# Academic Exercises

K. J. PARKER

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*For Jonathan Strahan*
With grateful thanks

# A Small Price to Pay for Birdsong

My sixteenth concerto," he said, smiling at me. I could just about see him. "In the circumstances, I was thinking of calling it the Unfinished."

Well, of course. I'd never been in a condemned cell before. It was more or less what I'd imagined it would be like. There was a stone bench under the tiny window. Other than that, it was empty, as free of human artefacts as a stretch of open moorland. After all, what things does a man need if he's going to die in six hours?

I was having difficulty with the words. "You haven't—"

"No." He shook his head. "I'm two-thirds of the way through the third movement, so under normal circumstances I'd hope to get that done by—well, you know. But they won't let me have a candle, and I can't write in the dark." He breathed out slowly. He was savouring the taste of air, like an expert sampling a fine wine. "It'll all be in here, though" he went on, lightly tapping the side of his head. "So at least I'll know how it ends."

I really didn't want to ask, but time was running out. "You've got the main theme," I said.

"Oh yes, of course. It's on the leash, just waiting for me to turn it loose."

I could barely speak. "I could finish it for you," I said, soft and hoarse as a man propositioning his best friend's wife. "You could hum me the theme, and—"

He laughed. Not unkindly, not kindly either. "My dear old friend," he said, "I couldn't possibly let you do that. Well," he added, hardening his voice a little, "obviously I won't be in any position to stop you trying. But you'll have to make up your own theme."

"But if it's nearly finished—"

I could just about make out a slight shrug. "That's how it'll have to stay," he said. "No offence, my very good and dear old friend, but you simply aren't up to it. You haven't got the—" He paused to search for the word, then gave up. "Don't take this the wrong way," he said. "We've known each other—what, ten years? Can it really be that long?"

"You were fifteen when you came to the Studium."

"Ten years." He sighed. "And I couldn't have asked for a better teacher. But you—well, let's put it this way. Nobody knows more about form and technique than you do, but you haven't got *wings*. All you can do is run fast and flap your arms up and down. Which you do," he added pleasantly, "superlatively well."

"You don't want me to help you," I said.

"I've offended you." Not the first time he'd said that, not by a long way. And always, in the past, I'd forgiven him instantly. "And you've taken the trouble to come and see me, and I've insulted you. I'm really sorry. I guess this place has had a bad effect on me."

"Think about it," I said, and I was so ashamed of myself; like robbing a dying man. "Your last work. Possibly your greatest."

He laughed out loud. "You haven't read it yet," he said. "It could be absolute garbage for all you know."

It could have been, but I knew it wasn't. "Let me finish it for you," I said. "Please. Don't let it die with you. You owe it to the human race."

I'd said the wrong thing. "To be brutally frank with you," he said, in a light, slightly brittle voice, "I couldn't give a twopenny fuck about the human race. They're the ones who put me in here, and in six hours' time they're going to pull my neck like a chicken. Screw the lot of them."

My fault. I'd said the wrong thing, and as a result, the music inside his head would stay there, trapped in there, until the rope crushed his windpipe and his brain went cold. So, naturally, I blamed him. "Fine," I said. "If that's your attitude, I don't think there's anything left to say."

"Quite." He sighed. I think he wanted me to leave. "It's all a bit pointless now, isn't it? Here," he added, and I felt a sheaf of paper thrust against my chest. "You'd better take the manuscript. If it's left here, there's a fair chance the guards'll use it for arsewipe."

"Would it bother you if they did?"

He laughed. "I don't think it would, to be honest," he said. "But it's worth money," he went on, and I wish I could've seen his face. "Even incomplete," he added. "It's got to be worth a hundred angels to somebody, and I seem to recall I owe you a hundred and fifty, from the last time."

I felt my fingers close around the pages. I didn't want to take them, but I gripped so tight I could feel the paper crumple. I had in fact already opened negotiations with the Kapelmeister.

I stood up. "Goodbye," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't go blaming yourself for anything." Absolution, so easy for him to give; like a duke scattering coins to the crowd from a balcony. Of course, the old duke used to have the coins heated in a brazier first. I still have little white scars on my fingertips. "I've always been the sole author of my own misfortunes. You always did your best for me."

And failed, of course. "Even so," I said, "I'm sorry. It's such a waste."

That made him laugh. "I wish," he said, "that music could've been the most important thing in my life, like it should've been. But it was only ever a way of getting a bit of money."

I couldn't reply to that. The truth, which I'd always known since I first met him, was that if he'd cared about music, he couldn't have written it so well. Now there's irony.

"You're going to finish it anyway."

I stopped, a pace or so short of the door. "Not if you don't want me to."

"I won't be here to stop you."

"I can't finish it," I said. "Not without the theme."

"Balls." He clicked his tongue, that irritating sound I'll always associate with him. "You'll have a stab at it, I know you will. And for the rest of time, everybody will be able to see the join."

"Goodbye," I said, without looking round.

"You could always pass it off as your own," he said.

I balled my fist and bashed on the door. All I wanted to do was get out of there as quickly as I could; because while I was in there with him, I hated him, because of what he'd just said. Because I'd deserved better of him than that, over the years. And because the thought had crossed my mind.

I WAITED TILL I got back to my rooms before I unfolded the sheaf of paper and looked at it.

At that point, I had been the professor of music at the Academy of the Invincible Sun for twenty-seven years. I was the youngest ever incumbent, and I fully intend to die in these rooms, though not for a very long time. I'd taught the very best. My own music was universally respected, and I got at least five major commissions every year for ducal and official occasions. I'd written six books on musical theory, all of which had become the standard works on the aspects of the subject they cover. Students came here from every part of the empire, thousands of miles in cramped ships and badly-sprung coaches, to hear me lecture on harmony and the use of form. The year before, they'd named one of the five modes after me.

When I'd read it, I looked at the fire, which the servant had lit while I was out. It would be so easy, I thought. Twenty sheets of paper don't take very long to burn. But, as I think I told you,

I'd already broached the subject with the Kapelmeister, who'd offered me five hundred angels, sight unseen, even unfinished. I knew I could get him up to eight hundred. I have no illusions about myself.

I DIDN'T TRY and finish the piece; not because I'd promised I wouldn't, but because he escaped. To this day, nobody has the faintest idea how he managed it. All we know is that when the captain of the guard opened his cell to take him to the scaffold, he found a warder sitting on the bench with his throat cut, and no sign of the prisoner.

There was an enquiry, needless to say. I had a very uncomfortable morning at guard headquarters, where I sat on a bench in a corridor for three hours before making the acquaintance of a Captain Monomachus of the Investigative branch. He pointed out to me that I was a known associate of the prisoner, and that I'd been the last person to be alone with him before his escape. I replied that I'd been thoroughly and quite humiliatingly searched before I went in to see him, and there was no way I could've taken him in any kind of weapon.

"We aren't looking for a weapon, as a matter of fact," captain Monomachus replied. "We reckon he smashed his inkwell and used a shard of the glass. What we're interested in is how he got clear of the barbican. We figure he must've had help."

I looked the captain straight in the eye. I could afford to. "He always had plenty of friends," I said.

For some reason, the captain smiled at that. "After you left him," he said, "where did you go?"

"Straight back to my rooms in college. The porter can vouch for me, presumably. And my servant. He brought me a light supper shortly after I got home."

Captain Monomachus prowled round me for a while after that, but since he had absolutely nothing against me, he had to

let me go. As I was about to leave, he stopped me and said, "I understand there was a last piece."

I nodded. "That's right. That's what I was reading, the rest of the evening."

"Any good?"

"Oh yes." I paused, then added, "Possibly his best. Unfinished, of course."

There was a slight feather of shyness about the question that followed. "Will there be a performance?"

I told him the date and the venue. He wrote them down on a scrap of paper, which he folded and put in his pocket.

THE GOOD CAPTAIN was, in fact, the least of my problems. That same evening, I was summoned to the Master's lodgings.

"Your protégé," the Master said, pouring me a very small glass of the college brandy.

"My student," I said. It's very good brandy, as a matter of fact, but invariably wasted, because the only times I get to drink it are when I'm summoned into the presence, on which occasions I'm always so paralysed with fear that even good brandy has no effect whatsoever.

He sighed, sniffed his glass and sat down; or rather, he perched on the edge of the settle. He always likes to be higher than his guests. Makes swooping to strike easier, I imagine. "An amazingly gifted man," he said. "You might go so far as to call him a genius, though that term is sadly overused these days, I find." I waited, and a moment and a sip of brandy later, he continued; "But a fundamentally unstable character. I suppose we ought to have seen the warning signs."

We meaning me; because the Master wasn't appointed until the year after my poor student was expelled. "You know," I said, trying to sound as though it was a conversation rather than an

interrogation, "I sometimes wonder if in his case, the two are inseparable; the instability and the brilliance, I mean."

The Master nodded. "The same essential characteristics that made him a genius also made him a murderer," he said. "It's a viable hypothesis, to be sure. In which case, the question must surely arise; can the one ever justify the other? The most sublime music, set against a man's life." He shrugged, a gesture for which his broad, sloping shoulders were perfectly suited. "I shall have to bear that one in mind for my Ethics tutorials. You could argue it quite well both ways, of course. After all, his music will live for ever, and the man he killed was the most dreadful fellow, by all accounts, a petty thief and a drunkard." He paused, to give me time to agree. Even I knew better than that. Once it was clear I'd refused the bait, he said, "The important thing, I think, is to try and learn something from this tragic case."

"Indeed," I said, and nibbled at my brandy to give myself time. I've never fenced, but I believe that's what fencers do; make time by controlling distance. So I held up my brandy glass and hid behind it as best I could.

"Warning signs," he went on, "that's what we need to look out for. These young people come here, they're entrusted to our care at a particularly difficult stage in their development. Our duty doesn't end with stuffing their heads full of knowledge. We need to adopt a more comprehensive pastoral approach. Don't you agree?"

In the old duke's time, they used to punish traitors by shutting them up in a cage with a lion. As an exquisite refinement of malice, they used to feed the lion to bursting point first. That way, it wasn't hungry again for the best part of a day. I always found that very upsetting to think about. If I'm going to be torn apart, I want it to be over quickly. The Master and the old duke were students together, by the way. I believe they got on very well.

"Of course," I said. "No doubt the Senate will let us have some guidelines in due course."

I got out of there eventually, in one piece. Curiously enough, I didn't start shaking until I was halfway across the quadrangle, on my way back to my rooms. I couldn't tell you why encounters like that disturb me so much. After all, the worst the Master could do to me was dismiss me—which was bound to happen, sooner or later, because I only had qualified tenure, and I knew he thought of me as a closet Optimate. Which was, of course, entirely true. But so what? Unfortunately, the thought of losing my post utterly terrifies me. I know I'm too old to get another post anything like as good as this one, and such talent as I ever had has long since dissipated through overuse. I have doctorates and honorary doctorates in music enough to cover a wall, but I can't actually play a musical instrument. I have a little money put by these days, but not nearly enough. I have never experienced poverty, but in the city you see it every day. I don't have a particularly vivid imagination—anybody familiar with my music can attest to that—but I have no trouble at all imagining what it would be like to be homeless and hungry and cold in Perimadeia. I think about it all the time. Accordingly, the threat of my inevitable dismissal at some unascertained point in the future lies over my present like a cloud of volcanic ash, blotting out the sun, and I'm incapable of taking any pleasure in anything at all.

He will always be known by his name in religion, Subtilius of Bohec; but he was born Aimeric de Beguilhan, third son of a minor Northern squire, raised in the farmyard and the stables, destined for an uneventful career in the Ministry. When he came here, he had a place to read Logic, Literature and Rhetoric, and by his own account he'd never composed a bar of music in his life. In Bohec (I have no idea where it is), music consisted of tavern songs and painfully refined dances from the previous century; it featured in his life about as much as the sea, which is something like two hundred miles away in every direction.

He first encountered real music in the Studium chapel, which is presumably why nearly all his early work was devotional and choral. When he transferred to the Faculty of Music, I introduced him to the secular instrumental tradition; I suppose that when I appear at last before the court of the Invincible Sun and whoever cross-examines me there asks me if there's one thing I've done which has made the world a better place, that'll be it. Without me, Subtilius would never have written for strings, or composed the five violin concertos, or the three polyphonic symphonies. But he'd already written the first of the Masses before I ever set eyes on him.

The murder was such a stupid business; though, looking back, I suppose it was more or less inevitable that something of the kind should have happened sooner or later. He always did have such a quick temper, fatally combined with a sharp tongue, an unfortunate manner and enough skill at arms to make him practically fearless. There was also the fondness for money—there was never quite enough money when he was growing up, and I know he was exceptionally sensitive about that—and the sort of amorality that often seems to go hand in hand with keen intelligence and an unsatisfactory upbringing. He was intelligent enough to see past the reasons generally advanced in support of obedience to the rules and the law, but lacking in any moral code of his own to take its place. Add to that youth, and overconfidence arising from the praise he'd become accustomed to as soon as he began to compose music, and you have a recipe for disaster.

Even now, I couldn't tell you much about the man he killed. Depending on which account you go by, he was either an accomplice or a rival. In any event, he was a small-time professional thief, a thoroughly worthless specimen who would most assuredly have ended up on the gallows if Subtilius hadn't stabbed him through the neck in the stable-yard of the *Integrity and Honour* in Foregate. Violent death is, I believe, no uncommon occurrence there, and he'd probably have got away with it had not one of the ostlers been a passionate admirer of his

religious music, and therefore recognised him and been able to identify him to the Watch; an unfortunate consequence, I suppose, of the quite exceptionally broad appeal of Subtilius' music. If I'd stabbed a man in a stable-yard, the chances of a devoted fan recognising me would've been too tiny to quantify, unless the ostler happened to be a fellow academic fallen on hard times.

I GOT BACK to my rooms, fumbled with the keys, dropped them—anybody passing would have thought I was drunk, although of course I scarcely touched a drop in those days; I couldn't afford to, with the excise tax so high—finally managed to get the door open and fall into the room. It was dark, of course, and I spent quite some time groping for the tinder-box and the candle, and then I dropped the moss out of the box onto the floor and had to grope for that too. Eventually I struck a light, and used the candle to light the oil lamp. It was only then, as the light colonised the room, that I saw I wasn't alone.

"Hello, professor," said Subtilius.

My first thought—I was surprised at how quickly and practically I reacted—was the shutters. Mercifully, they were closed. In which case, he couldn't have come in through the window—

He laughed. "It's all right," he said, "nobody saw me. I was extremely careful."

Easy to say; easy to believe, but easy to be wrong. "How long have you been here?"

"I came in just after you left. You left the door unlocked."

Quite right; I'd forgotten.

"I took the precaution of locking it for you," he went on, "with the spare key you still keep in that ghastly pot on the mantelpiece. Look, why don't you sit down before you fall over? You look awful."

I went straight to the door and locked it. Not that I get many visitors, but I was in no mood to rely on the laws of probability. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He sighed, and stretched out his legs. I imagine it was what his father used to do, after a long day on the farm or following the hounds. "Hiding," he said. "What do you think?"

"You can't hide here."

"Overjoyed to see you too."

It was an entirely valid rebuke, so I ignored it. "Aimeric, you're being utterly unreasonable. You can't expect me to harbour a fugitive from justice—"

"Aimeric." He repeated the word as though it had some kind of incantatory power. "You know, professor, you're the only person who's called me that since the old man died. Can't say I ever liked the name, but it's odd to hear it again after all these years. Listen," he said, before I could get a word in, "I'm sorry if I scared the life out of you, but I need your help."

I always did find him both irresistibly charming and utterly infuriating. His voice, for one thing. I suppose it's my musician's ear; I can tell you more about a man, where he's from and how much money he's got, from hearing him say two words than any mere visual clues. Subtilius had a perfect voice; consonants clear and sharp as a knife, vowels fully distinguished and immaculately expressed. You can't learn to talk like that over the age of three. No matter how hard you try, if you start off with a provincial burr, like me, it'll always bleed through sooner or later. You can only achieve that bell-like clarity and those supremely beautiful dentals and labials if you start learning them before you can walk. That's where actors go wrong, of course. They can make themselves sound like noblemen after years of study so long as they stick to normal everyday conversational pitches. But if they try and shout, anyone with a trained ear can hear the northern whine or the southern bleat, obvious as a stain on a white sheet. Subtilius had a voice you'd have paid money to listen to, even if all he was doing was giving you directions to the Southgate, or

swearing at a porter for letting the sludge get into the wine. That sort of perfection is, of course, profoundly annoying if you don't happen to be true-born aristocracy. My father was a fuller and soap-boiler in Ap'Escatoy. My first job was riding with him on the cart collecting the contents of chamber pots from the inns in the early hours of the morning. I've spent forty years trying to sound like a gentleman, and these days I can fool everybody except myself. Subtilius was born perfect and never had to try.

"Where the hell," I asked him, "have you been? The guard's been turning the city upside down. How did you get out of the barbican? All the gates were watched."

He laughed. "Simple," he said. "I didn't leave. Been here all the time, camping out in the clock tower."

Well, of course. The Studium, as I'm sure you know, is built into the west wall of the barbican. Naturally they searched it, the same day he escaped, after which they concluded that he must've got past the gate somehow and made it down to the lower town. It wouldn't have occurred to them to try the clock tower. Twenty years ago, an escaped prisoner hid up there, and when they found him, he was extremely dead. Nothing can survive in the bell-chamber when the clock strikes; the sheer pressure of sound would pulp your brain. Oh, I imagine a couple of guardsmen put their heads round inside the chamber when they knew it was safe, but they wouldn't have made a thorough search, because everybody knows the story. But in that case—

"Why aren't I dead?" He grinned at me. "Because the story's a load of old rubbish. I always had my doubts about it, so I took the trouble to look up the actual records. The prisoner who hid out up there died of blood poisoning from a scratch he'd got climbing out of a broken window. The thing about the bells killing him was pure mythology. You know how people like to believe that sort of thing." He gave me a delightful smile. "So they've been looking for me in Lower Town, have they? Bless them."

Curiosity, presumably; the true scholar's instinct, which he always had. But combined, I dare say, with the thought at the

back of his mind that one day, a guaranteed safe hiding-place would come in useful. I wondered when he'd made his search in the archives; when he was fifteen, or seventeen, or twenty-one?

"I'm not saying it was exactly pleasant, mind," he went on, "not when the bells actually struck. The whole tower shakes, did you know that? It's a miracle it hasn't collapsed. But I found that if I crammed spiders' web into my ears—really squashed it down till no more would go in—it sort of deadened the noise to the point where it was bearable. And one thing there's no shortage of up there is cobwebs."

I've always been terrified of spiders. I'm sure he knew that.

"Fine," I snapped at him; I was embarrassed with myself, because my first reaction was admiration. "So you killed a man and managed to stay free for three weeks. How very impressive. What have you been living on, for God's sake? You should be thin as a rake."

He shrugged. "I didn't stay in there all the time," he said. "Generally speaking, I made my excursions around noon and midnight." When the bell tolls twelve times, there being a limit, presumably, to the defensive capacity of cobweb. "It's amazing how much perfectly good food gets thrown out in the kitchens. You're on the catering committee, you really ought to do something about it."

Part of his genius, I suppose; to make his desperate escape and three weeks' torment in the bell-tower sound like a student prank, just as he made writing the Seventh Mass seem effortless, something he churned out in an idle moment between hangovers. Perhaps the secret of sublime achievement really is not to try. But first, you have to check the archives, or learn the twelve major modulations of the Vesani mode, or be born into a family that can trace its pedigree back to Boamond.

"Well," I said, standing up, "I'm sorry, but you've had all that for nothing. I'm going to have to turn you in. You do realise that."

He just laughed at me. He knew me too well. He knew that if I'd really meant it, I'd have done it straight away, yelled for

the guard at the top of my voice instead of panicking about the shutters. He knew it; I didn't, not until I heard him laugh. Until then, I thought I was deadly serious. But he was right, of course. "Sure," he said. "You go ahead."

I sat down again. I hated him so much, at that moment.

"How's the concerto coming along?" he asked.

For a moment, I had no idea what he was talking about. Then I remembered; his last concerto, or that's what it should have been. The manuscript he gave me in the condemned cell. "You said not to finish it," I told him.

"Good Lord." He was amused. "I assumed you'd have taken no notice. Well, I'm touched. Thank you."

"What are you doing here?" I asked him.

"I need money," he replied, and somehow his voice contrived to lose a proportion of its honeyed charm. "And clothes, and shoes, things like that. And someone to leave a door open at night. That sort of thing."

"I can't," I said.

He sighed. "You can, you know. What you mean is, you don't want to."

"I haven't got any money."

He gave me a sad look. "We're not talking about large sums," he said. "It's strictly a matter of context. Enough to get me out of town and on a ship, that's all. That's wealth beyond the dreams of avarice." He paused—I think it was for effect—and added, "I'm not asking for a *present*. I do have something to sell."

There was a moment when my entire covering of skin went cold. I could guess. What else would he have to sell, apart from—?

"Three weeks in the bloody bell tower," he went on, and now he sounded exactly like his old self. "Nothing to do all day. Fortunately, on my second trip to the trash cans I passed an open door, some first-year, presumably, who hasn't learned about keeping his door locked. He'd got ink, pens and half a ream of good paper. Don't suppose he'll make that mistake again."

# A SMALL PRICE TO PAY FOR BIRDSONG

I LOVE MUSIC. It's been my life. Music has informed my development, given me more pleasure than I can possibly quantify or qualify; it's also taken me from the fullers' yard at Ap'Escatoy to the Studium, and kept me here, so far at least. Everything I am, everything I have, is because of music.

For which I am properly grateful. The unfortunate part of it is, there's never been quite enough. Not enough music in me; never enough money. The pleasure, emotional and intellectual, is one thing. The money, however, is another. Almost enough—I'm not a luxurious sort of person, I don't spend extravagantly, but most of it seems to go on overheads; college bills, servants' wages, contributions to this and that fund, taxes, of course, all that sort of nonsense—but never quite enough to let me feel comfortable. I live in a constant state of anxiety about money, and inevitably that anxiety has a bad effect on my relationship with music. And the harder I try, the less the inspiration flows. When I don't need it, when I'm relatively comfortable and the worry subsides for a while, a melody will come to me quite unexpectedly and I'll write something really quite good. But when I'm facing a deadline, or when the bills are due and my purse is empty; when I need money, the inspiration seems to dry up completely, and all I can do is grind a little paste off the salt-block of what I've learned, or try and dress up something old, my own or someone else's, and hope to God nobody notices. At times like that, I get angry with music. I even imagine—wrongly, of course—that I wish I was back in the fullers' yard. But that's long gone, of course. My brother and I sold it when my father died, and the money was spent years ago, so I don't even have that to fall back on. Just music.

"You've written something," I said.

"Oh yes." From inside his shirt he pulled a sheaf of paper. "A symphony, in three movements and a coda." I suppose I must have reached out instinctively, because he moved back gently. "Complete, you'll be relieved to hear. All yours, if you want it."

All my life I've tried to look civilised and refined, an intellect rather than a physical body. But when I want something and it's so close I can touch it, I sweat. My hands get clammy, and I can feel the drops lifting my hair where it touches my forehead. "A symphony," was all I could say.

He nodded. "My fourth. I think you're going to like it."

"All mine if I want it."

"Ah." He did the mock frown. "All yours if you pay for it. Your chance to be an illustrious patron of the arts, like the Eberharts."

I stared at him. All mine. "Don't be so bloody stupid," I yelled. "I can't use it. It'd be useless to me."

He pretended to be upset. "You haven't even looked at it."

"Think about it," I said, low and furious. "You're on the run from the Watch, with a death sentence against your name. I suddenly present a brand new Subtilius symphony. It'd be obvious. Any bloody fool would know straight away that I'd helped you escape."

He nodded. "I see your point," he said mildly. "But you could say it's an old piece, something I wrote years ago, and you've been hanging on to it."

"Is that likely?"

"I guess not." He smiled at me, a sunrise-over-the-bay smile, warm and bright and humiliating. "So I guess you'll just have to pretend you wrote it, won't you?"

It was like a slap across the face, insulting and unexpected. "Please," I said. "Don't even suggest it. You know perfectly well I could never pass off your work as my own. Everybody would know after the first couple of bars."

Then he smiled again, and I knew he was playing me. He'd led me carefully to a certain place where he wanted me to be.

"That won't be a problem," he said. "You see, I've written it in your style."

Maybe shock and anger had made me more than usually stupid. It took a moment; and then I realised what he'd just said.

"Hence," he went on, "the symphonic form, which I've never really cared for, but it's sort of like your trademark, isn't it? And I've used the tetrachord of Mercury throughout, even quoted a bar or two of the secondary theme from your Third. Here," he said, and handed me a page—just the one, he was no fool—from the sheaf.

I didn't want to take it. I swear, it felt like deliberately taking hold of a nettle and squeezing it into your palm. I looked down.

I can read music very quickly and easily, as you'd expect. One glance and it's there in my head. It only took me a couple of heartbeats to know what I was holding. It was, of course, a masterpiece. It was utterly brilliant, magnificent, the sort of music that defines a place and a time for all time. It soared inside me as I looked at it, filling and choking me, as though someone had shoved a bladder down my throat and started blowing it up. It was in every way perfect; and *I could have written it*.

"Well?" he said.

Let me qualify that. No, I couldn't have written it, not in a million years, not if my life depended on it; not even if, in some moment of absolute peace and happiness, the best inspiration of my entire life had lodged inside my head, and the circumstances had been so perfectly arranged that I was able to take advantage of it straight away, while it was fresh and whole in my mind (which never ever happens, of course). I could never have written it; but it was in my style, so exactly captured that anybody but me would believe it was my work. It wasn't just the trademark flourishes and periods, the way I use the orchestra, the mathematical way I build through intervals and changes of key. A parody could've had all those. The music I was looking at had been written by someone who understood me perfectly—better than I've ever understood myself—and who knew exactly

what I wanted to say, although I've always lacked the skill, and the power.

"Well," he said. "Do you like it?"

As stupid a question as I've ever heard in my life, and of course I didn't reply. I was too angry, heartbroken, ashamed.

"I was quite pleased with the cadenza," he went on. "I got the idea from that recurring motif in your Second, but I sort of turned it through ninety degrees and stuck a few feathers in it."

I've never been married, of course, but I can imagine what it must be like, to come home unexpectedly and find your wife in bed with another man. It'd be the love that'd fill you with hate. Oh, how I hated Subtilius at that moment. And imagine how you'd feel if you and your wife had never been able to have kids, and you found out she was pregnant by another man.

"It's got to be worth money," I heard him say. "Just the sort of thing the duke would like."

He always had that knack, did Subtilius. The ability to take the words out of the mouth of the worst part of me, the part I'd cheerfully cut out with a knife in cold blood if only I knew where in my body it's located. "Well?" he said.

WHEN I WAS nineteen years old, my father and my elder brother and I were in the cart—I was back home for the holidays, helping out on the rounds—and we were driving out to the old barns where my father boiled the soap. The road runs along the top of a ridge, and when it rains, great chunks of it get washed away. It had been raining heavily the day before, and by the time we turned the sharp bend at the top it was nearly dark. I guess my father didn't see where the road had fallen away. The cart went over. I was sitting in the back and was thrown clear. Father and Segibert managed to scramble clear just as the cart went over; Segibert caught hold of Dad's ankle, and Dad grabbed onto a rock sticking out of the ground. I managed to

get my hand round his wrist, and for a moment we were stuck there. I've never been strong, and I didn't have the strength to pull them up, not so much as an inch. All I could do was hold on, and I knew that if I allowed myself to let his hand slip even the tiniest bit, I'd lose him and both of them, the two people I loved most in the whole world, would fall and die. But in that moment, when all the thoughts that were ever possible were running through my head, I thought; if they do both fall, and they're both killed, then when we sell the business, it'd be just me, best part of three hundred angels, and what couldn't I do with that sort of money?

Then Segibert managed to get a footing, and between them they hauled and scrambled and got up next to me on the road, and soon we were all in floods of tears, and Dad was telling me I'd saved his life, and he'd never forget it. And I felt so painfully guilty, as though I'd pushed them over deliberately.

WELL, I THOUGHT. Yes. Worth a great deal of money.

"More the old duke's sort of thing," he was saying, "he'd have loved it, he was a man of taste and discrimination. Compared with him, young Sighvat's a barbarian. But even he'd like this, I'm sure."

A barbarian. The old duke used to punish debtors by giving them a head start and then turning his wolfhounds loose. Last year, Sighvat abolished the poll tax and brought in a minimum wage for farm workers. But the old duke had a better ear for music, and he was an extremely generous patron. "I can't," I said.

"Of course you can," Subtilius said briskly. "Now then, I was thinking in terms of three hundred. That'd cover my expenses."

"I haven't got that sort of money."

He looked at me. "No," he said, "I don't suppose you have. Well, what have you got?"

"I can give you a hundred angels."

Which was true. Actually, I had a hundred and fifty angels in the wooden box under my bed. It was the down payment I'd taken from the Kapelmeister for the Unfinished Concerto, so properly speaking it was Subtilius' money anyway. But I needed the fifty. I had bills to pay.

"That'll have to do, then," he said, quite cheerfully. "It'll cover the bribes and pay for a fake passport, I'll just have to steal food and clothes. Can't be helped. You're a good man, professor."

There was still time. I could throw the door open and yell for a porter. I was still innocent of any crime, against the State or myself. Subtilius would go back to the condemned cell, I could throw the manuscript on the fire, and I could resume my life, my slow and inevitable uphill trudge towards poverty and misery. Or I could call the porter and not burn the music. What exactly would happen to me if I was caught assisting an offender? I couldn't bear prison, I'd have to kill myself first; but would I get the chance? Bail would be out of the question, so I'd be remanded pending trial. Highly unlikely that the prison guards would leave knives, razors or poison lying about in my cell for me to use. People hang themselves in jail, they twist ropes out of bedding. But what if I made a mess of it and ended up paralysed for life? Even if I managed to stay out of prison, a criminal conviction would mean instant dismissal and no chance of another job. But that wouldn't matter, if I could keep the music. We are, the Invincible Sun be praised, a remarkably, almost obsessively cultured nation, and music is our life. No matter what its composer had done, work of that quality would always be worth a great deal of money, enough to retire on and never have to compose another note as long as I live—

I was a good man, apparently. He was grateful to me, for swindling him. I was a good man, because I was prepared to pass off a better man's work as my own. Because I was willing to help a murderer escape justice.

"Where will you go?" I asked.

He grinned at me. "You really don't want to know," he said. "Let's just say, a long way away."

"You're famous," I pointed out. "Everywhere. Soon as you write anything, they'll know it's you. They'll figure out it was me who helped you escape."

He yawned. He looked very tired; fair enough, after three weeks in a clock tower, with eight of the biggest bells in the empire striking the quarter hours inches from his head. He couldn't possibly have slept for more than ten minutes. "I'm giving up music," he said. "This is definitely and categorically my last ever composition. You're quite right; the moment I wrote anything, I'd give myself away. There's a few places the empire hasn't got extradition treaties with, but I'd rather be dead than live there. So it's simple, I won't write any more music. After all," he added, his hand over his mouth like he'd been taught as a boy, "there's lots of other things I can do. All music's ever done is land me in trouble."

WHAT, WHEN ALL is said and done, all the conventional garbage is put on one side and you're alone inside your head with yourself, do you actually believe in? That's a question that has occupied a remarkably small percentage of my attention over the years. Strange, since I spend a fair proportion of my working time composing odes, hymns and masses to the Invincible Sun. Do I believe in Him? To be honest, I'm not sure. I believe in the big white disc in the sky, because it's there for all to see. I believe that there's some kind of supreme authority, something along the lines of His Majesty the Emperor only bigger and even more remote, who theoretically controls the universe. What that actually involves, I'm afraid, I couldn't tell you. Presumably He regulates the affairs of great nations, enthrones and deposes emperors and kings—possibly princes and dukes, though it's rather more plausible that He delegates that sort of thing to some kind of divine solar civil service—and intervenes in high-profile cases of injustice and blasphemy whenever a precedent

needs to be set or a point of law clarified. Does He deal with me personally, or is He even aware of my existence? On balance, probably not. He wouldn't have the time.

In which case, if I have a file at all, I assume it's on the desk of some junior clerk, along with hundreds, thousands, millions of others. I can't say that that thought bothers me too much. I'd far rather be left alone, in peace and quiet. As far as I'm aware, my prayers—mostly for money, occasionally for the life or recovery from illness of a relative or friend—have never been answered, so I'm guessing that divine authority works on more or less the same lines as its civilian equivalent; don't expect anything good from it, and you won't be disappointed. Just occasionally, though, something happens which can only be divine intervention, and then my world-view and understanding of the nature of things gets all shaken up and reshaped. I explain it away by saying that really it's something primarily happening to someone else—someone important, whose file is looked after by a senior administrative officer or above—and I just happen to be peripherally involved and therefore indirectly affected.

A good example is Subtilius' escape from the barbican. At the time it felt like my good luck. On mature reflection I can see that it was really his good luck, in which I was permitted to share, in the same way that the Imperial umbrella-holder also gets to stay dry when it rains.

IT COULDN'T HAVE been simpler. I went first, to open doors and make sure nobody was watching. He followed on, swathed in the ostentatious cassock and cowl of a Master Chorister—purple with ermine trimmings, richly embroidered with gold thread and seed pearls; anywhere else you'd stand out a mile, but in the barbican, choristers are so commonplace they're practically invisible. Luck intervened by making it rain, so that it was perfectly natural for my chorister companion to have his

hood up, and to hold the folds tight around his face and neck. He had my hundred angels in his pockets in a pair of socks, to keep the coins from clinking.

The sally-port in the barbican wall, opening onto the winding stair that takes you down to Lower Town the short way, is locked at nightfall, but faculty officers like me all have keys. I opened the gate and stepped aside to let him pass.

"Get rid of the cassock as soon as you can," I said. "I'll report it stolen first thing in the morning, so they'll be looking for it."

He nodded. "Well," he said, "thanks for everything, professor. I'd just like to say—"

"Get the hell away from here," I said, "before anyone sees us."

THERE ARE FEW feelings in life quite as exhilarating as getting away with something. Mainly, I guess, if you're someone like me, it's because you never really expected to. Add to the natural relief, therefore, the unaccustomed pleasure of winning. Then, since you can't win anything without having beaten someone first, there's the delicious feeling of superiority, which I enjoy for the same reason that gourmets prize those small grey truffles that grow on the sides of dead birch trees; not because it's nourishing or tasty, but simply because it's so rare. Of course, it remained to be seen whether I had actually got away with aiding and abetting a murderer after the fact and assisting a fugitive. There was still a distinct chance that Subtilius would be picked up by the watch before he could get out of the city, in which case he might very well reveal the identity of his accomplice, if only to stop them hitting him. But, I told myself, that'd be all right. I'd simply tell them he'd burgled my rooms and stolen the money and the cassock, and they wouldn't be able to prove otherwise. I told myself that; I knew perfectly well, of course, that if they did question me, my nerve would probably shatter like an eggshell, and the only thing that might stop me from giving them a comprehensive

confession was if I was so incoherent with terror I couldn't speak at all. I think you'd have to be quite extraordinarily brave to be a hardened criminal; much braver than soldiers who lead charges or stand their ground against the cavalry. I could just about imagine myself doing that sort of thing, out of fear of the sergeant-major, but doing something illegal literally paralyses me with fear. And yet courage, as essential to the criminal as his jemmy or his cosh, is held to be a virtue.

The first thing I did when I got back to my room was to light the lamp and open the shutters, because I never close them except when it snows, and people who knew me might wonder what was going on if they saw them shut. Then I poured myself a small brandy—it would've been a large one, but the bottle was nearly empty—and sat down with the lamp so close to me that I could feel it scorching my face, and spread out the manuscript, and read it.

THEY SAY THAT when we first sent out ships to trade with the savages in Rhoezen, we packed the holds full of the sort of things we thought primitive people would like—beads, cheap tin brooches, scarves, shirts, buckles plated so thin the silver practically wiped off on your fingers, that sort of thing. And mirrors. We thought they'd love mirrors. In fact, we planned on buying enough land to grow enough corn to feed the City with a case of hand-mirrors, one angel twenty a gross from the Scharnel Brothers.

We got that completely wrong. The captain of the first ship to make contact handed out a selection of his trade goods by way of free samples. Everything seemed to be going really well until they found the mirrors. They didn't like them. They threw them on the ground and stamped on them, then attacked our people with spears and slingshots, until the captain had to fire a cannon just so as to get his men back off the beach in one piece. Later, when he'd managed to capture a couple of specimens and

he interrogated them through an interpreter, he found out what the problem was. The mirrors, the prisoners told him, were evil. They sucked your soul out through your eyes and imprisoned it under the surface of the dry-hard-water. Stealing the souls of harmless folk who'd only wanted to be friendly to strangers was not, in their opinion, civilised behaviour. Accordingly, we weren't welcome in their country.

When I first heard the story, I thought the savages had over-reacted somewhat. When I'd finished reading Subtilius' symphony, written in my style, I was forced to revise my views. Stealing a man's soul is one of the worst things you can do to him, and it hardly matters whether you shut it up in a mirror or thirty pages of manuscript. It's not something you can ever forgive.

AND THEN, AFTER I'd sat still and quiet for a while, until the oil in the lamp burned away and I was left entirely alone in the dark, I found myself thinking; yes, but nobody will ever know. All I had to do was sit down and copy it out in my own handwriting, then burn the original, and there would be no evidence, no witnesses. You hear a lot from the philosophers and the reverend Fathers about truth, about how it must inevitably prevail, how it will always burst through, like the saplings that grow up in the cracks in walls until their roots shatter the stone. It's not true. Subtilius wouldn't ever tell anybody (and besides, it was only a matter of time before he was caught and strung up, and that'd be him silenced for ever). I sure as hell wasn't going to say anything. If there's a truth and nobody knows it, is it still true? Or is it like a light burning in a locked, shuttered house that nobody will ever get to see?

I'd know it, of course. I did consider that. But then I thought about the money.

THE DEBUT OF my Twelfth Symphony took place at the collegiate temple on Ascension Day, AUC 775, in the presence of his highness Duke Sighvat II, the duchess and dowager duchess, the Archimandrite of the Studium and a distinguished audience drawn from the Court, the university and the best of good society. It was, I have to say, a triumph. The duke was so impressed that he ordered a command performance at the palace. Less prestigious but considerably more lucrative was the licence I agreed to with the Kapelmeister; a dozen performances at the Empire Hall at a thousand angels a time, with the rights reverting to me thereafter. Subsequently I made similar deals with kapelmeisters and court musicians and directors of music from all over the empire, taking care to reserve the sheet music rights, which I sold to the Court stationers for five thousand down and a five per cent royalty. My tenure at the University was upgraded to a full Fellowship, which meant I could only be got rid of by a bill of attainder passed by both houses of the Legislature and ratified by the duke, and then only on grounds of corruption or gross moral turpitude; my stipend went up from three hundred to a thousand a year, guaranteed for life, with bonuses should I ever condescend to do any actual teaching. Six months after the first performance, as I sat in my rooms flicking jettons about on my counting-board, I realised that I need never work again. Quite suddenly, all my troubles were over.

On that, and what followed, I base my contention that there is no justice; that the Invincible Sun, if He's anything more than a ball of fire in the sky, has no interest and does not interfere in the life and fortunes of ordinary mortals, and that morality is simply a confidence trick practised on all of us by the State and its officers to keep us from making nuisances of ourselves. For a lifetime of devotion to music, I got anxiety, misery and uncertainty. For two crimes, one against the State and one against myself, I was rewarded with everything I'd ever wanted. Explain that, if you can.

Everything? Oh yes. To begin with, I dreaded the commissions that started to flood in from the duke, other dukes and

princes, even the Imperial court; because I knew I was a fraud, that I'd never be able to write anything remotely as good as the Symphony, and it was only a matter of time before someone figured out what had actually happened and soldiers arrived at my door to arrest me. But I sat down, with a lamp and a thick mat of paper; and it occurred to me that, now I didn't need the money, all I had to do was refuse the commissions—politely, of course—and nobody could touch me. I didn't have to write a single note if I didn't want to. It was entirely up to me.

Once I'd realised that, I started to write. And, knowing that it really didn't matter, I hardly bothered to try. The less I tried, the easier it was to find a melody (getting a melody out of me was always like pulling teeth). Once I'd got that, I simply let it rattle about in my head for a while, and wrote down the result. Once I'd filled the necessary number of pages, I signed my name at the top and sent it off. I didn't care, you see. If they didn't like it, they knew what they could do.

From time to time, to begin with at least, it did occur to me to wonder, *is this stuff any good?* But that raises the question; how the hell does anybody ever know? If the criterion is the reaction of the audience, or the sums of money offered for the next commission, I just kept getting better. That was, of course, absurd. Even I could see that. But no; my audiences and my critics insisted that each new work was better than its predecessors (though the Twelfth Symphony was the piece that stayed in the repertoires, and the later masterpieces sort of came and went; not that I gave a damn). A cynic would argue that once I'd become a great success, nobody dared to criticise my work for fear of looking a fool; the only permitted reaction was ever increasing adulation. Being a cynic myself, I favoured that view for a while. But, as the success continued and the money flowed and more and more music somehow got written, I began to have my doubts. All those thousands of people, I thought, they can't all be self-deluded. There comes a point when you build up a critical mass, beyond which people sincerely believe. That's how

religions are born, and how criteria change. By my success, I'd redefined what constitutes beautiful music. If it sounded like the sort of stuff I wrote, people were prepared to believe it was beautiful. After all, beauty is only a perception—the thickness of an eyebrow, very slight differences in the ratio between length and width of a nose or a portico or a colonnade. Tastes evolve. People like what they're given.

Besides, I came to realise, the Twelfth *was* mine; to some extent at least. After all, the style Subtilius had borrowed was my style, which I'd spent a lifetime building. And if he had the raw skill, the wings, I'd been his teacher; without me, who was to say he'd ever have risen above choral and devotional works and embraced the orchestra? At the very least it was a collaboration, in which I could plausibly claim to be the senior partner. And if the doors are locked and the shutters are closed, whose business is it whether there's a light burning inside? You'd never be able to find out without breaking and entering, which is a criminal offence.

Even so, I began making discreet enquiries. I could afford the best, and I spared no expense. I hired correspondents in all the major cities and towns of the empire to report back to me about notable new compositions and aspiring composers—I tried to pay for this myself, but the university decided that it constituted legitimate academic research and insisted on footing the bill. Whenever I got a report that hinted at the possibility of Subtilius, I sent off students to obtain a written score or sit in the concert hall and transcribe the notes. I hired other, less reputable agents to go through the criminal activity reports, scrape up acquaintance with watch captains, and waste time in the wrong sort of inns, fencing-schools, bear gardens and livery stables. I was having to tread a fine line, of course. The last thing I wanted was for the watch to reopen their file or remember the name

Subtilius, or Aimeric de Beguilhan, so I couldn't have descriptions or likenesses circulated. I didn't regard that as too much of a handicap, however. Sooner or later, I firmly believed, if he was still alive, the music would break out and he'd give himself away. It wouldn't be the creative urge that did for him; it'd be that handmaiden of the queen of the Muses, a desperate and urgent need for money, that got Subtilius composing again. No doubt he'd do his best to disguise himself. He'd try writing street ballads, or pantomime ballets, secure in the belief that that sort of thing was beneath the attention of academic musicians. But it could only be a matter of time. I knew his work, after all, in ways nobody else ever possibly could. I could spot his hand in a sequence of intervals, a modulation or key shift, the ghost of a flourish, the echo of a dissonance. As soon as he put pen to paper, I felt sure, I'd have him.

I WAS INVITED to lecture at the University of Baudoin. I didn't want to go—I've always hated travelling—but the marquis was one of my most enthusiastic patrons, and they were offering a thousand angels for an afternoon's work. Oddly enough, affluence hadn't diminished my eagerness to earn money. I guess that no matter how much I had, I couldn't resist the opportunity to add just a bit more, to be on the safe side. I wrote back accepting the invitation.

When I got there (two days in a coach; misery) I found they'd arranged a grand recital of my work for the day after the lecture. I couldn't very well turn round and tell them I was too busy to attend; also, the Baudoin orchestra was at that time reckoned to be the second or third best in the world, and I couldn't help being curious about how my music would sound, played by a really first-class band. Our orchestra in Perimadeia rates very highly on technical skill, but they have an unerring ability to iron the joy out of pretty well anything. I fixed

up about the rights with the kapelmeister, thereby doubling my takings for the trip, and told them I'd be honoured and delighted to attend.

The lecture went well. They'd put me in the chapter-house of the Ascendency Temple—not the world's best acoustic, but the really rather fine stained-glass windows are so artfully placed that if you lecture around noon, as I did, and you stand on the lectern facing the audience, you're bathed all over in the most wonderful red and gold light, so that it looks like you're on fire. I gave them two hours on diatonic and chromatic semitones in the Mezentine diapason (it's something I feel quite passionate about, but they know me too well in Perimadeia and stopped listening years ago) and I can honestly say I had them in the palm of my hand. Afterwards, the marquis got up and thanked me—as soon as he joined me on the podium, the sun must've come out from behind a cloud or something, because the light through the windows suddenly changed from red to blue, and instead of burning, we were drowning—and then the provost of the university presented me with an honorary doctorate, which was nice of him, and made a long speech about integrity in the creative arts. The audience got a bit restive, but I was getting paid for being there, so I didn't mind a bit.

There was a reception afterwards; good food and plenty of wine. I must confess I don't remember much about it.

I enjoyed the recital, in spite of a nagging headache I'd woken up with and couldn't shift all day. Naturally, they played the Twelfth; that was the whole of the first half. I wasn't sure I liked the way they took the slow movement, but the finale was superb, it really did sprout wings and soar. The second half was better still. They played two of my Vesani horn concertos and a couple of temple processionals, and there were times when I found myself sitting bolt upright in my seat, asking myself, *did I really write that*? It just goes to show what a difference it makes, hearing your stuff played by a thoroughly competent, sympathetic orchestra. At one point I was so caught up in the music that I

couldn't remember what came next, and the denouement—the solo clarinet in the *Phainomai*—took me completely by surprise and made my throat tighten. I thought, *I wrote that*, and I made a mental note of that split second, like pressing a flower between the pages of a book, for later.

IT WAS ONLY when the recital was over, and the conductor was taking his bow, that I saw him. At first, I really wasn't sure. It was just a glimpse of a turned-away head, and when I looked again I'd lost him in the sea of faces. I told myself I was imagining things, and then I saw him again. He was looking straight at me.

There was supposed to be another reception, but I told them I was feeling ill, which wasn't exactly a lie. I went back to the guest suite. There wasn't a lock or a bolt on the door, so I wedged the back of a chair under the handle.

While I'd been at the recital, they'd delivered a whole load of presents. People give me things these days, now that I can afford to buy anything I want. True, the gifts I tend to receive are generally things I'd never buy for myself, because I have absolutely no need for them, and because I do have a certain degree of taste. On this occasion, the marquis had sent me a solid gold dinner service (for a man who, most evenings, eats alone in his rooms off a tray on his knees), a complete set of the works of Aurelianus, ornately bound in gilded calf and too heavy to lift, and a full set of Court ceremonial dress. The latter item consisted of a bright red frock coat, white silk knee breeches, white silk stockings, shiny black shoes with jewelled buckles, and a dress sword.

I know everything I want to know about weapons, which is nothing at all. When I first came to the university, my best friend challenged another friend of ours to a duel. It was about some barmaid. Duelling was the height of fashion back then, and I was deeply hurt not to be chosen as a second (later, I found out

it was because they'd chosen a time they knew would clash with my Theory tutorial, and they didn't want me to have to skip it). They fought with smallswords in the long meadow behind the School of Logic. My best friend died instantly; his opponent lingered for a day or so and died screaming, from blood poisoning. If that was violence, I thought, you can have it.

So, I know nothing about swords, except that gentlemen are allowed to wear them in the street; from which I assumed that a gentleman's dress sword must be some kind of pretty toy. In spite of which, I picked up the marquis' present, put on my reading glasses and examined it under the lamp.

It was pretty enough, to be sure, if you like that sort of thing. The handle—I don't know the technical terms—was silver, gilded in places, with a pastoral scene enamelled on the inside of the plate thing that's presumably designed to protect your hand. The blade, though, was in another key altogether. It's always hidden by the scabbard, isn't it, so I figured it'd just be a flat, blunt rod. Not so. It was about three feet long, tapering, triangular in section, so thin at the end it was practically a wire but both remarkably flexible and surprisingly stiff at the same time, and pointed like a needle, brand new from the paper packet. I rested the tip on a cushion and pressed gently. It went through it and out the other side as though the cloth wasn't there.

I imagined myself explaining to the watch, no, the palace guard, they wouldn't have the ordinary watch investigate a death in the palace. You know he was a wanted criminal? Quite so, a convicted murderer. He killed a man, then killed a guard escaping from prison. He was my student, years ago, before he went to the bad. I don't know how he got in here, but he wanted money. When I refused, he said he'd have to kill me. There was a struggle. I can't actually remember how the sword came to be in my hand, I suppose I must've grabbed it at some point. All I can remember is him lying there, dead. And then the guard captain would look at me, serious but reassuring, and tell me that it sounded like a straightforward case

of self-defence, and by the sound of it, the dead man was no great loss anyhow. I could imagine him being more concerned about the breach of security—a desperate intruder getting into the guest wing—than the possibility that the honorary doctor of music, favorite composer of the marquis, had deliberately murdered somebody.

The thought crossed my mind. After all, nobody would ever know. Once again, there'd be no witnesses. Who could be bothered to break into a locked house on the offchance that there might be a candle burning behind the closed shutters?

I waited, with the sword across my knees, all night. He didn't come.

INSTEAD, HE CAUGHT up with me at an inn in the mountains on my way home; a much more sensible course of action, and what I should have expected.

I was fast asleep, and something woke me. I opened my eyes to find the lamp lit, and Subtilius sitting in a chair beside the bed, looking at me. He gave the impression that I'd been dangerously ill, and he'd refused to leave my bedside.

"Hello, professor," he said.

The sword was in my trunk, leaning up against the wall on the opposite side of the room. "Hello, Aimeric," I said. "You shouldn't be here."

He grinned. "I shouldn't be anywhere," he said. "But what the hell."

I couldn't see a weapon; no knife or sword. "You're looking well," I said, which was true. He'd filled out since I saw him last. He'd been a skinny, sharp-faced boy, always making me think of an opened knife carried in a pocket. Now he was broad-shouldered and full-faced, and his hair was just starting to get thin on top. He had an outdoor tan, and his fingernails were dirty.

"You've put on weight," he said. "Success agrees with you, obviously."

"It's good to see you again."

"No it's not," he said, still grinning. "Well, not for you, anyway. But I thought I'd drop in and say hello. I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed the recital."

I thought about what that meant. "Of course," I said. "You'll never have heard it played."

He looked as though he didn't understand, for a moment. Then he laughed, "Oh, you mean the symphony," he said. "Not a bit of it. They play it all the time here." He widened the grin. He'd lost a front tooth since I saw him last. "You want to get on to that," he said. "Clearly, you're missing out on royalties."

"About the money," I said, but he gave me a reproachful little frown, as though I'd made a distasteful remark in the presence of ladies. "Forget about that," he said. "Besides, I don't need money these days. I've done quite well for myself, in a modest sort of a way."

"Music?" I had to ask.

"Good Lord, no. I haven't written a note since I saw you last. Might as well have posters made up and nail them to the temple doors. No, I'm in the olive business. I won a beat-up old press in a chess game shortly after I got here, and now I've got seven mills running full-time in the season, and I've just bought forty acres of mature trees in the Santespe valley. If everything goes to plan, in five years' time every jar of olive oil bought and sold in this country will have made me sixpence. It's a wonderful place, this, you can do anything you like. Makes Perimadeia look like a morgue. And the good thing is," he went on, leaning back a little in his chair, "I'm a foreigner, I talk funny. Which means nobody can pinpoint me exactly, the moment I open my mouth, like they can at home. I can be whoever the hell I want. It's fantastic."

I frowned. He'd forced the question on me. "And who do you want to be, Aimeric?"

"Who I am now," he replied vehemently, "absolutely no doubt about it. I won't tell you my new name, of course, you don't want to know that. But here I am, doing nobody any harm, creating prosperity and employment for hundreds of honest citizens, and enjoying myself tremendously, for the first time in my life."

"Music?" I asked.

"Screw music." He beamed at me. "I hardly ever think about it any more. It's a little thing called a sense of perspective. It was only when I got here and my life started coming back together that I realised the truth. Music only ever made me miserable. You know what? I haven't been in a fight since I got here. I hardly drink, I've given up the gambling. Oh yes, and I'm engaged to be married to a very nice respectable girl whose father owns a major haulage business. And that's all thanks to olive oil. All music ever got me was a rope around my neck."

I looked at him. "Fine," I said. "I believe you. And I'm really pleased things have worked out so well for you. So what are you doing here, in my room in the middle of the night?"

The smile didn't fade, but it froze. "Ah well," he said, "listening to music's a different matter, I still enjoy that. I came to tell you how much I enjoyed the recital. That's all."

"You mean the symphony."

He shook his head. "No," he said, "the rest of the program. Your own unaided work. At least," he added, with a slight twitch of an eyebrow, "I assume it is. Or have you enlisted another collaborator?"

I frowned at him. I hadn't deserved that.

"In that case," he said, "I really must congratulate you. You've grown." He paused, and looked me in the eye. "You've grown wings." Suddenly the grin was back, mocking, patronising. "Or hadn't you noticed? You used to write the most awful rubbish."

"Yes," I said.

"But not any more." He stood up, and for a split second I was terrified. But he walked to the table and poured a glass of wine. "I don't know what's got into you, but the difference is

extraordinary." He pointed to the second glass. I nodded, and he poured. "You write like you're not afraid of the music any more. In fact, it sounds like you're not afraid of anything. That's the secret, you know."

"I was always terrified of failure."

"Not unreasonably," he said, and brought the glasses over. I took mine and set it down beside the bed. "Good stuff, this."

"I can afford the best."

He nodded. "Do you like it?"

"Not much."

That made him smile. He topped up his glass. "My father had excellent taste in wine," he said. "If it wasn't at least twenty years old and bottled within sight of Mount Bezar, it was only fit for pickling onions. He drank the farm and the timber lot and six blocks of good City property which brought in more than all the rest put together, and then he died and left my older brother to sort out the mess. Last I heard, he was a little old man in a straw hat working all the hours God made, and still the bank foreclosed; he's three years older than me, for crying out loud. And my other brother had to join the army. He died at Settingen. Everlasting glory they called it in temple, but I know for a fact he was terrified of soldiering. He tried to hide in the barn when the carriage came to take him to the academy, and my mother dragged him out by his hair. Which has led me to the view that sometimes, refinement and gracious living come at too high a price." He looked at me over the rim of the glass and smiled. "But I don't suppose you'd agree."

I shrugged. "I'm still living in the same rooms in college," I replied. "And five days a week, dinner is still bread and cheese on a tray in front of the fire. It wasn't greed for all the luxuries. It was being afraid of the other thing." My turn to smile. "Never make the mistake of attributing to greed that which can be explained by fear. I should know. I've lived with fear every day of my life."

He sighed. "You're not drinking," he said.

"I think I've got the start of an ulcer," I said.

He shook his head sadly. "I really am genuinely pleased," he said. "About your music. You know what? I always used to despise you; all that knowledge, all that skill and technique, and no wings. You couldn't soar, so you spent your life trying to invent a flying machine. I learned to fly by jumping off cliffs." He yawned, and scratched the back of his neck. "Of course, most people who try it that way end up splattered all over the place, but it worked just fine for me."

"I didn't jump," I said. "I was pushed."

A big, wide grin spread slowly over his face, like oil on water. "And now you want to tell me how grateful you are."

"Not really, no."

"Oh come on." He wasn't the least bit angry, just amused. Probably just as well the sword was in the trunk. "What the hell did I ever do to you? Look at what I've given you, over the years. The prestige and reflected glory of being my teacher. The symphony. And now you can write music almost as good, all on your own. And what did I get in return? A hundred angels."

"Two hundred," I said coldly. "You've forgotten the previous loan."

He laughed, and dug a hand in his pocket. "Actually, no," he said. "The other reason I'm here." He took out a fat, fist-sized purse and put it on the table. "A hundred and ten angels. I'm guessing at the interest, since we didn't agree a specific rate at the time."

Neither of us said a word for quite some time. Then I stood up, leaned across the table and took the purse.

"Aren't you going to count it?"

"You're a gentleman," I said. "I trust you."

He nodded, like a fencer admitting a good hit. "I think," he said, "that makes us all square, don't you? Unless there's anything else I've forgotten about."

"All square," I said. "Except for one thing."

That took him by surprise. "What?"

"You shouldn't have given up music," I said.

"Don't be ridiculous," he snapped at me. "I'd have been arrested and hung."

I shrugged. "Small price to pay," I said. Which is what he'd said, when he first told me he'd killed a man; a small price to pay for genius. And what I'd said, when I heard all the details. "Don't glower at me like that," I went on. "You were a genius. You wrote music that'll still be played when Perimadeia's just a grassy hill. The Grand Mass, the Third symphony, that's probably all that'll survive of the empire in a thousand years. What was the life of one layabout and one prison warder, against that? Nothing."

"I'd have agreed with you once," he replied. "Now, I'm not so sure."

"Oh, I am. Absolutely certain of it. And if it was worth their lives, it's worth the life of an olive oil merchant, if there was to be just one more concerto. As it is—" I shrugged. "Not up to me, of course, I was just your teacher. That's all I'll ever be, in a thousand years' time. I guess I should count myself lucky for that."

He looked at me for a long time. "Bullshit," he said. "You and I only ever wrote for money. And you don't mean a word of what you've just said." He stood up. "It was nice to see you again. Keep writing. At this rate, one of these days you'll produce something worth listening to."

He left, and I bolted the door; too late by then, of course. That's me all over, of course; I always leave things too late, until they no longer matter.

When I got back to the university, I paid a visit to a colleague of mine in the natural philosophy department. I took with me a little bottle, into which I'd poured the contents of a wineglass. A few days later he called on me and said, "You were right."

I nodded. "I thought so."

"Archer's root," he said. "Enough of it to kill a dozen men. Where in God's name did you come by it?"

"Long story," I told him. "Thank you. Please don't mention it to anybody, there's a good fellow."

He shrugged, and gave me back the bottle. I took it outside and poured it away in a flower bed. Later that day I made a donation—one hundred and ten angels—to the Poor Brothers, for their orphanage in Lower Town; the first, last and only charitable donation of my life. The Father recognised me, of course, and asked if I wanted it to be anonymous.

"Not likely," I said. "I want my name up on a wall somewhere, where people can see it. Otherwise, where's the point?"

I THINK I may have mentioned my elder brother, Segibert; the one I rescued from the cart on the mountainside, along with my father. I remember him with fondness, though I realised at a comparatively early age that he was a stupid man, bone idle and a coward. My father knew it too, and my mother, so when Segibert was nineteen he left home. Nobody was sorry to see him go. He made a sort of a living doing the best he could, and even his best was never much good. When he was thirty-five he drifted into Perimadeia, married a retired prostitute (her retirement didn't last very long, apparently) and made a valiant attempt at running a tavern, which lasted for a really quite creditable eight months. By the time the bailiffs went in, his wife was pregnant, the money was long gone, and Segibert could best be described as a series of brief intervals between drinks. I'd just been elected to my chair, the youngest ever professor of music; the last thing I wanted was any contact whatsoever with my disastrous brother. In the end I gave him thirty angels, all the money I had, on condition that he went away and I never saw him again. He fulfilled his end of the deal by dying a few months later. By then, however, he'd acquired a son as well as a widow. She had her vocation to fall back on, which was doubtless a great comfort to her. When he came of age, or somewhat before, my nephew followed

his father's old profession. I got a scribbled note from him when he was nineteen, asking me for bail money, which I neglected to answer, and that was all the contact there was between us. I never met him. He died young.

My second visit to a condemned cell. Essentially the same as the first one; walls, ceiling, floor, a tiny barred window, a stone ledge for sitting and sleeping. A steel door with a small sliding hatch in the top.

"I didn't think there was an extradition treaty between us and Baudoin," I said.

He lifted his head out of his hands. "There isn't," he said. "So they snatched me off the street, shoved me into a closed carriage and drove me across the border. Three days before my wedding," he added. "Syrisca will be half dead with worry about me."

"Surely that was illegal."

He nodded. "Yes," he said. "I believe there's been a brisk exchange of notes between the embassies, and the marquis has lodged an official complaint. Strangely enough, I'm still here."

I looked at him. It was dark in the cell, so I couldn't see much. "You've got a beard," I said. "That's new."

"Syrisca thought I'd look good in a beard."

I held back, postponing the moment. "I suppose you feel hard done by," I said.

"Yes, actually." He swung his legs up onto the ledge and crouched, hugging his knees to his chin. "Fair enough, I did some stupid things when I was a kid. But I did some pretty good things too. And then I gave both of them up, settled down and turned into a regular citizen. It's been a long time. I really thought I was free and clear."

Surreptitiously I looked round the cell. What I was looking for didn't seem to be there, but it was pretty dark. "How did they find you?" I asked.

He shrugged. "No idea," he said. "I can only assume someone from the old days must've recognised me, but I can't imagine who it could've been. I gave up music," he added bitterly. "Surely that ought to have counted for something."

He'd taken care not to tell me his new name, that night in the inn, but a rising young star in the Baudoin olive oil trade wasn't hard to find. Maybe he shouldn't have given me that much information. But he hadn't expected me to live long enough to make use of it.

"You tried to poison me," I said.

He looked at me, and his eyes were like glass. "Yes," he said. "Sorry about that. I'm glad you survived, if that means anything to you."

"Why?"

"Why did I do it?" He gave me a bemused look. "Surely that's obvious. You recognised me. I knew you'd realised who I was, as soon as our eyes met at the recital. That was really stupid of me," he went on, looking away. "I should've guessed you'd never have turned me in."

"So it was nearly three murders," I said. "That tends to undercut your assertion that you've turned over a new leaf."

"Yes," he said. "And my theory that it was somehow connected to writing music, since I'd given up by the time I tried to kill you. I really am sorry about that, by the way."

I gave him a weak smile. "I forgive you," I said.

"Thanks."

"Also," I went on, "I've been to see the duke. He's a great admirer of my work, you know."

"Is that right?"

"Oh yes. And to think you once called him a savage."

"He's not the man his father was," he replied. "I think the old duke might have pardoned me. You know, for services to music."

"Sighvat didn't put it quite like that," I replied. "It was more as a personal favour to me."

There was quite a long silence; just like—I'm sorry, but I really can't resist the comparison—a rest at a crucial moment in a piece of music. "He's letting me go?"

"Not quite," I said, as gently as I could. "He reckons he's got to consider the feelings of the victim's family. Fifteen years. With luck and good behaviour, you'll be out in ten."

He took it in two distinct stages; first the shudder, the understandable horror at the thought of an impossibly long time in hell; then, slowly but successfully pulling himself out of despair, as he considered the alternative. "I can live with that," he said.

"I'm afraid you'll have to," I replied. "I'm sorry. It was the best I could do."

He shook his head. "I'm the one who should apologise," he said. "I tried to kill you, and you just saved my life." He looked up, and even in the dim light I could see an expression on his face I don't think I'd ever seen before. "You always were better than me," he said. "I didn't deserve that."

I shrugged. "We're quits, then," I said. "For the symphony. But there's one condition."

He made a vague sort of gesture to signify capitulation. "Whatever," he said.

"You've got to start writing music again."

For a moment, I think he was too bewildered to speak. Then he burst out laughing. "That's ridiculous," he said. "It's been so long, I haven't even thought about it."

"It'll come back to you, I bet. Not my condition, by the way," I added, lying. "The duke's. So unless you want a short walk and an even shorter drop, I suggest you look to it. Did you get the paper I had sent up, by the way?"

"Oh, that was you, was it?" He looked at me a bit sideways. "Yes, thanks. I wiped my arse with it."

"In future, use your left hand, it's what it's for. It's a serious condition, Aimeric. It's Sighvat's idea of making restitution. I think it's a good one."

There was another moment of silence. "Did you tell him?"

"Tell him what?"

"That I wrote the symphony. Was that what decided him?"

"I didn't, actually," I said. "But the thought had crossed my mind. Luckily, I didn't have to."

He nodded. "That's all right, then." He sighed, as though he was glad some long and tedious chore was over. "I guess it's like the people who put caged birds out on windowledges in the sun," he said. "Lock 'em up and torture them to make them sing. I never approved of that. Cruel, I call it."

"A small price to pay for birdsong," I said.

MOST OF WHAT I told him was true. I did go to duke Sighvat to intercede for him. Sighvat was mildly surprised, given that I'd been the one who informed on him in the first place. I didn't tell the duke about the attempt to poison me. The condition was my idea, but Sighvat approved of it. He has rather fanciful notions about poetic justice, which if you ask me is a downright contradiction in terms.

I did bend the truth a little. To begin with, Sighvat was all for giving Subtilius a clear pardon. It was me who said no, he should go to prison instead; and when I explained why I wanted that, he agreed, so I was telling the truth when I told Subtilius it was because of the wishes of the victim's family.

Quite. The young waste-of-space Subtilius murdered was my nephew, Segibert's boy. I didn't find that out until after I helped Subtilius escape, and looking back, I wonder what I'd have done if I'd known at the time. I'm really not sure—which is probably just as well, since I have the misfortune to live with myself, and knowing how I'd have chosen, had I been in full possession of the facts, could quite possibly make that relationship unbearable. Fortunately, it's an academic question.

Subtilius is quite prolific, in his prison cell. Actually, it's not at all bad. I got him moved from the old castle to the barbican

tower, and it's really quite comfortable there. In fact, his cell is more or less identical in terms of furnishings and facilities to my rooms in college, and I pay the warders to give him decent food and the occasional bottle of wine. He doesn't have to worry about money, either. Unfortunately, the quantity of his output these days isn't matched by the quality. It's good stuff, highly accomplished, technically proficient and very agreeable to listen to, but no spark of genius, none whatsoever. I don't know. Maybe he still has the wings, but in his cage, on the windowsill, where I put him, he can't really make much use of them.

# A Rich, Full Week

He looked at me the way they all do. "You're him, then."

"Yes," I said.

"This way."

Across the square. A cart, tied up to a hitching-post. One thin horse. Not so very long ago, he'd used the cart for shifting dung. I sat next to him, my bag on my knees, tucking my feet in close, and laid a bet with myself as to what he'd say next.

"You don't look like a wizard," he said.

I owed myself two nomismata. "I'm not a wizard," I said.

I always say that.

"But we sent to the Fathers for a—"

"I'm not a wizard," I repeated, "I'm a philosopher. There's no such thing as wizards."

He frowned. "We sent to the Fathers for a wizard," he said.

I have this little speech. I can say it with my eyes shut, or thinking about something else. It comes out better if I'm not thinking about what I'm saying. I tell them, we're not wizards, we don't do magic, there's no such thing as magic. Rather, we're students of natural philosophy, specialising in mental energies, telepathy, telekinesis, indirect vision. Not magic; just science where we haven't quite figured out how it works yet. I looked at him. His hood and coat were homespun, that open, rather scratchy weave you get with moorland wool. The patches were

a slightly different colour; I guessed they'd been salvaged from an even older coat that had finally reached the point where there was nothing left to sew onto. The boots had a military look. There had been battles in these parts, thirty years ago, in the civil war. The boots looked to be about that sort of vintage. Waste not, want not.

"I'm kidding," I said. "I'm a wizard."

He looked at me, then back at the road. I hadn't risen in his estimation, but I hadn't sunk any lower, probably because that wasn't possible. I waited for him to broach the subject.

By my estimation, three miles out of town; I said; "So, tell me what's been happening."

He had big hands; too big for his wrists, which looked like bones painted flesh-colour. "The Brother wrote you a letter," he said.

"Yes," I replied brightly. "But I want you to tell me."

The silence that followed was thought rather than rudeness or sulking. Then he said, "No good asking me. I don't know about that stuff."

They never want to talk to me. I have to conclude that it's my fault. I've tried all sorts of different approaches. I've tried being friendly, which gets you nowhere. I've tried keeping my face shut until someone volunteers information, which gets you peace and quiet. I've read books about agriculture, so I can talk intelligently about the state of the crops, milk yields, prices at market and the weather. When I do that, of course, I end up talking to myself. Actually, I have no problem about talking to myself. In the country, it's the only way I ever get an intelligent conversation.

"The dead man," I prompted him. I never say *the deceased*.

He shrugged. "Died about three months ago. Never had any bother till just after lambing."

"I see. And then?"

"It was sheep to begin with," he said. "The old ram, with its neck broke, and then four ewes. They all reckoned it was wolves,

but I said to them, wolves don't break necks, it was something with hands did that."

I nodded. I knew all this. "And then?"

"More sheep," he said, "and the dog, and then an old man, used to go round all the farms selling stuff, buttons and needles and things he made out of old bones; and when we found him, we reckoned we'd best tell the boss up at the grange, and he sent down two of his men to look out at night, and then the same thing happened to them. I said, that's no wolf. Knew all along, see. Seen it before."

That hadn't been in the letter. "Is that right?" I said.

"When I was a kid," the man said (and now I knew the problem would be getting him to shut up). "Same thing exactly; sheep, then travellers, then three of the duke's men. My grandad, he knew what it was, but they wouldn't listen. He knew a lot of stuff, grandad."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Him and me and my cousin from out over, we got a couple of shovels and a pick and an axe, and we went and dug up this old boy who'd died. And he was all swelled up, like he'd got the gout all over, and he was *purple*, like a grape. So we cut off his head and shovelled all the dirt back, and we dropped the head down an old well, and that was the end of that. No more bother. Didn't say what we'd done, mind. The Brother wouldn't have liked it. Funny bugger, he was."

Well, I thought. "You did the right thing," I said. "Your grandfather was a clever man, obviously."

"That's right," he said. "He knew a lot of stuff."

I was doing my mental arithmetic. *When I was a kid*; so, anything from fifty-five to sixty years ago. Rather a long interval, but not unheard of. I was about to ask if anything like it had happened before then, but I figured it out just in time. If wise old Grandfather had known exactly what to do, it stood to reason he'd learned it the old-fashioned way, watching or helping; quite possibly more than once.

"The man who died," I said.

"Him." A cartload of significance crammed into that word. "Offcomer," he explained.

"Ah," I said.

"Schoolteacher, he called himself," he went on. "Dunno about that. Him and the Brother, they tried to get a school going, to teach the boys their letters and figuring and all, but I told them, waste of time in these parts, you can't spare a boy in summer, and winter, it's too dark and cold to be walking five miles there and five miles back, just to learn stuff out of a book. And they wanted paying, two pence twice a year. People round here can't afford that for a parcel of old nonsense."

I thought of my own childhood, and said nothing. "Where did he come from?"

"Down south." Well, of course he did. "I said to him, you're a long way from home. He didn't deny it. Said it was his calling, whatever that's supposed to mean."

It was dark by the time we reached the farm. It was exactly what I'd been expecting; long and low, with turf eaves a foot off the ground, turf walls over a light timber frame. No trees this high up, so lumber had to come up the coast on a big shallow-draught freighter as far as Holy Trinity, then road haulage the rest of the way. I spent the first fifteen years of my life sleeping under turf, and I still get nightmares.

Mercifully, the Brother was there waiting for me. He was younger than I'd anticipated—you always think of village Brothers as craggy old fat men, or thin and brittle, like dried twigs with papery bark. Brother Stauracius couldn't have been much over thirty; a tall, broad-shouldered man with an almost perfectly square head, hair cropped short like winter pasture and pale blue eyes. Even without the habit, nobody could have taken him for a farmer.

"I'm so glad you could come," he said, town voice, educated, rather high for such a big man. He sounded like he meant it. "Such a very long way. I hope the journey wasn't too dreadful."

I wondered what he'd done wrong, to have ended up here. "Thank you for your letter," I said.

He nodded, genuinely pleased. "I was worried, I didn't know what to put in and leave out. I'm afraid I've had no experience with this sort of thing, none at all. I'm sure there must be a great deal more you need to know."

I shook my head. "It sounds like a textbook case," I said.

"Really." He nodded several times, quickly. "I looked it up in *Statutes and Procedures*, naturally, but the information was very sparse, very sparse indeed. Well, of course. Obviously, this sort of thing has to be left to the experts. Further detail would only encourage the ignorant to meddle."

I thought about Grandfather; two shovels and an axe, job done. But not quite, or else I wouldn't be here. "Quite," I said. "Now, you're sure there were no other deaths within six months of the first attack."

"Quite sure," he said, as though his life depended on it. "Nobody but poor Anthemius."

Nobody had asked me to sit down, let alone take my wet boots off. The hell with it. I sat down on the end of a bench. "You didn't say what he died of."

"Exposure." Brother Stauracius looked very sad. "He was caught out in a snowstorm and froze to death, poor man."

"Near here?"

"Actually, no." A slight frown, like a crack in a wall. "We found him about two miles from here, as it happens, on the big pasture between the mountains and the river. A long way from anywhere, so presumably he lost his way in the snow and wandered about aimlessly until the cold got to him."

I thought about that. "On his way back home, then."

"I suppose so, yes."

I needed a map. You almost always need a map, and there never is one. If ever I'm Emperor, I'll have the entire country surveyed and mapped, and copies of each parish hung up in the

temple vestries. "I don't suppose it matters," I lied. "You'll take me to see the grave."

A faint glow of alarm in those watered-down eyes. "In the morning."

"Of course in the morning," I said.

He relaxed just a little. "You'll stay here tonight, of course. I'm afraid the arrangements are a bit—"

"I was brought up on a farm," I said.

Unlike him. "That's all right, then," he said. "Now I suppose we should join our hosts. The evening meal is served rather early in these parts."

"Good," I said.

SLEEPING UNDER TURF is like being in your grave. Of course, there's rafters. That's what you see when you look up, lying wide awake in the dark. Your eyes get the hang of it quite soon, diluting the black into grey into a palette of pale greys; you see rafters, not the underside of turf. And the smoke hardens it off, so it doesn't crumble. You don't get worms dropping on your face. But it's unavoidable, no matter how long you do it, no matter how used you are to it. You lie there, and the thought crosses your mind as you stare at the underside of grass; is this what it'll be like?

The answer is, of course, no. First, the roof will be considerably lower; it'll be the lid of a box, if you're lucky enough to have one, or else no roof at all, just dirt chucked on your face. Second, you won't be able to see it because you'll be dead.

But you can't help wondering. For a start, there's temperature. Turf is a wonderful insulator; keeps out the cold in winter and the heat in summer. What it doesn't keep out is the damp. It occurs to you as you lie on your back there; so long as they bury me in a thick shirt, won't have to worry about being cold, or too hot in summer, but the damp could be a problem. Gets into your bones. A man could catch his death.

It's while you're lying there—everybody else is fast asleep; no imagination, no curiosity, or they've been working so hard all day they just sleep, no matter what—that you start hearing the noises. Actually, turf's pretty quiet. Doesn't creak like wood, gradually settling, and you don't get drips from leaks. What you get is the thumping noises over your head. Clump, clump, clump, then a pause, then clump, clump, clump.

They tell you, when you're a kid and you ask, that it's the sound of dead men riding the roof-tree. They tell you that dead men get up out of the ground, climb up on the roof, sit astride the peak and jiggle about, walloping their heels into the turf like a man kicking on a horse. You believe them; I never was quite sure whether they believed it themselves. When you're older, of course, and you've left the farm and gone somewhere civilised, where it doesn't happen, you finally figure it out; what you hear is sheep, hopping up onto the roof in the night, wandering about grazing the fine sweet grass that grows there, picking out the wild leeks, of which they're particularly fond. Sheep, for crying out loud, not dead men at all. I guess they knew really, all along, and the stuff about dead men was to keep you indoors at night, keep you from wandering out under the stars (though why you should want to I couldn't begin to imagine). Or at least, at some point, way back in the dim past, some smartarse with a particularly warped imagination made up the story about dead men, to scare his kids; and the kids believed, and never figured it was sheep, and they told their kids, and so on down the generations. Maybe you never figure it out unless you leave the farm, which nobody ever does, except me.

As a matter of fact, I was just beginning to drift off into a doze when the thumping started. Clump, clump, clump; pause; clump, clump, clump. I was not amused. I was bone tired and I really wanted to get some sleep, and here were these fucking sheep walking about over my head. The hell with that, I thought, and got up.

I opened the door as quietly as I could, not wanting to wake up the household, and I stood in the doorway for a little while,

letting my eyes get used to the dark. Someone had left a stick leaning against the doorframe. I picked it up, on the offchance that there might be a sheep close enough to hit.

Something was moving about again. I walked away from the house until I could see up top.

It wasn't sheep. It was a dead man.

He was sitting astride the roof, his legs drooping down either side, like a farmer on his way back from market. His hands were on his hips and he was looking away to the east. He was just a dark shape against the sky, but there was something about the way he sat there; peaceful. I didn't think he'd seen me, and I felt no great inclination to advertise my presence. If I say I wasn't scared, I wouldn't expect to be believed: but fear wasn't uppermost in my mind. Mostly, I was *interested*.

No idea how long I stood and he sat. It occurred to me that I was just assuming he was a dead man. Looked at logically, far more likely that he was alive, and had reasons of his own for climbing up on a roof in the middle of the night. Well; there's a time and a place for logic.

He turned his head, looking down the line of the roof-tree, and lifted his heels, and dug them into the turf three times; clump, clump, clump. (And at that point, I realised the flaw in my earlier rationalisation. Three clumps; always three, ever since I was a kid. How many three-legged sheep do you see?) At that moment, the moon came out from behind the clouds, and suddenly we were looking at each other; me and him.

My host had been right; he was purple, like a grape. Or a bruise; the whole body one enormous bruise. Swollen, he'd said; either that, or he was an enormous man, arms and legs twice as thick as normal. His eyes were white; no pupils.

"Hello," I said.

He leaned forward just a little and cupped his hand behind his left ear. "You'll have to speak up," he said.

Words from a dead man; a purple, swollen man sitting astride a roof. "Tell me," I said, raising my voice. "Why do you do that?"

He looked at me, or a little bit past me. I couldn't tell if his mouth moved, but there was a deep, gurgling noise which could only have been laughter. "Do what?"

"Ride on the roof like it's a horse," I said.

His shoulders lifted; a slow, exaggerated shrug, like he didn't know what a shrug was, but was copying one he'd seen many years ago. "I'm not sure," he said. "I feel the urge to do it, so I do it."

Well, I thought. One of the great abiding mysteries of my childhood not quite cleared up. "Are you Anthemius?" I asked. "The schoolmaster?"

Again the laugh. "That's a very good question," he said. "Tell you what," he went on, "come up here and sit with me, so we can talk without yelling."

In the moonlight I could make out the huge hands, with their monstrous overripe fingers. How tight the skin would have to be, with all that pressure against it from the inside. Breaking a neck would be like snapping a pear off a tree.

"Let me rephrase that," I said. "Were you Anthemius? When you were—"

"Yes," he said, speaking quickly to cut off a word he didn't want to hear. "I think I was. Thank you," he added. "I've been trying to remember. It's been on the tip of my tongue, but somehow I can't seem to think of any names."

The approved procedure for coping with the restless dead is, essentially, what Grandfather did; though of course we make rather more of a fuss about it. The approved procedure should, of course, be carried out in daylight; noon is recommended. Should you chance to encounter a specimen during the night, there are two courses of action, both recommended rather than approved. One, you draw your sword and cut its head off. Two, you challenge it to the riddle-game and keep it talking all night, until dawn comes up unexpectedly and strands it like a beached whale in the cruel light.

Commentary on that. I am not a man of action. I don't vault onto roofs, I don't carry weapons. One of the reasons I left the

farm in the first place was, I have trouble lifting even moderate loads. So much for option one; and as for option two—

Also, I was curious. Interested.

"What happened to you?" I said.

"You know, I'm really not sure," he replied; and the voice was starting to sound like a man's voice, my ears were getting the hang of it, the way my eyes had got used to the dark. "I know I was out in the snow and I'd lost my way. I got terribly cold, so that every bit of me hurt. Then the pain started to ease up, and I sort of fell asleep."

"You died," I said.

He didn't like me saying that, but I guess he forgave me. "I remember waking up," he said, "and it was pitch dark and terribly quiet, and I couldn't move. I was very scared. And then it occurred to me, I wasn't breathing. I don't mean I was holding my breath. I wasn't breathing at all, and it didn't matter. So then I knew."

I waited; but I hadn't got all night. "And then?"

He turned his head away. No hair, just a bulging purple scalp. A head like a plum. "I was terrified," he said. "I mean, I had no way of knowing." He paused, and I have no idea what was passing through his mind. "After a long time, I found I could move after all. I got my hands up against the lid, and I pushed, and I could feel the wood burst apart. That scared me even more, I thought the roof, I mean all the earth on top of me, I thought it'd cave in and bury me." He paused again. "I was always frightened of tight places," he said. "You know."

I nodded. Me too, as it happens.

"I guess I panicked," he went on, "because I kept pushing, and I somehow knew that I was incredibly strong, much stronger than I'd ever been before, so I thought, if I push hard enough. I wasn't thinking straight, of course."

"And then?" I asked.

"Pushed right up through the dirt and into the moonlight," he said. "Amazing feeling. The first thing I wanted to do was run to the nearest farm and tell them, Look, I'm not dead after all."

He stopped; he'd said the word without thinking. "But then I thought about it; and I still wasn't breathing, and I couldn't actually *feel* anything. I could move my hands and feet, I could stand upright and balance, all that, but—you know when you've been sitting a long time and your feet go numb. It was like that, all over. It felt so strange."

"Go on," I said.

He didn't, not for a long time. "I think I sat down," he said. "I don't know why I'd have done that, standing up didn't make me tired or anything. I don't feel tired, ever. But I was so confused, I didn't know what I was supposed to do. It all felt wrong." He lifted his heels slowly and let them drop; clump, clump, clump. "And while I was there the sun started to come up, and the light just sort of flooded into my head and bleached everything away, so I couldn't think at all. I guess you could say I passed out. Anyway, when I opened my eyes I was back where I'd started from, lying in the dark."

I frowned. "How did you get back there?"

"I just don't know," he said. "Still don't. It always happens, that's all I know. When the sun comes up, my mind washes away. If I've gone any distance, I know I have to get back. I run. I can run really fast. I know I've got to be back—home," he said, with a sort of breaking-up laugh, "before the sun comes up. I've learned to be careful, to give myself plenty of time."

He was still and quiet for a while. I asked, "Why do you kill things?"

"No idea." He sounded distressed. "If something comes close enough, I grab it and twist it till it's dead. Like a cat lashing out at a bit of string. Reflex. I just know it's something I have to do."

I nodded. "Do you go looking—?"

"Yes." He mumbled the word, like a kid admitting a crime. "Yes, I do. I do my best to keep away from where there might be people. It's all the same to me; sheep, foxes, men. I'd go a long way away, into the mountains, if I could. But I have to stay close, so I can get back in time."

I'd been debating with myself, and I knew I had to ask. "What were you?" I said. "What did you do?"

He didn't answer. I repeated the question.

"Like you said," he replied. "I was a schoolteacher."

"Before that."

When he answered, it was against his will. The words came out slow, flat; he spoke because he had to. "I was a Brother," he said. "When I was thirty, they said I should apply to the Order, they thought I had the gift, and the brains, and the application and the self-discipline. I passed the exam and I was at the Studium for five years. Like you," he added.

I let that go. "You joined the Order."

"No." The flat voice had gone; there was a flare of anger. "No, I failed matriculation. I retook it the next year, but I failed again. They sent me back to my parish, but by then they'd got someone else. So I ended up wandering about, looking for teaching work, letter-writing, anything I could do to earn a living. There's not a lot you can do, of course."

Suddenly I felt bitter cold, right through. Took me a moment to realise it was fear. "So you came here," I said, just to keep him talking.

"Eventually. A lot of other places first, but here's where I ended up." He lifted his head abruptly. "They sent you here to deal with me, am I right?"

I didn't reply.

"Of course they did," he said. "Of course. I'm a nuisance, a pest, a menace to agriculture. You came here to dig me up and cut my head off."

This time, I was the one who had to speak against my will. "Yes."

