?”

“What some people call the intrusions into your world? The physical manifestations of what is imagined in my world?”

“Imagined in your world, and in others, yes. But it is something more, not just a product of but a corollary to, a part of, an addition to. I have a daughter and she is an emanation of me; I have a brother, and we are each emanations of the other, though being male we would more rightly be called specters of each other. These are blood relations, yes, but it goes beyond that, we are all of us bound together in eternity. We are Eternals, states rather than individuals. Your friend Anna, though she does not yet know it, is an Eternal.”

“Bound to you?”

“Ultimately. Yes. We will become one command, one joy, one desire; one curse, one weight, one measure; one King, one God, one Law.”

* * *

Griff felt the grief of a man divorced or bereaved, deprived of a loved one, as if memories came to torment him which were of a life he had yet to live, as if he had died already and was living

some kind of posthumous existence. He had contradictory memories of Anna as a wife cheating on him, turning her back on him, or as an ailing elderly woman taken from him by a cruel God. Or there was a child, his child, her child, and the anguish of losing it when he had lavished so much love on it.

He was disorientated, and it was not just the confusion of the peaks around him which had him thus, for he felt as lost in time as he was in space, memories of past and future combining to dizzy him with their possibilities. He had always set great store by ideas, believed in their power, and since coming to Eidolon he had further seen their actual manifestation. Now, faced with the idea that at some point in his future he might be lonely, or suffer bereavement or separation or be the victim of untold anguish was almost too much to bear, the possibilities as real as the actualities.

He was lost. Again. As lost as he had been before when Janas found him. She had told him that he was at the base of the String of Pearls, about two thirds of the way along its length, but it seemed that he was still in the heart of the range, that it rose all around him with the intention of never surrendering him. Mists rolled down the mountainsides, gathered below to hide the valleys, massed about the summits to disperse the light which shone from them. He had no sense of direction, no sure knowledge of which way was north or south, west or east, continued on blindly; but, he felt, driven by some sense of purpose, carrying the message Janas had commissioned him to deliver yet still not knowing what it was.

Though he was tired his purpose would not permit him to rest. There was still the urgency to find Anna, find Jack, return to Orasula before Leo was transported to the mines, he did not know how many days he had left, only that they were few, but it was something over and above this urgency which drove him on. Indeed, though the urgency remained with him, there were

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moments when the memory of Leo, and even of Anna, seemed to fade into the recesses of his mind, as if the scarab Janas had set to eat at his memory had already done a portion of its work.

He cursed her loudly as he rode, then cursed himself for calling her name to mind.

“I will not forget Anna!” he vowed, and throughout the night he fought to retain her memory, reliving the life he had shared with her, running through a narrative of their love episode by episode, the humdrum days along with the momentous occasions.

And throughout the night the fear kept returning, that this was what it would be like to miss a person.

The sky lightened though the mist did not immediately disperse, warmth penetrated only slowly, making his face feel chilled with perspiration, and as he shivered he could not decide if it was cold or fear which was the cause. Gradually the light gathered, focused, he saw a blurred sun climb at his shoulder, the ground grow more distinct beneath him and his shadow darken. As the light around him spread so his world expanded, opened up as if it was a living thing which bloomed, too distracted by the vista which unfolded to guide his horse with any sureness. The mist lifted from the valleys, rose as if to wrap him in a shroud but then dissipated before it could do so; around the peaks it massed and congealed, became like plumes of smoke which flared stark white against a clear blue sky. The landscape he then faced was so vast in its breadth, so infinite in its depth, that he swayed in the saddle, rocking against the movements of the horse as vertigo overcame him. He dismounted quickly, curled an arm around its neck, huddled close to it to feel the comfort of its sweating flank against him. The horse walked on without his encouragement and he moved with it, needing to be with it, as dependant on it as a child was on its mother.

Even after an hour's descent the valley floor was a giddy

distance below, a narrow defile to his left, broadening to his right. As the curve of the mountain carried him around with it he could see the end to the range, the plain beyond, a shimmer in the distance which might mark the coast, and across this mat of dull verdure and chrome yellow he could make out a dark stain moving, a blot in the east which coalesced and took on a more certain form. And just as certain he knew what it was, though he could make out no particular detail in the mass he somehow understood what he was witnessing: Eidolon going to war.

He descended the mountainside by the most direct route he could, intending to cross the valley to the facing peak, to circle in the shadow of that and make his way to the Garden of Earthly Delights without crossing the path of the marching army. He had to trust that he would find Anna there, doubted that Jack would have allied himself with the warring force, since such bravura was not in his nature.