"Of course," he said. "But I can't let you do that. It's my—"

He'd been about to say life. Presumably he tried to find another way of phrasing it, then gave up. We both knew what he meant.

"You passed the exams, then," he said.

"Barely," I replied. "Two hundred seventh out of two hundred twenty."

"Which is why you're here."

His white eyes in the ash-white moonlight. "That's right," I said. "They don't give out research posts if you come two hundred seventh."

He nodded gravely. "Commercial work," he said.

"When I can get it," I replied. "Which isn't often. Others far more qualified than me."

He grunted. It could have been sympathy. "Public service work."

"Afraid so," I replied.

"Which is why you're here." He lifted his head and rolled it round on his shoulders, like someone waking up after sleeping in a chair. "Because—well, because you aren't much good. Well?"

I resented that, even though it was true. "It's not that I'm not good," I said. "It's just that everyone in my year was better than me."

"Of course." He leaned forward, his hands braced on his knees. "The question is," he said, "do I still have the gift, after what happened to me. If I've still got it, your job is going to be difficult."

"If not," I said.

"Well," he replied, "I suppose we're about to find out."

"Indeed," I said. "There could be a paper for the journals in this."

"Your chance to escape from obscurity," he said solemnly. "Under different circumstances, I'd wish you well. Unfortunately, I really don't want you cutting off my head. It's a miserable existence, but—"

I could see his point. His voice was quite human now; if I'd known him before, I'd have recognised him. He had his back to the moon, so I couldn't see the features of his face.

"What I'm trying to say is, you don't have to do it," he said. "Go away. Go home. Nobody knows you came out here tonight.

I promise I'll stay away until you've gone. If I don't show up, you can report that there was no direct evidence of an infestation, and therefore you didn't feel justified in desecrating what was probably an innocent grave."

"But you'll be back," I said.

"Yes, and no doubt they'll send someone else," he said. "But it won't be you."

I was tempted. Of course I was tempted. For one thing, he was a rational creature; with my eyes shut, if I hadn't known better, I'd have said he was a natural man with a heavy cold. And what if the gift did survive death? He'd kill me. I had to admit it to myself; the thought that I could get killed doing this job hadn't occurred to me. I'd anticipated a quick, grisly hour's work in broad daylight; no risk.

I'm not a coward, but I appreciate the value of fear, the way I appreciate the value of money. I'm most definitely not brave.

I saw something in the moonlight, and said (trying not to talk quickly or raise my voice); "I could go back to bed, and then come back in the morning and dig you up."

"You could," he said.

"You don't think I would."

"Not if we'd made an agreement."

"You could be right," I said. "But what about the farmers? You've got to admit—"

At which moment, the Brother (who'd come out of the back door, crawled up on the roof behind him and edged down the roof-tree towards him until he was close enough to reach his neck with the axe he'd brought with him) raised his arms high and swung. No sound at all; but at the last moment, the dead man leaned his head to one side, just enough, and the axe-blade swept past, cutting air. I heard the Brother grunt, shocked and panicky; I saw the dead man—eyes still fixed on me—reach behind him with his left hand and catch the swinging axe just below the head, and hold it perfectly still. The Brother gasped, but didn't let go; he was pulling with all his strength, like a little

dog tugging on a belt. All his efforts couldn't move the dead man's arm the thickness of a fingernail.

"Now," the dead man said. "Let's see."

The delay on my part was unforgivable, completely unprofessional. I knew I had to do something, but my mind had gone completely blank. I couldn't remember any procedures, let alone any words. *Think*, a tiny voice was yelling inside me head, but I couldn't. I heard the Brother whimper, as he applied every scrap of strength in a tendon-ripping, joint-tearing last desperate jerk on the axe-handle that had no effect whatsoever. The dead man was looking straight at me. His lips began to move.

*Pro nobis peccatoribus*; not the obvious choice, not even on the same page of the book, but it was the only procedure I could think of. Unfortunately, it's one I've always had real difficulties with. You reach out with your hand that is not a hand, extend the fingers that aren't fingers; I'm all right as far as that, and then I tend to come unstuck.

(What I was thinking was; so he failed the exam, and I passed. Yes, but maybe the reason he failed was, he didn't read the questions through properly, or he spent so long on Part 1 that he didn't leave himself enough time for 2 and 3. Maybe he's really good, just unlucky in exams.)

I was mumbling; *Sol invicte, ora pro nobis peccatoribus in die periculi*. Of course, there's a school of thought that says the magic words have no real effect whatsoever, they're just a way of concentrating the mind. I tend to agree. Why should an archaic prayer in a dead language to a god nobody's believed in for six hundred years have any effect on anything at all? Ora pro nobis peccatoribus, I repeated urgently, nobis peccatoribus in die periculi.

It worked, It can't have been the words, of course, but it felt like it was the words. I was in, I was through. I was inside his head.

There was nothing there.

Believe me, it's true. Nothing at all; like walking into a house where someone's died, and the family have been in and cleared out all the furniture. Nothing there, because I was inside the

head of a dead man; albeit a dead man who was looking at me reproachfully out of blank white eyes while holding an axe absolutely still.

Fine; all the easier, if it's empty. I looked for the controls. You have to visualise them, of course. I see them as the handwheels of a lathe. It's because I had a holiday job in a foundry in Second Year. I don't know how to use a lathe. What I mostly did was sweep up piles of swarf off the floor.

Here is the handwheel that controls the arms. I reached out with the hand that is not a hand, grabbed it and tried to turn it. Stuck. I tried harder. Stuck. I tried really hard, and the bloody thing came away in my hand.

It's not supposed to do that.

I re-visualised. I saw the controls as the reins of a cart, the footbrake under my boot that was not a boot. I stamped on the brake and hauled back hard on the reins.

I haven't got round to writing that paper for the journals, so here it is for the first time anywhere. The gift does not survive death. Nothing survives. The room was empty. And the handwheel only broke off because I'm clumsy and cack-handed, the sort of person who trips over cats and breaks the nibs of pens by pressing too hard.

I heard the Brother gasp, as he jerked the axe out of the dead man's grip. The dead man didn't move. His eyes were still fixed on mine, right up to the moment when the axe shore through his neck and his head wobbled and fell, bounced off his knee and tumbled off the roof into the short grass below. The body didn't move.

I know why. It took ten of us, with an improvised crane made of twelve-foot three-inch fir poles, to get the body down off the roof. It must've weighed half a ton. The head alone was two hundredweight. Two men couldn't lift it; they had to use levers to roll it along the ground. There was no blood, but the neck started to ooze a milky white juice that smelt worse than anything you could possibly imagine.

We burned the body. We drenched it in pine-pitch, and it caught quite easily and burnt down to nothing; not even any recognisable bits of bone. The white juice flared up like oil. They rolled the head over to the slurry-pond and pitched it in. It went down with a gurgle and a burp.

"I heard you talking to it," the Brother told me. For some reason, the word *it* offended me. "I guessed you were using a variation on the riddle game, to keep it distracted till the sun came up."

"Something like that," I said.

He nodded. "I shouldn't have interfered, I'm sorry," he said. "You had the situation under control, and I could have ruined everything."

"That's all right," I said.

He smiled; as if to say, it wasn't all right, but thanks for forgiving me. "I guess I panicked," he said. Then he frowned. "No, I didn't. I saw a chance of getting in on the act. It was stupid and selfish of me. You'll have to write to the prebendary."

"I don't see why," I said mildly. "The way I see it, your actions were open to several different interpretations. I choose to interpret them as courage and resourcefulness. I could put that in a letter, if you like."

"Would you?" In his face, I saw all the desperation and cruelty of sudden, unexpected hope. "I mean, seriously?"

"Of course," I said.

"That'd be—" He stopped. He couldn't think of a big enough word. "You've got no idea what it's like," he said; all in a rush, like diarrhoea. "Being stuck here, in this miserable place with these appalling people. If I can't get back to a town, I swear I'll go mad. And it's so cold in winter. I hate the cold."

YOU CAN SLEEP in the coach, Father Prior said, when I tried to make a fuss about the timetable. I didn't say to him; have you

ever been on a provincial mailcoach, on country roads, at this time of year? A dead man couldn't sleep on a mailcoach.

I slept, nearly all the way; on account, I guess, of not having had much sleep the night before. Woke up just as we were crossing the Fulvens bridge; I looked out of the window, and all I could see was water, moonlight reflected on water. Couldn't get back to sleep after that. Too dark to read the case notes, which I'd neglected to do back at the farm. But I remembered the basic facts from the briefing. These jobs are all the same, anyhow. Piece of cake.

The coach threw me out just after dawn, at a crossroads in the middle of nowhere. Somewhere up on the moors; I'm a valley boy myself. We had cousins up on the moor. I hated it when they came to visit. The old man was deaf as a post, and the three boys (mid to late thirties, but they were always the boys) just sat there, not saying a word. The mother died young, and I can't say I blame her.

They were supposed to be meeting the coach, but there was no-one there. I stood for a while, then I sat on my bag, then I sat on the ground, which was damp. I heard an owl, and a fox, or at least I hope it was a fox. If not, it was something we never got around to covering in Third Year, and I'm very glad I didn't see it.

They arrived eventually, in a little dog-cart thing; an old man driving, a younger man and the Brother. One small pony, furry like a bear.

The Brother did the talking, for which I was quite grateful. He was one of the better sort of country Brothers; short man, somewhere between fifty and sixty, a distinct burr to his voice but he spoke clearly and used proper words. The boy was the younger man's son, the older man's grandson. He'd been fooling about in a big oak tree, slipped, fell; broken arm and a hideous bash on the head. He hadn't come round, and it had been a week now. They had to prise his mouth open with the back of a horn spoon to get food and water in; he swallowed all right,

but that was all he did. You could stick a needle in his foot half an inch and he wouldn't even twitch. The swelling on the back of his head had gone down—the Brother disclaimed any medical knowledge, but he was lying—and they'd set the arm and splinted it, for what that was worth.

I thought; better than killing the restless dead. One of my best subjects at the Studium, though of course we did all our practicals on conscious minds, with a Father sitting a few feet away, watching like a hawk. I'd done one about eighteen months earlier, and it went off just fine; in, found her, straight out again. She followed me like a dog. I'd been relieved when Father Prior told me; it could've been something awkward and fiddly, like auspices, or horrible and scary, like a possession. Just in case, I'd brought the book. I'd meant to mug up the relevant chapter, either at the farm or on the coach, but I hadn't got round to it. Anyway, it had to be better than that empty place.

It was quite a big house, for a hill-farm; sitting in the well of a valley, with a dense copper-beech hedge on all four sides, as a windbrake. Just the five of them in the house, the Brother said; grandfather, father, mother, the boy and a hired man who slept in the hayloft. The boy was nine years old. The Brother told me his name, but I'm hopeless with names.

They asked me, did I want to rest after the journey; wash and brush up, something to eat? The correct answer was, of course, No, so I gave it.

"He's in here," the Brother said.

Big for a hill-farm, but still oppressively small. Downstairs, the big kitchen, with a huge table, fireplace, two hams swinging like dead men on gibbets. A parlour, tiny and dusty and cold. Dairy, scullery, store; doorway through to the cowstalls. Upstairs, one big room and a sort of oversized cupboard, where the boy was. I could just about kneel beside the bed, if I didn't mind the window-sill digging in the small of my back.

The hell with that, I thought; I'm a qualified man, a professional, a Father; a wizard. I shouldn't have to work in conditions

you wouldn't keep pigs in. "Take him downstairs," I said. "Put him on the kitchen table."

They had a job. The stairs in that house were like a bell-tower, tightly coiled and cramped. Father and grandfather did the heavy lifting, while I watched. It's an odd thing about me. Sometimes, the more compassion is called for, the less capable I am of feeling it. I offer no explanation or excuse.

"He shouldn't have been moved," the Brother hissed in my ear, just loud enough so that everyone could hear. "In his condition—"

"Yes, thank you," I said, in my best arrogant-city-bastard voice. I couldn't say why I was behaving like this. Sometimes I do. "Now, if you'll all stay well back, I'll see what I can do."

I looked at the boy, and I could remember the theory perfectly, every last detail, every last lecture note. His eyes were closed; he had a stupid face, fat girly lips, fat cheeks. If he lived, he'd grow up tall, solid, double-chinned, gormless; the son of the farm. Pork fat and home-brewed beer; he'd be spherical by the time he was forty, strong enough to wrestle a bullock to its knees, slow and tireless, infuriatingly calm, a man of few words; respected at market, shrewd and fat, his bald patch hidden under a hat that would never come off, probably not even in bed. A solid, productive life, which it was my duty to save. Lucky me.

Theory; theory is your lifeline, they used to tell me, your driftwood in a shipwreck. I reminded myself of the basic propositions.

To recover a lost mind, first make an entrance. This is usually done by visualising yourself as a penetrating object; a drill bit, a woodpecker's beak, a maggot. The drill bit works for me, though for some reason I tend to be a carpenter's auger, wound in with a brace. I go in through the spiral flakes of waste bone thrown clear by the wide grooves of the cutter. I assume it's from some childhood memory, watching Grandad at work in the barn. You're not really supposed to use personal memories, but it's easier, for someone with my limited imagination.

Once you're in; first ward, immediately, because you never know what might be waiting for you in there. I raised first ward

as soon as I felt myself go through. I use *scutum fidei*, visualise a shield. Mine's round, with a hole in it at twelve o'clock so I can see what's going on.

I peered through the hole. No nasty creatures with dripping fangs crouched to pounce, which was nice. Count to ten and lower the shield slowly.

I looked around. This is the crucial bit, and you mustn't rush. How long it takes depends on the strength of your gift, so naturally I take ages. The light gradually increases. First things first; get your bearings. Orientate yourself, taking special care to get a fix on the point you came in by. Well, obviously. If you lose your entry-point, you're stuck; in someone else's head for ever. You really don't want that.

I lined up on the corners of a ceiling, drawing diagonal lines and fixing on their point of origin, measuring the angles with my imaginary protractor (it's brass, with numbers in gothic-italic). One-oh-five, seventy-five; repeat the numbers four times out loud, to make sure they're loaded into memory. Fine. Now I know where I am and how to get out again. One-oh-five, seventy-five. Now, then. Let the dog see the rabbit.

I was in a room. It's nearly always an interior; with kids, practically guaranteed it's their bedroom, or the room they sleep in, depending on social class and domestic arrangements. In all relevant essentials, it was the room upstairs I had him carried down from. Excellent; nice and small, not many places to hide anything. So much easier when you're dealing with a subject of limited intelligence.

I visualised a body for myself. I tend not to be me. With children, it's usually best to be a nice lady; the kid's mother, if possible. I'm not good enough to do specific people, and I have real problems being women. So I was a nice old man instead.

Hello, I said. Where are you?

Don't worry if they don't answer. Sometimes, they do, sometimes they don't. I walked round the bed, knelt down, looked under it. There was a cupboard; one of those triangular jobs,

wedged in a corner. I opened that. For some reason, it was full of the skins and bones of dead animals. None of my business; I closed it. I pulled the covers off the bed, and lifted the pillow.

Odd, I thought, and touched base with theory. The boy must still be alive, or else there would be no room. If he's alive, he must be in here somewhere. He can't be invisible, not inside his own head. He can, of course, be anything he likes, so long as it's animate and alive. A cockroach, for example, or a flea. I sighed. I get all the rotten jobs.

I adjusted the scale, making the room five times bigger. Go up in easy stages. If he was being a cockroach, he'd now be a rat-sized cockroach. If he was being a rat, of course, he'd be cat-sized and capable of giving me a nasty bite. I used *lorica*, just in case. I looked under the bed again.

I visualised a clock, in the middle of the wall opposite the door. It told me I'd been inside for ten minutes. The recommended maximum is thirty. Really first-rate practitioners have been known to stay in for an hour and still come out more or less in one piece; that's material for a leading article in the journals. I searched again, this time paying more attention to the contents of the cupboard. Dried, desiccated animal skins; squirrels, rabbits, rats. No fleas, mites or ticks. So much for that theory.

I visualised a glass jug, to represent my energy level. You can use yourself up surprisingly quickly and not know it. Just as well I did. My jug was a third empty. You want to save at least a fifth just to get out again. I visualised calibrations, so as to be sure.

Quick think. The recommended course of action would be to visualise a tracking agent (spaniel, terrier, ferret) but that takes a fair chunk of your resources; also, it burns energy while it's in use, and getting rid of it takes energy, too. I drew a distinct red line on my measuring-jug, and a blue line just above it. The alternative to a tracker is to increase the scale still further; twenty times, say, in which case your cockroach will be a wolf-sized monster that could jump you and bite your head off. I was still running *lorica*, but any effective ward burns energy. If

I found myself with a fight on my hands, I could dip below that essential red line in a fraction of a second. No, the hell with that.

I visualised a terrier. I'm not a dog person, so my terrier was a bit odd; very short, stumpy legs and a rectangular head. Still, it went at it with great enthusiasm, wagging its imaginary tail and making little yapping noises. All round the room, nose into everything. Then it sat on the floor and looked at me, as if to say, Well?

Not looking good. My jug was half empty, I'd used up my repertoire of approved techniques, and found nothing. Just my luck to get a special case, a real collector's item. Senior research fellows would be fighting each other for the chance of a go at this one, but I just wanted to get the job done and clear out. Wasted on me, you might say.

I vanished the dog. Quick think. There had to be something else I could try, but nothing occurred to me. Didn't make sense; he had to be in here somewhere, or there'd be no room. He couldn't be invisible. He could only turn himself into something he could imagine—and it had to be real; no fantasy creatures the size of a pin-head. At five times magnification, a red mite would be plainly visible; also, the dog would've found it. Tracking agents, even inferior ones visualised by me, smell life. If he was in here, the dog would've found him.

So—

As required by procedure, I considered abandoning the attempt and getting out. This would, of course, mean the boy would die; you can't go back in twice, that's an absolute. I'd be within my rights, faced with an enigma on this scale. The failure would be noted on my record, of course, but there'd be an annotation, *no blame attaches*, and it wouldn't be the first time, not by a long way. The kid would die; not my problem. I'd have done my best, and that's all you have to do.

Or I could think of something. Such as what?

They tell you; be wise, don't improvise. If in doubt, get out. Making stuff up as you go along is mightily frowned on, in much the same way as you're not encouraged to fry eggs in a fireworks

factory. There's no knowing what you might invent, and outside controlled conditions, invention could lead to the Cartographic Commission having to redraw the maps for a whole county. Or you could make a hole in a wall, which is the worst thing anybody can do. At the very least, I'd be sure to end up in front of a Board, facing charges of unauthorised innovation and divergence. Saving the life of some farm kid would be an excuse, but not a very good one.

I could think of something. Such as—

There's no such thing as magic. Instead, there's the science we don't properly understand, not yet. There are effects that work, and we have no idea why. One of these is *spes aeternitatis*, a wretchedly inconsistent, entirely inexplicable conjuring trick that no self-respecting Father would condescend to use. That's because they can't get it to work reliably.

I can.

*Spes aeternitatis* is an appearances-adjuster. You can use it to find hidden objects, or translate lies, or tell if a slice of cake or a glass of wine's got poison in it. I do it by visualising everything that's wrong in light blue. It's a tiny little scrap of talent that I've got and practically everybody else hasn't; it's like being double-jointed, or wiggling your nostrils like a rabbit.

I closed my eyes and opened them again, and saw a light blue room. Everything light blue. Everything false.

Oh, I thought; then, one-oh-five, seventy five, and I started lining up diagonals for my escape. But that wasn't to be, unfortunately. The room blurred and reappeared, and it was all different. It was my room; the room I slept in until I was fifteen years old.

He was sitting on the end of the bed; a slight man, almost completely bald, with a small nose and a soft chin, small hands, short, thin legs. I'd put him at about fifty years old. His skin was purple, like a grape.

"You were wrong," he said, looking up at me. "The talent survives death."

"That's interesting," I said. "How did you get in here?"

He smiled. "You practically invited me in," he said. "When I heard that fool behind me, with the axe, I looked at you. You felt sorry for me. You thought; is he not a man and a Brother, or words to that effect. I used Stilicho's transport, and here I am."

I nodded. "I should've put up wards."

"You should. Careless. Attention to detail isn't your strongest suit."

"The boy," I said.

He shrugged. "In there somewhere, I dare say. But we aren't in his head, we're in yours. I've made myself at home, as you can see."

I looked round quickly. The apple-box with the bottom knocked out, where I used to keep my books; it was where it should be, but the books were different. They were new and beautifully bound in tooled calf, and the alphabet their titles were written in was strange to me.

"My memories," I said.

He waved his hand. "Well rid of them," he said. "Misery and failure, a life wasted, a talent dissipated. You'll be better off."

I nodded. "With yours."

"Quite. Oh, they're not pleasant reading," he said, with a scowl. "Bitter, angry; memories of bigotry and spite, relentless bad luck, a life of constant setbacks and reverses, a talent misunderstood. You'll see that I failed the exam the second time because, sitting there in Great School, I suddenly hit on a much better way of achieving *unam sanctam*; quicker, safer, ruthlessly efficient. I tried it out as soon as the exam was over, and it worked. But I got no marks, so they failed me. I ask you, where's the sense in that?"

"You failed the retake," I said. "What about the first time?"

He laughed. "I had the flu," he said. "I was practically delirious, could barely remember my name. Would they listen? No. Rules. You see what I mean. Bad luck and spite at every turn."

I nodded. "What happens to me?"

He looked at me. "You'll be better off," he repeated.

"I'll stop existing. I'll be dead."

"Not physically," he said mildly. "Your body, my mind. Your fully-qualified licensed-practitioner's body, and a mind that saw how to improve *unam sanctam* in a half-second flash of intuition."

It says a lot about my self-esteem that I actually considered it, though not for very long. Half a second, maybe. "What happens now?" I asked. "Do we fight, or—?"

He shrugged."If you like," he said, and extended his arm. It was ten feet long, thick as a gatepost. He gripped my throat like a man holding a mouse, and crushed me.

I guess I was about seventy per cent dead when I remembered; I know what to do. I drew a rather shaky second ward; he closed his fingers on thin air, and I was standing behind him.

He swung round, roaring like a bull. He had bull's horns sticking out of his forehead. I tried second ward again, but he got there before I did, grabbed my head and smashed my face into the wall.

Just in time, I remembered; there is no pain. I used Small Mercies, softening the wall into felt, and slipped through his fingers. I was smoke. I hung above him in a cloud. He laughed, and fetched me back with *vis mentis*. The back of my head hit the floor, which gave way like a mattress. I became a spear, and buried myself in his chest. He used second ward and was the other side of the room.

"You fight like a first-year," he said.

Which was true. I clenched my mind like a fist; the walls closed in on him, squashing him like a spider under a boot. I felt him, like a nail right through the sole. Back to first ward, and we stood glowering at each other, in opposite corners of the room.

"You can't beat me," he said. "I'll wear you down and you'll simply fade away. Face it, what the hell have you got to live for?"

Valid point. "All right, then," I said.

His eyes opened wide. "I win?"

"You win," I said.

He was pleased; very pleased. He grinned at me and raised his hand, just as I got my fingers round the handle of the door and twisted as hard as I could.

He saw that and opened his mouth to scream. But the door flew open, knocking me back. I closed my eyes. The door was, of course, the intersection of two lines drawn diagonally across the room, at 105 and 75 degrees precisely.

I opened my eyes. He'd gone. I was in the boy's room, the room upstairs. The boy was sitting on the floor, legs crossed, hands under his chin. He looked up at me.

"Well, come on," I snapped at him. "I haven't got all day."

THEY WERE PATHETICALLY grateful. Mother in floods of tears, father clinging to my arm, how can we ever thank you, it's a miracle, you're a miracle-worker. I wasn't in the mood. The boy, lying on the kitchen table under a pile of blankets, looked up at me and frowned, as though something about me wasn't quite right. A quiet, analytical stare; it bothered the hell out of me. I refused food and drink and made father get out the pony and trap and take me out to the crossroads. But the mail won't be arriving for six hours, he objected; it's cold and dark, you'll catch your death.

I didn't feel cold.

At the crossroads, huddling under the smelly old hat father insisted on giving me, I tried to search my mind, to see if he'd really gone. There was, of course, no way he could have survived. I'd opened the door (Rule One; never open the door) and he'd been sucked out of my head out into the open, where there was no talented mind to receive him. Even if he was as strong as he'd claimed to be, there was no way he could have lasted more than three seconds before he broke up and dissipated into the air. There was absolutely nothing he could have done, no way he could have survived.

The coach arrived. I got on it, and slept all the way. At the inn, I got a lamp and a mirror, and examined myself all over. Just when I thought I was all clear, I found a patch of purple skin, about the size of a crab-apple, on the calf of my left leg. I told myself it was just a bruise.

(That was a year ago. It's still there.)

The rest of the round was just straightforward stuff; a possession, a small rift, a couple of incursions, which I sealed with a strong closure and duly reported when I got back. Since then, I've volunteered for a screening, been to see a couple of counsellors, bought a pair of full-length mirrors. And I've been promoted; field officer, superior grade. They're quite pleased with me, and no wonder. I seem to be getting better at the job all the time. And I'm writing a paper, would you believe; modifications to *unam sanctam*. Quicker, safer, much more efficient. So blindingly obvious, I'm surprised no-one's ever thought of it before.

Father Prior is surprised but pleased. I don't know what's got into you, he said.

# Amor Vincit Omnia

**Usually,** the problem was getting the witnesses to talk.

*…He just walked down the street looking at buildings and they caught fire. No, he didn't* do *anything, like wave his arms about or stuff like that, he just, I don't know, looked at them…*

This time, the problem was getting them to shut up.

*…Stared at this old guy and his head just sort of crumpled, you know, like a piece of paper when you screw it into a ball? Just stared at him, sort of annoyed, really, like the guy had trodden on his foot, and then his head just…*

As he listened, the observer made notes; *Usque Ad Peric; Unam Sanc (twice); ?Mundus Verg ??variant*. He also nodded his head and made vague noises of sympathy and regret, and tried not to let his distaste show. But the smell bothered him; burnt flesh, which unfortunately smells just a bit like roasted meat (pork, actually), which was a nuisance because he'd missed lunch; burnt bone, which is just revolting. His moustache would smell of smoke for two days, no matter how carefully he washed it. He stopped to query a point; when he made the old woman vanish, was there a brief glow of light, or—? No? No, that's fine. And he jotted down; *Choris Anthrop, but no light; ?Strachylides?*

The witness was still talking, but he'd closed his eyes; *and then Thraso from the mill came up behind him and shot him in the*

*back, and nothing happened, and then he turned around real slow and he pointed at Thraso, and Thraso just—*

He frowned, stopped the witness with a raised hand. "He didn't know—"

"What?"

"He didn't know he was there. This man—" Always hopeless at names. "The miller. He didn't know the miller was there."

"No, Thraso crept up on him real quiet. Shot him in the back at ten paces. Arrow should've gone right through him and out the other side. And then he turned round, like I just said, and—"

"You're sure about that. He didn't hear him, or look round."

"He was busy," the witness said. "He was making Cartusia's head come off, just by looking at it. And that's when Thraso—"

"You're *sure*?"

"Yes."

The witness carried on talking about stuff that clearly mattered to him, but which didn't really add anything. He tuned out the voice, and tried to write the word, but it was surprisingly difficult to make himself do it. Eventually, when he succeeded, it came out scrawled and barely legible, as though he'd written it with his left hand;

*Lorica?*

"UNAM SANCTAM," THE Precentor said (and Gennasius was leaning back in his chair, hands folded on belly, his I've-got-better-things-to-do pose) "is, of course, commonly used by the untrained, since the verbal formula is indefinite and, indeed, often varies from adept to adept. Usque ad Periculum, by the same token, is frequently encountered in these cases, for much the same reason. They are, of course, basic intuitive expressions of frustration and rage, strong emotions which—"

"It says here," Poteidanius interrupted, "he also did Mundus Verg. That's not verbal-indefinite."

The Precentor glanced down at the notes on the table in front of him. "You'll note," he said, "that our observer was of the opinion that a variant was used, not Mundus Vergens itself. The variants, of which Licinianus lists twenty-six, include some forms which have been recorded as indefinite. The same would seem to apply to Choris Anthropou."

"Quite," said the very old man at the end, whose name he could never remember. "Strachylides' eight variants, three of which have been recorded as occurring spontaneously." *So there*, he thought, as Poteidanius shrugged ungraciously. "I remember a case back in 'Fifty-Six. Chap was a striker in a blacksmith's shop, didn't know a single word of Parol. But he could do five variants of Choris in the vernacular."

"Our observer," the Precentor said, "specifically asked if there was an aureola, and the witness was quite adamant."

"The third variant," Gennasius said. "Suggests an untrained of more than usual capacity, or else a man with a really deep-seated grudge. I still don't see why you had to drag us all out here. Surely your department can deal with this sort of thing without a full enclave."

He took a deep breath, but it didn't help. "If you'd care to look at paragraph four of the report," he said, trying to keep his voice level and reasonably pleasant, "you'll see that—"

"Oh, *that*." Gennasius was shaking his head in that singularly irritating way. "Another suspected instance of Lorica. If I had half an angel for every time some graduate observer's thought he's found an untrained who's cracked Lorica—"

"I have interviewed the observer myself," the Precentor said—trying to do gravitas, but it just came out pompous. "He is an intelligent young man with considerable field experience," he went on, "not the kind to imagine the impossible or to jump to far-fetched conclusions on the basis of inadequate evidence. Gentlemen, I would ask you to put aside your quite reasonable scepticism for one moment and simply look at the evidence with an open mind. If this really is Lorica—"

"It doesn't exist." Gennasius snapped out the words with a degree of passion the Precentor wouldn't have believed him capable of. "It's a legend. A fairy tale. There are some things that simply aren't possible. Lorica's one of them."

There was a short, rather painful silence. Raw emotion, like raw chicken, upset elderly gentlemen of regular habits. Then the Preceptor said gently, "Ninety-nine out of a hundred human beings would say exactly the same thing about *magic*." He allowed himself to dwell on the word, because Gennasius hated it so. "And of course, they would be right. There is no such thing as magic. Instead, there is a branch of natural philosophy of which we are adepts and the rest of the world is blissfully ignorant. Gentlemen, think about it, please. It may well not be Lorica. But if it is, if there's the slightest chance it could be, we have to do something about it. *Now*."

"I'm sorry," the young man said. "I've never heard of it."

The Precentor smiled. "Of course you haven't." He half-filled two of his notoriously small glasses with wine and handed one to the young man, who took it as if the stem was red-hot. "For one thing, it doesn't exist."

The young man looked at him unhappily. "Ah," he said.

"At least," the Precentor went on, "we believe it doesn't exist. We hope like hell it doesn't exist. If it does—" He produced a synthetic shudder of horror that actually became a real one.

The young man put his glass down carefully on the table. "Is it some kind of weapon?"

The Precentor couldn't help smiling. "Quite the reverse," he said. "That's the whole point. Lorica's completely harmless, you might say. It's a defence."

"Ah."

"A total defence." The Preceptor paused and watched. He'd chosen young Framea for his intelligence and perceptiveness. This could be a test for him.

He passed. "A total defence," he said. "Against everything? All known forms?"

The Preceptor nodded slowly. "All known forms. And physical weapons too. And fire, water, death by suffocation and falling from a great height. Possibly some diseases too, we don't know."

"That would be—" Framea frowned, and the Preceptor imagined a great swelling cloud of implications filling the young man's mind. He didn't envy him that. "That could be bad," he said.

"Extremely. An individual we couldn't harm or kill; therefore outside our control. Even if he was a mediocre adept with limited power, knowledge of the basic offensive forms together with absolute invulnerability, it doesn't bear thinking about. Even if his intentions were benign to begin with, the mere possession of such power would inevitably turn him into a monster. Hence," he added gently, "our concern."

"But I still don't quite—" Framea looked at him, reminding him vaguely of a sheep. "If it doesn't exist—"

"Ah." The Preceptor held up a hand. "That's the question, isn't it? All we know is that it *could* exist. Blemmyes, a hundred and seventy years ago, proved that it could exist; his reasoning and his mathematics have been rigorously examined and found to be perfect. There is a potential for such a form. Of course, nobody has yet been able to produce it—"

"You mean people have tried?"

The Preceptor nodded slowly. "Unofficially, you might say, but yes. Well, you can imagine, the temptation would be irresistible. Some of the finest minds—But, thankfully, none of them succeeded. Several of them, indeed, wrote papers outlining their researches, basically arguing that if they couldn't do it, nobody could—flawed logic, you'll agree, but when you're dealing with men of such exceptional vanity—"

"I think I see," Framea interrupted. "Trained adepts have tried, using proper scientific method, and they've all failed. But an untrained—"

"Exactly." The Preceptor was relieved; he'd been right about the boy after all. "An untrained might well succeed where an adept would fail, because the untrained often possess a degree of

intuitive power that tends to atrophy during the course of formal education. An untrained might be able to do it, simply because he doesn't know it's impossible."

Framea nodded eagerly. "And an untrained, by definition—"

"Quite. Unstable, probably mentally disturbed by the power inside him which he doesn't understand or know how to control; if not already malignant by nature, he would rapidly become so. And with Lorica—Really, it doesn't bear thinking about."

There was a long pause. Then Framea said, "And you want *me* to—"

Framea hadn't been cold for as long as he could remember. It was always warm in the Studium; warm, unpleasantly warm or downright hot, depending on who'd been nagging the Magister ad Necessariis most recently. Old men feel the cold, and the adepts of the Studium didn't have to worry about the cost of fuel.

He pulled his coat up round his ears and quickened his pace. He hadn't been out in the dark for a long time, either. It didn't frighten him ("an adept of the Studium fears nothing, because he hs nothing to fear"; first term, first day, first lecture) but it made him feel uncomfortable. As did the task that lay ahead of him.

*You will, of course, have to seduce a woman—*

Well, fine. And the rest of the day's your own. He winced as he recalled his reaction.

("I see," he'd said, after a moment of complete silence. "I don't know how."

"Oh, it's quite straightforward. So I'm told."

"Is there, um, a book I could—?"

"Several.")

More than several, in fact; from Flaminian's *Art of Seduction*, three hundred years old, eight thousand lines of impeccable hexametric verse, to Bonosius Brunellus' *On the Seduction of Women*, three hundred pages with notes and appendices, entirely drawn from the works of earlier authors. The librarian had given him a not-you-as-well look when he'd asked for them, and they'd been no help at all. He'd asked Porphyrius, the only adept in the

Studium who might possibly have had first-hand experience of such things, but he'd just laughed like a drain and walked away.

Lorica, he reminded himself.

The inn was, in fact, just another farmhouse, where the farmer's wife sold beer and cider in her kitchen, and you could pay a half-turner and sleep in the hayloft; not the sort of inn where you could rely on finding a prostitute at any hour of the day or night. In fact, he doubted very much whether they had prostitutes out here in the sticks. Probably, it was one of those areas of activity like brewing or laundry; you only got specialist professionals in the towns. Still, it couldn't hurt to ask.

"You what?" the woman demanded.

He repeated the question. It was unambiguous and politely phrased. The woman scowled at him and walked away.

He took his mug of beer, which he had no intention of drinking, and sat down in a corner of the room. Everybody had turned to look at him when he came in, and again when he asked the question, but they'd lost interest. He stretched out his legs under the table, closed his eyes and tried to think.

("You will, of course, have to seduce a woman," the Preceptor had said. "To use as a source."

The second statement was infinitely more shocking than the first. "That's illegal," he said.

"Yes, well." The Preceptor had frowned at him. "I hereby authorise you to use all means necessary. I suppose you'll want that in writing."

"Yes, please. Also," he'd added, "I don't know how.")

He reached into his pocket and took out the book. It was only just light enough for reading, even with Bia Kai Kratos to enhance his eyesight. He wondered if anybody had ever read a book in this room before and decided no, almost certainly not. He tried to concentrate on the analysis of the necessary forms, which were difficult, abstruse and in some cases downright bizarre; not all that different from the exercises he'd read about in Flaminian and Brunellus, come to that. The thought that he

was going to have to perform both the forms and the other stuff *simultaneously* made him feel quite ill.

"Excuse me."

He looked up and saw a woman. At first he guessed she was about thirty-five, but she seemed to get younger as he looked at her. She was very pale, almost milk white, with mouse-coloured hair that seemed to drip off her head, like a leak in the roof. He wondered what she wanted.

"You were asking," she said. "About—"

Oh, he thought. "Yes, that's right."

She looked at him with a combination of hope and distaste. The latter he felt he deserved. "How much?" she said.

"I don't know," he replied. "What do you think?"

He didn't need to use Fortis Adiuvat to know what was going on in her mind. Think of a number and double it. "A thaler," she said.

Almost certainly way over the odds, but the Studium was paying. "Sure," he said quickly. "Now, or—?"

"Now," she said.

He reached in his coat pocket. The cellarer had issued him with money, along with spare clothes, stout walking boots and a waterproof hood. It had been so long since he'd had any dealings with the stuff that he didn't recognise the coins. But he seemed to recall that thalers were big silver things, and all he'd been given was small gold ones. "Here," he said, pressing a coin into her hand. It felt warm, soft, slightly clammy. "That's fine."

She stared at the coin and said nothing. "Now?" he said. She nodded.

Outside, it was raining hard. It wasn't far across the yard to the barn, but far enough for them both to get soaking wet. He couldn't face that, not on top of everything else, so he executed Scutum in coelis under his breath and hoped she wouldn't notice. As they climbed the ladder to the hayloft, something scuttled. He hoped she wasn't one of those people who had an irrational fear of mice, like he did.

"Use a general Laetitia," the Preceptor had said. It was the only specific piece of advice he'd given him. He tried it; the form to fill another person with unspeakable joy. He hadn't done it very often.

Either it worked, or he had a latent and unexpected talent for what Brunellus insisted on calling the subtleties of the bedchamber. His own impression of the activities involved was decidedly ambiguous. Predominant was the stress involved in doing two demanding and unfamiliar things at the same time. There was anxiety (though he calmed down a bit when he realised that the yelling and whimpering didn't mean she was in excruciating pain; bizarrely, the opposite). Guilt; partly because what he was doing was illegal—he had the Preceptor's written exemption, but it was still a crime; partly because he knew what would happen to the poor girl, who'd never done him any harm. Other than that, it was really just a blend of several different strains of acute embarrassment. The thought that people did that sort of thing for *fun* was simply bewildering.

In the morning he went to the village where it had happened. Sixteen dead, according to the report; four still comatose with shock and fear. He stopped at the forge and asked for directions.

The smith looked at him. "You're not from—"

"No," he said. "I'm from the city. I represent the Studium. It's about the incident."

It was the word they used when they had to talk to the public. He hated saying it; incident. Only stupid people used words like that.

The smith didn't say anything. He lifted his hand and pointed up the street. Framea followed the line, and saw a larger than average building at the end, white, with a sun-in-glory painted over the door. Which he could have found perfectly well for himself, had he bothered to look, and then the whole village wouldn't have known he was here.

Fortunately, the Brother was at home when he knocked on the door. A short man, with a round face, quite young but thin on top, tiny hands like a girl. According to the report, this little fat man had walked out of his house into the street after the perpertrator had killed sixteen people, and had tried to *arrest* him—And the perpetrator had turned and walked away.

"My name is Framea," he said. "I'm from the Studium."

The Brother stared at him for a moment, then stood aside to let him in through the door. He had to duck to keep from banging his head.

"I told the other man—"

"Yes, I've read the report," Framea cut him off. "But I need to confirm a few details. May I sit down?"

The Brother nodded weakly, as though Death had stopped by to borrow a cup of flour. "I told him everything I saw," he said. "I don't think there was anything—"

Framea got a smile from somewhere. "I'm sure that's right," he said. "But you know how it is. Important facts can get mangled in transmission. And the man who interviewed you was a general field officer, not a Fellow. He may have misunderstood, or failed to grasp the full significance of a vital detail. I'm sure you understand."

He went over it all again. Thrasea the miller had shot the perpetrator in the back with a crossbow, at close range, ten paces, but the arrow—No, he hadn't simply missed, you couldn't miss at that range. Well, you could, but not Thrasea, he'd won the spoon at shoot-the-popinjay the year before last, he was a good shot. And besides, the arrow had just *stopped*—

Technical details? For the report. Well, it was a hunting bow, you needed a windlass to draw it, you couldn't just span it with your hands. Well, it's possible, the man could have been wearing something under his coat, a mailshirt or a brigandine; but at that range the arrow would most likely have gone straight through, one of those things'll shoot clean through an oak door at point-blank range. Besides, if the man had been shot, even

if he was wearing armour and it turned the arrow, he'd have moved; jerked like he'd been kicked by a horse, at that distance. And the arrowshaft would've splintered, or at the very least the tip would've snapped off or gotten bent. No; he'd picked up the arrow himself later that day, and it was good as new.

"And then he turned round and—"

"Yes, thank you," Framea said quickly. "That part of the account isn't in issue." He swallowed discreetly and went on; "Did you see any marks on the man? Scratches, bruises, anything like that?"

No, there wasn't a mark on him anywhere that the Brother could see, not that he'd expected to, since nobody had gotten closer to him than Thraso did. Cuts and scratches from flying debris, from when he made the houses fall down; no, nothing like that. There was stuff flying in the air, bits of tile and rafter, great slabs of brick and mortar, but none of them hit the man. Yes, he was right up close. No, he didn't make any warding-off gestures or anything like that. Too busy killing people. Didn't really seem interested in the effects of what he was doing, if Framea got his drift.

"And you're absolutely sure you'd never seen this man before."

"Quite sure. And the same goes for everybody else in the village. A complete stranger."

Framea nodded. "Don't suppose you get many of those."

"Carters," the Brother said, "pedlars occasionally, though they never come back. People here aren't very well off, you see. We don't tend to buy anything from outside."

"Can you think of anybody who'd have a grudge against the people here?" Framea asked. "Any feuds, or anything like that?"

The Brother looked blank, like he hadn't heard the word before.

"Inheritance disputes? Scandals? Anybody run off with someone else's wife lately?"

The Brother assured him that things like that simply didn't happen there. Framea thought of the girl, the previous night. She was probably a part-timer, like the smith and the wheelwright

and the man who made coffins. Simply not enough business to justify going full time.

"There was one thing," the Brother said, as Framea stooped under the lintel on his way out. "But I'm sure it was just me imagining things."

"Well?"

"I don't know." The Brother pulled a sad, indecisive face. "When I was looking at him, in the street, it's like he was sort of hard to see; you know, when you're looking at someone with the sun behind them? And at the time, I guess I must've thought that's what it was, only it didn't register, if you know what I mean."

"You noticed it without realising."

The Brother nodded. "But then later, thinking about it, I realised it couldn't have been that, because it was mid-morning, and I was looking *down* the street at him, I mean looking from my end, which is due east. So the sun was behind me, not him."

Framea blinked. Yes, he thought, it was just you imagining things. Or, just possibly, a really powerful Ignis in favellum; except why would anybody enchant himself to glow bright blue in broad daylight?

"Thank you," he said to the Brother. "You've been most helpful."

*Your only viable approach will be to provoke him into attacking you.*

Framea stopped at the crack in the wall where the fresh-water-spring trickled through. He'd seen women standing here, filling their jugs and bowls painfully slowly. It was the only clean water in the village. He knelt down and cupped his hands, then drank. It tasted of iron, and something nasty he couldn't quite place.

If it was such a poor village, how come Thrasea the miller could afford a good hunting bow? He shook his head. Urban thinking. He'd probably built it himself; carved the stock, traded flour with the smith for the steel bow. He could almost picture

him in his mind—patiently, an hour each evening in the barn, by the light of a bulrush taper soaked in mutton-fat. People in the villages often used sharp flints for planing wood, because steel tools were luxuries. Or you might borrow a plane from the wheelwright, if he owed you a favour—

Motive. What motive would an untrained need? He tried to imagine what it must be like, to carry the gift inside you and not know what it was. You'd probably believe you were mad, because you knew they things you were able to do were impossible (but you'd seen them happen, but they were impossible, but you'd seen them). You wouldn't dare tell anyone else. But there'd be the times when you got angry (you'd have a shorter temper than most people, because of the stress you'd be under all the time) and you found you'd done something without realising. Something bad, inevitably. Your victim would tell people, in whispers; they wouldn't quite believe it, but they wouldn't quite disbelieve it either. You'd get a reputation. People would be nervous around you. Not much chance of a job, if you needed one, not much chance of help from your neighbours if something went wrong. It'd be a miracle if an untrained reached adulthood without being a complete mess.

He filled another handful and drank it. The taste was stronger, if anything. Iron and—

He stood up. Provoke a fight, the Precentor had said. Well, indeed. Easy peasy.

(But an untrained would *know*, wouldn't he? He'd feel the presence of another gift, he'd be drawn here. Would he dare come back to the village, where he'd be instantly recognised? It would all depend on exactly what he could do. Besides Lorica, of course. But untrained were always an unknown quantity. There were cases on record of untrained who could do seventh-degree translocations, but not a simple light or heat form. There was no way of knowing. Damn.)

He spent the rest of the day slouching round the village, trying to be conspicuous, something he'd spent his life avoiding. The idea was that news spreads like wildfire in small, remote rural communities, and he wanted everybody for miles around to know that there was a man from the Studium in the village, asking questions about the massacre. But the village chose that day to be empty, practically deserted; if anybody saw him, he didn't see them. It did cross his mind that it was deserted precisely because he was there. As darkness closed in, he began to feel rather desperate; he really didn't want to have to stay here any longer than was absolutely necessary. He went back to the spring-mouth, scrambled up onto a cart that someone and left there for some reason, and looked all around. Nobody in sight. Then he took a deep breath and shouted; "I AM FRAMEA OF THE STUDIUM! SURRENDER OR FIGHT ME TO THE DEATH!" Then he got down, feeling more ridiculous than he'd ever felt in his whole life.

He hadn't actually said anything about that night, but she was there waiting for him when he got back to the inn; standing alone, in the corner of the room. The five or six men sitting drinking acted as though she was invisible. Strictly speaking, it wasn't necessary; once was usually reckoned to be sufficient to form the connection. She looked up at him. Presumably, it was just about the money.

He nodded, and she left the room; as she did so, the men stopped talking, and there was dead silence for a while, as though they were at a religious service, or remembering the war dead on Victory Day. He'd thought about sitting down for a while and drinking a mug of the disgusting beer, but he decided against it. A man could catch his death of cold from a silence like that.

The subtleties of the hayloft, he thought, as he crossed the yard. The ground was still wet from yesterday's rain, and his muddy foot slipped on the bottom rung of the ladder. She was

waiting for him, lying on her back, fully clothed. She looked as though she was waiting for the attentions of a surgeon, not a lover. Never again, he promised himself.

This time, he cast a number of specific Laetitias as well as a general one. It was easier now that he knew what a woman's reproductive organs actually looked like (he'd seen drawings in a book, of course, but you couldn't get a real idea from a drawing. Besides, the illustrations in Coelius' *Anatomy* looked more like a sketch-map of a battlefield than anything to do with the human body). The results were quite embarrassingly effective, and he was worried the people in the inn might hear, and assume the poor woman was being murdered.

She fell asleep quite quickly afterwards. He lay on his back with his eyes closed, wishing more than anything that he was back in his warm chambers at the Studium, where he could wash properly and be alone. She snored. He realised he didn't know her name; though, to be fair, there was no compelling evidence to suggest she even had one.

Also, he wanted to wake her up and apologise. But of course she was better off not knowing.

If he'd been asleep, he was woken up by a soft white light filling the hayloft. He opened his eyes. It was as bright as day, lighter than lamplight, even the glare of a thousand candles in the Great Hall of the Studium at the Commemoration feast.

The light came from a man. He was standing at the entrance to the hayloft, where a beam ran across, separating the loft from the rest of the barn; he guessed it was used as the fulcrum for a rope, for hoisting up heavy weights. The man was leaning on his folded arms against the bar. It was impossible to make out his face, blindingly backlit. He was tall and slightly built.

"Hello," he said.

Framea sat up. "Hello."

"You wanted to see me."

Him. Framea felt terrified, for a moment or so. Then the fear stabilised; it didn't go away, but it settled down. It was something he could draw on. Maybe that's what courage is, he speculated later.

"You're Framea, right? The wizard."

Framea was pleased he'd said that. It triggered an automatic, well-practiced reponse. "We aren't wizards," he heard himself say. "There's no such thing. I'm a student of natural philosophy. A scientist."

"What's the difference?"

The man, he noticed, spoke with no accent; none at all. Also, his voice was strangely familiar. That's because it's inside my head, Framea realised. And the man isn't really there, this is a third-level translocation. But he wasn't sure about that. The light, for one thing.

"Are you here in this room?" he asked.

The man laughed. "You know," he said, "that's a bloody good question. I'm not sure, to be honest with you. Like, I can feel this wooden beam I'm resting on. But I definitely didn't leave the—where I'm staying. So I must still be there, mustn't I? Or can I be in two places at once?"

A *ninth*-level translocation. Under other circumstances, Framea would be on his knees, begging to be let in on the secret of how you did that. "Technically, no," he replied, his lecturer's voice, because it made him feel in control. Like hell he was; but the man didn't need to know that. "But there's a form we call Stans in duobus partibus which—theoretically—allows a person to be in two different places simultaneously. That's to say, his physical body. His mind—"

"Yes?" Eager.

"Opinions differ," Framea said. "Some maintain that the mind is present in both bodies. Others hold that it exists in another House entirely, and is therefore present in neither body."

"House," the man repeated. "You've lost me."

Framea shivered. "No doubt," he replied. "You would have to have studied for two years at the Studium to be in a position to understand the concept."

"That's what I wanted to see you about," the man said. "No, stay exactly where you are, or I'll kill her."

*Her,* Framea noted. "I'm sorry," he said. "A touch of cramp. Let me sit up so we can talk in a civilized manner."

"No." Maybe just a touch of apprehension in the voice, leading to a feather of hostility? "You can stay right there, or I'll burst her head. You know I can do it."

"I can, of course, protect her," Framea lied. "And I don't think we have anything to discuss. I have to inform you that you are under arrest."

The man laughed, just as if Framea had told the funniest joke ever. "Sure," he said. "I'll try and bear that in mind. Now, tell me about this Studium place of yours."

She was still fast asleep, breathing slow and deep. He could smell her spit where it had dried around his mouth. "I don't see that it's anything to do with you," he said.

"Come off it. You know I'm one of you lot. I want to come and be educated properly. That's what you're there for, isn't it?"

Framea winced. "Out of the question," he said. "For one thing, you're much too old. More to the point, you've committed a number of brutal murders. You should be aware that I'm authorised to use—"

"No, that's not right." A statement, not a question, or even an objection. "I've never done your lot any harm. Our lot," he amended. "I'm just like you. I'm not like them at all."

"They were human beings," Framea said. "You killed them. That is not acceptable."

"But we're not human, are we?" The man was explaining to him, as if to a small child. "We're better. I mean, wizards, we can do anything we like. That's the whole point, isn't it?"

Framea didn't answer. Far too much conversation already; he knew it was discouraged, since any interaction with a malignant

could only serve to weaken one's position. The trouble was, he was on the defensive. Lorica…

"Well?"

"You will surrender now," Framea said, "or I shall have no option but to use force."

"Screw you, then," the man said, and he lashed out. It was Mundus Vergens in a raw, inelegant variant, but backed up with enormous power. Framea barely held it with Scutum and a third-level translocation. Fortunately the man had fogotten about his threat to kill the girl, or else he'd never meant it. Framea replied tentatively with Hasta maiestatis, more as a test of the man's defences than anything else. The form stopped dead and washed back at him; he got out of the way of the backlash just in time with a fourth-level dissociation into the third House.

Lorica, he thought, and then; why *me*?

"Are you still there?" he heard the man ask. "Hello?"

Framea paused to consider the tactical options. If, as he suspected, the man was present only by way of a ninth-level translocation, the safest course would be to break the form and force him back into his other body, wherever the hell that was. He could manage that, he was fairly sure; but it would mean draining the source, because of the backlash, and how would he ever find him again? He wasn't here to protect himself, he was here to bring the malignant in, or kill him. In which case—

Oh well, he thought.

He concentrated all his mind on the sleeping girl. He imagined shoving his hand down her throat, grabbing her heart and ripping it out. On the count of three, he told himself; one, two, three.

He pulled, felt all of her strength flow into him, and immediately struck out with Fulmine. He put everything into it, all of her and all of him. It soaked into Lorica like water into sand, not even any backlash.

"Did you just do something?" the man asked curiously.

Framea felt empty. He had no strength left. By any normal standards he'd completely overdone the Fulmine—if he'd missed the target and overshot, they'd have to send to the City for cartographers to redraw all the maps—and the man was asking, did you just do something? It wasn't possible. It couldn't be happening. Lorica; which didn't exist.

The girl grunted in her sleep and turned over.

"This is pointless," the man said. "You can't hurt me, I can't hurt you, the hell with it. Don't come after me any more, or I'll kill the village."

The light suddenly went out.

He spent the rest of the night crouched over the girl's body, watching her breathe.

She woke up just after dawn. As soon as she opened her eyes, he asked her, "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "Why? What's the matter?"

"Nothing." He hesitated. "Did you have nightmares?"

She frowned. "I think so. But I always forget my dreams. Why?"

He wanted to say, because I very nearly killed you, and I want to know if you remember any of it, because if you do, I'll have to erase your mind. He wanted to explain, at the very least. Dear God, he wanted to *apologise*. But he knew that would be to make him feel better. It would be self-indulgence, and they'd warned him about that on his second day as a student.

"Here," he said, and gave her two of the gold coins. She stared at them, and then at him. She was terrified.

"What happened?"

"Nothing," he said. "Well, you know. But that's all."

She went away, to wherever it was she went to. He pulled his clothes on, climbed down from the loft, crossed the yard and tried to wash in the rain-barrel. He felt disgusting (but that was probably just more self-indulgence; weren't there savages who washed by rolling in mud, then waiting till it caked dry and peeling it off, leaving their skins clean? Is that me, he wondered, and decided not to pursue that line of thought.) Then he crossed the yard and went into the kitchen, where the farmer's wife served him salted porridge and green beer with a face you could have sharpened knives on.

I could go home, he thought. I've failed, clearly this untrained is far too strong for me. If I stay here, the most likely outcome is that I'll be killed, the untrained will slaughter the innocent people here, and then they'll have to send someone else to sort out the mess. Somebody competent. Well, they might as well do that now. Out of my league. There'll be a certain amount of humiliation, and it won't do my career a lot of good, but at least I won't be dead. And they'll understand. After all, it really is Lorica. In fact, I'll probably get a mention in a book, as the man who proved Lorica existed.

And what about the girl, he asked himself, but of course he knew the answer to that. The reason why using another human being as a source was illegal was because of the risk of damaging them. In eighty-six cases out of a hundred, there was significant harm to the mind, the memory or both. In seventy-four cases studied by Sthenelaus and Arcadianus for their report to the Ninety-First Ecumenical, forty-one ex-sources killed themselves within five years of having been used. A further twelve died insane. Only eight were found to have emerged from the experience unscathed, and six of them were found to have latent abilities, which enabled them to repair the damage to some extent. There were further, worse effects when the source was female, as was usually the case, given that sexual intercourse was the simplest and most reliable means of forming the connection. Use of sources had been forbidden by the Sixty-Third Ecumenical, and

the prohibition had subsequently been restated by the Seventy-Ninth and the Ninety-First, and by a series of orders in enclave; the discretion to ignore the prohibition, vested in an officer of Precentor rank or above, had only been granted by the Hundred and Seventh as an emergency measure during the Pacatian crisis. The intention had been to repeal the discretion as soon as the crisis was over, but presumably the repeal was still tied up in committee somewhere.

I'm not a hero, he told himself. None of us are, we're natural philosophers. Scientists. We shouldn't have to do this sort of thing, except there's nobody else to do it.

He went back to the hayloft, took his paper and portable inkwell out of his coat pocket, and wrote a report for the Precentor. As soon as the ink was dry, he burnt it, sending it into the fifth House. Thanks to intercameral distortion, the reply arrived a few minutes later.

*Proceed as you think fit. You have full discretion. This matter must be resolved before you leave. Use any means necessary. Regret we cannot send further operatives at this time.*

My mistake, he thought. I can't go home after all.

So he spent the day hanging around the village again, not doing anything much, pretending not to notice the overtly hostile stares of the villagers, the few of them who ventured into the street while he was there. He couldn't help being just a little angry at the injustice of it. Fairly soon, he assumed, he'd be giving his life for these people, and here they were scowling at him.

Giving, wasting; there'd be no point, since the untrained had Lorica and therefore couldn't be beaten.

The point struck him while he was sitting on the front step of some house, after a failed attempt to buy food. Such was the feeling against him that even a whole gold coin hadn't been enough to secure a loaf of bread. He'd been reduced to conjuring

half-ripe apples off a tree in a walled orchard, when nobody was looking. As he bit into an apple and pulled a face, he remembered something the malignant had said.

*You can't hurt me, I can't hurt you, the hell with it.*

Factually inaccurate; but the malignant believed it—He let the apple fall from his hand, too preoccupied to maintain his grip on it. The untrained malignant believed that, if he could do Lorica, so could everyone else; he assumed it was perfectly normal, part of every adept's arsenal.

And why not? Perfectly reasonable assumption to make, in the circumstances. Something so fundamentally, incomparably useful—naturally, you'd think that it was basic stuff, the kind of thing you were taught at the same time as joined-up writing and the five-times table.

In which case—

IT APPEARED TO have worked the last time, so he did it again.

"I AM FRAMEA OF THE STUDIUM!" he roared, to an audience of three dogs, two small boys and an old woman who took absolutely no notice. "SURRENDER OR FIGHT ME! TONIGHT!" Then he scrambled down off the cart, turning his ankle over in the process, and hobbled back to the inn.

The farmer's wife was in the kitchen, cutting up pork for sausages. "What's that stuff all the people round here drink?" he asked.

She looked at him. "Beer," she said.

"Is it fit for human consumption?"

"Well, we drink it."

"That's not an answer. Never mind, the hell with it. Get me some. Lots."

You got used to it, after a while. At the Studium, wine was drunk four times a year (Commemoration, Ascension, Long Commons and the Election Dinner); two small glasses of exquisite

ruby-red vintage wine from the best cellar in the City. Framea had never liked the stuff. He thought it tasted of vinegar and dust. The beer tasted of decay and the death of small rodents, but after a while it did things to his perception of the passage of time that no form had yet been able to accomplish. He slept through the afternoon and woke up in his chair in the kitchen just as it was starting to get dark. He had a headache, which he quickly disposed of with Salus cortis. He didn't feel hungry, even though he hadn't eaten all day.

He hauled himself to his feet, wincing as his turned-over ankle protested under his weight. An injury like that would be a death sentence if he'd been facing a conventional battle, with swords or fists. He limped across the yard, and the farm workers stared at him as he passed them. There were two young men in the barn, cutting hay in the loft with a big knife-blade, like a saw.

"Get out," he said. They left quickly.

He lay down on the hay, his hands linked behind his head. I do this for the people, he told himself. I do this so that there won't be another massacre like the last one. Then, because he didn't want what could well be his last meditation to be spoiled by such a flagrant lie, he amended it to; *we* do this for the people, for the reason stated. *I* do this because I was told to. I do this because if I refused a direct order from my superior, I'd be demoted from the Studium to a teaching post in the provinces. Hell of a reason for killing and dying.

I do this because of Lorica. Simple as that.

He considered the paradox of Lorica; the ultimate, intolerable weapon that hurt nobody, the absolute defence that could save the life of every adept who ever walked or strayed into harm's way. He couldn't help smiling at the absurdity of it. Half the cities in the Confederation forbade their citizens to own weapons; it never seemed to make any difference to the murder rate, but you could see a sort of logic to it. But no city anywhere banned the ownership of *armour*. Most of

the scholars in the Studium spent at least some of their time developing weapon-grade forms, new ways of killing, wounding, forms directly or indirectly ancillary to such activities—all to be used only against the enemies of order and stability, of course, except that somehow the enemy always found out about them, which was why the Studium needed to develop even better weapons. Lorica, on the other hand, was pure anathema. The Studium didn't want to find Lorica and then try and keep it to itself; it was realistic enough to know that that wouldn't be possible. Most of all, they wanted it not to exist. If it did exist, they wanted it destroyed, without trace. Why? Because all government, all authority, no matter how civilised, enlightened, liberal, well-intentioned, ultimately depends on the use of force. If a man exists who is immune to force, even if he's the most blameless anchorite living on top of a column in the middle of the desert, he is beyond government, beyond authority, and cannot be controlled; and that would be intolerable. Imagine a rebel who stood in front of the entire army, invulnerable, untouchable, gently forgiving each spear-cast and arrow-shot while preaching his doctrine of fundamental change. It would mean the end of the world.

And *I*, he thought, am here because of Lorica because I'm expendable. Let's not lose sight of that along the way.

SHE CAME WHEN it was dark outside. He'd hoped she wouldn't, but he couldn't help feeling a rush of joy when she climbed up the ladder and sat down beside him. It was too dark to see, so he had no way of knowing what, if any, signs of damage she was showing. He put his hand in his pocket, closed his fingers around all the remaining coins, and held it out to her.

"I don't want any more money," she said.

"I don't care what you want," he replied. "Take it, lie down and go to sleep."

She didn't move; didn't reach out her hand for the coins. He grabbed her left arm, prised the fingers apart and tipped the coins into it. "Please," he said. "It'll make me feel better."

(It didn't, though. It wasn't his money.)

She withdrew her hand, and he had no way of knowing if she pocketed the coins or dropped them into the hay. "You just want me to go to sleep," she said.

"Yes."

He felt her lie down, making a slight disturbance in the hay. He applied a light Suavi dormiente, and soon her breathing became slow and regular. He closed his eyes and went through the plan, for the hundredth time. The more he thought about it, the more problems, defects, disasters waiting to happen leapt out at him. It wasn't going to work, and any moment now the untrained would be here, and he'd have to fight—

He came in light, as before; it occurred to wonder how he did that, but of course he couldn't very well ask. He appeared where he'd been the first time, leaning against the cross-rafter, his face just as impossible to make out.

"I thought we'd been through all this," he said. "There's no point, is there?"

This time, though, his voice was different; accented (a City voice, but overlaid with the local flat vowels and ground-off consonants; so maybe he'd been one of the children evacuated in the War, who hadn't gone back again afterwards); more or less educated, so at least he'd been to school, even if it was just a few terms with a Brother. It wasn't much, but at least he knew something about him now. And he was *here*; not a ninth-level translocation, but an appearance in person, unified body and whole mind together in this place. *Thank you*, he thought.

"On the contrary," he replied. "We have to settle this."

"Why?"

That was a really good question, and he had no answer. "You might be able to hide," he said, "for a little while. But if you ever use your power again, we'll be able to trace you. We can kill you

in your sleep if you'd rather. But I assumed you'd prefer to do the honourable thing."

The untrained laughed. "Can't say I'm bothered one way or the other," he said. "Sure, I'd like to join up, be a proper wizard, but you said I can't, so that's that. Don't see why I should want to play by your rules, in that case."

Framea could smell something. It took him back thirty years, to before he came to the City and joined the Studium; to when he'd lived with his mother in a small house, more of a shack, out back of the tannery. He could smell brains, which the tanners used to cure hides.

"You work in a tannery," he said.

"If you're reading my mind you're not very good at it," the man replied. "Six months since I left there. Five months and twenty-seven days since it burned down," he added. "Anyway, what's that got to do with anything?"

"Fight me," Framea said. "If you dare."

"If I think I'm hard enough, you mean?" The man laughed. "That's what they used to say at that place. Regretted it, later. But there's no point. We can't hurt each other. You know that."

Framea took a deep breath. "The defence you're referring to is called Lorica," he said.

"Fascinating."

"Take it down," Framea said. "I'll do the same. Then we can fight and really mean it. It's the way we do it."

He didn't dare breathe until the man replied, "Is that right?"

"Yes. Think about it. How do you suppose anything ever gets sorted out?"

Another pause. Then the man said, "How'll I know you've taken yours down?"

Framea muttered Ignis ex favellis, making his skin glow blue. "I've lit mine up, same as yours. When the lights go out, we'll both know the other one's taken down Lorica. Then we can put an end to this, once and for all." He waited a heartbeat, then

added, "I'm taking mine down now. Don't disappoint me. I'm paying you a compliment."

He ended Ignis. Another heartbeat, and the white glow at the far end of the loft went out. With his mind's arm, he reached down into the girl's heart and took everything, at the same time as he ripped every last scrap out of himself, and launched it all in Ruans in defectum.

The form went through. The smallest fraction of time that he could perceive passed, and no counterstroke came. No backlash. With the last shreds of his strength, he moved into the second House.

As usual, it was light and cool there. Today it was a meadow, with a river in the distance, sheep in the pasture on the far bank. He looked round and saw the man, lying on his face, burned practically to charcoal. He ran across, lifted his head by his charred, crumbling hair and whispered in his ear, "Can you hear me?"

The reply was inside his own head. *Yes*.

"This is the second House," he said. "This is another place, not the place where you used to live. In that place, your body has been disintegrated. I used Ruans. There's nothing left for anyone to bury. You're dead."

*I understand*.

"I'm holding you here by Ensis spiritus. The second House is outside time, but it takes a huge amount of effort just to be here. In a moment I'll have to let you go, and then you'll just disappear, drain away. It won't hurt. Do you understand?"

*Yes*.

"Show me Lorica."

*But you know—*

"No. I don't know Lorica. Nobody does." He closed his eyes for a moment. "Nobody living. Show it to me. You're the only one who ever found it. Show it to me now."

The body was charred embers, it was ash, it was falling apart. Any moment now, the thing inside it would leak out into the air

and be gone for good. Framea used Virtus et clementia, which was illegal, but who the hell would ever know?

He saw Lorica.

He wanted to laugh. It was absurdly simple, though it would take considerable strength of mind and talent; still, easier and more straightforward than some forms he'd learnt before his voice broke. It was nothing more than a wide dispersal through at least twenty different Houses, combined with a third-level dislocation. The weapon (or the form, or the collapsing wall or the falling tree) killed you in one House, or twelve, or nineteen; but there you were, safe and sound, also in the twentieth House, and a fraction of a second later, back you came, as though nothing had happened. All there was to it. Less skill and technique required than conjuring up a bunch of flowers.

The voice sighed in his head. A gentle breeze blew away the last of the ash. Framea felt the bitter cold that meant he'd stayed out too long and needed to get back. He slipped out of the second House just in time, and as soon as he got back he passed out.

SOMEONE WAS SHAKING him. He opened his eyes and grunted,

"Are you all right?" The girl was leaning over him, looking worried. "You wouldn't wake up. I was afraid something had happened."

You could say that, he thought. Something did happen. "I'm fine," he said. "I had a bit too much to drink earlier, that's all. I'm going now," he added. "Thanks for everything."

He stood up. His ankle still hurt, and for some reason he couldn't be bothered to fix it with Salus or any of the other simple curative forms.

"Are you a wizard?" she asked.

He turned to face her. She looked all right, as far as he could tell, but in many cases there was a delay before the first symptoms manifested. "Me? God, no. Whatever gave you that idea?"

He walked away before she could say anything else.

"And was it," the Precentor said delicately, "the problem we discussed?"

Framea looked straight at him, as if taking aim. "No," he said. "I got that completely wrong. It was just an unusually powerful Scutum."

The Precentor's face didn't change. "That's just as well," he said. "I was concerned, when I received your letter."

"Yes. I'm sorry about that." Behind the Precentor's head he could just make out the golden wings of the Invincible Sun, the centrepiece of the elaborate fresco on the far wall. Had the Precentor deliberately arranged the chairs in his study so that, viewed from the visitor's seat, his head was framed by those glorious wings, imparting the subconscious impression of a halo? Wouldn't put it past him, Framea decided. "I guess I panicked, the first time I fought him. I'm new at this sort of thing, after all."

"You did exceedingly well," the Precentor said. "We're all very pleased with how you handled the matter. I myself am particularly gratified, since you were chosen on my personal recommendation."

Not long ago, that particular fragment of information would have filled him with terror and joy. "It was quite easy," he said, "once I'd figured it out. A simple translocation, change the angle, broke his guard." He licked his lips, which had gone dry, and added, "Needless to say, I regret having had to use lethal force. But he was very strong. I didn't want to take chances."

The Precentor smiled. "You did what had to be done. Now, will you join me in a glass of wine? I believe this qualifies as a special occasion."

Three weeks later, Framea was awarded the White Star, for exceptional diligence in the pursuit of duty, elevated to the Order of Distinguished Merit, and promoted to the vacant chaplaincy of the Clerestory, a valuable sinecure that would allow him plenty of time for his researches. He moved offices, from the third to the fifth floor, with a view over the moat, and was allocated new private chambers, in the Old Building, with his own sitting room and bath.

Nine months later, he wrote a private letter to the Brother of the village. He wrote back to say that the village whore (the Brother's choice of words) had recently given birth. The child was horribly deformed; blind, with stubs for arms and legs, and a monstrously elongated head. It had proved impossible to tell whether it was a boy or a girl. Fortuitously, given its sad condition, it had only lived a matter of hours. After its death, the woman hanged herself, presumably for shame.

Father Framea (as he is now) teaches one class a week at the Studium; fifth year, advanced class. He occasionally presents papers and monographs, which are universally well received. His most recent paper, in which he proves conclusively that the so-called Lorica form does not and cannot exist, is under consideration for the prestigious Headless Lance award.

# On Sieges

A friend of mine once developed a board game based on Milton's 'Paradise Lost'. It was an exciting game to play. You could be the good angels or the fallen angels, and usually the fallen angels won the early stages, because they were better fighters, better motivated. But in the final round, the good angels played the Messiah card, which automatically won them the game. Siege warfare worked more or less the same way. The outcome was not in question. What mattered was how the defenders played their game before they lost.

Sieges caused civilisation. Some time over five thousand years ago, somewhere in Mesopotamia, a community that was reluctant to face its enemies in open battle built walls to shelter behind. Outside the walls, the enemy constituted the first siege. The people inside were the citizens of the first city.

From Jericho to Stalingrad, human beings have expended a vast proportion of their species' energy, ingenuity and resources on the lethal game of building walls and trashing them. The science developed slowly; the Theodosian Walls of Constantinople, built in the 5th century AD, were able to defend the city from countless sieges for a thousand years. By the seventeenth century, siegecraft had evolved rules as sophisticated and inflexible as chess. The French engineer Vauban wrote a book in which the conduct of a siege on both sides was set out with mathematical certainty; no city could withstand a siege conducted under Vauban's principles, and the length of time between the various stages of the siege's progress were as precisely calculated and tabulated as a railroad timetable. Nevertheless, Vauban also laid down designs for the state of the art in fortification, on the principle that, although success

for the besieger was inevitable if he was able and prepared to commit the staggering resources of time, manpower and money necessary, he might well be deterred from making the attempt if the scale and strength of the defences were such as to render the exercise cost-ineffective. The designs themselves are masterpieces of Enlightenment geometry; if you look at them without knowing what they are, you'll see them as some kind of advanced abstract art, visually arresting, a disturbing blend of symmetry and menace—malevolent starfish encrusted with spiky cancerous growths. There's no mistaking that these extraordinary shapes are weapons of earth and stone. Just as sieges gave birth to the cities we live in, they gave them their location and their shape.

Before 2000 BC, the Egyptians already knew about the three main approaches to storming a city; climbing the walls, smashing gates, undermining the walls to make them collapse. They used scaling ladders, battering rams and siege towers. The Assyrians developed these techniques, bringing them to such a level of perfection that little would change until the Middle Ages. They added pavises (shields to protect sappers from defending archers) and embankments (heaps of earth piled against the wall to enable machinery to get up close). The Greeks invented artillery—the various forms of torsion engine (stone-throwers powered by twisted-rope springs). By Alexander's time, siegecraft was already a complex science. We have a military textbook written at that time; among other recommendations, the author suggests that the best way to deal with sappers digging tunnels under your walls is to make a hole in their tunnel, throw in as many beehives as you can lay your hands on and fill in the hole. Pouring hot or noxious liquids on the attackers' heads goes way back, and the Greeks had invented the flamethrower by the fifth century BC; the Byzantines perfected it a thousand years later with the invention of Greek fire, a sort of early napalm that couldn't be put out; it even kept burning when sprayed on, or under, water, and it was sprayed through a siphon powered by bellows. The final innovation was gunpowder, first used to propel cannonballs against masonry around

the middle of the 14th century. It was cannon that breached the Theodosian walls, though it took a specially large gun to do it; invented by a Christian renegade who'd previously offered the design to the last emperor of Constantinople, who couldn't afford to pay the asking price.

BEFORE GUNPOWDER, IT wasn't quite so cut and dried. Western literature starts with a siege. In the *Iliad*, the Trojans have been so secure behind their walls that even after nine years, King Priam has to be told who everybody is on the Greek side, because they've never managed to get close enough for him to see them. The Trojans come out to fight, hand to hand on the plain, but only because honour requires it. The real Troy, as excavated by Schliemann, may not have been quite so invulnerable. About the size of a medium shopping mall, it was destroyed by fire at least once, during the so-called Catastrophe of the late Bronze age, when nearly all the great cities of the Aegean were burnt down and abandoned by raiders from the sea, whose identity and motivation we can only guess at.

PITCHED BATTLES AND sieges make up a large part of the history of war. In ancient Greece, war was endemic; it was also (for the most part) under control. Sparta aside, the Greek city states didn't have standing armies. The army was just another permutation of the citizen assembly. Adult Greek middle-class men came together to vote, to worship, to watch plays and to fight. All these activities, war included, had to fit in with the really important priorities of the agricultural year—ploughing, sowing, harvest. Wars had to be fought quickly and decisively; so, in a country of mountain and maquis, Greek armies met together on the plains. In a country murderously hot in summer, they met together covered from head to ankle in bronze armour. The Greeks despised archers, weren't bothered about

cavalry or light infantry (which tended to wander off before or during the battle); what mattered was the *othismos*, the shoving-match between rival phalanxes; American football to the death. The stronger team pushed back the weaker; the losing side broke up, fled, and were butchered as they ran, for a short while. The object of the exercise was to win the field and set up a trophy (*tropaion*, a heap of captured weapons). As soon as a result was achieved, the survivors could go home and get on with some useful work. If you were on the winning side, casualty rates were very low. It was formal, sensible war, keeping damage and waste to an acceptable minimum, and the Greeks practised it among themselves, almost unchanged, for three hundred years. The great sieges of Greek military history came in the biggest, nastiest war, at the end of the Classical period, between Athens and Sparta; no land dispute, but a fear-and-loathing confrontation between radically different ideologies, where all the rules gradually broke down.

It's easy to speculate that the Greeks avoided sieges for as long as they could because they had the sense to realise how nasty things could get. The ancient and medieval world was under no illusions about the misery of sieges. The Mongols made that common knowledge into a military tool. When they wanted a city, they offered it three chances to surrender; three refusals, and the city would be razed to the ground and the inhabitants massacred.

The Mongols ran their wars the way good businessmen run successful corporations. The war had to be cost-effective and show a profit. Taking a city represents an enormous investment, so it made sense to avoid it if possible. A Greek general once said that no city is invulnerable if a mule laden with gold can get inside it, and a substantial proportion of the great sieges of history ended in treachery; someone inside bribed or terrified into sneaking out at night and opening the gates. Finding a traitor, an opportunistic individual or disaffected political faction, would have been the besieging general's first and favourite option—"I love treachery," said the Roman emperor Augustus, "it's traitors I don't like." He would, of course, also try more

conventional means of negotiation. The defenders knew the score; that, unless they could hold out until their own side sent an army to drive the besiegers away, it was only a matter of time and resources before the city fell. Terms would be offered; safe conduct for the garrison to come out and go home, keeping their weapons, standards and military insignia; a promise not to loot the city and kill or enslave the people. The defender would have done the arithmetic. The equations were well known and straightforward; numbers on both sides, stocks of food, the risk of disease—with so many people cramped up in a confined space, outbreaks of plague on either side of the wall were a regular occurrence—morale, how long a relieving army would take to arrive, the political will to send such an army; if the city had access to the sea, would an enemy blockade be effective.

Both sides would, of course, make the same calculations, most likely arrive at the same answer. Long before Vauban wrote down the ratios in his impeccably scientific book, the basic formulae were well known to everybody in the trade. Of course, there were always mavericks who didn't care, like the Zealots who defended Masada against the Romans, and killed themselves rather than surrender. A defending commander serving a psychotic autocrat (no shortage of them throughout history) might choose to continue an untenable defence if he knew that a sensible, businesslike surrender would cost him his head. Naturally, the headman's axe cut both ways. Many unwinnable sieges dragged on because the besieging general knew exactly what would happen to him if he gave up and went home.

TREACHERY AND SWEET reason both having failed, the besieger had three options. He could withdraw; he could sit outside the walls and try and starve the enemy out; or he could mount an assault in hope of carrying the city by storm.

Torsion artillery—stone and arrow throwing engines powered by twisted-rope springs—started with the Greeks and overlapped with gunpowder. The Roman name for the rope-powered

single-armed engine was *onager*, the wild ass, because the way the throwing arm slammed into the wooden frame reminded them of a donkey's kick, or because the squeaking sound it made as the rope was being wound sounded a bit like 'hee-haw'. It took eight men to work it. At Masada, the Jewish garrison got the hang of watching the trajectory of the white balls against the sky and getting out of the way just before they pitched; the Romans painted the balls black and started killing Jews in great numbers. The double-armed engine, resembling a giant crossbow but also powered by twisted rope rather than just the bending of the arms, was called the *ballista*, from the Greek word for 'to throw'. It could shoot arrows or throw stones. In the Islamic world it was called a *ziyar*, and was used well into the 15th century. The Europeans refined the *ziyar* to develop the *espringal*, wound by a long screw and a windlass.

Torsion engines killed men on both sides and caused a certain amount of damage to masonry, but they weren't city-smashers. Trained artillerymen could shoot them surprisingly accurately. Their main function was to keep heads down (or knock them off). To get inside the city, the attackers had three options; to climb over the walls, bash down a gate, or breach the walls by digging under them and making them collapse.

Climbing the wall, using long scaling ladders, was the least effective option if the wall was adequately defended. A man climbing a ladder is sadly vulnerable. You can drop things on his head, push the ladder away from the wall with a forked stick, or kill him as soon as he reaches the upper rungs. Siege towers evened the odds a little; mobile wooden fortresses as tall as the tops of the walls, with platforms for archers who could lay down a barrage of arrows. But the towers themselves were dangerous places to be. They were usually armoured with thick planks, sometimes with water-soaked hides to protect them from fire; they worked well for the Assyrians in the 9th century BC, and the Greeks called them *helepoleis*, 'city-takers', which suggests they got the job done, for a while at least. More sophisticated versions were fitted with a drawbridge arrangement, allowing men to cross from the tower directly onto the

wall. The Turks were still using siege towers in 1453, against Constantinople, and in 1565, at the siege of Malta. But they were cumbersome, needing to be wheeled into position by teams of men or oxen; a good hit from an onager would cause havoc inside, and if they caught fire they were death-traps. If the approach to the city was rough, uneven or wet, getting a tower up to the wall must have been a nightmare. Defenders sometimes dug deep trenches around the walls, filled them with storage jars and covered them with turf; when the towers were brought up, their weight crushed the jars and the towers collapsed into the trench. The Greek architect Diognetus foiled the towers of Demetrius Poliorcetes (his name means "sacker of cities") by commandeering the contents of every midden and chamber-pot in the city and pumping it out through holes in the wall; the towers duly bogged down and got stuck.

Breaking down a gate was a basic approach. Battering-rams are unsophisticated things; a tree-trunk, with or without handles, a cradle of ropes to swing from, a covered frame to protect the men propelling the ram from arrows and rocks. The defenders would, of course, brace the gate from the inside, and in the medieval period, gates were often made of an early form of plywood—sheets of wood laminated together with the grain of the alternating layers running in different directions to stop them splitting. Rather more sophisticated than basic rams were worms, giant drills under covered frames for boring into the walls themselves.

Against a sparsely or carelessly defended city, assaulting the walls or the gate might get the job done. A strong, intelligent defence stood a reasonable chance of success. The attacking force needed numerical superiority of at least five to one, and even then losses would be high. Attacking two or more points on the wall simultaneously made things harder for the defence, assuming the attacker had the numbers and the resources. Morale was the biggest problem. A man needed to be highly motivated before he could be induced to climb a long ladder under constant fire, with every chance of falling to his death or being killed as soon as he set foot on the parapet.

Leaders often took great risks to inspire their men. Alexander the Great frequently led such assaults from the front; he was wounded several times, and got the wound that finally killed him leading an assault on a city in India.

A MUCH MORE businesslike approach, though slower and requiring vast effort, was undermining the walls. The basic technique was simple, and in use from the earliest times up to the First World War. A team of specialists dug a tunnel under the wall, shoring it up with wooden props as they went. When they reckoned they were directly under the wall, they dug a chamber and filled it with brushwood, which they then soaked in oil and set alight. The fire burnt through the props, the chamber collapsed and the wall above subsided and collapsed, leaving a breach through which the attackers could enter the city. Gunpowder made little difference; instead of brushwood, sappers stuffed the chamber full of explosives.

Foundations of solid rock made sapping extremely difficult; moats meant the sappers had to dig deep or risk being flooded out, and the deeper the sap passed below the wall, the bigger the chamber had to be if it was to cause enough subsidence to collapse the wall. The Byzantines reinforced the foundations of some of their fortresses with stone columns to obstruct sappers. Where such reinforcement was lacking, the defenders' options were limited to counter-sapping; figuring out or guessing where the enemy sap was, digging a tunnel of their own, breaking through and killing the enemy sappers or undermining their tunnel and caving it in. To locate the enemy workings, defenders placed bowls of water on the ground and watched for ripples caused by the vibrations, or hung bells on portable frames. In 265 AD, at the siege of Dura Europos in Syria, the besieging Persians dug a sap under the walls of the Roman fortress. The Romans countersapped, killed the Persians and collapsed the tunnel, creating a unique time capsule. Archaeologists found evidence of savage hand-to-hand fighting; discarded weapons,

armour, bones, even partly-preserved bodies, along with the resin and sulphur the attackers had brought to ignite their chamber with. Hand-to-hand fighting in dark, cramped galleries and shafts was, naturally, something to be avoided if at all possible. Whenever they had the opportunity, the defenders relied on other expedients to drive the enemy sappers out of their tunnels. If they had running water, they had the option of flooding the sap; failing which, there was always smoke—Aeneas Tacticus, Alexander's armchair tactician who also recommended bees, as noted above, was keen on straw smoke, but the most effective fuel was chicken feathers, which saved Ambracia from the Romans in 189 BC.

SIEGE WARFARE FROM the earliest times to the beginning of the fourteenth century was, therefore, largely decided by resources. If you had the time, the men and the equipment, you could be fairly sure of taking a city by undermining the wall. The cost in time, lives and money was enormous, and unless you were lucky enough to carry the city by a surface assault, you were faced with a cold, straightforward calculation. Could you afford the outlay, and if so, was the city worth it? If the answer was no, you had two choices; give up and go away, or blockade the city and starve the besiegers out.

Blockade—a siege as opposed to an assault—may seem a rather more sensible, businesslike approach. Why go to all that trouble and effort when starvation will do the job for you? The problem was that a siege could easily turn out worse for the side outside the walls. The defenders, after all, had proper roofs over their heads, while the attackers were under canvas. Any governor, castellan or garrison commander worth his salt would have substantial reserves of food in store before the siege began. Supplying the besieging army was likely to be its commander's biggest problem. Unless food could be brought in directly by sea, supply from home was fraught with difficulties. The besieging general had to contend with extended lines

of supply, miserable and often impassable roads, ox-drawn carts moving at three miles an hour. More usually, he'd have no option but to try and live off the land, assuming that the enemy hadn't taken the simple precaution of burning every ear of wheat and driving off every head of cattle. Even if his opponent had neglected these basic precautions, there were few places in a subsistence-agriculture world where there was enough surplus food lying in barns or stores to feed tens of thousands of outsiders for months, or years, at a time. A special delight reserved for the garrison of a well-supplied city whose besiegers were starving was to load their onagers with loaves instead of rocks and shoot them out over the enemy camp in a gesture of diabolical charity.

The greatest danger to any army, regardless of which side of the wall it was on, was disease. Before the twentieth century, disease killed many times more soldiers than weapons ever did. The biggest killer was dysentery, also known as camp fever. Most cities had at least some rudimentary drainage and sanitation. A siege camp was a much more basic affair. If the siege took place in summer, the heat made things worse; winter sieges meant bitter cold, endless scrabbling for firewood, wretched cold under canvas. Rain at any time of year meant drenched clothes and the constant misery of mud.

Kings and generals in their pavilions would not, of course, feel the pain quite so keenly, and since they made the decisions, the suffering of the besieging army wasn't usually a good enough reason in itself to give up and go home. But when men started dying in unacceptably large numbers, the besieging commander might well contemplate renewing the assault, or stepping up his attempts to find a traitor inside the city. At the very least, if he had to call the siege off and go away, it would be on the understanding that he'd be back again as soon as the weather improved, or he'd refilled his ranks, or amassed the necessary supplies.

## ON SIEGES

IN THE EARLY years of the fourteenth century, the first real improvement in artillery since the Romans was developed, probably by Muslim engineers working for the Mongol khans. The trebuchet was a stone-thrower, like the torsion engines. But it threw a bigger stone, and much further. Trebuchet shot could batter down walls, from a safe distance. Basically a giant see-saw, the trebuchet was an asymmetrical lever mounted on two A-shaped supports. The lower, shorter end of the lever connected to a counterweight, usually a huge box filled with rocks. The top end was the throwing arm, a long, slim shaft topped off with a sling. The crew hauled the throwing-arm down with winches to load the sling and raise the counterweight. A simple loop-and-hook release let it go; the counterweight dropped and the throwing end swung up like a baseball pitcher's arm, discharging the payload with a final flick from the sling. It was simple, relatively easy to construct, and not constrained by the physical properties of rope. The only limit on the size and power of trebuchets was the supply of quality lumber and the skill of your carpenters.

Defenders tried to compensate by building thicker walls and shooting back with trebuchets of their own. But the balance had shifted dramatically; at last, the attacker had technology that made a swift, cost-effective assault a realistic proposition. Before the fourteenth century was out, the trebuchet was itself on the way to being obsolete, as the first cannon started punching holes in masonry. The earliest guns looked like bells and shot arrows, and were cast in bronze; their development was hindered by the extreme difficulty of casting something as big as a cannon. As soon as molten metal flows into a mould, it begins to cool. Using technology fundamentally unchanged since the Bronze Age, early gunfounders discovered that the outside of a gun had cooled down while the inside was still hot. The result was fissures, flaws and cracks in the metal, which tended to blow apart with extreme prejudice when charged with gunpowder and let off.

So gunmaking passed from the bell-founders to the blacksmiths, who bent sheets of iron round a mandrel and forge-welded a seam to make a tube, which they reinforced with stout

iron bands, as coopers did with casks (hence the term gun-barrel). These guns, made in two parts with a detachable breech, were considerably more reliable. There was no new technology involved in their manufacture; rather, it was old technology employed on an unprecedented scale. I explained how such guns were made to one of the best blacksmiths in Europe and he didn't believe me; not possible, he said, you couldn't get that much metal up to an even welding heat, and even if you could, you wouldn't have enough time to form sound welds. As for heating up the bands and then shrinking them onto the barrel, forget it. Too much heat, not enough time. Couldn't be done. But it was, and the welded-and-hooped cannon made rubble out of walls that had defied assault for centuries. Later, gunfounders fixed the cracking problem by casting the cannon solid and boring it out with a huge lathe. Finally, an American inventor around the time of the Civil War figured out how to homogenize the temperature of the liquid metal and cast a gun which didn't need drilling out of solid.

Artillery changed everything. Instead of thick stone walls, cities were defended by broad earth banks, into which cannonballs sank harmlessly, and the defences were reshaped to allow wall-mounted cannon a maximum field of fire. A cannon mounted on a straight wall can't shoot downhill; if you want to harrass the enemy once they're close to the city, you need triangular projections (bastions) sticking out, from which you can enfilade. Cities started to look like starfish, and (thanks to canister—hundreds of musket bullets in a leather bag, turning the cannon into a giant shotgun) gunshot range from the battlements was a no-go area where nothing could survive.

From the fifteenth century to the mid-nineteenth, therefore, sieges once again belonged to the sappers. The problem they faced was getting to the wall without being killed by artillery fire. The only way to do this was by digging very long trenches, which couldn't be straight, because that would invite the enemy to lob balls and shells (another Mongol invention) into the trench, with appalling results. So the trenches zigzagged their way across hundreds of yards, from out of shot

right up to the wall. The sides of the trench had to be protected by gabions (large wicker baskets packed tight with earth, like sandbags), which absorbed a certain amount of shot and were then replaced.

Defenders could launch sorties and kill sappers, block up trenches, collapse galleries with explosives, but if the enemy had the time and the resources, they were only delaying the inevitable. Once one of Vauban's zig-zags appeared in front of the city, there wasn't really anything anyone could do. As before, the only real constraint was the besieger's ability to supply his army. Vauban's employer, Louis XIV of France, was the richest king in Europe, and he bled France white paying for sieges. Being besieged wasn't quite so ruinously expensive, but it didn't come cheap. Of course, during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Europe was awash with new money—gold from the New World, the proceeds of expanded trade and early colonialism; just as well, given that Europe's rulers had acquired such a taste for probably the most expensive hobby in history, at least before the start of the space race.

It was in the New World, during the American Civil War, that siegecraft finally overextended itself and fell into decline. It was a war decided by a different sort of engineer; cutters of metal, not shapers of stone. For example; at Petersburg, the Union forces executed a textbook undermining of the Confederate fortifications. Vauban would have approved. But, when the camouflet went up, a gaping breach appeared in the line and the infantry poured in to secure it—a formality, according to the rules—they were shot to pieces by the Confederates. Samuel Colt's Hartford production line had revolutionised small arms manufacture, with the result that every infantryman now held a rifle capable of accurate aimed fire. At New Orleans, the Union used the waterways to float city-smashing mortars close enough to the city to prompt surrender. Paddle steamers and railways made possible a new kind of war, fought in the open over great distances, with mobility the key. Why bother cracking open the layered defences of Atlanta when you could simply go round them?

The machine-gun briefly gave the battlefield back to the trench-diggers in the First World War, just as cannon had done in Vauban's time. But the tank—a siege tower, if you like, but self-propelled and massively armed and armoured—put an end to trench warfare. The tank was, of course, nothing new. It was the logical development of the 16th century armoured wagons of Jan Huss. Leonardo had tried to invent it. With the advent of fast, powerful tanks, the siege as generations had known it was obsolete. Motorised warfare dealt with the Maginot line by going round it. A different kind of siege took place at Stalingrad. The pounding of masonry into rubble by long range artillery simply gave the defending infantry endless cover, and Vauban's formality became the main event. Aerial bombardment brought the horrors of war back to city-dwellers in yet another permutation of the siege, but the Second World War was won in the open field, by mobility, firepower and (most of all) industrial capacity.

THE ONLY REASON to study war is the reason doctors study a disease; to find a cure. Smallpox is now officially extinct, and the same is probably true of the classical assault-and-blockade siege. There are, of course, plenty more diseases. The siege shaped our society at every level. It brought us together to live behind walls, in cities. Its fundamental influence on the nature of warfare directed political life and development for three thousand years. It was, of course, the mother of many of our essential technologies, from mining to metalworking. It would have been nice, of course, if we could have arrived at the same place without such a monstrous waste of lives, resources and effort. It's impossible to calculate how many millions of tons of earth were shifted in its name, mostly in wooden shovels tipped with iron, steel being too rare and expensive.

Well; our ancestors may have been disreputable and violent, but we are their descendants, and we can't simply wash our hands of our inheritance. Nor, as we cheerfully prepare to destroy the planet itself, can we afford to be too superior in our

attitude to our predecessors, who were content simply to wreck cities. The deadly elegance of Vauban's geometry and the miserable reality of sick, starving men digging trenches ought to teach us some kind of lesson, but that's probably too much to hope for. Instead, we pack sandwiches and tour the broken walls and slighted castles, marvelling at mankind's ability to smash up practically anything, given time, money and other people to do the dirty work.

# Let Maps to Others

*There is such a place. And I have been there.*

They all say that, don't they? They say; I met someone once who spent five years there, disguised as a holy man. Or; the village headman told me his people go there all the time, to trade timber and flour for spices. Or; the priest showed me things that had come from there—a statuette, a small, curiously-fashioned box, a pair of shoes, a book I couldn't read. Or; from the top of the mountain we looked out across the valley and there it was, on the other side of the river, you could just make out the sun glinting off the spires of the temples. Or; I was taken there, I saw the Great Gate and the Forbidden Palace, I sat and drank goat-butter tea with the Grand Master, who was seven feet tall and had his eyes, nose and mouth set in the middle of his chest.

You hear them, read them. The first, second, third time, you believe. The fourth time, you want to believe. The fifth time, you notice a disturbing pattern beginning to emerge—how they were always so close they could hear the voices of the children and smell the woodsmoke, but for this reason or that reason they couldn't go the last two hundred yards and had to turn back (but it was there, it is there, it's real, it really exists). The sixth time breaks your heart. By the seventh time, you're a scholar, investigating a myth.

I am a scholar. I have spent my entire life investigating what I now firmly believe to be a myth. But there is such a place. And I have been there.

"THE DUKE," SHE said, "is watching you."

Bearing in mind where we were, who she was and what we'd been doing, I sincerely hoped she was talking figuratively. "You don't say."

"Oh yes." She tugged at the sheet. Women feel the cold. "He's very interested in you."

Another thing women do is say things that aren't entirely true. Men do this, of course; but usually for a reason, usually a reason you can perceive; a shape hidden under the lies, like a body under a blanket. You see a blanket, but you can trace where the arms, legs, chest are. Women, by contrast, say untrue things just to see where the path will lead. "I doubt it," I said. "He won't have heard of me."

"Of course he's heard of you."

I yawned. I didn't feel like conversation. "My father, possibly," I said. "Maybe, just conceivably, my brother, because of the lawsuits. Me, no. Nobody's heard of me."

She cleared her throat.

"Outside of the Studium," I amended. "And the scholarly fraternity at large. I confess, I'm reasonably well known among my brother scholars. That fool who believes, they call me. Outside of that, though—"

She nuzzled against me, purely for warmth. "The greatest living authority on Essecuivo," she said.

"Exactly. That fool who believes. What on earth could that possibly have to do with the duke?"

"He's bought the Company."

I felt a shiver that had absolutely nothing to do with the temperature of the room. "Then he's an idiot," I said. "Even if he only paid a penny for it."

"He doesn't think so."

"Well, he wouldn't."

"And it was rather more than a penny," she went on, talking to the ceiling. "He's mortgaged Sansify and Gard Hardy and sold his half share in the tin mines to raise the money. He's serious about it."

I frowned; it was dark, so she couldn't see me. "I feel sorry for his sons," I replied. "It's miserable, being the poor son of a rich father. You never quite manage to get away from it. Mind you, there's a substantial difference in scale. My father was *well-off*, but nothing at all like—"

"He thinks it's a good investment."

I really wasn't in the mood for talking about the duke; especially since the conversation also appeared to involve Essecuivo, a subject I talk about incessantly among scholars and never to outsiders. In fact, I didn't want to talk at all. I just wanted to go home; but you can't, can you? Not straight away. "Well," I said, "I hope his faith turns out to be justified, naturally. If so, I'll be as pleased as I'll be amazed."

I felt her turn towards me. "It does exist, doesn't it?" she said. "There is such a place."

I sighed. "Yes," I said. "I believe it exists. Aeneas Peregrinus went there, and he was real enough. But we don't know where it is."

"You don't know?"

"And I'm the greatest living authority." I sighed. "One of the greatest living authorities. Professor Strella, in Aerope, would dispute that last statement, but he's a fraud. Carchedonius of Luseil—"

"You must have some idea."

I stretched. Time to get up and go. "It exists," I said. "Somewhere. Beyond that, your guess is as good as mine. I'd better go."

"No."

"I'd better. He might come back early, you never know."

"It's the second reading of the Finance Bill," she said irritably, "he won't be back till the morning. You never want to stay."

"I really should go."

"Fine. That's fine." You see what I mean. They're always saying things they don't mean. "Tomorrow?"

"Not sure about tomorrow," I said, "I may have to dine in Hall. And then I've got a lecture to prepare. The day after tomorrow would be better."

"Suit yourself."

I slid out of bed, felt for my trousers in the dark. I always find that sort of thing exquisitely distasteful. "Is the House sitting next week?"

"I don't know."

Of course she knew. But I could look it up in the gazette. I pulled on my shirt, then hesitated. "Is the duke really interested in me?"

"Yes."

I shrugged. "Maybe he'll be good for a few marks toward the chancel fund," I said. "It's getting pretty desperate, the rain's coming in under the eaves."

I WAS BORN in the City. My father was a junior partner in the Eastern Sea Company, which at that time was a cross between a bank and a munitions factory. He was on the munitions side of things; he ran the ordnance yard where they cast the cannons and mortars that would be mounted on the ships that would make the journey to Essecuivo, to sell woollen cloth, tin plates, mirrors, shovels, whatever in return for cinnamon, mace, nutmeg, fine red pepper and the curious root that cures plague, syphilis and baldness. Because nobody had discovered Essecuivo yet, there wasn't exactly a hurry; so, in order to keep the cash flow moving along, the Company sold the cannons and mortars my father made to the kings and dukes of neighbouring states,

who always managed to find a use for them. Back then, money was still pouring in to the Company (because everybody knew it was only a matter of time before someone found Essecuivo), and the directors invested it sensibly in worthwhile projects, to build up the capital against the day when the crucial discovery was made and the Company could launch its first fleet. It was called the Eastern Sea Company because, on the balance of the evidence then available, it was generally held that Essecuivo was somewhere to the east. But if it had turned out to be in the west, they wouldn't have minded. They were practical men, back then.

My father was a practical man. He wasn't convinced that Essecuivo would simply fall into our laps like an overripe pear; it would need finding, so someone would have to find it. Ordinarily he'd have done it himself (he was a great believer in if-you-want-something-done-properly) but he was too busy with supervising the cannon-founders and doing deals with foreign princes to find the time, so it seemed logical to keep it in the family and give the job to his spare son (me). Accordingly, from the age of nine I was tutored in geography, history, languages and book-keeping (for when I'd found Essecuivo and established our first trading post there). When I was sixteen, I was sent to the Studium, which possesses a copy of every book ever written, to continue my studies. And there I stayed, becoming the youngest ever professor of Humanities at age thirty-two.

EVERY BOOK, I discovered, except one.

I first encountered Aeneas Peregrinus when I was twelve. I read about him in Silvianus' *Discourses*. Aeneas Peregrinus had been to Essecuivo, three hundred years ago. He set off from the City with a cargo of lemons, heading for Mesembrotia, but was blown off course by a freak storm. The storm lasted for nine days, and when the wind dropped, nobody had any idea where they were; even the stars were different, Aeneas wrote. For four weeks

they drifted, until another storm, even more ferocious than the first, picked them up and carried them at terrifying speed for eight days, then died away as suddenly as it had arisen. On the skyline, they could see land. They sat becalmed for a further three days, until a gentle breeze carried them to what turned out to be Essecuivo, where the soil and climate are the best in the world, the people are gentle, sophisticated, wealthy beyond measure and wildly generous, and where they'd never seen a lemon.

Aeneas sold his cargo for its weight in gold, then spent a month or so travelling round the country talking to noblemen, priests and scholars, finding out everything he could about the wonderful country he'd stumbled across. Most of all, naturally, he wanted to find out where it was. That, apparently, was no problem; the Essecuivans are exceptionally learned in astronomy, geography and all related sciences, and taught him the principles of latitude and the techniques of advanced navigation using the astrolabe, compass and sextant (all previously unknown outside Essecuivo) which every ship's captain uses to this day. With this knowledge, it was a simple matter for Aeneas to fix the relative positions of Essecuivo and the City and plot a course home. The return journey took him three weeks, partly because he was held up by contrary winds a third of the way over. He arrived home with his cargo of gold ingots, and immediately sat down to write his two great books. The first of these, *A Discourse on Navigation*, he presented to the Council, who made him a Knight of Equity and set up a ten-foot high statue in his honour in what is now Aeneas Square. The second book, a complete description of Essecuivo, including precise directions for finding it again, he kept to himself, although he occasionally showed selected passages to his close friends. After all, he reasoned, he was determined to go back there and make a second massive fortune, and quite possibly a third, fourth, fifth and sixth, for as long as the Essecuivans were prepared to pay ridiculous prices for lemons. Only an idiot would disclose the secret of unlimited wealth, and risk a flooding of the market.

## LET MAPS TO OTHERS

Aeneas Peregrinus died suddenly, at the age of forty-six, three hundred and seven years ago. At the time of his death, the whereabouts of the manuscript of his second book were not known. It hasn't been seen since.

I'M NOT SURE if I'm a geographer or a historian, or whether geography's a humanity or a science. What I do know is that, if I really am smart enough to deserve a chair at the Studium, I should've asked myself what a senator's young trophy wife ever saw in me, long before that casual mention of the duke. Still, better late than too late.

I walked home slowly through the back alleys, and every turning and doorway was crawling with the duke's men, watching me, taking notes, except that I couldn't quite see them. By the time I reached the lodge I was exhausted. The porter got up from his nice warm fireside and handed me a note.

*Must see you at once. My rooms.*
*Carchedonius*

THAT'S NOT HIS real name, of course. Before he came to the Studium he was Liutprand Thiostulfsen. It cost me twelve angels to find that out, and I never could think of a good way of using it against him. Just knowing it made me feel better, though.

I should explain about Carchedonius. He's a fine scholar. He's painstaking, insightful, clear-headed, occasionally brilliant, always worth listening to. His work on the manuscript tradition of Thraso's *Dialogues* was what started me on the road to my finest hour, the deciphering of the Sunao Codex. Between us, we know everything there is to know about Aeneas, and Essecuivo. All in all, it's a shame we hate each other the way we do.

But that can't be helped, any more than you can get an injunction to stop the winter. The stupid thing is, neither of us can account for it. I've never done him any real harm, though not for want of trying, and all his wild schemes to encompass my downfall have failed or backfired on him. Apparently he has some kind of grudge based on some relative of his losing a lot of money when the Company went under. If that's really the case, he must've nursed it like a shepherd's wife with an orphan lamb. I think I hate him so much because he hates me, though I'm not sure I didn't hate him first. In any case, it's been going on since we were both seventeen-year-old freshmen. I guess it's an interest for both of us; cheaper than collecting pre-Mannerist miniatures, slightly more exciting than watching the donkey-cart races.

*Must see you in my rooms at once* presumably meant the latest in a long line of laboured, over-elaborate stratagems; presumably it hadn't occurred to him that I might simply decide not to turn up. He'd make a lousy spider; the patience and dedication to spin a good web, but not a clue about luring flies. His idea of subtlety would be a big notice; WEB THIS WAY. He'd starve.

I nearly didn't go. Nearly. If I was a fly, I'd be dead by now.

HERE I GO, rattling on about myself and my own inconsequential history. I'm ashamed of myself, as a historian. My part in the sequence of events is significant but limited. I shouldn't have talked about myself or even acknowledged my own existence for at least another ten pages.

The Company; the Eastern Ocean Company; actually, the correct name is the College of Merchant Adventurers for the Promotion and Regulation of Trade with the Nations of the Eastern Ocean. It was founded, coincidentally, in the year of my birth—here I am, intruding again—by three clockmakers and a goldsmith, affluent men with a taste for abstruse literature who'd been brought up on secondary accounts of Aeneas

Peregrinus, and who could afford to indulge their scientific pretensions by chartering and outfitting a small ship (the *Squirrel*, 90 tons) to look for Essecuivo. That was all. But, being businessmen, they thought it would be common sense to spread the risk a little. Accordingly, they issued a prospectus, which they hired a couple of layabouts to give away free in the tea-houses around the Golden Carp.

The year I was born was also the year of the great gold strike in Eroine. For the first time in centuries, the City was awash with money; newly-coined gold angels, tumbling like raindrops, looking for channels, gutters and conduits to drain off the flood. Men who'd been wise enough to take an early stake at Eroine and then sell before the strike worked out were looking around for the next good thing; preferably something a bit more substantial than gold-mining, up and down like a peacock's tail, as my father used to say. Essecuivo was exactly the sort of thing they were after; a solid, long-term venture yielding rich dividends for ever and ever. In a matter of days, copies of the free prospectus (the clockmakers had only printed two hundred) were changing hands for an angel each.

At this point, something strange and wonderful happened. The clockmakers, in order to keep track of who was investing what, had some more papers printed; not prospectuses this time, but shares. It wasn't a brand new idea, but it had never really caught on before. That all changed. The first subscription, at one angel a share, sold out in a week. The second subscription, three angels, went in a single morning; meanwhile, in the tea-houses, the disappointed investors who'd missed out on the subscriptions were cheerfully paying six angels apiece for second-hand shares. Twelve subscriptions later, Company stock stood at a hundred and six, and only the clockmakers had any idea how many shares were in circulation. At this point, they quietly sold out their own interests and retired to vast country estates in the Naquite, leaving the Company in the hands of its newly-elected Board, one member of which was my poor father.

What nobody realised at that moment was that just under a third of the entire value of the Republic was now invested in the Company; whose assets, apart from money, consisted of a fine neo-Archaic mansion house in Widegate, a fair collection of maps and books put together by the clockmakers, four remaining years of a six-year charter of the *Squirrel* and some second-hand barrels. I think it was this that led my father to decide that someone really ought to find Essecuivo as quickly as possible.

I WALKED IN and he didn't look up. "Tea?" he asked.

"Yes, why not?" I looked around. I hadn't been in his rooms for some time. Mind you, nothing had changed; the same heaps of junk everywhere. I decided to assume that the offer of tea implied an invitation to sit down, so I moved a stack of books and perched on a chair. He swung the kettle arm over the fire and peered back at me over his shoulder.

"I saw that thing you did in the *Proceedings*," he said.

"Did you now."

"Very good." He pawed the lid off the tea caddy and measured out three spoonfuls. Black tea, the cheap sort. I could smell the bergamot oil they use to mask the poor flavour. "I think you're right about Psammetichus. It makes sense of the western tradition, and it fits in with Hiero in the *Summary*."

"Thank you."

"Of course, you were wrong about Arcea," he went on, with his back to me. "The foundation date is fixed by the Lelantine War."

I frowned. He had a point. "That's a terminus post quem."

He shook his head. "Hiero lists Arceus among the dead at Limma," he said. "If he died at Limma, he couldn't have founded Arcea the year after, could he?"

Six months of agonisingly hard work gone up in smoke. I could have cried. Instead, I said, "If you're prepared to follow Hiero."

"You were," he replied. "Can't have it both ways." He turned round, holding a teapot and two small wooden cups. He loves to make a show of poverty, although his family owns half the Neada valley. "Lemon?"

I shook my head. "That's what you wanted to see me about."

"No." He sat down, not bothering to shift the books first; he sort of settled in beside and on top of them, like cement. "No, I've already written a note for the *Review*." He smiled. "Sorry."

I made a show of shrugging. "Just as well you spotted my careless oversight," I said. "The human race should be properly grateful."

He leaned forward to pour the tea. "Oh, the hell with that," he said. "I never could be doing with slipshod scholarship, is all." He frowned. "Did you say you wanted lemon?"

"Not for me, no."

He sipped his tea and pulled a face. "No," he went on (he starts most of his sentences with *no*), "it was something quite other. How are things with you, by the way? It's been a while since we had a chance for a civilised conversation. How's your father getting on?"

"He died," I said. "Last spring."

"That's a shame, I'm sorry. He can't have been out for long."

"Six months."

He shook his head. "Well," he said, "at least he didn't die in prison. That must be a terrible thing, don't you think?"

Sometimes, the best way of fighting is not to fight. I sat still and quiet. He drank his tea.

"No," he said eventually, "what I wanted to see you about was—" He stopped, put his cup down and folded his hands neatly in his lap. "You heard that Count Dorcellus is dead."

"No, actually."

He nodded. "The family's deep in debt, so they had to sell up. The whole place, including the library."

In spite of myself, I was mildly interested. The Dorcelli are one of those old families who used to be everywhere a few

hundred years ago, and haven't done a damn thing since. Also, they were always notoriously mean-minded about allowing scholars to use their library. As a result, nobody had any idea what they'd got in there.

"It just so happens," he went on, looking over my shoulder, "that my uncle bought a few cases of books at the sale." He grinned, still not looking at me. "When I say cases, that's quite accurate. He bought four large crates, sight unseen. He's a clown, my uncle. Still."

I had a feeling of being taken on a guided tour of the torture chamber. They do that, apparently, to make people confess. This is the rack, that's the iron maiden, and over here we have the thumbscrews. "Anything interesting?" I asked.

"Some bits and pieces." He frowned again, then lifted his head and looked at me. "Oh, before I forget. They sent me your latest on Aeneas Peregrinus. They want to know if it's any good."

I felt cold all over. They, in this context, meant the faculty board, to whom I had submitted an outline of my researches in the hope of getting funding for another five years. Through ignorance or malice they'd given it to Carchedonius for peer review. I swallowed. "What did you think?"

"Splendid."

Oh, but you can't tell, really you can't. He always says *splendid* or *excellent*, just before he wields the knife. I waited. He made the moment last.

"No," he said, "I went through it all very carefully, and I'm forced to admit, I do believe you're right. And I've been wrong all these years. You convinced me. Congratulations."

Still I waited. These are the red-hot irons, that cage thing over there is for bending your arms backwards until your elbows burst. "And?"

"And nothing." The smile faded. "You know I can't stand you," he went on. "You're arrogant, sloppy, careless and full of shit, and the way you carry on with married women is a disgrace to the Studium. But, on this occasion, you've produced a piece of work

of real quality. And put me in my place in the process." He picked up his teacup and put it down again, his fingertips still surrounding the rim. "I know now that you were right about the latitude of Essecuivo, and I was wrong. I'm trying to be graceful about it, but I'm probably not succeeding. It's not really in my nature."

It suddenly occurred to me to be glad I hadn't touched the tea he'd poured for me. Bergamot oil would mask any number of unusual flavours. "Well—" I said.

"Anyway." He stood up, crossed to the fireplace and gave the logs a sharp poke. Little red stars got up, like flies off a turd. "I've written to the faculty recommending that you get your money. I had no choice," he said. "After all, we're scholars, aren't we?"

I took a deep breath. "Is that what you—?"

"No."

I looked at him. People have mistaken us for each other. We're both tall and skinny, with very similar long faces and straight noses. Two scholars. "Fine," I said. "So?"

He sat down again, this time carefully moving the books, like miners clearing the fallen rocks behind which their friends are trapped, until he unearthed a long brass tube. He laid this across his knees and covered it with his forearms. "One small point in your work that I'd take issue with. Very small," he added quickly. "It hadn't occurred to me either until very recently. It's about the manuscript of the *Discovery*."

(The *Discovery of Essecuivo*, by Aeneas Peregrinus. Of course there was no manuscript.)

"You and I," he went on, "have both spent a large part of our adult lives trying to figure out what became of the manuscript when Aeneas died. Both of us assumed that it would have been inherited by his son. We traced every living descendant, we sorted through indices and cartularies wherever there's a library that might have received papers or books from Dives Peregrinus or his heirs. It's all been—" He grinned. "A complete waste of time. Oh, we've found books and papers. Just not the one we were looking for. Agreed?"

I nodded.

"We assumed," he went on, "that, because Dives inherited the land and the money and the house, he'd have had the papers too. After all, Aeneas was planning on going back. He died suddenly. The papers would have been with the rest of his property."

He seemed to want me to say something. "Yes," I said.

"Naturally enough. It was a fair assumption. But what—" He stopped, as though he'd walked into an invisible door. "What if Aeneas and his son quarrelled about something, and Aeneas gave the papers to somebody else? The land and the money; well, he didn't really have a choice, people didn't just disinherit their only sons back then, so Dives got them all. But the papers—"

A hot, bright light inside my head. "The niece," I said.

He gave me a beautiful smile. "Precisely," he said. "His sister's daughter, whose name we don't even know. What if *she* got the papers, while he was still alive?"

I was ashamed. I really, really should have thought of it before. But I was too excited to let that get in the way just then. "The niece—"

"Married into the Dorcelli family," he said quietly. "Who, being at that time wealthy enough not to need to sully their hands with trade and commerce, filed the papers safely away in the archives of their beautiful library at Touchevre and forgot all about them. Probably never bothered to look to see what was in them. Meanwhile Dives, having ransacked his father's house searching for the old fool's last book and failed to find it, concluded that it must have been destroyed, and told people so. Naturally, they believed him. He was, after all, Aeneas' son."

Suddenly I could scarcely breathe. "Your uncle."

He smiled. "Bought four large crates, sight unseen. Including—" He pointed the brass tube at me, like a weapon. "This."

He held on to the tube. I unscrewed the cap. I could see the end of a roll of parchment. My hand was frozen solid. I couldn't move.

"Allow me." He pinched the parchment between forefinger and thumb and drew it out. It was stiff and brown. It looked like a stick. "Now, then," he said. "You're the greatest living expert on Essecuivo. You've just proved that, to my satisfaction. Would you care to take a look?"

My enemy, my one and only true enemy, holding in his hand the one and only manuscript. Would I care to take a look? I nodded. He leaned across, took my hand, opened the cramped fingers and pushed the scroll in between them. "Take your time," he said. "I'm in no hurry."

YOU KNOW THE story of Saint Aguellinus; how, every morning since he was nine years old, he climbed the mountain just before dawn and prayed to be allowed to look into the face of the Invincible Sun. For ninety years he prayed; then, one day, his prayer was granted. The Sun, rising above the Techenis mountains, burst upon him as he prayed and spoke to him, saying, Follow me. Whereupon Aguellinus, his prayers answered, was consumed by the fire that leaves no ash and ascended bodily into Heaven—

ME, I'M NOT religious. I can see the Sun any time I like. But this—

"Go on," he said (I'll never forget how he said it). "It won't bite you."

I unrolled it. The parchment creaked; I was suddenly terrified in case it snapped or crumbled into dust before I could read it. But it rolled out, smooth and springy, the surface hard under my fingernails. It was hand-written, of course, and of course I recognised the handwriting. I'd spent hours poring over the nine authentic surviving letters written by Aeneas Peregrinus—to his land agent, his son, the sherriff of his shire concerning the window tax.

*Concerning the True Discovery of Essecuivo, being a faithful account—*

"Go on," he said gently. "Read it."

I THOUGHT; IF only my father was still alive. He died, as Carchedonius so thoughtfully reminded me, only a short while ago, after ten years in prison. He'd done nothing wrong; at least, not the things he was accused of doing. But when the bubble burst and millions of angels were wiped out overnight, as suddenly and irrecoverably as snow melting, someone had to take the blame. My father, who'd done nothing wrong and therefore saw no need to leave the country with a small valise filled with precious stones, put up a strong case at his trial. He always was a good speaker, and he couldn't resist arguing the toss, even when it was clearly not the smart thing to do. I can imagine (I wasn't there) him arguing with Death, scoring five or six good solid debating points; the last thing he'd have seen before his eyes closed for ever was the panoramic view you get from the moral high ground.

But if he'd lived just a little longer, and seen this—

He'd have scolded me for not finding it earlier. The niece, he'd have said, shaking his head in that insufferable way of his, any idiot would've thought to investigate the niece. And he wouldn't have said *you failed me, you always were a bitter disappointment to me,* because he wouldn't have had to.

I READ THE manuscript. I could have written it myself.

That was the extraordinary thing. All my life I'd been speculating about Essecuivo, making educated guesses, extrapolating castles from grains of sand. From a tiny handful of dubious fragments of recollections in old age by men who'd heard their grandfathers talking when they were children; from observations

based on ancient artefacts that may possibly have been copied more or less faithfully from things that may or may not have been smuggled back by Aeneas' men in their sea-chests; half the time I was pretty much making it up, on the balance of probabilities, and the rest of the time I was working from evidence you wouldn't rely on to convict a fox of killing chickens. The thing was, though, I was *right*. Uncannily so; even my wildest reaches and most vertiginous leaps to conclusions were borne out by the tall, thin, looped brown letters on the page. It was enough to make you weep. I hadn't needed the manuscript, except as proof. I knew it all already.

—But *proof*; oh, there's a world of difference, isn't there? I felt like a man accused of murder who's made up a wild and totally false alibi, only to have it corroborated by a perfect stranger of flawless integrity. *I was right*. About everything; the height of the mountains (which I'd calculated based on an almost certainly apocryphal story about how Aeneas had spilt a kettle of boiling water over his hand on a mountaintop, and not been scalded), the source of the great river that washes the gold dust out of the northern heights, which province the red-and-yellow parrots come from. Every damn thing.

"I expect you're feeling pleased with yourself," he said.

I'd forgotten all about him. I'd been gazing at the illuminated capital letters. Aeneas hadn't done them himself, he'd have hired a local scrivener or law-writer. They were typical of the period, quickly but well executed, the letters shadowed in red and embellished with leaf-and-scroll; standard decoration for title deeds, leases and contracts. Every paragraph started with one. A small touch of vanity, from a man who could afford it. "Sorry?"

"I imagine," he said, "that you're feeling quite happy just now. I would be, in your shoes."

"Yes," I said. "Of course. And you too."

He smiled. "Very much so. You know," he went on, "I've never had much in the way of good luck in my life. When things

have gone well for me, it's because I made it happen. Not very often," he added with a grin. "But this is something quite different. I feel—well, *justified*, if you know what I mean."

I wasn't quite sure that I did, but I didn't want to spoil the mood. "Splendid," I said. "What do you intend to do?"

He leaned across and took it gently from me. I didn't want to let go, but I was afraid of tearing it, so I opened my fingers wide and let it slip through. "The only thing that's missing," he said, "is map references. Co-ordinates. But most people agree Aeneas must've known them, because he used them to plot his course home. Odd, don't you think?"

I thought about it. "I guess that was the one secret he didn't want to commit to writing," I said. "After all, he was planning on going back, like you said."

He nodded. "I'm glad we agree," he said. Then he leaned back a little and put the manuscript into the fire.

ANYWAY. BACK TO the real history.

For about five years, the Company continued to thrive. True, no progress whatsoever had been made in finding Essecuivo. I don't think anyone even tried. They were too busy.

To begin with, the money that poured in to the Company's coffers came from the gold miners and bullion dealers, who had, essentially, too much money and nothing to spend it on. Before long, however, the old landowning families started to invest, and then the established City merchants; and then, as the stock price kept on going up, anyone who could find or borrow the cost of a share or two. Land was easy to raise money on; canny investors who'd already made a pile sold out and bought estates, farms, forests, only to mortgage or sell them again to reinvest when the temptation grew too great to bear. The Council started buying stock with public money—why not? Each share issue was bigger than the last, and the price kept on rising steadily.

My father's side of the business—making artillery—was an early diversification. It came about because the *Squirrel* had twelve gun-ports but no guns. One of the original clockmakers knew a bell-founder who was going through a slow patch; he leased a space in his yard and had a dozen cannon made. They happened to turn out pretty well (cannon are notoriously hard to cast), and a friend of the clockmaker who was outfitting a ship of his own asked if he could buy eight pieces just like them. Before long, the Company had bought out the bell-founder and was turning out three dozen premium demi-culverins a week.

My father's fellow directors, who were starting to worry, realised that there was a lesson to be learned from what was essentially a commercial accident. They had enormous sums of money at their disposal. One day, it would be needed for Essecuivo. In the meantime, however, there was no sense in it just sitting there. They looked around for good ideas, like my father's cannon, to put money into.

At first, they didn't have far to look. They invested in shipyards, lumber yards and forestry—all quite logical, since once Essecuivo turned up, they'd be needing ships; lots of ships, well-built, properly fitted out, the right size and tonnage, at a sensible price. Then they figured that once they got to Essecuivo, they'd need goods to trade with. So they invested in woollen mills, sheepwalks and hill-country grazing; they bought land on the Sieva river and planted a thousand acres of lemon trees; they put money into cutlery, tinware and mining; all so as to be as well prepared as possible once Essecuivo eventually rose out of the sea, shining and inviting as the Goddess of Love.

The lease on the *Squirrel* ran out and somebody forgot to renew it; but the Company's investments were all doing quite well. So, quite accidentally, were the citizens of the Republic. Every month, hundreds of people left the farms and ranches where they'd been accustomed to scrape a meagre living, and headed for the City, to work in the new foundries and factories. With the money they earned, they were able to buy the cheap

goods the Company's trading partners produced; families who'd always eaten off wooden trenchers now had fine pewter plates, and wore good broadcloth instead of homespun. Thanks to the three per cent tax and its own investments in Company stock, the Council had funds for all sorts of magnificent projects; public buildings, paved roads, a dam on the Deneipha river to drain the marshes to provide more land for more lemon trees. They also commissioned the Republic's first fleet of publicly-owned warships, built in the Company's yards and armed with my father's cannon. They were reckoned to be the most advanced warships in the world, and more than a match for anything they'd be likely to meet, in our own waters or beyond. They would even—people reckoned—give the antiquated galleys and galliots of the Empire a run for their money, if it ever came to it.

The war lasted three years. The immediate cause was the Evec peninsular. It seemed quite logical at the time. The Evec was notionally Imperial territory, but there was nothing there; just a few sheep ranches occupied by a handful of peasants, primitives (about as primitive as we'd been, before the Company came along). The Empire wouldn't waste money and resources defending an obscure and distant outpost, it wouldn't be cost-effective. We, on the other hand, could plant the whole lot out with lemon groves. It was the obvious thing to do.

The first action of the war took place off Cape Acuela. Two squadrons of antiquated Imperial galliots sent the Republic's magnificent new fleet to the bottom in just over an hour.

When the news reached the City, it sparked off a reaction of incandescent rage. Addressing the huge crowd gathered in Aeneas Peregrinus Square, the First Citizen vowed that we would never yield, not if it took every penny, every man. The replacement fleet was ready to sail in three weeks; it was twice the size and twice as heavily armed. The third, fourth and fifth fleets were even better. But not, unfortunately, good enough.

Once the Articles of Surrender had been signed and the Imperial fleet raised its blockade of the City harbour, the

newly-appointed provisional government sat down and looked to see what was left. There wasn't much. I have figures somewhere for the total cost of the war, in men and money. I can't recall them offhand. Some things are too uncomfortable to store in your head for any length of time. There was a debate about whether to dissolve the Company or to leave it as a sort of midden for the national debt. They couldn't decide, so they referred the matter to committee. That was eleven years ago. They haven't reported yet.

At first, I must have thought he was prodding the fire with the poker.

That's what the brain does. It takes images and tries to interpret them in accordance with a sane, rational view of reality. I'd seen a man poking a sluggish fire back to life a thousand times. It was something that made sense. Burning the manuscript made no sense at all.

But I looked again and saw what he was really doing, and I froze. I've been over it in my mind time and time again. If I'd reacted at once, could I have pushed him out of the way and saved the manuscript? It's almost like a game, a tennis match or something. Roughly four times out of ten, I win; I drag him back from the hearth, I wrestle the manuscript out of his hand and stamp out the fire, the damage is sometimes quite bad and sometimes minimal, but at least I save *something*. The other six times I don't make it; he shoves me out of the way, or we're struggling over it and the flames surge up and burn our hands, and I let go. It burnt surprisingly quickly, I remember that. Possibly something to do with how the parchment was originally cured, I think they may have used saltpetre back then.

Anyway, the parchment burned. I stared at him. I couldn't speak. He looked at me. When the flames reached his fingers, he opened them and let go.

"Now look what you've made me do," he said.

He explained. He told me that love and hate are as similar as brother and sister, both of them forms of the same obsessive fixation on another; love and hate both lead people to do extravagant acts, to make sacrifices, to subordinate themselves to the other. He told me that when the manuscript first came into his hands, he'd more or less made up his mind to kill me, because he couldn't bear the thought that I continued to exist. He'd had his reservations, nonetheless. In killing me he'd be giving his own life, because he would inevitably have been found out, arrested and hung. This troubled him, because in a very real sense (he said) it would have meant that I'd have *won*. I would be remembered as an innocent victim, he'd be condemned as a criminal, therefore he'd have handed the moral victory to me on a plate. That, he said, struck him as a gross crime against natural justice and ultimately self-defeating.

Nevertheless (he said) he'd resolved to go through with it, to make the ultimate sacrifice—his reputation, his moral soul; to give his life and his honour, greater hate hath no man than this—when quite suddenly and out of a blue sky, the manuscript arrived, along with a load of other junk, from his uncle. It could only have been, he said, a sign, sent by the Invincible Sun, in Whom he'd never believed until then.

It was particularly significant because at that precise moment he had my dissertation open on his desk. He read the manuscript and my dissertation side by side. At first, he was crushed. The manuscript proved that I was *right*, had been all along—in which case, I was right, a better scholar, I was the more worthy, I had prevailed and beaten him. But then (he said) the Invincible Sun's true design slowly revealed itself to him, and he understood why the manuscript had come to him at exactly that moment.

I was, after all, a scholar. Unsatisfactory and unworthy in every respect, but a scholar. Nothing mattered more to me than my work, science, the truth, to be proved right. What better punishment, therefore, than for me to know I was right, know beyond

any shadow of a doubt, and *never to be able to prove it*. He and I would know; we two only, joined inseparably by our shared bond of mutual obsession. But the definitive proof, which I would have seen and read, would be lost for ever. When in due course, as was inevitable given the nature of scholarship, some other scholar came along with the mental strength and agility to cast doubt on my research and question my findings, I would have no defence. I would know the truth, but not be able to prove it.

And that, he said, was why he'd done it. It was, of course, entirely up to me what I did next. I could kill him in an excess of entirely justified rage. He wouldn't mind that in the least; because then I'd be the one dragged through the streets on a hurdle and pushed off a stool with a rope round my neck, to die with the jeers of common people in my ears. No? Ah well. In that case, I could go to the faculty and denounce him, tell them exactly what he'd done. He hoped I'd do that. He would deny it strenuously, I'd have no proof, and (given the history between us) my accusations would be dismissed as a deranged attempt to blacken his name, I'd be disgraced, and all my work would be discredited with me. And if I did neither—well, then, I'd have to spend the rest of my life reflecting on how he'd beaten me, out-thought me, used his superior intellect to devise the perfect snare; which thought would gradually eat me up over the years, like a tapeworm, growing commensurately bigger and stronger as I faded and became weak.

I said nothing. There was nothing to say. I drank my tea, which had gone cold, and went home.

Once I met an old man who told me he reckoned he was happier in his eighties than he'd ever been in his youth. I told him that was hard to believe. He grinned at me. I'm free, he said, of my worst enemy. Myself. My past (he explained). All the stupid things I've done and said, all the lies I told, everything that

makes me cringe or weep when I think of it. You see, everyone I ever knew is dead, so there's no witnesses. Only I know the truth, and my memory's so bad these days, I can't rely on it worth a damn. So, all the bad things, for all I know, they may never have happened. And that (he said) is freedom.

History, science, scholarship; the art of extracting the truth from unreliable witnesses. Nine times out of ten, the best you can hope to do is make out a case that convinces on the balance of probabilities. Your jury—fellow-scholars, minded and motivated just like you—will be persuaded by the most plausible argument, the most probable version. Thus we create a model of the past governed by common sense, rational thought, considered actions, reasonable motives. Now think about the decisions you've made and some of the things you've done over the years.

History, therefore, will have every right to be sceptical about my account of the destruction of the Aeneas manuscript. No sane man, history would argue, would do something like that for such a reason. Logically, therefore, Carchedonius could only have done such a thing if he was insane. Indeed; and it's proverbial among historians that if your argument depends on such and such a key player being insane, it's probably untrue or at least deeply unsound. Go away and think of a more plausible explanation, we say. Insanity just isn't that common.

We've now reached the point in this narrative at which I can justifiably start talking about myself. From now on, my actions and their consequences are significant enough to be worth recording. I am, of course, an unreliable witness, simply because most of what I'm about to assert can't be proved by reference to external sources. You'll have to form your own judgement of my professed motives and the credibility of my account. That doesn't bother me unduly. I invite an appropriate degree of healthy scepticism. Besides, I'm presumably dead by now, and out of it, and so I couldn't really give a damn.

As it happens, I don't remember much about the week after Carchedonius burned the manuscript. People tell me I was wandering around in a sort of daze, either not answering or biting people's heads off when they spoke to me. Everyone assumed there'd been a death in the family.

No such luck. For what it's worth, I hadn't spoken to my mother since my father's trial. She seemed to think that I could've done something. I have no idea what she had in mind. Perhaps she thought I could pull Essecuivo out of my sleeve like a conjuror. The last I heard of my brother, he was in Mescarel, trying to sell diamonds and small, high-value works of art in a seriously flooded market. Either of them, or any of my relatives—I'd have shed a tear, of course, but life would have gone on. The *True Discovery*, on the other hand, was another matter entirely.

The eighth night after the burning, I was sitting in my rooms. I had a copy of Vabalathus' *Late Voyages* open on my desk; I was chasing down an obscure reference that might be taken as evidence to support the view that Essecuivo's climate was temperate enough to support olive trees. Ridiculous; I knew they had olives in Essecuivo, because Aeneas had written about them in the book. But the garbled fragment in Vabalathus was open to at least two other interpretations, which meant I couldn't substantiate my hypothesis, which meant that I had no solid foundation for my assertion that Essecuivo must lie below 62 degrees, the upper limit of cultivation of the olive. I was tempted to throw Vabalathus on the fire, except that for some reason I hadn't lit one for the past eight days. Stupid; it was just starting to get cold.

That made me realise that I couldn't go on. It was as though I'd reached an impassable barrier; a river in spate, a ravine, the sea. I could see where I wanted to go all too clearly. I could smell the woodsmoke, and hear the voices of children playing. But, having come so very far, I couldn't cross the last hundred yards. I didn't have enough provisions to go back the way I'd come. I was stranded.

The hell with that. I poured myself a large dose of brandy and made myself think long and hard about the nature of truth.

Take, for example, the concept *authenticity*. It's crucial, seminal, to the business of scholarship. However, like, say, brandy, it can tolerate a certain degree of dilution. A translation, for example; the words you read aren't the words the author wrote, but a translation can be allowed to possess qualified authenticity. Quotation and reporting; a substantial part of what we do is picking out nuggets of lost texts from the works of later authors who've quoted from them. Source-hunting, a favourite academic pastime; read a historian and try and figure out which of his facts and assertions were copied out from the earlier authority A (held to be accurate and reliable) and which were taken from B, who's generally believed to have made it up as he went along. Manuscript tradition; we have very few very old manuscripts. Most of the works of the great authors of classical antiquity exist only in the form of later editions, copies of copies of copies of copies of the original. As soon as a page is translated, quoted, edited, it ceases to be truly authentic. But the snippet of Archelaus I'd been looking for in my relatively modern edition of Rocais' translation of Vabalathus' *New Voyages* was, by all relevant criteria, authentic *enough*; and if only it had said what I wanted it to say, I'd have adduced it as proof of my assertions without a moment's hesitation.

Well, then.

First, I needed something to write on. That wasn't too hard. There's plenty of three-hundred year old parchment around, if you know where to look. Fortuitously, I have a cousin who's a lawyer. In the cool, dry cellar under his place of business there are thousands of packets of title deeds, many of them so old as to have lost any semblance of relevance years and years ago. I made up some story and he gave me a Deed of Rectification—something

to do with sorting out a boundary dispute between two neighbours who subsequently both sold out to a third party, rendering the Deed entirely obsolete—which bore the countersignature of a Council official who'd been in office the year after Aeneas Peregrinus came back from Essecuivo. Perfect. How much more authentic can you get?

Back then, they used soot and oak-apple gall, ground fine, for ink. It comes off quite cleanly if you damp the parchment slightly and rub it down with a pumice stone. Naturally, you lose a tiny amount of thickness, but that's not a problem; six out of ten old documents you come across have been written on pumiced-off parchment. The stuff cost money, after all, and people were thriftier back then. In fact, it was entirely in keeping with what we know about Aeneas that he'd have used second-hand parchment. He didn't, in fact, but he could have. Should have, even.

Soot-and-oak-apple-gall ink is no trouble to make, if you happen to have read Theogenes' *On Various Arts*; it's two centuries earlier than Aeneas, but nothing much changed in the intervening time. There's a fine old oak in the Studium grounds that's been there for at least two hundred and fifty years. It still drops acorns. Attention to detail, you see. Authenticity. For soot, I climbed up onto the leaded roof of the Old Hall and scrabbled around inside the chimney-cowls. I mined deep and came up with a rich vein of soot that could well have been there since Aeneas was a lad. I'm not sure I needed to go that far, but if a thing's worth doing—

Style and handwriting. No problem. After all, I'm the world's leading authority. If someone wanted to authenticate a piece of writing attributed to Aeneas, they'd come to me. Also, I've always had a gift for copying other people's handwriting. Because my father was less than generous with my living allowance when I was an undergraduate at the Studium, I was forced to make ends meet by reproducing his signature on Company bills of exchange. Now my father's handwriting was so bad that

occasionally *his* bills were questioned by the clerks, but all of mine were cleared without question.

I made a trip to Corytona, where they've got two of the surviving Aeneas letters, and studied them carefully. I knew for a fact that Aeneas had written his book using a pen with a newfangled (at that time) steel nib. But most authorities agree that steel nibs didn't come in to general use for another twenty years or so, so I used an ordinary goose-quill.

Carmine, for the red illuminated capitals, was a serious headache. Back then, they made it by crushing dried beetles—not just any beetle, but a special kind only found in Maracanto, which is why it was expensive, which is why it was so fashionable as a decoration in manuscripts. These days we get carmine from grinding up a sort of rock they find at certain levels in the mines. Everyone says you can't tell the difference. I can't. But by that stage I was in no mood to take chances. Also, I felt a sort of *obligation*. If what I was doing was justified and right, it had to be done *properly*. As luck would have it, in the chemistry stores in the East Building, where nobody goes any more, I found a tiny, dusty old bottle containing six shrivelled, desiccated carmine beetles. For all I know, they could well have been there for three hundred years. With Theogenes open in front of me on the bench, I pounded them very carefully in a pestle, added the other bits and pieces, and came up with a beautiful deep red paste. Genuine authentic carmine ink.

Unfortunately, authentic genuine carmine ink fades over time. The colour I'd seen in the manuscript that Carchedonius had burned was more a sort of reddish-pink. As far as I know, there's no way of artificially fading the stuff. In the end, I had to mix in finely-ground barley flour and a few drops of aqua orientalis, which gave me precisely the colour I wanted. It wasn't right, of course. It was an entirely authentic, genuine and period-correct reddish-pink (the recipe is in Theogenes) and therefore, inevitably, a lie. I felt very bad about that, but really, I had no alternative.

As for the words themselves; once again, I was in the invaluable position of being the acknowledged expert. I've read every surviving word Aeneas wrote, many times. I know his turns of phrase, his verbal eccentricities, the rhythms and cadences, the pet phrases. That, and I have a really good memory for the written word; if I read something through once, I can usually regurgitate large chunks of it weeks or even months later. From my reading of the *True Discovery* I guess I could remember about a third of it word-perfect. I got that down on paper straight away, then set about filling in the gaps. As far as content goes, I was on pretty firm ground, since so much of what I'd seen in the manuscript was little more than a pre-emptive paraphrase of my own various papers, essays and dissertations. There were one or two things in the original that I couldn't recall clearly or accurately enough to feel safe about including them, so, reluctantly, I left them out. I resisted the temptation to put in stuff from my own research that Aeneas had somehow neglected to include. I was proud of myself for that. I can see how easy it must be for a diplomat, say, or a commercial agent to overstep his authority in the heat of negotiations. I'd have loved to have put in my pet theory about the little cedarwood box full of crumbly red dust preserved in the archives of the Serio-Beselli at Anax; the family tradition says it was brought back by Aeneas' ship's doctor, and I'm convinced it's a sample of rottenstone (whose properties were unknown until shortly after Aeneas' return). It'd have been so easy to drop a casual mention of rottenstone, and how my friend the surgeon brought some home with him in a small box. That's just the sort of throwaway anecdote Aeneas goes in for. But no. That would've been wrong, I'd never have forgiven myself.

From start to finish, recreating the manuscript took me seven weeks. I then put it up in the rafters in the roofspace above the Great Hall kitchens; there's a flaw in the chimney lining, and smoke gets in there. Also, the air up there is very slightly damp and greasy. I've noticed that old manuscripts are

often a bit clammy to the touch; the *True Discourse* hadn't been, but I needed a provenance. It had to be something to do with the niece—after all, that had been what actually happened, and the manuscript tradition is in itself a valid subject for scholarship—but I couldn't think of a convincing way of explaining how I'd got hold of something from the Dorcelli auction. After all, the auctioneer's clerk would have records of who'd bought what, and my name would be conspicuously absent from it. That meant I'd have to invent a fictitious middleman, or else suborn a dealer in old manuscripts as an accomplice, which I was very reluctant to do. Instead, I decided to work backwards from a passing reference in the Ancusi diaries, which I'd known about for years but never gone into properly; Ortygia Ancusa, about a hundred and seventy years ago, talked about visiting the Dorcelli and expressing interest in some old maps and charts, which Lollius Dorcellus gave her as a gift. Ortygia was an amateur Essecuivo scholar (not a very good one). My theory would therefore be that the bundle of old maps that Lollius gave her included the *True Discourse*. It works, because Ortygia died of pneumonia not long after the visit, so wouldn't have had time to go through the papers she'd been given and recognise the *True Discourse* for what it was. The papers would've been bundled away in the house archive and forgotten about. I'd been given permission to go through the Ancusi papers several years ago, but never got around to it; I happen to know, however, that the bulk of the archive is stored in a loft directly above the main kitchens.

All right, answer me this. If the person you loved the most in the whole world died, and you somehow managed to catch that person's soul in a bottle; and suppose you then went round all the graveyards, digging up the newly-buried bodies, carefully choosing a part here and a part there; and suppose you could stitch all the bits together so skilfully that it didn't show; suppose you'd built a body that looked so exactly like the person you'd loved that even you couldn't tell them apart; and you sucked the soul

out of the bottle and blew it into the composite body's mouth and brought it back to life—

Well?

I CONFESS I was looking forward to meeting Carchedonius again, though I didn't go out of my way. I didn't have to wait too long. He was there as a guest when I was awarded the Imperial Medal. I wasn't surprised to see him there. I'd insisted his name was on the guest list.

He was standing in a corner. That was what he did, at any kind of social gathering. I walked up to him and smiled. He gave me a long, grim look.

"Congratulations," he said.

Not quite what I was expecting. "Thank you."

I was prepared for anger (prepared? I was looking forward to it) but not to that degree of intensity. It took me a moment to decode it. He wasn't angry with me. He was absolutely furious with the entire world.

"I've got to hand it to you," he said. (He was wearing his green-with-age black Matriculation gown, over a shirt with frayed cuffs and flogged-out black boots that would've been very expensive twenty years ago. The rest of us were in frock-coats and lace ruffs. I think he was trying to look genuine.) "You're lucky."

I frowned. "Am I?"

It was rather frightening, watching him keep the anger down. I could see, it wanted to flow into his arms and hands, but he was keeping it bottled up in his head. "Oh, I grant you, it was a masterly piece of scholarship. You followed a clue the rest of us had overlooked, and it led you straight to the prize. I'm not for one moment suggesting you didn't deserve the medal."

I was puzzled by that. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, you did. You do. If you look at the nomination papers, I'm the fourth signature from the top." He paused to take a

very deep breath; I could see him exploding, if he wasn't careful. "What I never anticipated was that there could possibly be a second manuscript." He gave me a three-second glare. "Now that's luck."

I could've burst out laughing. Instead, I nodded my head towards the door. "Come outside," I said. "I need to tell you something."

He shrugged and followed me. Outside, it was dark and just starting to spot with fine rain. "Well?"

I told him.

For a moment, I was sure he was going to attack me. I was worried. As a boy I learned fencing—good at it, though I hated it—but that's as close as I've ever got to anything in the way of physical violence. I'm taller than he is, but he's got arms like a bear. No idea why, since he's been a scholar all his adult life.

"You faked it."

I nodded.

"I see." I could almost hear him think. He was having trouble keeping his mind clear, because of the anger. "And of course I can't tell anyone, because then I'd have to explain how I know."

"That's the general idea."

Suddenly he went blank. "I examined it," he said. "My first thought was, it's a fake, he's got someone to forge a copy for him." Then he frowned; puzzled. "But it's perfect," he said.

"Thank you."

"Who did you—?"

"I did. Myself."

"Good God." He raised both eyebrows. "Seriously?"

"Of course. You don't think I'd be stupid enough to trust an accomplice."

"The capitals," he said. "You can't fade red carmine."

"I used Theogenes' recipe for pink."

I could tell from his face he'd never have thought of that. "Congratulations," he said. "I'm impressed. I never imagined you had a creative streak."

"Hardly that. That's the point. I didn't invent anything. I just copied."

He shook his head. "I've always wanted to be able to draw and paint, that sort of thing. But I'm useless at it. You could be an artist."

"I've never wanted to be anything else but what I am."

I've never seen so much contempt on a human face. He moved his head so he didn't have to look at me. I felt I had to defend myself, even though I'd so obviously beaten him. "It's not so different from how all the classics survived," I said. "The original is lost, but someone made a copy. If you look past the immediate deception, the end product is as authentic as the Gigliami Codex. In a thousand years it'd be just a footnote in the manuscript tradition, if anyone ever knew."

The blank look was back. "Last month I was offered the chair at Euphrosyne," he said. "It's more money, and I'd be head of department. I think I'll accept."

I was stunned. Euphrosyne. I imagine there must be people up there who can read—a few of them, clerks and customs officials—but Euphrosyne, after the Studium. It'd be like starving yourself to death over the course of thirty years. "Why?"

"Because you've won," he said. Then he turned and walked away, and I've never seen him since.

WHO WAS IT said that the only thing sadder than a battle lost is a battle won? Not my period, so I'm not going to bother checking the reference. Anyway, it's garbage. Once you've got past the initial frisson of guilt, victory is wonderful.

I had every reason to be pleased with myself. Faced by a reverse which would've broken most men in my position, I'd rallied and struck back. I'd routed the enemy, and my cause had been just. As a result, I was feted and lionised; promoted to the vacant Gorgias chair of commercial history, elected to Chapter,

honorary doctorates from a slew of provincial universities; rock-solid tenure, more money, better lodgings, reduced teaching duties leaving me more time for research. True, the victory I was being rewarded for wasn't quite the victory I'd actually won, but you don't have to go too far back to find precedents of the very highest quality. After all, everybody says it was Palaechorus who defeated the White Horde. Garbage. He was a thousand miles away at the time, busily breaking down the Sueno bridges so the Aram Chantat couldn't get across. He saved the Republic, no possible doubt about that, but not in the way the man in the street thinks he did.

The only negative aspect to total victory is that once you've achieved it, the war is over. Having spent my adult life trying to recreate the lost manuscript of Aeneas Peregrinus, I was in the depressing situation of having succeeded, totally. The question *now what?* was written across the top of every new day, and I found it rather hard to answer. Of course, I didn't have to do *anything*. That's the point of being the Gorgias professor. You don't have to teach or publish, all you're called on to do is lounge around looking wise, maybe as a special favour explaining to selected admirers just how very clever you used to be. Gorgias professors are usually men in their mid seventies. At that time, I was thirty-seven.

"THE DUKE," SHE said, "would like to meet you."

I bet he would, I thought. Who wouldn't? "It'd be an honour," I said. I didn't specify who for.

"Fine," she said briskly, "I'll set something up. He wants to move quickly, so make sure you're available."

"That shouldn't be a problem," I said. "I'll have finished the paper for the General Conclave by this time next week, and then I'd better get something down for the Alixes Lecture, but after that, I should be—"

"No," she said. "This is important."

I'd have engaged her in a discussion of the true meaning of the word *important*, but just then we heard her husband's voice down below in the entrance hall. Her room has a balcony, and there's a hundred-year-old grapevine on that wall. I hate climbing.

THE DUKE CAME to see me. Appreciate the significance. He came to me. An honour. One I could have done without.

I was in my rooms, as usual. For some reason, I was spending a lot of time there, in the book room, at my desk, just sitting. I had one oil-lamp—the habits of a lifetime of frugality die hard—and Diodorus' *General Discourse* open in front of me. In theory I was chasing down a reference, but really I think I was doing what the wild boar do in the woods; building a nest where I could curl up during the hours of daylight and not be seen.

There was a bang on the door, and before I could get up, it flew open and two kettlehats came bursting in. I assumed they were there to arrest me. Naturally I froze. But they stopped and took up position on either side of the doorframe, and the duke came in.

It wasn't so long ago that everywhere you looked, there was a portrait. As a scholar, I can tell you that ninety per cent of them are copies of the Treblaeus portrait, which used to hang in the atrium of the House chapel. I could also be very interesting about the subtle changes in the iconography of the mass-circulation portraits—the significance of the white rose in the top left field, or the changes in the political undercurrents that led to the wren perched on the windowsill quietly metamorphosing into a robin. The duke himself was, of course, an artefact, a thing created, reinvented, adapted and updated, until by the time I met him there's a plausible argument for saying that he was pretty much a forgery of himself. Bear in mind, this was just after the Secession debate but before the

White Glove scandal. The duke had lost about a third of what he'd owned or controlled at the height of his ascendency, but he was still the second richest and third most powerful man in the Republic. People like that are generally too big to fit inside rooms like mine, even if they are only five feet tall.

No, you don't see that in the portraits, but it's true. What the Invincible Sun had in mind when he made him that way, I have no idea. In the paintings you see what's essentially the perfect human being; classical proportions, perfect muscle tone if it happens to be a Classical or post-Mannerist portrait, and the face of an emperor off the old coinage, back when the die-cutters really knew what they were doing. Naturally people assume that in real life he looked nothing at all like that. Not true. The portraits are for the most part surprisingly accurate; authentic, genuine copies of the original. Except that he was five feet tall, which meant, when I rose to greet him, he just about came up to my shoulder.

"Please," I said. "Sit down."

He didn't move, and I realised that the only other chair in the room was piled up with books. I grabbed them and spilled them on the floor. It was the gesture of an idiot. He sat down. I looked round for something to offer him, but both decanters were empty, which was probably just as well.

I sat down opposite him, with the desk between us, for all the world as though he was a student in a tutorial. Just like a student, he sat there still and quiet—I hate it when they do that; I'm not one of your natural showmen. I never really know where to start.

I cleared my throat. "What can I do for you?" I said.

He looked at me. His nose really was quite thin at the bridge, as in the Corolles portrait. Treblaeus, of course, got round that by painting him three-quarter face; how to lie and tell the truth at the same time. "Allow me to congratulate you," he said.

What the hell was I supposed to say to that? "Thank you."

He slid his elbows out onto the arms of the chair. It should have been a magnificent gesture denoting confidence and power,

but the chair was my father's, and he was a big man. Therefore, the arms were a bit too wide apart, and made the duke look like a chicken. Of course, there's never a mirror when you need one. "As you may know," he went on, "I've been a keen amateur student of the Essecuivo question for many years. I've read your work on the subject. I find it impressive."

The Invincible Sun leans down out of the clouds, pats you on the head and says *well done*. That's nice, and you hope he'll go away quickly. But the duke had settled in my chair like a besieging army. I kept my face shut. He peered at the books on the shelf opposite, then looked back at me. "The manuscript," he said. "A triumph."

"Thank you."

"I've taken the liberty of bringing it with me."

Now that really did knock me sideways. When I discovered it in the Ancusi archives, quite naturally they went berserk. The thought that something like that, something worth such a very, very large sum of money, had been sitting in their damp loft for three hundred years drove them wild. They moved it to the jewellery safe, hired forty armed guards and immediately opened negotiations with the Treasury with a view to making sure this priceless treasure stayed in the Republic. I believe the discussions stalled at two hundred thousand angels. Meanwhile, apart from me and scholars with my personal accreditation, *nobody* was allowed near it.

Almost nobody. He wiggled a fingertip, and a third kettlehat I hadn't even noticed sprang forward holding a silver-gilt tube. It was a real work of art, embossed with Essecuivo personified handing a cornucopia to the Spirit of the Republic. He must've had it made specially, probably overnight.

The kettlehat made a show of pulling on a pair of brand new white cotton gloves. Then he brushed all my books and papers off the desk onto the floor—the duke gave him a dirty look for that, but I don't see what else the poor man could've done—opened the tube and laid my manuscript out on the desk.

Not the first time it had been there, of course. In fact, I'd grown used to seeing it there, while I was making it, and I had to tell myself, this is the first time it's left the Ancusi, this is a special moment. It felt strange, though; like being formally introduced to your son and having to pretend you don't know him.

"Now then." The duke put his hand inside his coat and produced a pair of gold-framed pince-nez. I was stunned. As soon as he put them on, he changed out of all recognition. "Ah yes." He'd thrust his hand out over the parchment; he was touching it, no white cotton gloves. I was appalled. How dare he. Not appalled enough, mind you, to say anything.

He looked up at me. "No map reference," he said.

"No."

"Which I confess I found rather strange." He took the pince-nez off and put them down *on the manuscript*. I twitched, but kept still. I could see the kettlehats watching me. In their line of work, of course, you have to be able to interpret the smallest warning signs. "Because in the *Navigation*, Aeneas explicitly states that he calculated the co-ordinates of Essecuivo in order to plot his course home."

Not true, in fact. He implies, but doesn't state. For some reason, I didn't put him straight.

"Therefore," he went on, "you would expect to find detailed map references in the manuscript."

Pause. My cue. I nodded.

He leaned back in the chair. It made a sort of soft creaking noise. Like I said, my father was a big man and he used to tip it onto its back legs. There's only so much abuse tenons and wood glue can stand. I prayed to the Invincible Sun without moving my lips. "I've been studying Aeneas—in an entirely amateur capacity, of course—for twenty years," he went on, "during which time I evolved a theory of my own about the circumstances in which this book was written, and the reason why it wasn't with the rest of Aeneas' papers at his death. Would you care to hear it?"

"Oh yes."

He smiled. I'd said the right thing.

Shortly after his return from Essecuivo (the duke said), Aeneas quarrelled with his son Dives. The cause of the disagreement was Dives' refusal to marry the daughter of a neighbouring landowner, a match desirable for dynastic and territorial reasons but not to Dives' taste, since his affections were engaged elsewhere. This quarrel is evidenced by passing references in the letters of the neighbouring family, which had lain in obscurity for centuries until the duke, whose tenants the family were, recognised their importance. (He had brought along transcripts for me to see; he'd even had them notarised, so I'd know they were genuine) As a result of the quarrel, Aeneas took legal advice from the leading lawyer of the day (whose files the duke had been allowed to see, since the lawyer's descendants acted for him in property transactions) and was told that although he couldn't prevent his son from inheriting all his land and real property, because of a complex entail I didn't really understand, he was at liberty to disinherit him with regard to movable goods, ready money and choses in action—

Choses in action (the duke seemed disappointed that I needed to ask) means valuable but insubstantial assets—debts, promises to pay, the benefit of contracts, that sort of thing. Aeneas' principal chose in action was, of course, his knowledge of the whereabouts of Essecuivo. Not only was this knowledge valuable as a potential resource, it had immediate value in that Aeneas had entered into a partnership with six leading merchants (exhibit three; a notarised copy of the agreement) for the exploitation of Essecuivo and division of the profits. Aeneas was to get sixty-six per cent of the net, but he hadn't put in any money. Instead, he'd agreed to disclose the map reference.

From what he knew of his partners, so he told his lawyer, he didn't trust them to honour the agreement. They were perfectly capable, if they contrived to find the co-ordinates from some other source, of cutting him out and keeping all the profits themselves. Furthermore, they would have no scruples about

suborning Aeneas' clerks, servants or even family members in order to get the information they needed.

Therefore (the duke went on) Aeneas had a very good reason for not committing the co-ordinates to paper, or at least not in any document liable to be read by anyone he couldn't absolutely trust—into which category his son no longer fell. On the other hand, it would have been the height of folly to rely on his memory alone. He had to write it down, but in such a form that only he would be able to read it. In other words, he'd have written it in code.

(I wanted to object at this point, but I got looked at and decided not to.)

As I myself had proved (the duke went on) Aeneas gave the manuscript to his niece; a silly, frivolous girl, according to the traditions of the family she married into; just the sort of featherbrain who'd let her cousin Dives look at or even take away the manuscript if he asked her nicely enough. And yet, where else would the co-ordinates be but in the book itself? Aeneas had written it principally as an aide-memoire—not for publication, since the information it contained needed to be kept secret, because of his agreement with his partners. Therefore the coded information must be in the text somewhere.

And that, the duke said, was as far as he'd been able to go without the manuscript itself; except for one final fragment, which he'd come across two years ago in the library of the Connani.

(I couldn't help myself. "The Connani let you look at their archives?"

He frowned. "Of course."

"Scholars have been trying to get access for *centuries*."

He looked at me down that long, thin nose. "Well," he said. "They're quite particular about that sort of thing.")

He'd found a letter—notarised copy herewith—from Manius Connanus to a friend of his I'd never heard of, some long-forgotten country squire, in which he mentioned in passing that his cousin Orthosius had lent the services of one of his

clerks, a specialist in illuminated lettering, to none other than the celebrated Aeneas Peregrinus—you know, the bounder who came back from abroad with all that money. For some unexplained reason, Peregrinus was obsessed with finding a clerk of unimpeachable integrity and discretion, bribe-, blackmail- and threat-proof; Orthosius' man had been with the family for fifty years, and Orthosius owed Aeneas rather a lot of money. In exchange for a day of the clerk's time, Aeneas forgave Orthosius the debt. What an odd thing to do, can you credit it &c.

"AND THAT," THE duke said, his voice suddenly urgent, "was the clue I'd been looking for. Suddenly it all made sense."

I was still reeling from all of that. Fury at the thought that there was all that wonderful Aeneas material out there, and the selfishness and arrogance of the aristocracy had kept me from knowing it even existed; pure unalloyed lust at the thought of the paper I could write, if only I could persuade the duke to leave those notarised copies with me. "Excuse me?" I said.

"The capitals," the duke said impatiently—surely I'd figured it out for myself, a clever fellow like me. "The red illuminated capital letters at the start of each paragraph." He scowled at me, the way my tutors used to do when I was being particularly slow on the uptake. "I don't need to remind you of all people of the intense interest in numerology in educated circles at that time."

He was quite right, of course. In Aeneas' day, it was the latest fashion. Society necromancers would tell you your fortune by adding up the numerical value of your name—A is one, B is two and so on—adding it to your birthdate, subtracting your eldest child's middle name, multiplying by the distance in miles between your birthplace and the Golden Temple—whatever it took, in fact, to arrive at an auspicious number which would enable the soothsayer to give you the fortune you wanted in the first place. I believe they still go in for it now in the country.

And yes, just the sort of thing Aeneas would've been interested in. He had a superstitious streak (black cats, magpies, all that nonsense) and just enough of the scientific mindset to make him an easy touch for all the astrologers, alchemists, metaphysicians and other chancers who passed for scientists in those days. Now I came to think of it, he owned Priscian's *True Mirror*, Stellianus' *Many & Diverse Arts* and a couple of other numerological texts; they're mentioned in an inventory made just before he sailed. Of course, the duke must've known that.

Even so. "Excuse me?"

He sighed. "I believe," he said, "that if you were to find the numerical values of the illuminated capitals in the manuscript, taken together they'd prove to be the co-ordinates of Essecuivo—hidden, you might say, in plain sight. Why else would he hire a scribe specialising in illuminated capitals, at extraordinary expense, insisting on a man of flawless integrity?" He paused, watching me like a terrier beside a hayrick. "Well?"

The true horror of my position broke in on me like the dawn. For one thing, I wouldn't be at all surprised if he was right—in which case, he'd pulled off a coup of scholarship I'd have gladly sold my soul for a few weeks earlier. As a scholar, I could feel the excitement bubbling up inside me, in spite of everything. I was also acutely aware that the illuminated capitals in the manuscript, so painstakingly created using only the finest and most authentic materials, had been chosen by me—not exactly at random, but the effect was bound to be the same.

"Well?" he repeated.

At that moment I longed for a counterargument. All through my academic life, I've had a special knack of being able to come up with quibbles, objections, plausible doubts, even when I know the hypothesis I'm arguing against is rock-solid correct. It's a gift to which I owe my rapid advancement, a weapon I've used unsparingly against better men who happen to be marginally less mentally agile than me. And now, at the moment when I needed it most, it deserted me.

I did my best. I called into question the reliability of the sources, the value of hearsay evidence, the timings, the prosopography, certain fine points of semantic interpretation. The duke fended off each attack with the calm patience of a master, supporting each refutation with arguments and citations that made me all the more convinced that he was perfectly correct. After half an hour of this sorry performance, he'd backed me into a corner and I could dodge and weave no longer. I surrendered as gracefully as I could, and he actually smiled at me.

"Thank you," he said. "As you know, I place the highest possible value on your opinion. If, as you say, you feel that I have made out a case to answer—"

I nodded heavily. He nodded back. We understood each other.

"In that case." He picked up his pince-nez and fitted them solidly to his nose. "I suggest we proceed. Would you happen to have a pen and something to write on?"

A voice, a calm and beautiful voice, spoke to me in the back of my head just then. It said; Have no fear, the numbers he comes up with will turn out to be a meaningless jumble, whereupon he'll sadly conclude that his theory was wrong after all, he'll go away and never bother you again. It was the sort of voice, speaking in the sort of quiet, calmly reassuring way, that you instinctively trust. I passed him a pen (I very nearly gave him the goose-quill I'd used for my forgery; it was nearer, in the drawer of my desk) and an inkwell and a whole half-sheet of brand new pressed-linen paper. He wrote very much in the manner of a time-served clerk or scrivener, not looking down at his hand as he moved the pen, peering down at the figures through the top half of his pince-nez. But he pressed too hard, and bent my best Capo Latto nib.

Then he did the calculations; first in his head, then by writing out the alphabet with a number next to each letter. He'd made one mistake the first time. He wrote the result at the bottom of the page. I have to admit, it did look remarkably like a map reference; the right number of digits, and the appropriate order of

magnitude. That gave me a twinge in the pit of my stomach, but I thought, So what? So much the better. He'll be happy, and go away, and when he gets home and looks at a map and sees there's no such place, he'll be in no hurry to advertise his failure. No more will be said about it, and everything will be fine.

"Would you have such a thing," he asked, "as a map of the world?"

I stared at him. Of course, in the circles he was used to moving in, it was probably a perfectly reasonable request. I've been to great houses where they have such things painted on walls, with the stars and constellations on the ceiling to match. "I'm afraid not," I said.

He frowned, then his eyebrows shot up. "The map room," he said.

Oh, I thought. The Studium does, of course, have as fine a collection of maps as you'll find anywhere. I floundered. "It'll be locked up for the night," I said. He didn't need to remind me that I was a senior member of the faculty. He just looked at me briefly. "I'll go and get the key from the porter," I said.

You will never have seen the map room. I'd been in there maybe a dozen times, looking up various points to do with my researches. I always think it looks like a giant haberdashery, the walls covered in shelves filled with rolls and bolts of cloth. You take down your roll and spread it out on a twelve-foot table, with heavy ivory and ebony ornaments to keep it from curling back up again. They had a map of the world; in fact, they had sixty-six of them, all subtly different. That's the thing about learning and scholarship. The more you learn, the less you actually know.

He chose Aurunculaeius' Sixth Projection; a mildly unorthodox choice, but the one I'd have made myself, in his position. I didn't ask him why, mostly because I was afraid he'd tell me that I'd argued strongly for it in a paper about three years earlier. For some reason, Aurunculeius chose to mark his latitude and longitude lines in red, and they've faded a bit over the years.

It makes them a trifle hard to follow over the green and brown land, but against the blue sea they're still reasonably clear.

"Here." He was pressing a fingertip on the middle of the Southern Ocean.

There's nothing there, I didn't say; because he'd have pointed out that we were, after all, looking for an undiscovered country. So, naturally, it'd be an empty spot in the middle of the sea. I felt another of those twinges. Why couldn't it have been slap-bang in the middle of the Cian mountains, or the Great Central Desert? But no, the voice told me, that's perfect. He's found himself a plausible spot on a map, he'll go away now. He might even give you money. In any event, it's over and you've survived.

"I wish," he said suddenly, "your father could have lived to see this moment."

I felt as though I'd been punched in the head. "You knew him?"

He shook his head. "Only very slightly," he said. "I visited him twice, when he was in the Citadel."

News to me. But of course he'd have been wonderfully discreet, money would've changed hands, the right people would've looked the other way. I didn't say anything.

"I needed to ask him a few questions about the Company," he went on, and suddenly I remembered. He'd bought it, hadn't he? For a ridiculous amount of money. Presumably it hadn't been a mere whim; he'd been planning it for years, meticulously researching every relevant issue. And so, reasonably enough, he'd been to see my father.

"I liked him," he said. "I believe he was an honest man."

He could have said it to make me like him; but why bother? I felt as though my heart had stopped. "Thank you," I said.

He didn't need my thanks, and he was too well-mannered to say so. "He would have been pleased to know that Essecuivo had been found at last," he went on. "It mattered to him, even in that dreadful place."

Had it? I'd never thought to ask him about it, or even wondered if he'd had an opinion. My father as idealist, dreamer, believer in wonderful lost lands beyond the sea. Not the man I knew, but—it occurred to me then for the first time—I didn't really know him all that well. Only as someone performing the office Father; not as a person, not as a man. But the duke had met him twice, and probably understood him better than I did.

"I have a copy of the Sixth Projection at home." (Well, he would.) "First thing tomorrow, I'll cross-reference with Carchedonius on tides and currents."

That threw me for a moment, until I realised he was talking about Carchedonius the book, not the man. Actually, Carchedonius on tides and currents (properly, *A Discourse On The Practicalities of Sailing To Essecuivo*) is a fine piece of work; he's taken every last scrap of evidence about Aeneas' voyage and compared it to what's known about tides, currents, prevailing winds and all that sort of thing in all the areas where Aeneas might possibly have gone. If I wanted to know whether the freak storm could conceivably have blown Aeneas to the spot on the map the duke's finger was pressed against, Carchedonius is where I'd look.

All I could think of at that moment was how to get rid of him. "I'll have a look at it myself," I said, and realised that it didn't sound right; however, I couldn't face trying to rephrase, and he didn't seem to be listening. I wondered if he'd notice if I simply backed quietly out of the room, and decided not to risk it.

Again, in my hour of greatest need, the little voice came to me. It said, There still isn't a problem. The mad nobleman's got what he wanted, and he's pleased with you. In the morning, Carchedonius will prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Aeneas's ship couldn't have reached this arbitrary intersection of lines, because of the prevailing nor'-easterly trades, or some such nautical gibberish. The duke will then conveniently forget that he ever did anything so undignified as make a mistake, and it'll all be over, and you'll still be Gorgias professor. For now, though,

play along. Pretend to be enthusiastic. There's still time for him to give you money.

"Of course," said the duke, "you'll have a copy of Carchedonius. We'll go and look it up right now."

So we did that; and, as was only to be expected, my enemy betrayed me. Not only was the arbitrary intersection a feasible destination, it was also, on the admittedly limited evidence available, a strong contender. If Aeneas, sailing on his original course, had been caught up in the prevailing south-westerly trade winds, which can reach gale force at that time of year, he'd have been blown at that spot on the map like an arrow from a bow.

The duke smiled, and closed the book. My input wasn't required, so I sat still and quiet. I'd decided I didn't want any money, even if he offered.

"Excellent," he said at last. "Well, I think we have everything we need. Can you be ready to sail in, say, three days?"

I WAS NOT at home to the little voice for quite some time after that. I felt, not unreasonably, that it hadn't advised me well. Indeed, I might have been forgiven for suspecting that it had deliberately led me on, encouraging me to make matters worse for myself. But it kept on whispering quietly, and on the second day I grudgingly allowed it to say its piece.

True, said the voice, you've let yourself in for a long sea voyage, which is never pleasant and can be extremely dangerous. But think; you'll be sailing with the second richest man in the Republic; a man who, like you, has never previously set foot on a ship in his life. You can at least be moderately certain that all the proper preparations will have been made, that the ships and crew will be of the highest quality, and that for the passengers at least, the journey will be made in circumstances of comfort and quite possibly luxury. He's agreed to pay you three hundred angels, which is nice, together with a pro rata share of the

treasure (ah well, never mind). And, when you get there and there's nothing to be seen except empty blue ocean, it won't be your fault. It's a nuisance and a dreadful waste of time, but the chances are you'll survive and come home none the worse.

THE PREPARATIONS—OH, you should've been there.

Our fleet was to consist of five ships—*five*; this one man owned *five* ships. The lead ship, or admiral, was the *Lion*, 400 tons burden, three-masted galleon, seventy guns. Also; the *Lion's Whelp*, 150 tons burden, two-masted ketch, twelve guns; the *Attempt*, 200 tons, frigate-built two-masted brigantine, twelve guns; the *Heron*, 90 tons, two-masted galliot, forty guns, previously the property of the Empire, one of the very few prizes taken by our side during the War; and the *Squirrel*, 90 tons, two-masted sloop, six guns; not the original *Squirrel* but named, for some reason that escaped me, in her honour.

The duke and I, needless to say, would be on the *Lion*, along with sixty men-at-arms, the military stores and most of the gunpowder. The *Attempt* was the supply, carrying nearly all the food and water. The *Whelp* had the tools, surveying equipment, spare masts, lumber, ironmongery and so on. The *Heron* and the *Squirrel*, as far as I could see, were basically just sea-going footmen, their only function being to look impressive and top-and-tail the convoy.

The military stores came first. There was a cart jam in Longacre. Presumably the idea was that, in the event that we were called upon to fight at any stage in the venture, every man in the expedition could be fitted out as an archer, or an arquebusier, or a pikeman, with full black-and-white armour and all the bits and pieces. We had a thousand muskets, best quality; three hundred wheel-lock pistols, at four angels each; eight hundred longbows, six hundred crossbows, something like 400,000 arrows (they're sold by weight, so the precise number wasn't

available), twelve hundred pikes, a thousand swords, Type 18, six hundred swords, Type 15—After a while, I simply didn't want to know. We had a hundred horses—a whole deck on the *Lion*—with hay, oats, rolled barley, all that sort of thing. My thought was that they definitely had horses in Essecuivo—Aeneas says so—and it'd have been much easier to take one small chest full of gold coins and buy horses when we got there, if we needed horses at all. But that, evidently, wasn't the way the duke's mind was working. If (I was beginning to think) it was working at all.

Rather more to my taste was the surveying equipment, though I didn't get a chance to look at it as closely as I'd have liked. I watched them loading it, but mostly it was crated up, and one enormous pine box looks pretty much like another. All I could tell for sure was that there was a lot of it, though not nearly as much, by weight or volume, as the weapons. Another bulk item, which came as a surprise, though a relatively pleasant one, was the musical instruments. I was nearly pushed off the gangplank into the Bay by three strong men carrying between them the biggest spinet I've ever seen in my life, followed by other men with harpsichords, violas, cellos, two harps and a tuba. At least, if we were going to suffer, it wouldn't be in silence.

Most of the food, as I said just now, went on the *Attempt*. But the duke's personal rations travelled aboard the *Lion*, and it took half a day to get them on board and properly stowed. I can appreciate the difficulties the duke's people must've faced. How on earth can you store two hundred bottles of exquisitely fine wine on a ship without running the intolerable risk of them getting shaken up, exposed to potentially lethal extremes of temperature, theft by unauthorised persons and spoilage by seawater? Nobody seems to have considered that until the last moment; so the whole operation had to be suspended while the carpenters converted the front half of the middle deck into an emergency wine cellar.

Don't ask me about the voyage. I wasn't there; at least, my body was, but the rest of me was somewhere else. My body—poor abused, long-suffering flesh—spent three weeks in a tiny box, curled up on a wooden shelf with nothing but a sack stuffed with mouldy feathers between my aching joints and the rough-planed planks. Occasionally someone remembered me and brought me food; rather better food than I'd have had back at High Table, but I didn't want to eat it. Why bother? It wasn't going to stay down very long, and when it came back up again, it just added to the misery.