He had reached the valley floor, was crossing its flat expanse with eyes constantly darting to the right, watching for any change of course in the ink-black flow of troops, when he became aware of the two figures descending the facing mountain. They were no more than pinpricks, dark mites against the grey scree, but though they were as yet too distant to recognize he knew both the instant he saw them.

Jack was mounted on a horse draped in mail and leather, a studded apron guarding its breast, a veil of fine steel mesh covering its head and armored blinkers shielding its eyes. As the steel reflected the sun's rays so the matt black leather seemed to soak them up like a sponge would water, making the horse seem to flicker in and out of vision as it approached. Astride the creature Jack wore no armor, just a large sword at his side, and seemed no more than a shadow carried on by its strobe-like gait, leaving behind a series of fading after-images. Jack hated him, Leo had said, and now Griff could sense that hatred, across the

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distance which separated them there came a wave of animosity such as he had never known.

The second person, striding along on foot, was Urizen. He knew the name though he had never before heard it spoken, knew the aging figure with the flowing white hair though he had never before set eyes on him. The hatred he had felt flowing from Jack was now returned to this second figure, not his own hatred but a hatred delivered by proxy, the hatred of Janas. This was the message he had brought, and it was not one he carried gladly.

Jack and Urizen had now reached the valley floor and continued to come towards him, the horse's slow pace matching the old man's steady stride, their approach deliberate as if they were immovable objects. When no more than a hundred yards separated them Griff pulled his horse to a halt, but the other two continued on until they were near enough for him to see the whites of their eyes, the determined set to Jack's mouth, the amused smile which creased the face of Urizen.

"Janas has sent you," said Urizen, bringing his hands together in a clap which made no sound. "Oothoon's daughter, the vengeful young bitch of the lovesick old hag. How is the 'sage-femme'? Living a life of solitary misery, I hope?"

Griff felt a rage well inside him, the rage of Janas which stretched like some umbilical chord linking them. He fought against it, strove to remember his true purpose, said to Jack, "You have to come back with me."

"Where you go you go alone," Jack answered, swinging from the saddle, planting his feet square on the ground.

"What does Janas think you might do, young man?" Urizen was asking.

"We don't belong here, Jack."

"She thinks to kill me?" Urizen wondered, taking the reins from Jack. "She thinks to make me suffer, as her mother did and herself because of that? But the cut of the sword is rash reward

for the cut of love, hardly just punishment.”

Griff could not understand what the old man was talking about, knew only that with each word the rage, Janas’ rage, burned ever fiercer. Again he fought the anger, tried to control it, or at least redirect it. The flush it brought was making his brow sweat, his hands were slick with perspiration as he asked Jack again: “Come back with me.”

“But I have never known a world where I belong more. I have power here.”

“We all do, and no good can ever come of it.”

“Who wants good?” laughed Jack, without humor, and in a single movement had drawn his sword and cut through the forelegs of Griff’s horse. The stricken creature dipped forward in a bloody genuflection, spilling him onto the ground. “Down to my level, Griff, to meet me eye to eye. Your life has been one long string of events without cause, all that has happened to you has been despite you. Luck, Griff. But now it has changed.” He tested the weight of the sword, swept it to his left, to his right. “Prepare for one final blistering cause, one final damning effect.”

The blade seemed to cut through the air as it swept in a broad arc, light distorting, reality folding around the edge as it scored through Griff’s tunic and drew a line of blood across his midriff. The pain was great, as if the cut had gone deeper, and Jack’s grin threatening, as if to say that he could do much worse.

“Jack! Stop this!”

“Draw your sword or I will cut you down where you stand, bleed you little by little until you don’t even have the energy to beg.”

“Stop! This is madness! It’s..... uncivilized!” was the word which came, a protest which sounded so futile in the face of such loathing.

Jack raised the sword two-handed over his head, held it there no more than a moment before bringing it down with all

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his might. Before he knew it Griff had his own sword drawn, blocking the blow, the judder of steel against steel and the flash of light against light shaking him awake to the peril of the situation, causing him to counter a second blow and then strike out himself.

“Urizen! Strike Urizen!” he heard the encouragement of Janas ring in his mind, almost too compelling to resist, but Urizen was beyond his reach, seated on a rock some yards apart from the combat, as entertained as a spectator at a sport. If Janas wanted the man’s blood then Jack would have to be dealt with first.

The sound of their blows rang from peak to peak, Griff no longer seeking simply to defend himself but striking out to kill, even though it was a denial of all that he had once held dear, all that he had been taught. That it was a question of kill or be killed was no consolation.

Jack drew blood and he drew blood, exchanging cut for cut, no strike fatal in itself but every one sapping a little more of their strength, as if there was some force –the force of Urizen’s wicked smile?- insisting that the combat be prolonged, be as much a torture as a battle. Griff felt his limbs grow weary, his mind grow dull, thought he recognized the same in Jack. He wanted nothing more than to curl up and surrender, would have welcomed sleep even if it meant death, but like a puppet caught on jangling strings his arm still swept the sword back and forth. In his weariness there came a vision, a memory of that future he had yet to live, he saw himself and Anna sharing the same death-bed, and it was this which strangely gave him heart, for if he had shared her death then he must surely have shared her life.

One thing he did know, and it was that Jack would never share it. A blaze of determination scorched his body, he did not even feel the weight of the sword in his hand, nor the strain on his muscles as he renewed the attack.

He was prepared to kill or be killed when the cry came, staying his hand.

“Griff!”

* * *

With her art she would enfold the shadow of his horrors, she was eternal and she was light; this was the truth Tharmas tried to convince Anna of as he guided her and Auberjonois from the last heights of the String of Pearls. In his attitude towards her there was something which was almost veneration, it was more than the respect Auberjonois had for her ability, as demonstrated in their combat with the Dark Guards.

“He is the tyranny of reason and you are the light which can defeat him, the pale fire he fears,” Tharmas told her, and she raised a hand to her hair, brushing a strand back from her cheek. Griff had described it as soft gold, Jack she recalled arguing for it being something paler, like a weak sun on a hazy morning; Jack had wanted to paint her, Griff to portray her as an idea, an essence, an eternal form. “Yes, pale fire,” Tharmas repeated. “Like a thing which burns so fiercely that it is almost without flame.”

“I witnessed it,” Auberjonois confirmed. “When you tended Selina’s wound and you tackled the Dark Guard. Your body flushed with the force of the Afflatus and your hair grew pale like a halo around a ghost. And with each occasion it grows paler still.”

“I burn in the sun, my hair always bleaches,” she said, searching for reasons.

“No, Anna,” Tharmas interrupted. “You burn like the sun.”

“Be quiet, Tharmas!” she snapped, becoming impatient with their commendation which was becoming more like adoration. She looked around in frustration, taking in the terrain, the peaks which still surrounded them, though they seemed of a lesser height than they had been before. “When will we be out of this

godforsaken range?" she demanded. "When will I find my way to the Garden of Earthly Delights?"

"Soon," Tharmas answered, and then smiled his most annoying smile. "You see? Your destiny drives you."

"It is my need to find Griff which drives me," she insisted, slapping Auberjonois on the shoulder, urging him to spur their horse on.

With Tharmas not breaking his own steady stride he was soon left behind, lost to view as they followed the trail which curved around the side of the mountain, but she knew that he would reappear some way ahead, when their path became confused or they least wanted to meet him.

"Do you trust him, Auberjonois?" she asked.

"I believe he is possessed of powers as strange as yours."

"And so?"

"No," he admitted, with barely a glance over his shoulder to her. "I cannot trust a man with such powers."

"Which would suggest that you cannot trust me," she argued.

"I have felt only the benefit of your power, as when you healed Selina, or defeated the Dark Guard. And if Tharmas is to be believed it seems that your powers must continue to be used for good."

"Is he to be believed?"

"He repeats what the Nabis woman said," Auberjonois stated. "That is either collusion or it is truth."

As Anna had expected Tharmas was waiting for them an hour later, when the trail split to fork to the left and the right, around a large outcrop of rock, rose silently as they approached and walked ahead, following the right-hand path. The way dipped sharply, the rock towered a sheer height above them, the vista before them broadened out and the gradient became so steep that it seemed that at any moment they must plummet to

the valley below. They found it safer to dismount, lead the horse along behind Tharmas, and the narrow trail funneled out, became a deep wide blanket of scree.

“Her destiny awaits pale fire,” said Tharmas, his arm sweeping out as the sun rose above the peak behind them, bathing the land in light as if the illumination came as much from the gesture as from the day breaking. “In the distance, to your right, you see the dark stain of black forces massing, marching, to spread their gloom across the land according to Urizen’s instruction. To the east you see the glow of the Garden of Earthly Delights, the legacy he leaves behind. And below, on the valley floor, where facing slopes meet and level out.....”