I don't suppose I missed very much. The sea is, after all, the sea. From time to time I asked the steward if we were nearly there yet, but he only smiled. Once, after a particularly violent episode in the course of which I was repeatedly hurled off the shelf against the side of the box, I asked him if the ship had taken much damage from the storm. "What storm?" he said. I'd have told him about it, but he chose that moment to take the cover off a plate of scrambled eggs, so of course I was sick all over his shoes.

There came a day when the ship seemed to have been sitting still for rather a long time. I didn't mind that in the least. The thing I'd been dreading most about the voyage was boredom; how naive I was, back then. When you've been subjected to twenty-one days of incessant torture, with your guts trying very hard to force their way up through your mouth, a prolonged interval of nothing at all strikes you as the sort of bliss reserved by the Invincible Sun for the blessed elect. In fact, for a while I wondered if I'd died. But no. No such luck.

I was just nerving myself to sit up when the door opened and the duke came in.

He, of course, had proved to be a natural sailor. He'd divided his time between standing on deck looking magnificent in gold

braid and sitting in his cabin doing precise calculations with mathematical instruments. He looked at me and winced, and covered his nose with a linen handkerchief.

"You might care to come up on deck," he said, and left the room.

THE LIGHT HIT me like a hammer as soon as I stuck my head through the hatch.

"Thank you for joining us." I could hear the duke's voice, but all I could see was blinding clouds of orange, yellow and red. "I thought you might like to be present at this extraordinary moment. After all, it's your dream too, and your father's."

He wasn't making any sense. I groped my way forward until my hand connected with something I could hang on to. It proved to be a man's arm. I let go quickly, staggered, and slumped against what turned out to be the mast. The firework display was thinning out a little. I could see the deck of the ship, a clear blue sky, dark blue sea. Nothing extraordinary about that.

"Essecuivo," the duke said.

Don't be silly, I wanted to say, there's nothing out there, just too much sky and water. But he was pointing—to be precise, he was posing for the statue that would presumably one day be cast to commemorate this moment; back straight, side on like an archer drawing, right arm outstretched at right-angles to his body, pointing. At what? I looked. There wasn't anything, apart from a greyish blur of clouds on the horizon.

"Excuse me?" I said.

He didn't reply. There were four or five other men, too clean and well-dressed to be sailors, and they were looking at the clouds too. Humouring the great man, who'd finally flipped. Maybe not.

They weren't clouds. Instead, I was looking at a mountain range, a very long way away. Land.

"Captain," the duke said. "Be so kind as to show our guest the chart."

Meant nothing to me, of course. Lots of pale blue, with pencil lines; some zig-zags, with dates scribbled beside the angles in tiny neat handwriting. The longest line stopped abruptly in the middle of nowhere. Something told me to look up and trace the latitude and longitude.

"Exactly where Aeneas said it would be."

No, I thought. No, please. Not even the Invincible Sun, that incorrigible practical joker, who designed the human digestive and reproductive systems, gave Man the brain of a god and a half the lifespan of a beech tree, could be so cruel, so capricious. I stared, longing for the mountains to be clouds, but they weren't. They were mountains, just like the mountains Aeneas had described, in words that had gone up in smoke on Carchedonius' hearth, that you see as you approach Essecuivo from the northwest; the Aoidus mountains, at the foot of which sits the mighty city of Aos.

No good will come of this, said my little voice. Indeed. There are times when I wonder who's side I'm on.

THE WIND HAD died away completely almost as soon as we came within sight of land. The sails were flat, dead, and the smoke from the galley fire went straight up into the air, like a pine tree.

We sat there for two days. We couldn't quite hear the children's voices or smell the woodsmoke, but we were that close; but not quite close enough to launch a boat and row over. So we sat. The duke managed to keep his composure, but he spent most of the time peering at the distant bump through a colossal brass telescope, which he didn't offer to share. As far as I was concerned, the total stillness of the ocean more than made up for the frustration of being stuck. I was able to eat food, get up and walk about. I found a quiet place on deck not apparently

required for seafaring purposes, snuggled down on a coil of rope, and read a book.

In the small hours of the morning of the third day, the wind got up. I began to suspect that something was wrong when I was thrown off my shelf and bounced off the *ceiling*. I didn't land terribly well, and I was lying there wondering if I'd been killed—I honestly don't know about all that stuff; how are you supposed to know the difference between a fractured skull and a nasty knock?—when someone barged in, dragged me off the floor and bundled me out through the door. I assumed I was being arrested and taken to be executed—it didn't require much imagination to supply a possible reason—but it turned out that we'd been holed on submerged rocks and they needed everybody to work the pump.

Everybody. The duke was there, leaning all his weight on the lever. It didn't seem to be working. It was a while before I noticed, but I remember looking down and not being able to see my knees because they were under water. That made me forget about my poor soft hands and pulled muscles, and I dragged on my allotted area of lever as though I was pulling myself up out of a snake pit. It was only when we stopped that I realised I was so blown I could scarcely breathe.

We pumped until well after dawn, at which point the wind suddenly died away, the ship stopped moving, and we all collapsed like empty clothes for a while. When eventually someone came down to tell us what was going on, the news wasn't good.

The storm had blown us almost to shore. We weren't quite there because the captain and the helmsman had fought like lunatics to keep us back, otherwise we'd have been crunched against the reefs like corn in a mill. The *Lion's Whelp* and the *Attempt* hadn't been so lucky. The lookout had seen them go down, and there wasn't any point looking for survivors. Where the *Squirrel* had got to, nobody knew. The *Heron*, fifty years old and built in the Imperial yards, had bobbed about like a bit of stick on a fast stream and was more or less unharmed. The *Lion*, however,

was looking pretty sick. All three masts had gone (all the spares were in the *Whelp*, remember), she was badly holed below the waterline, two ribs had cracked through and she was only holding together through ignorance and force of habit. There was a chance—say one in ten—of getting her onto the beach, in which case it might have been possible to fix her up if we still had the tools and materials that had gone down in the *Whelp*; but only if we ditched as much superfluous weight as possible. Superfluous weight, in this context, meant the guns, the powder, the horses and their fodder, the arms and armour, the duke's wine, and all personnel not absolutely essential to the handling of the ship.

They had a devil of a job throwing the horses into the sea. They didn't want to go. So we had to hood them, hamstring them and tip them off the side using spars as levers. It took a long time. I was still part of the emergency workforce, though all I was fit for was fetching and carrying spars. I was too tired to think, which was a blessing. We worked all day and well into the night, spurred on by the pleasant thought that the wind could get up again at any time. The duke stayed till early evening before transferring to the *Heron*, which stayed with us through the night. I think I fell asleep standing at the windlass. I woke up in a sort of sprawl on the deck, and every bit of me hurt.

Come dawn, we were stuck again. They'd taken a mast off the *Heron* and jury-rigged it so that, with any luck, it'd get the *Lion* to shore, assuming a very gentle wind in precisely the right direction. Which was what, about halfway through the morning, we got. The ship, what was left of it, sort of slid lazily across the water at more or less walking pace. Just as it got dark, they dropped anchor and lowered the boats. Wherever the hell we were, we'd arrived.

THE DUKE HAD drawn a map while we'd been becalmed, before the storm. It was one of a handful of things he'd managed to take with him, stuffed down the side of his boot. It was based

on Aeneas and the rest of the available material, and if I hadn't known better, I'd have believed in it.

He stood on the beach with this thing in his hands, looking up at the mountains. They took me to him; I was, apparently, necessary. I'd come in on the *Lion*, which very nearly made it all the way, close enough that we were able to get nine-tenths of the passengers and crew off in longboats. The rest were picked up by boats from the *Heron*, which was shallow-bottomed enough to ride in close.

"That," the duke was saying, looking up from his extrapolated map, "must be the Ieria bluffs."

I knew all about them; the foothills of the Aoidus mountains, to which (in Aeneas' day) the suburbs of Aos were just starting to extend. He was measuring distances with a pair of dividers, doing calculations; his lips were moving. I looked for myself, and felt obliged to point something out.

"If that's the Ieria," I said, "where's the city?"

I maintain that it was a valid point. Aos was visible from the ocean; Aeneas saw it on his way in, sailed right up to the splendid granite quay, which stuck out a quarter of a mile into the bay. We'd landed on a sandy beach, and there was nothing man-made to be seen anywhere.

He ignored me. "In that case," he went on, "the mouth of the river should be no more than six hundred yards to our left." He lowered the map and turned his head. I looked with him, and saw, on the surface of the sea, the score-marks and ripples of an undertow. Exactly where he'd said it would be. But; no city.

"Follow me," he said, and we all set off up the beach, the wet sand sucking at our heels. A few minutes later, we were standing beside a fast-flowing river at the point where it emptied out into the sea. The duke looked as though he'd just been personally awarded the Order of Merit by the Invincible Sun, in a gold-and-pearl tiara. "The river," he said. "This is where the piazza used to be."

*Used to be*—I stared at him. That thought hadn't occurred to me.

"I imagine what happened," the duke said, "is that over time the bay silted up and became useless, which is why it was abandoned." He smiled gently. "The circumstances of our own arrival would tend to support that view, don't you think?" He turned aside and poked at the ground with the tip of his sword. "I assume that the piazza is somewhere under the sand here. A pity. I was looking forward to seeing the great bronze statue of the Founder." He shrugged. "Presumably they moved it when they left here, so we'll see it in due course."

I think, as a scholar, that the text of Holy Scripture has been corrupted during the course of manuscript tradition, in some places. For example, I think the famous line should read; Blessed are those that have seen, and still believe.

One of the others started whacking the undergrowth with his sword. I looked at him, and heard the clinking noise of steel on stone. He knelt down, yanking out handfuls of weed and stuff. The duke came and stood behind him. "There," the man said. "Look."

It was worked, finished stone, peeping out between the stubble of hacked-off green shoots.

We searched for an hour or so, but didn't find anything else. Then the captains of the *Lion* and the *Heron* came looking for the duke and led him gently but firmly away. They had to talk, they insisted, about what was to be done.

Basically, we had nearly three hundred people on the beach, the crews of both ships plus the duke's party and the soldiers. There was enough food left on the *Heron* to feed them all once, maybe twice if we all went a little hungry. A hundred and fifty people could probably crowd on board the *Heron* without sinking her, but it'd be a tight squeeze, and obviously she wouldn't be

able to go anywhere like that. Something had to be done about food and shelter. Instructions, please.

The duke wasn't particularly interested. He told them to do whatever they thought fit. Then he left them to it and walked away up the beach, his nose in the map. I wanted to stay and eavesdrop on the captains, but they made it fairly clear that I wasn't needed, so I left them and trotted back to the duke.

He'd found what he reckoned was the point where the main street—so wide, according to Aeneas, that four grand coaches could run side by side without scraping wheels—came down to the harbour. Follow it up—he pointed at the dense forest that swept down off the hills—and we'd come to the Great North Road, which ran from Aos to the capital, Eano, through a narrow pass in the mountains. If we set off straight away, he said, we could be in Eano by noon next day. At Eano, they'd give us all the food and shelter we could ask for, and we could open negotiations for shipping to take us home, or, at the very least, materials to build a ship to carry the rest of our people. I was the leading authority, he said, lifting his head from the map and looking straight at me. What did I think?

(What did I think? Let's see. I thought; this isn't Essecuivo, it can't be. Through a combination of uncanny coincidence and extreme wishful thinking, we've all perceived a resemblance; but, please note, the map the duke is holding was drawn *after we got here*; after he'd spent a long time peering fixatedly at the coast through his monster telescope. The map is therefore not evidence. Discount the map, and we're back to interpretations of the text. For all I know, there may be a thousand bays and natural harbours with rivers running down to them all over the world. Maybe it's an abundant form in nature, something you always get wherever there's a confluence of certain factors—estuary plus mountains plus prevailing winds and certain sorts of tides equals

something more or less like this. Therefore, the professor regrets to inform you that your hypothesis has not been adequately proved and your paper cannot be accepted for publication.

And whether or not it's Essecuivo, unless we find some food and somewhere to shelter, we're going to *die*. If we go plunging into the forest, instead of digging for turtles' eggs or whatever the hell it is people do, we'll lose our little snippet of time, and we'll starve.

If I explain, perhaps he'll listen.

If—)

We followed the road. To be fair, there was a distinct line through the undergrowth and rubbish; a straight line, of the sort that rarely occurs in nature. And that man had found worked stone. It could once have been a road, at that.

Three hundred yards or so on, the straight line vanished into the trees. The duke had a compass, a beautifully dainty little thing in a silver gilt case, that hung around his neck on a blue silk cord. Eano, according to Aeneas, was thirty-two miles due north of Aos. I salved my conscience by telling myself that we were more likely to find edible animals and birds in the woods than on the beach. I had no basis for such an assertion. I'm not a true scholar.

I'm in no mood to tell you about that walk in the woods. On the first day, someone took a shot at something that could have been some kind of pig. He missed. The noise put up about a million small black birds, which flew off screaming. After that, the only living thing in the woods was us.

We spent the night in a bramble thicket. We chose it as a camp ground because it was too dense to hack a way through

with what little energy we had left. I fell asleep as soon as my back hit its unsatisfactory mattress of crushed brambles, and didn't wake up till somebody kicked me. I'd have let them leave me there, because I ached so much I'd rather have died than try to move, but they wouldn't allow it. Tempers were getting short, and fools weren't being suffered gladly. I did as I was told.

It's usually cooler inside woods than outside them; in which case, I shudder to think what the temperature must've been outside, if there was an outside—for all I know, the forest covered the entire country. In any event, it was savagely hot, and we hadn't brought any water, for the excellent reason that we didn't have anything to carry it in. Around mid-afternoon we stumbled across, nearly fell into a river, of sorts. The duke immediately claimed it was the Aloura. I agreed. I was past caring.

That night was bitter cold. We lit fires, which didn't really do anything. In the morning, about twenty of the men had fevers, stomach cramps, various symptoms. There was no food. We told the sick men we'd come back for them. By nightfall, another thirty-odd were reporting the same symptoms; we left them, too. A part of me, the part that wasn't triple-checking my body temperature every minute or so for the slightest sign of incipient fever, was doing mental arithmetic; fifty from three hundred leaves two-fifty; the *Heron* could carry seventy of us, at a pinch, and still get home. By the next evening, we were down to one-eighty and I was still all right. Now (that little part of me said) if only the duke were to catch this unknown disease and die, we could all—

The duke took ill on the afternoon of the fourth day. We'd stopped because we'd found a huge spread of flat-topped green fungi, which none of us definitely knew to be poisonous. There was a bit of a free-for-all. I'm not big, strong and assertive. I didn't get any. Some people have all the luck.

Over half the fungus-poisoning victims died during the night. By daylight, none of the survivors could move. They were sweating, twitching, bleeding from the nose. The duke

somehow managed to haul himself up against the trunk of a tree, presumably so he wouldn't die sprawled in the leaf-mould. I sat and watched him for about three hours. His breathing was slow and shallow, but he kept on and on doing it. After that I'd had enough. I got up and stumbled off, crashed around in the holly, brambles and brash until my foot caught in something and I fell over. When I opened my eyes, I found I'd landed on top of a big, fat creamy-white fungus, the sort they call Chicken-in-the-woods. You're supposed to cook it first. The hell with that.

By the time I'd finished stuffing my face it was getting dark. I tried to retrace my steps, got completely lost, gave up, looked around for somewhere to sleep and caught sight of a man's feet sticking out from behind a tree. It turned out I'd been going in circles, or a freak storm had blown me off course, or something like that. Anyway, I was back at the camp. I went to look at the duke.

Ninety-six men died from eating the poison mushrooms. The duke survived. By the time I got back he was sitting up straight, the map on his knees, though it was already too dark to read. He looked up at me as I trudged towards him and said, "If I'm right, those hills over there are Cata Ano."

I stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"Cata Ano. Where Aeneas changed horses on the post road to Eano. In which case, Eano is twelve miles dead ahead."

"I've been thinking," I said. "I might head back to the ship."

He smiled at me. "What, and miss all the fun? I don't think so."

"I think I'll go back," I said.

He shrugged. "You'll sail the ship all by yourself back to the Republic," he said. "What an exceptional fellow you are. And on an empty stomach, too."

I didn't tell him about the Chicken-in-the-woods. I said; "I don't think Eano's there any more. If it's the capital, and it's only twelve miles away—"

He raised a hand, and I shut up. "I think I'd like to be proved right before I die," he said. "What about you? Aren't you just a little bit curious?"

I thought; he's going to die, and he's talked himself into believing, so why not let him die happy? But, if we all turned round and went back, maybe we could catch fish or something. If he said go back, they'd go back, wouldn't they? "There's something I need to tell you," I said.

"Really?"

"Yes." And I told him.

I shall never forget the look on his face. Hard to describe. The nearest I can get is, he didn't believe me, and he was deeply puzzled at why I should choose to make up such an improbable story. When I eventually ground to a halt, he gazed at me for a while, then looked down at the map. "From Eano," he said, "we should be able to row down the Pelanaima, assuming we can hire boats, and follow the coast back to Aos. That'll save us having to walk back the way we came."

I shook my head. "You're forgetting," I said. "There's a waterfall at Deudo. Aeneas said it was as high as the steeple of the New Year Temple."

"There'll be a portage," the duke replied.

"Aeneas never mentioned one."

"There'll be one by now," the duke said. "After all, that was three hundred years ago."

So I went looking for someone else in authority. That proved to be difficult. The captains and first mates of both the *Lion* and the *Heron* were dead; three from mushrooms, one from fever. The helmsman of the *Heron* was still alive, but delirious and shouting at people who weren't there. At least that explained why there'd been no mutiny; nobody left to lead it.

I wandered round the camp, counting heads. By now I was feeling considerably better, thanks to the chicken-fungus. I counted sixty-one, of whom probably fifty-eight would still be alive in the morning. Then I sat down under a tree with my head

in my hands and burst into tears. Nobody objected, commented or seemed to notice.

While I was bawling my eyes out, it occurred to me that there was still one high-ranking officer still alive; me. I was, after all, the Gorgias professor of humanities at the Studium, which made me an *ex officio* member of the Lower Conclave and standing delegate to the College of Deacons. I wasn't sure if my jurisdiction extended to the ends of the earth, however. Also, I didn't want to be a leader. It's bad enough dying; dying when it's your fault must be so much worse.

Twice during the night I got up, with the intention of walking away, back down the trail we'd blundered through the forest. I didn't, of course. Too scared. It had all happened so fast—the deaths, the disaster, the sudden falling-apart of everything. I tried to put my finger on the moment when we'd lurched from in control to doomed, but I couldn't. The obvious truth, which I found I couldn't hide from no matter what I did, was that by this point there really wasn't anything I or anyone else could do. There was definitely no hope if I went back. We'd come too far. If we went on—well, who knows? We might just stumble to the edge of the forest, or meet with friendly savages, or kill a very large, stupid, slow-moving, half-witted animal.

In the morning, nobody was in any hurry to move on, not even the duke. We spent a while looking at the dead—we didn't have the energy or the tools to bury them, so we left them where they lay, but we looked at them, as being the only sign of respect we could still afford. Gradually, in twos and threes, we hauled ourselves to our feet, hesitated; then, without orders or words of command, we silently turned to face due north and began picking our way.

I don't know how long we'd been going—the canopy was high and dense, so we rarely saw the sun—when the man next

to me, I never did find out his name, grabbed my shoulder and pointed. He wasn't the only one to have noticed. On the skyline, in a fortuitous gap between the trees, was a human outline, standing straight and perfectly still.

Someone yelled out; we all joined in. The human outline didn't move. We surged forward, howling, pleading. Actually, I'd sort of figured it out before anyone got close enough to see. Accordingly, I slowed down and walked while the others broke into a run.

Aeneas had liked most things he saw in Essecuivo, but he was mildly scathing about their works of art. Their paintings, he said, were simplistic and garishly-coloured, and their sculptures were stiff and unnaturalistic. But, he added, you can't help but be impressed by the sheer size of some of them. There was one, he said, a mile outside Eano on the main road to Aos, an advancing draped female in basalt, that had to be fifteen feet high—

Well, it was too badly weathered and worn to be sure what it was supposed to be, other than a human being, walking forward. We gathered under it, staring up. There was no face. But on the pedestal—too low to catch the wind and sheltered from the rain—was an inscription, in an alphabet I'd never seen before.

The duke crouched down to peer at it, then got up slowly and painfully. "Nearly there," he said.

History demands absolutes. History would like to say that, at three minutes past the tenth hour of the seventeenth day of the sixth month, twelve hundred and seventy-one years after the foundation of the Republic, the duke entered Eano by the west gate. History, of course, is written by people like me.

As a historian, however, I'm at an overwhelming disadvantage. I was there. Accordingly, if I want to cling on to the few tattered scraps of intellectual honesty I have left, I'm forced to say, I don't know. I couldn't tell you what time it was, because

the forest canopy was so high and dense I couldn't see the sun. I can guess at the date, but I suspect I've lost a day somewhere in my recollections; other survivors I've talked to remember another day before we reached the statue, which I have no memory of whatsoever. I can be reasonably sure of the year (but bear in mind Suavonius' recent and highly persuasive paper arguing that the Republic wasn't founded in Year One, but two years earlier). As to where we made our entrance, who knows? We walked between what looked like two ivy-smothered dead trees, which turned out to be the broken stubs of stone columns. The duke reckoned they were the remains of a gate, but for all I know they were the back door of a very large tannery. And as for the name of that city; well, ask someone else. Thanks to my lifetime of exhaustive study, I'm the least qualified man in the world to offer an opinion.

We spent the rest of that day and most of the next wandering round in a sort of daze, like country people on their first trip to town. We tripped over the fallen remains of walls, fell into gutters, cisterns, fountains and what may just possibly have been Aeneas' great central open-air bath (but it was filled with a tangle of vines, briars and creepers, so there was no way of knowing how deep it once was). At one point, we definitely walked across the flat roof of a large building. My guess is that something like twelve feet of leaf-mould had built up over what used to be ground level, so we were at least two storeys high; in which case, we most likely marched straight over the suburbs without knowing they were there. We found about two dozen inscriptions in the same unknown script; the duke was desperate to copy them down, but nobody had a pen or a pencil; someone tried lighting a fire and charring the end of a stick, but it didn't work.

I forget the name of the man who found the window. He was one of the soldiers, a short, cheerful man with the unusual ability to sleep standing up; I'd exchanged a few words with him from time to time, until his optimism got on my nerves. He was poking about in the undergrowth when he came up against what

looked like a huge anthill, except that under all the forest-floor garbage there was stone. He poked some more, and was mildly shocked when his questing boot shattered a pane of glass. The noise brought the rest of us, and we crowded round; there was just a chance, after all, that a relatively intact building might have been used as a food store by people coming this way.

The window proved to be big and round, and when we looked inside, there was just enough light to see that what we'd stumbled across was a rose window in a tower. Someone found a stone and pitched it through. We listened for the sound of it hitting the floor, but there was nothing. Then, just as we'd given up, we heard a faint, distant plink. The soldier stuck his head through as far as it would go, then wriggled back out in a hurry. The stink, he explained, was unbearable. What was down there? No idea. But the window was a very, very long way off the ground, and it was a sheer drop all the way down. If we had a lot of strong rope—But we didn't, and even if we had, we'd have lacked the strength to hold a man's weight, all of us put together.

How much of the city we explored I really couldn't say, because mid-afternoon on the second day we made a discovery that put everything else out of our minds, and accounts for me being here to tell you this story.

It was just as well we had a couple of farm boys with us. They recognised the yellowy-green turd-shaped things dangling from the trees as plantains; a cheap, low-grade animal fodder that we import by the flyboat-load from Scheria. You can eat plantains.

Later, we decided that they must have been the fifth-or sixth-generation descendants of a grove of ornamental plantains (the tree's quite nice to look at, apparently) planted to decorate some public space or building. Mercifully, they'd bred more or less true, which most cultivated fruits don't. What we ate was unripe and decidedly bitter, but somehow or other we rose above that and gorged ourselves till we could barely stand. Then, having learned at least a small part of our lesson in comissariat management, we crammed every pocket and aperture in our clothing

with plantains, strung bunches of plantains together on creepers and slung them over our backs. There were still a few desolate survivors hanging from the trees when we left, but only because they were too high to reach.

Next morning, after we'd slept off the effects of the plantain orgy, we got up and started walking back the way we'd come. Nobody gave an order or made a decision; nobody objected. The feeling was a bit like a theatre at the end of a rather boring play; everybody stands up and slowly files out, not saying much. I'd expected the duke to make a scene; I imagined he'd want to stay and carry on exploring. Maybe he had more sense than I credit him for; if he'd tried to stop us from going back at that point, I don't imagine he'd have lived very long. I don't think so, though. I believe that he found still being alive after his apotheosis moment of entering the lost city came as such an anticlimax that he simply gave up and couldn't be bothered any more. True, the next day he was showing signs of coming back to life. He put himself at the head of our pathetic little column and made a point of leading (which meant we got lost twice). He went round asking everybody who they were, an unfortunate thing to do in the circumstances, since it emerged that of the fifty-four of us still alive, only seven were sailors; and later, two of them died of a resurgence of the unknown fever, along with three others. That only seemed to energise the poor fellow. He started making plans for the five remaining sailors to train the rest of us in the maritime arts, so we'd be able to sail the *Heron* back home. Nobody paid him much attention.

We still had masses of plantains left over when we emerged from the forest into the light, to find ourselves on a shingle beach we'd never seen before. We weren't unduly upset about that. Getting out from under those horrible trees more than made up for being somewhat lost. We spent a night on the beach in more or less total silence; then, at dawn, the duke pointed left up the beach and said, Follow me. We didn't move. He said it again. We stayed put. Then he shrugged and walked

right, down the beach, and we followed. We reached the bay a couple of hours later.

For some reason, I'd spent most of the walk back through the forest trying to prepare myself in advance for the shock of finding that the ship wasn't there any more; that something had happened, it'd sunk or been burnt or carried off by passing buccaneers. Nice, just for once, to be wrong; because as we rounded a headland and saw the bay, there was the *Heron*, drawn up on the beach, exactly where we'd left it. More remarkable still, it wasn't alone.

The crew of the *Squirrel* had had, they told us, a pretty miserable time. The storm that sank the *Whelp* and the *Attempt* and effectively did for the *Lion* had blown them past rather than into the bay, and shoved them into the path of a strong current that swept them two days' sail down the coast. They'd lost their masts, so there wasn't much they could do, until the current eventually petered out, leaving them stuck on a sand bar. The next tide floated them free, and they'd sent the longboat ashore to cut two tall trees to make into new masts. No sooner had these been shaped and fitted than another sudden wind picked them up and threw them back out to sea. They weathered the storm, just about, and slowly picked their way back to shore, only to find the *Heron* beached and deserted, and no sign of life to be seen anywhere. They spent the next day fishing, being fortunate enough to hit a monster shoal of a sort of dark blue sardine; and then we showed up, looking like death; and where the hell was everybody else?

The captain of the *Squirrel* was the son of one of the duke's tenants in Rhiopa; he'd been in the duke's service since he was twelve, and regarded him as a sort of middle-order god. When

the duke put him in charge of the expedition and said he wanted no further part in it, the poor man was temporarily stunned. Once he'd come round, however, he set about sorting out the mess, and by and large he did a pretty good job.

On closer examination, the damage to the *Squirrel* from the various storms proved to be worse than originally thought. Given time and a shipyard, she'd have been fixable. As it was, our new leader decided to abandon her and transfer the lot of us onto the *Heron*. We were short of pretty much everything—sailors, food and worst of all, barrels for storing water—but there didn't seem to be much we could do about it with the resources available. He therefore decided to make a run for home as quickly as possible. Accordingly, at first light the next day, we sailed out of the bay and almost immediately picked up a very useful wind blowing north-west, precisely the direction we wanted. I can't remember seeing anybody look back as we left the coast behind us. The feeling was more one of sneaking away before the bastard woke up and had another go at killing us.

A WORD ABOUT plantains. Don't let the frost get on them, or they spoil and start to rot. Therefore, don't store them in nets on the deck of a ship.

We didn't know that. Accordingly, we ran out of food with at least six days still to go. I remember thinking, how perfectly ridiculous, to have survived so much, only to be killed by a cold snap. The *Squirrel* people tried casting their net, but it kept coming up empty; we were in a sea with no fish, which struck me as entirely in keeping. I'm not sure what we'd have done if we hadn't spotted a sail, far away on the horizon.

Odd, isn't it, how things turn out. If we hadn't lost the *Lion* and the rest of the fleet and all ended up squeezed together into the *Heron*, we wouldn't have been able to sail up to within

boarding distance of an Imperial carrack, bristling with heavy guns and loaded down with nutmeg, mace, pepper, walrus ivory and lapis lazulae. Reasonably enough, they assumed we were the relief escort they'd been told would be meeting them at precisely those co-ordinates to make sure they got home safe without being attacked by privateers from the Republic.

I have a note somewhere of how much the cargo of the *Fortitude and Mercy* made at auction when we got home. To give you a rough idea, the twenty per cent claimed by the Treasury in payment for a retrospective privateering licence amounted to slightly more than the government's entire annual revenue from other sources. The remaining eighty per cent was topsliced to pay off the mortgages the duke had taken out, reimburse him for the entire cost of the expedition and pay the death-in-service benefits of everyone who didn't make it back. The balance was divided pro rata between all the rest of us, the duke taking fifty per cent. I got four hundred and seven angels, which at that time was more money than I'd ever had at one time in my whole life.

I WONDERED ABOUT that. The ocean, after all, is a very big place, and the *Fortitude and Mercy* had made a point of staying well clear of the usual shipping lanes, for obvious reasons. Furthermore, what were the odds against us turning up, in an Imperial ship, at the exact place in all that sea where the carrack was expecting to rendezvous with an Imperial warship? I'm no mathematician, but they can't be very much greater than the odds against finding a new continent or large island at a set of co-ordinates randomly generated by adding a bunch of letter-values together. The fact remains, however, that the *Fortitude and Mercy* was only the fourth largest prize ever taken by Republican privateers; consider the *Roebuck*, the *Flawless Rays of Orthodoxy*, the *White Swan*, all chance encounters, and the biggest haul of all time, the *King of*

*Beasts*, which Orlaeus stumbled into after both ships, following courses over two hundred miles apart, had been caught in a freak storm and carried to within a few hundred yards of each other in the exact centre of nowhere.

Not only was the *Fortitude* laden with treasure. They had salt beef, salt pork, biscuit, flour, fruit, water-casks, even six dozen live chickens (though not, after we'd caught up with them, for very long). Under other circumstances, we'd have been hard put to it to find enough men for a prize crew for a ship so much bigger than our own. As it was, we were able to secure the prize for the journey home and alleviate the overcrowding on the *Heron* at the same time.

From that moment on, things couldn't have gone more smoothly. We had a mild following wind all the way home, the weather was warm, and two of the men who'd been at death's door with the unknown fever quite suddenly snapped out of it and were fine, as soon as we crossed the 17th parallel. By the time we saw the Belltower, the duke was very nearly back to normal. He called me up on deck and gave me a lecture on how, all things considered, the expedition had been a success. We'd found Essecuivo. True, the two cities we'd visited had been abandoned at some point in the three centuries dividing us from Aeneas. There were all sorts of possible reasons for that, all of which he'd be analysing in the book he'd already started to write. But there was no earthly reason to suppose that the entire country was like that; and when we went back again, next year—

"The duke?" she said. "Oh, he's out of it completely. Nobody even mentions him any more."

I had a slight headache. "I thought—"

"The money?" She smiled at me, as if at a simple-minded child. "All gone. As soon as he got back, he took a massive gamble on wheat futures. But it was a record harvest, so he's back home in the country licking his wounds. Meanwhile, the Viscount Eretraeus—" Her small black eyes lit up as she said the name. "Now there's someone you should definitely get to know."

Shortly after that, I stopped seeing her.

I AM, ABOVE all, a scholar. Just because I'm a bad human being, it doesn't necessarily follow that my scholarship is proportionately deficient. I can analyse evidence, draw conclusions and formulate plausible hypotheses.

So; as I think I mentioned, I have one of those see-it-once-and-it's-there memories. What I must've done was remembered, deep in some remote part of my mind, which letters were illuminated red in the original manuscript. When I came to make my true-as-possible-in-the-circumstances copy, I remembered which letters to start the paragraphs with.

The duke's theory about Aeneas' cypher was correct. The place we went to was Essecuivo. A lot can happen in three hundred years. Think about it. Three hundred years ago, Macella was a mighty kingdom, as big and strong as the Republic. What's there now? The bases of a few statues, what's left of a handful of buildings, after the locals plundered the worked stone to build pigsties.

As for our incredible luck in running into the carrack; when we asked the captain where he'd come from with all that valuable stuff, at first he refused to tell us, quite properly. But then we explained how big and wet the sea was, and asked him if he was a really good swimmer; and he told us he was returning from the annual spice harvest at Mas Agiba, an Imperial outpost whence the Empire derived the bulk of its spices. It had been Imperial property for well over two hundred years, and

no, he wasn't going to tell us the map reference, not even if we threw him to the sharks.

Mas Agiba could just about be the same word as Essecuivo, phonetically speaking; or, more likely, they're both corruptions of the real name. Now, if the Imperial carrack had started from a different point on the same land mass as we had, going in more or less the same direction, it's rather more likely that we'd have run into each other in the way we did. It was still an exceptional piece of luck—good for us, bad for them—but at least it's possible. Imperial occupation would, of course, be a good reason for the destruction and abandonment of Aos and Eano. When the Empire makes a new friend in the colonies, it likes to play rough games. I imagine the captain is still being interrogated, somewhere in the State House cellars, assuming he's still alive. I am therefore quietly confident that additional data will become available in due course, and the matter will be cleared up to everyone's satisfaction.

THERE WAS ANOTHER expedition. Not the duke; he sold the Company to clear his debts from the wheat speculation, and a consortium of City merchants took over. They went to Essecuivo in an orderly, businesslike manner, with precisely one object in mind, and were more or less successful. They'd heard the story of the rose window and the appalling smell and taken a chance, which proved to be entirely justified. The smell, they guessed, was guano (bat-shit, as it turned out; the very best material for the manufacture of saltpetre, which as you know is the prime ingredient of gunpowder). They brought back a caravel filled with the stuff, and they plan on going back every year until it's all gone.

That worked out well for me. Leafing through my copy of Emulaeus one day, I found a sheet of paper I'd folded to use as a bookmark, many years ago. It was my father's certificate for ten shares in the Company, which he'd bought on a tumbling market

as an act of solidarity shortly before the crash. I sold my shares to the consortium for two thousand angels. So I'm all right.

One piece of evidence I nearly suppressed; but I find I can't. It wakes me up in the night sometimes, and I have to drink rather too much brandy to get rid of it.

I said that the carrack's cargo included fruit. So it did. What I neglected to mention was that it was carrying three tons of premium, freshly-harvested lemons.

# A Room with a View

The door wasn't locked. "Is he in?" I asked.

She looked at me. "Depends."

I nodded. "I'll go on up," I said.

I hate border towns. They have that insubstantial something-and-nothing quality, to be expected in a settlement that exists precisely because it's neither one thing nor the other. Aperesia Apoina was my seventeenth posting; twelve out of seventeen, border towns. I have mentioned my feelings on this issue, but I don't think anybody cares much.

The stairs were pine, chipped white paint, shows the dirt. His door was shut. I knocked, not that it mattered. No reply, so I thumbed the latch and let myself in.

Nobody behind the desk. It was a small room, mostly full of biscuit-boxes crammed with paper. There was a low, broken chair for visitors. I fixed it with *choris anthropou*, which I'm not particularly good at, and sat down. It creaked, but held.

A form, even something as mundane as *choris anthropou*, would put him on notice, as effectively as the ringing of a bell. I settled down to wait. It was only boredom that made me pick up a letter from the desk.

"You put that down," he said, materialising in the chair and scowling at me. "Restricted."

I grinned at him. He's three grades my senior but I was a year ahead of him in school. "Balls," I said. "It's the office copy of last

month's charcoal requisition." I glanced at it again. "What a lot of charcoal you get through in this small building," I said. "I'm surprised. It's quite chilly in here."

He glared at me. He can't resist small, pointless scams and fiddles. He was pulling the charcoal dodge back when he was a junior prefect, in sixth year. "That's still restricted," he said, snapping the paper out of my hand and stuffing it in a box on his desk. "Hence the red seal in the corner, which you can't have failed to notice. What do you want?"

"You sent for me."

"Did I? Why would I do that?"

I shrugged. "How's things, anyway?"

"Dismal." Yes, but they always are. If he dies and goes straight to the Court of the Sun, he'll complain about the cold. And probably put in a spurious charcoal requisition. "Studium's on my back about the Clearwater case, I'm two men short and nobody ever *does* anything around here except me. Did I really send for you?"

"Yes."

"Then I must've had a damn good reason." He opened the big book on his desk and made a show of examining it closely. All theatre, of course, to put me in my place. I made a better show of yawning. I'd have put my feet up on the desk, only I didn't trust the chair.

"Oh, right," he said, and closed the book with a thump. "What's your view of compliance work?"

"I hate it," I said. "I'd rather cut turf."

He nodded. "How about mentoring?"

"Worse."

"Thought so." He was writing something on a scrap of paper, a corner he'd torn off some old letter. "Got a job for you. Compliance *and* mentoring. As soon as it came in, I immediately thought of you."

I'm what you might call something of an under-achiever. I was recognised when I was six years old, immediately admitted

to the Temple under-school, won an open scholarship to the main school, straight on to the Studium after that, came fifth in my year out of a class of forty-six. Everybody said I had a remarkable natural talent, that I'd sail through my induction year, qualify before I was thirty and get a research post by forty. It didn't turn out that way. I struggled through induction, failed, retook twice, scraped through, interviewed badly for all my chosen postings, got one rubbishy job after another and ended up here, a freelance on the reserve list. When people ask me what someone like me is doing in a place like this, I must confess I find it hard to explain. Usually I hint at a scandal or a disastrous error of judgement; it's easier than telling the truth, and people are so ready to believe it. Fact is, I do have a remarkable natural talent and on my day I'm as good as any adept in the College. But my days don't come round as often as I'd like, and the rest of the time, I flounder. Silly little mistakes, inattention to detail, failure of concentration, that sort of thing. People tell me it's because my heart isn't in it, and when I've finished slandering them under my breath I have to admit they've got a point. I just don't care much for the work. I'd rather not have the gift and do something else. Not an option, of course. Anyway, I'm too old now to start on a new profession, so it's this or unskilled manual labour.

"Sweet of you," I said. "So, what's it involve?"

He grinned at me. "Here's the address," he said. "They'll explain when you get there."

There is no such thing, they tell you on your first day in school, as magic. Instead, there's natural philosophy, science; logical, provable facts and predictable, repeatable reactions and effects. What the ignorant and uninformed call magic is simply the area of natural philosophy where we've recorded and codified a certain number of causes and effects, but as yet can't wholly explain how or why they work. Research is, of course, ongoing, and in due course it'll all seem as simple and straightforward and ordinary as the miracles of procreation, metallurgy

or fermentation. Until then, foolish country people insist on calling it magic and calling us wizards. Meanwhile, since we can do all this useful stuff and they can't, we get to charge them large sums of money for exercising our strictly controlled and regulated powers. The cynic in me wonders whether the research that will finally strip away the curtain, explain it all and make it so that anyone can do it would be a bit further along if we didn't hold such a profitable monopoly.

I say 'we.' I have no profitable monopolies. I don't even have a job. I have jobs, from time to time, and that's another thing entirely.

Compliance is bread-and-butter stuff to failures and no-hopers like me; I guess I just don't like bread and butter terribly much, or at least not for every meal. It's boring, it's repetitive and the pay's garbage. Mentoring, though, is worse. Mentoring is taking some pushy young kid under your wing for a fortnight, knowing that once the ordeal's over, he's going on somewhere better and you're stuck here. That makes it so much worse, somehow. Besides, I don't like young people. I didn't like them when I was one, and I like them even less now I've grown out of it.

You can't really comment on how close laughter is to tears without sounding trite, so I won't bother. By a supreme effort of mental strength and discipline I managed to avoid both. And they say there's no such thing as magic.

"That's it?" I asked.

He looked at me. "That's it. You want the job or not?"

Want, no. Need, yes. "When do I start?"

"Now."

And that's how I came to be there, at that time, in that place. Fundamentally, I believe, comedy and tragedy are the same thing, right up to the end. At the end, in comedy they get out of the mess they're in and live happily ever after. In tragedy, they all die. But there's a tipping point, a moment when it's so evenly balanced it could go either way.

Dogs; that's what the job was. Our wonderful empire is blessed with many old and distinguished noble families, who

among other things love to hunt. The best hunting dogs come from Razo, on the other side of the border from Aperesia Apoina. Razo's one of those mountain towns; desperately poor, can't grow anything, can't keep any useful livestock apart from goats, and nobody ever got rich, or even comfortable, raising goats. Can't be done. They graze so close that they wreck the pasture. Result: either you severely limit the size of your herd (so no expansion, no surplus, no wealth) or you overgraze and end up stripping your ground down to bare rock. Luckily for the Razoans, they have the dogs, for which our gilded nobility are prepared to pay silly money. Every Razoan is therefore a full or part-time dog breeder, and twice a month they bring a convoy of the stupid animals over the mountain passes to Apoina, where dealers buy them for a fraction of what the end users will eventually pay. My part in all this? It's a legal requirement (I'm not making this up) that every dog coming into the country from abroad is examined by a Studium-qualified practitioner for signs of demonic possession.

I know. I agree. But it started a long time ago, back when serious people seriously believed in all that stuff. Apparently, four hundred years ago or thereabouts, Apoina and the neighbouring countryside was afflicted by an outbreak of the dancing plague. There hasn't been a case in I don't know how long, but it's a recognised disease, properly documented. The symptoms are uncontrollable shaking, groaning, thrashing about, inability to keep still, eventually leading to a rather horrible death from mental and physical exhaustion. The Apoina outbreak finally burnt itself out, but not before close on a hundred people had died. The city fathers ordered an enquiry, and the examiners came to the conclusion that the plague had been caused by a demon or malign spirit, who'd entered the country from Razo inside the body or mind of a hunting dog. Hence the requirement (city statute D&K47, 106(ii)) which is still very much in force, even though the plague's never been back and not one demonically possessed dog has been impounded in all that time.

Of course, the Apoinans say the plague's never returned precisely because of the inspections, and the evil spirits don't even try to sneak in that way because they know they'll be detected and cast out. They're a quaint, old-fashioned lot in Apoina, and their national dish is pigs' feet on a bed of pickled cabbage.

Now perhaps you can see the true evil of the pit that had been dug for me. Under normal circumstances, I'd have spent my two weeks' secondment daydreaming, surreptitiously reading or writing a paper for one of the learned journals. No chance, because I'd also be mentoring. Pitiful though it may seem, I was actually going to have to see into the tiny minds of thousands of dogs, so that my temporary apprentice could watch me and learn how it's done. In other words, I was going to have to take this awful job seriously, or else risk being informed on by a credit-hungry student.

The shed was huge, about fifty yards long, and bitterly cold. Outside dog season it was where they penned up sheep waiting to be sold at market. The whole of the back end was divided up with hurdles, against which the dogs jumped and pawed and scrabbled, barking all the damn time; I tried *ouden menei* to lay down an invisible barrier in the hope it'd keep the sound out, but it didn't work so I gave up. Meanwhile, the owners led their wares past me, one at a time, while I executed the pointless, demeaning but really rather difficult form that allows you to climb inside the mind of another living creature.

It's really just *epoiesen noon* scaled down and differently keyed, without a verbal access-point. You need to climb in though the third Room, but if you're doing hundreds of subjects in a single day, obviously you can't move from there to here and back again every single time, you'd boil your brain trying. So you have to do it in Separation, which in theory is less demanding, but I find that more than an hour in Separation gives me the most appalling headache. Of course, most practitioners who do these forms are working with humans, dangerously ill, in comas. They go in, find the problem, fix it and lead the patient out; five minutes

perceived time, practically instantaneous in real time, and then a lie-down being crooned over and abjectly thanked by a grateful family, until you're feeling strong enough to write a receipt for your four-figure fee. Actually, I think dogs are harder than people. True, all you do is poke your head round the door, so to speak, to make sure nobody's home who shouldn't be. But the dog mind is so wretchedly *small*. It's like crawling into a house up the coal-shute rather than walking in through the front door.

I was on my own for the first day, which was a relief; the young hopeful hadn't shown up (they muttered something about bad roads and flooding) so at least I was able to flounder about getting the hang of it unobserved. Just as well. It had been a long time since I'd done anything even remotely similar, and needless to say I made a lot of stupid mistakes before I managed to figure out a reliable and efficient way of doing the job. Even then it was a hell of a strain. I was so determined not to show myself up in front of the kid the next day that I actually did a proper examination on every single dog, and there were hundreds. When they eventually let me go, I crawled off to the quarters they'd prepared for me (three sacks stuffed with straw and a horse-blanket in a mostly-swept-out feed store) and collapsed, my head full of dog, too tired to face the stale bread and crumbly cheese they'd so thoughtfully provided for my evening meal. I seem to remember turning round three times before finally settling down to sleep.

I woke up with a growl and found myself looking at a pair of shoes.

Let me tell you something about them. If I close my eyes, I can picture them still. For a start, they were red, sort of halfway between blood and a good apple. They shone; not like gold or burnished steel, it was a warmer, deeper glow, such as comes from the application of wax and a great deal of work. The toes were quite savagely pointed, and they arched, like a cat stretching, on account of the three-inch heels. They were quite small, and they did up on one side with a row of tiny silver buttons.

"Excuse me," said a voice, "but are you Master Chrysodorus Alexicacus, from the Studium?"

Hadn't been called that in a long time. These days it's Manuo, which is what my father called me, usually coupled with an unflatteringly apt epithet. The use of my academic name, together with the shoes, made me wonder if I was still asleep and dreaming.

"Mm," I said, rubbing my eyes. "Who are you?"

"My name's Comitissa Aureliana," the voice said. "I think you're supposed to be mentoring me."

Well, it's not unheard of. Every now and then, you get a female with the talent. In my time, I may have come across half a dozen—and very competent practitioners they were too, though limited in the range of their abilities, as most of us are. Five of them were exclusively healers, and the sixth was the best water-diviner I've ever worked with. Women can do the job, no question about that, if they happen to have the gift. It's just that very few of them do; the same way that not many women have genuine moustaches. Also, in women it tends to surface much later, usually around puberty. Compared to men, that's very late, which means that by the time a woman's finished her training, even assuming she hasn't had to repeat a year or do retakes, she's likely to be in her late twenties or early thirties, by which time her male contemporaries should (unless they're no-hopers like me) be three or even four grades up the ladder. By and large, the few women we do have in the profession have a pretty rough time of it, though I can't say I've lost too much sleep because of it over the years.

Comitissa Aureliana, though; that was a hell of a name. I looked up.

You know what students tend to look like. There's a general rule-of-thumb formula, quite reliable in my experience, which states that if you add together the age of the student and the age of his coat, you get exactly one hundred. The Lady Aureliana was definitely an exception. An awful lot of time, money and wool had gone into making her coat, and I have to say, there were worse things you could have done with all three. As well as the coat,

there was a hat and a skirt, both constructed on the same principles. Holding the components of all this splendour together was a thin-faced woman, about thirty-five, of the kind that my mother used to describe as being prettier than she looks. Not, of course, that stuff like that had any relevance to me, given the nature and requirements of my calling. But you can't help noticing.

"You're it?" I asked.

She nodded. "Afraid so," she replied. "I'm in my second year at the Lusso academy. We have to do a two months' practical before we take our diploma."

Once the surprise had worn off a bit, I came to the conclusion that it could have been a lot worse. I'd been expecting a seventeen-year-old with roughly equal numbers of hairs on his chin and spots on his face. A grown-up was a much more appealing proposition. You can talk to grown-ups, for one thing. Female and a member of the aristocracy weren't aspects I'd have chosen myself, but I'm not exactly opposed on principle to either. Live and let live, I always say.

I hauled myself to my feet, making a nominal effort to brush bits of hay off my coat. "You just got here," I said.

"That's right," she replied. "My coach got stuck trying to cross the river at Ferabrune. Flooding."

I nodded. "*Andra moi ennepe*," I said. "To modulate and reduce a flow of water. Or haven't you done that yet?"

"Elemental and environmental is next year," she replied. "I have actually read it up in the book, but I didn't want to try it before I'd covered it in class, in case it went wrong."

I couldn't help grinning. I tried to put out a house fire in my second year, using *proelthe*. Put the fire out, flattened half the street. "Very sensible," I said. "Come on, we'd better make a move."

"What exactly is it that we'll be doing?"

They hadn't told her. Well, why should they? Nobody ever told me anything when I was a student; expected me to find out for myself, or know by light of nature. Which was entirely appropriate for seventeen-year-olds who, as everybody knows, thrive

on humiliation the way roses grow in horseshit. But a grown-up deserves more respect, surely.

How to phrase it, though. "Do you like dogs?"

"Yes."

"You're going to have a ball," I said. "This way."

Some people are born teachers. I'm not one of them. I get impatient if I have to tell someone something more than once. I tend to forget how many times I had to do various simple procedures before I got the hang of them. When I'm teaching someone and they don't get it right first time, I assume they're stupid, or being dense on purpose, or not listening to me, or else for some reason they don't believe me when I tell them something.

But the Lady Comitissa would have tried the patience of the most skilled and dedicated teacher—like the ones who taught me, for instance. She had the ability, she wasn't stupid and she wanted to learn, but things just didn't sink in. She shrugged off new knowledge the way oilskin repels water. I could tell she was no happier about this than I was, and she did her best to keep her temper, remember what we were there for and that we were both on the same side, etcetera. But after the first hour it was obvious to me that she'd been brought up in a world where she was never wrong, simply because of who her father and grandfather had been, and it took her an exceptional amount of effort and application to get past that. The aristocracy are like that. They're comfortable with the idea that it's easier and more fitting to change the world rather than change themselves. Of course, that very quality stands them in good stead in our profession; but only once they've learned the basics and qualified. Not the most helpful mindset for a trainee. Of course, if she'd been a man, she'd have done all this stuff in her teens, when the mind (even the aristocratic version) is so much more pliable. At her time of life, trying to teach her was like trying to file hardened steel.

And meanwhile, there were dogs. They came along every few minutes, on the ends of ropes, with grim-looking Razoans holding the other end and scowling at me as though it was all

my fault. If you think I'm making a fuss about nothing, you try it: a Third room examination of an animal, in Separation, in under three minutes real time, while simultaneously trying to explain what you're doing to an increasingly short-tempered noblewoman who just can't seem to get it. Now I look back on it, I reckon it must've been one of the best days' work I've ever put in, and all for next to nothing.

Finally, just when I knew I couldn't take any more, the flow of dogs dried up. We sat there for a while, me just absorbed in the sheer golden joy of having stopped, until the foreman came by and asked us to leave so his men could start clearing up the mess.

Aperesia Apoina has many places where you can buy strong drink. I marched her to the nearest one, ordered a quart jug of whatever was cheapest, and ordered her to shut up, sit still and listen. I think the only reason I'm still alive is that she was too frazzled to argue.

"I don't see what your problem is," I said. Whatever-was-cheapest tasted horrible and didn't do anything to cure my headache, but after a long pull at the stuff I really didn't care. "All you've got to do is cross into the Third room—"

I stopped short. She was looking at me. "I've got a confession to make," she said. "I can't do rooms."

It was a bit like walking into a wall you hadn't noticed was there. "But you're in second year," I said. "Surely—"

"I can't do rooms," she repeated. "I just can't. Luckily I'm really good at forms, so my marks sort of balance out. Next year, of course, it's all bloody rooms, and they'll realise I can't do them and throw me out. And that'll be two years of my life completely wasted."

Can't do rooms…Like someone admitting to you that they've lived for thirty-odd years and never managed to learn how to breathe. "But they're easy," I said. "And if you can do forms—"

She sighed. It came from deep down. "That's what everybody keeps telling me," she said. "But—" She shook her head. "It's all a bit ridiculous, really. When we first did them I didn't

understand, not a word of it, but everybody else did, and I didn't want to stick my hand up and confess, because I didn't want to look totally stupid. Doesn't help that I'm old enough to be my classmates' mother. Anyway, it snowballed from there. Everything in the course is predicated on understanding the basics, and I didn't. The longer I left it, the worse it got, till I reached the point where I gave up. Guess I thought I'd be able to get by on my forms work. Stupid."

I took a while to get a grip. Stunned is putting it mildly. Rooms are *easy*. But then I thought: correction, *I* find rooms easy. She doesn't. I took a deep breath, and tried to imagine what I'd do in this situation if I was an ordinary decent, compassionate human being.

"It's like this," I said. "Imagine the universe is an old, neglected house. The family's fallen on hard times, so they only use one of the rooms. The rest are all boarded up and dust-sheeted. With me so far?"

She actually smiled. "I've got cousins like that."

"Fine. Imagine your cousins, in their one room. That room is the world that anybody can see: people without the gift, normal people. Now imagine they've been living in that one room so long that their kids and grandkids have grown up there, and don't even realise there are any other rooms. That's how it is for the untalented."

She pulled a face. "And me."

"Not anymore," I said firmly. "Now, obviously, what you need to get from one room to another is a door. Untalenteds only ever see two doors, birth and death, and generally speaking they have no control over when they encounter them or go through. We're different. We can *make* doors, any time we choose."

Little scowl. "Speak for yourself."

"No, listen," I said. "It's so simple. Provided you've got the gift, of course, otherwise you can't do it at all. But you can. If you can do forms—"

"Forms are completely different."

I let her have a moment before I contradicted her. "My old teacher used to say, forms are just tools we bring back from other rooms. If you can do forms, *trust me*, you can do rooms. Come on," I added, as she shot me that I-don't-think-so look. "It's like swimming. For ages and ages you're convinced you'll never be able to, and then suddenly something clicks into place and suddenly you're doing it. Rooms are like that. You just need to—"

"I can't swim, either," she said.

I'm really proud of the way I didn't hit her at that point. "Fine," I said. "You can't swim. But you can do rooms. No, really," I added, as she opened her mouth. "You can. You're going to do it right now. Understood?"

The best time for anything, according to my old and much-loved copy of *The Art of War*, is when the enemy is tired. "All right," she snapped at me. "So, what do I do?"

I gave her a big, warm smile I hadn't realised I had. "Just look at that wall over there," I said, "and imagine a door."

"Yes, but—"

"Try it."

She decided to humour me, presumably as her best shot at getting me to shut up and leave her alone. She turned her head, held it for a second or so and closed her eyes. And then it happened.

Untalenteds say things like, "I saw him flicker" or "there was a flash of light." Sometimes they hear noises, or feel a slipstream. Pure imagination. There's nothing to see, hear or feel because nothing's happened. Someone who was there a millionth of a second ago is still there. Big deal.

She looked at me. Her eyes were huge. "There was a door," she said.

"Yes," I replied.

"Really. It was *there*. You do believe me, don't you?"

I restrained myself, and just rolled my eyes instead. "So," I said, "what did you do?"

She frowned. "Well, I suppose I must've opened it, but I don't remember standing up or walking across the room—"

"Don't worry about it," I said quickly. "You were by the door. You opened it. Did you go through?"

She nodded. "The door swung open, so I went in."

"What did you see?"

"It was just—" She looked helpless for a moment. "Well, just a room, really."

"Hence the name," I said. "Did you recognise it?"

"No, of course not. It was just—well, a room. Empty. Plain floorboards, no furniture. I don't remember seeing any windows—"

"You wouldn't have," I assured her. "They come later. Advanced level. So, what did you do?"

"I turned round and came back."

I smiled. I was feeling really rather pleased with myself. "There you are, you see," I said. "You did it. You can swim."

"Yes, but how did I—?"

"Don't ask," I cut her off. "No, really, don't ask. Don't even think about it, not till you've got used to it. Just tell yourself, I can do this, because I've already done it once. That's all."

She grabbed her cup and drank some of the disgusting strong liquor, which she hadn't touched before. "All right," she said quietly. "But *what* did I do?"

"You went into the First room," I said.

"What does that mean?"

Curiously, I didn't feel quite so tired. "The First room is pretty straightforward," I said. "We use it for simple things, like moving from place to place instantaneously, disappearing, moving objects. As you saw for yourself, it's empty, you only find what you've brought yourself. It's worth bothering with because when you're in the First room, you can open a door back to anywhere you like; where you just came from, or somewhere completely different. So, if I wanted to nip back to the Studium to look something up, I'd just go into the First room, then open a door back into Long Cloister, and I'd be looking straight at the Library gates."

Her mouth had dropped open. "That's—"

"A piece of cake," I said. "In actual fact there's slightly more to it than that. There are restrictions and limitations, which you'll need to know eventually. But don't even think about them now, or you'll lose confidence. For the time being, just assume you can go anywhere you like. And that's just the First room," I couldn't resist adding. "Really, the First's only important because it leads to the others."

Well. I said it because that's what my teacher said to me, when I was a kid; an unusually talented and promising kid, who had the misfortune to grow up to be me. All my teachers had to do was engage my enthusiasm.

The trouble with me is, when I get interested, I get impatient. "Come on," I said, "I'll come with you this time."

"You want me to go there again?"

"Sure. It won't hurt, I promise."

Imagine you were born and brought up on Temple Street, or in a cottage on the slopes of Mons Tonans. To you, it's familiar, it's just home, no big deal. To the people who sail across the sea and walk a hundred miles just to see it, it's the most amazing thing ever. But you never even bother to look. I guess that's me and the rooms. By the time I was seven years old I'd already made it to the Third room; I used to go exploring, and not tell anybody. And somehow, I always knew exactly what I had to do. I'm prepared to bet that if room time was real time, I've spent more of my life in rooms than I have here.

It's easy to forget that other people aren't like you.

Before she could start arguing, I opened a door. I left it open behind me. A moment later, she followed me in.

"Is this how it looked the first time?" I asked.

She nodded. "Maybe not quite so filthy," she said.

I looked down. There was dust on the floor. I tried to remember if that was normal, but I couldn't. I tend not to look at floors much. "This is how it should look," I said. "Remember, nothing but what you bring with you."

She looked round. "Is this is?"

Blasé already. "It's a transit point," I said. "Like I told you. We can use it for getting where we want to go in our room, or we can move on." I smiled at her, trying to be reassuring. She just looked mildly disappointed. "Which would you prefer?"

"Whichever's easiest."

Sensible attitude. But I'm not exactly famous for being sensible. "Just for that," I said—I was so full of myself I was dripping out of my own ear—"we'll move on. Door," I said (though of course it's not necessary. I just wanted to impress) and a door appeared in the opposite wall. "Second room," I said. "Come on."

You know, there's a reason why adepts in our profession are required to be celibate. I've given the matter a degree of thought over the years, and I don't believe it's to preserve us from the distractions of worldly affection or bodily pleasure. It's because when we're around women, we can't help showing off. Whether that's cause or effect I can't rightly say, but in any event it makes us a danger to ourselves and others.

I opened the door and asked, "What do you see?"

"A staircase," she replied.

"Yes?"

"Just a staircase. All right," she went on, after I'd frowned at her. "It's painted white, the paint's a bit chipped in places. It could do with a good washing-down."

Something nagged at the back of my mind, but I was too busy showing off to care. "Very good," I said. "Up the stairs to the Second room. Would you like me to go first?"

"All right," she said. "But don't get too far ahead of me."

I ran up the stairs two at a time. I can do that, in the Second room, and not arrive at the top gasping for breath. I waited for her to join me. She took her time.

"Ready?" I asked.

"I suppose so."

The Second room isn't like the others. It's above and to the side; in other words, you can't get directly back to normality from it, you need to go back to the First or on into the Third.

Researchers and academics spend a certain amount of time there. The whole of one wall is covered with bookshelves, and the shelves are crammed with books. Men have gone mad trying to figure out how to read them. There are long, polished tables lined with fascinating instruments, with dials and pointers and scales; they measure something, or record changes, or register variations or fluctuations. There are things that look and work like clocks, and things with lenses and eyepieces; there are miniature furnaces, and wheels that spin round when you touch them, with compartments for the placing of samples. There's a rack of small, fine tools, but no one has any idea what they're for. Also, if you try tossing a coin in the Second room, it always comes down tails. Sometimes there's a big glass tank full of water, with small, brightly-coloured birds flying in it. We assume that's an experiment being conducted by scientists from somewhere else. We've never met them, of course. The best thing you can do in the Second room is pass through it as quickly as you can.

I looked at her. She seemed fine. I was surprised, and impressed. The length of time (subjective time, naturally) you can stay in the Second room is directly connected to the strength of your ability. You can learn how to extend that time, a bit, in the same way you can train yourself to hold your breath. I can manage an hour, on my day. Novices are usually gasping for breath in a couple of minutes. Some quite experienced and talented adepts have to get through the Second room at a run.

She was standing there looking about, like a country woman in the Museum.

"Like it?" I asked.

"What on earth is all this *junk*?" she asked.

For some reason, I felt like I should take that personally. But I remembered; I was the guide, not the proprietor. "Your guess is as good as mine," I said. "How are you feeling?"

"What? Oh, fine." She touched one of the instruments, a brass thing with four spring-loaded arms and a dial. The needle quivered and moved a few degrees on the scale. "Shouldn't I be?"

"Would you like to go on to the Third room?"

She shook her head. "I want to go back," she said. "This is all a bit—"

I nodded. "Fine," I said. "You've done really well for a—"

She wasn't listening. She was staring at something over my shoulder. Ah, I thought. "It's all right," I said, and turned round.

I've seen worse. It had a human body (the arms were unnaturally long) with a pig's head; very long, curled-over fingernails, like the sad people you see sleeping in doorways. "Don't worry," I said. It opened its mouth; rows of teeth, like bent needles. *Elthe chelidon* sorted it out in two seconds flat. All that was left was a little fine ash.

She was frozen. I had to make an effort not to laugh. But the first time, it can be really scary.

"Nothing to worry about," I told her. "They aren't even alive. It's just a bit of—well, something, we brought in with us."

She looked at me as if I was mad. "Something?"

I shrugged. "Anything," I said. "It can be a stray thought, a memory, a little rush of emotion, even toothache. In the rooms, they sort of gather matter. *Elthe chelidon* is all you need, like you just saw. Really, I should've let you do it, and then you'd know it's no big deal."

She was looking at the place where it had been. "You're sure about that?"

I laughed. "Absolutely," I said. "Anything weird or strange-looking you meet in the rooms is nothing to worry about, so long as it's moving, acting like it's alive. In fact, the weirder they are, the better. It's only the ones who look exactly like ordinary people you need to worry about."

"Oh, right," she said. "What if I meet one of them?"

"Run," I said. "But you won't. They're incredibly rare. And if you do, chances are it'll have six fingers on one hand or a stub of a tail, in which case it's nothing. Better not to stick around and find out, though."

She gave me a nasty look. "I really want to go back now," she said.

We repeated the exercise the next morning, just before I was due to start work. I was really pleased with how quickly she'd taken to it; she was quietly ecstatic, I could tell. "I really do appreciate this," she told me, when we'd come back. "You've no idea how ashamed of myself I was. I mean, everyone else in my year can do it, and they're just *kids*."

"My pleasure," I replied, truthfully. After all, for years I reckoned I was a hopeless teacher. I think I was as relieved as she was. For one thing, there's steady work in teaching. "Anyhow," I went on, "I don't think you'll have any problems now. In fact, you're doing really well. Most people—"

"You're very kind," she said. "I expect I'm pretty hopeless really. But I do feel much better about it."

I didn't labour the point in case it made her over-confident, which would have been doing her no favours. "At least there'll be some purpose to this exercise," I said. "Now at least you'll be able to watch what I'm doing. You might even learn something."

Admiration is a wonderful thing. I like it in the same way I like hundred-year-old brandy, and both of them come my way about as frequently. The other similarity is the way it goes to my head.

"It's amazing," she said. "I don't know how you can do that."

God help me, I simpered. "It's not like it's difficult or anything," I told her. "Just a lot of work."

Which it is, of course. Every time they confronted me with a new dog, I had to open a door, go through the First room, up the stairs, through the Second room (*elthe chelidon*-ing any nasties that might happen to pop out at me; and of course, the more tired and hacked off I got as the day progressed, the more nasties there inevitably were) and into the Third, from which I could use a projection to take a quick glance inside the mutt's head to make sure there wasn't anything in there that shouldn't be. Then all the way back again, to nod to the dog-handlers so they could

take it away. You don't get tired running up and down the stairs in rooms, of course, but although your brain knows that, your body doesn't. It thinks it ought to be tired, so that's how you feel. And all in Separation, remember, which really doesn't help. Even so; it's hard work, but it's simple and straightforward, the kind of work the sort of person who just scrapes a pass in Finals can be relied on to handle. For a talented chronic under-achiever like myself, a piece of cake.

She started to say something, then decided against it. "What?" I said.

"Nothing."

"Please," I said. "Don't go all female on me. What is it?"

She laughed. "I was going to ask you if I thought I could have a go. But obviously I can't."

We'd been working for five hours. Three hundred dogs. Six hundred traverses of the staircase. "I don't see why not," I said.

"But I haven't even been in the Third room yet. And I don't know how to do a projection—"

"Easy," I told her. "You just look. Visualise. The door between rooms is a projection. Think of it as opening a window into the dog's head."

"And I wouldn't know what I was looking for, anyway," she said.

"Oh, that's not a problem," I replied. "If there's something nasty in there, you'll know it when you see it. Trust me on that."

She looked doubtful. So did the two men with a dog, who were waiting for us to stop chattering. Just as well they couldn't have had a clue what we were talking about. "I don't know," she said. I could tell she was wavering. "What's the Third room like, anyhow?"

"Come with me," I said. "I'll show you."

On the stairs up to the Second room, I said; "Third room's not scary or anything, but you do need to take care." Just then, a nasty reared up right in front of her. She blew it apart without a

moment's hesitation, like she'd been doing it for years. "You can run into—well, awkward stuff."

"Awkward?"

I nodded. "It's like—well, you know when you're walking after it's been raining, and sometimes you glimpse your reflection in puddles?"

We were at the top of the stairs. I had to wait for her. "Yes?"

"Well," I said. "The Third room is principally used for looking inside people's minds. In a place like that, a mirror can be a real nuisance."

She got the point. "Are there mirrors in there?"

"Define mirrors," I replied, pushing open the door. A nasty tried to stop me; I dealt with it. "A mirror in the real world is a shiny thing that reflects light. In the Third room, there are various objects that reflect thought."

"I see what you mean," she said. "How do I—?"

"Just concentrate on what you're there for," I said. "You'll be fine. And it's not dangerous, even if you do bump into a mirror. It can just be—well, uncomfortable, all right? So be careful."

Second room was dark, lit by a long row of candles on the table. It's like that sometimes. Nobody knows why.

"What do I do?" she asked. "Just open a door, same as usual?"

For a moment, I felt really proud of her. Open a door, same as usual. This from the woman who'd sworn blind she'd never be able to do it, less than twenty-four hours earlier. "Go ahead," I replied.

"Um, which wall?"

I laughed. Valid point. All the walls in Second room are covered in stuff—bookshelves, paintings (did I mention them? Really strange, some of them), tapestries, ornamental trophies of weapons. "Just go ahead," I said. "The stuff gets out of the way."

I've known people to have real difficulty with that; but she opened a door right in the middle of a shelf of books, no trouble at all. "That's amazing," she said, as the door swung open. "I just—"

"Go on in," I said.

This is going to sound completely stupid, but never mind. I'd never been in the Third room with anyone before. Accordingly, I wasn't prepared.

I followed her through the open door, and stopped dead. Stunned, confused. I'd been in there just a moment ago, and hundreds of times before that, since breakfast. But it was all different.

Well, of course it was. Everybody's Third room is different; and because she went in ahead of me, what I walked into was her version of it. Took me a minute to figure that out, of course.

My Third room is basically a study; the sort of study I always thought I'd have one day, when I'm Regent professor at a high-class provincial academy somewhere. In my Third room, there are two chairs. There's mine, a beautiful old carved number that belonged to all my predecessors back through five hundred years (it creaks when you sit on it, but it's really comfortable, and you can put your feet up on the crossbar under the desk), and there's another plain, old, rosewood, straight-backed, for the few select students I condescend to teach when I'm not engrossed in my research. The walls are all book-lined—there's a long shelf, just above my head where I sit, that's all the books I've written; it stretches from wall to wall. There's piles of books on the floor, too, with five or six bookmarks in each one, and a small round table with crystal decanters. It has a drawer in its side, into which over the years all the commendations and medals of honour I've been awarded have been stuffed any old how, because of course that sort of thing doesn't really matter to me. And there's a window, looking down into the main quad, except when it's pointed into somebody's, or some dog's, head.

Spot the difference. Her Third room was—

Empty. Nothing. I had to look quite hard before I could see floorboards on the floor, instead of a light brown blur. Three bare walls and ceiling. The fourth wall was a frameless window. I peered over her shoulder at it, and was marginally reassured. That was a dog's mind, all right.

"What should I be looking for?" she said.

"It'll be in colour," I replied.

(Well, obvious. Dogs don't see colours like we do, just an infinite variety of shades of grey. Any stowaways show up coloured, you can spot them at a glance.)

"I'm colour-blind," she said.

Oh. "Doesn't matter," I replied. "Anything not moving."

Images streamed past in the window, intermittent. I saw my own face, huge, as I moved my head slightly. When I held still, I vanished. I saw one of the dog-handlers scratching his chin. Fine. Nothing here. "That's all there is to it," I said. "We'd better go back."

"How do you get to the Fourth room?" she said.

I'd already turned my back on her. "Same basic idea," I said, not looking round. "So I understand. Never been there myself."

"You just open a door. By imagining it."

"Yes," I said. "But you don't want to go trying it. Come on, we've got dogs to molest."

We went back. I worked. She was quiet and I was busy. Up and down those bloody stairs, in and out of my study—it looked different, though I didn't stop to look closely. But I got the impression that some of the books had been moved, and my father's portrait was by the window instead of the door. The Fourth room. I really didn't want to think about that. My fault, for letting her get over-confident.

"Can I have a go?" she said, at some point. "On my own?"

Sure, I thought, why not? "Later," I said. "Let's just get through the rush, and then we'll see."

There are people—loads of them—who really like dogs. I don't object to them, most of the time. By mid afternoon, however, I'd had enough. The Razoan hunting dog isn't, in any case, a thing of beauty. Its head is too big for its body, and all its ribs stick out, and it drools. It's about the size of a large goat, and it only eats raw meat. The smell, accordingly, can be a bit intense.

This one was nothing out of the ordinary; it was a silver-point roan (that means brown; they're all brown) bitch with an underslung jaw—that's a fault, apparently, means it's worth less money, I have no idea why. Its owners were two sad old men in coats way too big for them, so that the sleeves came down to the quicks of their fingernails. I was beginning to ask myself, quite forcefully, why I was bothering. After all, nobody would know if I just sat there, rapt mystic expression on face, then nodded and said "Next." Nobody would care. Nobody.

I hadn't let her have a go on her own yet. She hadn't asked again. She looked bored.

I opened a door. Second room, stairs, Third room. On my way through, I helped myself to a stiff drink from one of the crystal decanters. One of the great disappointments about rooms is that anything you drink there tastes of cold tea and doesn't *do* anything. I checked the silver label on the decanter. *Hundred-year-old brandy.* Cold tea.

I turned to the window. Everything normal, everything grey. Might as well not have bothered.

Something moved in the room.

You know how, in really good portraits, they play tricks on you. The eyes follow you around the room, or the feet are always pointed at you, no matter where you stand. I understand that artists train for years to learn how to do that. You can't do it with a form, by the way. I've tried.

If you were to ask me why I put a portrait of my father in my dream study, I couldn't tell you. I don't actually remember putting it there. It just turned up one day, and I accepted it. It's a very overstuffed room. By the same token, I can't remember calling into existence each of the thousand or so books on the shelves; but if you look closely, each one's got a title, and if you pull one down at random and open it, there are words on the pages and everything. Most of them are books I've read at some time; others, I can only assume, are books I will read one day but haven't read yet. None of them are any good. I've always believed

that the room pulled them out of my mind, so to speak, to fill gaps on the shelves; the same, presumably, with the portrait.

But it's not a good portrait. In fact, it's pretty ghastly. In that respect, I'd always given the room due credit. Catch me paying fancy money for a portrait of my father. It's just a daub, makes him look like a lobster in a fake beard. And it shows him in profile, so the eyes most definitely don't follow you around.

He was looking at me.

I did the only thing I could. I looked back.

A necessary digression.

Not all practitioners are as celibate as they ought to be. My father, for example. He entered the Academy at Oudeis Oudemia when he was five—child prodigy—and was formally inducted at thirteen. I imagine he was insufferable at that age. He went on to be senior lecturer at Oudeis for forty years, and ended his career as vice-chancellor of the Studium. No underachiever. Not like his son.

I still don't know exactly how he came by me. He never said, I never asked. I take it that an opportunity arose, and he made full use of it. Rules were things he made; they didn't apply to him. Anyway, I was one of the many rare and curious objects cluttering up his lodgings for fourteen years, and then I was packed off to the Studium. Other kids went home for the holidays. I took advantage of the empty library. Didn't occur to me to find it strange.

I saw him once, after I left home. That's the memory of him that found its way into the portrait. I came back to my lodgings after my induction ceremony, and he was there waiting. He'd brought me a present, the only one he ever gave me: a copy of Sthenelaus' *Reflections and Maxims*. I sold it two years ago, and was surprised at how much it was worth. He handed me the book, scowled at me down his ridiculously long nose (that and Sthenelaus are all I ever got from him) and said, "Don't disappoint me." Then he walked out.

"But you have," he said.

I wasn't having any of that. I looked him straight in his painted eye, and said: "You aren't real. You're a room artefact. Presumably you're my inner guilt, reminding me I'm a failure. It's just because I'm pissed off after two days with the dogs."

He looked at me. I felt the need to break the silence. I said; "Probably the mentoring's got something to do with it. I'm upset that she's done so well, it's reminded me that I've got all this talent and I'm here mind-reading dogs, while she's on the brink of a splendid career. Stop looking at me like that or I'll turn you to the wall."

He didn't blink. "You disappointed me," he said.

"So what?" I turned back to the window, and saw the inside of a closed shutter.

"You're a fool," he said.

He used to say that a lot: when I got a homework question wrong—he always went over my homework after I'd done it, made me do it again, then tore up what I'd written and dictated an answer. The teachers knew, but he was their boss. "Quite probably," I said. "But this is my room. Get out."

He laughed; and he was standing in front of me, towering, much taller than he'd ever been (but he was that much taller than me when I was fourteen). "Work it out," he said. "Do it again."

"That proves my point," I answered, stepping back until my heel collided with the desk. "You're just pulling phrases out of my memory. You aren't real."

He pushed past me, went behind the desk and sat down, in my chair. I had no option. I sat down in the student's chair. "You're guilty of a false premise," he said.

I thought about it. "I don't think so," I replied. "This is my room. Therefore, if you're in it, I must have created you."

"That's the false premise," he said.

Oh, I thought.

Do it again. How do things arrive in the Third room? They come in with you, or from outside. If he hadn't—

"Come in with you," he said, "therefore I must have come in from outside. What's outside?"

I nodded, couldn't help it. "The dog's mind," I said.

"Correct." He tapped the desktop with his fingertip, his way of awarding me a single, begrudged mark.

"So what are you?" I said. "Are you a—?"

"Demon." He shook his head. "An unquiet inhabitant of a far, dark room, determined to creep through into the light. Is that what you believe?"

I didn't answer.

"In which case," he went on, "you must believe that I have infiltrated your memory and pulled out the most intimidating identity I found there, with the aim of dominating you and taking possession of your physical body." He scowled. "Is that really how you think of me? Your worst nightmare?"

I didn't say anything.

"You're guilty of limited thinking," he said. "Do it again."

I took my time. One thing I'll say for him, he was always patient with me, in a brutal sort of a way. I said, "The rooms are where we come from, and where we go to. Even the untalenteds have access to two of them."

He nodded. "Birth and death."

"The Third room—"

"You're forgetting," he said. "How did I come in here?"

I frowned. "In the dog's head," I said.

"False premise."

I could feel my hands clenching into fists. "All right," I said. "I admit it, I'm too stupid to figure it out for myself. So just tell me, all right?"

He shook his head sadly. I'd disappointed him again. "Very well."

"What are you?"

"I am what I look like," he said.

I thought about that. "You died nine years ago," I said.

"I went into another room," he replied. "But I confess I didn't find it much to my taste. That disappointed me. I'd always hoped that the far room would be beguiling, fascinating, a place

of answers, a room I'd never been able to reach. Instead—" He shrugged his broad, thin shoulders. "The windows all face the courtyard and all the books are ones I'd read before. The rules say I have to stay there. But the rules—"

I think it was that that clinched it for me. It was him all right. "What do you want?" I asked.

"To come back, of course," he replied. "I find the far room intolerable. Recently I have once again become aware of the passage of time. They assure me that that is not possible, that there is no time in the far room. I fear that that is yet another rule that doesn't apply to me." He closed his eyes for a moment, then went on; "There are days in my death: hours, minutes. They pass very slowly. My mind is every bit as active as it ever was. I need to come back. There is so much I want to do. I can discover new things. I can be useful. You, on the other hand—"

He didn't need to be explicit. Fair point, after all. I'm a chronic under-achiever, and who would miss me? "Is that possible?" I said.

"It can be done," he replied. Then he leaned forward, unusually animated. I'd only ever seen him this passionate once or twice before. "Be logical," he said. "There are two of us, and only one body. Which of us should have it? Which of us will make the better use of it? It's an old ethical question, you could never get it right: where there are needs and resources, who has the better right to them? I say there can only be one correct answer. Look at yourself. What have you ever done to justify your existence?"

The Third room can be full of mirrors sometimes. This was one of those times.

We looked in the mirror together. I saw my entire life. I had to admit, he had a point.

"I asked you," he said, "not to disappoint me. I knew that one day I must pass into the far room. I had high hopes of it, but I was deceived. I trusted you to fulfill those promises I had made but would not live to keep: research, discovery, the amazing things I

could have done had I lived. I gave you intelligence, a prodigious talent. You failed me. Accordingly, I have the right."

I thought about it. "You can't come back," I said.

"The rules don't apply to me."

"Maybe not," I said. "But this is my room. Get out."

He stood up, looming over me. He reached out, and his hands closed around my throat. "You will go into the far room," he said. "It resembles the life you've made for yourself so closely that I dare say you won't notice the difference. I, on the other hand, am simply taking back what's mine."

I could feel his fingers tightening. I put my hand on the desk and fumbled for something to use as a weapon. I found a knife. I stuck it in him.

He looked at me. His face was so close to mine that I could feel his breath. A demon, of course, wouldn't breathe.

"Go back," I said.

His eyes were fading. "Please," he said. I didn't reply. I wasn't there when he died, the first time. I made up for that.

He faded, bit by bit. When he was completely gone, I looked for his portrait on the wall. Not there any more.

Then I looked at the knife.

I went back and did the rest of the dogs. Nothing; everything was grey, like it's supposed to be. I looked for the portrait, but I couldn't find it. Ever since then, I have difficulty remembering what he looked like. Ah well, no great loss.

When the last dog had been led away, I said; "Let's go and have a drink. I need one."

We sat on opposite sides of a wobbly table. I swilled down a jug of the local poison before she said anything.

"You didn't let me have a go on my own," she said.

"No." I drained the last drop into my cup and swallowed it. No effect, like the booze in the Third room. I wondered if my punishment was a life of unbreakable sobriety. "Just as well I didn't, really. Don't you think?"

She looked at me. "You know," she said.

I nodded wearily. "Yes," I said. "Took me long enough to figure it out, but I did, eventually. Had to be told," I added. "Couldn't see it for myself."

She didn't say anything. Apparently, it was up to me.

"Things can only get into the Third room," I said, "if someone brings them there. Earlier today, I found a knife, just when I needed one. I didn't bring it there. You did."

She just looked at me.

"Thank you," I said.

"You're welcome," she replied.

"But that's not all you left there," I went on. "Was it?"

She shrugged. "What's a girl to do?" she said.

I almost felt sorry for her. But it hadn't been her hands on my throat. I could have forgiven that. It was his.

"You don't belong here," I said. "And you didn't come here in the head of some dog."

"I just want to go home," she said. "What's so terrible about that?"

"But you can't," I replied. "It's against the rules."

"Some rules don't apply to some people."

I laughed. "How much time did you spend with him?" I asked.

"Longer than you did." She smiled bleakly. "Actually, it really was all his fault. He conjured me, from the room where I lived. I didn't want to go, but he was very strong. I was his familiar for fifty years."

I nodded. "And when he died—"

"I was stuck here. I didn't even have a body, not for a long time, not till he died and I was able to wriggle free. This was the only body I could get." She grinned. "Not what I'd have chosen."

"Because the talent is so rare among women." I nodded. "And the late onset, too."

"Nine years," she said. "When he died. It fitted rather nicely. Don't blame yourself for not suspecting."

"I should have," I replied. "You got out of breath on the stairs, which should've told me you were at home there, not an intruder. You saw the stairs as the staircase up to the appointments office, when I got this job; you took that from my mind. You couldn't do rooms; then, as soon as I teach you, you're a natural at them. You played on my vanity. I hadn't realised I still had one."

She laughed at that. "Of course you do," she said. "You think you're amazingly brilliant, but your life's been ruined by your father. Which is largely true," she added. "That's something we have in common."

"You took him in there," I said, "when we went there together. You left him there to wait for me. I should've known when you said you're colour-blind."

"Silly of me," she said. "Maybe I wanted you to guess, so I gave you a great big hint."

I looked in my cup but it was still empty. "Was that the deal?" I said. "You'd take him back, and in return he'd let you through? After he'd murdered me?"

She looked down at her hands. "If that was the deal," she said, "why did I leave you the knife?"

I took a deep breath. "I think that question is the reason we're having this conversation," I said. "Otherwise I'd have blown you away with *philon hetor* the moment I got back."

She looked at me, again. "I must have changed my mind," she said.

"I suppose you must," I said. "How did you find me?"

"Wasn't easy," she said. "You disappeared into obscurity, it took me most of the nine years just to track you down. I wanted to use someone else, but he insisted. He said he didn't have a right to take anybody else's life. Just yours."

"He always was a very ethical man," I said. "And a great one for rules."

"Well?" she said. "Will you? You owe me, for the knife."

I thought about it. "I'm not sure I know how."

"He did. He told me. I can tell you." She grinned. "It's not too difficult, actually. Even you should be able to manage it."

I thought: about him, my life, under-achievement generally. I thought: I am my father's son, and he left unfinished business. And the rules: the rules don't apply to me.

The door wasn't locked. He was in his office.

"Had a good time in the sticks?" he said, not looking up from his paperwork.

"A bit boring," I replied. "But thanks anyway."

He looked up. "You're welcome," he said. "How were the dogs?"

"Very much as you'd expect," I said. "I think I might get myself one, for the company."

He nodded slowly. "And the mentoring," he said. "How did that work out?"

I shrugged. "She wasn't suited," I said. "She's given up. Gone home."

"Ah well." He shook his head. "Probably just as well. There isn't really a place for women in the profession." He uncorked the bottle on his desk, poured himself one, offered me one. I refused. "Really," he said, "there ought to be a rule about it."

"Quite," I said. "Well, thanks again. Please bear me in mind when something else turns up."

I left, down the stairs, out into the street. My two weeks' work had earned me forty shillings. I spent one of them on a bottle of hundred-and-fifty proof. Sadly, like the rules, I found it didn't apply to me.

# Cutting Edge Technology

War is a great generator of ironies. My all-time favourites are the patent infringement lawsuits brought against the US government after World War I by the German arms industry. The US, desperate to upgrade its antiquated rifles and ammo when it entered the war, had copied the Mauser bolt action and the German-designed spitzer bullet to create the Springfield rifle. The German patent holders won the suit, and the US had to pay royalties on every rifle issued to and every bullet fired by their armed forces during the war. I'd put that in a book, but nobody would believe it.