“Griff!” she cried, one single step forward taking her a hundred feet down the slope, the ground breaking beneath her in a cataract of shale, carrying her with it like a soft grey surf. “Griff!” her voice rebounded from the facing slope, and far below two figures froze in a miniature of a tableau.

She saw Griff with his hands raised, a beam of light extending from them, and a figure opposing him with his own hands held chest high, emitting a similar blaze of light. The juxtaposition of the two formed a luminous white cross, vivid against the dun verdure.

Her cry caused Griff to turn, to look over his shoulder to search out the source, and as he did so the cross flashed with a crack like lightning, shaking the valley and scorching the ground at his feet. He stumbled as he saw her, recognized her as he fell, called out to her even as he struck the ground, her name coming like a dying breath, as he had so often whispered it in love and passion.

He lay prone as a sword was raised above him, held like a stake above his heart, and in an instant she somehow knew -she was surely too far away to see- that the one who was about to strike the final death blow was Jack.

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“No!” she screamed, her body rigid with the realization that she was helpless to intercede.

Jack looked up at her, the sense of a smile carried towards her, a wave of hatred and victory and glee as he summoned the force to deliver the blow.

“No!” she screamed again, and each taut muscle burned, each straining tendon protested, her whole body bathed in Tharmas’ pale fire as she called on the gods to deny her destiny.

They could never be together, she had been told.

Then so be it.

But please...!

The flaring of that thing which the people of Eidolon called the Afflatus was stronger than she had ever known it before, it hurt more than the pain she had taken from Selina, was fiercer than the anger which the assault of the Dark Guard had occasioned. The peaks of the String of Pearls flashed with a bright phosphorescence, before her and behind her the light shot between them as they pulsed and sparked, filling the valley with a blinding light as she fell to her knees.

“I’m sorry, Jack! Forgive me!” she sobbed, as peak seemed to tear against peak, stretching the land and rending the valley, folding and warping and wrapping everything, the warring figures included, in a blur of white.

* * *

“What did I do?” she asked, as Auberjonois helped her to her feet, held her to him to support her trembling body.

“Something I have never seen before, something that I never thought to witness,” said Tharmas at her other side, his hand touching her arm lightly, as if in awe of her, his unblinking gaze slowly tracking from left to right, north to south, taking in the whole horror of it and wondering how he might describe it to her.

Lightning flashed from the peaks behind them, and from those to the north, from the further reaches of the String of

Pearls, forked ribbons of cold blue zig-zagging from one to the next in a dazzling relay. But where there had been peaks facing them to the east, where the electric dance might be expected to continue, the lightning flashed in broad white sheets, flared with a dull luminescence as if seen through a veil of gauze. There were no points of focus, as there were along the western edge of the valley, for those peaks which faced them had gone, as had the valley itself. There was nothing before them, not even a glimmer of a mirage, nothing but emptiness, a featureless void.

“You have conjured an intrusion,” Tharmas told Anna, and she nodded, for though her head was bowed, her eyes were closed to the view before them, she could feel the weariness it had caused her, the fever of pale fire it had brought. “And yet it is not an intrusion,” he continued, struggling to put into words what he witnessed, “for an intrusion must be of something, and this.... well....”

“What has happened to the land, Tharmas? What has happened to my world?” asked Auberjonois, but Tharmas could only shrug.

Finally Anna raised her head, opened her eyes, saw and simply said, “He’s gone. Griff was there. And Jack. Gone.”

Tharmas nodded. “And Urizen.”

“You bastard,” she cursed him, but with little energy, with less venom than she would hope. “You have what you wished.”

“Oh, I doubt very much that Urizen has gone. He is as eternal as you are, his state might change but his essence will not. But at least, for the moment-”

He had not got Anna, nor her two friends; his power had not been diminished but at least it was not added to, and that in itself was a victory. He persuaded Anna to come away, to retreat from the void before she could be drawn into it, and though she allowed herself to be led by him still she cursed him.

“You have what you wanted, your prophecy fulfilled, my

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destiny assured, that I can never be with Griff.”

“It was not what I wanted, merely what was stated. I did not wish this upon you, Anna.”

“If ever I can return the favor,” she vowed, but was too weary to complete the promise, for the moment could only accept his support, and that of Auberjonois, as they helped her back into the String of Pearls, climbed into the peaks which sparked and flared, then down to the sheltered valleys which wound between them.

Having retrieved their horse, and mounted Anna on it, it was some hours before they had left behind the trauma of what she had caused, as night fell the disturbance she had brought to the kingdom was no more than a gentle pulse of light in the east.