A milder irony lies in the fact that, in 1917, George S Patton, pioneer of modern mechanised warfare, designed a sword for the Army. He was only a young lieutenant at the time, but the weapon he came up with was, by all the arcane criteria of swordsmen and swordsmiths, more or less perfect, the best sword ever issued to an army. It was a light, slim thrusting sword for cavalry use, wonderfully balanced, an ergonomic marvel, and if it was ever drawn in anger, I can find no record of it. The peak of perfection is reached only when the instrument itself is entirely obsolete, and the designer was the father of the impersonal hell of modern mechanised war.

Patton didn't just design a sword, he also wrote a user's manual, setting out a standardised training program for swordsmanship in the US cavalry. The approved method is refreshingly simple; you hold the sword at arm's length, point it at the enemy and gallop. That's it. Patton deliberately declined to teach any defensive parries; the cavalry swordsman is basically just a bullet fired at the enemy by his commanding officer, and there's no need for a bullet to defend itself.

A SWORD IS a piece of metal, usually flat, usually with a point, an edge, or both. You can cut with it, or you can thrust. If killing is your priority, the thrust is your friend. You're much more likely to kill with the point than the edge. But if you want to stop the fight as quickly as possible, the edge is probably a better choice. Swords work by inflicting a combination of shock and damage. A stab can damage you fatally but shock you so little that you don't realise you've been hit; you can carry on with the fight, kill the other guy, walk home and only find out you're dying when you take your coat off and see the blood. By contrast, a severed arm stops most fights, even though it may not kill you, and the pain and shock of a heavy cut will neutralise an opponent even if he's wearing armour and his skin remains unbroken.

The thrust is generally a safer manoeuvre to undertake. Thrusts are straight lines. Cuts tend to be arcs. Basic geometry dictates that the thrust takes less time, and needs less elbow room. You can poke a lethal hole in someone with comparatively little effort. To have any useful effect, a cut needs strength behind it, calling for big movements of arm and body. In making these movements, as often as not, the swordsman leaves himself open, presenting an inviting target for the thrust.

So the point has it, and the edge is nowhere. Maybe, if the other guy's fighting in his shirt. If he's wearing armour, the thrust suddenly loses its appeal. All wearable armour has gaps, weak points, joints, into which the skilled swordsman can poke his point, assuming the other guy is kind enough to hold still. But a sword light enough to be usable won't punch a killing hole through one-sixteenth inch steel plate, the average thickness of medieval armour. Instead it'll bend, possibly snap like a carrot. A cutting sword, by the same token, won't slice easily through plate armour (1). What it will do is transmit enough blunt force to scramble brains and rupture internal organs. The function of the sharp edge is to cut into the armour just enough to stop the blow glancing off and dissipating its force into empty air.

# CUTTING EDGE TECHNOLOGY

THE GEOMETRY OF swords is a matter of compromise. Thin needle-sharp points penetrate best but are too frail for business purposes; if they hit bone, armour or the other man's sword, they snap off or bend. Broad, thin cutting edges cut best, but are similarly weak. To cut, you need the most acute angle possible. The edge of a blade is a wedge forced into a gap of its own making; the thinner the edge, the less force required to drive the wedge in to the required depth. A razor blade cuts better than an axe, but you couldn't chop down a tree with one, because it'd buckle under the force of your blow. Cutting swords tend to be wide, to make the wedge as long as possible. Thrusting swords are the same wedge turned through ninety degrees; they need to be narrow. They also need to be stiff, or else they'll bend, like a modern fencing foil, rather than penetrate. Cutting swords should be flexible, capable of giving way and springing back under the tremendous force of impact. Stiffness and flexibility are governed by the blade's cross-section. Nearly all double-edged swords, for example, have a cross-section roughly like a squashed diamond; the flatter the diamond, the greater the degree of flex. You can compromise by making the faces of the diamond concave arcs instead of straight lines. This accentuates the central rib, imparting stiffness, while reducing the angle of the edge, promoting flex. By a happy coincidence, it's also the angle you get if you grind a sword lengthwise on a wheel rather than planing it down with a flat stone or a file.

THE EARLIEST SWORDS were double-edged. It's easier to forge them that way. When you beat out an edge, you spread the metal, like spreading butter. The side you hammer on spreads, the other side doesn't; therefore, the blade tends to curve, giving you the distinctive profile of the sabre and the scimitar. Trouble is, if you beat the edge out enough to make it thin

enough to cut, you get rather more curve than you want, so you have to keep stopping and straightening. This process is hellishly awkward, as the blade tends to buckle and distort. You flatten it out and you think you're home and dry, but as soon as you heat the thing up and quench it, during the heat-treatment stage that gives the blade its flexibility, the distortions you've so carefully beaten out of the steel somehow come back, and you end up with something looking like a two-dimensional corkscrew designed by M C Escher. In comparison, a two-edged sword is a piece of cake. You hammer on both sides, spreading the steel evenly. The blade stays straight of its own accord, giving you nice, wide cutting edges and a stiff central rib.

Forging steel is all about spreading. A billet of red-hot steel is like a tube of toothpaste (with the cap on, of course); you can squidge it into the shape you want. If you pinch the edges, you raise the middle. If you squash one end thin, you fatten the other end, as toothpaste is forced backwards. A desirable quality in swords is *distal taper*; wide and thick at the handle end, tapering gently and regularly, narrow and thin at the point. Distal taper should come naturally as you work your red-hot flat-rectangular bar into a double-edged blade. You start at the point end and hammer your rectangular bar on the edge. This makes it narrower, but also thicker, as material from the edge is forced into the middle. So you flip the bar over onto its side and pound on the flat side, squidging your steel toothpaste up the tube. Then turn it back on the edge, to narrow it some more; then on its back, to thin it. As you work up the blade from point to hilt, you decrease the rate at which you draw it out, to get your taper. When you're done, you should have a nice icicle shape, with a rectangular cross-section. Then you beat out the edges to turn the rectangle into a diamond. Compared to making a single-edged sword, it's a walk in the park; and the customer gets the added bonus of a spare cutting edge, so that when he's blunted his sword bashing it on some guy's helmet, all he has to do is flip it round in his hand and he's back in the cutting business again.

## CUTTING EDGE TECHNOLOGY

THE ANCIENT GREEKS were passable architects, not bad at sculpture, literature, philosophy and mathematics; they were *fantastic* metalworkers. They made a kind of double-edged sword that distal-tapers the wrong way—narrow at the handle end, widening up as far as the centre of percussion (if you lash out instinctively with a sword, the place on the edge that contacts the target is the centre of percussion) and then narrowing sharply to give a usable point for stabbing with. That's good design. A curved edge cuts better than a straight one, which is why swordsmiths went to all the extra trouble of making sabres and scimitars. The Greek leaf-shaped blade has the advantages of the straight two-edged sword, but has curved edges, which cut better. Even more impressive was their other major sword type, the *kopis* or *machaera*. It's a single-edge curved sword, but the sharp edge is on the inside of the curve; your basic hook, or sickle. This is sheer misery to make but works exceptionally well, since the concave curve tends to pull the cutting edge into the target, giving you a slicing action. The *machaera* is, in fact, the only pattern of sword still used by the military for killing people. Alexander the Great took the *machaera* to India, where the local smiths copied it. Nearly two and a half thousand years later, the Gurkha mercenaries employed by the British army still carry and use the *kukhri*, which is basically Alexander's sidearm of choice, but these days they're made in Nepal out of recycled Mercedes lorry springs.

GREEK CRAFTSMEN MADE weapons to order for middle-class citizen soldiers who paid for their own equipment. The Romans were into mass production for huge professional armies. They copied a Spanish design; a short, broad double-edged blade, easy to make, wide enough to have thin edges that cut superbly, the edges running parallel for most of the sword's length before tapering sharply to form a wickedly efficient point. The *gladius Hispaniensis* is an outstanding design, and Roman infantry tactics were founded on it for centuries. It cuts brutally but

its primary purpose was stabbing. It's very short—big deal, said the Romans; when we fight, we like to get close to the enemy—because if it was any longer it'd be too heavy to use. Swords need to be light. Two pounds is the optimum. Some two-handed medieval longswords weighed over three pounds, but they had long handles to give extra leverage, and they were so well balanced that they felt much lighter in use. Any form of swordfighting is exhausting work, and if you get tired and slow, you don't stand a chance.

WHEN JULIUS CAESAR fought the Gauls in the first century AD, he noticed how, in the heat of hand to hand combat, the Gallic warriors often had to stop and straighten their swords under their feet. Their swords were soft iron, not steel. The extraordinary virtue of heat-treated carbon steel is that it has a memory; bend it, and instead of staying bent as iron does, it springs back.

These days, we know exactly how steel works. It has to do with the carbon content of the metal, which enables steel to change its crystalline structure when heated red hot and immediately quenched in water or oil. This makes the steel extremely hard, but also brittle—if you drop it on the floor, it might just shatter like glass. To make a flexible blade (which is basically just a spring with sharp edges) you need to reheat the hardened blade to a specific temperature and quench it again. Luckily for smiths, before the invention of thermometers, the steel itself tells you exactly when to quench it. It changes colour, running through the rainbow from pale straw yellow to purple to deep, then light blue. You quench swords at the dark blue point, to make them as springy and tough as possible while still able to hold a sharp edge. Or you can dip them in oil and stick them in the fire until all the oil burns off, or you can simply dunk them in molten lead, whose melting point just happens to be the same temperature as the blue stage; these processes are easier and more reliable, but far less aesthetically satisfying.

TO MAKE STEEL, though, you need the right sort of iron—not the pure stuff, but iron alloyed with a small quantity of carbon. There were places where you could dig naturally-occurring steel-bearing ore straight out of the ground. The most famous deposits known in antiquity were in India—King Porus gave Alexander the Great thirty pounds of it—and came to be known as *wootz*. For the vast majority of smiths who couldn't get hold of the imported material, making steel was a mysterious hit-and-miss affair. You were more likely to get steel if you recycled old iron—horseshoes, wheel tires—than if you used fresh ore, but it was a combination of luck and serendipitously-acquired skill, which wasn't freely shared. What actually happened, of course, was that carbon from the charcoal universally used to fuel the smith's fire until the Industrial Revolution migrated into the iron, but they didn't know that. As a result, decent hardening steel was rare and precious, and only an idiot would dream of making a whole sword out of it.

Instead, bladesmiths all across the world developed the technique now known as pattern-welding. Horribly time-consuming and requiring exceptional skill, pattern-welding was used for hundreds of years, until some point in the ninth century AD, simply because there was no other way of making a half-decent sword. Pattern-welding is based on the happy fact that when two pieces of steel or iron are brought to a temperature just shy of melting—you have to get it just right or the steel is ruined; it's blinding-white hot, so you judge the exact moment by the soft hissing noise it makes—you can fuse them together by gently hammering. You can weld short bits together to make a useful length; you can also weld hardening steel to soft iron, which means you can make the body of the sword out of cheap, pliable stuff and save the rare, brittle-hard steel just for the cutting edges. Dark Age smiths twisted hundreds of iron twigs together and welded them into billets, then welded the billets into a core, then added the steel edges. The pattern part of the description refers to the swirls, waves, spirals and parallel lines that show

up when you etch the finished blade with acid; an unintended by-product, but stunningly beautiful. A pattern-welded sword would have taken weeks to make, and only a deeply skilled man could do it—one mistake, one chunk of slag embedded in the fabric, one seam not heated up enough and failing to fuse—would ruin the whole thing, turning it into gorgeously-figured scrap. The end result was a conflict between two diametrically opposed materials, one soft and ductile, the other hard and brittle. A pattern-welded sword is a supreme triumph of skill, beauty and ingenuity, and it just about gets the job done. A blade beaten out of a SAE 5160 truck leaf spring will outperform it every time.

WHICH LEADS US neatly to an assessment of the traditional Japanese sword, the *katana*. Most of the rest of the world got better, cheaper steel which allowed them to start making all-steel swords, but the Japanese didn't, and so stuck with pattern-welding. They used *tamahagane*, steel smelted out of volcanic black sand, welded to a soft, multiple-folded iron core. The *katana* is single-edged; so, in order to make it strong enough not to bend or break, it has to be thicker in the body than practically any other sword type. To control and handle such a chunky, heavy object, the Japanese opted for a relatively short blade and a long, two-handed grip. The curved blade is ergonomically suited for cutting, particularly the draw-cut (where you pull the blade across the enemy's flesh to slice rather than chopping at it); it's got a point, but one that's primarily designed to assist with cutting with the tip rather than thrusting. All in all, the *katana* is a clunker, an Edsel, fossilised, self-circumscribing, only capable of being used in a limited number of ways, and not much of a stabber; beautifully-made, because only the nobility were allowed to own them; rather like the traditional English game-shooting shotgun, still handmade by craftsmen in a fashion that's hardly changed since the 18th century, a joy to look at and handle; but a mass-produced

Remington slide-action kills birds just as dead, handles just as well, has three times the firepower and costs 1,000 times less.

The myth of the semi-magical Japanese sword arose after WW2, when GIs brought captured *katanas* back from the Pacific, and their sons started playing with them. This led to the Western discovery of the Japanese tradition of swordsmanship, which was unique in one vital respect; it was still alive. By 1945, sword-fighting was dead in the West. There was no living tradition; if you wanted to know how to use anything more practical than a bit of wire in a dish-shaped handle, you had to learn it from a book, which you'd have to go to a museum to read. The Japanese tradition, by contrast, was unbroken back to the 14th century. By the same token, the Japanese had been fighting with basically the same sword design for 600 years; hardly surprising, therefore, that they were about as good at it as it's possible to get. The *katana* isn't a particularly good design, and *kenjitsu* isn't the supreme martial art; but by the second half of the 20th century it was the only game in town. The only swords apart from *katanas* that an American would-be swordsman was likely to encounter were 19th century military sabres, designed primarily for use on horseback, for chopping at the heads and arms of footsoldiers; good enough for that, not much use for anything else, heavy and forward-balanced, extremely unsuited for anything resembling scientific fencing. No wonder, therefore, that to the post-war generation, the *katana* was a magical object possessing practically supernatural qualities.

THESE DAYS, THERE are scores, hundreds even, of swordsmiths working in the USA who will supply you, for the price of a decent desktop computer, with the best swords ever made. They're better than anything produced in antiquity because they're made of modern steel. Demand, based on the revival of interest in the Western martial arts, has been sufficient to justify outsourcing medieval replica sword manufacture to China.

So, for around two hundred dollars, you can have an American-designed replica of a medieval sword, made in China out of 5160 steel, that's better in every meaningful respect than the finest blade ever commissioned by the Kings of France. You'll never use it, of course. You might slice into a water-filled plastic bottle. You might even dismember a 50 gallon oil drum, and post the ensuing carnage on YouTube. But the masterpiece you hold in your hand is obsolete at the moment of perfection. All you can really do with it is look at yourself holding it in a mirror, in the same way as a zoo lion stalks in his cage, glorying in his absolute possession of seven paces.

NO OFFENCE INTENDED to the bottle-choppers. It's entirely thanks to them that we have any insight at all into European swords and swordsmanship in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In the 19th and 20th centuries, before the Society for Creative Anachronism kick-started the re-enactment hobby and made it possible for grown men to earn a living making faithful reproductions of old swords, all manner of weird myths had grown up about the medieval European sword. It weighed ten pounds. It was basically a heavy iron bar for bashing with. There was no skill involved. It's not hard to figure out where these misconceptions came from. The number of surviving medieval swords is quite small, and they tend to be in museums, where you're not allowed to take them out of the case and play with them, to see how they handle.

Fortunately, there was one man, an eccentric English book-illustrator and sword collector, who was prepared to do just that. Starting in the 1940s, Ewart Oakeshott devoted his life to the medieval sword. Many of the finest extant specimens passed through his hands at one time or another, and, since he wasn't afraid to pick them up and waggle them in the air, he made the remarkable discovery that they weren't absurdly heavy and unwieldy; in fact, they handled really rather well. Oakeshott went on to classify sword types from the Viking Age

to the Renaissance, and his research was taken up, not by the scholars and curators, but by the stick-jocks and tatami-mat-slicers of the living history movement. Once authentic replicas were available, re-enactors went to the library and discovered the small but meaningful number of medieval fencing manuals, whose existence had been more or less forgotten about since the last brief flurry of interest at the end of the 19th century. The manuals are oblique, elliptical and deliberately obscure—they were study aids for students of the fight schools rather than teach-yourself books—but we do at least have a keyhole through which we can peer at medieval swordsmanship, and form the inescapable conclusion that it was a true martial art of exceptional subtlety and sophistication. With some idea of the fighting techniques, we can go back to the swords and begin to understand them properly.

THERE ARE TWENTY-TWO well-defined different types in Oakeshott's classification. Take the Type Fourteen, a popular 14th century pattern. It's the perfect cutter. The blade is relatively short, wide at the hilt, narrowing to an acute point. Running down the middle for most of its length is a fuller, a broad groove designed to reduce weight by removing superfluous metal without compromising strength; also, in the process of hammering the groove into the blade, you spread metal sideways, widening the blade, thinning the cutting edge to give you a pointier, more efficient wedge. The Type Fourteen was an effective cutter of flesh, but when the armourers upped the stakes by introducing plate armour in the 14th and 15th centuries, the Fourteen was outmatched. It wasn't stiff enough to deliver powerful thrusts into the joints and weak points of armour. Also, fighters started armouring their legs, which had always been a favourite target (2). A new pattern was needed; still a dual purpose weapon, but favouring the thrust, the way the Fourteen had favoured the cut. The Type Fifteen was roughly the same shape—broad at the hilt end, tapering to a needle point—but instead of the fuller, it

had a strong central rib, formed by the forging out of the cutting edges. It was stiffer for the thrust, while still capable of efficient cutting. Superbly balanced (all medieval swords achieve balance by means of a thick, heavy pommel, usually wheel-shaped; the optimum centre of balance is around two to three inches in front of the crossguard) and weighing in at somewhere between two and three pounds, it feels light and quick in the hand. It's the ideal weapon for sword-and-shield fighting.

The shield, however, was on the way out. Plate armour for the nobility and long-handled cutting weapons for the rank and file that needed both hands to use them made it obsolete in the 15th century, and the Fifteen became the Eighteen (to be precise, the 18a); roughly the same blade, but longer and with an extended hilt, making it possible to use the sword single or double handed. The 15th century longsword is a landmark in sword design, perfection within its own terms of reference, and around it there grew up a school of swordsmanship of which we get tantalising glimpses from the fencing manuals of Ringeck and Talhoffer. By the time these books were written, longswordsmanship was already into the early stages of decadence and decline, the silver rather than the golden age. Suffice it to say, Hollywood has never put on screen a fight sequence as beautiful or viscerally thrilling as the half-guesswork reconstructions of longsword fighting staged by modern re-enactors. Look for them on YouTube and save yourself a fortune in movie tickets.

TALHOFFER'S LONGSWORDSMEN DON'T cut very much; and when they do, they tend to come to a bad end. The cut was out of favour, particularly since most of Talhoffer's book deals not with battlefield armoured combat but fights between unarmoured civilians. Economic and social changes in the late Middle Ages meant that the sword was no longer exclusively the battlefield weapon of the aristocratic knight. With the rise of an affluent urban middle-class, eager to ape their sword-wearing

betters and addicted to picking fights in the street, the sword acquired a new, non-military function. The enthusiastic students who flocked to the German and Italian fighting schools in the 15th century weren't training for war.

The fight schools are a significant development. Trainee knights didn't need them; they learnt swordsmanship from the castle master-at-arms, practically as soon as they were weaned. The schools were there to teach merchants' sons how to survive street brawls, a genre of combat for which the military swords of the High Middle Ages weren't really suited. For one thing, they either needed a shield (3) or else were awkwardly long to wear with everyday costume. Although some form of cutting continued to be taught and practised, the thrust began to dominate, logically enough. Edges shrank, blades thinned and lengthened. Marozzo, who wrote at the turn of the 16th century, teaches an awkward, clumsy proto-rapier called the *spada di lato*. By the middle of the century, the true rapier had arrived from Spain. Three to four feet long, with only a vestigial cutting edge, the rapier is comparatively slow, best used with a defensive weapon in the left hand (a dagger, a cloak, something to parry with) but it's much better than anything that had gone before for its intended purpose, the formal duel and the street-corner rumble. By the turn of the 17th century, Ridolfo Capo Ferro had refined rapier fencing to a precise science. It's not fencing as a modern Olympic athlete would understand it. For one thing, the rapier fencer isn't restricted to moving in a straight line. He can sidestep, performing devastating moves like the *volte* (a twisting side-shuffle that leaves your lunging enemy impaling himself on your sword). He isn't restricted to the ritual exchange of lunge, parry, riposte; defence and counterattack are combined in the same move, making a rapier duel short and extremely lethal. The rapier was soon obsolete itself, replaced by the shorter, lighter, more convenient smallsword, the ancestor of the modern foil. The most efficient non-projectile tool ever designed for killing an unarmoured man, the smallsword made no pretence at a cutting edge. It was a sharp, stiff, triangular-section

wire, so quick in the hand that there was no longer time for the rapierman's sidesteps and simultaneous defence and counter-attack. Once again, the sword had arrived at total perfection, only to find once it got there that it was obsolete, replaced by the flintlock pistol for duelling and self-defence.

POOR OLD SWORD. Few artefacts have commanded so much care, skill and resources, and at each stage of its development it's been superfluous or obsolete. If swords had never been invented, history would barely have noticed (4). Other weapons were just as good or better for business purposes; armour always won in the end; apart from a brief spell in the hands of the Roman legions, it's always been a rich man's accessory, a status symbol, an overrated icon. Mostly, it survived because it looked cute, and people felt safer if they had one when things got bad.

For a ninety-percent pacifist like me, it's the weapon of choice. Its purpose is and always has been unambiguous, but compared with the instruments that actually did the business—the spear, arrow, cannon, machine-gun, tank, bomber, nuclear bomb—the sword may be allowed to have a relatively clean conscience. On the battlefield, it was generally the last line of defence rather than the weapon that started the fight. The duellists who died on the points of rapiers and smallswords were at least willing participants in their own undoing. If you want an abiding image of the sword in the West, think of the Polish cavalrymen in World War II who charged the German tanks with their sabres. A professional soldier's summary of another stupid cavalry charge sums up the sword for me; *magnifique* (if you like that sort of thing) *mais ce n'est pas la guerre*—which I'd venture to suggest, is about the nicest thing you can say about any weapon.

# NOTES

*(1) Actually, it's a moot point whether swords in the hands of ancient swordsmen could cut mail and cleave helmets. Modern researchers say no, but back in the 13th century they were pretty sure they could, to judge from contemporary literature and art. For example, the Maciejowski Bible, an illuminated manuscript painted for the French crusader king Louis IX, has many scenes showing swords cutting armour in graphic, almost photographic detail. The context is worth considering:*

*1. The Maciejowski Bible was commissioned by an experienced and horribly enthusiastic fighter, who wouldn't have been amused by gross inaccuracies.*

*2. The painter records arms, armour, clothes and footwear with great care and precision. The illustrations are meant to be totally realistic.*

*3. The battle scenes are generic images of warfare rather than particular exploits of superhuman heroes. The armour-cutters are just plain folks, not legendary heroes of whom exceptional feats are to be expected.*

*A redoubtable modern experimental archaeologist, one Mike Loades, recently set out to disprove the Maciejowski Bible once and for all. He acquired a very fine reproduction sword and had a very fine reproduction helmet made, looking just like the ones in the Bible, and proceeded to bash on the helmet with the sword for all he was worth. He managed to dent it, but that was all.*

*Proof positive; except that—*

*1. The very fine helmet, like the very fine sword, was made of modern steel. Mr Loades didn't go into details, but the industry standard for modern repro helmets is something like 2mm cold rolled steel sheet. Medieval armour was made of iron, not steel, and the sheets were hammered by eye with sledgehammers, not rolled in a computer-controlled mill. King Louis would've traded you the Loire*

*valley and half of Touraine for a helmet, or a sword, as good as the ones Mr Loades used for his test.*

*2. Most of the armour-chopping in the Maciejowski Bible is done by men on horseback. Add the momentum of a moving horse to the strength of the human arm, and you vastly increase the force of the blow; rather like the difference between getting punched by a pedestrian and hit by a moving car.*

*3. Mr Loades is one of the most skilled swordsmen currently alive, but he's a 21st century weakling. They were stronger back then. They could shoot bows that we can't draw. They could till an acre a day with an ox-drawn plough—we know they could, because that's the original definition of an acre, but you try it and see how far you get. They could fight all day in heavy armour, which exhausts us in a matter of minutes. Medieval noblemen trained intensively with weapons from childhood. The fact that we can't do it is no proof that it can't be done.*

*(2) Our best evidence about how men died in battle in the Middle Ages comes from the mass graves discovered on the site of the Battle of Wisby, fought in Sweden in 1361. The remains of over a thousand bodies were unearthed there between 1905 and 1928. The dead were almost exclusively local Swedish infantry conscripts rather than knights; they wore mail coifs rather than helmets and little or no leg armour. Considerable numbers of them show cutting wounds to the legs and head, which suggests a fairly basic feint-high-cut-low or feint-low-cut-high style of battlefield swordsmanship, a hypothesis supported by descriptions of fighting in the roughly contemporary Icelandic sagas and elsewhere. Of the skeletons where cause of death could be established, cuts outnumbered piercing wounds by almost 5 to 1. In several cases, both legs had been severed by one blow, though of course we can't establish whether the weapon used was a sword or an axe.*

*(3) The shield survived into the rapier era, in the form of the buckler, a steel disc about the size of a dinner plate. The buckler was a handy piece of equipment. You could punch with it as well as defend, and it was just about small enough to hang from your belt as you swaggered about town, though the incessant clanking would have driven you crazy. It fell into disuse when contemporary fashionistas decreed that wearing the buckler (swash-buckling) was just so last year.*

*(4) Robert Drews, a leading authority on the Bronze Age in Europe, accounts for the extraordinary catastrophe that left most of the great walled cities of the Aegean in ashes near the end of the Bronze Age to the introduction of a new type of sword, the Naue Type II or Griffzungenschwert, wielded by a loose confederation of Sicilian and Sardinian pirates. Drews' hypothesis is significantly more convincing than the alternative explanations previously offered by scholars, and it's undeniable that the Naue II was a massive success, appearing simultaneously all over Europe and the Near East and replacing previous types. However, his theory tends towards the Hells Angels school of historical speculation—a bunch of mindless hooligans blow into town, trash the joint and vanish without a trace, as though they'd never been—which I've always had problems with. Furthermore, the Naue II is better than most bronze swords but it's still a bronze sword; smack something hard with it and it bends like a banana. Professor Drews could do worse than invest in one of Neil Burridge's outstandingly authentic replicas of the Naue II and try it for himself.*

# Illuminated

*Codex Escatoensis XIV.67/3c; 127-339*

The truth, the sad, banal truth, is that they're nothing but a network of three-hundred-year-old Imperial relay stations, built in a hurry in the last decades of the Occupation to pass warning messages about pirate raids. Of course they built them on hilltops, so they'd be visible at a distance, and of course they had to be towers, for the same reason. They used stone because they used stone for everything; white stone because the Porthead marble quarries hadn't been completely worked out back then. It's true they didn't use mortar, and you can't slide the tip of a knife between the stones. That's how they built everything—temples, barns, outdoor privies. They didn't know any other way.

We know this, because we can read the inscriptions they left over the doorways. They look mysterious and grand. Translated, they're nothing at all. They tell you the station number, the commissioning date, the name and rank of the engineer in charge of construction, and some basic standing orders. We go out of our way to tell people that the ancient writings aren't runes of power or deadly curses. Nobody believes us, of course. They never do. We rarely want them to.

When I was a kid, I wanted one, for my very own, more than anything in the world. Feel free, therefore, to have no sympathy for me.

She stood up in her stirrups, her eyes positively shining. "It's a wizard's tower," she said.

"There's no such thing as wizards," I replied. "You should know. You're training to be one."

She ignored me, as usual. "It's beautiful," she said. "How old is it?"

"Late Occupation," I replied. "As you deduced from the style of the masonry and the materials used. Or perhaps you read the date, there, above the door."

She squinted; the late afternoon sun was dazzling on the white stone. "Procuratorship of Callias and Sthenodorus. When was that?"

"You can look it up when we get home. Come on, will you? You've got the key."

"Are you sure? I thought you had it."

*Laus tibi soli* is a third-level excession, primarily designed for bringing the latent silver in alluvial lead deposits to the surface. It also opens most locks. To be fair, she did it quite well. I shouldn't have had to remind her of the words, though.

A brief digression about women. I have no problem with them. Bearing in mind the disadvantages they suffer from—late onset, early diminution, traumatic dispossession, all that—many of them do remarkably well. And I fully support the recent initiatives to bring more Talented women into the Order, and to help them make the most of their talent while they still have it. In the appropriate disciplines (medicine, primarily; they can also make pretty fair weather forecasters and water diviners) there's absolutely no reason why they shouldn't be treated just the same as us, though of course advancement beyond junior deacon is out of the question, they simply don't have time. I also accept that there's no substitute for a field placement between sixth and seventh year; all this business about accelerated apprenticeships and pushing

them along with *fors maius* is clearly counterproductive, based on a fundamental misunderstanding of how you grow and develop as an adept. So, obviously, someone's got to draw the short straw occasionally. I just wish it didn't always have to be me.

THE FIRST THING I noticed, of course, was the smell. It's unmistakable.

Actually, it wasn't just *the* smell; it was the rather extraordinary combination of *the* smell and all the usual neglected-building smells—mould, damp plaster, mildewed fabrics, the lives, digestive cycles and deaths of birds and rats. Blend all those with the stink of non-Saloninan physics and you get an entirely unique fragrance guaranteed to tantalise the mind and turn the stomach.

I said something about it. She looked at me. "What smell?" she said.

I looked around. It was more or less what I'd expected. Any normal, sensible person looking to build a tower would opt for a plain stone tube; not these jokers. They used a weird system of tiers of arches braced by internal buttresses; we've been studying the wretched things for a century and we still don't know for sure how they work. Basic architectural theory tells us the lot of them should've fallen down years ago, which is why the College of Works refuses to certify them as safe for military use, which is why we've got them instead of the Brigade of Signals. When you first walk into one and look up, you're terrified of sneezing in case you end up wearing the roof as a hat. But there they stand, smugly infuriating, proof against landslips, floods, earth tremors, subsidence and all known artillery. They've even survived ten generations of east-country crofters scavenging for building materials, unlike the great castles, temples and monasteries built under the Occupation.

Looking up, and then around, I felt as though I was inside a ribcage—all those arches, columns, vestigial ornamental pillars

and columns cut in low relief into the walls, taper-curving up over my head. All a bit unnerving, though that's probably just cultural conditioning. You spend your childhood being told scary stories about wizards' towers, nothing's ever going to scrub those images out of your brain, even when you know the banal facts. Even so; all those curved uprights looked uncommonly like bones to me, which put us squarely in the tower's digestive tract. Call me old-fashioned, but I don't like it when a building eats me.

The furniture was presumably the fault of the previous tenant. The only good thing was that there wasn't very much of it; three chairs, one table. But the chairs (a matching set) were carved in the shape of a giant cupped hand—the fingers were the back, and you sat in the palm—and the table had arms instead of legs. They were thin, bony arms with the muscles standing out, like you see on country people, undernourished but still very strong, and the hands clawed at the floor with splayed fingers.

"Late Conceptualist school," she observed. "Very nice. And worth a lot of money."

I stared at her. "You don't honestly expect me to believe you actually *like* that stuff."

"They're classics of post-Restoration design."

"They're grotesque."

She had that no-point-talking-to-you shrug. "How much?" I asked her.

"Three chairs and a table." She thought for a moment. "Nine hundred angels. Why?"

The thought hadn't crossed my mind, really. "It amazes me," I said, "that anyone would pay good money for something so horrible. Put blankets over those chairs, would you? I really don't want to have to look at them."

She hesitated, then pulled three blankets out of the saddlebag. "This isn't like you," she said. "Something's bothering you, isn't it?"

She'd only known me for two days. "Yes," I said. "The horrible furniture. You could give yourself nightmares, looking at that sort of thing."

She looked at me. Mind-reading forms are strictly forbidden, of course; also, they don't work. In her case, they were redundant.

There was also a bookshelf; mercifully not a classic of post-Restoration design, just a slab of board, grey with age, resting on two chunks of batten nailed to the wall. And on the shelf, six books. I guess you could say they were what we'd come for. I sort of casually strolled in that direction and happened to find myself standing where I could make out the writing on the spines.

"Well?" she said.

"Saloninus' *General Principles*," I read out. Well, of course. "Perceptuus' *Divine Instrument*." I grinned. "Everyone keeps their old school books, don't they?"

"I sold mine."

Ah well. "*Corbulo On Natural Philosophy*." I pulled it down and checked the title page. It had the frontispiece but no watermark. Pity. "Second edition." I put it back. "Maxentius' *Huntsman's Garland*, and—" There was nothing written on the spine of the next one. I opened it and quickly put it back.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing."

"*What*?"

"If you must know, it's a deluxe edition of the *Garden of Entrancing Images*. With pictures," I added. She blushed. "Oh," she said.

"Quite."

"Maybe," she suggested hopefully, "it was already here when he—"

"Yes," I said. "Of course. Anyway, that just leaves—" The last one just had the number 5, on the bottom of the spine, in black ink. I opened it.

Ah. Now, then.

"Is that—?"

I nodded.

His handwriting—of course, at that stage we had no idea who he was, no name or anything—was even worse than mine, and that's saying something. Of course there are many different types of appallingly bad handwriting; this was the sort that appears completely unintelligible if you look closely at the individual letters, but if you lean your head back a bit and treat it as a pattern rather than conventional script, sooner or later you get the hang of it, apart from the occasional completely obscure squiggle which you have to reconstruct from context. Trouble is, my eyes aren't what they were. *Actis heliou* helps—I muttered it under my breath, and the blotches and squiggles calmed down a little—but not enough. I'm told you can buy bits of round glass, like flattened raindrops; but they're very expensive.

"Well?"

I sighed. "See what you can make of it," I said.

She hesitated, bless her. "Are you sure?"

Fair enough. She only had a Class 3 clearance. But I was supervising her, and I've got a Class 8. "Go on," I said. "It won't bite."

She took the book over to the horrible table and sat down in one of the horrible chairs. "I don't recognise any of this," she said.

"Well, you wouldn't, if it's original research."

She screwed up her eyes. "What's *orbs subito*?"

"No idea. What's the context?"

"Sorry, I can't make head or tail of this. It's all in sort of note form."

Naturally; he was writing for himself, not us. "Is there anything at all you recognise?"

"Sorry." She lifted her head. "Shall I read it out to you?"

"Don't do that," I said quickly. Actually, I kept my temper really rather well. A moment later, the penny dropped. "Oh," she said.

"Quite."

(First rule of practice; don't say any kind of Form out loud unless you're absolutely sure what it is and what it does. As

basic principles go, it's on a par with not checking the level in the oil tank by the light of a naked candle. She really should've known that.)

"This is awkward," she said. "You can't read it and I can't understand it, and I can't read it to you. It looks like we're a bit stuck."

I smiled. "Not really," I said. "This is what we do. You copy it out, in your nice, clear copperplate hand, and then I'll be able to figure it out." I paused. "You brought your inkwell."

"Oh yes."

"Fine."

"Did you bring some paper?"

All due respect to women in general and absolutely no offence intended, but you have to tell them every damn thing.

"We'll just have to take it back with us," she said.

Sensible; but I wasn't having that. Stupid of me, very stupid indeed. But this was my first field assignment for three years, and I really didn't want it to be the last. *Didn't you take any paper with you?*, I could hear them saying, and then I'd have to explain. In situations like that, I get creative. It's a failing of mine.

"Just a moment," I said, and I pulled down the deluxe edition of *Entrancing Images*. Written, of course, on best-quality white parchment vellum, which makes a much better medium for painting illustrations on than paper.

"What we need," I said, "is a brick."

WHEN I WAS a novice, you did two years in the scriptorium before they let you anywhere near a reading list. At the time I found this both arbitrary and oppressive—I'd come here to learn magic, not how to copy out old books—and I'm still not entirely sure of the logic behind it. That said, one thing I learned was how to clean off a page of parchment using brick dust and the palm of my hand.

It's a foul job. Think about it. Parchment is basically just skin, like your hand. The difference is, the parchment has been cured

and polished, which makes it hard and durable. The brick dust grinds skin away. Reasonably enough, it takes the soft stuff off first. You can see why page preparation is a job usually assigned to the most junior members of the scriptorium staff.

By the time I'd done half a dozen double-fold sheets my hand was red raw. I went outside and washed it off in the brook. It was just starting to get dark. We'd brought a dozen of the big field-issue candles, enough to read by for ten hours, and one of those army-pattern closed lanterns. You can see your hand in front of your face, but that's about it.

All the time I'd been mutilating myself in the cause of scientific investigation, she'd been reading. "Any joy?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Sometimes it's like it's just starting to make some kind of sense," she said, "and then I lose it completely. I *think* it's supposed to be a reasoned, consecutive argument, but he keeps wandering off, and then it's just plain weird."

I wasn't sure I liked the sound of that. Our department title is, forensic recovery investigation and damage limitation. I had a nasty feeling we were rather too late for the last part of our remit. "I suggest you leave it for tonight and we'll have a proper go at it in the morning," I said. I'd wrapped a handkerchief round my hand. My handkerchieves aren't the cleanest in the world. "I don't know about you, but I've had enough for one day."

She gave me this look, which I confess I found hard to interpret. "What?" I said.

"Oh, nothing."

Now I'm a scholar, sworn to the celibate life, wouldn't have it any other way. But once a year I go home and spend a week with my brother—married for thirty years, two sons, still working the farm—and sometimes his wife says "Oh, nothing" in exactly that tone of voice, and that's when I make an excuse, take a book and spend a couple of hours reading in the hayloft, because if I was the sort of man who relishes the spectacle of total war, I'd have joined the army instead of the Order. There's that bit in

the General Collect about how you have broken every law, dishonoured every commandment, done every evil, neglected every good. Get a woman to say it and you could compress all that down into 'Oh, nothing' and save twenty minutes.

"What?" I said.

"Perhaps you hadn't noticed—" she was one of those women whose voices get quieter when they're really angry—"but there's nothing to sleep on in this horrible building. There's no beds, there's no couches—"

"Floor," I pointed out.

"It's *freezing*."

Ah, I thought. Here we go. "No it isn't."

"Yes it *is*." You can't argue with women about temperature, I've noticed. They're always cold, all of them. It can be hot enough to puddle the nails in the doorframe, and still they'll moan at you for not lighting the fire. "I'm chilled to the bone, and there's no fireplace."

"This isn't cold," I assured her. "Where I grew up, you'd be sweating. When I was a kid—"

"I'm not spending the night here," she snapped. "Not without a proper bed and some heat."

"No choice, I'm afraid," I explained, as patiently as I could. "It's four hours to the village, and you really don't want to try going down the mountain in the dark."

"I wasn't proposing to," she growled quietly.

I frowned at her. "You're not suggesting—"

"Yes."

"No, sorry." I shook my head. "*Bia kai cratos* is a high-intensity sixth-level transmutation. It takes enormous amounts of energy and creates a force three differential."

"I know," she said. "If it was easy, I'd do it myself. But I can't, so you'll have to."

"Don't be silly," I said. "This is a highly unstable environment. Diverting that much energy into heat and light could cause a flashover. Wrap up warm in a blanket, you'll be fine."

There are various military forms (*mirabile ictu*, that sort of thing) that enable you to kill a fellow human being just by looking at them. Technically they're quite straightforward—level three—but for obvious reasons they're not taught until fourth year postgraduate. On the other hand, she struck me as the sort of dedicated student who reads ahead. I was, therefore, tempted to raise a surreptitious shield form. Trouble is, in subdued lighting or darkness you glow slightly. So I did the sensible thing and used *dormienda* under my breath. She was fast asleep in ten minutes. She snored.

A question that's always coming up in year four end-of-term exams is, why can't you use *dormienda* on yourself? Answer—well, you know, of course (and if you don't, stop reading this and *revise*). Annoying; because there are times when you're lying awake at night and you'd give anything to be able to mutter a few words and drift off to sleep, even if it does mean a headache and slight nausea in the morning. Instead, I made myself as comfortable as I could in one of the horrible chairs and spent the night staring at where the ceiling would be if only I could see it. I remember taking extraordinary pains to stay as still as possible, almost as if there was someone or something else inside the tower with us, which I really didn't want to disturb. I'd like to report that I spent the time working on some abstruse point of theory. Sadly, no. My mind drifted; various topics, including the refectory roof (I really didn't want to be on the Works Committee, but sometimes you just get lumbered), the vacant chair in Theoretical Ethics, that nagging pain I get in my jaw, the six hundred angels my brother needed to fix up the mill—a first edition Corbulo would've covered that easily, and I've heard it said that unscrupulous people know how to fake the watermark using wood blocks, steam and olive oil; the problem was, I didn't know any unscrupulous people; that sort of thing, the usual garbage that bounces around inside your head when you're awake in the wee small hours. Also, for some unaccountable reason, our mysterious friend's choice of reading matter. The textbooks, yes,

everybody's got a Saloninus and a Perceptuus, and the Corbulo—nice to have your own copy, saves waiting your turn in the library. The *Huntsman's Mirror*, on the other hand, suggested landed gentry rather than your typical poor scholar. By and large, the Order is mostly middle-class; a respectable profession for the sons of merchants, lawyers, doctors, the better class of land agent. We don't get many scions of the nobility, for some reason. The upper echelons of society simply don't seem to be fertile ground for the Talent, which I've always put down to inbreeding. But you get them from time to time, just as you get peasants' sons and even women. Or maybe our friend had ideas above his station, or he won the book in a card game. You can't tell, can you?

The *Garden*, on the other hand. We don't encourage that sort of thing. In fact, we don't hold with it at all. Go figure. It really is true what they tell you in first year; you can damage your talent, possibly lose it altogether—look what that sort of thing does to women adepts, after all. A copy of the *Garden* would get you thrown out of the Studium, and even the lesser schools, where they can't afford to be quite so fussy, would take a pretty dim view. Hence, quite possibly, our man moving away from civilisation and setting up shop in a wizard's tower in the middle of nowhere. All very sad, and it wouldn't be the first time.

In which case, we really did need to know what he'd been up to. A corrupted and decadent talent, under the influence of malignant tendencies, decays quickly but nastily, with occasional flashes of exceptional brilliance. It's not widely known, but half the military forms in the *General Concordance* were developed under those sorts of circumstances, and if you want a classic example, you don't need to look further than Saloninus himself.

Well, we had his journal; that was the main thing. In cases where the journal's lost or destroyed, all you can do is reconstruct and guess. Much easier when you've got a detailed, scientifically-compiled record of a fellow adept's mind going all to pieces; you can see where the shrapnel flew, and usually how fast it was going, and possibly what it hit.

"I THINK WE should go back," she said.

"Really." I was grinding the brick against a flint to make more dust.

"Well, yes. We should take this back to the Studium and let the experts look at it."

"I'm an expert," I said coldly.

She paused, not for very long. "Yes, but some of this stuff is really strange. There's whole pages that simply don't make sense at all. I mean, it's perfectly normal words and phrases, proper grammar and syntax. *Really* good spelling. But it doesn't mean anything."

"Not to you."

She pulled a face. "I really wish I could read some of it out to you, and then you'd be able to see what I mean. It's *gibberish*. Except sometimes—"

Odd she should put it that way. It's gibberish, except sometimes. I'd said that once, those exact same words, twenty years ago. Whereupon my field supervisor (Germanus of Met'Oc, rest his soul; a good man and a competent scholar) grabbed the book out of my hands and sent me to fetch him an apple from the refectory. Later, of course, he explained.

"I'd leave it for now," I said, as pleasantly as I could. "Why don't you go outside, have a walk, stretch your legs? You've been cooped up in here all morning, you could do with some fresh air."

"It's tipping down with rain out there. Can't you hear it?"

"And then," I said, "I'll have cleaned off enough parchment and you can start copying out. All right?"

She scowled horribly at me as I closed the tower door on her, but I couldn't help that. It was for her own good; pneumonia can be cured, but you can come to harm reading allogloss, even if you don't know what it means. She was going to have to copy it out; that was bad enough.

Just to be sure, I put my hand on the page she'd left it open at and used *spes gentis*. Turned my fingertips numb for several seconds. Allogloss. Oh hell.

Think about what you do when you write something down. You take a thought out of your own mind, you separate it from yourself, and you fix it in a permanent medium, like a fly in amber. Then you leave it there.

A book can last a very long time. Even if the paper you wrote on is lost or destroyed, all it takes is for someone else to make a copy. Written words can propagate like maggots in a sheep's arse. Some flies in amber are only sleeping.

Allogloss is worse than that. You make it using a form I don't know and don't wish to learn. What you write *changes*; it disguises itself. A non-adept looks at it and just sees nonsense. It's like a code, but it's truly unbreakable, unless you know the appropriate form, *moi aeide*. Once you use the form, allogloss wakes up. The words (more to the point, a little bit of the mind that wrote the words) can talk to you. Ten people reading a page of allogloss will read ten very different texts—the meaning is exactly the same, but the phraseology, even the language it's in—will be completely different. Allogloss is not a toy. It's toxic.

Nothing wholesome was ever written in allogloss; nothing anyone ever wanted to read. There's a school of thought, to which I'm tempted to adhere, that says the only place for allogloss texts is the back of a lit grate.

Sadly, I had no choice. She was going to have to copy it out, and I was going to have to read it. What fun.

The first passage went something like this; or at least, this was the sort of thing I heard in my head. I'm not sure to this day how much of it's him and how much is me. I've tried to make it sound like him, but pretty soon you reach a point where the distinction gets blurred, and believe me, that's not an experience I'd wish on anyone.

Read on. Enjoy.

I MET HER when I was thirty-three years old and she was, what, seventeen, eighteen. She was a classic case of late onset, but fiercely talented. Her name was

I really do believe that talented women should be treated properly, given genuine opportunities. We make all sorts of excuses, we abuse and exaggerate the evidence—sure, some of it's perfectly true; their talent's more fragile than ours, so what? That means we should help them more, not less. Wherever it occurs, the talent is precious and wonderful, and someone who's got it is special. Someone with as much of it as she had is a miracle, an extraordinary gift to the world. Any other attitude is simply barbaric.

To begin with, she came to me for mechanics, logic and theory of displacement. I've never met someone who learned so fast. It's the difference between watering a plant and watching it slowly grow, and pouring water into a glass. I barely had to explain anything; it was more like I was reminding her of things she already knew. She covered the entire first year syllabus in one term. Amazing. I had to resit logic three times, and then I only just scraped through.

They wanted to send her to Palaeologus for forms, but I talked to Father Prior. He gave me a few odd looks, but he knew me well enough to realise that if I was so certain about a student, I was probably right. So I got her for forms, levels one to three, and I persuaded Father Prior to let her skip her scriptorium year, on account of the lateness of her onset. It'd be a wicked waste, I told him, and he had to agree.

Ask anyone; I'm not a natural teacher. I go too fast, I get impatient if the student doesn't share my enthusiasm, doesn't want to learn as much as I do. Teaching her was extraordinary. I don't really know how to describe it; except that once, many years ago, I took a clock to pieces, to see how it worked, and

then I put it back together again. I remember how perfectly each component fitted into its carefully-prepared place in the mechanism, how each cog spindle clipped neatly into a hole drilled in exactly the right place, how the teeth came together, exactly spaced and timed, how each stratum of the design supported and anticipated the rest. Teaching her was like that; each new theory and form slotting into place, as though her mind had been machined to receive them, slots, holes, lugs, keyways, dovetails, as if I was building it according to a preordained design; as though I was reassembling inside her head something that belonged there, but which had been removed at some point for maintenance and repair. Lambanus, wasn't it, who believed that education is simply reminding us of things we knew in a previous incarnation. I'd always laughed at that. I still don't believe it, but I can see how, under certain circumstances, a rational man might formulate the theory.

Correction; not Lambanus. The reincarnation theory was actually my sainted grandfather, though he thought better of it and cut it out of *General Principles*; he must have told Lambanus about it in a letter, and that fool stole it and passed it off as his own.

(I BLINKED THREE times when I read that. See my AUC 1744 lecture to the Fifth Ethical Congress, "Lambanus and the Relearned Memory Hypothesis", in which I proved that the source for Lambanus' theory was a deleted section from Saloninus. I was rather brilliant back then, before my brain got rusty. *My sainted grandfather?* Dear God.)

BUT THEN, GRANDFATHER wasn't writing for the record, was he? You can't blame someone for chance remarks taken out of context. I need to remember that. Nobody else's fault. Mine alone.

After all that, my hard work, my obsession, she got a decent but unremarkable lower second in Moderations and was certified for ancillary field work. I wasn't having that. I went straight to Father Prior, who said it was out of his hands—he's a coward—and referred me to Chapter. Fine. I raised a formal petition, argued the case at a full hearing, got her upgraded to an upper second and assigned to me as a research assistant. Naturally they asked me what my research was going to be. I told them, aspects of traumatic ability loss; which was partly true.

You must remember, I must remember, *we* must remember that I was deeply, wildly, passionately in love with—

—AND THEN THREE pages of astronomical observations, carefully arranged and meticulously recorded. What?

"Did you miss out a bit?" I asked her.

"No, of course not." She looked up and frowned at me. The insides of her fingers were black with ink. "Why would I want to do something like that?"

"I thought maybe there were some illegible pages."

She shook her head. "Actually, it's pretty bad but after a while you get used to it. I find I can sort of guess just by looking at it. Does that make sense?"

Oh yes. "Sorry," I said. "Only it reads like there's a chunk missing here."

She laughed. "Is there really any point to this? The poor man was obviously deranged. It's all just—"

"Quite." I gave her a thin smile, best I could do. "Never mind. Onwards."

"Can we have something to eat now? I'm starving."

"Sure." I paused, and thought about what she'd just said. "You did remember to bring some food, didn't you?"

SCIENTIFIC METHOD [THIS is the next bit of allogloss narrative]. It's the rock I cling to. Scientific method, no matter what.

Therefore—

You have seen, haven't you, that I've proved beyond doubt that loss of virginity and frequent sexual intercourse do not necessarily deprive a female adept of her talent. I have conceded that her talent was exceptionally strong, and that the usual power level found in female adepts may well be insufficient to survive such experiences. The data, however, speaks for itself. To cite one example, picked at random from my records; on 17/5/1802AUC, in the early hours of the morning, we engaged in full-scale sexual activity for forty-seven minutes. One hour later, she was able to perform a fifth-level form (*lux dardaniae)* and a third-room dislocation. No detectable sign of accelerated heartbeat or respiratory activity. I have thirty-seven similar documented experiments, with full case notes.

More than that. As yet I have insufficient data to prove it, but I'm convinced that her abilities are actually *increasing*. Unthinkable! But how else am I to account for her ability to perform *decus et gloria*, unaided and without an interval?

My fault; not having anticipated such a possibility, I neglected to make a control study before taking her virginity. What I should have done was get her to attempt a range of sixth and seventh level forms &c, so as to be in a position to compare results. As it is, I only have her performance in levels one to three to go on, these being the forms she was trained in as part of her normal education, and no dislocations at all. Until another subject of similar aptitude can be found, I'm precluded from making a meaningful comparison, which is intensely frustrating; I have no way of knowing whether she would've been able to do sixth level and above beforehand, or whether it's my work that has augmented her abilities. I have only myself to blame for this, of course.

Since there doesn't seem to be any way for me to move forward in this area, I shall now turn to the next—

"THAT'S IT," SHE said.

I looked up. "What?"

"That's all the parchment used up. If you want me to copy any more out, you'll need to clean off some more pages."

I groaned. My right hand was a mess. I'd used all the healing forms I knew—not many, I'm afraid, and I've never been much good at them—but they didn't seem to have worked, because the skin was still raw and deeply cracked. Trouble is, you can't get a decent finish if you rub the brick dust on with a cloth. It has to be your hand if you want a surface you can write on.

"How far have you got?" I asked.

She skimmed the pages. "I'd say about two-thirds," she said. She hesitated, then added, "They've got heaps and heaps of paper back at the Studium, and then you wouldn't have to—"

I scowled at her. "Here's two angels," I said. "Go down to the village and buy some food."

"What? It's an eight-hour round trip."

I shrugged. "Fine. That's about how long it'll take me to clean off the rest of these pages."

Curious look on her face; rage at being ordered about, deep distress at the thought of all that riding, sincere compassion and concern about my hand and what I was proposing to do to it. And more rage because I wouldn't give up and go back home. "If you insist," she said. "But I still think—"

"Splendid," I said. "See you later."

I'VE NEVER [HE went on] invented a form before. It's extraordinary.

They say the words choose themselves, but it's not true. You have a choice (another myth exploded). When I opened the agent parameters, I realised, it was up to me. My choice. I wouldn't have believed it possible.

In the end I opted for *verbum scripsi* rather than *verba scripsi* or *scripsimus*, simply because I liked the sound of it better. Strange thought; generations of practitioners will use those words, believing them to be immutable and—well—magical, and all because, at a given moment in time, *I* made a decision, based on preference, whim. Anyway, *verbum scripsi* it is. I have this mental image of an endless succession of students muttering "verbum scripsi" over and over under their breath as they file into the examination halls. I hope it'll be easy to remember, and that they won't lose marks if they get it slightly wrong, *verba* or *scripsimus*, because either of those will do just as well. But I won't be there to speak up for them, of course.

An endless succession. Communication divorced from the presence of the communicator. The dead speak to us, and through us to others yet unborn. And you can perform this miracle by scratching obscenities on a wall, if nobody can be bothered to clear it off.

I didn't tell her, of course. Risk of observer bias. Instead, I waited till she was asleep, then put her deep under with *dormienda*. Then I set to work.

I enjoyed my two years in the scriptorium, mostly because I was so good at it. I've always loved being good at things. It was a loss to the profession, they told me, when my time was up. I was the youngest ever illuminator of capitals; they let me do five-colour initials in my first year, and by the time I left I was doing gold leaf. Best of all, though, they told me, was my basic cursive script; in other words, my handwriting, would you believe. The clearest, best spaced, most classically formed letters they'd ever seen.

That was then, of course; many years ago. But, apparently, there are some things you don't forget.

I wrote out *verbum scripsi* in full on her face as she slept, using oak-gall and soot in a thin alcohol base. I covered her forehead and both cheeks. Then I got rid of the mirror and covered

up all the reflective surfaces in the room, and waited to see what would happen.

For the record; *verbum scripsi* is a ninth-level form enabling the user to take control of the subject's mind and body. In order to be effective, it must be written on the subject's skin. The subject need not be conscious. So far, I have made no tests to ascertain whether the effect is diminished if the subject is aware of what is being done. Given the nature of the form, however, I doubt whether this will make much difference in practice.

The next step, logically, will be to

WHICH WAS AS far as she'd got.

Food for thought there, all right. For example; I sent her down to the village to buy food. Actually, there were three days' rations in my saddlebags, something I neglected to mention, because I wanted her out of the way, because I needed to think. See? I imposed my will on her with a command—verbal, in this instance, but you can give orders just as well in writing. Giving orders, controlling, commanding, is easy. You don't even have to be there. You don't even have to be alive.

Grandson of the immortal Saloninus; thirty years to a generation, so round about AUC 1790; ninety years ago. Practically certain both of them were dead by now. Ninety years since the tower was last occupied? Hardly. Five; ten at most. And the reports said, activity here within the last eighteen months. Our orders (written *and* verbal) were, simply, investigate. Fine. An open-ended remit like that suggested that something nasty was suspected, but nobody knew what, and couldn't be bothered to find out. Entirely possible, therefore, that the book and the allogloss texts were nothing to do with the problem we'd been sent to deal with. Sometimes I wonder what they do all day in General Situations. Whatever it is, it can't be their jobs. They wouldn't last a day in the private sector.

I needed a breath of fresh air, so I went outside. The sun was shining, so bright that the tower shone white against a rich blue sky. I thought about that for a moment, then went back inside and got the journal. With light this bright, maybe I'd be able to read it for myself.

NEEDLESS TO SAY—

[The voice in my head was different, somehow]

Needless to say, he'd got it completely wrong. The form he'd invented worked all right, but it didn't do what he thought it did.

Many women are arrogant; a great many women are stupid. But that special blend of stupidity and arrogance; my unique insight allows me to be quite categorical on this point. I don't see how a woman could be capable of it. Quite simply that. It came as a terrible shock to me. I actually felt *guilty* about it, though of course it wasn't my fault.

For the record; the form *verbum scripsi*, which I have recorded here and which I sincerely hope nobody will ever be stupid enough to use ever again, comprises a verbal component (the magic words, if you will) and the act of writing on the skin of another person. The effect of the form is to transfer to the person written on (the inscribed? The writee?) an intuitive summary of the writer's consciousness at the time of writing. When I woke up, I knew everything, as though his memories had been *put* into my head. I knew what he'd done; put me to sleep with *dormienda*, concocted a form which he thought gave him the power to control my mind, planned an extensive and meticulous program of research into the way in which women gain, use and lose the talent (with me as his research tool, his subject, his raw material). I had his motivation; to improve the standing of talented women with a view, eventually, to seeing them recognised as men's equals, provided that our biological frailties—his delightful expression—could be overcome by training and artificial assistance. I also knew, with

summer-sunlight clarity, how he was prepared to sacrifice my talent and my life to further his sublime aim. Oh, and I could now fully participate in his obsession with me—intellectual admiration, a fierce collector's desire to possess an exceptionally rare specimen, and lots and lots of straightforward physical lust. And something else, of course.

I am reminded of that fine old excuse, I don't know what got into me. Except; I do. Unfortunately, knowledge is no antidote. A person can know all about the disease that's killing her, but that doesn't cure it. So; again for the record, and I do hope someone reads this; before he wrote on me, I was perfectly sane and rational. I had a perfectly functional moral compass and a proper, if conventional, respect for human life.

I'm telling the page this, and I hope the page will tell someone else. It wasn't my fault. It wasn't me. Not my insanity, but his. Not murder, but—what, suicide? I think we need a new category of homicide. Is there a lawyer in the house?

I STOPPED READING and went back inside. I wasn't feeling too good.

My hands had been hurting for some time; a sort of dull throbbing, which suggested to me (though I wasn't in the mood to listen) that scraped-off parchment flakes and brick dust had got into the cuts and cracks in my hand and turned septic. Not too good; you can get blood poisoning that way, and die. That's a problem with reading allogloss, of course. It starts to become an obsession, as though the narrator's will to be heard grows stronger than your own. Probably, now I come to think of it, why I'd refused to take the book back to the Studium. He'd been talking to *me*, after all. He was mine, just as I was his.

Hers, now. And I knew what had happened.

SHE CAME BACK just before dusk with bread, bacon, sausage and a jar of that revolting pickled cabbage that the country people seem to live on, though it always gives me the most appalling heartburn. I was outside, waiting for her.

"Is that you?" I called out.

"No, it's the Supreme Archimandrite. Who do you think it is?"

Made me laugh. Questions of identity and all that. "If you wouldn't mind stopping right there," I said. "I don't think you should come any closer."

Silence. Well, we all know the risks. We never talk about them. But she knew enough to take me seriously.

"Something's not quite right," I said, as matter-of-factly as I could manage. "Probably best if you keep away from the tower. A bit of a nuisance, since it's getting dark and all, but I think it'd be better." I paused. "Hello? Can you hear me?"

No reply. Smart girl. Using *vox in tenebris*, I could've located her exactly by her voice. If she had the sense she was born with, she'd be doing a long dislocation—stop, query, can she do long dislocations? No idea, the subject hadn't come up. If not, at the very least a deep *scutum*, or better still, *lorica*, which would at least protect her from any physical harm I might do her. But she'd be listening. Wouldn't she? No way of telling (just as the writer doesn't know who, if anyone, will read. Ah, your heavy-handed symbolism! Now read on.)

"I think what happened," I said into the darkness, "is this. Well, actually, I'm pretty sure I know. You'll need to tell the board of enquiry, so pay attention."

I told her about him—Saloninus' grandson—and his female protegee. I laid a certain stress on his motives, which were for the best, and rather less on his methods. I explained about *verbum scripsi* and how it hadn't done what he thought it did.

"That's as far as I've got," I concluded. "But I know the rest." Pause. Maybe she'd run for it—which would be entirely sensible—and I was talking to myself. "I know what happened," I

went on, "because I scraped down that manuscript, so it's sort of in my blood. I'll come to that in a minute."

I paused for breath, which I took in the form of a deep, wolf-like sniff. A female human scent is easy to find, using *nasem lupi*. "She killed him," I went on, starting to move. "Partly it was her or him; self defence. Partly it was sheer rage at what he'd done. Mostly, though, I think it was pure intellectual curiosity."

I can walk very quietly when I want to.

"So she killed him," I went on, "bashed him on the head with—" I stooped and felt around. "A stone. Then she flayed off his skin."

Sniff.

"She knew exactly what to do," I went on, "because he'd done his two years in the scriptorium. She soaked the skin overnight, washed it in the stream over there"—I nearly said, to your right—"until the water ran clear. Then she filled the stone basin with slaked lime—had to go down to the village for that—put in water and the skin, stirred with a long pole, left it for a week. Then she scraped the hair and flesh off with a dull flint and soaked the skin another week in fresh slaked-lime solution. Then she pegged the skin out on the door, scived it with a sharp knife, rubbed the flesh side with pumice powder—"

I paused. No need to tell her the rest. She'd know it soon enough.

"Anyway," I said, "she made enough parchment for a whole book. Of course, she never worked in the scriptorium, so the calligraphy and the illustrations must've come straight from him; also, I'm assuming, the text. You can tell he was deranged. I mean, what sort of man knows the whole of *Entrancing Images* off by heart, word perfect?"

I paused and stood still. Hard to listen when you're talking, even with *lux dardaniae*.

"That's what's done for me," I said. "Flakes of the parchment, with her writing on it, getting into the cuts in my hands. Actually, it's a rather marvellous feeling; I've sort of got both of

them in here with me. I must say, I like her a lot." Reminds me of you, I didn't say; or rather, he didn't.

"You can see," I went on, "the quite extraordinary potential of her discovery. With the form, and parchment made from human skin, you can write a living book. It's a real shame she chose *Entrancing Images*, because really, that's not a good use of the technology, it makes the reader into a dangerously obsessive sexual predator, a menace to society who ought to be put down." I smiled. "Like me. But suppose—well, just imagine if Saloninus had used it to write *General Principles*. He'd be there, for all time, in the book. You'd read it and you wouldn't just see the words, you'd be *inside his mind*, like he was standing right next to you, talking to you; and the next generation, and the next. No-one's a good enough writer to say exactly what he means, get precisely the right word. Allogloss helps, a bit, but it's limited by the capacity of the reader's intellect; if you're too stupid to understand, half of what's written gets lost passing through you. But a living book—"

She spun round and stared at me. Hadn't heard me coming. I'd been projecting my voice with *rem optimam*.

"You do see," I said. "Don't you?"

[EDITOR'S NOTE; THE next six pages of the manuscript are too badly damaged to be legible]

I'D NEVER MADE parchment before. Of course, I knew how to do it, but that's not quite the same thing as having practical first-hand experience. There are some things you simply can't get from books.

The form, *verbum scripsi*, was deeply flawed. Carchedonius—that was his name; Saloninus' grandson—hadn't known about recursive encoder bias. The ancients didn't either, when they

composed half the forms in what we now call the Syllabus, but they had an intuitive feel for that sort of thing, and compensated accordingly without even knowing it. That sort of illustrates the problems caused by literacy and scientific method, which leaves no place for intuition or feel. Write everything down, and there's no room for the unwritten.

I, on the other hand, wrote the definitive paper on recursive encoding, so I was able to fix Carchedonius' mistake simply by rearranging a few words—a little brick dust on the fingertip and the false word vanishes, leaving a space for you to write in what it should have said. Unfortunately, brick dust doesn't work that way on people. The form under whose influence I was—am—was fundamentally bad, and you can't mend these things retrospectively. Accordingly—here's irony—I, the expert, am now the victim of classic recursive encoder bias, and there's not a lot I can do about it.

Well. At least I know what's going to happen. As the form breaks down—and it will, no doubt about that—so, essentially, will I. Not sure, given how new and untried *verbum scripsi* Mark I is, whether the mental deterioration will become apparent before the physical breakdown, or whether they'll come together, or what. Studies have shown that the memory's usually the first thing to go, appropriately enough; so I'm writing all this down as fast as I can, and writing small to get as much as I can on my limited supply of parchment (because there won't be any more where this came from. Will there?)

I suppose I really ought to finish the narrative first and then move on to my findings, conclusions and observations—scientific method, which is what Carchedonius wants. I, on the other hand, feel quite strongly that my conclusions are of value, and I want to get them down while they're still clear in my mind. After all, what really matters, the silly old sequence of events or the meaning thereof?

After all; a book is practically an act of violence. At least, it's an attempt, wrong word, it's a bid, weak word, a book is you the

writer trying to impose, bad word, *superimpose* yourself (your vision of things, your experience, your narrative, your world view) onto someone else, the reader. Writing/reading can of course be consensual, I want to tell you stuff, you want to be told, but it isn't always, necessarily. It can be polemical, persuasive, subversive, perversive (no such word; well, there is now). It takes you over by sapping and undermining more often than by direct assault, but it's still an aggressive act. Great books change you—Saloninus &c—and you have to ask, by what right? Am I just a blank sheet for some dead man to write on? On the other hand, wouldn't it have been a tragedy if Saloninus, everything he was and thought and knew, had ended when his body died? Tragic, unspeakable waste. He was a great man. He had the right.

How about his grandson? Carchedonius wanted to prove that women adepts were as good as men, wanted to find a way to help them keep their talent. He was willing to kill me, her, us to achieve his laudable ends. Did he have the right? Well, he was also an idiot, but that only came out later; the circumstances of his failure shouldn't let us avoid the question.

Not all books, not all people, are of equal value. Let, therefore, the better superimpose themselves on the worse. Here is someone who's never read *General Principles* and (not being a world-class genius) hasn't figured it all out from first principles. Having read and understood, that person is improved out of all recognition. He, she has become Saloninified; educated, learned, *illuminated*, just like the sheet of dried, cured goatskin. Illuminated manuscript, get it? Ah well.

Maybe, if there was some reliable and objective test; peer review, perhaps. A grand conclave of scholars gathers in Chapter to decide whether such and such a person, such and such a book has the right. If so—well, then. Slake that lime, bring on the pumice powder and the brick dust. Otherwise, strictly no.

I don't see that working worth a damn.

Blessed are those who have read and yet have not believed. *Verbum scripsi* is cheating, of course, it's unfair, it's, um, magic.

Books written on goats rather than people don't have nearly as much power to be dangerous. Let us, therefore, adopt a pragmatic approach. Outlaw writing on human skin; burn this record; let's carry on as before and pretend none of it ever happened, until it happens again. With any luck we won't know it's happened before, because we'll have brickdusted out the memory. Even our names, forgotten.

Sorry; I was wrong. My observations are of no value. Forget them. Pretend you never read them. Do not allow them (and me) to imprint themselves upon you.

I KILLED HIM, using *mirabile ictu*.

I can only assume he wanted me to. He crept up on me so carefully, skilfully; I'm guessing Carchedonius made him do that. Then he just stood there; no *scutum*, no *lorica*, gave me a clear shot. His memories are obscure on this point, so I'm guessing there is a certain degree of loss in transmission. That's reasonable. Something is always lost or obscured in the course of the manuscript tradition, because after all, the writers are only human, aren't they?

Accordingly, I will believe that he intentionally allowed me to kill him, rather than kill me. That was a noble act by an otherwise second-rate individual.

Needless to say, I didn't kill him then and there. Hence *mirabile ictu*. I stunned him, then cooked his poor brain with a couple of military forms I'm not supposed to know about, until he had no choice but to do exactly what I told him to. He wrote on my face; the full text of *verbum scripsi*, and two stanzas of Gnatho's *Eclogues*, which happened to be the first thing that came into his mind. Then I killed him, with a stone.

I do not presume to do this for myself. I, we, none of us are sufficiently remarkable to warrant preservation, continuation, reproduction. *Verbum scripsi*, on the other hand, is. It has, to

coin a phrase, the right. I write this so that it will not be lost; so that, when the next Saloninus comes along, or the next Antipater or Perceptuus of Bryona, a tool will exist for preserving, continuing, reproducing them, for ever, amen. If that happens in my lifetime, I will gladly offer my own skin to the parchment-makers, with the proviso that it be thoroughly brick-dusted and cleaned off beforehand, boiled right down into the pores, to get rid of every last trace of me, lest I should corrupt the text, like some careless copyist. It occurs to me that there is some element of risk; what if *verbum scripsi* should fall into the hands of a madman, a dictator, a military adventurer? God forbid. Imagine the outcome if Carnufex the Irrigator had used it to write *The Art of War*. There will, of course, have to be safeguards; which is why this manuscript will pass into the custody of the governors of the Studium. It'll be safe there. No unauthorised eyes will ever read this, thank heavens. Most definitely not for publication.

All that remains, therefore, is for me to write out the full text of the form, in its final, definitive version. It goes like this—

*Verbum scripsi verum immutabileque in quo versimus*

[Editor's note; at this point, water damage to the MS renders it incapable of conclusive interpretation. For a speculative reconstruction of the remainder, see Ctisthenes, *Speculations*, XXV, 46, c; alternatively, Magnetho, *Towards Understanding*, 36, 1—9; or, more recently, Perceptuus, *Opera Nova*, 17, 5, edited by Clauson, *Proceedings of the Studium*, AUC 2271, CLXXV, 391, 6)]

# Purple and Black

For Francis Fitzgibbon
and Malcolm Barres-Baker,
*comites Catulli*

***Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, to His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, greetings.***

*Phormio begs to inform His Majesty that he has safely arrived at Tremissis City and has assumed control of the civil and military administration.*

You are, of course, an unmitigated bastard. Not content with dragging me away from my chair at Anassus, which I worked bloody hard to earn and which will now go to that pinhead Atho, you made me waste three months of my life in a military academy, of all places, and now you've dumped me here, in the last place on earth, surrounded by snow, soldiers and savages. What the hell did I ever do to you?

Well, I'm here now. Absolutely ghastly journey, being thrown around in a post-cart along with mail-sacks and boxes of biscuits and cages of shitty chickens. There was this fat woman sitting opposite, and every time the cart went over a pothole or a rock, she got shot across the cart straight into my lap. I guess

she must've been used to travelling post, because she just carried on reading; even when she ended up sitting on my head with one leg sticking out over the side, I don't think she ever lost her place. Oh, and a wheel came off, slap bang on the top of the mountain, just before noon. That was no fun. Thanks, friend.

Governor Philoctenus wasn't pleased to see me. Really, when you sack a man, it's only polite to tell him about it, rather than leaving that particular chore to his supplanter. He didn't believe me (and why should he?). He assumed I was some kind of loon, nearly had me slung in jail, except quite by chance I had my commission with me in my pocket rather than packed away in my document-case at the bottom of my trunk. It took me quite some time to convince him it wasn't a forgery. Then he lost his temper.

Anyhow, I'm here, and everything seems to be in order, more or less; I say that, but I haven't got a clue what a properly-functioning provincial government looks like. There's about ten thousand clerks in grubby shirts and worn-out sandals who dart in and out of offices and don't seem to hear you when you ask them something, and miles and miles of shelves of dossiers, files, records, ledgers, you name it, and everybody's extremely busy, so I guess something must be getting done. Whether it's anything useful, I simply don't know. By the way, it's perishing cold here; they have five enormous sheds full of charcoal, but it's against regulations to issue any before the Ides, and apparently I haven't got the authority to override the rules. The least you can do, in my opinion, is send me a woolly scarf.

You haven't got a book on governing you could lend me, have you? Seriously.

As for the insurgency, it can't be all that bad, because nobody around here seems to know anything about it. Of course, I haven't met the military yet. That particular joy still awaits me.

***His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, to Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, greetings.***

*His Majesty acknowledges Phormio's report and hereby authorises the early release of restricted stores, namely charcoal, at the governor's discretion.*

Sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry. Please find herewith;
Item; three (3) scarves, woollen, long, thick
Item; six (6) pairs mittens, woollen, extra thick
Item; six (6) pairs socks, woollen, double ply
Item; twelve (12) blankets, civil/diplomatic grade
Item; one (1) jar oysters, Bethusian, first quality, in brine
(Are you all right for footwear? Hats? How about
a portable stove?)

Look, I'm sorry, all right? It is, as they say, a lousy rotten job but someone's got to do it. A bit like being emperor, yes?

Anything you need, you write to me, it'll be with you as soon as possible—not Civil Service as soon as possible, but as fast as a cart can get up the mountain. The thought of you freezing to death, huddled in a blanket, warming your tiny pink fingers over a guttering candle, is more than I can bear. I've been losing sleep over it. The administration of the empire is on hold until I hear from you that you're warmer. All right?

Moving on, how are things out there? Have you found the war yet? Everything's always somewhere, as my mother used to say when I couldn't find my hymn-book. Maybe it's fallen down the back of something, or it got put away somewhere safe. A great big noisy thing like a war is bound to turn up sooner or later. Please advise.

***Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, to His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, greetings.***

*Phormio begs to inform His Majesty that he has sought out the enemy, but as yet has been unable to identify them.*

You're still a bastard, but thanks for the socks. Not my colour, but at least I'm getting some feeling back in my toes. They still won't let me have any charcoal. Apparently, you need to write separately to the quartermaster's office, charcoal being a military commodity (why?) and specify the quantity to be released and the date of release. You should know that, dammit. Why should I have to teach you your job?

I blame myself, of course. I remember it clearly; in third year, in the back bar of the *Poverty and Justice*. Political power, I said, should under no circumstances be allowed to vest in the hands of anybody who wants it, and all the important offices of state should be filled by men who'd much rather be doing something else. Well, quite.

Now then, the war. There definitely is one, but I'm damned if I can find it. I've been through all the reports, and the impression I get is that there's been a lot of skirmishing, hit-and-run raids, a good deal of general nastiness that's borderline criminal banditry but probably relates. Mostly, by the time we get there they've gone, whoever they are. That's the big mystery. There's theories, of course, hundreds of them, but when you look at it properly, nobody has the faintest idea who the enemy are, where they come from, where they go back to, what they want, how many of them there are. Apparently they go to extraordinary lengths to retrieve their dead, so there aren't any corpses to examine. The few bits of kit we've recovered are either nondescript generic commercial stuff, like you can buy from any reputable arms dealer, or Imperial issue. Witnesses say they look a bit like Imperial regulars, only scruffier, less organised. I went

and interviewed a bunch of survivors (me, on a horse; if that's not devotion above and beyond the call, I don't know what is) but they just looked scared and clammed up. I think they're terrified of what might happen to them if they help us in any way. Not a nice business. Anyway, my investigations are continuing (good, meaningless civil service phrase) and as soon as I know anything, I'll let you know.

A thought has just occurred to me. If you're really the brother of the invincible Sun, maybe you could persuade Him to pay us a visit, just long enough to thaw the ice in the latrine.

***His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, to Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, greetings.***

*His Majesty acknowledges Phormio's report.*

The point you raise is an interesting one, which has vexed the finest minds in Temple for generations. As far as I can make out, the invincible Sun isn't actually my brother, as such; more like a second cousin. As you can imagine, this came as a relief to me. Last thing I need to worry about is one more birthday to remember. Besides, what do you give the Sun? Socks? A nice book? I'm fairly sure He's not a great reader (the pages would get scorched, for one thing).

I've written about the charcoal. I made the Adjutant General look up the rules (he's got a book with all the procedural rules in it, the lucky sod. I asked him if he could let me have a copy, but he went all coy on me) and he copied out the proper form of mandate for me to use. So, fingers crossed, and let me know what happens.

In case I didn't make my meaning clear in my last letter, I really am dreadfully sorry about all this. Of course, it wasn't my fault that all my obnoxious relatives chose to massacre each other and land me with this job, but even so, I'm sorry, and I'm really grateful to all of you for rallying round like this and helping out. The plain fact is, I can't trust anybody here. Either they're completely useless, or they're robbing the Treasury blind, or they're plotting a coup, or their nephew's boyfriend's uncle's plotting a coup, and it's all so horrible and dreary I could scream. I'm convinced they're deliberately keeping me working all hours on meaningless trivia so I won't find out what's really going on; a clever enough idea, but it's going to backfire on them, trust me. As soon as the rest of the gang's come in and taken charge, we'll have those wankers out and then we can start doing things properly. And then, my dear old friend, you can come home. Promise.

Excuse me if I'm sounding a bit more bewildered than usual, but I've been trying to picture you on a horse, and the image has taken root in my mind and smothered practically everything else. Here's a tip you may find useful. Once you've mounted, if you can see the horse's tail, you're on back to front.

***Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, to His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, greetings.***

*Phormio begs to inform His Majesty that the enemy have burnt Saleia. Imperial forces were unable to engage.*

No kidding. Remind me; which end is the tail?

The Saleia business isn't quite as bad as it sounds. One useful thing I've done (sorry, forgot to mention it in my last letter) is organise a sentry network. What that means is, each village headman is responsible for posting a watch, round the clock, to look out for trouble. This idea hadn't actually occurred to anybody, which I find quite remarkable. Anyhow, the Saleia watch saw the bad guys coming well in advance, and they evacuated with time to spare. Nobody thought to send a runner to the garrison at Limes Regni, so the first the military knew about it was when they saw the column of smoke, but you can't have everything. The village got burned to the ground, but nobody died, the bad guys didn't find or couldn't be bothered with the cattle, and I've got carpenters and masons up there right now rebuilding the place. By all accounts it was the armpit of the North, so I imagine they'll do quite well out of it in the end. Even so; can't have been fun for them, and of course we're still none the wiser about who these buggers are. I sent out scouts, naturally, but the trail petered out after a couple of miles (new snowfall covered the tracks; you might care to raise that with your second cousin. He's been no help at all). All the village watchmen could tell us was that there were a lot of them; not much help, since people in these parts tend to count one-two-three-four-five-loads. Anywhere between a hundred and a million, in other words.

I looked up insurgency in my *Art of War*, and it says I should set up a rapid response unit, stationed in the epicentre of the attack sites, comprising two divisions of heavy cavalry supported by horse-archers and scouts. I'd do this like a shot, except;

1. Cavalry don't do so well in steep mountains

2. I haven't got two divisions of heavy cavalry

3. The attacks have been so widely spaced that there's no chance in hell of getting to where we're needed before the bad guys melt away into the hills.

I'm working, mind you, from the 9th edition. Maybe they've updated since then. Failing which, I confess to being baffled, at a loss and screwed.

One last thing. Could you send me some more purple ink? The bonehead at Supply would only let me have an ounce; can't have more than that without a signed warrant from His Majesty personally. I tried asking the clerks to mix red and blue ink together, but they nearly had a fit. Apparently, unauthorised manufacture of purple ink carries the death penalty. What kind of a law is that, for crying out loud?

***His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, to Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, greetings.***

*His Majesty acknowledges Phormio's report and applauds his actions with regard to Saleia.*

Please find herewith one (1) pound of purple ink. It's from my own personal stock. Life is too short to go through Supply.

The whole purple ink business is indicative (is that the word I want?) of what's wrong with this administration. You start off with a basically harmless, quite fun idea; purple ink is reserved for the exclusive use of the Emperor and his officials. That way, you can tell at a glance if the warrant or summons or conveyance you've just been handed is genuine. Fine. What happens? First, one of my megalomaniac-psychotic predecessors takes it a bit too seriously, and misuse of purple ink is suddenly a capital offence. Second, the clerks at Supply figure out that they can exercise a remarkable level of control over the administration, particularly officials they don't like or approve of, simply by limiting their ink supply. Do something that gets up their collective nose; next time you need a refill, you're told that the last batch they had in from the contractors wasn't up to snuff quality-wise (not purple enough, presumably); or else the ship it was on sank, or a new and unknown disease has wiped out all the oyster-beds in Fragia. Result; no ink, no documents, nothing can be done. Marvellous. It means I'm having to stockpile the stuff while I can, in case they stop liking me. Meanwhile, I'm on the track of a forger (he's in jail somewhere out East) who was convicted of making a copy so close to the real thing, it's indistinguishable. Soon as I find him, I'm having him brought here and set to work. Seriously. It's the way you have to do things here.

Sorry. Rant over.

I don't know what to suggest. The rapid response idea's clearly a non-starter; all you'd be doing is tying up forces in one

place, giving the baddies a licence to attack somewhere else. All I can think of is infiltration and intelligence, but you don't need to tell me you've thought of that already and it's not that simple. Do the best you can, that's all I ask. Your best will be about as good as it's possible to get. That's why you're there.

In other news. Progress, at last. I've contrived to get Menestheus in as Chancellor, Strato as Master of Ordinances and Aristaeus as Grand Domestic, which means that all the key Cabinet posts are now in the hands of the Class of '13. There is, of course, a fair chance that by the time you read this, we'll all have been murdered in our beds by the palace guard, or the Optimates, or maybe even the public at large; it's not exactly been a popular move, but I'm determined to see it through; and when you get home, I'd like you to be Commander in Chief. Please?

***Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, to His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, greetings.***

*Phormio begs to inform His Majesty that he has engaged the enemy, but without success.*

Thank you for your astonishingly generous and flattering offer, which you can stuff where your second cousin doesn't shine. I am not, repeat not, a soldier; I'm an effete, slightly overweight dilettante scholar who just might one of these days, if I'm lucky and the right people die and some clown doesn't send me away to the frontier, secure a senior lectureship at a respectable university. I know, we agreed; give positions of power to people who'd rather die than have them. But there are limits. The point being, I'm no bloody good at this.

As witness the recent debacle referred to above. Quite by chance I happened to be in Choris Anthropou (don't bother looking it up; not on map) to interview some time-waster who reckoned he'd seen the bad guys up close. Literally just as I was about to pack up and go home, a rider comes thundering up the street and falls off practically at my feet. Poor bugger was a horrible mess, all cut up and bleeding, but he managed to tell us that the bad guys were six miles down the valley, breaking up the road.

Needless to say, I didn't stop to think. I'd got fifty dragoons with me as personal escort. I sent them off to do what they could, scribbled a note to the garrison commander at Gelos, nine miles back in the wrong direction, then got in my chaise and wobbled off after the dragoons, with an absolutely terrified village headman as guide and coachman.

I owe my life to that man. He got us lost; I can only assume on purpose, since he lives there and must know the mountains like the back of his singularly grubby hand. Result; we arrived on the scene when it was all over. Ten minutes earlier, and we'd

have ended up like those poor bastards I sent to their deaths, because I acted without thinking, because I was desperate to do something but didn't know what to do, because I panicked.

There were two survivors when we got there, and by the time I'd finished throwing up and pulled myself together, there was one survivor. Amazing; he apologised. Sorry, general, but there were six hundred of them and only fifty of us and we rode straight into an ambush, and thirty of us got shot full of arrows before we knew what had hit us, and they carved up the rest of us with axes and swords; I failed you. That's what he said. I felt so ashamed, I wanted to die. But I told him he'd done really well and Vesania was proud of him and a bunch of other shit. He made it, I'm delighted to say; lost an eye, though, and his left hand's useless. He obeyed my order, presumably under the misapprehension that I knew what the hell I was doing. I didn't tell him I'd never even seen a dead body before.

The soldiers from Gelos got there amazingly quickly; two hundred heavy cavalry and two dozen horse-archers. Their commander seemed to know what to do, so I left him to it; my second mistake of the day. You see, I'd omitted to mention to him that the bad guys had been seen breaking up the road. If he'd known that (being a proper soldier, as opposed to me, an ignorant amateur), he'd have known that they were fixing up an ambush, and nothing on earth would have induced him to go galloping full-tilt along the main post road. Which (since I'd forgotten to pass on the one bit of information I had) is exactly what he did.

You know about this stuff, so I imagine you're way ahead of me. The bad guys had let themselves be seen. The rider who brought me the news was the only survivor of a regular six-man patrol (again, I should've thought to ask him who he was and what he was doing out there). They knew when the patrol would be passing, so they planned to attack it, kill five of them and let one go. The survivor would then rush straight to the nearest garrison and call out the cavalry, who'd zoom off up the road, straight into the ambush. To welcome them, the bad guys

had undermined the road and set up rolling-log blocks to bottle them up in a cutting, where they could be quickly and efficiently slaughtered with minimum risk of any of them getting away. Smart, yes?

The only consolation I can see is that they're not completely infallible. They ballsed it up, slightly. They somehow missed the six-man patrol at the point where they'd planned to intercept it, which meant it blundered happily on until it ran straight into the main body of the raiding party, busily digging trenches under the road. Apart from that, it all went like clockwork. They killed five, let one go (turns out all that impressive blood was because he'd ridden so fast through the forest, he scrunched himself on a low branch and landed in a briar-patch). Instead of the garrison at Gelos, however, the survivor runs into me and my fifty dragoons, who shouldn't have been there at all. That, of course, cocks everything up further. The bad guys are expecting six hundred cavalry; instead they get fifty dragoons. They see them coming and are quite properly bewildered; this isn't how it was supposed to work out. So, instead of waiting patiently at the ambush site, they rush up the road to meet them, slaughter them, and then, presumably, panic. What if they're the ones who've just been lured into a trap? Because (I'm sure they argued) nobody in their right mind would send a piddling little detachment of fifty men in pursuit of a force of unknown size in that sort of terrain; therefore, something fishy must be going on, therefore it'd be sensible to cut their losses and get the hell out of there.

Which they were in the process of doing when the Gelos cavalry bumped into them. A stroke of luck, or what? As far as I can make out, our men ran slap into the undermined road and came horribly unstuck, as planned, but there weren't any bad guys on hand to complete the operation and slaughter them like sheep; they'd already buggered off, and were never seen again. Outcome; instead of six hundred dead, we lost one man killed (broken neck), seven badly injured, about twenty horses. Could've been far worse; but the fact remains, they did us good

and proper. Correction; they did me. I was the idiot who turned our stroke of good luck—the original patrol getting sight of the undermining—into a narrowly and fortuitously avoided disaster.

Far be it from me to question the wisdom of your Imperial Majesty's proposed appointment, but do you honestly believe, after reading this, that I'm fit to command a sheep-dip, let alone the combined armed forces of the Empire?

I've written it all up in proper military language in despatches, copied herewith. I would also be enclosing herewith my formal resignation from the governorship, only my original supply of purple ink's been stolen and the stuff you sent me has dried up into a solid block, which has proved unbreakable even to strong men with sledgehammers. Please can I come home now, before I get any more of our people needlessly killed? Please?

***His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, to Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, greetings.***

*His Majesty advises Phormio to expect the arrival of reinforcements, namely two (2) divisions of dragoons and one (1) division of auxiliary cavalry.*

Don't you fucking dare. Things are not going well for me here. The bureaucrats and the old money are dancing rings round us, because we don't know our way about in their precious systems, and I've been having to field questions in Senate about frontier security. Surely by now it's apparent to his Majesty that the situation requires the firm hand of a seasoned professional soldier. If you quit on me, they'll make me assign some steelneck from the Phocas or the Bringas, and you know what he'll do the moment he takes command? That's right. He'll march on the City and I'll be dead. You bloody well stay where you are, or we're all done for.

Sorry. Didn't mean to fly off the handle. I sympathise, I really do. But it's pretty desperate right now, and basically I'm hanging on by my fingernails. Yours is the only active military zone; therefore, the only place where they can legitimately post a fighting general. So; what I need most of all is you, my best friend, who I know I can unreservedly trust, to stay put, make it look like you're doing something, and hold things together until I can deal with Antilochus and the First Families and their huge entourage of subsidiary arseholes. All right?

Please?

Look, the troops I'm sending you are pretty damn good. They're my father's veterans; for some reason best known to themselves, they seem to like me, or at least they like me better than Eugenius Bringas. Also, they're hard as nails, the officers aren't just somebody's nephews, and so long as you let them know you're open to suggestions, if you're about to do something bloody stupid, they'll tell you. Also, the auxiliaries are Aram no Vei—a bunch of

murdering savages, yes, but *our* murdering savages. Just pay them on time, and they'll kill anything that moves on this earth.

Talking of which; how are you off for money? It's a bit tight right now—the Treasury's playing silly buggers about collecting the property tax, to starve me of funds—but I've got Dad's reserve and uncle Zeno's reserve and a few other bits and pieces they don't know anything about. Sometimes it's good that all my family were basically a bunch of thieves and pirates. As the last man standing, I inherited their stashes.

Sorry about the ink. I can't prove it, but I'm convinced they put plaster in it, to stop me writing to anybody. Bastards. Anyway, the one (1) pound enclosed herewith is my unofficial homebrew, knocked up by my pal the forger. He's a treasure, that man. He's going to teach me how to lift seals next.

While I think of it, a few messages from the rest of the gang. Menestheus says to stop whining; you should try doing his job. Aristaeus asked me to remind you about that time in second year when we stole the Dean's post-chaise, dismantled it and put it back together again on the roof of the Old Library. He reckons that if we could do that and get away with it, running the Empire should be a piece of piss. Strato is looking about for a copy of *The Bedchamber Dialogues* for you (the seventh edition, with the full-page pictures) so at least you'll have something to read.

Having them here—and you there, of course—is the only thing that's keeping me going. I really do miss Gorgias, though. He'd know what to do.

I remember you saying to me once, when we were carrying that wardrobe up the back stairs at Chairmakers' Street; it's bloody hard work being your friend, Nico. Well, you were right about that. I hope I've never pretended otherwise. All I can say is, thanks; for the past, and for now.

You will stay, won't you?

***Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, to His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, greetings.***

*Phormio begs to inform His Majesty that the reinforcements have arrived and are being deployed in accordance with standing orders pending new developments.*

Tell you what, this moonshine purple ink of yours is a major improvement on the official rubbish. Whatever you're paying your pet crook, double it.

Tell Strato thanks ever so much for the book. Tell him I especially appreciate it because it's evidently his own personal copy. At least I assume it is. That would account for the curious stains.

All right, I'll stay. Actually, things are looking up, ever since you sent me those lunatics. I've always been scared stiff of soldiers, but these guys are real headcases. I mean that in a nice way, of course, and so far they've been behaving themselves, more or less. The main thing is to keep them away from garlic. It does funny things to them.

Seriously; what I've got in mind is a string of rapid-response units, three hundred dragoons and a hundred Aram no Vei, right across the frontier, with the provincial regulars to stop up the gaps. Meanwhile, I've been spending your money like you wouldn't believe. Contrary to what it says in the briefings, it is possible to suborn the frontier elders into actions they consider dishonourable, just so long as you suborn them a *lot*. As a result, I think I may be able to find out a bit more about what's going on. The frontier villages must know something; the bad guys can't just flit backwards and forwards across the line without anybody seeing anything. You can break the news to Menestheus; tell him that my quarterly accounts will be

a masterpiece of fiction unsurpassed since the golden age of Vesani literature. While we're on the subject; can you let me have HS 300,000 from your dad's rainy-day fund? Well, you did offer.

***Nicephorus to Phormio; greetings***

Thanks

***Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, to His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, greetings.***

*Phormio begs to inform His Majesty that he has engaged the enemy and won a minor victory. Despatches herewith.*

I don't know why people make such a fuss about this soldiering thing. It's a piece of piss.

No, really. It's all in the book. If you happen to have your copy handy, turn to volume II, chapter 16, paragraphs 36b to 42e, and that's more or less what happened.

Yes, but I'm not going to leave it there, because I want to boast about it. I was actually there, you see. I watched the whole thing.

I'd been brooding quite bit on how the bad guys had suckered me so easily, and then it struck me. Quinctillus, I thought (to be precise, O*n War*, ch.7, 98f-101d). Always attack your enemy at his strongest point. You remember how dumb we always thought that was; but it's not.

Their biggest strength, I reasoned, is my weakness. Namely, my not having a clue; that's their greatest asset. So, all right, I thought. Use that. Because they made a monkey out of me so easily last time, they'll happily believe I'm capable of making further and yet more catastrophic bog-ups. Only this time, I'll make one on purpose, and be ready for them.

It took a bit of setting up, of course. The bait had to be money, the pay convoy. It's become fairly obvious that they've got sources of information here in the governor's office. They always seem to know what I'm going to do, usually before I do it. So, use that too.

So; I told my senior clerks that I'd asked you to send me the HS 300,000. I left it at that; let the information trickle down to the spies, it's more natural. The next step was the clever bit.

You remember Clearchus? Tall, thin, miserable kid in the year above us. Always being ragged about his dad being in trade. Well,

I happened to remember that among other things, his dad supplied ironmongery to the military; nails, bolts, hinges. So I wrote to Clearchus, nice chatty letter, asking him what his best possible price was for forty barrels of sixteen-gauge hot drawn wire might be, COD Tremissis City. He wrote back, typical snotty attitude; he wasn't anything to do with the family business, he was a successful and highly sought-after lawyer specialising in religious law (I knew that already), but he'd passed on my letter to his father, who'd be in touch. Dad wrote back—much more friendly—quoting a price. We haggled; in fact, I got one hell of a deal, I surprised myself; who'd have thought I'd be good at trade? Anyhow, we agreed terms and I confirmed the order and sent him a money warrant, and we fixed up a delivery date.

Which was, of course, the whole object of the exercise. You see, I told Clearchus' dad a whole load of lies about the main roads being liable to get blocked by snow this time of year, and the subsidiary roads being iffy on account of bandits; basically, I gave him a delivery route that'd take his carts within spitting distance of the frontier, very close to where I'd had very promising reports of enemy activity (your bribe money at work). Then I told my clerks, as casually as anything, that I'd arranged a convoy of military supplies, coming in on such and such a date via the Leuca Pass.

Now, because I never do anything like that, sully my hands with the irksome business of day-to-day materiel procurement, that put the spies on notice that I was up to something. Forty barrels of something heavy, loaded on eight carts; hardly catapult science to figure out what that something heavy was likely to be, given that I was known to be expecting a huge sum of money from central government.

This is where your dad's lunatic dragoons were so important. I had to take the chance that the bad guys' infiltration network hasn't been able to get to them yet. To be on the safe side, I waited till we had a routine staff meeting, at the end of which I told the dragoon colonel to stay behind, because I wanted

to discuss some disciplinary issues (plausible enough, right?). Instead, I told him exactly what I'd got planned. He was to be on hand with a whole division, plus half the Aram no Vei. I left it up to him to figure out how he'd manage that without letting the cat out of the bag. As it turned out, he had no trouble; simply didn't tell them about it until an hour before departure time; told them to get three days' rations and saddle up; didn't tell them where they were going until they were practically there. Apparently, dragoons will stand for that kind of shit.

I wasn't going to go along, but in the end I couldn't resist. It was sheer impulse. I saw the dragoons forming up in the barracks square, I grabbed my hat, the *Art of War* and a pair of boots and ran out after them. They were very kind; lent me a horse (horrible creature; foul temper, mad as a tanner; when I kicked up a fuss about it later, they said they'd chosen it for me because it was white, and a commander-in-chief should always ride a white stallion. Bastards.) and off I went.

This is supposed to be a happy story, so we'll pass over the torments and miseries of getting there. Suffice it to say, I've been paying well over the odds for really good quality goose-down cushions lately. Anyhow, we got there, very fast indeed. I left the map-reading to the colonel and his people, so we didn't get lost. Actually, I tried to leave everything to them, but they weren't having that. Protocol. If the commander-in-chief's present, he's got to command; junior officers can only advise. So, the first thing I said when we stopped and got off our horses was, "Advise me." Which, your second cousin be praised, they did.

The biggest laugh I got out of the whole business was when Colonel Bessas (good man, that; keep an eye on him) opened his saddlebag and took out, guess what, a very old and battered copy of *The Art of War*. Never left his tent without it, he told me. Snap, I said, and showed him mine. Better still, he's only got the seventh edition. There were so many bookmarks in it, it's practically twice the size it should be. Anyway, we looked it up and there it was, diagrams and clear instructions, so that was what we did.

And it worked. Bugger me, Nico, it worked. It's just like chess, only a bit more straightforward, and you have to send runners and despatch riders to make the moves. Other than that; you sit there on your horse, Nico, assuming you can persuade the loathsome thing to keep still, and you look down from a high place, like you're a god or something (I'm sure you know the feeling), and you try and find what you're looking at on the map. The little-kid's-doodle trees on the parchment sort of blend into the real but tiny trees you can see in the distance. In your mind's eye you flatten the hills down into the contour-lines; you learn the trick of ignoring one dimension. You find the river; and guess what, it's exactly where it's supposed to be. It's roughly the same relationship as between fresh and dried figs; the same, but flat and neat and all the juice drained out. A map is a whole desiccated world, once you've learned to see it in those terms.

It's also a bit like the theatre; the theatre as seen from a very high place, like the cheapskates who climb the trees in Victory Avenue so they can watch the play without paying. Of course, they're too far away to hear a word the actors are saying. A general's a bit like that. He's a cheapskate too (unless he's a steelneck fighting general, in the thick of it with his men; not me). He won't pay the ticket money, namely the risk of getting stabbed or hacked or trampled to death, so he has to perch in his tree, and he never hears the words. He has to follow the whole thing in dumb-show. But the cheapskates in the trees get to see far more. They can see backstage as well as what goes on in front of the curtain. So; I saw the carts trundling along the road, way off to the left, not a care in the world (naturally, the drivers weren't in on the secret; security); simultaneously, I could see the bad guys, just little insect shapes moving about just inside the tree-line. And, because I knew exactly where to look, I could see our boys, keeping absolutely still, like chess-pieces, or those bizarre porcelain armies your illustrious ancestors used to be buried with, to guard them in the next world. There was a moment when they were all moving at the same time—carts going trundle up the

road, bad guys sneaking through the woods, good guys creeping down the hillside; none of them could actually see any of the others, but I could see them all; they were all there because of me, because I'd brought them all there to come together in one small place at one specific time, to achieve the result I wanted. It's the weirdest feeling, Nico. In one sense, you're the Angel of Death. People are going to *die* because of you, and isn't that the most appalling thing imaginable? On the other hand, it's all perfectly all right, because the bad guys are the enemy, it's like killing rats, not homicide but pesticide; and some of the good guys will have to get killed too, because that's the price we pay. Well, not you and me personally. Just soldiers. It's what they're paid for.

Way off on a mountain, of course, you don't get to see the detail. You don't buy a ticket, you aren't entitled to see blood, and smashed bones, and hands and feet cut off, and dying men ignored because they're no longer relevant. In a way, I almost admire the fighting generals; except I have a nasty feeling they enjoy it.

Be that as it may. It worked just fine. The bad guys never knew what hit them. A double volley of arrows from the Aram no Vei, followed by a full-on heavy cavalry charge. Best estimates say there were about a hundred and fifty of them (which suggests that robbing the pay convoy was only part of their mission; some village somewhere got lucky), of whom we killed a hundred and nine. I'd told the colonel that taking live prisoners was top priority, followed by securing dead bodies. That didn't work out. They don't surrender. Those who were too badly hurt to run had their throats cut by their friends. According to our men, quite a few of them got killed because they stayed behind to finish off the wounded when they could easily have made their escape. I can't understand how anybody could do that.

The whole performance lasted a matter of minutes. If I'd gone off into the bushes for a shit just before the carts first came into view, I'd have missed nearly all of it. It's hard to believe so much can happen, so much really drastic stuff, in so short a

space of time, in such a small area. Four hundred yards away to the east, while the fighting was fiercest, I saw two deer amiably grazing; not a clue there was anything untoward going on just over the ridge.

Anyhow. We now have a hundred and nine dead bodies. (Our losses; six, of whom two were Aram no Vei. Oh, and the cart crews, unfortunately.) I had them unload the carts and load up the corpses, exactly as they were, and we lugged them back here for a closer look.

You remember the story about the philosopher; the more I think about it, the harder it gets? Well, quite. The more data we get on the bad guys, the less we know about them. Their kit, for example. Seventy-four of the corpses had the same pattern of basic, entry-level scale-mail jerkins and half-onion pot helmets. I'm no expert (I'm sending examples to you so your people can make a proper analysis) but I believe that stuff's made in Rhangabe, the big mass-production factories, for sale on the open market. It may be possible to trace the actual batch numbers from the ordnance marks, in which case you may be able to find out who the actual buyers were. The rest of them had standard government issue, just like our men except the crests, unit and rank badges had been cut off—isn't that standard practice for decommissioned stuff sold as surplus? Again, your experts may be able to find something useful. It's the best lead we've got.

As for the men themselves; well, they aren't foreigners. Not overseas foreigners, anyhow. I haven't been to look at them myself, but I'm told they could be anybody; locals, Northerners from over the border, or recruited anywhere in the Empire north of Uncia. I'm getting the village headmen down to look at the bodies to see if they recognise any faces. Nobody here knows any of them.

Well, that's about it. I sent the carts back for the wire, by the way. I'll need it for the wall I'm building; right the way across the Seclera valley, just in case that's where they've been coming in and out. Ten-foot high earth bank with matching ditch,

topped off with pallisades and post-and-wire fences, to slow up a direct assault. The idea is, forward observation patrols see the bad guys coming and send word to the nearest rapid response unit, who zoom up and man the wall before the bad guys reach it. It'll never work, of course. The real idea is to discourage the bad guys and make them choose another entry/exit point; and we'll see them doing it and be ready.

Like I said; this soldiering is the proverbial slice of pudding. It's better than work any day.

***His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, to Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, greetings.***

*His Majesty congratulates Phormio on his success. Preliminary results of the examination of the armour and other effects recovered from the dead insurgents herewith. The plan to construct a barrier approved and applauded.*

Years ago, before I even met you and the rest of the gang, I saw a man killed. He was one of the builders working on the roof at our old house, and the scaffolding platform he was standing on gave way. I was watching out of my window at the time, and I vividly remember seeing it happen. One moment there was this little man, standing on a platform, doing something with nails and a hammer. Then the platform shifted and broke away from the wall; and I laughed, because it looked just like one of those slapstick routines in the circus. The man was so surprised; he did an enormous double-take, just like the clowns do, and grabbed wildly and caught hold of one of the brackets holding up the guttering. Well, of course he did, I thought. That's what happens. That's what's so funny. I was absolutely sure he'd clamber up the bracket, pulling a big funny face, and then he'd haul himself up onto the roof, do the big oversize dusting-himself-down gesture, and then move on to the next part of the routine. But he didn't. He struggled and struggled to get his leg over the bracket, but then his fingers just let go, and he fell; and he wriggled in the air, like a fly caught in a web, and then he hit the ground, and he bounced just a little bit, and ended up sprawling all over the place. I didn't understand. I stood there thinking, no, that's not right, he was supposed to climb back up again (and then the plank he was on would shift and throw him, or a hoist full of bricks would swing round and hit him on the head, or something equally diverting). It was wrong, like the sun starting to come up and then changing its

mind and setting again, in the east. I don't suppose I'll ever forget that. It was the moment when I decided that death was a really bad, wrong thing, about as bad as it could get.

Recently, I had to sign a death warrant; my first. They put it on my desk along with a load of other stuff—minor charters, land grants, proceedings of the House for my approval, and this other bit of paper, that said a man had to be killed. I sat there staring at it, with my pen dribbling ink up my sleeve. A clerk asked me if anything was wrong and I just turned and looked at him, and he backed away and left me to it.

Of course, the man in question had to be executed. He was a nasty piece of work—murder, rape, armed robbery—but he was a nobleman's son, so it needed my signature. I simply couldn't do it. My arm wouldn't move. I thought, scribbling my name on this bit of paper will kill someone; well, don't do it, then, that's obvious enough. But it had to be done, and eventually I did it. Believe it or not, I closed my eyes as I signed. I went around the rest of the day in a daze; people had to repeat everything they said to me, and I couldn't grasp the simplest thing I was told.

So what? It's like the old argument about eating meat; if all the city people had to kill and skin their own food, everybody'd be a vegetarian. But that's not true. A few weeks of living on nothing but greens, and they'd find it in themselves to get the job done. They'd do what I did; they'd make an effort of will and do it. I felt afterwards like I'd cut out a part of myself, or blinded a third eye. I felt smaller, less smart, reduced. But the next time, I won't make such a meal out of it. Probably I'll shudder and feel bad, but I'll just sign the bloody thing and have done with it. That's what we do, and it's amazing what you can accustom yourself to. Like the very first time you taste wine or beer, and it's revolting, and you think, people drink this stuff for fun?

I've made damned sure everybody everywhere's heard about your success. I even considered raising a statue or having a special issue of coins minted, but I suppose that'd be premature. But a least it's shut the mouths of the Bringas in the House, and

I'm sleeping a great deal easier. It goes without saying, I'm so grateful. I knew I could rely on you.

Neatly done, too; the stuff with the wire was pure Charisticus; exactly what Xanthus the Fox would've done (is that where you got the idea from? Go on, you can tell me.) And to think you were talking about packing it in and coming home. You idiot.

Now, to business. We've learned a lot from that armour and stuff, though I can't see that it gets us anywhere, at least not yet. You were right about the commercial stuff. It was made in Rhangabe, at the Strength & Honour factory, the second biggest armoury in the city. They're a perfectly legitimate concern; in fact, I'm their biggest customer. They make basic equipment which we ship to the buffer states in the East as military aid. Once it gets there, of course, anything can happen; the local chieftains give it away as presents to their retainers, or the grand vizier intercepts it, tells his boss the ship sank, and then sells the stuff through intermediaries, or it's used to fit out mercenary companies, who neglect to give it back or keep it against arrears of pay. That's before it gets used, of course. Most of the armour in the trade is, of course, battlefield pickups. I didn't know this, but one of the biggest companies quoted on the Exchange is the Philargyrus Brothers; they employ fifteen thousand free men and eight thousand slaves, as at close of business yesterday their ordinary shares stood at HS 70, and their main business is going round battlefields stripping the dead. Where they can't get their own people in, they buy the stuff from local freelances—usually grim old women and orphan kids; it's one of the few ways you can make a living if you haven't got land in the North-East and the South. The Philargyrus company's the biggest dealer, but there's a dozen other major players, plus a whole crowd of small independents. A lot of the stuff they pick up just goes for scrap, but anything that's serviceable or can be cost-effectively repaired goes straight back on the open market. The Philargyrus aren't too bad, actually; in return for the plunder concession (which they negotiate with both sides in advance) they undertake to

look after the wounded and bury the dead, and they do a pretty good job. The local freelances are much more likely to cut the throats of anybody they find still alive, just because it's easier to strip a body if it's not wriggling about.

Anyhow; we've been in touch with the Strength & Honour people, and they tell us that the stuff you recovered wasn't just one big order. They mark their work with batch numbers and ordnance marks, and your stuff came from at least a dozen different batches, ranging in date from two years ago to twenty. There were fifteen helmets from the same batch, so they looked up their records; apparently, those helmets were part of a consignment that went, through the War Department, to the Principality of Chosroene; which, before you ask, is a mountain with three goats on it the other side of Tazrat, and what Uncle Zeno thought he was playing at, giving those clowns military aid, I can't begin to imagine. Anyway, the stuff's forty years old, and there's no way of tracing how it got from Chosroene to Tremissis in the meantime. Sorry.

Slightly better luck with the Imperial issue stuff. It was all made at the state ordnance factory at Chloe, just down the road, in fact, seventeen years ago, and issued to the 276th Regiment five years later. As you will doubtless remember, the 276th sided with my Uncle Vatatzes in the late unpleasantness, and got wiped out by my unspeakable brother on the Field of Magpies. Looking at the stuff itself, in particular the mailshirts, I believe they were battlefield retrievals. The Philargyrus had the contract for that battle, and they're checking their records now to see how long they had the proceeds from that battle in inventory, and what became of it.

The bottom line is; it looks like your bad guys bought all their gear through the trade. That tells us something, at least; it implies they've got money, because it's been a seller's market for decades and good stuff is expensive, and they can't just be bandits and hooligans if they're placed so they can conduct large-scale arms deals with reputable firms, even indirectly. I've

asked Menestheus to get his Treasury snoops to look around and see if they can follow the money trail, but I'm not holding my breath. The weapons business isn't like crockery or carpets or bulk grain; I think the people who take part in it must actually enjoy being furtive and cloak-and-dagger, because everything's done through agents and shell companies using bills drawn on banks in Perimadeia and private letters of credit and all that sort of crap. We'll see.

I was reading Stesimachus last night, and I opened a page at random and there was Gorgias' handwriting in the margin. He'd written some smart-arse comments, and drawn one of his trademark cows. I suppose I must've lent him the book at some point; I can't remember. Anyway, I just sat there, staring at it for I don't know how long, until my valet came in and asked me why I'd been crying. I felt so stupid. But hardly a day goes by when I don't think about him. I've told the War Records people to go back through the lists, just to check his name isn't on them. If we knew for certain he was killed, at least that'd be better than knowing nothing at all.

I like your idea of building a barrier. It's so *military*.

***Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, to His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, greetings.***

*Phormio begs to inform His Majesty that he has succeeded in capturing a number of insurgents, and is interrogating them.*

Well, it had to happen. Eventually, I had to get lucky.

Which is precisely what Antimachus Voutzes did. You won't know the name. He's about nineteen years old, his father's a purveyor of high-class sausages here in Tremissis City (he does particularly good black pudding, if that's not a contradiction in terms). He went to school, decided he wanted to be a scholar, tried to get in to the Order but they wouldn't have him because his clothes smelt of blood; got mightily pissed off at the Order, what he calls the Establishment and the world in general, and wandered off into the mountains looking for trouble. Which he found, in the shape of the insurgency. They took him on—pity, maybe, or desperation, or more likely because he can read and write and do sums—and made him a supply officer. So far, so good, but after a while he decided that counting jars of salt herring and getting yelled at because the officer's mess had run out of vinegar wasn't his idea of overthrowing a corrupt and decadent society, and so he demanded a transfer to active service. I guess someone must've taken pity on him, or else wanted rid of a nuisance. They assigned him to a forward unit just the other side of the frontier (yes, I'll get on with the proper military stuff in a minute; just let me do the human interest first), where he spent six weeks shivering his nuts off in a threadbare tent out on the mountainside, and occasionally sneaking down into Limes to steal food.

Which is how he got lucky, as previously advised. He met this girl. Apparently he was burgling her house, and their eyes met, and the rest you can extrapolate. Anyhow, he told her he was a desperate freedom fighter, which naturally she thought was just too romantic for words, and for a while she was feeding him and giving him cast-off clothes, not to mention aid, comfort and spiritual

guidance, until her parents noticed that the larder was emptier that it should have been and Dad's best overcoat had gone missing; to cut it short, they found out what their daughter was up to, got really, really frightened and ratted on her to the guard. Naturally, we scooped him up without further delay, and suddenly we've got a genuine, hundred-percent captive insurgent. Ain't love grand.

I looked up interrogation in the book, and it said that many prisoners break down when merely shown the instruments of torture. Fine, I thought; the only drawback being, we have no instruments of torture. So I had young Voutzes taken round to the millhouse and shown the back end of the countershaft mechanism, and we told him that was the instruments of torture; and of course he didn't know any better, and to anybody with even the shreds of an imagination all those cogs and wheels and ratchets look absolutely shit-yourself terrifying; and he burst into tears and said he'd tell us everything.

That's about the high point of the story, since everything in his case turned out to be not much. Translated from the pathetic, it goes like this. It was pure fluke he bumped into the insurgents, who happened to be on their way back from a reconnaissance mission. He couldn't tell us anything useful about where the main camp is; he simply has no sense of direction, and they blindfolded him on the way up there, and when they brought him back down to the frontier. He said it was a long ride in the back of a cart—somewhere between four and six hours, he thinks, but he's got no sense of time. And that's it. I scared him as much as I could. I even dragged him up into the Barracks bell tower and showed him the insides of the clock. That was when he started making stuff up, hoping to please me.

We had rather more luck with the forward post, where he'd been living. He was shamefully eager to take us up there and betray his comrades; we got seventeen of them. They're made of rather better material than Voutzes. I tried the same trick on one of them; I took him up the mill and showed him the bit where the big reciprocating arm goes backwards and forwards,

and I said, "Well, are you scared?" And he gave me a look and said, "Not really, but the camshaft bearings need oiling." He used to work there. Great. Actually, it's fairly clear they don't know a great deal more than my boy Voutzes. Whoever the bad guys are, they're good at this.

So now we know a little bit more. They aren't foreigners. All the men Voutzes met were from this area. True, some of them came from villages a few miles the other side of the border, but that doesn't mean a great deal. It's never been a closed frontier as such, and people tend to come and go quite freely. Prices are generally lower on our side, so we've never had a smuggling problem (there's a certain amount of it going the other way, of course, but that's none of our business). Most of the prisoners I spoke to got involved because they had nothing better to do; men who'd lost their land, by foreclosure or in lawsuits or just because they were no good; artisans and apprentices who'd been sacked for laziness or stealing; tradesmen and shopkeepers who'd gone bust. Not the most likely material, you'll agree, from which to forge a successful guerilla army. Think about what they've been able to do. They move very fast, very efficiently, they fight extremely well and they've got this honour code thing that means they don't surrender and they don't leave their wounded or their dead. We only got the ones we caught because we took them by surprise when they were asleep—couldn't run for it or get to their weapons in time.

This suggests, doesn't it, that they've been very well trained by someone who's very good indeed at training soldiers. Consider also the infrastructure and administration that Voutzes told us about; a well organised supply system, a properly structured chain of command, the right support services to back up the front-line units. Everything, in fact, done right and by the book.

And not just any book, if you ask me. I think whoever's running the insurgency is reading the same book I am; which suggests we're dealing with Imperial career military. One of ours.

You can see where I'm leading. There can't be that many Imperial soldiers with the necessary skills and experience who

aren't accounted for. I would guess we're looking for a colonel at least, possibly a brigadier-general, with a pretty solid career behind him, including training experience and combat. How many men can there be who fit that description?

I watched two old men fighting a duel yesterday. I should've stopped it, of course, but I was fascinated. They were both well into their seventies; one was tall and bald and skinny, with a stoop, and the other one was short and fat, with a limp. I have no idea what it was all about, but they were going about it very formally—seconds, a doctor, a roped-off ring in a meadow at dawn. It was sheer luck I happened to be passing (I was on my way to do a surprise inspection at the Stymon garrison). They fought with swords and bucklers, and my guess is that thirty years ago they were both accomplished fencers; they knew what they wanted to do, but they couldn't quite do it. Even so, they kept going for about five minutes, until they were both ash-white and stumbling about with exhaustion. Then the skinny one tripped and fell badly, and the short one tried to stab him on the ground but missed and overbalanced and went sprawling. Neither of them could get to their feet, so they sat up and shuffled towards each other on their bottoms, and started hacking at each other like that. Then the skinny man managed to connect with the fat man's kneecap—I don't suppose that's what he was trying to hit; in fact, it looked like an accident to me, and it only goes to show what happens if you play with sharp objects. To make matters worse, I think it was the fat man's bad knee. Anyway, he dropped his sword and started howling and hugging his leg and rocking backwards and forwards—he'd forgotten all about the duel and the other man, who just sat there looking bewildered. Then the seconds helped them both up, and the doctor got busy, and I came on.

Why do people insist on trying to hurt each other, Nico? Beats me.

***His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, to Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, greetings.***

*His Majesty acknowledges Phormio's report and encloses detailed information relating to the current investigation.*

We're amateurs, Phormio, obviously. I was never meant to be the Emperor. It was made abundantly clear to me when I was ten years old; Nico, you're never going to be the Emperor, you're never going to be anything. Find something to do with your life and stay out of trouble Which came as a great relief, let me tell you. Even when I was ten, I could read. I read how, in the past hundred years, there had been seventy-seven emperors, five of whom died of natural causes (and one of them was apoplexy brought on by news that his brother was rebelling against him). Seventy-two emperors murdered by their families, their soldiers, their friends, their household servants, or torn apart by the mob, or overthrown by armed revolts and executed, usually in a very nasty way. Who the hell would want to get involved in that business, I thought.

So I went to Anassus (they waived the entrance exam, for some reason) and there I met you and the others, and we read books and talked (sober, some of the time). I tried to put who I was completely out of my mind. I was just tall, skinny Nico with the stammer and the long, pointy nose, and by and large people were pleased to see me. It helped that I was in with Menestheus and Gorgias, the coolest of the cool. But they accepted me because I was, on balance, an asset to the community rather than a liability, because of what was in my head and what came out of my mouth (and because, unlike the rest of you, I still had the price of a round of drinks at mid-term? Well, maybe. That's something I'll never know).

So; I'm an amateur, and so are we all. That said, we aren't doing all that badly. In fact (bearing in mind that we're a bunch

of political, economic and military virgins who couldn't wipe our arses in the dark) we're doing pretty well.

Take land reform. Second reading of Aristaeus' Community Freeholds Bill in the House yesterday; and we got it through without me having to intervene. Law reform; three days ago, Strato pulled off an astounding dawn raid, and we impeached the twenty most corrupt and bigoted judges on the circuit; they never knew what hit them, they went so quietly I could hardly believe it—and, more to the point, we did it within the rules, instead of me sending soldiers round at three o'clock in the morning. Menestheus has actually made sense of the Treasury accounts, so for the first time in nearly forty years we know how much money there really is, how much we owe and how much is coming in. He's cancelled sixty-six illegal or oppressive taxes, while at the same time he's cut out so much graft and corruption and inefficiency and waste that we can cover expenses and maybe even start paying back some of the debt. Not bad for a bunch of unworldly, ivory-tower academics.

None of which would be worth a damn if we couldn't keep the bastard steelnecks off our backs. You remember the dog at Leuco's; how it used to sit there while you were eating, watching your every move, waiting for the slightest chance to jump up and snatch the bread off your plate or the meat out of your sandwich? That's what the generals have been like, ever since I got the job. Dreadfully bad luck on them, of course, that for the first time in a decade, the Empire's at peace with its neighbours. The only crack they could possibly get a knife into is Tremissis; and boy, haven't they been trying their best. But—thanks to you—I've been able to smile sweetly at them, thank them for their offers of assistance but assure them that my governor and I have the matter entirely under control and expect a satisfactory resolution in due course. And there's not a damn thing they can do about it. They pace up and down like caged jackals; and meanwhile, I'm quietly stripping away their funding and their support mechanisms. If we can only hold things together up there, I'm hoping I

can get rid of the whole pack of them, and then the Empire will be safe from the greatest threat of all.

No pressure, Phormio. But—I'm telling you the truth—what you're doing is the single most important thing in the whole business. Without you, the steelnecks would have my head on a spike, and it'd be civil war, business as usual. Just thought I'd mention that.

Now, here's something really strange. You asked me to go through the military and find out which officers answering the profile can't be accounted for. Well, the answer is, none. We've checked up on everybody who fits that description under the age of eighty, and none of them can be our man. So we've started again and we're checking out their sons and grandsons, their adjutants, Academy lecturers, foreign asylum seekers with military experience; I know, it doesn't make sense. You think someone, no military experience or background but extremely bright, could pick up the Book and learn it well enough to put it all into practice?

Rather more luck with the money. It's a bit like the story about the invisible man; you couldn't see him, you could only see his shadow. Menestheus' people are trying to trace the money by the wake it leaves behind as it passes, if that makes any sense (if it does, please explain it to me). For example; the Philargyrus Brothers are very scrupulous about paying their taxes. When they make a big payment, it's a sign they've done a big deal. Likewise, if a bank cuts its lending rate, it can mean they've just had an unusually large deposit. Stuff like that. It makes my head hurt, but Menestheus appears to understand it, so I don't have to. He reckons that large sums have been moving about since roughly a year before the insurgency started—a bit nebulous about the early stages, because of the chaos during the last stages of the War—and there's no indication of where it came from to begin with; it just appeared out of nowhere, and that simply doesn't happen, apparently. Unfortunately, at various stages this mysterious fortune vanishes completely. Menestheus reckons it

leaves the jurisdiction; gets shoved into Perimadeia for a while to cool off, throw the likes of us off the scent. Still, as the Treasury boys keep telling me, it only needs them to make one mistake and we'll have them. Indeed. My breath, however, remains resolutely unheld.

Full reports enclosed. In with them, somewhere near the bottom of the third tin, if memory serves, there's a copy of the new and utterly definitive edition of *Form & Substance*—yes, it would appear that Doc Stesichorus (he must be nearly ninety by now) has finally finished revising and mucking about with it and handed it over to the copyists. Amazing. I can only assume it's because we're not there any more to get under his feet and bother him with idiot questions. If that's not an omen of the end of the world, I don't know what is.

***Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, to His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, greetings.***

*Phormio begs to inform His Majesty that the insurgents have breached the defensive barrier, burnt Theano and demolished the bridge at Zapontus.*

From Stesichorus, *Form & Substance*, book IV, chapter 7, paragraphs 7a to 9d (the new edition);

> "If therefore we postulate an abstract, objective measure of freedom, of justice, of good and bad government, of right and wrong, what then? What means are we justified in using to attain our ends, to bring about the desirable outcome? Is it acceptable to wage war in order to bring peace; to murder a bad king in order to replace him with a good one; to oppress in order to liberate; to damn ourselves in the cause of our redemption? Can an objectively bad act be subjectively good; and if so, can there be any objectivity in morality? But if we withdraw our hand and, fearing to transgress, abstain from action and thereby suffer the wrong to be perpetuated, is that not also a misdeed—worse, arguably, since compounded with the sins of prevarication and cowardice?"

Just thought I'd share that. Forty-six years in the writing, and what does he give us? An answer? No, a rhetorical bloody question. Thanks, Doctor.

I was reading Stesichorus when they told me about the raid. You know that wretched feeling you get when the worst thing that could possibly happen happens? You simply can't help taking it personally, even if it quite obviously isn't. So; I don't really believe that the bad guys went to all that trouble and effort just to spoil what, up till then, had been a really quite pleasant day;

but it felt like it. It felt spiteful and petty and mean, and I wanted to hit someone, and there wasn't anybody to hit.

They must've approached the barrier the long way, right round the top of the woods, because our scouts didn't see or hear a thing. What was so clever, they broke into the trench right at the extreme western end, where we'd only just finished propping and boarding in. I imagine they must have started just after dark, because it would've taken them at least six hours to work their way along, slowly and carefully sawing through the load-bearing props—not all the way through, of course, they left just enough to keep them from caving in; roughly half-way, they piled up a great big heap of the dry brushwood bundles we were using to reinforce the parapet; then they carried on sawing through the rest of the props. When they set the brushwood heap on fire, it burned through the main beams of the lower gallery, which made it collapse at that one point, which put a strain on the adjoining chambers, which was enough to snap off the nearly-sawn-through props, which made the whole bloody trench collapse in on itself in less than a minute. It really is a shame none of our people saw it, because it must've been the most amazing sight. All the dirt we'd spent all that time, effort and money digging out and piling up into a bank, just quietly sliding back down where it came from. It was so quiet, it didn't wake up the workers in their camp, a hundred yards away. I went and had a look for myself, and honestly, I had trouble seeing where the ditch had been, it was filled in so neatly.

You've got to admire people who can do something like that.

Well, so much for finesse. Wasn't much of that in evidence when they broke into the camp. There were three hundred and sixty men asleep in there; we found a hundred and sixty-eight bodies. A few survivors trickled back out of the woods when we showed up, but the rest just kept going, and I can't say I blame them. It's bloody obvious we can't protect them, so they'd have to be mad to go back to work, even if we decide to rebuild the trench.

By this time, it was about an hour before dawn. They must've walked pretty fast to get to Theano by first light. I gather the scouts saw them coming and raised the alarm, but by the time the garrison was awake and ready to do anything useful, the bad guys were already inside the gates and setting fire to anything with thatch on it. The garrison commander, Major Lonaras, very sensibly decided to leave them to it and get his men, and as many civilians as he could, out of the southern gate before the fire reached it and trapped them all inside the town. It was a good decision; it's just a pity that the bad guys had anticipated it, and were waiting just outside the gate. Lonaras and those of his men who were still obeying orders at that point managed to get between them and the civilians long enough for them to get away. It was a brave thing to do, but in the event he needn't have bothered; the bad guys headed straight for the Zapontus bridge and cut them off there. All told, out of two thousand civilians and nearly a hundred soldiers, so far we've got thirty-odd civilian survivors; sixteen hundred confirmed dead, including nearly all the garrison, and Lonaras, of course.

After that, they broke up a jetty about two hundred yards downstream, piled up the dry planking on the middle of the bridge and set fire to it. The bridge is repairable, but that's not the point. They did it so the Mesoura garrison had to take a fifteen-mile detour in order to cross the river, and when they got to Theano, needless to say, it was all over and the bad guys were long gone. We tried following their trail, but it petered out in the foothills. We didn't catch a single prisoner or recover a single body. For all I know, they may have pulled it off without losing a man.

So, there you have it. I suppose you could try asking your generals what they think they might have been able to do to prevent it, or catch the bad guys before they got away. It might shut them up, at least in public, because I really don't see what we could've done. We can't put out pickets along the whole length of the frontier. That was the whole idea of the barrier—and I

suppose we've proved it would've been a good idea; it must've worried them, to make them go to so much trouble to stop us doing it. But they have.

Nico, I don't want to add to the horrendous problems this mess is about to cause you; but just think for a moment and be perfectly honest with yourself; am I really the right man for this job? If you can think of anybody else, maybe I should step down and go home. To cope with something like this, you don't need a plodder, an honest man doing his level best. You need a genius; someone even cleverer than the clever bastard who planned that whole operation. Seriously. Think about it.

Meanwhile, I've only got one suggestion, and personally I think it stinks. Rebuild the barrier; not just put it back how it was, but extend it, right down to the sea at the western end and the Hog's Back to the east. It would, of course, be an undertaking of truly staggering proportions. We'd need at least ten thousand men working on it, with certainly no less than five thousand soldiers to guard them; materials, plant and equipment, food, shelter and general support. I haven't even considered how much all that would cost. But; I don't know. I'm trying to put myself inside the mind of my enemy, trying to think; if I was him, what could that clown Phormio possibly do in response to the raid that might in any way alarm, inconvenience or even annoy me? And the answer came back; build the barrier. Build a bigger, longer, better specified barrier. Build a fucking *wall*.

Apart from that, I have only one suggestion, which relates directly to the Stesichorus quote. The only alternative to a wall, that I can think of, would be to bring up another two divisions, then do a fast, thorough sweep of everything within five miles of the border; burn every house, intern all the people, burn or impound all livestock and food reserves; then, when we've done that, cross the border and make a similar dead zone for five miles on the other side, put in a garrison, build forts; if that doesn't work, increase the cross-border zone to ten miles, bring up even more troops, and so on until the insurgency stops.

I remember my father telling me something his father told him when he took over the family business. If a man treads on your foot, break his arm. If he spits on your shoe, kill him. Let them hate you, so long as they fear you. That was how he thought, and I have real problems with knowing that I'm descended from someone like that. The horrible thing is, though, that Grandad's approach, in certain circumstances, does seem to work really well. It's how Grandad made his fortune in shipbuilding; and if there's anywhere on earth harder and nastier than the Callirhoe shipyard, it's the Tremissis frontier.

Please, please, please think of a third alternative.

***His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, to Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, greetings.***

*By these presents, know that His Majesty has appointed the bearer of this letter, General Lamachus, as deputy commander of the Tremissis sector. Lamachus will assist Phormio with co-ordinating the defences and overall security of the province.*

You have a new number-one priority. Immediately find and secure the person of the leader of the insurgency, buy him lots of drinks and offer him a job. We need someone like that at Command.

It won't have escaped your notice, my brilliant and perceptive friend, that enclosed herewith, instead of oysters or a warm scarf or a nice book, there's a steelneck. Sorry about that. Not—definitely not—my idea, can't be helped, do the best you can. Your spot of bother has become my spot of bother, and thing aren't looking good here at the moment. Lumbering you with an unwanted four-star arsehole was the best deal (for all of us) that I could cut in very uncongenial circumstances. Play nicely together.

(If the seals on this letter were broken or showed signs of having been played about with, you'd better arrange an accident for him. But I don't think that's likely. I have no reason whatsoever to suppose that General Lamachus can read.)

Fairly soon, you should also be taking delivery of;

Item; two (2) divisions regular infantry

Item; one (1) division auxiliary cavalry

Item; one (1) division, the Imperial Corps of Engineers, with an architect, his pencil-sharpeners, cartographers, specialists and other assorted entourage, useful and/or ornamental, literate and semi-literate.

I think we'll build a wall. You can't have too many walls. In years to come, the happy and contented subjects of the Empire can take their families for picnics among the picturesque ruins.

It'll be marked on all the maps as Nicephorus' Wall, which means my name will live for a thousand years, which will be nice. Also, there is a desperate need here for me to do something, and building as wall is as definite and concrete (pun intended) a something as even the most intractable steelneck could ask for.

Talking of the most intractable steelneck; General Lamachus served my father (not in itself a recommendation), and was never conclusively proved to have taken part in any serious conspiracy against him. In military circles, this means we're practically engaged to be married. Be nice to him, keep him well away from the garlic and the wives of people you daren't offend, and he's not actually all that bad. He also knows a surprising amount about building walls (the wide bit goes in the ground, the crenellated bit sticks up in the air; all the latest cutting-edge technical stuff) and he's worshipped as some sort of minor god by the Lusir Soleth, a whole division of whom you will soon have the pleasure of entertaining. Of the Lusir Soleth, the best thing that can be said is, they take some of the pain out of reading casualty reports. I've stuck you with them purely and simply because, if things turn smelly here, I want them as far away from the City as possible. Sorry about that.

Menestheus' financial wizards have drawn a blank on the money trail, and so have the chronic under-achievers who've been looking into the personnel records.

Look on the bright side. We may be facing the final collapse of the Empire, the overthrow of all our hopes and our own violent and painful deaths, but at least neither of us will ever have to take an end-of-term philosophy exam again, or listen to Phylarchus lecturing on precepts of Nominalist theory, or eat another breakfast in Great Hall. You see? Once you put this stuff in perspective, it ain't so bad.

***Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, to His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, greetings.***

*Phormio begs to inform His Majesty that the reinforcements have arrived, general Lamachus has taken up his command, and work has begun on the Nicephorine Wall.*

(Happy now? Your place in history.)

Really, Nico, you should try talking to people. Just because someone served your father faithfully throughout a long and distinguished military career, it doesn't necessarily follow he's a total bastard—a safe bet, yes, but not an absolute certainty. If only you'd taken the trouble to share a glass or two of wine with my new best friend Lamachus, you'd have found out that underneath that bluff, grim, savage, raw-flesh-eating, human-sacrificing exterior beats the heart of a rather unpleasant person—*but* (and this is where I may have a slight edge over you, even if you are the second cousin of the invincible Sun) a rather unpleasant person who in his spare time collects old manuscripts. True, the sort of old manuscript he particularly likes tend to be mostly pictures of athletic young men and women with no clothes on, but at least it's a start; a tiny bridge of shared humanity linking the human and the steelneck. Fact is, I happened to leave lying around in my study that copy of the *Bedchamber Dialogues* that Strato sent. When Lamachus came to report in, he caught sight of it out of the corner of his eye and swooped on it like a vulture. Offered me HS 2,000 for it, cash. Apparently, it's the rare sixth edition, with the extra woodcut in chapter nine. Take it, I said, as a gift. General Lamachus is now my friend.

(Accordingly, please have your literary advisers scour the City for every last scrap of antique porn they can lay their hands on, expense no object; must be at least two hundred years old, and the rarer the better. Lamachus isn't just a sad bastard, he's a genuine collector. Last night I had to listen to him banging on for

two hours about watermarks. But for as long as I can feed him a steady trickle of goodies, he's mine.)

Work on the wall progresses. What can I say; it's a wall. Everybody in these parts thinks I'm out of my tiny mind, but they're happy enough to sell us stuff or take our wages, now that there's soldiers everywhere you look to keep them safe. The idea that the government can be a net provider of money, rather than a bottomless pit into which their taxes vanish without trace, is new and intriguing around here, and in consequence we're rather more popular than we used to be. In fact, I have a suspicion that the Nicephorine Wall will do us more good, hearts-and-minds-wise, as a source of easy money for the local spivs and unemployables than as a piece of military architecture. Nothing wrong with that, needless to say.

Tell Strato his unerring instinct for quality smut may just have saved the Empire. He'll be ever so pleased.

***His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, to Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, greetings.***

*His Majesty is pleased to enclose the top-priority military materiel requested by Phormio in his last communication.*

You bastard. You owe me. I've now acquired a reputation for depravity and unspeakable vice comparable only with that of my father, my brothers and my uncle. Talking of which, there's a copy of Corydon's *Fragrant Bedchamber* from Dad's own personal travelling-chest. Went with him everywhere, the lascivious old git, from the halls of Hyperpyron to the sands of Miliarense. Tell your pal Lamachus you had your agents steal it for you. He'll love that.

You've also confirmed my long-held suspicion that I'm as thick as a brick. I used to wonder exactly why Lamachus always stuck by my dad, when he could've stabbed him in the back a score of times. Human nature. A man will betray his honour, his country and his friend, but the bond between two people who share a common devotion to hardcore porn is unbreakable.

***Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, to His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, greetings.***

*Phormio begs to inform His Majesty that General Lamachus has engaged and defeated the enemy at Choris Andron.*

And there you have it. Proof positive of the enormous social value of dirty books. Primed to bursting point with the finest vintage filth money can buy, our friend Lamachus has sought out and destroyed a respectable chunk of the enemy; and I for one applaud him for it. A fine soldier and a wonderful human being.

And he made it look so simple, too. When I had my crack at the bastards, you may remember, I went to all kinds of elaborate lengths—cartloads of wire, careful drip-feeding of information through their spy network. Lamachus' approach is more straightforward, and quite brilliant.

You want to pay close attention to this, because it's a masterclass in practical tactics. All Lamachus did was pick a fight with one of the guild bosses, something about withholding agreed bonuses, productivity targets not met, which provoked him into calling a two-day strike. The men lay down tools and stomp off in a huff. Lamachus sends in troops to do their work, so as not to hold up progress. The troops he assigns are a unit who've been guarding the section of the perimeter closest to the mountain pass we believe they've been using to get across the border. Result; a gaping hole in the perimeter, with easy access to the site, and anywhere else they may care to go.

It looked so convincingly like a genuine balls-up that our friends in the mountains simply couldn't resist. Very sensibly, Lamachus didn't try and catch them out in the open. He let them get right up onto the parapet, like they did the last time, and there he was in the ditch, waiting for them. He thinks we got them all; over five hundred dead; better still, fifty-odd very much alive. He's talking to them now, and I suspect that he's not

confining himself to showing them round clock-towers. But let's not dwell on that.

I may be tempting providence a *lot;* but maybe this is the ideal solution. A proper fighting general doing his stuff as only a true professional can, but kept on a leash by a human being.

Stesichorus wouldn't like it, of course. Men like Lamachus are quite definitely an evil means to a good end. I'm writing this in the chief clerk's office, because my study's just across the yard from where Lamachus is conducting his interviews; the theory being, if I can't hear it, it's not happening. Nice theory, but I fancy there's a fallacy in there somewhere. Men like Lamachus save lives by taking lives. They prevent cruelty and inhumanity by inflicting it. Men like us let them, because it's for the greater good, and because we're afraid that, if it wasn't done for us, we might find it in our hearts to do it ourselves.

On which cheerful note, I'll let you get back to your feasting and your nameless debaucheries. Lamachus loved the copy of *The Blacksmith's Daughter*, by the way. Not because of the content, but because it's the much scarcer third edition by the Smicrines brothers of Ianassa, with the page numbers on the left instead of the right.

***Nicephorus to Phormio***

Gorgias is alive.

It's true. No, I haven't seen him, but I know he's alive. It's like this. One of the first things I did when I got the throne was send for the chief clerk of the Military Roll; that's the department that records stuff like enlistment dates, expiry of tours of duty, and deaths in service. I figured that if it was true that Gorgias got press-ganged at Smicra and died at Thanatta, there'd be a record; the Roll seems to be the one department of the civil service that actually works. Sure enough, they found me his draft notice and enlistment details, which tie in pretty well with what we'd heard from his sister. So, needless to say, I told them to find me the record of his death. They couldn't.

Which meant precisely nothing, since a hell of a lot of the dead on both sides at Thanatta were simply shovelled into a mass grave. So I ordered the Engineers to find the mass grave and dig it up.

I expect you're way ahead of me, but just in case you aren't; Gorgias, as you know, was missing his upper front tooth. He was six feet two inches tall, and when he was twelve he broke his left leg. So; I had the Engineers pull out every single body in that pit and prise the jaws open, looking for that missing tooth. In the event that they found more than one (they did, of course), they were to measure the overall length of the skeleton, and check the left femur for signs of a childhood fracture.

He wasn't there. Sixty-two corpses were missing the front tooth, but forty-nine of them were missing other teeth that I knew Gorgias still had; ten of the remaining eleven were under six feet tall, and the last two showed no sign of having had a broken leg.

Which still meant precisely nothing. So I had them go over the battlefield inch by inch, digging out every last body that'd been overlooked at the time; then they worked outwards for a radius of two miles, plus they interviewed all the local farmers,

anybody who might've found an unrecorded dead body. It took them three months, but they found plenty. None of the skulls was missing the upper front tooth.

Now, Gorgias' unit was the 725th Infantry, and we know for a fact exactly where they were all through the battle. Dad kept them in reserve until the last hour of the action, when he managed to smash through the left wing of my brother Philo's infantry line; at which point, he sent in the 725th to wedge the gap open. But he got it horribly wrong, and (as you know) Philo's horse-archers cut them off and shot them to pieces where they stood; the handful of survivors surrendered, and were marched off the battlefield by the Aram no Vei auxiliaries while Philo was staging his counter-attack.

Right; let's do a logical assessment. The 725th were intact when they advanced towards the gap in the line. We know precisely where the horse-archers bottled them up, and where the vast majority of them died. We know, from unit insignia found on the bodies, that all the dead from that engagement went in pit number 6, and Gorgias isn't in there with them. Eye-witnesses confirm that there was no way anybody could've broken out of the encirclement and made a run for it. Therefore, the only logical possibility is that Gorgias wasn't killed in the shoot-up; he was one of the survivors who surrendered and got taken away by the savages. We can confirm that beyond reasonable doubt from the fact that he wasn't one of the stray bodies that never got collected and buried. At the close of the battle, he must still have been alive.

So, the next thing I did was call in the Aram no Vei liaison, and offer a HS 100,000 reward for relevant information. It's amazing how helpful and co-operative they can be when there's a vast amount of money at stake. They found me this sergeant (their equivalent of a sergeant) who remembered a man with a tooth missing and a limp. Naturally, I didn't believe a word of it, so I had the man arrested and taken down into the cellars for a word with the very bad men who work there. Fortunately for

my conscience, he was both willing and able to adduce proof of his assertion; quite by chance, but it's good evidence. He remembered the missing-tooth man because he'd gone to pull a gold signet-ring off his finger, and instead of being all meek and scared, the man had punched him in the mouth. He was so taken aback he let the man live, but he took the ring, and—

Phormio, it's *his ring*. It's on the desk in front of me right now. I remember it so well. I remember how we gave him hell about it when he first started wearing it, and how he got all upset because his dying father had made him promise to wear it, because it bore the family crest; and how we said that was very touching, but his father was still very much alive; and how he came clean and admitted that this girl had given it to him and—You remember, don't you? Of course you do. I'd know it anywhere, Phormio, and it's here, in my hand. The savage stuck it on his own finger, but it was too tight and he couldn't get it off again, and there it still was. My people got it off no trouble at all; it can't have been much fun for the savage, but he's got HS 100,000 to console him, so I don't suppose he's too unhappy, at that.

After that, it was comparatively straightforward. The prisoners from the 725th were interned in one of the prison ships in Thymnos bay. Obviously, some of them died; the ship's captain had the bodies dumped over the side, and since the ship never moved all the time it was being used as a prison, it was a fairly simple job for my team of pearl-divers to go down and fish them all up again. Gorgias wasn't one of them. So, he was alive when the surviving prisoners were released at the end of the war. I talked to the officer in charge, and he told me they were each given a change of clothes, a pair of boots, three days' rations and HS 10 and sent on their way; I checked, and that's what actually happened, remarkably enough. I managed to trace a dozen 725th veterans who were on the ship, and they backed up the officer's story.

Better than that; much better. I asked each of them in turn if they knew the name, Gorgias Bardanes. One said yes. I talked to him this afternoon, and he described Gorgias exactly.

He said they'd been in the same compartment of the hulk; he remembered Gorgias very well because of his posh voice, also he muttered in his sleep (didn't that make me grin when he said it). To cap it all, he told me a name he used to mutter, over and over again; Eudocia.

He *can't* have known that unless Gorgias was there, and alive. He just can't.

This man said Gorgias was very much alive when they all got sprung; that he collected his clothes and his money and walked away, and that was the last he saw of him, headed into town, same as most of the others, but walking alone, not talking to anybody.

Phormio, if he survived the battle and the march and being in the prison ship, I absolutely refuse to believe he could've died of anything after that—pneumonia, knocked down by a cart, slipped on a muddy bridge and fell in the river, no way. Gorgias was alive when he was released from the prison ship, he had money in his pocket, he knew that all he had to do was come here, or write me a letter, or get in touch with any of us, or his sisters, or—There's all those people he could've gone to, but he didn't. And that was two years ago. His family haven't moved house, and there's no way in hell he doesn't know exactly where to find me, or the rest of us.

That's what I simply can't understand, and it's tearing me up. He's alive, he's on his feet and walking about, and he *hasn't made contact*. Why? What the hell is going on?

Naturally, I've got a small army of people on it; trying to pick up the trail in Thymnos. So far, no joy.

The others are stunned. I didn't tell them anything until today, just in case the news turned out bad, or it didn't add up after all. None of us can make head or tail of it. It just doesn't make sense.

Anyway, now you know. As soon as there's any news, I'll write. The main thing is, he's still alive. But why—Oh, the hell with it. He's alive.

***Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, to His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, greetings.***

*Phormio begs to inform His Majesty that general Lamachus has successfully engaged the enemy.*

Nico, it's not true. I'm sorry. I couldn't bring myself to tell you, or Menestheus, or any of the others. Gorgias is dead. He died just after I got here, at the temple in Parcys. There's a free hospital there, run by the Order. The doctor who treated him said it was pneumonia. I've known for some time.

He knew I was coming here—must've heard the announcement, I don't know; he wrote to me, but by the time I got here and saw his letter, he was already dead. I went to Parcys straight away, but they'd buried him in the paupers' ground and nobody could remember where. So, no, I haven't actually seen the body, but I know for a fact it was him. Quite by chance, they hadn't got around to getting rid of his stuff, what little there was of it. The drill is, when someone dies in the free hospital, his things are stored in a warehouse along with the other paupers' stuff, until there's enough for an auction. I went there and scrabbled about—it's heartbreaking, Nico, all that junk, the last scraps of so many wasted lives—and in an old arrow-barrel I found Gorgias' things; his clothes, shoes, penknife, an old kitbag, and his journal.

That's how I know it was him, Nico. Proof positive.

I sat on a biscuit box in that dismal bloody shed, and I read it. It was like he was sitting next to me, talking, moaning, complaining, looking for an argument, soaring off on crazy flights of extrapolation and speculation. He was furious at being ill; of all the bloody stupid things, he said. He was determined he wasn't going to die. Then he started to wonder; what if I am going to die? Then he was scared stiff, and then he was angry again. He tried to calm himself down—it doesn't matter, he said, nothing matters, viewed objectively one life is utterly trivial. But he

couldn't accept that. All the memories, the knowledge, the perceptions, the experiences stored inside a man's head, all wasted in the time it takes a heart to stop beating. It was the waste that appalled him. What a ridiculous way to organise things, he said; a man spends his whole life learning, acquiring information, both on his own and as part of a collective. Just when he's starting to get somewhere, the bucket's tipped out and all the good stuff is poured out onto the ground. He had a lot to say about that. He said that of all the evils in the world, of which there were rather too many for his liking, the greatest evil of all was love; it's sheer spitefulness to allow mortals to love, because everybody dies, but the love they cause to be in others doesn't die with them. Therefore love is the cause of the greatest sorrow, therefore love is the greatest evil.

I think I know what he meant.

I know why he never got in touch with any of us after the war. He was so angry about being conscripted. The last thing he wanted was to be a soldier. He didn't want to have to march all day in sopping wet clothes and sleep on the damp ground and eat garbage and get dysentery and do demeaning physical labour and get ordered about by men who weren't fit to clean his shoes. He didn't want to kill anybody, and he most definitely didn't want to die. But, being Gorgias, when it became obvious that there was no getting out of it, he determined to do his very best, if only to show the ignorant rubbish around him how much better than them he was. He tried really hard. He was determined to get promoted, to make sergeant at least; but he didn't, and that really hurt him, because he wasn't good enough, and in the end he knew it. That really depressed him. In the battle, he only survived by pure fluke. He was livid that a savage stole Eudocia's ring; he tried to fight for it, but the savage punched him in the mouth and (here's a typical Gorgias phrase) he was left with no alternative but to fall over. While he was in the prison ship, he more or less gave up. He lay there in the dark trying to remember as much as he could of the first book of the *Bessaid*, but he

could only remember the opening thirty lines; so he said them to himself over and over again, until they lost all traces of meaning. When they finally let him go, he made a conscious decision that he was through with everything from his past life. He'd betrayed himself and us, we'd betrayed him, the whole world, everything he'd valued and put his trust in had failed him and let him down. As far as he was concerned, he'd died at Thanatta. He made up his mind to walk to the monastery at Eschate—mostly, I think, because it's a very long way away; as and when he got there, he'd pull himself together and decide what to do next. He made it four-fifths of the way; and then he got ill.

That's how Gorgias died, Nico. And that's why I couldn't bring myself to tell you, or send you his journal. That Gorgias, of all people, died angry and afraid and in despair; I had to read that book, Nico. I didn't see why the rest of you should have to.

Well, there you have it. I've got a team of clerks making copies of the journal (I'm not going to risk the original in the mail, not even your infallible Imperial couriers). I suppose I was wrong to try and keep it from you all. I'm sorry.

Lamachus won a battle against the insurgents. I enclose a copy of his report. He did a great job and things are going really well.

***His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, to Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, greetings.***

*His Majesty commends the courage and diligence of General Lamachus.*

I see. Thank you for telling me. Thank you, I suppose, for not telling me. I guess I've only got myself to blame.

The trouble with this job, with all the power and the resources and the ability to actually get things done, is that you start believing you can fix things. You see an obvious injustice; fine, you stretch forth your Imperial hand and there, you've fixed it. The economy's in a mess. So, you summon the people who really control it, and you make sure that on their way to your office they're taken past the guard-room and the dungeon and the place I told you about where the very bad people work, and then you tell them to get it sorted out, and it gets sorted out. You're disgusted at the poverty in the Naranite Quarter; you send in food, you start up public works to provide employment, problem solved. You think the new wing they've built onto the Goldsmiths' Hall is an eyesore and shouldn't have been allowed; ten days later, they're carting it away in big skips. Job done.

But you never fix any damn thing. The obvious injustice turns out to have rather more to it than you first thought. You make them fix inflation, you get a run on the banks. Your public works mean you've got to jack up taxes, and small businesses go to the wall. And everybody liked the Goldsmiths' new wing except you, and you had it pulled down. The more you try and make things better, the more you end up looking, sounding and acting like the Government.

I thought I could fix the Gorgias problem. Either I'd find him alive, or at least we'd know for sure what happened to him. Result; more misery, more unhappiness, which you tried to spare us.

My illustrious ancestors and predecessors in this ridiculous job used to have themselves made into gods. Some of them actually believed it, and I always used to wonder how that was possible.

How can you believe you're immortal, all-powerful, equal of the invincible Sun, when you've got a toothache, or when you're wiping your arse? But I understand better now. After all, I tried to bring the dead back to life, and look where it got me.

Oh well. Looks like it's still just the five of us after all.

***General Theophano Lamachus, commanding the auxiliary forces in Upper Tremissis, to His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, greetings.***

*General Lamachus begs His Majesty's indulgence for the grave breach of protocol which this letter represents. In his defence, he pleads the potential seriousness of the allegations herein contained.*

*General Lamachus has been given to believe that His Majesty has been making enquiries concerning the whereabouts of Dr Gorgias Bardanes, late of the University of Anassus, formerly a fellow-student with His Majesty at the said University. General Lamachus further understands that Governor Phormio has assured His Majesty that the said Gorgias Bardanes died in Parcys on the seventh day preceding the Ides of Trionalis.*

*General Lamachus begs to inform His Majesty that this is not the case.*

*Furthermore, General Lamachus has compelling evidence, acquired during the course of his intelligence operations relating to the current insurgency, that the said Gorgias Bardanes is closely involved with the said insurgency, possibly at the highest level. General Lamachus annexes hereto duly notarised copies of witness statements taken from suspects questioned by him in which said witnesses state, without prompting or coercion, that the said Gorgias Bardanes is involved with the said insurgency. The said witnesses are in custody and can be forwarded to His Majesty at any time.*

*General Lamachus makes no accusation against Governor Phormio, but begs to suggest to His Majesty that the said Governor Phormio should be questioned by His Majesty or his agents concerning his knowledge of and dealings with the said Gorgias Bardanes.*

*General Lamachus begs to remind His Majesty that he loyally served His Majesty's late father, now restored to the Divine Element, for twenty years, and it is General Lamachus' dearest*

*wish that he be permitted to serve His Majesty with the same loyalty, sincerity and total commitment for as long as His Majesty shall please to employ him in any capacity whatsoever. General Lamachus is aware that in making allegations that might potentially be interpreted as detrimental to the honour of Governor Phormio, he risks His Majesty's grave displeasure. Should such allegations prove to be unfounded, General Lamachus submits himself willingly and penitently to His Majesty's mercy, should His Majesty see fit to bestow it.*

***Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, to His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, greetings.***

*It is with great regret that Phormio begs to inform His Majesty of the death in combat of General Lamachus. The general died bravely and with honour in the act of leading his troops into battle, and the engagement was successful.*

He was a steelneck, and besides killing people his only interest in life was dirty books. That said, damn.

They made a surprise attack on the wall. At least, that's what they thought they were doing. He was there waiting for them, again, and we made a real mess of them. They'd already broken and were about to run; Lamachus saw an opportunity to cut them off and led the charge in person. But something went wrong; he and his guards got there just a bit before the main force, he was surrounded and killed. Once our men realised the general was down, they more or less lost interest, and the bad guys got away. Even so, we killed sixty-two of them and caught another dozen. I don't know if they realise they got Lamachus; I think they probably do, and if they don't they soon will. How much of a setback this will prove to be, I don't know. Damn it, he was making real progress. He made fools of them twice; a few more times and I think they might lose their nerve. Well, it's up to me now.

Listen to me. It's getting so I'm afraid to go out in the rain, in case my neck rusts.

I don't know who you'll choose to replace him. I do believe we need a fighting general up here. But it's got to be someone we can control.

***His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, to Phormio, governor of Upper Tremissis, greetings.***

*His Majesty acknowledges Phormio's report concerning the death of Lamachus.*

Enclosed herewith, please find a letter. I got it two days before your last report. You can keep it; I don't want it back.

Phormio, what the *hell* are you playing at?

***Phormio to Nicephorus***

I have a confession to make.

Yes, he was alive when I got there. I honestly thought he was dead. But no, he was sitting up in bed, bitching at the nurses. He was bored, his head hurt, the bedlinen was a disgrace, the food was rubbish. Hello Gorgias, I said.

He told me what had happened; Thanassa, and afterwards. All more or less what you'd been told, except for one thing. He was on his way up here to join the insurgency, with a view to taking it over.

What the hell do you want to do that for, Gorgias? Well, he said, I've had a lot of time to think, and I've come to the conclusion that it's got to go. What's got to go, Gorgias? The empire, you idiot. It's all got to go. Pull it all down and start over.

Don't talk stupid, I said, that's Nico you're talking about. I know, he said, and then he grinned—you know how he grins when he's really upset about something. If it'd been anybody else, he said, I'd probably be able to let it go, I'd just give up on everything and go somewhere, get a job, die. But Nico's betrayed us. He's gone back on everything we agreed.

What are you talking about, I said. He scowled at me, like I was stupid. Everything, Phormio, he said. Everything we talked about, everything we decided on, everything we agreed, back in Anassus, when we were still thinking straight. And then he pointed to his coat and told me to look in the pocket, and there was the book.

You remember the book, Nico. It's in your handwriting; proceedings of the board of inquiry into the condition of the world. He made me give it to him, and then he leafed through and found the place. Then he made me read it out loud.

You remember the bit, Nico? It goes—

> *Proposed by Nicephorus Tzimisces; that all power (political, military, economic) is an abomination; that Mankind*

*is addicted to servitude through long use, but is capable of surviving without it; indeed, can only survive if the addiction is broken; that all and any means are justified in the struggle against power. Further proposed by Nicephorus; that in the unlikely event that he should succeed to the Imperial throne, he would immediately dissolve the Empire and give power back to the Senate, subject to an overriding agenda to disband the standing army, grant self-determination to the provinces, break up the major trading corporations and put in place all measures necessary and expedient to reduce power and government to the absolute minimum necessary, until such time as Humanity is ready to do without it altogether. Put to the vote and passed unanimously.*

Come off it, Gorgias, I said, we were just kids.

He looked at me. You don't mean that, he said. And I thought about it, and he was right. Then he took the book back, and found another bit. Remember this?

*Proposed by Phormio; Man is born free. As soon as he is born, he is subjected to authority; that of his parents, his educators, the government. Each submission to authority diminishes him, so that as the body grows, the soul withers. He learns away his freedom, his divine essence, until the day comes when, fully educated in the skills of the slave, he denies all his potential, forswears everything he might have done or been. Proposed, therefore, that the members of this board of enquiry shall make a solemn undertaking to remember this moment, when they could still see clearly, and to acknowledge that on this day, at this moment, the seventeenth hour of the sixteenth day after the Calends of Triptolemon in the fifth year of the Emperor Actis IV Tzimisces, being one thousand, two hundred and fifteen years from the foundation of the city of Vesa, they agreed and declared that the following precepts were unalterably and unequivocally true; that*

*power is the greatest evil; that evil must be resisted; that compromise is betrayal; that the fight must never end. Put to the vote and passed unanimously.*

I looked at him. I did say that, didn't I?

He nodded. And Nico wrote it down in the book, he said. Look, there it is, in his truly terrible handwriting.

I shook my head. Fine, I said, you look at it. That's kids talking, Gorgias. Notice the unique blend of cockiness, pomposity and ignorance that identifies the voice of youth. So when I was nineteen, I wanted to abolish the Empire. Big deal. When I was eleven I really wanted to be a cavalry captain. I made a promise to myself that that's what I'd be. But I grew up, I said to him, and I'm not bound by that earlier undertaking, and I'm not bound by this, either. Idealism is like spots and wanking; it's a phase you go through, and then you grow out of it. But he just looked at me and shook his head. It's me you're talking to, he said. I know you better than that.

And you know what, Nico? He was right.

God, we were pompous in those days; and cocky, and very, very ignorant. We'd read a few books, thought we'd understood them, thought we could see so much more clearly than our stupid parents and grandparents and a million generations before them. Like the kid who wanted to be an explorer, so he set off from home and after half an hour he came to a place he'd never been to before; so he said to himself, I've discovered a new country. But.

They trained me in logic, rhetoric, analytical thinking and adversarial disputation. Somewhere there's a bit of paper with a seal at the bottom that says I'm fully qualified in the above; so it's hardly surprising I can win arguments, even against myself. I can win this argument any day of the week. But that doesn't mean a bloody thing. If I close my eyes and ask myself, were we right or not, and I only give myself one heartbeat to answer, the answer's got to be yes, we were right. We were stupid kids, but we were right.

You should've seen the smug look on Gorgias' face, Nico. That look.

It hasn't been easy. The main thing was to play for time. Gorgias has been raising money for the cause (I'm sorry, but I can't tell you where from) and building an army. The little piddly raids and bits and pieces he's done so far are really just training exercises, though they served a more important purpose; to get you to send me an army of my own. It was a bit of a blow when I found that Lamachus came with it. Gorgias (he learned it all from the Book, would you believe; you and I read it too, but he *understood* it. I always knew he was the clever one) played it quite well, I think. He let Lamachus have his victories, to get his blood up, make him feel good. Then he and I laid the trap; or rather, we let Lamachus lay the trap, and we tweaked it a bit. All I had to do was transfer one lieutenant (one of our people) to command the company that should've backed Lamachus up, but didn't. I regret that. I regret all the dead, on both sides. My trick with the barrels of wire was actually genuine—I didn't even tell Gorgias what I was doing until afterwards, because it had to be perfect or it wouldn't have been convincing. And you were convinced, Nico, and that was all that mattered.

It's a comedy, isn't it? In order to eradicate the evil of the misuse of power, I've been misusing power like few people in the history of the world. Wicked of me, but it's got to be done. Of course, I couldn't have done it without your help. You gave me everything I needed. I now have a field army large enough to march on the City. I have supplies, equipment, the very best; my troops are the only regulars in Imperial service who have boots that are younger than they are. Thanks to your generous funding for the wall project, I have the money to pay them, plus a HS 500 incentive payment (I think that's what your father used to call it)—in other words, I've bought them, in the traditional manner. Five hundred down, another thousand each when we've won the Empire. You were kind enough to send me the best troops in the army. Even if any of the steelnecks are minded

to fight for you, which I'm inclined to doubt after your really quite savage attacks on their pay and privileges, with my army and Gorgias' forces, we can take them all, one at a time or all together. Please therefore accept this as my formal declaration of war. Sorry, Nico.

But, of course, we don't have to do that. Absolutely no need. All it'd take would be for you to walk into the Senate, issue the dissolution decree and the rest of it—disband the army, provincial autonomy, dismantling the monolithic corporations—and not a drop of blood need be shed. You'd have in your hand a letter from Gorgias and me, guaranteeing the reforms, undertaking that as soon as they're in place, we'll pay off our army and disband it. Think about it, Nico.

Why are you Emperor? Not because you wanted to be. I *know* that's the case. Because you were the third son of Actis IV; because your father and both your brothers and your uncles and their sons slaughtered each other in an orgy of violence that was remarkable even by Vesani standards; because after all the other Tzimisces were dead, the army wanted an unquestionably legitimate ruler, born in the purple, and they practically had to drag you by the hair. I understand that at the outset there was no way you could've dissolved the Empire, because the steelnecks would've killed you. But we're past that now. Menestheus and Strato and Aristaeus have seen to that; and you, of course. You've been trying to keep your word, Nico; that's what decided me to go along with Gorgias. Deep down, you know we were right. You're trying to do it, but you're afraid—not of being killed, of course not. You're afraid of failure. You're afraid that if you're not careful, you'll play into the bastards' hands and we'll end up with another civil war, worse than before, and an even worse Empire after that.

If I thought you wanted the job, if I thought you didn't hate every minute of it, I'd have told Gorgias to go to hell. Same with Menestheus and the others. They're trying too, but they're just as scared as you are. Well, it's all right now. Gorgias and I have

dealt with all that. We're coming with an army that the steelnecks can't beat; they'll see that, and there won't be a military coup and thirty years of civil war, and we can do what we agreed to do.

Isn't that what you really want?

Sure, you're angry with us both. You wouldn't be human if you weren't. Two of your closest friends have been plotting against you; it doesn't get worse than that. But ask yourself this. *Why* would Gorgias and Phormio do something like this? If we thought it wasn't the best thing, for you as well as everybody else, we wouldn't be doing it.

Think about it, Nico; really think. If you carry on the way you've been doing, what do you suppose your chances are of reaching thirty? Pecking away at the steelnecks and the bureaucrats and the merchant princes and the landed aristocracy; all that'll happen is that sooner or later you'll push them too far, and then that'll be it. That's what's always happened before. Remember your history, for crying out loud. Theonides' reforms. Sinon and the redistribution of public land. Basiliscus and the Franchise Act. As soon as the established interests decided that they'd had enough, what happened? Blood on the floor, and back to how things have always been. The plain fact is, there are certain things that the emperor, brother of the invincible Sun and father of his people, simply can't do. We recognise this. We know it's up to us. If you want, we can wait until our army's camped under the City walls; you can tell them it's the only way to avoid a terrible siege followed by a murderous sack. You'll go down in history as the emperor who voluntarily gave up his throne to save his people; what could be nobler and better than that? And it won't just be myth and spin, it'll be the whole truth.

Think about it, Nico. See what the others have to say. Then, if you really must, you can hate us. Or, in a year or so's time, we'll look at all this clearly, like we used to be able to when we were arrogant, ignorant kids, and we'll see that we *all* did the right thing, when it mattered.

***His Divine Majesty Nicephorus V, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, to the criminal traitors Phormio and Gorgias, defiance.***

*His Majesty commands the aforesaid, criminals and traitors, to disarm immediately and surrender themselves to the garrison commander at Sybas, there to await transportation to Vesa for trial.*

Well, I've got to write something. The courier's been waiting in the corridor outside for two hours already, while I've been here staring at this stupid sheet of parchment, trying to think what I'm going to say. So, I figure that if I just start writing, maybe.

Three hours now. The poor bastard. And not just him. They'll have got his horse all ready, tacked up and tethered in the despatch yard, with a groom standing by. I expect they're all wondering what's going on. Me too.

All right, let's start at the beginning.

Gorgias is alive. You can't imagine how wonderful that is. Particularly after you told me he was dead. Phormio, you bastard, you lied to me. Why did you do that? Gorgias is alive; you've known that all this time, and you didn't tell me. Us.

The others have been in here with me all night. A sort of pattern emerged. There'd be a long silence, minutes at a time. Then we'd all start talking at once; then we'd be shouting, swearing at each other—the guard came busting in at one point, they thought I was being murdered—and then back to the long silence.

You two should know that the four of us have talked it through, and I'm speaking for Menestheus and Aristaeus. Strato gave up at about five o'clock this morning. He stood up, said, I think I'll go to bed now, and off he went. He hasn't been back. It's been too much for him, I guess. I think, when we all thought Gorgias was dead, it hit him the hardest. Now this.

Four hours. About an hour ago, I got a note from Strato. It says; whatever the rest of you decide is fine by me. Then they told me he's gone. Left the City. My guess is, he's gone back to Anassus. So it's just the three of us here now. But we've sort of reached an agreement, though we haven't actually called it that.

Phormio, I *can't*. When I read your letter the sixth time, I thought; hell, yes, why not? Do what they say, and it'll be all right. It'll work. As soon as their army passes the twentieth milestone, go to the Senate and abdicate, like Phormio suggested. It'll work, I thought; and then it'll all be over, this stupid job, this pretence. Gorgias is coming to take charge, and I've been let off.

Let off; that was where it broke down.

When I was at school in Histamenon—actually, thinking about it, Histamenon was a good experience for me. Because whatever happens to me in later life (a monastery, on campaign, even prison), it's got to be better than Histamenon. When you've been that miserable, as I was there, it gives you a wonderful sense of freedom. And I survived school, so I can survive anything.

When I was at Histamenon, they used to make us play the boot game, once a week, even when it was so cold outside that even the peasants stayed indoors. I hated that so much. So I spent a large part of my life trying to find ways of getting let off the game. Illnesses; I had my brother smuggle me in Semonides' *Medical Summary*, and I'd read it for hours, looking for new illnesses I could fake. I joined every club and society going, took up every musical instrument going. I'd do anything, just to be let off. And when I was successful, I'd watch the other poor bastards trooping off to the playing field in the murderous cold, and I felt awful.

So; I'm done with being let off. That's not a good enough reason.

Then I went to the cellar, where they generously allow me to store a few personal things (can't have them in the palace; it's not seemly) and I dug about in my old college trunk until I found my

diary. You never knew I kept a diary; you'd have kidded me about it, and got hold of it somehow. But I sat there and read it, trying to remember. And I found the entry for 16 aK Trip, 1115. I quote;

> *Board meeting, back bar, Poverty & Justice. Very drunk. Gorgias on good form, Aristaeus had a good point but said it badly. Phormio, mostly. Can't remember what he said. Can't remember what I said. Can't read own handwriting, so sod it. Got stuck with the bill, again. All right, I've got more money than them, but it'd be nice if just once, someone else paid for something. Must go bed now; head hurts.*

So much, then, for when we could all see clearly.

Phormio, it's not as simple as that. Real politics, in the real, grown-up world; Gorgias simply doesn't understand that. I do. I have no choice. I hated Histamenon, every waking moment. But—you know, this has only just become clear to me; thank you—do you suppose for one moment that if I'd said to Dad, I don't like it there, don't send me back, that he wouldn't have taken me out of there so fast, people would've been knocked down by the slipstream? I stuck it there because it was so much better than home. Home, where my father and brothers and uncles lived. Until they murdered each other.

So don't you fucking dare talk to me about politics; or power, or the evils of authority, or the menace of faction and a standing army. I understand all that. When the only important things to you were the girl two doors down and exam results and your arrowhead collection, I was eavesdropping on my father conferring with his steelnecks about how to kill his brothers and his other two sons. So, yes. Yes, you're both absolutely right. We were right, back in the Poverty. All power is evil. All government is evil. All armed force is evil. And there's nobody on earth knows that better than me.

But—Phormio, for crying out loud, this is not the way. If you do this, and I let you, we'll end up right back where we

were before my grandfather's time. Seventy-seven emperors in a hundred years; all steelnecks, each with an army. My family were all murdering bastards, but at least Grandad kept the peace for twenty years. In passing, interesting piece of family history I only found out recently, looking through old papers, the way you do. When Grandad became emperor, the first thing he did was have death warrants made out for all his sons except Uncle Vatatzes. He knew that after his death, Dad and Uncle Zeno and Uncle Phrontis would try and carve up the empire; so he took the decision to have three of his four sons killed, to stop that happening. My grandmother managed to talk him out of it, but only just. Then, when Dad had Arcady and Philo and me, and Grandad got sick, Grandad ordered him to have me and Philo killed. Dad actually had to pretend he'd done it; Philo and I were whisked away and hidden for a month, until Grandad got better and it was fairly certain he wasn't going to die after all.

When you tell Gorgias about that, he'll say it's just more evidence in favour of his view; that power makes men evil. I don't agree. I remember Grandad, just about. He was a nice old man, a bit stern but quite kind really; he gave me strawberries he'd grown in his glasshouse, and we talked about something I'd been learning at school. He actually listened to what I was saying, which was the first time a grown-up had done that. But he was prepared to kill his own sons and grandsons to avoid the evil; and, for pity's sake, Phormio, he was *right*. And grandmother was wrong, and she's responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands.

That was his way. He was a steelneck, and so was my father, his brothers, my brothers. And you know what, Phormio? If you do this, you'll be a steelneck too.

Have they done the inauguration yet? Where they make you stand on a shield, and four captains lift you up, and all the soldiers whoop and holler? My personal theory is, that's when it happens. That's when the brain and the heart die. When they lift that shield, it doesn't matter who you were before. When

they raise you off the ground, you become something else. A bit like my crazy predecessors declaring themselves gods, I suppose.

I left it for an hour, and I'm calmer now. I think the courier's given up and wandered off. It's unnaturally quiet around here. They know something's wrong. I walked down the corridor just now and I didn't meet anybody. Usually there's clerks and servants and guards everywhere. Maybe they know something I don't. Hey, Phormio, you haven't arranged to have me murdered, have you?

I'm calmer, and I've thought about it some more. I thought a lot about Grandad. If he was prepared to slaughter his family, I suppose I have to declare war on my friends. Steelneck is as steelneck does. That'd be the one thing I'd have serious trouble forgiving you for, if it turns out you've made me into one of them.

If you possibly can, please change your minds. It goes without saying, if you do, I'll grant a full pardon—you and your men, whoever you damn well like. If you're afraid that if you give it up now the soldiers will kill you, then we'll think of some way to get you out of there.

Gorgias; when you read this, I want you to know something. I'm so glad you're alive after all. That's the main thing.

***Gorgias Bardanes to Phormio, greetings***

The war goes well.

That, I believe, is what soldiers say. How goes the war, my friend? The war goes well. We have today engaged the loyalist armies, and we have defeated them.

And that, I must confess, is a gross simplification. I received a message from Nico's latest general, a man called Euphorbus; I confess I hadn't heard of him. I can only suppose he's the next in line of seniority, after the recent spate of defections. General Euphorbus wished to put me on notice that he would be deploying his forces at (some map reference). I understood this to be a sort of invitation; be there or be square. So I wrote back and said I'd be delighted. I asked Nico's previous five generals who this Euphorbus was, and none of them had heard of him, either.

So we went to the place on the map. That's all it was, a place on a map; no village, no river or mountain or anything. I think we arrived unfashionably early, because it was a long time before the enemy showed up. They shuffled onto the battlefield; they reminded me of Strato in the morning, before he's had anything to eat. Nearly two thirds of the army were auxiliaries, and even I could tell, from a mile away, that they really didn't want to be there. And can you blame them? You know the recruiting pitch, out there in the territories; join the army, see the civilised world, fight Vesa's enemies and earn good money. Fighting Vesani regular troops wasn't what they joined up for. The battle was over before it started.

I met with the salvage companies and struck a good deal, and then we had a final staff meeting, and then I couldn't put it off any longer, so we advanced. I did as you said and put a lot of auxiliary archers out front. It worked. They shot up Nico's auxiliary infantry for about five minutes at maximum range, and provoked a wild, spontaneous charge; they fell back, and our Vesani cavalry cut them off and slaughtered them like rats in a barn. That was enough. The rest of Nico's auxiliaries started to

pull slowly back, and it was obvious they hadn't been ordered to do so. The regulars just stood there, trying to figure out what to do. I ordered our heavy centre slowly forward. Immediately, I got a message from General Euphorbus; he'd considered his position, and wished to join the Alliance.

Call that a victory? I just think it's depressing.

So now I have six of Nico's generals, and five of his armies. We only need two more for the complete set. We held a welcome-to-the-club party that evening. I was appalled to see the condition his Vesani were in. Most of them hadn't eaten for two days, and when one regiment was called on to lay down their arms, they just laughed, because they hadn't got any; just shields, no swords or spears. I gather they hadn't been paid since the war began. Nico's run out of money, as well as everything else.

Our poor friend; I feel desperately sorry for him. But we have to face facts. It's too late now. I imagine he's virtually a prisoner in the palace, and his keepers are most likely arguing among themselves about the best way of getting rid of him before we reach the fifteenth milestone. I asked the special forces people if there was any way we could get a unit inside the City and pull him out, but they advised against it; chances of success were slight, and projected losses unacceptable. Does Nico constitute an acceptable loss? I didn't ask them that. I don't like to ask questions I don't know the answer to.

By the time my next letter reaches you, it may well all be over. I do hope so. It's been the most dreary, miserable business. I never thought doing something so well could be so tedious.

Added in haste; I just managed to catch the messenger before he set off. Excellent news, the best—almost the best—possible. Guess who's looking over my shoulder while I write this. Menestheus; and Aristaeus is standing next to him, drinking cinnamon tea. And Strato's safe at Anassus; he'll join us at the City when it's all over. They didn't want to leave Nico, but he insisted. They say he's been bearing up remarkably well, right up till the last defection—well, the last defection but one, strictly

speaking. Then he called them all in and said that the only thing that mattered now was for them to get out and be safe, and the safest place would be here. I'm pleased to say they don't blame him for what's happened.

Not long now, Phormio, and the five of us will be together again, and then; you wait and see what we'll do. It'll be amazing.

***Phormio, commander in chief of the Imperial forces, to His Divine Majesty Gorgias, brother of the invincible Sun, father of his people, defender of the faith, emperor of the Vesani, greetings .***

*Phormio begs to inform His Majesty that his forces have arrested the criminal traitor Nicephorus Tzimisces and sent him to Vesa to await His Majesty's pleasure.*

No message.

***Nicephorus, brother of the Order of the Invincible Sun at Tyene, to General Phormio, commander in chief of the Imperial forces, greetings.***

Gorgias came to see me today.

He, of course, did all the seeing. I couldn't see him back, for obvious reasons.

When I was a kid, they taught me that the custom of blinding illustrious prisoners and banishing them to monasteries, rather than killing them outright, was a mark of how civilised our society is. I thought, that's wrong, it's barbarous. How could anybody bring himself to do such a thing? I guess Dad and the rest of our family thought the same way, or else they weren't taking any chances. After all, it's just a convention that a blind man can't be emperor.

Now that I've been on the receiving end, literally and figuratively, I've changed my views somewhat. It's not so bad. It's a damned sight (pun) better than being dead. It has its advantages. They don't expect a blind man to do all the hard manual labour that a novice brother usually gets lumbered with; weeding the vegetable garden, lugging jars of water about, sweeping up, emptying the latrines. I think I'd have quite liked copying manuscripts, mind you, but would they have ever let me? You know what my handwriting's like. So, what I mostly do is sit here in this room, which I can't describe to you because I've never seen it, and some of the older brothers take it in turn to read to me. I have Strato to thank for that. He paid HS 1,000 for a permanent endowment; monks to read to me while I'm alive, prayers for my soul when I'm dead. I'm not all that fussed about the prayers—I can't see the look on the face of brother Anthemius, who's writing this down for me, but I bet he's shocked at that last bit. You're not? No, don't write that, you fool.

Actually, they've all been very kind to me, ever since I got here. Partly, I think, it's a sort of vague respect for my former office. After all, for a while there I was the second cousin of

the Invincible Sun. I asked the prior about that, by the way, and he explained it to me very clearly, how I could be a blood relative of the Supreme Essence one minute and no relation at all the next. I wish I could remember his argument. It was very good. Father Prior has, in fact, been exceptionally kind. He even lets the monks read me proper books, not just religious stuff, which is a great blessing. Mind you, I've grown quite fond of the Precepts and the Offices lately. For the first time in my life (never thought I'd say this), they're starting to make some kind of sense. Perhaps we were wrong after all, Phormio, about seeing things clearly. Maybe this is what you have to go through before it's possible.

(In case you think I've adjusted really well, I haven't. Every morning, when I wake up, I try and open my eyes. Then there's a moment of panic; and then I think, Oh.)

I'm wandering, I know. Easy to do in the dark. The reason for this letter is, Gorgias came to see me. The emperor, himself. I have to confess, the truly special nature of the honour was wasted on me just a bit. But then, I've always loathed and despised emperors, until now, of course. All the emperors I ever knew before I came here were rubbish.

I heard his footsteps in the cloister, and I knew it was him. You don't believe me, but it's true. I asked the brother to stop reading, and called out his name. I heard the door open. Hello, Nico, he said. Hello, Gorgias, I replied, how are you? Fine, and yourself? A bit blind, I replied, but otherwise not so bad. I could hear the monk who'd been reading to me suck in his breath sharply, so I asked him if he'd mind leaving us, and I heard him go.

I'm sorry, he said. There's a coincidence, I said, so am I. He wasn't quite sure how I meant that, so I said; Let's not talk about bad stuff. Sit down and tell me something cheerful. So he sat down next to me on the bed and started talking—well, lecturing; like he was making a speech—about all the political stuff you're doing. Shut up, Gorgias, I said.

He was quiet for some time. Then he laughed, like a twig snapping. Sorry, he said. I guess that's not what you want to hear. Doesn't bother me, I replied, but it's boring. All right, he said, and there was another silence. So, he said, what isn't boring?

I couldn't help smiling. Is it true, I said, that you're hanging round Eudocia's kid sister?

A sort of a gasp; then, Who told you that?

Strato was here, I said. So it's true, then.

Emperors don't hang around, he said gravely. They negotiate marriage contracts with dynastically and politically suitable candidates. And she isn't, I said, and he clicked his tongue. Unfortunately not, he said. I'll probably end up marrying some savage with a bone through her nose, to safeguard the northern frontier. Meanwhile, he added, I'm hanging round Pulcheria. Nice kid, he added, but she reminds me of her sister.

Then we talked a bit about the old days, and then he gave me the news about the rest of the gang (nothing Strato hadn't already told me); then we started arguing about textual cruces in the *Bessaid*, of all the crazy things. I thought I'd win for sure, because the monks had just finished reading me Glycerius' *Commentaries;* but no, Gorgias somehow managed to dredge all the relevant stuff up out of his memory, from ten years ago. I'm telling you, Phormio, it was a hell of a good debate. And Gorgias won, of course.

Then, I really am sorry, he said suddenly; and I said, Forget it. You don't really mean that, he said. True, I said. I can't forget something just because I want to, in the same way I can't fly. But I can forgive. Besides, I said, it doesn't matter all that much.

I think that upset him a bit, but I wasn't too bothered about his fine sensibilities. All that stuff, I said, politics and morality and good and evil, it's just nonsense we used to talk about in the Poverty when we were kids. But if you insist on being deadly serious, I want you to answer me some questions. Truthfully, I said. On the Book.

Book?

I grinned. Not the Precepts, stupid, I said. On *our* book. I don't suppose you've got it with you.

As a matter of fact, he said. (I don't know if he was telling the truth. Could've been any book. It's easy to lie to a blind man.) All right, he said, on the book. So?

Question one, I said. Is it true that, all along, you wanted to be emperor?

No, he said.

On the book.

Yes, he said. And then he added, in a rush, Because how else could I ever get anything done? Good things, like we're doing now. Like the land reform proposals, or—

Question two, I said. When we were kids, was the only reason you let me hang out with you because I had money to pay for the drinks?

He laughed. No, of course not, he said. I'm not saying it didn't help us like you, but no, it wasn't that. It's true, he went on, we were never as close to you as we were to each other. I tended to think of you as Phormio's friend, rather than my friend, to begin with. But that changed, by second year.

I nodded. Question three, I said. If Phormio had been emperor instead of me, or Strato, would you have done the same thing?

Can't answer that, he said. The situation could never have arisen.

I let him get away with that. One lie out of three wasn't bad.

He stayed for two hours. Apparently, there's going to be a sort of visiting rota, which is a bit patronising, but very welcome nonetheless. Next month, Aristaeus will come and see me, and Menestheus the month after that; and Gorgias promised me faithfully you'll all come and visit on my birthday. I'm not holding my breath, but it'd be nice. In fact, it'd be the best thing.

My friends the monks read me the *Gazette* each week, Phormio, and I know how to interpret all those official announcements. I know that Gorgias has more or less given up trying to change anything. He'll be the Emperor from now on. I think

he'll be a good one, so that's all right. Better than me, anyhow. Anyway, what do I care? I've been let off all that.

This is probably the best place I've ever been, and I've only been happier once. Please write, when you can spare the time.

# Rich Men's Skins; A Social History Of Armour

In ancient Greece, birthplace of democracy, the concept "too poor to fight" would have been universally understood. At some point around 650BC, the Greeks adopted a highly formalised form of warfare, the phalanx. Battles were all the same. The opposing armies, made up of affluent citizens in heavy armour, lined up opposite each other in wide formations five or so ranks deep. They charged, collided, pushed and shoved until one side gave way and ran. They were all armed with spears, but in the cramped conditions of the phalanx, they couldn't really use them. The spear was held in one hand, overarm; it was over six feet long and weighed three or four pounds. Simply keeping control of the wretched thing, holding it over your head, while shoving and being crushed from both sides by four ranks of strong men must have been some achievement. Striking downwards hard enough to pierce the enemy's breastplate, using only the arm muscles, must have been practically impossible.

A phalanx battle was a scrum, pure and simple. The side that was bravest and best nourished, and which shoved hardest, won. The other side broke formation and ran—at which point there was room to use weapons, and the fugitives took losses. A wise general didn't let his soldiers pursue too far, however. The phalanx was as simple and as basic as two stags locking antlers.

By modern criteria, it was a wildly inefficient way of waging war. You need a wide, flat plain, and Greece is a country of mountains. It allows very little scope for brilliant, innovative strategy (which seems to have been avoided, if anything; phalanx warfare continued unchanged for nearly 300 years). It's a lousy way of destroying the enemy. The Greeks seemed to

take a perverse pride in making it as inefficient as possible; the overhead spear hold, for example—nearly all other spear and pike formations in history held the spear at or below shoulder height, forming a lethal hedge. Archers, the logical choice in a mountainous country, were regarded as cowardly and unfair, and missile weapons were banned by both sides in the Great Lelantine War, the first ever arms limitation treaty.

Or you could read these drawbacks as advantages. On the winning side, casualties were minimal. A phalanx battle usually produced a clear result, and the Greeks fought to decide specific issues—who owns this disputed stretch of pasture, who gets to extort money from that relatively weak city. Most of all, though, because you couldn't survive in the scrum without heavy armour (you'd be crushed to death), warfare was the monopoly of those citizens who could afford the helmet, breastplate, greaves and shield. Paraphrase that; the rich held the monopoly of force, which, in the fiercely aristocratic city states of ancient and classical Greece, was exactly how it should be.

The Greek panoply, which historians call hoplite armour, was poorly designed for fighting in. The wraparound Corinthian helmet made it hard to see and practically impossible to hear, which ruled out complex manoeuvres. The tight, flanged neck and arm holes of the bell corselet made it difficult and excruciatingly painful to move your arms, bend down or run. What hoplite armour did do was provide a rigid tortoise-shell to protect you from being crushed, while discouraging tactical innovation and pricing the lower classes out of war[1].

[1] The hoplite's rigid bronze body armour (known to military historians as the 'bell corselet') stayed in use for centuries, but was gradually replaced by the linothorax, a form of body armour whose name means 'linen breastplate'. We have pictures of these things, but very little hard data. A recent academic study at the University of Wisconsin concludes that the linothorax was a three-piece breastplate (front-and-back; two shoulder straps) made out of 18+ layers of linen, glued or quilted together, ending up about half an inch thick. The Wisconsin tests suggest that this model would have turned arrows and sword-cuts.

The advantages over the bell corselet are obvious. It's cheaper, which means more people can afford one. It can be made by semi- or unskilled labour; even modern university students can make one. The shoulders move, which means the fighter has a better chance of using his weapons. What it doesn't do is provide a rigid shell to protect you from having your insides squeezed out through

Hoplite armour was very expensive. There was no copper or tin in Greece worth mentioning, so the raw materials had to be imported. Helmet, breastplate-and-backplate and greaves were all exceptionally complex shapes to beat out of sheet bronze, requiring a level of skill in the mystical art of raising[2] that only

your ears in a 10,000 body pileup. It also goes against all the principles I've claimed or will claim for Greek hoplite warfare in this essay.

Consider the context. As far as we can tell, the linothorax comes into general use around the time of the Persian wars. Instead of fighting other Greeks in hoplite formation to settle specific points in a sort of armed referendum, the Greek cities are fighting for their existence against the Persian empire; a different war, against different enemies, with a totally different agenda. Suddenly, there's a strong, unprecedented incentive to innovate, and the stakes had never been higher.

The linothorax appears to have been the dominant form of armour in the Peloponnesian War, the longest and nastiest war in ancient Greek history. During that war, a great deal changed. Basically, the alarming growth and unacceptable behaviour of the Athenian empire so terrified the Spartans that they decided that Athens had to be brought down, and the majority of Greek states outside the Empire agreed with them. This was a very unGreek war—its length, its objectives, its bitterness, the damage and disruption it caused—and during its course the rules changed forever, so that in the final stages, during the Sicilian campaign, light infantry with bows and javelins—the poor, the scum of the earth—were used to pick off, exhaust and harry to death an Athenian hoplite army.

The tactics used against the Athenians in Sicily could have been used at any time in the preceding three centuries. They're not exactly rocket science. To my mind, they were used in Sicily in the same way that nuclear weapons were used against Japan in WW2; because of desperation, moral exhaustion, an overwhelming desire to get the war over with and the unspeakable enemy beaten, even if it meant changing the rules and unleashing a force that could destroy the world, or at least the world as they knew it.

The linothorax, like the Sicilian light infantry, should, in my view, be seen as part of the breakdown and collapse of the unspoken conventions of gentlemanly hoplite warfare, forced on the Greek cities by circumstances—a foreign enemy, followed by an unprecedented domestic 'total war' that proved unwinnable for both sides by conventional means.

[2] Raising is the most useful, and the most difficult, of the armourer's skills. It's used to form a deeply concave shape—a helmet, a breastplate—out of a single sheet of metal. In order to do this, you need to work from the outside of the piece rather than the inside; squashing the metal onto a form rather than stretching it into one. Basically, you hold the sheet against an upright steel stake and make a dent in it with your hammer; then you deepen and widen this dent, making the metal flow like an extremely thick, sluggish liquid, continually turning it, until the sheet sort of flows downwards from the place where you started into the shape you're trying to make.

a few hundred people in the 21st century can emulate. The division between rich-enough-to-serve and too-poor-to-fight was enshrined in law. In Athens, for example, there were rigidly defined property qualifications. If your land produced less than a specified quantity of grain, wine and oil per year, you couldn't vote and you couldn't fight[3].

Consider, by contrast, the Romans; and a remarkable man by the name of Marius. Before his dictatorship, the Roman Republican armies were made up of men rich enough to afford armour, as in Greece. Marius changed all that. He allowed the poor to join up, paid them adequately, provided them with a pension when they retired and issued them with publicly-owned equipment. A generation later, an off-relation of his by the name of Julius Caesar used the Marian army to stage a coup d'etat; his successor, Augustus Caesar, became the first Roman emperor. Under the Empire, the Roman army was supplied by a vast and sophisticated network of arms factories, and industry as we know it was born; mass production of standardised patterns using interchangeable parts. Those factories remained in existence and in production for most of the 1,400 year lifespan of the Empire, and taught the world a lesson in industrialisation it would never forget.

Marius wasn't, of course, the first man to enlist the proletariat into military service. The pharaohs had been doing that 3,000 years before he was born. The world-changing revolution that Marius and his successors brought about was to elevate the poor to the status of heavy infantry; armour-wearers, the soldiers who actually mattered in battle, who decided who

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I can't do this, though God knows, I've tried. I can only do dishing (where you hold the sheet over a hollow scooped out of the top of an oak log and hammer the metal down into it). That's OK. You can make a full suit of armour without knowing how to raise. The Greeks raised all their helmets and probably their bell-corselets too; the Romans didn't bother with it; they could do it in Dark Age Europe, but it seems to have been largely forgotten about in Europe until the 14th century.

[3] An evil genius called Themistocles put an end to all that by turning Athens into a sea power, building ships and enlisting the poor to row them. His excuse was defeating the Persians; the outcome was democracy, followed in short order by ruthless imperialism, the enslavement by Athens of half the Greek world, the Peloponnesian war (qv), the defeat and abject humiliation of the Athenian people and the Macedonian conquest of Greece. But there you go.

would win. It was, arguably, the moment when the State was born; when armed force (on which all political power ultimately depends) first came directly under the control of a government owning and issuing military equipment, rather than relying on the private owners of that equipment doing what was asked of them. In Greece, even warships were privately owned. The Greek army was simply an alternative form of the citizen assembly, which voted for a war, elected a general and marched off to fight. When you look at it from that perspective, no wonder Greek warfare was stylized, fossilized, inefficient and as safe as it could be made to be without depriving it of any meaning.

Roman armour was designed with mass production and ease of maintenance and repair very much in mind. It was also superbly efficient and practical. What we think of as typical Roman body armour—*lorica segmentata*, though they never called it that—consisted of overlapping hoops of iron plate, articulated on leather straps to give the wearer the maximum practical level of mobility consistent with protection. It didn't actually last very long (about 200 years; a mere interlude in the history of the Empire), mostly because the fastenings that held it together were prone to breakage, and because it only protected the torso. Before and after the *lorica segmentata* there was mail; a Celtic invention, enthusiastically adopted by Rome, formed of between ten and fifty thousand iron rings linked together, each ring being closed with a weld or a rivet. Or there was scale, possibly the earliest form of body armour, directly inspired by the scales of fish; small overlapping metal plates laced or riveted to a cloth or leather backing. Later on, when the Roman empire entered its Byzantine phase, it borrowed the concept of lamellar armour from the East. Lamellar is scale, but each small metal plate is pierced with holes top, bottom and sides, and attached by laces to the plates above, below and on either side of it, forming an armour that is both rigid and flexible.

Mail, scale and lamellar are all ideal for the large professional army. They can be made, assembled and maintained by unskilled labour, quite possibly the soldiers themselves. They don't need large pieces of sheet metal, a vital consideration at a time when

sheet was made by men with hammers beating red-hot ingots flat. Mail, worn over heavy padding to provide cushioning, will turn most cuts and some thrusts, though it's not a lot of use against arrows. It's heavy (though you quickly get used to the weight) but so flexible that it hardly impedes movement at all. Scale offers much more protection, isn't much heavier than mail, is more prone to go wrong (laces or rivets come loose) and constricts your movements a bit more; there's also the constant, insufferable *clinking*. Neither mail nor scale protects you all that much from getting crushed, though the padding invariably worn under it would have helped a bit. Lamellar, on the other hand, is semi-rigid. Because of the way the plates overlap, much of your body is protected by two thicknesses of armour, and the lacing acts as a sort of suspension, absorbing shock like the springs of a car. It's very heavy, but the weight is efficiently distributed, so after a while you don't notice it too much. Lamellar was the armour of the Byzantine empire and the Islamic world for most of the Middle Ages, and was worn by the samurai of Japan until they ceased to be relevant in the 19th century[4].

So there are two philosophies of armour, exclusive and inclusive; both pursuing social as well as purely military agendas. The warrior tradition uses armour to promote the position and prestige of the noble individual, and price the common man out of warfare. The soldier tradition supplies armour to the low-class volunteer and the conscript to serve the interests of the state. The warrior wants his armour to be as fine, as well-made, and as expensive as possible. The soldier gets issued with an efficient, cheap and easy-to-make mass-produced pattern,

[4] Lamellar appears to have originated in China around the 3rd century BC; it's worn by the First Emperor's terracotta warriors. In the 13th century, an Italian traveller in Asia wrote this description of Mongol lamellar:

"They make a number of thin iron plates, a finger's breadth wide and a hand's breadth long, piercing eight holes in each plate; as a foundation they put three strong, narrow straps; they then place the plates one on top of the other so that they overlap, and they tie them to the straps by narrow thongs which they thread through the holes; at the top they attach a thong, so that the plates hold together firmly"

With minor variations, all lamellar was made that way, from China to Constantinople, for over a thousand years.

which he can repair and maintain himself. The warriors were responsible for some of the finest examples of engineering and artistry produced in the pre-modern era. In the fifteenth century, there was a keen rivalry between the armourers of Milan and Germany for the custom of the incurably warlike, ridiculously rich European knight. It was a genuine arms race. Milan aimed for elegant functionality (everything we associate today with Italian design, in fact), whereas Germany focused on fluted decoration and the deflective qualities of angled surfaces. Along the way, both schools invented the new concept of research and development; of actively thinking about how to make their product better, rather than simply building it the way it had always been built. The rate of technological advance in 14th and 15th century armour was unprecedented in the history of technology, and not to be repeated until the Industrial Revolution. It was the dawn of deliberate invention, as opposed to happy serendipity. New ways of engineering joints, so that arms and legs could move naturally; designing angled surfaces, so that blows glanced off; heat treatment, to make steel tough and flexible; for the first time, makers of artefacts, spurred on by competition and funded by the bottomless purses of the rich, were thinking of ways to innovate, perfect, or at least sell more units through gimmickry. No other trade called for or rewarded such innovations. It took thousands of years for the pre-Industrial Revolution plough to evolve; it grew like a stalactite, mostly because none of the potential customers had the money to hire someone to design a better version. Helmets, on the other hand, improved dramatically in the comparatively tiny space of time between Crecy and the Wars of the Roses. Thanks to the armour-buying warrior, the age of the better mousetrap had begun[5].

[5] I've wilfully ignored the other fields of endeavour where progress and innovation flourished in the ancient world—shipbuilding and military architecture—because both of these developed in the same way and for roughly the same motives.

I'm lying, by the way, about ploughs, and agricultural equipment in general. Roman aristocrats, owners of vast agricultural estates, were into increased profitability through mechanisation, and were well on the way to inventing the combine harvester. With the fall of the West, however, these advances were quickly forgotten.

On the one hand, standardised, cost-effective mass production; on the other hand, technological innovation and the concept of advancement through design; between them, the two philosophies of armour played a substantial part in creating the phenomenon we know as industry. If you enjoy that sort of thing, you can picture armour-making as the trunk of a tree whose branches hang heavy with cars, machine tools and tumble-driers; the Tree of Progress, whose roots run deep and whose leaves are forever turning towards the sun. Maybe. The historical fact remains that the Roman Empire, whose technological advances were unmatched until the Industrial Revolution, didn't do so well against the primitives and savages surrounding its borders. In the west, the empire fell—not in a blazing orgy of destruction, but a slow decline; the savages took over the Imperial institutions more or less intact, decided they were more hassle than they were worth, and let the grass grow over them. The nobly-born warriors of the empire's Germanic successors preferred an older version of society, in which their supremacy was assured.

The western empire fell because it was rotten inside, not because the Vandals and the Goths were better than the Romans at anything that mattered. Imperial professional soldiers, in mass-produced armour from government factories, could still beat them into a pulp—as the eastern Roman general Belisarius proved, when the eastern emperor Justinian sent him to reconquer Italy, about a century after the Fall. True, Belisarius was a military genius on a par with Hannibal and Napoleon, but the ease with which he crushed the Vandals and the Goths, hopelessly outnumbered, ludicrously ill-supplied and in the face of unrelenting hostility and suspicion from his own government, suggests that Roman soldiers found barbarians as easy to defeat as they had five centuries earlier, when Caesar conquered Gaul. The speed with which Italy was lost again, once Belisarius had gone home, also points to the most important factor in war; the will to fight. It's that, not superiority in arms, training and technique, that wins wars. From the overthrow of the palace kingdoms of the Near East in the 2nd millennium BC

right down to Vietnam and Iraq, the message is painfully clear; if you don't really want to fight, you can't buy victory or even security simply by increasing your defence budget. The chariot-riding archers of the Hittites and the Minoans were wiped out so effectively by primitive but ferocious footsoldiers that their existence was forgotten about for nearly 3,000 years, until archaeologists dug up the ruins of their overthrown cities. Technologically, they were light-years ahead of the Sicilian and Sardinian pirates who trashed their mighty kingdoms; but the savages liked to fight and the city-dwellers had evolved beyond that sort of behaviour. Read Kipling's 'Arithmetic On The Frontier'[6] and go figure.

FOR THIS REASON, rather than any deficiency in hardware, the soldiers of the Roman Empire lost and gave way to barbarian warriors, among whom only the leaders could afford to wear armour; almost exclusively mail. This begs the question of why the barbarians didn't at least copy the superior Imperial patterns—scale and lamellar—even if they didn't keep the captured factories running. As we've seen, scale and lamellar are better at keeping you from getting hurt; they're a bit harder to make, since they call for the use of sheet iron, albeit in small pieces, but the barbarians were perfectly capable of making sheet metal for helmets, and any smith who can draw wire to make mail rings should be able to make small plates. The nomads of the eastern steppes, whose smiths worked by definition on small portable forges, had no trouble making quite sophisticated lamellar armour. The fact remains, though, that scale and lamellar don't show up much in the west between the fall of Rome and the late 13th century; the exception being among the Vikings, whose art occasionally depicts a scale or lamellar wearer, a phenomenon I'd choose to explain by pointing out that the Byzantine emperor's personal guard was traditionally recruited from Vikings, who went to Constantinople to win

[6] The text of which should be tattooed on the face of any western politician advocating getting involved in a land war in Asia.

prestige and bring home wonderful treasures (and to the Vikings, luxury arms and armour were wonderful treasures indeed). My guess is that any scale or lamellar found in Scandinavia in the early middle ages was made in Constantinople and brought back by Guard veterans.

So; they knew about better armour, could have made it, but chose to ignore it. Why would men for whom fighting was a way of life do such a thing? I think the answer must lie in what they believed armour, and war itself, was *for*.

We've seen that the Greeks fought to decide issues, while the Romans fought to conquer, contain and retain an empire. The Germanic tribes of Western Europe fought for other reasons—

*Men die, cattle die; Only the deeds of heroes live for ever*.

That's how the Vikings saw it; and the only heroic deeds worth remembering were war and fighting. They fought for honour—or call it prestige, or acquiring or maintaining a dominant place in society through actions held to be prestigious by their peers; they fought in the same way that movie stars negotiate their pay, not because they need the money but because it's the only real way of keeping score. *They* in this context means the nobility, the ruling elite. It may be hard for us to get our heads around ideas of aristocracy and nobility among fur-clad savages, but barbarian societies were ferociously aristocratic and hierarchical, pyramids of king, great nobles, lesser nobles, rich farmers, poor farmers, nobodies. In materially poor cultures, lacking the palaces, fine tableware and refined manners of the urban Imperials, a member of the elite could really only justify his exalted status by actions, rather than possessions or expenditure. Insofar as they had fine possessions, they had armour and weapons; they also had a deep-rooted tradition of reverence for the past, for tradition itself. The best sword you could own was one that had belonged to a dead hero two hundred years ago; by using his sword, you partook of his deeds, his honour. Accordingly, sword designs don't change much, even when better designs became available[7]. Any sword—or helmet,

[7] There's a justifiable tendency to confuse beautifully-made with efficient. Take, for example, the pattern-welded sword. In the western European dark ages, and

or body armour—that looked different, looked *new*, couldn't be a family heirloom and therefore couldn't be imbued with the honour of one's glorious ancestors. New armour, like new money, simply isn't the same. Accordingly, in the graves of these dead heroes we find arms and armour; beautiful arms, made the hard way and decorated and embellished with exceptional skill and lavish expenditure of precious materials, but not *better* arms. For at least 300 years, until Charlemagne rebooted Rome as the Holy Roman Empire, and Carolingian warriors start wearing a new design of helmet, there is essentially no change in arms, armour or military tactics. When changes do come, it takes a new empire to bring them about; which empire fell apart almost immediately after Charlemagne's death, because nobody else really seemed to want it. The new two-piece helmet died out too, and people went back to the old four-piece design.

It's a case—sorry, but the pun's irresistible—of self-denying ordnance. Greek hoplites created and persevered with military equipment that was (by our standards) inefficient, inconvenient and needlessly overengineered, because it was suitable for what they wanted out of war. They could make highly advanced composite bows when they wanted to, bows every bit as good as the Persians', but they didn't want to, because archery warfare would have changed the rules, spoilt the status quo, ruined everything. The Romans had no such compunction, their agenda

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in medieval Japan, there was precious little high-carbon steel capable of being heat-treated to produce a hard, flexible blade that would (a) cut (b) not snap like a carrot; furthermore, although they could make steel, they didn't understand how they made it. So, to get hardening steel, they went through a complex rigmarole of forge-welding folded strips of different sorts of iron together, a process involving infinite skill and patience, and a side-effect of which was the most exquisite patterns in the finished blade. Pattern-welded swords are inferior to swords made from a single piece of high-carbon steel, and when the latter became freely available, pattern-welding died out in Europe. But not in Japan. There, both the design and the manufacturing process got fossilised in the early Middle ages, and modern Japanese swordsmiths still forgeweld their raw material together out of bits of naturally-occurring carbon steel dredged up from riverbeds. Their products are fine swords, not because the design or the material has any inherent superiority over the alternatives, but because if you've been doing something non-stop for over a thousand years, you get to be pretty good at it—in spite of, rather than because of, the design and the materials.

being so very different; as well as innovating and inventing, they cherry-picked arms and tactics from every nation under the sun, but their successors, the Germanic barbarians, also drew back from progress in military technology, and for the same reason as the Greeks. Mass participation in war by common people in mass-produced armour was the last thing they wanted. It was the exact opposite of what they were fighting for.

We have to fast-forward a long time, from the Fall of Rome to the thirteenth century, before we come to a real change in armour, or attitudes. During that time, the Western European warrior's outfit, consisting of a mailshirt and a simple conical helmet with a nose-guard, usually made of four plates riveted to a frame, hardly changed at all; hemlines rose and fell, as hemlines do, and we start to see a few helmets made from a single sheet of metal, but that was about all, and there's no evidence of technical advance or any desire for it. Then, at the end of the eleventh century, westerners came into violent contact with a richer and vastly more sophisticated culture: Islam.

The First Crusade succeeded mostly through sheer ferocity. European knights, predominantly French and Norman, smashed their way into the Holy Land and took Jerusalem. In every aspect of military technology, from equipment to tactics to logistics, they were hopelessly inferior to their enemies; they succeeded largely through the element of surprise. For four hundred years, with only a few reversals, Islam had had no trouble defeating Christians; it was largely to internal divisions in the Muslim world that Byzantium owed its continued existence. The crusaders were, however, a different sort of Christian entirely. Unlike the Byzantines—it's a sad irony that the most spiritual culture the world has ever known had to spend most of its energy and resources on war—the Crusaders wanted to fight; they were warriors, not soldiers.

A hundred years later, the Christian defenders of the Crusader states weren't warriors any more; they were demoralised, underresourced soldiers defending their homes against a superior enemy whose victory was inevitable. They had a real and urgent incentive to try and improve their arms and armour;

and we begin to see innovations; new helmet designs, defences for legs and arms to supplement the basic mailshirt. Once these changes had become acceptable, it's no surprise that they start appearing back in the old country, where the prestige of the crusaders would have made emulation of their fashions desirable. Whether the improved equipment prompted increased interest in the chivalric games of the tournament—better armour made jousting safer, so it became more popular—or whether a demand for better jousting gear led to improvements, we can only guess; in any event, supplementary defences for the body, to protect against the horseman's lance, begin to show up by the end of the thirteenth century.

The mailshirt, even worn over padding, was quite inadequate against the lance. Consider the physics of a galloping knight; three quarters of a ton of horse at thirty miles an hour propelling a needle-sharp point against a target of similar weight moving towards it at similar speed. It's the doubling effect of the joust that introduces a level of danger never previously experienced; nothing had ever hit that hard before, and something had to be done.

*Something* took the form of iron plates, sewn inside a cloth or leather jerkin and worn over the mailshirt. Known as the coat or pair of plates (really fancy versions made of hundreds or thousands of small scales sewn into velvet were called brigandines), this essentially makeshift reinvention of 3,000-year-old scale armour was considered entirely adequate until the next disaster happened; the ascendency of the bow.

READ MOST MODERN histories of medieval warfare, and you'd be left with the impression that the English yew longbow was a dramatic, game-changing innovation. Not so. It's not even a particularly good bow, compared with other contemporary designs—its D-shaped section is inefficient, meaning that less of the energy expended in drawing it is converted into arrow velocity than with, say, a rectangular-section flatbow; it's made of solid wood, and therefore can't compete with the exquisite,

difficult-and-expensive-to-make composite bows (horn, wood and sinew) used since antiquity by the Greeks, the Romans and the medieval world east of the Balkans. It wasn't even particularly new; the same design and material was used by the Vikings, and very similar bows made by prehistoric cavemen have been fished out of peat bogs. In any event, no longbow capable of being drawn by a human being can shoot an arrow as fast or as hard as the high-powered crossbows used throughout Europe since the twelfth century.

The English longbow wasn't an outstanding weapon, but it was relatively cheap and easy to make, and it was used by special men. The archers who fought at Crecy, Sluys and Poitiers were extremely strong and very highly trained. It's unlikely that they were marksmen, like the Genoese crossbowmen[8]; they'd been trained to shoot volleys, to get as many fast-moving heavy arrows in the air as possible in the shortest possible time. In modern terms, they were machine-guns.

And they could shoot through armour. There's a lively debate about whether the coats of plates worn by the French nobility could turn the heavy ash-shafted, bodkin-headed English arrows shot from 100-pound draw-weight yew longbows; on the balance of probabilities, it seems like they could, but that still left a lot of the body protected by nothing but mail and padding. Therefore, as a matter of urgency, fourteenth-century armourers turned their attention to finding a way of covering all the other bits with iron plate, in a way that meant the wearer could still move and breathe. A great deal was at stake here; nothing less than the survival of the nobility, the warrior class.

There were an awful lot of noblemen in France in the fourteenth century; a whole army of them, literally. The fact that the French army at Agincourt in 1415 was still based around a substantial core of aristocratic horsemen, in spite of the horrendous losses sustained by that class at Crecy and Poitiers

[8] Genoa produced the best crossbowmen, and they were very good indeed. They were not, however, used in the field to mow down armoured knights, even though they'd have been perfectly capable of doing so. They were, after all, mercenaries, and armoured knights were paying their wages. Crossbows were mainly used in siege warfare, where the rules and conventions were quite different.

(not to mention the Black Death and other unpleasantnesses) shows just how many of them there were. The Hundred Years War was, quite literally, a class war; French nobility against the English middle class. By the time of Agincourt, coats of plates were widely supplemented with articulated arm and leg armour that covered a man literally from head to toe (the bits for the feet were called *sabatons*). The particular circumstances of that battle (lost by the French, not won by the English) make it hard to pontificate about whether the armourers had done the job they'd been asked to do; in the later stages of the war, however, particularly once the Milanese armourers had started heat-treating high-carbon steel to make it harder and tougher, it was clear that armour was capable of seeing off the long-bow. It was a short and hollow victory. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, knights in shining armour found themselves facing massed matchlock muskets, and the age of armour was drawing to a close.

For a while, though, the European knight was confronted with a wonderful, tantalising possibility; armour so good, so comprehensive[9], that it would be proof against *anything*. Wearing it, provided you were enormously strong and wonderfully fit, you *couldn't be killed*. It was the apotheosis of the noble warrior; invulnerability, hitherto the exclusive preserve of Achilles and Siegfried, was now readily available at an armourer's near you, always provided you had the money to pay for it. For a decade or so, it looked as though the warriors would be vindicated, after three thousand years of murderous debate, going right back to the Lelantine War treaty outlawing the use of missile weapons. That approach had never worked and never will; but the armourers had succeeded in rendering the arrow, and therefore by implication the lower-class soldier, obsolete. Nobody, not even a fellow noble, could kill a knight, unless he did something stupid (like getting off his horse and charging

[9] It really was that good. When NASA was trying to figure out how to articulate a space suit, to be worn on the Moon, one of their principal sources of inspiration was a suit of armour made for Henry VIII. This extraordinary outfit covered every inch of the royal body (and there was an awful lot of it to cover) while allowing practically unimpeded movement.

the enemy across a quagmire, as at Agincourt), or unless God willed it. It's heartbreaking to think that this dream, in pursuit of which so much blood had been spilt and so much money spent, should have been rudely shattered by the perversion of Chinese firework powder.

SIR THOMAS MALORY'S *Morte Darthur* is a glorious evocation of what might have been. About three-quarters of the book is blow-by-blow accounts of imaginary tournaments, really fine sports journalism. Wonderful knights knock each other off their horses, beat each other insensible with swords, are set upon by twenty enemies simultaneously and still prevail; and (provided they've got their armour on) nobody gets killed or maimed or seriously inconvenienced; the most debilitating injury Lancelot suffers is when he's accidentally shot in the arse by a lady archer.

Malory lived during the last, brightest blaze of glory of the noble warrior. In his day, armour was better than it ever had been, or would be again, and noble warriors were fighting the Wars of the Roses, the last self-destructive gasp of the independent barons before the Tudor monarchy sorted out the over-mighty aristocracy once and for all and established a modern state protected by gunpowder and low-class professional sailors. You can tell from the way he writes that he knows it's all a fantasy, even though he desperately yearns for the values and certainties of the imaginary world he claims as history. Malory gave us the image of the knight in shining armour, of Lancelot, able to prevail over any earthly danger provided his cause is just, whose function is to protect the weak against the strong and pursue the Holy Grail of spiritual perfection. There never was such a creature[10] but modern palaeontologists

[10] Indeed. But there's a tendency these days to dismiss the medieval knight as a steel-clad thug, which may not be entirely fair. If taste in music is any sort of index of civilisation, the 12th century patrons of the troubadours and trouveres were civilised men. Knights could be poets and composers; as witness Jaufre de Rudel and William X of Aquitaine, examples of whose exquisite work is among the heartbreakingly small body of medieval music that has survived. Richard

can nevertheless examine his fossilised remains, his steel shell which remains after his imperfect flesh has long since rotted away. The evolution of that shell doesn't obey the usual Darwinian rules; in a sense, the evolution of armour is the survival of the unfittest, because the Gothic and Vandalic chieftains didn't want to evolve into the most efficient killers they could possibly be. Instead—according to their own values, which aren't ours—they wanted to be the best men they could be; brave fighters, superior to those who depended on them, men of honour. Laugh all you like; call them Klingons, and charge them with an impressive catalogue of crimes against humanity, including all the customary offences of the rich against the poor, the proud against the humble. But then you might care to consider the things that have been done since, by standing and conscripted armies serving duly elected governments, by soldiers, at the taxpayers' expense; at which point you might start to wonder if the rich men who wanted to lock antlers and not get killed were quite so misguided after all.

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the Lion-heart, rightly condemned as a lousy king, could play all the musical instruments in use at the time.

# The Sun And I

*I mean to rule the earth, as He the sky;*
*We really know our worth, the Sun and I*
—W. S. Gilbert

"We could always invent God," I suggested.

We'd pooled our money. It lay on the table in front of us; forty of those sad, ridiculous little copper coins we used back then, the wartime emergency issue—horrible things, punched out of flattened copper pipe and stamped with tiny stick-men purporting to be the Emperor and various legendary heroes; the worse the quality of the die-sinking became, the more grandiose the subject matter. Forty trachy in those days bought you a quart of pickle-grade domestic red. It meant we had no money for food, but at that precise moment we weren't hungry. "What do you mean?" Teuta asked.

"I mean," I said, "we could pretend that God came to us in a dream, urging us to go forth and preach His holy word. Fine," I added, "it's still basically just begging, but it's begging with a hook. You give money to a holy man, he intercedes for your soul, you get something back. Also," I added, as Accila pursed his lips in that really annoying way, "it helps overcome the credibility issues we always face when we beg. You know, the College accents, the perfect teeth."

"How so?" Razo asked.

"Well," I said—I was in one of my brilliant moods, when I have answers for every damn thing; it's as though some higher power possesses me and speaks through me—"it's an established trope, right? Wealthy, well-born young man gets religion, he gives everything he owns to the poor, goes out and preaches the word. He survives on the charity of the faithful, such charity being implicitly accepted as, in and of itself, an act of religion entitling the performer to merit in heaven."

Accila was doing his academic frown, painstakingly copied from a succession of expensive tutors. "I don't think we can say we gave all our money to the poor," he said. "In my case, most of the innkeepers, pimps and bookmakers I shared my inheritance with were reasonably prosperous. Giving away all our money to the comfortably off doesn't have quite the same ring."

I smiled. Accila had made his joke, and would now be quite happy for a minute or so. "Well?" I said. "Better ideas, anyone?"

"I still think we should be war veterans," Teuta said stubbornly. "I used to see this actress, and she showed me how to do the most appalling-looking scars with red lead and pig-fat. People love war veterans."

I had an invincible argument. "Have we got any red lead? Can we afford to buy any? Well, then."

Accila lifted the wine-jar. The expression on his face told me that it had become ominously light. We looked at each other. This was clearly an emergency, and something had to be done. The only something on offer was my proposal. Therefore—

"All right," Teuta said warily. "But let's not go rushing into this all half-baked. You said, invent God. So—" Teuta shrugged. "For a start, which god did you have in mind?"

"Oh, a new one." Not sure to this day why I said that with such determined certainty. "People are hacked off with all the old ones. You ask my uncle the archdeacon about attendances in Temple."

"Precisely," Razo said. "The public have lost interest in religion. We live in an enlightened age. Therefore, your idea is no bloody good."

I knew he'd be trouble. "The public have lost interest in the established religions," I said. "They view them, quite rightly, as corrupt and discredited. Therefore, given Mankind's desperate need to believe in something, the time is absolutely right for a new religion; tailored," I went on, as the brilliance filled me like an inner light, "precisely to the needs and expectations of the customer. That's where all the old religions screwed up, you see; they weren't planned or custom-fitted, they just sort of grew. They didn't relate to what people really wanted. They were crude and full of doctrinal inconsistencies. They involved worshipping trees, which no rational man can bring himself to do after the age of seven. We, on the other hand, have the opportunity to create the *perfect* religion, one which will satisfy the demands of every class, taste and demographic. It's the difference between making a chair and waiting for a clump of branches to grow into a sort of chair shape."

"Not sure about that," said Zanipulus; his first contribution to the discussion, since he'd been clipping his toenails and had needed to concentrate. "You walk around telling people that Bong just appeared to you in a dream. They give you a funny look and say, who's Bong when he's at home?" He sniffed; he had a cold. "There's no point of immediate engagement, is what I'm saying. You need that instant of irresistible connection—"

"Of course." A tiny sunrise in the back of my head produced enough light for me suddenly to see clearly. "That's why this idea of mine is so absolutely bloody inspired. Of course we can't expect customers to believe in some nebulous entity that nobody's ever heard of. We need to create a deity that everyone can see, plain as the noses on their faces, every day of their lives."

Silence, which I allowed to continue for a moment or so, during which Razo dribbled the last few drops out of the jar into his cup; drip-drip-drip. "Well?" Accila said.

"Simple," I told him. "We worship the sun."

Razo yawned. "Been done," he said. "To death, in fact. If you'd been to Cartimagus' lectures on recurring motifs in late

Mannerist epic, you'd know that practically every hero in legend is your basic solar metaphor."

"Sure," I said. He was starting to annoy me. "But not the big shiny yellow disc *per se*. I'm talking about the Sun with a capital S. One single supreme deity; no pantheon, no bureaucracy, no waiting. Someone you can look in the eye and talk to directly, man to God—"

"Wouldn't do that if I were you," Zanipulus said with his mouth full. Apparently the treacherous bastard had a private reserve of cashew nuts he hadn't seen fit to declare to the rest of the Commonwealth. "Makes you go blind."

"Metaphorically speaking. Come on, you know I'm right. That's why the old religions fell apart, too many gods, too damn *fussy*. The old thing about government by committee. One god, it's like monarchy, it's the only way to get things done."

"The Divine Sun," Accila said thoughtfully. "You know, he might just have something."

"Not the Divine Sun," Teuta said. "No buzz. No snap. Also, there's the redundancy. What's the leading characteristic of our god? That he's divine. Yawn."

"All right," Accila said. "So, right now, what do people really want? Apart," he added, "from money."

"Peace," said Zanipulus. "An end to the war. That's a no-brainer."

The word sort of catapulted itself into my mouth. "The Invincible Sun," I said. "Well, how about it?"

Razo wiped his mouth. "Actually," he said, "that's not bad."

"It's magnificent," I said. "Implied promise of victory followed by a sustained peace."

"Which isn't going to happen any time soon," Zanipulus pointed out.

"No," I rounded on him, "because Mankind is sinful and refuses to follow the path laid out for it by the Invincible Sun. As disclosed," I went on, "by His true prophets. Us."

Another silence. Then Razo said, "We'll need a list of thou-shalt-nots. People like those."

"And observances," said Accila. "Top of the list, I would suggest, should be giving generously to the poor. Instant merit for doing that."

Pause. They were looking at Zanipulus, which offended me rather. Just because he doesn't say much, people think he's smart. Whereas I talk all the time, and you just have to listen to me for two seconds to realise how very clever I am. "Well," Zanipulus said, "it's got to be better than war veterans. For a start, there's too many of the real thing."

At that moment, in the brief silence after those words were spoken, I believe that the Invincible Sun was born. And why not? After all, everything has to start somewhere.

IT WAS A real stroke of luck that general Mardonius contrived to wipe out the whole of the Herulian Fifth army at the battle of Ciota ten days after we took to the streets to preach the gospel of the Invincible Sun. I'm not inclined to give Mardonius all the credit for our success. Obviously we'd made some impression over the preceding nine days, or nobody at all would've known who we were, and nobody would've made the association between the latest street religion and the entirely unexpected, heaven-sent victory. We were helped enormously by the coincidence that one of us—I think it was me, but it's so long ago I can't be sure—had been predicting a mighty victory for the forces of light on the ninth day of Feralia, which just happened to be the day when the news of Ciota reached the city. Not, please note, the day of the battle itself; fortunately, nobody pointed that out at the time. Anyhow, that was our breakout moment. We were the crazy street preachers who'd predicted Ciota; and there's a weird sort of pseudo-logic that operates in people's minds. If you predict something, in some way or another you're responsible for it, you made it happen. Suddenly, out of (no pun intended) a clear blue sky, the Invincible Sun was a contender.

Forgive me, I'm forgetting my manners. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Eps. At least, that's what it was then, before we started the whole names-in-religion thing, which we did basically so as to protect our real identities in the event that we made ourselves unpopular with the authorities and had to retire prematurely from the theology business. Of course, if you're a cleric or come from a clerical family, the irony of the name I was born with won't have been lost on you; *eps* is now, has become, the recognised shortening for *episcopus*, which is the word for high priest in Old Aelian, which we chose, more or less at random, as the language in which we were going to write our holy scriptures. Which would've made me Eps *eps* on official documents; quite, except that I adopted the name-in-religion Deodatus (yes, *the* Deodatus; that's me) some time before we decided on Old Aelian. For what it's worth, Eps is a traditional and not uncommon name on Scona, where my family originally came from. It means, so I'm told, *the chosen one*.

And, I have to confess, I enjoyed preaching. At first, of course, it was horrendously scary and embarrassing. Nothing in my sheltered, privileged life had prepared me for opening my mouth in a public place and ranting at strangers. I managed to get over that by pretending I was doing something else; acting in a play, shouting to someone I knew on the far side of the square who happened to be invisible to everyone else. That worked surprisingly well; but the breakthrough came when I learned to convince myself that it wasn't actually me doing this extraordinary thing. Instead (I pretended) some irresistible force had taken over my body and was using my lungs and lips. After that, it was no problem at all. And, as I said just now, I started to like it.

In fact, I was far and away our best preacher, which was probably just as well. The other four all had skills and talents that were invaluable to the project. All I could claim to justify my involvement, and my share of the take, was that it had been my idea in the first place. That was starting to wear a bit thin when I discovered my latent talent for religious oratory; and, since the others could do it but hated it, I quickly assumed the role of Chief Celebrant.

What skills and talents? Well, Accila was our scholar, though you wouldn't have thought it to look at him. Nevertheless, he actually did know his stuff. Before he was slung out of the Studium for gross moral turpitude, he'd been a rising star in the faculties of Literature and Logic, with four published dissertations on suitably obscure cruces in suitably obscure texts under his belt—not bad for a young man of twenty-four. Teuta was our scribe and copyist. He'd parted company from the Golden Spire after a spot inventory revealed the absence of some two dozen manuscripts. Teuta pointed out at the hearing that he'd had no intention of stealing them. He honestly and sincerely intended to put them back where he'd found them, once he'd finished making perfect copies to sell to wealthy Mezentines. That was a tactical error on his part, since theft is a civil crime, for which he could've claimed benefit of clergy, whereas forgery of sacred manuscripts is an ecclesiastical felony. Teuta accordingly spent two years in the penal monastery at Andrapoda, a section of his life he can never be induced to talk about. Razo was our poet; and before you say anything, yes, a poet is essential if you're in the synthetic religion business. Religious poetry doesn't have to be good, but it does have to be poetry, and the rest of us couldn't scan a hendecasyllable or insert a caesura in a trochaic hexameter if our lives depended on it. So: Razo wrote the holy scriptures, with Accila telling him what sort of thing he ought to include, and Teuta wrote them out in impeccably authentic Fourth Century hieratic-demotic script on three hundred year old property title deeds, which he stole (from the law office where he did

copying work) and scraped down with pumice. The end result of their labours was the Book of the Sun—a working title that got overtaken by events; we were expounding the damn thing in Cornmarket before we'd had a chance to think of a better one, and then of course it was too late; seventy closely-written, unimpeachably genuine pages of three-hundred-year old revelations of the divine that no scholar has ever been able to fault. Actually, that's a terrible indictment of modern scholarship, since Teuta admitted he'd made a mistake—something to do with a shade of blue he used for an illuminated capital which wasn't invented until fifty years later. Still, he was in a hurry, and the powdered oyster-shell he should have used was five tremisses for a tiny little jar, and at that stage we didn't have five tremisses.

And Zanipulus; well, he was in fact our star performer. Zanipulus' father was a seriously wealthy and respectable man; councilman for a fashionable City ward, followed by a seat in the House, followed by the tribunate and two terms as assistant prefect for roads and waterways. How he found time, with all that on his plate, to indulge in the study of arcane and forbidden arts, I simply don't know; but he did, and they found him out, and that was the end of him and the family fortune, which was confiscated and awarded to the informer who nailed him. What he'd been doing, it turned out, was researching and inventing new medicines, building on the work of the Mezentines (it's perfectly legal over there). Zanipulus didn't get on very well with his father when he was young; it was the old man's brilliant idea that they should work together on the research, so as to have something in common which would draw them closer together. It didn't, as it happened; but Zanipulus found the alchemy stuff quite fascinating, and the fact that it was illegal appealed to the perverse side of his nature, so that when they carted the old man off to the scaffold, Zanipulus resolved to continue his work as a gesture of defiance against the authorities, and because he reckoned he was really close to some breakthrough or other, and couldn't bear to see all that work go to waste.

Since we seem to be doing biographies, I might as well append mine. My great-grandfather was a shipowner on Scona. He made a good deal of money shipping tar and bitumen, which just sort of bubbles up out of the ground out there—you go along with barrels and just scoop it up, and suddenly you've got a valuable commodity for which foreigners will pay money. Anyway, his son, my grandfather, wasn't keen on the bitumen trade—brought him out in a rash, my father told me—so he branched out into general trading, did so well at it that he moved here, to the City, and quickly became significantly rich. Sadly, my father had two unfortunate defects when it came to commerce; he was no good at it, and he didn't realise he was no good at it. The truth only finally sank in when the bailiffs came round and took away our remaining furniture in a small cart, about six months before this story begins. My father died in debtors' prison two months after the business failed. I have no idea where my mother is; when the bailiffs came she announced that she'd had enough and was going home to Scona. I imagine she's still there, and good luck to her.

Anyway, that was us. Between us, we had what Teuta got paid by the lawyers, plus what we could get by begging and very small-scale confidence tricks. We hadn't been caught yet, but we knew it was just a matter of time. Accordingly, when the Invincible Sun called us to His ministry, we had no hesitation. That or poverty and starvation, followed by a long career in rock-splitting in the slate quarries. Hallelujah.

I KNOW IT sounds really horrible, but the outbreak of mountain fever was a real slice of luck. Even back then, it wasn't necessarily a death sentence. About four victims in ten made it—not wonderful odds, but good enough to keep you from simply turning your face to the wall as soon as the symptoms became unambiguous. At the time, though, we thought it was a damned nuisance,

possibly enough to put us out of business if we couldn't cure it, which of course we couldn't.

The epidemic started when we'd been going for about six weeks, about a fortnight after the victory at Ciota got us noticed. By then we had premises; actually, a derelict lime kiln on the edge of town, where the North Road branches off from Underway. Not a bad place, in fact; the acoustics in a lime kiln are really rather good, and we got it for practically nothing. Anyway, the fever hadn't been on for more than a day or two when people started turning up on our doorstep, visibly sick, expecting us to cure them. Razo took one look at them and bolted into the back room with his face muffled up in the hem of his cloak. Zanipulus told him not to be so stupid, you don't catch mountain fever like that, but Razo wasn't taking any chances. The pitiful moaning was starting to get on our nerves, so I went outside and did my best.

I felt awful. It's one thing handing out imaginary absolution in return for a sprinkling of low-value copper; quite another confronting a dying man and pretending that you can make him well again. People knew us by then, so they had their money ready. They were lying there, where their families had left them, reaching out to me with hands clenched around fistfuls of coins. I couldn't bring myself to take them. This surprised and annoyed the customers—sorry, the sick and the dying; not customers, not in that state—they wanted to know why I wasn't prepared to intercede for them, as we were always promising to do. Some of them managed to struggle to their feet and lunge at me, trying to stuff money into my pockets or down my shirt. I managed not to panic. I said, of course I'll intercede for you, and this time no payment is necessary. They didn't like that. I guess I'd done my job too well. It was a fundamental tenet of the faith, as I'd been preaching it, that no prayer is audible to Him unless accompanied by clinking money. When I contradicted myself so blatantly, they didn't believe me. Take the money, Father, please (I don't know where *father* came from; they started calling me that at some point,

and it sort of stuck)—what could I do? I had the feeling that if I didn't take money off them, I'd be lucky to get out of there in one piece. What made it worse was the amounts. Typical. For their immortal souls, the most they were usually prepared to give was ten trachy, fifteen if they were being eaten alive by guilt and remorse. For their bodies, they were desperate to give me forty, fifty, sixty; fat pouches the size of cooking apples, and there was a terrified old woman who pleaded with me to accept a whole tremissis, your actual silver. I said the usual garbage—I have asked the Invincible Sun to consider your case; if you have truly repented and your sins have been forgiven, your prayers will be answered—then backed away, clanking slightly under the weight of all that coinage, and bolted.

"You aren't taking money off them, are you?" Accila said. "That's sick."

"They're insisting," I tried to explain, but he just gave me that look.

"I guess we brought it on ourselves," Teuta said, helping me with the money before it burst its banks and flooded the building. "We made the poor devils believe, so what did we expect?"

"I guess this is the end of the line," Razo said gloomily. "Soon as they realise we can't cure them, that'll be it, we'll be out of business. Just our bloody luck."

I noticed that Zanipulus wasn't there. "Anyway," I said. "I'm not going out there again. It's definitely someone else's turn."

Nobody was prepared to face the devoted mob, so we shot the bolts and hunkered down, from time to time peering out of the narrow slit of a street-front window to see if they were still there. Oh yes. In fact, the numbers grew, until the kettle-hats came and moved them on for obstructing the traffic. An hour later they were back; in the meantime, I'd scribbled a note to the effect that we were engaged in holy rituals of intercession and were not to be disturbed, and nailed it to the door. I hoped that'd induce them to go away, but no chance. They settled down, in heartbreaking silence, and waited.

About mid-afternoon, Teuta went to peer through the slit and called out, "There's someone out there, walking up and down."

"There's about six hundred people out there," I told him. "Come away from the window before they see you."

"It's Zanipulus. He's giving them soup."

I shrugged. Guilt takes people different ways. "Fine," I said. "So long as he's paying for it, let him."

"That's a really bad precedent." Accila was sorting the coins into little towers. "Give them soup once, they'll come to expect it."

"Those poor bastards will all be dead inside a week," I growled. "Don't worry about it."

Accila was all set to give Zanipulus a piece of his mind when he saw him next, but Zan didn't show up next morning. Probably just as well; we still hadn't opened the door. When I peeked out just before dawn, there was a huge mob of them out there. Different ones, though; yesterday's crowd had gone home and been replaced by an even larger one. I wasn't sure what to make of that.

Just before midday, Zanipulus arrived and started doling out yet more soup. I watched him carefully. He had a big copper basin and a brass ladle, and everybody got two mouthfuls. If that was supposed to be a meal, it was a pretty sparse one. Then I realised. Not soup; medicine.

Teuta was livid. "He can't go trying out his stupid potions on real people," he said, "even if they are sick. Suppose he poisons someone and they die. That could mean our necks."

I was watching the crowd. "Fine," I said. "You go out there and tell him."

"You go. You're the figurehead."

"No chance. They'd tear me to pieces. Whatever Zan thinks he's doing, it's going down really well."

There was, it turned out, a reason for that. The stuff he gave them worked. Later he explained that mountain fever was one of the family of diseases his father had been studying; as soon as he saw a crowd of victims assembled in one place, he'd

scooted home, cooked up a big batch of the recipe (he had all the ingredients—mouldy bread, for crying out loud, and garlic juice—ready for just such an eventuality) and rushed over to try it out. He'd told them it was a gift from the Invincible Sun that would purge away their sins and leave them whole, and they swallowed it, literally and figuratively. And, would you believe, it actually worked. Twelve hours later, the symptoms started to fade; six doses of the stuff and you were right as ninepence. It was, Razo said, a miracle.

"No it bloody well wasn't," Zanipulus replied angrily. "It was thirty years of painstaking research by a better man than you'll ever be, so shut your face before I shut it for you."

Accila cleared his throat meaningfully—he's six feet six and built like a carthorse, so he was our Justice of the Peace. "Actually, Zan," he said, "you want to be a bit careful, bearing in mind what happened to your dad. If word gets about that his son's handing out miracle cures for the fever, you'll have the kettlehats after you. One martyr in the family is quite enough, I've always thought. Two in two generations is just showing off."

I guess that must've sunk in, because after a medium-length sulk, Zanipulus came sidling round us and asked if we wouldn't mind handing out the rest of the magic goo, spiced up with some religious stuff to distract attention from the medicine side of things. Well, we couldn't refuse, because there were thousands of the poor devils out there by then; so we let him out the back way, to go down to the bakers' scrounging for mouldy bread, while we knocked up a quick liturgy for the healing of the sick.

Muggins here got elected to perform it. Luckily I'm a quick learner. I was word perfect by the time we opened the door and processed out in our vestments (three tremisses for a big wicker hamper of surplus costumes from the Theatre; stank of moth and mildew, but washed up well). I did the words, the other three did the soup. We ran out twice, but fortunately Zan was back with all the stale bread he could carry, and was cooking up a storm in the back room. By nightfall we were all absolutely shattered, and

we'd burnt a month's charcoal in a day. We also took three hundred tremisses, nearly all in small change—we had to take it to the moneychangers in herring-barrels. Oh, and we cured the fever epidemic and saved something like two thousand lives. Just us.

And pretty smug about it we were too, as you can imagine. It was the ascent to the next level we'd been praying for (so to speak), it was handed to us on a plate and it worked better than we could possibly have hoped for. Because of it, we made the jump from just-another-street-cult to serious mainstream religion in the course of a week. And, let's not forget, we took a great deal of money. Vast amounts of money. Almost enough.

Almost. None of us had said anything out loud, but the unspoken agreement had been; if this thing really takes off, we'll run it until we've each got enough for a stake, the money we'd need to buy into some good, solid, reliable business, retire and be comfortable for life. That moment had very nearly come, but not quite. We counted it, and counted it again, and once more for luck. Split five ways, three hundred and twenty tremisses each. For which, in those days, you could buy a small farm or an established trade (but none of us wanted to be a cooper or a bootmaker) or four carts or a sixteenth share in a ship—a living, in other words, but lower middle class at the very best. That wasn't quite enough, as far as we were concerned. We'd rather set our hearts on being gentlemen, for which we needed another one-seven-five each, minimum. We counted the fever takings one more time, and decide we were still in the faith business.

We expected that, once the mountain fever was over, things would quieten down. Not so. We were now established as the go-to faith for healing the sick, and that was a real headache.

Mountain fever was one thing; we had the recipe for that, but not for the million-and-one other horrible things that people waste away and die from. No way, of course, that we could explain that to the faithful; so we had to carry on, do the three services a day, and hope that in due course we'd become discredited and forgotten about (but not, hopefully, before we'd scooped in that extra one-seven-five a head).

And wasn't that the weirdest thing. We sang our psalms and intoned our meaningless prayers to our home-made god and ladled out our thin gruel of flour, water and rock salt, guaranteed no medicinal value whatsoever; and still they came, and still they got better. It was embarrassing. Recovered patients turned up, completely unsolicited, and told the crowd at our door that the Invincible Sun had cured them of this or that revolting disease, and that they should all have faith, give generously and believe. If I hadn't known the truth, I'd have been convinced the whole thing was a fix and the happy beneficiaries of divine clemency were out-of-work actors we'd hired for thirty trachy a day in the Horsefair. Thousands of my fellow-citizens, however, weren't so sceptical. They came, limping and groaning and seeping pus; they listened, they prayed; they got better.

Zanipulus told us that such things had been known. Some Mezentine once did an experiment with a load of sick people; he gave half of them proper medicine and the rest of them some old rubbish, told them all it was the real stuff; of the half who got the rubbish, something like a fifth of them got well anyway. Well, fine; goes to show how gullible people really are. The thing was, the number of sick people apparently cured by us—by me, since the other four just handed out the wallpaper paste—was far more than in the Mezentine's experiment. Furthermore, I'm not just talking about coughs and snuffles here. Genuine serious illnesses, the sort that kill you dead; we were curing those, with a success ratio of something like two-to-one.

"I'VE HAD ENOUGH of this," Razo announced. It was the day after he'd cured a leper. The experience had left him badly shaken. "It's getting crazy and out of hand. I vote that we quit the business, divide up the proceeds and go our separate ways."

Two days previously, Accila, in his capacity as treasurer, had announced that he was switching his basis of account from silver to gold. That was when there were a hundred and six silver tremisses to the gold stamen. The net, he then informed us, stood at four hundred and ninety stamina; just ten more to go and the arithmetic would be really straightforward.

"We can't," Teuta replied with his mouth full. "It's gone too far. They know our names. We're respectable. For crying out loud, we had the Secretary of War in here yesterday."

"We wouldn't be able to stay in the City, agreed," Razo said. "So what? The world's a big place, especially if you've got a hundred stamina in your pocket. We could go anywhere."

"I'm not sure I want to give up," Teuta said. "Whatever the hell it is we're doing, it seems like it's working. And I like having Cabinet ministers calling me your Grace. It sort of makes up for some of the other stuff, if you see what I mean." He yawned, and swung round in his chair. "Zan? What do you think?"

Zanipulus shrugged. "I agree, it makes a pleasant change being respectable, and the money's nice. And I don't think for one moment it'll last forever. Sooner or later this weird run of luck's going to peter out, people will stop curing themselves and saying it was us, and the whole thing will grind to a halt. Until then, I say we carry on milking it for everything we can. You only get something like this once in a lifetime. And it's not like any of us have any other means of making a living."

Nobody, please note, seemed interested in what I'd got to say. My own fault, I guess. I'd spoken inadvisably a couple of times, and my opinion was no longer welcome. I gave it anyway.

"I vote we carry on," I said. "Yes, we're making money. We're also healing the sick. Don't pull faces, Razo, you'll stick like it. We're healing the sick, or they're healing themselves because of

us, makes no real difference. What matters is, it's *happening*. If we give up now—"

"Don't start," Teuta said ominously.

"Too late," I shouted, and they all looked at me. "For pity's sake," I said, "can't you see it? We've started something here. People believe in us. They believe so strongly that they're curing themselves, like in that Mezentine's experiment. Zan, you're a scientist, aren't you just the tiniest bit curious? It's an extraordinary thing."

"No kidding," Zanipulus said. "For one thing, it's not possible. Therefore, it scares me. However—"

"Impossible's just a way of saying we haven't figured out how it works yet," I snapped at him. "You should be ashamed of yourself. For crying out loud, Zan, you cured the mountain fever, you saved hundreds, thousands of lives. It's what your father died for. Doesn't that mean more to you than just money?"

"I proved that dad's idea worked," Zanipulus said. "That's all I wanted to do. Other people's problems are not my concern."

"You know what," Teuta said. "He's got religion. He's starting to believe his own bullshit."

"You're all mad," Razo said. "We should pack it in now, before we get ourselves in deep trouble."

"One against four," Accila said. "We keep going. After all," he added, in a soothing voice that made me want to scream, "it's not going to last for ever."

RAZO'S ATTEMPT TO kill the new religion was completely stupid and half-baked, exactly what anyone who knew him as well as we did would have expected. Three days later, at the end of morning prayers, he suddenly turned round, faced the crowd and called out, "The world will end at noon on the fourth of Vectigalia. You have been warned. Goodbye." Then he walked

past us very quickly into the Temple, ran upstairs and locked himself in the strongroom.

We only just made it back inside ourselves—we'd moved, by the way, from the old lime kiln to what's now the Silver Star in Westponds—and bolted the door and put the bars up. There was total chaos outside. Teuta was all for bashing the strongroom door down and cutting Razo's throat; he and Zanipulus got hold of the long oak table in the exchequer room and tried to use it as a battering ram, but our strongroom was strong—we kept huge sums of money in there—and after a few minutes they gave up. Razo came out eventually. We just ignored him.

The kettlehats came and broke up the riot. We were given an armed guard, two companies of regulars in shiny breastplates. Once the streets were quiet and they'd dragged away the bodies (three dead, fourteen badly injured) the guard captain came inside to tell us it was all right and his men would be staying there for the next three days, until the fourth.

"Is it true?" he asked, in a quiet, terrified voice. "Is the world really about to end?"

I took charge. "Bless you, my son," I said. He was at least ten years older than me. The father thing is something I'll never get used to. "Are you a member of our congregation?"

The captain hesitated, then nodded shyly.

"Have faith," I said. "The world as we know it will end. The new world will begin. For those who have faith, this is a time of joy."

I'd said the right thing. He gave me a huge, childlike smile, saluted and went away. "Nicely done," Zanipulus said, with grudging admiration. "We may get out of this after all."

THERE HAD, OF course, been total eclipses of the sun before. Anaximander records one, in dry, impersonal detail, back in the second century; he watched the whole thing, making careful

notes, and the last line of his account—*thereafter, I became blind*—is one of the most poignant lines in scientific literature. There have been others, though the only trace they've left is their imprint in various mythologies, vague and unsatisfactory. They're rare, though; rare enough that by the time the next one comes along, the previous one's become overgrown with legend and dumped in the place where facts go when people no longer really believe in them.

So, except for the quarter-percent of the population who'd read Anaximander, the total eclipse that took place on the fourth Vectigalia, AUC 552, wasn't a rare and fascinating scientific phenomenon. It was what I'd said it would be. They saw the Invincible Sun die and instantly be reborn, in fire and glory, beyond a shadow of a doubt the beginning of a whole new world.

Oh boy, was that ever good for business. When we finally got the temple cleared and the gates shut, well after midnight, we had a very quick and perfunctory extraordinary general meeting, at which it was resolved that we needed to start hiring some staff, since there was no way in hell we'd be able to carry on running things at that pace all on our own. Razo—somehow in the confusion of that day he'd been completely forgiven and elevated to the status of hero—proposed the hierarchy that prevails in the Church to this day. I was to be the first High Priest; the other four were to be isangels (a term Razo coined on the spot, would you believe), and we'd hire ten full-time priests and fifty minimum-wage part-timers to do pastoral and missionary work, along with three clerks to help out with the books.

Filling the vacancies wasn't a problem. Actually, it was; we were deluged with applicants, ninety-nine per cent of whom we rejected out of hand on the grounds of excessive zeal. The candidates we finally chose were all, in fact, renegade priests from other religions. We wanted men who knew the score and understood the business, and I venture to suggest that we chose well, since of the original ten, eight are still in post and the other two

died in harness. As for the part-timers, we went the opposite way and hired the frothing-at-the-mouthest zealots, in the interests of diversity and balance.

THE NEXT PHASE began with our first purpose-built temple. You'll know it as the Silent Rock, on the corner of Old Guard and Tanneries; we just called it The Temple, fondly believing that it'd be the only one. Note the location: We could have gone further into New Town, in pursuit of the carriage trade, but we decided the frontier between upmarket and the slums was a strategically better choice. Yes, the rich gave more, but there are an awful lot of the poor, and handfuls of trachy soon add up, so we weren't inclined to turn our backs on the devoted unwashed. That was the mistake the Ephraists made, and the Poldarnians. They made it clear they weren't interested in the common people, and where are they now? Nor did we want to go the way of the Blachernicans or the Ranting Friars and get closed down by the government as subversive and antisocial. A middle course, was what we decided on. A universal church, with every man contributing according to his means.

The explosion in our income since the eclipse meant that we could hire the very best architect. It's an indication of how our luck was running that when we approached Thalles with the commission, he turned round and told us he'd be delighted to do the job for free, as his personal offering to the Invincible Sun. Accila tried to insist on paying him—if you hire them, he said, you can also fire them if needs be, but volunteers can be a real pain to get rid of—but he simply wouldn't hear of it; if we gave him money, he'd simply give it all back in the offertory, so where was the point? You can't argue with that, or at least, we didn't try.

It was the same story when it came to buying building materials and hiring labour. If it was for the Temple, nobody wanted

paying. That didn't stop contributions to the building fund flooding in, although we made no secret of the fact that we were getting all this free stuff. We decided we had to spend some of the Fund or it'd look really bad, so we sent to Perimadeia for gold offertory plate and embroidered vestments. By the time the order was completed and delivered, there was already a small but thriving Church of the Invincible Sun in Perimadeia—what's all this stuff for, the merchants there asked; gosh, that sounds like a good idea, let's worship Him too. The same in Aelia and the Vesani Republic. I'm not making this up. It really was happening that fast. For example; the first we knew about the Church in Scona was when a ship's captain arrived with three hundred stamina in a goatskin bag; offerings from the faithful to the Mother Church. Honestly, we didn't know what to say.

THE NIGHT BEFORE we broke ground on the Temple foundations, I had a dream. Well, of course you did, I hear you say, what sort of a high priest would you be if you didn't? Indeed: but I did actually have a dream, and unlike most of my dreams, which I forget within a few heartbeats of opening my eyes, this one's stayed with me ever since.

I was inside the Temple—I recognised it, even though I'd only seen it as straight lines on a sheet of parchment—and it was beautiful. The walls were a kind of dark red marble, and the ceiling was a vast golden mosaic of the ascent of the Invincible Sun, surrounded on all sides by saints, angels, apostles and other glorious beings—I recognised them all, though I couldn't remember all their names. In the chancel a choir was singing (and I remember thinking; that's a point, we ought to get some religious music written, it goes down really well) and the air smelt wonderful; roses and lavender and some deep, rich scent I couldn't identify. I was on my knees, wearing vestments of plain black wool, and I think my feet were bare.

I remember looking up and meeting the eye of the beautiful golden Sun in the mosaic. I felt no hesitation, no shame; and then he spoke to me:

"Peace be with you," I think he said. "You are my one true prophet. Go out and do my work."

And then (in the dream) I remembered; it was all fake, nonsense, garbage; I'd invented the whole thing; it was all lies and deceit, to get money.

"Blessed are those who believe," he said, "for in my name they will heal the sick and feed the hungry. Blessed are those who show others the golden path to faith, for they shall see me face to face."

At which point Anaximander, painted over the door to one of the side chapels, muttered, "Thereafter, I became blind," but the Sun didn't seem to have heard him. He raised his right hand in benediction, and said, "Blessed are those who build, for they shall receive the great gift. Blessed are those who make new things, for everything they make shall come from me. Blessed are those who write, for their words shall be my words. Blessed are those who pray, for I shall hear them."

While he was saying all that, I remember, I was trying to shout—no, no, I'm sorry, it's all pretend—but for some reason my mouth wouldn't open. And then he said, "Blessed are those who lie, for they shall speak the truth." And then I woke up.

PAINT FUMES, I told myself when I opened my eyes. They'd only just painted my room a couple of days before, and the place reeked of whatever that foul stuff is that they use as a base. Paint fumes and a ticklish conscience, and I'd been talking to the interior designer about mosaics for the ceiling, and there was a long list of beatitudes in the phoney gospel we'd cooked up. Nothing to worry about. Tomorrow night, sleep with the window open and you'll be fine.

THEY FOUND IT about four feet down, in the trench they were digging to connect the latrine (we may have been men of God but we were practical) to the brook. The first I knew of it was when a crowd started to gather; a silent crowd, which is always the most ominous sort. My first thought was that some poor devil had had an accident, and I hurried over to see if anyone had thought to send for a doctor.

They'd uncovered a box. So far, they'd cleared the dirt away from the lid. It was about three feet by one, and it shone like gold.

It took me about half a second to think; it's been buried in the ground God knows how long, and it shines like gold. Therefore—

I found that I'd shoved my way to the front of the crowd. Naturally, people made way for the high priest. Some workman looked up at me, as if asking what he should do. "Don't just stand there," I yelled at him. "Get it out."

Once they'd scrabbled away the rest of the dirt, they tried to lift it. Too heavy. I jumped down into the trench, cassock-tails flying. The bloody thing was solid gold. At times like this, there's a part of my brain that works independently, regardless of context or propriety. It reported; a thousand stamina, and that's just the box. "Open it," I said.

There was no lock, and gold hinges don't seize. They swung open the lid.

My first reaction, I'm sorry to have to tell you, was, shit, it's just old parchment. Then the better part of me thought to inquire as to what sort of document you'd bother burying in an airtight solid gold box. I shoved someone out of the way. They were rolled up, in scrolls. I grabbed one and pulled down. Miraculously, it didn't tear, disintegrate, come apart in my hands. It was just writing, no pictures, in a script I didn't recognise.

But I knew a man who knew about this sort of thing. "Where's Accila?" I called out. Blank faces. Then I remembered. "Father Chrysostomus," I translated. "Go and find him, now."

The scrolls—there were nine of them—were in Old Middle Therian, a language that hasn't been spoken for a thousand years. Only about six people in the world can read it. Fortuitously, Accila was one of them. "It's some sort of religious text," he told us, as we gathered in secret session in some storage hut, with the door wedged shut with a pickaxe handle. "I'm a bit rusty, so you'll have to—"

He went quiet. Not like him at all. We indulged him for about ten seconds, and then Razo said, "Well?"

Accila looked up. He had the strangest look on his face.

"You're not going to believe this," he said.

LATER, WHEN ACCILA had transcribed and translated all nine scrolls, and we'd all sat down, with the new texts on one hand and the Gospel we'd concocted on the other, we tried to convince ourselves that there were differences, significant ones; some key words were ambiguous, there was a sprinkling of *hapax legomena* which could mean anything, translation is at best an imprecise science. We were kidding ourselves. To all intents and purposes, the scrolls we'd found in the box and the gospel we'd made up out of our heads were the same.

I HAD ANOTHER dream. It wasn't on the same sumptuous, no-expense-spared scale as the previous one, so maybe my dream budget had all been spent. All it was, I was looking in a mirror and the face I saw there wasn't mine.

"This is all wrong," I said.

"Why do you say that?" he said.

"It's *wrong*." He just looked at me. "It's wrong because you're not real. I made you up. You aren't even my imaginary friend, it was deliberate. You're a forgery."

He smiled beautifully. "You made me up."

"Yes. For money. To defraud poor, weak-minded people out of money they couldn't afford."

"For money." He shrugged. "Well, you need to live. And it's not like you're indulging in extravagant luxuries. Apart from the vestments, which are badges of office, like a uniform, you dress in simple clothes, you mostly eat bread and cheese, you've practically stopped drinking wine, you sleep on a mattress in an attic—"

"Only because I'm too busy."

"Too busy. Doing my work. You are my good and faithful servant."

I wanted to hit him. "Cheating people. Deceiving them. And I did make you up. You're a lie."

"You made me up."

"Will you stop repeating everything I say?"

"You made me up," he said firmly. "Let's just think about that. You were trying to find a way to feed yourself and your friends when you were poor and hungry, and an idea came into your head." He smiled. "Where do you think that idea came from?"

"I *made you up*." I couldn't seem to get him to understand. "I invented you as part of a criminal conspiracy."

He shrugged again. "You gave me life," he said. "Like Maxentius."

Good reference. Maxentius was the son of a prostitute, engendered as part of a routine commercial transaction. His military coup overthrew the cruellest tyrant in history, and his welfare reforms led to his reign becoming known as the Golden Age. "If I gave you life, you can't be God," I pointed out. "And if you're not God, you can't exist in this form. Therefore you don't exist."

He shook his head. "If I'm God I can do anything," he said, "and that includes being born of a fallible human. Besides, it's not so hard to believe in, is it, that I should choose to come into existence through you. Seeds grow best when they're planted in rotting shit. No offence," he added gravely.

"None capable of being taken," I replied. "But in that case, why me? Why not be made up by a holy man, a true holy man? There's plenty of those."

"A holy man wouldn't stoop to fraud and deceit. Therefore he wouldn't have made me up, therefore I could never have been made."

"Ah," I said, "you've contradicted yourself. A moment ago, you could do anything."

He nodded. "Once I exist, of course I can. Before I existed, I was nothing."

"Then you can't be God," I cried in triumph. "God must be eternal, in existence for ever since the beginning."

"Must I?" He gave me a mock frown. "I'm God, there's no *must* about it. I can do anything I like."

"Fine," I said. "Then who created the world?"

"I did. Retrospectively."

"You can't—"

"Of course I can. I can do *anything*. Once I exist."

"I'd like to wake up now, please."

"In a moment," he said. "I'm going to teach you some doctrine. Are you listening carefully?"

"Go on," I said.

He looked me straight in the eye. "There is no right or wrong," he said, "there is only good and bad. Starvation is bad; feeding the hungry is good. But it's not right to feed the hungry, because you might easily do so through vanity, which is bad, or because you want to build up a political power-base in order to launch a coup, which is bad, unless you're Maxentius, in which case it's good. Killing someone is wrong, unless you're Maxentius killing the Emperor Phocas, in which case it's entirely right. Do you understand?"

"Not really."

"And you're supposed to be so bright," he said. "Very well," he said. "Let's try again. Motive is irrelevant. The best things have been done for the worst motives, the worst things have

been done for the best motives. Lusaeus the Slaughterer started the Fifth Social War because his people were oppressed by the Empire and he wanted the best for them. But Maxentius started a civil war because his people were oppressed and he wanted the best for them. The Fifth Social War was bad, because two million people died needlessly and countless more were left in hunger and misery. Maxentius' war was good, because it freed the people and led to the Golden Age. Hunger is bad, freedom is good. Motive is irrelevant."

"There's nothing good about greed for money."

"Tell that to Peregrinus, who discovered the north-east passage to Ceugra, bringing cheap food and full employment to Mezentia. On the other hand, consider Artabazus, who sailed from Perimadeia to the Anoge with a quarter million sacks of grain to feed the famine victims, and carried the plague with him. Outcomes are good or bad. Motive is irrelevant. This," he added, "is the word of the Lord. It's not open to debate."

"You can't just say—"

"Of course I can. Now wake up and believe."

The Temple was a great success. We had full congregations every day, tremendous enthusiasm, full offertory-boxes. Three weeks after we held our first Intercessionary Mass for Peace, the Herulians surrendered unconditionally and the war was finally over. We held a special service of thanksgiving; we couldn't fit them all in the Temple, so we borrowed the Artillery Fields. Almost all the Cabinet attended, along with most of the City nobility and every-one who was anyone from society, commerce and the arts. The take for that service alone was 16,000 stamina.

Winning the war was the last straw, as far as I was concerned. I had to do something. But I didn't want to rush into it blindly and screw everything up; so I suggested to the others, quite casually at the end of a routine meeting, that it'd save on

accountancy time and paperwork if the Church gave me a discretionary budget, so I could pay for everyday maintenance and procurements without having to bother anyone else. Fine, they said, how much do you need? Not quite sure yet, I said; just give me a drawing facility on Number Two account for now, and when I know how it pans out, we can establish a figure.

With unlimited access to Church funds—a licence to embezzle, if you prefer to look at it in those terms—I really got going. I funnelled out money into fake corporations, lost fortunes in imaginary fires and shipwrecks, filtered vast sums through four sets of books, and used it all to feed the war refugees at Blachissa. There were something like a hundred thousand of the poor devils stranded there, fugitives from three major cities burnt down by the enemy during the war, and since their cities no longer existed, they had no governors, therefore there was nobody to petition the government for relief on their behalf, therefore they were nobody's problem, therefore they were left to starve. I bought grain from the farmers in the Mesoge—when Taraconissa was destroyed they lost their principal market and had no one to sell to, so they were in pretty dire straits—and employed discharged veterans to cart and distribute the supplies. I made a special effort to ensure that at every stage in the process, I was helping someone who badly needed help. I was so pleased with myself.

There was so much money, of course, that for a long time nobody noticed. It was, though, simply a matter of time. When, sooner or later, my colleagues realised what I was up to, I anticipated harsh words, bitter accusations and a great deal of bad feeling. What I didn't expect—

"YOU CAN'T DO this," I roared.

They looked at me.

"You can't," I repeated. "I invented this religion, it was my idea, I created it. I'm the high priest. You can't excommunicate me."

"Actually," Accila said quietly, "we can. It says so in the constitution."

"What constitution?"

"The one we just made up," Accila replied. "And submitted to a general synod for ratification, passed unanimously. And it says, the ecumenical council—that's the four of us—can dismiss the high priest on grounds of heresy or gross moral turpitude. We're going with heresy as an act of kindness, so we don't have to go public with the news that you've been stealing from the Church. That's provided you go quietly and don't make trouble."

"You can't adopt a constitution without my agreement."

"Yes we can," Accila said. "Retrospectively. Since there is currently no high priest, you having been dismissed, the ecumenical council is us. And we can do anything we like."

The others just sat there, grim-faced, hiding behind Accila. "I'll have the lot of you for this," I shouted. "I'll expose you. I'll tell everything. I'll tell them it's all a fraud."

Accila sighed. "Please don't," he said. "You'll just embarrass yourself. After all, nobody's going to believe you, are they? They've seen us curing the sick, they saw the miracle of the reborn sun, they saw us end the war. They'll just think, here's a man who lost a power struggle and wants to make trouble. Politics. The people understand about politics. And then," he added with a sad smile, "we'll tell them how you defrauded the Church of a quarter of a million stamina. Or we can do it our way. Up to you entirely."

I was breathing rapidly, and my palms were sweating. "Heresy," I said. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Razo cleared his throat. "We'll put out a statement saying that you object to the doctrine of vicarious absolution. The doctrine having been upheld by the ecumenical council, you're a heretic."

I blinked. "What," I demanded, "is the doctrine of—?"

"Vicarious absolution." Teuta steepled his fingers. "My idea. In exchange for a substantial offering, you can ensure the salvation of someone else's soul, even if he's not actually a believer

himself. He doesn't have to know about it, if that's what you want. For double the money, you can even save someone's soul against his will. We think it'll be very popular."

I TRIED. I went to the magistrates and swore a complaint, but the chief justice was a believer and threw the case out for lack of evidence. I went to the chief archimandrite of the Fire Temple, who told me that the last thing he wanted to do, in the present circumstances, was pick a fight with a much bigger, richer church. I tried to see the emperor, but the chamberlain wouldn't even take my money. There are more important things, he said, with a sanctimonious scowl, and sent me away.

I preached in the market-place. The first time, I drew a good crowd. I hadn't lost my touch. I told them; the Gospel of the Invincible Sun is a fake, written by five poor rich boys to make money. The so-called ancient scrolls dug up in the Temple foundations were fakes, made by a skilled forger with a criminal record for falsifying religious texts. The miracle of the Reborn Sun was no miracle at all; my former colleagues had started with Anaximander, carefully studied the other records, and accurately predicted a natural phenomenon that would have happened anyway. The cure for the mountain fever was just mouldy bread beaten up in garlic juice—a wonderful thing, granted, but no miracle. The other cures could all be explained by the scientifically-documented phenomenon of mass hysteria; it was all there in the Mezentine books, I told them, all we did was read and repeat. The Herulian war was almost over anyway, so we hadn't ended that. As for the Church, it was nothing more than a mechanism for sucking in unearned wealth, which the five of us had always intended from the start to keep for ourselves.

My second street corner sermon drew about a dozen people, five of whom jeered and threw apples. On the third occasion, I was arrested by the kettlehats for disturbing the peace.

They kept me in for a week, in a dark, tiny cell along with two thieves, a wife-killer and a rapist. I preached to them, expounding the doctrine of right and wrong that I'd been given in my dream. I think the rapist was interested, but on the fourth day the wife-killer, a believer, hit me so hard I passed out, and when I came round, a lot of the evangelical zeal seemed to have faded.

On the seventh day, two kettlehats came and pulled me out of there. I was being transferred, they said, to the ecclesiastical courts. What ecclesiastical courts, I asked.

"THEY'RE NEW," ACCILA explained. He'd come to see me in my cell. "Very new."

"How new?"

"Actually, we got the whole thing set up in six days. Soon as we heard you'd been arrested."

I stared at him. "What?"

"In your honour," he said grimly. "On account of, there wasn't really anything in ordinary criminal law we could get you for, apart from disturbing the peace and criminal slander, maybe just possibly incitement to riot. At best, those would get you put away for two years. So, we created an entirely new jurisdiction, just for you. They had to rush an emergency enabling bill through the House; quickest piece of legislation this century, apparently. The emperor signed it yesterday, so it's now the law. And of course it's—"

"Let me guess. Retrospective."

He grinned. "Not much point otherwise." He sighed, a reasonable man brought to the limits of his patience. "Eps, you bloody fool, why can't you just drop it and shut your face? You've lost, accept it, move on." He hesitated, then added, "They've authorised me to make you an offer. One million stamina, provided you leave the country and never come back. That's for old time's sake, we don't have to pay you anything. Well? What about it?"

"And if I won't?"

He looked very sad and grave. "Well," he said, "I don't see where you leave us much choice. But for pity's sake, Eps, you're a sensible man, there's absolutely no reason why we can't sort this out in a reasonable, businesslike fashion. Damn it, we used to be *friends*."

I just looked at him. "You're the ones who had me locked up," I said. "You threw me out of my own Church. I'm sorry, but I can't see how it's my fault."

He shrugged. "You don't want money," he said. "You don't want a quiet, prosperous life. For crying out loud, Eps, what do you want? A martyr's crown?"

So they were going to kill me. Oh, I thought. "If the crown fits," I heard myself say.

"You bloody idiot," Accila said, and left.

THE TRIAL WAS short and, as I understand, very orderly and efficient. I wasn't actually there, having been ejected for gross contempt about ten seconds after they put me in the dock. They sent some clerk down to the cells to tell me the verdict. Guilty of blasphemy, twelve counts, fraud and embezzlement, ninety-six counts, other offences, a hundred and four counts. Sentence: death by fire. I'd pleaded guilty, apparently.

"Death by fire?" I asked.

The clerk nodded briskly. "Only the refining power of flame," he told me, "can purge the taint of blasphemy, which would otherwise form a miasma and lead to plague."

"Is that right?"

"That's what it says here," he said. "Tomorrow morning, at dawn. Sorry," he added, which was nice of him.

"I'd like to see a priest," I said.

"Sorry."

I spent the night on my knees, in prayer. Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it, but you do that sort of thing in a condemned cell.

After all, why not? Not as if there's anything better to do, sleeping would be a sinful waste, and—well. If it was true, and I really had invented God, brought him in to existence—I thought about that. Why not? There are innumerable examples of sons who turn out to be a thousand, a million times better, cleverer, stronger than their fathers. If I really had invented God, then I reckoned he owed me; a vision, a visitation, a sign or portent at the very least. No dice. I fell asleep kneeling.

I woke up, and it was still dark. The floor was shaking.

We don't get earthquakes in the City. If you want to experience that sort of thing, you have to go to Permia, or up North. It's the weirdest feeling. It's like being on a ship in a storm. You have to keep moving your feet just to stand still, and the vibration goes right down and through you, till you can feel your bones moving. Everything blurs, as though you've just had a bang on the head, and there's this noise like nothing else, a sort of deep rumbling purr, as though you're a flea on the back of a cat the size of Scheria. I jumped up, promptly fell over, got up again; I was trying to learn how to stand upright on a moving surface when the floor split, right between my feet, and a huge gap appeared—a great big slice of nothing, with a foot on either side of it. I yelped like a dog, and then a chunk of the roof came down, missing me by a whisker. I could feel pee running down the inside of my leg. Then there was this extraordinary singing, moaning noise, which later on I was able to rationalise as the sound of steel under intolerable tension, and the doorframe burst. The cell door actually flew open—it swished past me, if I'd been a hand's breadth closer, it'd have swatted me like a fly. A head-sized chunk of roof bashed me on the shoulder; it hurt like buggery, I staggered and nearly went down the hole in the floor. The hell with this, I thought, and I did a sort of standing jump through the open doorway.

I landed on my bruised shoulder, which really didn't improve matters, and sat up. One end of the corridor was blocked with chunks and slabs of fallen roof. The other end was clear. I

scrambled to my feet and ran. The floor played funny games with me; I ended up flat on my back three times before I reached the stairs. They'd pulled away from the wall on one side, but I was in no mood to be fussy. When I was a few steps from the top, I felt the whole lot give way under the pressure of my heel; I sprang, like a cat, as the staircase just sort of fell away, and landed in a ball on something relatively solid.

It was a miracle that I got out of there. About ten seconds after I burst out through a shattered window into fresh air, the whole prison sort of folded in on itself and subsided into a heap of stones. How come I wasn't squashed by any of the huge slabs of flying rubbish, I simply don't know. All I remember was how hard it was to breathe, because I couldn't stop running, even though my legs were jelly and my lungs stabbed like knives; I ran, dodging falling trees and collapsing buildings, jumping over dead people and people trapped under things, I ran and ran until a particularly violent tremor swept me off my feet and I fell down and no effort on my part could make me get up again. Then, I guess, I went to sleep, or something like that.

I woke up in a weird landscape; masonry trash, blocks of stone, as far as the eye can see; I remember thinking, whatever possessed me to spend the night in a quarry? But then I caught sight of a building I knew; the *Integrity Rewarded*, in Sheep Street, except that Sheep Street wasn't there; just the *Integrity*, taken out of context, floating serenely on a sea of rubble.

I limped over and banged on the door, but it was bolted shut. Pity. I could really have done with a drink (except I had no money, and they don't do credit at the *Integrity*). I wandered away and just sort of drifted for a while. It was a very long time before I saw anyone, but when I did, it was a patrol of kettlehats. They looked at me and shouted, You there, stop where you are. So, naturally, I ran.

THE GREAT EARTHQUAKE of AUC 552 was exceptionally violent but extremely localised. It shook down the whole of the Potteries district, so that only a handful of buildings were left standing, but was hardly felt at all in Cornmarket, East Hill or the Grand Crescent. Remarkably, given the scope of the destruction, only about two dozen people were killed, and eight of those were prisoners in the gaol awaiting execution.

I holed up in the *Charity & Austerity* in Pigmarket; a haunt of my youth, where nobody ever asks you anything so long as you have at least ninety trachy. I had considerably more than that, courtesy of some poor dead man whose pocket I picked on my way out of the ruins. I could have afforded enough of the house red to kill a regiment of dragoons, but oddly enough I didn't touch a drop; I had a bowl of soup and half a loaf of grindstone bread, and that was all I wanted. I think I coped really rather well with the realisation—it came up on me like a sunrise—that the earthquake had been for me—an intervention by my God, the Invincible Sun, to get me out of prison and save me from the flames. Well? What other possible explanation can you think of?

I could have been horrified, torn apart by guilt at the thought of the deaths and the damage. Or I could've been really, really, really smug; God loves me so much, He shook down a quarter of the City just for me. I was neither. I accepted what had happened; not my fault, not a victory or a vindication. He knows best, I told myself; if that's what He felt needed to be done, who am I to question?

HAVE YOU EVER been to Eremia? I thought not. If you were thinking of making the trip, take my advice, don't bother. There's nothing there except sand, rocks, murderous heat, biting winds, freezing cold at night. I can only think of one man in the history of the world who wanted to go there, and I have a shrewd suspicion that at the time, he wasn't quite right in the head.

Looking back, I can't understand how I survived. I was out in the desert, just walking. I had nothing, no shoes, not even a water-bottle. On the third, or was it the fourth day, I stumbled across an oasis. I call it that; there was this brown puddle, fringed with tall, thin trees. There was a rock with a sort of ledge, you couldn't call it a cave; under the ledge, I found a dead man. He must've been there for a long time. His skin was brown and hard, like rawhide. His eyes had gone, but his hair was mostly still there; thin, wispy, like the strands of wool you find caught on brambles. He was curled up, asleep. When I moved him, he was as light as a log of rotten wood.

We had many long conversations, the dead man and me. He told me he was a pilgrim, on his way to the celebrated desert oracle at Cocona. He'd gone there to get the answer to a very important question which had subsequently slipped his mind; the answer, though, was, *Yes, but it will not end well*. Looks like they were right, I told him. Well, of course, he said, it's a very reliable oracle.

I did most of the talking. I told him my story; how I'd created God, how He'd outgrown me, moved away from me, how He'd rescued me from prison and fire; but these days he never comes to see me, he doesn't even write—that's how it is, the dead man said, they have lives of their own, what do you expect? Of course, I said, and I know how busy He is, but it'd be nice if he could spare me just five minutes once in a while.

"Here I am," the dead man said. "What can I do for you?"

I looked at Him. "Sorry," I said, "I didn't recognise You there for a minute."

"That's all right," He said.

"Well?" I asked Him. "Are You keeping well? Are You eating properly?"

"I am the Invincible Sun," He said. "I don't eat."

Fair point. At that moment He was everywhere around me, burning, a white heat blazing down from the sky, rising up from the hot sand. "What do You want me to do?" I asked.

"You've done so much," He said.

"That's not an answer."

He had no eyes, but they were filled with pity. "I want you to go to the City," He said. "Give yourself up. Submit to the cruelty and hatred of our enemies. They will put you in prison and they will hang you, and when you die, all the sins of the world will die with you. You don't mind, do you?" He added. "If you'd rather not, I'll understand."

"No, that's fine," I said. "Is there anything You want me to say?"

"Tell them that you were wrong," he said. "Tell them that the miracles were true miracles, that it was I who cured the sick and ended the war, that the scriptures are My holy word, that I saved you from the prison and I sent you back. Tell them everything is true, and everything is good, and that motive is irrelevant, only the outcome matters. It's essential that you tell them, and that they understand. Will you do that for Me?"

"Of course," I said. "Anything else?"

He smiled. "I think that's quite enough to be going on with. I will send others, later, to do the rest."

"It doesn't seem very much," I said. "Go home, give up, tell a few lies, get killed. Are you sure there isn't more I can do to help?"

"Nothing that you're capable of doing," He replied, not unkindly.

"Well, if you're sure," I said. "Can I ask you something?"

"Fire away."

"Why me?"

He smiled. "Why did I choose you as my high priest, out of all the people in all the world?"

"Yes."

"You mean you haven't—" He stopped, grinned, composed His face. "Your name, of course."

"My name?"

"That's right. Eps *eps*. Joke."

I looked Him in the eye. "I don't believe it."

His gaze rested on me like the noonday sun, bright and intolerable, so that I couldn't help remembering Anaximander. "Are you seriously suggesting," He said, "that God has no sense of humour? Now, there's blasphemy."

"But it's not even particularly funny—" I stopped. I was talking to a desiccated corpse. Ah well, I thought.

LATER THAT DAY, a caravan of salt traders on their way to the coast stopped at the oasis. They were amazed to find anyone there. They said they ought to kill me, for stealing their water, but since I was a lunatic and a holy man, they'd overlook it just this once. I explained that I had to get to the coast as quickly as possible; I have a message from God, I told them. Of course you have, they said.

I didn't feel much like talking on the long walk to the coast, but they wouldn't leave me alone. How did you survive, they asked; how did you manage for food? I told them I had a vague memory of eating beetles, or something of the sort. They laughed and shook their heads; no beetles in the desert, they said. I shrugged. The Invincible Sun must have sent them, I said, so that I wouldn't starve. They gave me an odd look. Your god sent you beetles to live on, they said, that's pathetic. Would it have killed Him to send you sausages and honey-cakes? I thought about that for a moment and said, I think He must have sent the beetles, because clearly there weren't any living there under normal circumstances. I saw no sign that insects had attacked the dead body. What dead body, they said.

TWO KETTLEHATS WERE waiting for me at the quay. For some reason, I was in ridiculously high spirits, that end-of-term feeling I hadn't felt since I'd walked out into the sunlight after six days in

the Examination Halls, at the end of my last year at the Studium. I waved to the kettlehats as I walked down the gangplank. They looked at me.

"I'm Eps," I said, before they had a chance to open their mouths. "Sorry, Father Deodatus, if that's the name on the warrant. Are you here to arrest me?"

"No talking," they said. "You're with us."

They had one of those closed carriages; a pity, because I'd have liked to look out of the window. It was a bright, sunny day, and the City is always at its best in sunshine; it brings out that deep honey yellow in the stonework, and sparkles on the copper roofs of the temples. I've always admired it; that day, knowing what I did about the Sun, I could understand. It was because He loved the City so much, the buildings and the people looking at them. I was proud of Him for that.

THEY MUST HAVE known well in advance that I was coming, because everything was ready. They'd built the scaffold in the Golden Square, presumably so that the nobility could watch from the windows of their town houses without having to come down and mingle with the common people. For them, the imperial carpenters had built seventeen (I counted them) rows of bleachers, which only goes to show that the moaners are quite wrong and the government can get things done quickly and well if it sets its mind to it. On the outskirts there were the usual mulled wine and hot sausage stalls, quite a few other traders—I noticed a man selling quality imported textiles, and another doing a brisk trade in commemorative pottery figurines. Three squadrons of the Household Cavalry added a touch of that colour and pageantry we've always done so well in the City. I couldn't tell from where I was whether they were charging people for admission, but I'd be surprised if they weren't.

A kettlehat captain in a magnificent gilded breastplate took charge of me and led me through a cordon of dismounted guardsmen to the scaffold steps. I asked him, "Will I have a chance to make a speech?" He shook his head. I was disappointed. I had a message to deliver, after all, and I was surprised to find that no opportunity had been provided. How about a priest, I asked. Shake of the head. But I want to confess my sins, I told him (we were getting closer and closer to the scaffold), I want to tell the people that I've seen the error of my ways and urge them to love and obey the Ecumenical Council. Sorry, he said, and then we were there.

I was starting to panic. I had, after all, been sent there to pass on the word of the Invincible Sun; my death was merely ancillary to that, and there was a terrible risk of missing the point of the exercise. I tried to protest, but the kettlehats proved to be very skillful at moving a person who didn't want to be moved, efficiently and unobtrusively. Mostly it was done by judicious barging and blocking, with firm but gentle pressure from a hand in the small of the back; you have to go where you're nudged, or you lose your balance and fall over. I guess they'd had the practice, but still, I was impressed.

"Gentlemen, be reasonable," I said. We were at the foot of the steps. "A few last words, is that too much to ask? I just want to—"

"Sorry." A knee pressed the back of my knee, and somehow I was standing on the first step. If I'd been ten times stronger and trained from boyhood in the secret arts of the warrior, I don't think there was anything I could've done. I could see the hangman waiting for me at the top of the steps. He had a sort of black bag over his head. This was all wrong. I had to deliver my message, but time was running out. I thought; if He could be bothered to level the Potteries with an earthquake to let me escape the first time, surely He can do something, some little thing, to give me a chance to carry out His explicit instructions. Made no sense. I'd done exactly what I'd been told, so what had gone wrong?

I looked up and there He was, a round white eye in a sea of clear blue, watching, not doing anything. I let them nudge me up the steps, and the hangman grabbed me and put the noose round my neck. "Excuse me," I started to say, but he tightened the knot so I couldn't speak. He trod on my toe, making me step back so I was properly centred on the trapdoor. "Just a—" I croaked, and he pulled the lever.

NOW THEN, LET'S see.

Motivation, we have been taught, doesn't matter. All that counts is the outcome, the end result. Therefore, it didn't matter that my colleagues and I had started the Church as a criminal conspiracy to cheat gullible people out of money. Clear away the nettles and brambles of motive, and underneath them you find a set of circumstances capable of producing the desired result. You find a group of people with a unique combination of talents and abilities—the scientist, the poet, the skilled forger, the scholar and the preacher. Driven by, motivated by, an urgent need of their own, they set about the task of bringing a god to the attention of the public. Consider how many religions, how many gods, show up on our streets in any twelve-month period; scores, hundreds even, and how many of them make it to mainstream acceptance? Quite. But, I dare say, a fair proportion of those religions, those gods, have perfectly viable doctrines, sufficient to serve as the basis for a thoroughly satisfactory Church. The margin, is what I'm trying to say, the edge, the difference between the three hundred failures and the one success, is tiny; but it's real, it's there. It's not just a matter of luck. To succeed, you need the perfectly pitched message, the unforgettably phrased scriptures, the eye-catching iconography, the significant moments indelibly etched on the public consciousness. The trouble with most religions is the people who propound them. They may be charismatic and inspirational, but they're not quite

charismatic and inspirational *enough*. Also, they're deficient in those core skills we've just examined. Their scriptures are written in a pedestrian style. They're too new, without the sanctity of ancientness. They're internally inconsistent, or they ask people to believe stuff that ordinary folk can't quite stomach. Their preachers lack that certain indefinable but absolutely indispensable *something*. They are, in other words, amateurs. They lack the professional touch.

We, by contrast—well. Think about it. Suppose you were the Invincible Sun, with the whole human race to choose from. We were conmen, whose business was getting sceptical people to believe us. Would you really select a bunch of unskilled nobodies—farm workers, fishermen, carpenters—or would you insist on nothing but the best; well-born, university-educated, intelligent and naturally articulate, and motivated (I'm repeating that word so you'll notice it) by ferociously intense self-interest. Well, wouldn't you? If you want a house built, you hire builders. If you want a gallstone taken out, you pay the best doctor you can afford. So, if you want people persuaded, you enlist the best persuaders in the business.

Once you realise the simple truth that motive is irrelevant, it all makes sense. Really, you don't need a special flash of insight direct from the lips of the Invincible Sun to figure that one out. There is no right and wrong, only good and bad. Faith is good; it's essential, if you want to survive in a perverse and gratuitously cruel universe. Nihilism is bad; it deprives the world of meaning, so why the hell bother with anything? Anything that can induce people to have faith, have hope, believe that there is meaning, is good. Motive is irrelevant.

I WOKE UP.

Later, I figured out that I must've banged my head on the gallows frame or the edge of the trap, which made me pass out.

I had a lump the size of an egg and a splitting headache. I was lying on a bed. It hurt when I breathed in. There was someone sitting looking down at me. It was Zanipulus.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Awful," I said. Then I frowned. "Zan?"

"Hello, Eps."

"Sorry," I said. Talking hurt. "I was expecting someone else."

He laughed. "No doubt you were," he said. "But you'll have to make do with me. Now then, you've probably got a bad head and a hell of a stiff neck, but basically you're fine. You should be up and about in no time."

"You—" I paused. "For God's—for pity's sake. What happened?"

He smiled. "Exactly what we wanted to happen," he said. "Just for once, everything went according to plan, no balls-ups, no hitches. It was a complete success."

I frowned at him. "I don't think so," I said. "I'm still alive."

He stared at me; then he burst out laughing. "Eps, you *idiot*," he said. "You didn't seriously believe we actually wanted to kill you? Oh come on. We're your *friends*."

"But—"

He shook his head in disbelief. "We staged your execution," he said. "We made a martyr of you. Well? Isn't that what you told Accila you wanted?"

A martyr's crown. "I thought—"

"For crying out loud, Eps." He was amused, but also a little bit hurt, a little bit angry. "Obviously, when we realised you had issues with the direction we were going in, we knew it was time for you to go your separate way. And, equally obviously, we couldn't have you wandering off making a nuisance of yourself. So, we thought about it and decided that the best thing would be to stage your death, in public, so everyone could see, so there'd be no chance of you making a comeback and being a pain in the bum for the rest of us. Also, there was a fantastic opportunity to move the business up to the next level, by making

you the Church's first martyr. Which has worked," he added, "beyond our wildest dreams. Where before we had one thrivingly successful Church, we now have two, in a state of perfect schism, the Orthodox and the Deodatists. Overall attendances are up twenty-one per cent. And," he added with a grin, "the Deodatists—your lot, I guess; our wholly owned subsidiary—are particularly generous with their donations. At this rate, we should be in a position to retire by the end of the current financial year." He stopped and frowned. "Hang on," he said. "Didn't Accila explain all this to you, the night before the—?"

Earthquake. I winced. I could see precisely what had happened. In our brief conversation in my cell, I'd so annoyed Accila that he'd flounced off in a huff—intending, no doubt, to come back later and try again when he'd had a chance to simmer down. But then the earthquake happened, I vanished; Accila either neglected to mention to the others that he hadn't had a chance to fill me in on the plan, or else was ashamed of having flown off the handle and cocked it up, so kept quiet. Bloody fool. Next time I saw him, I'd kick his arse.

"Of course he did," I said. "Sorry, I'm being a bit slow. I think I may have banged my head."

Zanipulus relaxed and grinned at me. "That's all right," he said. "For a moment there, I was really worried. I thought, what must he be thinking of us? He must reckon we're *horrible*."

"You might have warned me," I said, "about the hanging thing. It was really convincing. If I hadn't known—"

"Oh, that." He tried not to look smug. "Basically, just a really carefully padded noose and a precisely calculated drop, though there's a bit more to it than that, obviously. I'll draw it out for you some day, if you're interested."

"So," I said. "I'm dead. What now?"

He shrugged. "Up to you entirely," he said. "We've worked out your share." He named a figure, which made my head swim. "Accila was all for deducting the money you took from us with all those weird schemes of yours, but the rest of us managed to

calm him down, make him see it was ultimately good for business—laying the foundations for the Deodatist schism, that sort of thing—and he came round in the end and he's fine about it now." He grinned. "If it's all right with you, we'll pay you half now in cash and the balance in instalments over, say, ten years, to save us from liquidity problems. Or if you prefer, we can give you rentcharges, the reversions on Church properties, it's entirely up to you. After all, we owe you a great deal. We'd never have maintained and increased our rate of exponential growth without you."

"Cash and instalments will be just fine," I told him.

"Splendid." He sat up a bit straighter. "So," he said, "any idea what you're going to do next? The world, as they say, is your oyster."

"I hate oysters."

"So you do, I'd forgotten. Any plans? Or are you just going to bugger off to the sun and enjoy yourself?"

Interesting choice of words. Deliberate? Who gives a shit? Motive is irrelevant. "I think that's what I'll do," I said. "Looking back, I never enjoyed my life particularly much. So I'm hoping my death will be one long giggle."

As part of my severance package, I received a one-fifth share in the net profits of Officina Solis Invicti, a wholly-owned trading consortium with interests in, among other things, shipbuilding and arms production. That has proved to be a real slice of luck—heaven-sent, you might say—what with the dreadful wars we've been having lately, between the Orthodox empire and the Deodatist Aelians and Vesani. As I write this, Zanipulus is in the process of setting up a chain of arm's-length offshore subsidiaries so that OSI can open factories in Aelia and the Vesani republic, and we can start selling ships and weapons to both sides. And why not? It's only fair; last I heard, the Vesani had

taken a hell of a beating from the empire, on account of their vastly superior military technology. It wouldn't do for God to be seen to be taking sides.

Motive is irrelevant. The war is a terrible thing, but it was coming anyway, it was inevitable; once the empire had sorted out its traditional enemy the Herulians, it was only a matter of time before it picked a fight with the Vesani, the Aelians, anyone else it could find. By having the war now, and over religion rather than trade or boundaries, we limit the damage. It's highly unlikely that the empire will win, particularly if OSI arms the opposition. Defeat, or a stalemate, will put a limit on imperial expansionism for a century or more. As a result, tens of thousands of soldiers won't die, millions of civilians won't be enslaved. History will thank us, I have absolutely no doubt.

Meanwhile, every trachy I get from OSI, my estates in the Mesoge, my mercantile and other investments, goes to feed the war refugees. I live here among them in the Chrysopolis camp, sharing their bad water and their plain, barely sufficient food, and I have to say, it's pretty horrible. We live in tents, or shacks built out of scrap packing cases. The refugees are surly and miserable, they yell at me and sometimes throw stones, because they have no idea what I'm doing there. Their idea of hygiene is rudimentary at best. I've nearly given up trying to keep them from slaughtering each other over trivial disputes (nearly)—beyond keeping them alive, I can't say I've done very much for them. But there's so many of them, a hundred, hundred and fifty thousand; all rabid Deodatists. Really, the only thing that keeps them going is their faith, which got them into this dreadful state in the first place and sustains them in the face of the torments of hell. The Invincible Sun, and the glorious example of His true prophet Deodatus, who died for them that they might live; except he didn't, but I wouldn't dream of telling them that.

In fact, I don't dream of anything. At first, I was bitterly disappointed. I felt I was owed, at the very least, a well-done-my-good-and-faithful-servant, followed by a long overdue explanation

and, just possibly, an apology. I'd have liked *something*, rather than complete and impenetrable silence. But there; they say that up in the Calianna mountains there's an ancient Velitist monastery whose monks have spent the last two thousand years waiting for their gods to apologise for the Creation. They're hopeful, so reports say, but they aren't holding their breath.

# One Little Room an Everywhere

Well now," he said, giving me a sad smile, "what on earth are we going to do with you?"

A valid question, to which I've never been able to think of an answer. "I thought," I lied, "maybe teaching?"

He shook his head slowly. "I wouldn't, if I were you," he said. "It takes a special sort of person to teach. Besides—" He didn't need to say it, and wisely saved his breath.

I'd wanted to be a Brother of the Studium, an adept, a practitioner, a *wizard*, for as long as I could remember. "All right," I said, "what about commercial work? I understand they're crying out for qualified men in East Permia."

"Yes," he said. "But it wouldn't suit you. Commercial calls for certain qualities which maybe aren't your strongest suits. And—" He hesitated. "To be brutally frank, the Studium has a duty to ensure that the candidates we recommend for placements abroad meet certain standards. We have a reputation, which we've worked hard to build up. No, I can't honestly say we could support you if you chose to go down that road."

I nodded. None of this was coming as an earth-shattering surprise to me. "Fine," I said. "So what would you suggest?"

He looked at me for about as long as it takes to recite the Abbreviated Creed. "You know," he said, "there's a wide selection of highly rewarding careers outside the profession which

you might well consider. Your qualifications—" he glanced down at the file "—such as they are, ought really to be a gateway to your true vocation, not a cage holding you back from doing what you were born to do. Which could well," he added gently, "be something not directly involving the day-to-day use of the talent. Let's see, now," he went on, grabbing the file as though it were a friendly hand and he was drowning, "you've got lots and lots of outside interests, according to what it says here. Painting. Play-acting. And I see you play the bassoon."

"Not very well," I said. He nodded. He believed me. "A marked creative streak," he carried on. "Maybe something in the fine arts." He paused. "Well, perhaps not. But *connected* to the fine arts, perhaps. Brother Perceptuus says you're good with figures. Accountancy—"

As soon as it was polite to do so, I thanked him and left. I bore him no ill will. I'd come to the same conclusion quite some time ago. Ten years in the Studium, studying the Science; wasted.

Not quite. If I'd been completely useless and talentless, they'd have thrown me out when I was twelve. I have the innate ability. I can do quite a wide range of Forms, some of them very well indeed. I can do Rooms, and I was third in my class in Voices in sixth year. But there are things I can't do, no matter how hard I try, and they happen to be basic, fundamental skills, without which I couldn't possibly cope in any form of practice. I can't See worth a damn; it's humiliating, really. We went on a field trip to a battlefield once, and I just stood there, while all the rest of the class were talking to people I couldn't see or hear, watching invisible armies sweeping across the meadow, minutely describing things that to me simply weren't there. The Brother was very kind to me, but I could feel his contempt. I'd have quit the Studium then and there if I'd had any place to go.

THERE I WAS, then; twenty-five years old, penniless, unqualified—I had my basic degree, but with no references or recommendations, it was useless for all practical purposes; no family to sponge off, nothing.

Again, not strictly true. When you leave, you're supposed to hand in your textbooks, which are of course restricted texts, illegal to own for non-adepts. I guess I had things on my mind. I neglected to give my books back when I left, and when a nice man in the booksellers' quarter offered me sixty-five angels for the set, I hesitated, but only long enough for him to say *all right, seventy.*

One of those seventy angels bought me enough industrial-strength brandy to drown my conscience and my sorrows. Five of them got me an attic room for a month in the Tanneries. I put aside twenty-five quarters for food and so forth; the rest I spent on paints, brushes, eighth-inch ten-year-seasoned lime-wood boards, gesso, a fine-tooth saw, a framer's hammer, twelve sticks of willow charcoal, two quarters' worth of wire nails and ten sheets of gold leaf. Then I went to the Golden Spire temple, by way of the dockyards (you can always pick up a few scraps of sixteenth-inch veneer offcuts from the trash bins outside the Arsenal) and spent a day making sketches.

I spoilt three good boards and a quarter of a sheet of the gold leaf before I came up with anything that looked like anything. The fourth board was more or less all right, but I looked at it for a bit and threw it on the fire. The fifth attempt I gilded, framed and took down to the Golden Spire steps. An hour later, I'd sold it, for nine angels. And that was that. In the few seconds it took for me to let go of the board and accept the coins, I was transformed—greater and more wonderful magic than any Form I'd learned at the Studium—into a professional iconographer.

It's a wonderful feeling when, after a quarter of a century of frustrating bewilderment, you finally find out who you are. I won't say it didn't come as a surprise, but really, I didn't mind in the least. I imagine it's what coming home must feel like, though of course I wouldn't know about that.

In orthodox icon-painting, there are nine subjects;

1. The victory of the Invincible Sun
2. The ascent of the Invincible Sun
3. The triumph of the Invincible Sun
4. The Invincible Sun in glory
5. The Invincible Sun, wearing lorus and divitision and holding labarum and globus cruciger, receiving the homage of the First Emperor
6. The Invincible Sun, crowned, wearing chlamys and holding acacia, giving the key of the City to the First Emperor
7. As 3, but the Invincible Sun wears the double crown without pendetilia
8. The transmigration of the Invincible Sun
9. The coronation of the Invincible Sun

There are those who take the view that the limited range of subject matter in iconography tends to stifle creativity and holds back the development of the graphic arts. This is simply and demonstrably untrue. Look at icons painted a thousand years ago and you'll see significant differences. In Category 5, for example, a thousand years ago the Invincible Sun held the labarum in his left hand and the globus in his right; these days, it's the other way around. Category 7 was added as recently as AUC 1744, so it's barely five hundred years old. On a more intangible level, stylistic innovation is the only real constant; just look at the different ways in which shading is used by Symbatus, say, and Laelianus. Or take the single tear on the Sun's face in Category 2. Scylitzes uses at least four distinct colours, from dove grey to pure linen white. Macrianus, by contrast, merely hints at its presence with a fleck of silver, visible only from certain angles. And Corydon notoriously left it out altogether in his great Recessional Triptych—which led, of course, to his temporary anathemisation, furious debates in the Golden Chapter, and a serious riot in Ap' Escatoy. Sorry,

but no; anyone who says that the conventions are a limiting factor in iconography is missing the point completely. That's like saying all people are identical and interchangeable just because they have one head and two legs.

Anyhow, the conventions suit me just fine. They're a wonderful thing if you can paint the Invincible Sun, and I can. Partly it's a gift I was born with. Mostly, though, it's cheating.

I WASN'T THERE when the silk merchant in Conessus beat his wife to death with a footstool, nor when that deranged woman set fire to the orphanage in Salim Beal. When those terrible murders were going on in the Potters' quarter I was out of town, delivering two Category Fours to the Glorious Hope monastery. Quite obviously I had nothing to do with the plague in Antecyra, nor could anybody possibly hold me responsible in any way for the Boc Bohec earthquake, the Seal Island tidal wave, the flooding in Sembrai or the outbreak of the Second Vesani War. True, I was in the City when senator Bryennius killed his children and their nurse, and when the Olybrias family were all found dead in their beds. I was in the City; so were approximately two hundred and fifty thousand other people. There's not a single shred of evidence to connect me to any of these terrible things. And, true, I have the ability, which I was born with; so were the six hundred or so adepts of the Studium, not to mention the staff, students and visiting fellows of the six daughter academies spread across the empire, and the unquantified number of untrained and unidentified talented who have the misfortune to live in foreign lands. I tell myself that I worry too much about these things.

I CHEAT.

You must promise not to tell anybody. For one thing, it'd destroy my reputation, and the price of my canvasses would

plummet, causing distress and financial loss to all the innocent people who've spent so much money buying them. Also, it's against the law. Actually, I'm not sure how anybody could bring a prosecution, since offences involving misuse of the talent are covered by canon law and therefore can't be prosecuted by the civil authority, but since I never qualified I'm not officially an adept and therefore can't be tried in front of an ecclesiastical court. It's one of those grey areas, and I have no particular desire to be the cause of a bright light being brought to shine on it.

I mentioned that I can do some Forms. One of these is a tricky little thing called *talis artifex*. You won't find it in any of the books, even if you were allowed to read them. *Talis artifex* is proscribed, which means it's illegal to use; also to copy out, quote from, refer to in passing, even in an approved scholarly commentary, or even to know by heart. But—well, you can't really expect scientists to destroy data once it's been discovered, or scholars to burn authentic source material. Worse than murder, to the academic mindset. So *talis artifex* still exists, in the fifth volume of the Appendix to the Universal Concordat, which is located on the closed shelves on the west wall of the South hall of the New Library, on the third floor, next to the fine stained-glass window with the scenes from the Ascension, by Scylitzes. I guess that if anyone's to blame, it's the architect who built the South hall, and thought it'd be a good idea to have a drainpipe running down that side of the building so close to the window; or possibly the leadsmith who made the drainpipe, and decided it'd look better with the fluted neo-Romantic decorative twiddles, which really do look very fine but which provide excellent footholds for bad people, like me, who have other uses for drainpipes beside the collection and removal of rainwater.

(Here let the record show that the Brother who did my careers interview neglected to mention one of my most significant talents, namely climbing up things in the dark. He can't be blamed for that, since I've tried to keep it quiet, for various reasons. Still.)

So; on a moonless night in my second year, I made the acquaintance of *talis artifex*. Needless to say I'd never heard of it, and the book doesn't actually tell you what it does and what it's for; it just sets out the words and tells you what Room you need to be in and what you have to do once the words take effect. I copied it out on a scrap of waste parchment, along with a bunch of other equally illegal Forms from the same source, went back to my cell and tried to figure out what I'd just got hold of.

A problem that inevitably goes with stealing illegal Forms you don't understand is that there's nobody you can ask. Presumably somewhere in the Studium there was someone who knew how you made the thing work, and what you had to look out for, and all that; but it goes without saying, I couldn't expect any help from anyone. All I could do was try it out and see if I could figure it out for myself. Not such a problem for an accomplished adept, but for someone like me, painfully aware of his own shortcomings, it was rather a daunting prospect. Still, with the likelihood of being thrown out of the Studium at any moment hanging over me and the sure and certain knowledge that I'd have a living to make and precious few assets to help me make it, I couldn't afford to turn my back on anything that might prove useful in my near and unpromising future. If it's banned, I argued, it must do something, and that something must be pretty big and powerful; in which case, in the right circumstances, it's got to be worth something to somebody. It's reasoning like that, of course, which led the Order to prohibit such things in the first place. I only wish they'd made a better job of it.

To perform *talis artifex*, you need to be in the east Room on the fifth floor. Rooms have never been a problem for me. All I have to do is close my eyes and imagine a door in the nearest wall. I open the door, and there's a staircase. Up the staircase; there's a first floor landing with four doors at the cardinal points, or I can carry

on up to the second, third, fourth, fifth or sixth floors. Actually, I'd never ventured beyond the fifth floor, because in order to survive up there, so our lecturer told us in First year, you need to be at least competent in *mundus vergens*, which I've never been able to do. Still, that leaves twenty of the twenty-four Rooms that I can get to and work in, so I've never lost much sleep over it.

Fifth east is not one of my favourites. According to the Appendix to the Universal Concordat, it exists in the same elevation of the same plane as Absolute One; which means, in the split second during which you cross the threshold and shut the door carefully behind you, technically speaking you're dead. Of course you come to life again the moment the door closes, which is nice, but you have to die again when you leave. In practice, you're dead for such a short fragment of time that your heart doesn't have a chance to stop beating, and you're not supposed to be able to notice anything at all. But I always get a sort of choking fit, like I'm suffocating. Purely my imagination, of course, but none the less upsetting for all that. Also, there's something about the Room itself that always gives me a splitting headache—not while I'm there, not after I leave and come back to the here and now, but forty-eight hours later, infallibly, like clockwork, every time. *Renovare dolorem* won't shake it, and neither will willow-bark tea. I just have to lie down with the blinds drawn and keep still and quiet until about half an hour after Vespers, by which point it begins to wear off, though it leaves me weak and shaky. *You look like death*, people say to me when they see me like that, and I nod and say, *yes*, and hope they'll go away.

But fifth east is where you have to go to do *talis artifex*, so I go there. The first time—remember, at this point I had no idea what *talis artifex* does or what was supposed to happen—I walked in and closed the door behind me, and there was this man sitting in a chair looking down at something he was resting on his knee. I couldn't see his face or what he was up to because he had the light from the window behind him.

"Oh," he said, looking up, "it's you."

"Excuse me?" I said.

"About time you showed up," he said; and that was when I realised what was wrong, or at least very unusual. It made me choose my words carefully.

"Excuse me," I said, "but do you know me?"

That didn't deserve a reply, apparently. "It's all ready for you," he said, and then I could see what he was doing. He was painting an icon. He gave it a sort of oh-well-could-be-worse sideways glance, then picked it up carefully by the edges and held it out at me. "There you go," he said. "Careful, the gesso's still a bit tacky."

I didn't take it, naturally. "Excuse me," I said, "but what's this for?"

He gave me a bewildered look; then he started to laugh. "Oh for crying out loud," he said. "You don't know, do you?"

"I'm sorry, I don't—"

"You don't know what it's for." He gave me an enormous smirky grin and put the icon back on his knee. Suddenly I wanted it more than anything in the whole world. "You don't *know*," he taunted me. "You clown."

"All right." By then I was too angry to give a damn about anything. "Let me see if I can guess."

He shook his head. "Not in a million years."

"*Talis artifex*," I said (he winced), "meaning 'such a craftsman'."

"So what?"

And suddenly I knew. No idea how. Well, in retrospect, I have several viable hypotheses, but now of course it's far too late. "It's a Form for creating things," I said. "Artefacts. Works of art."

He raised his eyebrows. I could see him quite clearly now. He was an old man, bald, fat, many chins, liver spots on scalp and hands, pale blue eyes. "Not bad," he said. "Not art, necessarily. Anything you like, so long as it's made by human hands."

"But the very best quality."

"Of course," he replied gravely. "In all other respects I may be ethically bankrupt, but I give value for money. Ask anybody." He held the icon out again. "You want it or not?"

I hesitated. "When I get back—"

He frowned at me. "What do you want, a user's manual? Take it, or go away. Your choice."

It was a Category 6, outstanding, magnificent; and when I got back, opened my eyes and found myself sitting in the chair I'd been sitting in when I closed my eyes a fraction of a second earlier, there it was, in my hands, the gesso still gleaming slightly on top of the gold leaf. I could distinctly remember having painted it; every step of its creation, the planning, the composition, the charcoal sketches, drawing the outlines, grinding and mixing the colours, the painting, the fixing, applying the gesso, gently pressing down the gold leaf, the final inking in of the names and signature with the pin-feather of a woodcock. Only I hadn't bought my paints or sold my textbooks yet. I was still a student in good standing at the Studium, and I'd never painted an icon in my life. Didn't know how to, in fact.

I said it was a Category 6, and it was. I've also talked briefly about the creative dynamic between innovation and tradition. My innovation—I distinctly remembered making the decision and executing it—was to paint a small window in the wall of the City gatehouse, just above and to the left of the First Emperor's head.

I knew exactly what to do. I wrapped an old pillowcase round it, took it to a patch of waste ground I know out back of the Excise warehouse, drenched it in lamp-oil and set light to it. It burned with a green flame, which was weird.

Let me rephrase that slightly. I knew exactly what had to be done. I have this instinct, in fact, for knowing what has to be done—the right thing, the proper course of action, and of course its antithesis, the wrong thing, the very bad thing. Trouble is, I don't always follow that instinct. Not, I hasten to add, because I'm particularly reckless, feckless, irresponsible or plain stupid. It's

always circumstance, bad luck, unforeseeable supervening factors, someone else's fault. In this case, it was leaving the Studium with no useful qualifications, no money, nowhere to go. I knew exactly what had to be done and what had to be not-done. No grey areas this time. Perfect noonday clarity. But what can you do?

ALLOW ME TO introduce myself. My name is Epistemius.

No it isn't, of course. You couldn't pronounce my name. Actually, it's been so long since I was around native no-Vei speakers, *I* couldn't pronounce my name. But when I joined the Studium, naturally I took a name in religion, like you do. I called myself after a twelfth-century Patriarch of Perimadeia—if you're trying to figure out who I am, you can look up the list, but it won't do you much good; there were thirty-six Patriarchs in the course of the twelfth century, and all of them named themselves after Fathers of the Early Temple, so go fish. Then, when I left the Studium and set up as a professional artist, naturally I chose myself a *nom de brosse*, like you do. I chose Epistemius in honour of Epistemius of Tyana, an unjustly neglected Desert school master of the early Mannerist period. Actually, I chose the name because my original idea was to forge Epistemius icons, and the law says that if you sign your actual name to a painting, even if it's a perfect copy of someone else's work, that's not a crime. You see; always anxious to obey the law and do the right thing. Story of my fucking life.

The forgery thing never got off the ground. No need. Thanks to *talis artifex*, my artistic career hit the ground running. The ninth icon I painted sold for a hundred and six angels, an obscene amount of money, more than my poor old father made in a year fair-copying writs and title deeds in a law office. That was just the start. My fifteenth icon was commissioned at one thousand angels. I'll write that again, so there's no mistake. One thousand angels. Ridiculous.

At that point, I realised it was time to quit. I was still living in the squalid dump in the Tanneries, with three angels left out of the proceeds of selling the textbooks, plus the eighteen hundred-odd I'd made from my fifteen sales. I hadn't spent a single trachy on anything except rent, food, paints, very occasionally a bottle of bleach-grade domestic red to help me get over the after-painting horrors I mentioned earlier. Eighteen hundred angels; I could've bought a farm, or a ship, or a share in an established business. All my troubles were over, and the mind-crushing dread that had been haunting me ever since I realised I wasn't going to make the grade at the Studium had at some point evaporated and drifted away, without my even noticing it was gone. Three months of earning my own living, and I didn't have to any more. Set up for life. Free and clear. Mission accomplished, job done, the rest of the day's your own. Oh yes.

Time to quit, but I didn't. Since then I've often asked myself why, and the answer's stupidly simple. People kept asking me to paint icons, and offering me silly amounts of money; and I thought, all right, one more trip, just one more, and that'll be that. But it was so hard to say no when abbots and viscounts and chairmen of companies came to call on me—*they* came to *me*, up my seven flights of stairs to my desperately-needs-painting doesn't-quite-close-properly door in the stinking heart of the Tanneries, and they were polite, respectful, anxious, keen, desperate to get the chance to buy a genuine Epistemius, so they wouldn't be left out. I tried to shoo them away by doubling my price; two thousand angels, or I wouldn't lay a finger on a brush. They'd look round at the grey patches on the walls and the cobwebs on the ceiling and the blue mould on the wedge of stale cheese on the windowsill, and they'd say, two thousand, no problem, would you like me to write you a draft now? I'm far too weak to resist that kind of bullying. I gave in. I knew it was the wrong thing to do. I always know.

THERE WAS THIS client. He was a dealer in cotton, ivory and nutmeg, fifty-six years old, member of the Board of Trade, governor of his local Temple. His daughter was getting married, and he needed a special gift for his son-in-law's parents; father was a judge, mother was an off-relation of the Vatatzes, so it'd have to be something really outstanding. He knew for a fact that they were buying him a snow-white eagle; "and I don't do falconry, I don't have the time, I hate the outdoors, but they'll expect me to go hawking with them on the Downs, so I'll just have to grin and bear it. You understand, I'm sure. I need to be able to hold my own, to fight back, or they'll swamp me. Please," he said, "can you help me? Money isn't an issue."

My heart bled for him, as I'm sure yours would have done; so, for three thousand angels I agreed to paint him a Category 6. He was delighted. I could see him filling up with joy, like he was a jug or something. "That's fantastic," he said. "Really wonderful, the best news I've had all year. When will it be ready?"

"I'm a bit busy right now," I said. "But before the spring, definitely."

He looked at me. "The wedding's in ten days," he said.

I always tell them I'm busy. It's not true. "Fine," I told him. "It'll be ready."

I used to paint at an old beechwood kitchen table. It was already there when I moved in. I shifted it a little so it was next to the window, to catch as much light as possible. Silly, really. Given my method of creating works of art, I could just as easily have worked in a pitch-black cellar with my hands tied behind my back. All I needed was a wall, to imagine a door in. I didn't even have to be able to see the wall, just as long as I knew it was there. But I'd read somewhere about real artists' studios, and they have four really big windows, one in each wall, so they can get all the light that's going, every degree and graduation. It's supposed to be different for iconographers, who paint by the inner light. Zeuxis was blind, and Symbatus used to paint with his eyes shut. Bardanes the Younger worked in a tower with solid

walls and a single small hole in the roof, so that all the light came from above. I think I liked sitting by the window because it meant I could look out, let me rephrase that, so I could look *down*, on the heads of the poor people in the street, one of whom I would've been, if I hadn't found a good way of cheating.

So anyway, I painted the poor fool his Category 6, or at least it got painted while I sat with my eyes shut; a day for everything to dry properly—tell me why, for crying out loud, if it's all done by magic, why is it always still slightly wet? Would it kill them to dry the paint and cure the gesso, just once?—and then send a page round to say it's ready for collection. I made them come to me, of course. Catch me climbing up and down all those stairs. Bad enough doing it in Rooms, where you never get tired or out of breath—

He was thrilled with it, naturally. I got my draft, drawn on the Tarasius Brothers, so as good as a big stack of coins and far less heavy to cart about. Thanks, I said; no, thank *you*, he said, and left. And, as he walked through the door (I guess he thought I couldn't see him at that angle) his face changed slightly. Just a hint of—oh, I don't know. Maybe *I got away with it*, maybe *I fooled him*. Maybe a touch of spite, gloating, savage happiness. And maybe I imagined it.

But I wasn't there, I really and truly wasn't anywhere near, I have witnesses, when a Court of Appeals judge strangled his aristocratic wife with his bare hands before slashing his wrists with a razor. When I heard about it, in some bakehouse somewhere, I didn't make the connection straight away. It was only later, when I overheard someone saying that the wife was a Vatatzes on her mother's side and the family were furious, up in arms, that I remembered what my client had told me, and the look on his face I wasn't supposed to see.

WHAT DO YOU take me for? Some kind of hero? What did I do? I did nothing. I thought about it, a lot, but I was able to persuade myself that there was insufficient evidence to form anything apart from a purely intuitive connection between the unfortunate judge and my icon and the prohibition on *talis artifex*. The latter, I'll admit, had given me a degree of concern; but there were all sorts of good reasons why the Studium should've decided to outlaw such a confoundedly useful Form. Think about it. If any adept could perform any work of art or craft simply by going to a Room and placing an order, it'd be the ruination of artisan industry right across the Empire. We exist by permission of the untalented. They put up with us partly because they really have no idea what we can or can't do, partly because we keep ourselves to ourselves and don't throw our weight around. Upset that delicate balance and you'd have riots and adepts burnt alive in the streets (which is precisely what happened in Auxentia about ninety years ago). Now that's a perfectly good reason for prohibiting *talis artifex*; logical, reasonable and no need to dream up anything dark and sinister to account for the ban. That's what I told myself, and I ended up believing it. I don't know. Maybe I should've been a lawyer.

But then there was the silk merchant in Conessus, and the fire in Salim Beal, and a bunch of other sad news items, and I went to the Bank and asked how much money there was in my account, and the clerk went away and looked in the book, and when he came back he was much more polite than he had been; he offered me a seat and a glass of wine, and was there anything else he could do for me? I walked home slowly. The whole point of painting icons was making money, surely; enough money to live on, to be comfortable, not to have to worry any more. Well, I'd reached that point, passed it, all my troubles were over. It occurred to me that I was still living in a horrible dark, damp room in the Tanneries and eating stale bread and cheese that was only fit for pigs or students; as if I was still waiting for something.

But that something had happened, and it had all worked out just fine, so why was I still there? Why was I still painting icons?

Not, it goes without saying, because I'm a natural born artist who lives only to create things of beauty and joys forever. I don't actually know if I *can* paint; I haven't tried since I was sixteen. Certainly not because I'm driven by my faith to glorify the Invincible Sun, since I don't believe in Him and I never have. The best explanation I could come up with was that I'd become addicted to making money. I believe it's a common complaint among people who used to be poor, and who can never quite bring themselves to believe that they've got enough now and will never be poor again. Just another five hundred or another thousand, they tell themselves, to be on the safe side, just in case, because you never know. I could believe that that was me; but even if that was what was keeping me in the nasty attic room doing illegal magic, there was no reason why I had to carry on that way. Other methods of making money—respectable methods, practically harmless—were now open to me. I could buy into a trading company, or get a farm or two, or invest in a building consortium in the City. Obviously, there's no way of making money that doesn't hurt somebody somewhere, but there are degrees of scale and immediacy. A merchant prince or a banker or a wealthy landowner isn't generally required to take responsibility for the people he cheats, screws and starves; society couldn't function if that were the case. It was time, I couldn't help thinking, that I got out of icon painting and into some decent line of business.

BUT YOU KNOW how it is. A good night's sleep, followed by an early morning visit from the president and guardians of the Scriveners' Guild—two thousand angels for a Category 1, to be hung above the altar in the new chapel they were building at the Guildhouse. One possible explanation I hadn't really considered; maybe I just don't like saying no to people. Anyway, I took the

commission. They were delighted; and so what if their joy came from knowing that they were going to get a genuine Epistemius, while their deadly rivals in the Clerks' Federation had nothing more impressive in their chapel than a small, smoke-blackened bit of old plank optimistically attributed to Narses the Elder. Joy is joy, and it's contagious.

So, after a light lunch and an hour reading Saloninus' *Essays* (which always helps me clear my mind), I closed my eyes and thought of a door. It swung open, and there were the stairs, and shortly afterwards I closed the door of fifth east carefully behind me.

Now it's a well-known fact about Rooms that they're rarely the same twice. There's a bucketload of theories to explain it; the truth is, nobody knows and practitioners don't really care. On this occasion, fifth east was looking particularly fine. The walls were covered in the most exquisite mosaic—hunting and pastoral scenes, I think—while the ceiling was a gilded fresco in the style of Dalassenus, a sort of giant Category Five but with attendant troops of angels and transcended saints watching from the sidelines. There was a stunning rose window, with blue, yellow and red glass, which drew the accents out of the walls and sort of mixed with them, creating colours I'm not sure I'd ever seen before. Instead of the usual table there was a great big marble slab, behind which sat a short, thin dark-haired young man with a weak, unshaven chin and huge brown eyes with bags under them. He looked up at me and gave me a shy smile. He was me.

Well, you see all sorts of weird stuff, and mostly it doesn't mean a damn thing. "Hello," he said. "What can I do for you?"

I tried not to stare. "I want an icon," I said.

"Of course you do." He was still smiling in that awkward, anxious-to-please way I really wish I could grow out of some day. "What've you got in mind? Any particular category?"

"One," I said.

He nodded. "That shouldn't be a problem. How big?"

I always ask that; because people never tell you unless you ask, and if it's not the size they wanted, you get the blame. "About so big," I said, doing the hand movement my Scrivener friends had done two hours earlier. "Gilded, of course."

"Naturally." Of course gilded. Icons are always gilded, but customers keep telling me like I don't know my own business. "When do you need it by?"

"Soon as possible." I looked at him. He was making notes, in my tiny, neat-looking-but-very-hard-to-read handwriting; C*at 1*, *m*, *gld'd*, *asap*. Nobody on earth writes like me. Nobody else can read what I've written. I couldn't stand it any longer. "Who are you?" I said.

It's the one question you don't ask. He gave me a slightly hungry expression. "You want to know my name?"

Trick question, of course. "You're Epistemius."

"That's right." He nodded happily. "An assumed name, of course, the name used by whoever it is who paints Epistemius' paintings. Was that the answer you wanted?"

I got the feeling I was being let off the hook, given a second chance. "I'm sorry," I said quickly.

"Not at all." His smile faded. "If I were you," he said, "I'd get out of here, right now. And I don't think I'd come back."

"If you were me."

He smiled feebly and nodded. "I know," he said. "But it's good advice. You'd do well to follow it."

I took a step back, then hesitated. "My icon," I said.

"What? Oh." He nodded and handed it to me. "You do know what'll happen, don't you?" he said sadly.

"No."

"Ah well."

"What? What'll happen?"

"It won't be your fault." He looked straight at me. I looked away. "It's an interesting idea," he went on. "Supposing you knew

there was something you could do, and it'd lead to something bad, but nobody would ever blame you for it. It's better than the perfect crime, because even if there was such a thing, there's always the possibility that you could confess, and then they'd take you away and hang you. But if this something couldn't possibly be your fault, even if you confessed, nobody would listen."

"What? What something?"

"You mustn't blame yourself," he said. "Please bear that in mind. You're not responsible."

The room was getting dark. I looked past him, and saw that the window was closed and shuttered. One of the few things I learned at the Studium was, don't hang around in dark Rooms.

"Goodbye," he called out after me as I opened the door. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

IT WAS A beautiful icon, though I do say so myself. Into it, someone had poured all the sins and sorrows of the world, above which the Invincible Sun rose in glory, rising from them but completely unsullied and untouched, pure triumphant innocence, His face perfectly serene, the absence of expression that includes all possible expressions, just as rivers drain into the sea. I wish I'd painted that, I said to myself, and I signed it. In passing I noticed that the window in the tower in the background (my own unique touch; my sole contribution to iconography) was closed and shuttered; also, that all the light in the picture was coming from the front.

I WAITED, AND nothing happened. I waited two days, two weeks, two months, still nothing. Finally I couldn't bear it any longer, so I went to the Scriveners' Guildhouse and asked if I could see my icon.

They were delighted to show it to me. The great hall smelt new; drying plaster, a faint sweet smell of new wood, a hint of mustiness from the priceless antique tapestries on the walls. My icon hung in the nave, where the light of three tall, narrow stained glass windows met. The gold burned on a plain white wall. The colours rose up to meet me. "Far be it from me," the President whispered to me, "but I really do think it's the best thing you've ever done."

I wasn't looking at the icon. I was examining the interior of the chapel for obvious fire risks, flaws in the masonry, architects' miscalculations. It all looked safe and solid enough, but you can never be sure, can you?

THREE MONTHS, AND it was tearing me apart. Nothing. Meanwhile, the Scriveners had been showing off their new treasure to anybody they could catch. Seventeen commissions I was offered; name your own price, money no object. They looked stunned when I refused, and offered me more money, still more money, which I declined with a nauseated look on my face, as though they were offering to pay me in worms and sheeps' guts. I'm terribly sorry, I told them, but I've retired. No, really. The genius has left me, I told them; I was only ever a mere vessel for the clarity of the Invincible Sun, which He saw fit to bestow on me for a short time, and which He had now seen fit to withdraw. Not for me to argue, I told them; blessed be His name. And they looked at me, and thought of a number, and doubled it.

SO I WENT to the Studium. It was the first time I'd been back. The porter recognised me, hesitated, remembered that I was now respectable and famous, and gave me a polite smile. Delighted to see me, and would I just wait there while he fetched the Dean and Chapter?

I didn't want to see the Dean and Chapter. "Father Methodius," I told him. "If he's not too busy."

It's the tradition that former students who don't make the grade as adepts but who then go on to make a fortune in the mundane world express their gratitude to the Studium by way of huge cash endowments. Father Methodius wasn't too busy. Not at all.

"I expect you're glad you followed my advice," he said. He hadn't changed at all. He was still round, circle-faced, still the thin white wreath hopelessly besieging the citadel of his tonsure. Was it possible, I wondered, as I sat down in the same chair I'd occupied for my careers interview, that no time at all had passed, and that everything I thought had happened had been an illusion or a dream? Obviously not; Father Methodius was pleased to see me. Therefore something must have happened. "We've been following your career with great interest," he went on. "The foremost man in your field. We're very proud of you."

I can't read minds (*lex mentis*, a seventh-year Form, though in theory it's restricted. Father Methodius was an expert in *lex mentis*) but I knew precisely what he was thinking. A genuine Epistemius would go very nicely in the Dawn chapel, just to the right of the big silver-gilt lectern. Naturally the Studium could afford to pay, but it hadn't got to be offensively rich by paying for things it could get for free. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about," I said. "The fact is, I have a confession to make."

He wasn't reading my mind. It's one of those things you just don't do, except in extreme circumstances. "Really?"

I nodded. I'd been dreading this moment, but now it had come, I felt curiously joyful. I've long suspected that I'll feel that way when I'm on the point of death, though I'm in no great hurry to prove myself right. "I don't actually paint icons," I said. "I make them using an illegal Form." I waited. He just looked at me. "*Talis artifex*."

He blinked. "Talis what?"

Now that was one possibility that simply hadn't occurred to me; that *talis artifex* was so restricted, so secret, so deadly in its effects and consequences that even a Father and member of Inner Chapter hadn't heard of it. The thought was terrifying. "I read it in a restricted book," I told him. "I broke into the library, shortly before I left here. I found it there and I've been using it ever since." I was about to add *I'm sorry* or something like that, but it would've been ridiculous to apologise for a crime of such magnitude. I waited.

Eventually he frowned. "*Talis*—"

"*Artifex*. It enables you to create objects; works of art, handicrafts, the very best quality. You go to fifth east and tell the man there what you want, and when you get back, there it is, real and material. It's in the fifth volume of the Appendix to the Universal Concordat."

He closed his eyes and rubbed his eyelids, as if he'd got dust in them. "I don't think so," he said. "I don't remember it, and I'm quite familiar with the Appendix. In fact, the current edition is mostly my work. If there was a such a Form, I'd know about it."

"It's there all right," I said.

"It's impossible." He was looking straight at me. "The process you describe. It can't be done. People have tried, over the years, but it's a direct breach of Anastasius' fifth law of Matter and Energy. It's—*conjuring*," he said, pulling a slight face. "The sort of thing we like people to think we can do, but of course we can't. I'm sorry, but—"

"Take me to the library," I said. "I'll show you."

He took a great deal of convincing, but eventually we went to the library and stood where I'd been before, in the South Hall of the New building. It looked quite different in daylight, of course, with the light pouring in through the great Scylitzes window. Now that did look familiar. It took me a moment to realise why. Someone had copied it to create the triptych effect in the Scriveners' chapel, where my latest icon was hanging.

Father Methodius reached up onto a shelf and took down a book. "Here we are," he said. "Now, you're not allowed to look at this, so you'll have to direct me to the place."

"Right between *ducis meliora* and *ruat caelum*," I told him. "About a third of the way through, on the right hand side."

He gave me a ferocious look; I wasn't supposed to know about *ducis meliora* or *ruat caelum*, both of which are heavy duty military Forms and horribly dangerous. "We're going to have to do something about security in this building," he said. "Now then, let me see."

He turned a few pages, found the place, looked at me. "Well?" I said.

"There's nothing here." He hesitated, then spread his fingers to obscure the text. "See for yourself."

I looked. Under his left thumb I could see a few words of the directions for *ducis meliora*. Under his right thumb, the opening rubric for *ruat caelum*. Between them, half an inch of blank pearl-grey vellum.

He closed the book and put it back. "You're sure that was the place," he said.

"Yes."

He shook his head. "There's no such Form," he said. "As I told you, it's impossible."

"But I can do it. I've been doing it for years. I make my living—"

"We ought to go now," he said. "We're not supposed to be here."

Halfway down the stairs he stopped dead. "Which Room did you say?" he asked me.

"Excuse me?"

"The Room you go to, to do this Form of yours. Which one?"

"Fifth east," I told him. "You know. It's the only Room with a window in it."

His face was completely blank, just like the Invincible Sun in an icon. "There is no east Room on the fifth floor," he said.

WELL, HOW WAS I to know? I was a piss-poor student. There were *thousands* of things I didn't know.

It took me quite some time to get away, to persuade Father Methodius that I wasn't interested in coming back as a research fellow (with an honorary Deaconate, a research staff of twelve, an office on the third floor of the North tower). He wanted to tell me about the great discoveries of the past and the bunch of apparent misfits, losers and inadequates who'd made them; Phylax, who'd stumbled on *lorica* while chasing after the Philosopher's Stone, or Agrigentarius, who'd spent twenty years jumping off tall buildings in the misguided belief he'd learned how to fly before isolating the root of *fors partis*. He made it sound like I fitted the mould exactly, and I could see his point. Furthermore, he went on, several of the giants of the past had refused to take any credit for their epoch-making discoveries, claiming that they'd been told of them by teachers who proved never to have existed, or that the Invincible Sun had appeared to them in dreams and dictated the exact words. That, he said, is part of the extraordinary mystery of creativity, as manifested in both art and the Science.

I have my own views. I know that nine times out of ten, artistic creativity is the result of an alchemical reaction between a certain latent ability and a pressing need for money. Nor was I prepared to believe, even for a fleeting moment, that I was responsible for *talis artifex*. You've got to be a really exceptionally gifted adept to do research and come up with new Forms, and I'm hopeless, I know I am. No; I read it in a book, and that's all there is to it.

THE SCRIVENERS' CHAPEL burned down. Apparently some careless idiot of a plasterer left a charcoal brazier burning overnight, to dry out wet plaster; it toppled over and sparks caught in the

priceless old tapestries I'd admired so much, and the whole thing went up like a pine-resin torch. The roof-beams burned through, bringing that supremely graceful copper-plated dome crashing down, and the walls crumbled away like cake, and seven men who'd been trying to put the fire out were killed. The only thing that survived—

Yes. It was a miracle, they said. Everything else either burned or crushed or ruined beyond repair by smoke; but the Epistemius icon survived, completely unharmed. A clerk found it among the ashes. The frame was too hot to touch, but the icon itself was still perfect.

So I tried an experiment. Using intermediaries sworn to silence, I bought back, for three thousand angels, a Category Four I'd painted for six hundred. I rented a brickmaker's kiln on the outskirts of the western suburbs, and told the man to stoke it up real good. A burn of best quality bricks takes three days and uses thirteen tons of first quality charcoal. When they raked it out afterwards, there was my icon, as good as new.

I promise you, I promise myself, if it had worked, I'd have got them back somehow—bought, stolen—and destroyed them, every last one, everything I ever painted and sold. But you can't fight something like that. I sold the icon again, for four thousand.

NATURALLY, I SPECULATE. I have theories.

Fact; during my career as an iconographer I painted thirty-six icons. With the money I got for my stolen textbooks, I bought forty-five boards. Four I wasted when I was just starting up before I was satisfied with the results. I have five boards left. Also, my stock of paints, paint ingredients, fixatives, gesso and gold leaf is very nearly exhausted. But, apart from the experiment I'll tell you about in a moment, I've never knowingly picked up a paint-brush since I started shaving. I assumed that that was how it worked; that the Form, mystical and utterly transcendental but

at the same time despicably cheapskate, required me to provide all the raw materials. Some Forms do actually work like that. Bizarre, I know, but that's the Science for you.

Fact; after I failed to burn the icon, I took one of the five remaining boards and the leftover paints and stuff, sat down at my table and tried to paint a Category Three, myself, unaided. Actually, the result wasn't so bad. Proportions, light and shade, use of colour, composition, all perfectly acceptable; looking at it, you'd say it was the work of a technically accomplished amateur. But lifeless, devoid of power and passion, meaningless, dead. I washed the paint off with spirits of salt and scraped the board back to bare wood with a pad of sharkskin.

Fact; of the thirty-six Epistemius icons in existence, twenty-five have been owned by people or institutions that have come to harm in some way. The count so far stands at eighty-nine killed, sixty-seven injured. Of the other eleven, eight are in monasteries. One was stolen, and its whereabouts are unknown. Three of my icons have been involved in a series of misfortunes; in each case, after the death of the original owner, the icon was inherited by an heir who also came to grief. I haven't included the death toll from the Antecyran plague, the Boc Bohec earthquake, the tidal wave, the Sembrai floods or the Vesani war, because the link is rather tenuous; in each case, my icon was displayed in a public building at the epicentre of the disaster, but I would like to point out that there have been any number of plagues, earthquakes, floods and wars in places where there isn't a genuine Epistemius. Not everything is my fault.

I no longer paint, or practise the Science in any shape or form. Father Methodius died about eighteen months ago, killed by a collapsing floor in the West Gallery of the Studium. An unconfirmed report contended that he'd been using a room off the main Gallery as a studio for painting icons, though so far no examples of his work have come to light anywhere. I invested my money in a farm, a ropewalk, a copper mine, a coaching inn on the main East road, and two ships, one of which was lost with all

hands off the Auxentine coast two months ago. But it was properly insured, and my other investments are doing very nicely.

I don't blame myself. After all, a distinguished Father of the Studium certified that there's no such Form as *talis artifex*, and that the effect I mistakenly attributed to it is impossible to achieve. Nothing can be proved or established. I'm in the clear, and all my troubles are over.

# Blue and Gold

Well, let me see," I said, as the innkeeper poured me a beer. "In the morning I discovered the secret of changing base metal into gold. In the afternoon, I murdered my wife."

The innkeeper looked at me. "That'll be two bits," he said.

I dug in my sleeve for the coins. "You don't believe me," he said.

"I believe everybody," the innkeeper replied. "It's my job. Will you be wanting dinner, or just the room?"

Two bits from seven leaves five. "Just the room."

"Ah." The barman nodded and turned away. Alchemists, murderers and other cheapskates, the back of his neck seemed to be saying. I picked up my beer and looked at it. Worse things had happened, but not for a very long time. I drank it anyway. I was thirsty.

Saloninus the philosopher was born in Elpis towards the end of the reign of Philopoemen VI (the exact date is not recorded). He showed early promise during his time at the university, but was prevented from completing his studies by the death of his uncle, on whom he was financially dependent. The university authorities found him a job as a junior porter, and he was allowed to sit in on lectures when his duties allowed. After two years, however, he left Elpis under a cloud, and nothing is known about him until 2763 AUC, when he was arrested in Paraprosdocia on charges of highway robbery and violent assault. Condemned to

the gallows, he was reprieved through the intercession of the Prince Regent, Phocas, a former classmate of his at Elpis, who employed him (much to the consternation of the court) as a scientific adviser. It was around this time that Saloninus began the alchemical experiments that were to culminate in his greatest achievement.

I'm Saloninus, by the way. And I tell lies, from time to time. Which goes to prove the old rule; never entirely trust a man who talks about himself in the third person.

It's true, by the way, about me murdering my wife. At least, I count it as murder. Drink this, I said, it's the elixir of eternal youth. She gave me that look, but she always—well, her opinion of me as a human being was always pretty low, and justifiably so. Saloninus is not a nice man, and that's Saloninus talking. But she never for one moment doubted that I was—am—the finest alchemist the world has ever known. Also true. But even the best of the best makes mistakes from time to time. My mistake, I have since come to appreciate, was adding a quarter drachm of sal draconis. Her second worst mistake was drinking it.

I went up to the room. It was a room. There were four walls, a more or less level floor, and a forty-five-degree ceiling, which is what you get for sleeping right under the eaves. For the first time in a long time, I didn't sleep alone (and, compared with some of the characters I've shared a bed with, the fleas were no bother. At least they didn't keep pulling all the bedclothes off me).

But I slept, which surprised me. I think the six scruples of vis somnis I mixed in with the dregs of my beer helped a bit; but a man who's just watched his wife die in convulsions on the floor has no right to sleep, no matter what. Nor did I have nightmares. If you must know, I dreamt about the sea (which definitely means something, but I've never quite managed to figure out what).

I know I must've slept like the proverbial log, because I distinctly remember being woken up. There were soldiers, two of them, in those shiny coal-scuttle-on-backwards helmets that

only the Kitchen Knights are allowed to wear. They were looking at me as though I was something they'd found in an apple.

"Saloninus," one of them said.

"No," I replied.

"You're with us."

Actually, I'm not sure if one of them wasn't one of the men who arrested me the time before last, when I tried stowing away aboard the avocado freighter. Soldiers in tall shiny helmets all tend to merge together in my memory and besides, I've never been that special with faces.

They let me dress, which was nice of them. I hate being arrested in the nude. But while I was dressing, one of them stood between me and the door, and the other one guarded the window. Well done, boys, I thought. It always pays to read the file first.

"What time is it?" I asked. They didn't answer. Warning; do not allow the subject to engage you in idle conversation. He has the ability to suck men's souls out through their ears. I wish.

All in all, I was fairly relaxed about it. Being arrested by the scuttlehats was probably the best thing that could've happened to me at that point. It meant prince Phocas had been told, and had decided to have his goons arrest me before the real law did. I had absolutely no interest in explaining my recent past to the Knights of Equity, thank you very much. Phocas, bless him, would make sure that wouldn't happen.

Soon as I'd pulled on my shirt and pants and laced up my boots and put my coat on, they herded me to the door, like stockmen guiding a pig with a board. There was a third one outside on the stairs, which I found impressive and almost flattering. I did that palms-wide-open gesture that tells them you really don't intend to give them any grief, and allowed them to sandwich me down the stairs into the bar.

My friend the innkeeper was there, next to the fire, moving grease around the plates with an old rag. He gave me the look that means he'd known all along it was just a matter of time. I grinned weakly at him. Then I stopped dead in my tracks. The

two guards behind me froze in time not to cannon into me. "It's all right," I said. "I just need to pay the innkeeper for my room."

There was a slight worried edge in the guard's voice when he said, "Don't worry about it."

"No, please," I said. "I hate owing money. Look, if you don't trust me, I'll give you the coins, and you can give them to him. All right?"

He looked at the innkeeper, who shrugged. "How much?" the guard said.

"Two bits."

I smiled. "I'm going to put my hand in my coat pocket," I said. "Nice and slow." Which was what I did. Then I took it out again nice and fast, and threw the walnut-sized nugget of compressed pulveus fulminans that I never leave home without straight into the heart of the fire. What can I say? I have amazing hand-eye co-ordination. One of the very few gifts I was born with.

People have the wrong idea about pulveus fulminans, presumably because they believe what I wrote about it when I discovered it. They think that when ignited it goes off with a devastating roar, blowing out windows and cracking rafters. Not at all. What you get is an enormous whoosh, rather like a giant drawing in breath and sneezing, and a ball—often a perfect sphere, which intrigues me—of white smoke, and sometimes a sort of core of condensed fire, depending on how much of the stuff you use. Also depending on quantity, you can get a blast of hot air that'll knock you sideways and singe your eyebrows if you're too close. My standard getting-away-from-people nugget doesn't do that. Last thing I want to do is risk hurting someone and getting myself in even worse trouble. I use five drachms of the stuff, pressed wet between two empty nutshells and allowed to dry on a windowsill for a day. That'll more or less guarantee you three seconds when nobody's looking at you, without trashing the place or setting light to the thatch.

To their credit, the three scuttlehats were after me pretty quickly. Running away from people, however, happens to be

another of the very few gifts I was born with. It's not the quantity, I always maintain, it's the quality.

You may think, basing your opinion on what I've told you so far, that escaping from prince Phocas' guards at this stage in my career was a stupid thing to do; shortsighted, also tinged with ingratitude. There's Phocas, you're thinking, going out on a limb to rescue his old college chum from the proper authorities—not for the first time, according to the subtext. All right, I may not have deliberately killed my wife (an unwarranted assumption on your part, I should point out) so maybe it wasn't murder, but didn't I just say the last thing I wanted was to get myself arrested by the civil authorities? Damn fool should've gone quietly, you're thinking, and I can't fault your logic.

Instead, I ran like hell for about five minutes, at which point I'd used up my emergency turn of speed and had to stop for a bit. Fortunately, it looked like I'd done the trick. Paraprosdocia's the sort of town where people look the other way when they see someone running like hell, and it'd never occur to anyone who lives there to give a truthful answer to any question along the lines of *which way did he go?* Just to be on the safe side, I sneaked in behind a big stack of barrels, sat down and emptied my mind of harsh, stressful thoughts.

Free and clear, then, for now. Net assets; what I've got in my head and my pockets. Net liabilities; everything not listed under net assets. First time I've been in this position? No.

I was born with all the advantages and had a good start in life. It was scrupulous honesty and clarity of thought that made me end up in this mess. Really and truly.

I had five bits cash and a stack of barrels to hide behind. On the other side of the barrels it was daylight, which made moving about the city a dangerous indulgence. If I could only make it to Choris Seautou, of course, everything would be different. In Choris I had another name, twelve thousand angels in the Catholic & Apostolic Bank and at least one business associate I could trust; also, there's no extradition treaty between Choris and

the Empire, and the mayor of Choris was an old college chum. But Choris is seventy-nine miles from Paraprosdocia, any day of the week, no matter how you measure it, and the first thing the Knights would've done would've been to put men who knew me on all five City gates. Also, there were still things I had to do here before I could indulge in the luxury of escape. Considering my situation dispassionately and in depth, I was forced to the conclusion that I'd have to be brave, resourceful and imaginative. Depressing. I hate situations that bring out the best in me.

In my mind, I drew a map of the city. Luckily, I had a rough idea of where I was, because over the top of the barrels I could just make out the spire of the Early Day Temple, with the sun more or less behind it. That put me in Coppergate; not a bad place to be. For a start, it's pretty much the centre of town, about as far from the gates as you can get, so they wouldn't expect me to be there. Also, it's a maze of yards, alleys, passages, roads that go nowhere. I'd probably hear a methodical search coming well in advance, because of all the yelling and swearing from the snarled-up traffic. Having reviewed all the data (scientific method, you see), analysed it and considered the various inescapable conclusions, I closed my eyes, stretched my legs out and went to sleep. It's what animals do, and when it comes to being hunted by predators, they're the professionals. Conserve energy, make yourself small and quiet in a dark, hidden place.

When I woke up, it was just starting to get dark. I could see the glow of lanterns on the far side of my wall of barrels, and a middle-blue sky.

Generally speaking, I don't like sleep much. I tend to wake up with all the symptoms of a hangover—fuzzy head, furry tongue, sometimes a sharp pain in the temples, bitterly unfair when you consider that I very rarely drink strong liquor—and it takes me several hours before I'm human again, let alone intelligent. But sometimes, just occasionally, when I go to sleep with a really bad problem on my mind, I wake up with the answer suddenly there, fully-formed and perfect, like a chicken's egg in the straw.

It says a lot about me that the answer to my problems was the *first* thing that came to me when I opened my eyes. There was an appreciable delay before the memory of the other big thing I'd done the previous day caught up with me. Killed my wife. Oh, that.

There are things you carry around with you wherever you go, like a snail's shell; they slow you down and crush you, and you live in them. The image that came bounding to greet me was of my hand holding the cup—glazed pottery, because the sort of substances I work with do the most appalling things to metal, even gold and silver—and her hand taking it; and she said, "Are you sure it's safe?" and I said, "Don't be bloody stupid, of course it's *safe*." And she tilted the cup and swallowed twice and said, "God, that tastes revolting," and put it down, and then there was a moment of dead silence, and then she said, "So now what?" and I said, "You've got to let it work, it'll take a moment," and she said, "Will I, you know, feel anything?" and I said, "Well," and then she screamed.

I'm not proud of one of my greatest achievements. I've learned to lift certain things out of my mind, at least for a while. Let's not think about that, I told myself. Instead—

My brilliant idea, which came to me in a dream (which sounds better than *came to me in my sleep*). I got up off the ground, didn't stand up straight, kept hunched and low so I could peek over the top of the barrels. The yard was empty, but someone had been to the trouble and expense of lighting three lanterns and hanging them on hooks on the wall. There's a common misconception that bright lights scare away thieves. Really, it just gives us, I mean them, light to see by. I straightened up and walked slowly and wearily (not acting; stiff neck) round the barrels, out of the yard, down an alley and into Coppergate.

I may have committed a lot of crimes, but I'm not a criminal, as such. Wish I was. Criminals, at least the ones I've known over the years, have a wonderfully instinctive way of doing difficult things, like walking unobtrusively down a street. A good thief

is practically invisible. A basically honest man like me trying to walk innocently is the most suspicious sight you'll ever see. Just as well there was nobody about—well, there wouldn't be; day shift had just gone home, night shift not yet started. The ideal time to be out and about in Coppergate, and I wish I could claim credit for astute tactical thinking.

Walked up Coppergate, left into Old Street, right into The Mile; fifth left, second right. No reason whatsoever to assume he'd be at home. I stood under his window and looked up. A light burning behind the screens. I tried the door; open. Sometimes, you get bursts of good luck, for no perceptible reason.

I went up the stairs, which were dark and smelt of burnt tallow and urine. His door actually has his name on it. I knocked and pushed it open in one smooth movement.

Astyages, my old college chum, is a writer. He writes stuff. He'll write you a bill of lading, a chancery pleading, a letter home enclosing two angels, a letter to a rich uncle begging for money, a deed of partnership, a will, a pretty good sonnet (five bits extra if he has to make one up from scratch). The joke is, he has lousy handwriting. But he does really pretty initial capital letters, with loops and scrolls and even gold leaf, if you've got the money. He says he only does scrivening to keep himself fed and clothed while he's finishing off his great thesis, *Some Aspects of the Caesura in Late Mannerist Minor Lyric Poetry*. Really, he's a spy for the government. At least, that's what he tells everybody.

"You," he said, twisting round in his chair and glowering at me over his spectacles (his dearest and only valuable possession; inherited from his father, a senior lecturer at Elpis before the War. Astyages actually has perfect eyesight, in spite of his trade, but he wears the things because they make him feel scholarly). "Actually, I'm not surprised. You lunatic."

I smiled. "Mind if I sit down?"

He shrugged. "What do you want?"

"Message to Phocas," I said, and he sighed.

"Tell him yourself," he said wearily. "I had the scuttlehats here, earlier."

"Of course you did," I said. "Sorry about that."

"That's all right," he said. "There's beer in the jug, probably some cheese in the cupboard." Astyages practically lives on cheese; he gets it cheap from the dairy on Ropewalk, but you've got to scrape the green bits off. "And I suppose you'll be wanting money as well."

I felt guilty. "I still owe you from last time," I said.

"Yes," he said. "I can let you have two angels, but that's it."

"Thanks," I said. "Will you—?"

He shook his head. "Go and see him, no," he said. "Write him a note, yes. What do you want me to say?"

I thought for a moment. "Well, sorry'd be a good place to start," I said. "And then, please don't come after me. And it doesn't work."

Astyages frowned and adjusted the position of the glasses on his nose. They've worn a sort of slot half-way down. "Is that true?" he asked.

"Of course it is," I said. "Come on, nobody can turn base metal into gold. It's not possible."

"That's not what—"

"It can't be done," I said. "All my assurances to the contrary notwithstanding. So tell him, really sorry about the lies and the false hopes, and I'm going abroad, indefinitely. Usual best wishes, Saloninus."

Astyages laid down his pen and looked at me. "You've cracked it, haven't you?"

"I just said, it can't be—"

"Don't bullshit me, please. You've cracked it, and now you're running away with the secret, before Phocas has you locked up in a tower somewhere for the rest of your life making gold. I know you," he went on, overriding my attempts at protest. "You know, I always had this tiny sneaking suspicion at the back of my mind that one day you'd do it."

"Really, I—"

He shook his head irritably. "So," he said, "what was it? Sal draconis? Virtus aurei in a suspension of quick-silver?"

"Not sal draconis," I said, with feeling.

"All right, then. It's in the method, isn't it? Something really obvious in the way you distil the—"

"It can't be done, Astyages. Everybody knows that."

"Fine," he snapped, "don't tell me. But when you're obscenely rich and living in your palace in the Blue Hills, for once in your life do the decent thing and send me money. All right?"

"If it ever comes to that," I said, "I promise. On my word of honour."

He gave me a cracked grin, scrabbled for a fresh sheet of paper, and started writing.

I sat down. He wrote about a dozen words—he's left-handed, and it always amazes me, the way he writes—then paused and chewed the end of his pen. "How's the thesis coming along?" I asked.

"Oh, fine," he said. "Another month and it'll be finished."

I believe him. I always have. Which month he's referring to is another matter. He wrote another dozen words, then turned round slowly and looked at me. "The scuttlehats said Eudoxia's dead," he said.

"That's right."

"They told me—"

"That's right too."

He stared at me; forgot to look over the top of his glasses. "God, Saloninus," he said. "That's—"

"It was an accident," I said.

"Well of course it was a bloody accident," he snapped at me, "even you wouldn't deliberately poison your wife." He paused. He'd run into that terrible impassable barrier we all come up against when trying to express sincere sympathy to a friend. "I'm sorry," was the best he could do. Actually, it's not bad.

"Me too," I said.

"I always liked her."

I grinned. "You were nuts about her," I said. "When I think of the exhibition you always made of yourself whenever she came to visit, back at Elpis—"

"Yes, all right." He was actually blushing. "I knew I didn't have a hope in hell."

"No," I said, "you didn't."

"She never liked you much either," he said, and then realised what had just slipped past the gate of his teeth, and looked wretched. I smiled, to show it was all right. It wasn't, but he was doing me a favour.

"She liked you, though," I lied. "Not that way, but she liked you. Told me so, several times."

A light came on in his eyes. "Really?"

I nodded. "Thought you looked sensitive," I said. "Misunderstood."

"Is that right?" he said, in a sort of stupid voice, and I nodded again. Actually, the only time I ever mentioned him to her, she said, "Who?"

I spent most of the night drifting around Coppergate, too scared to go in a bar out of the cold or crawl in a doorway. I walked up and down, trying to look like I was on my way somewhere. Fortunately, the people in that part of town can practically smell trouble and keep well out of the way of anybody who looks like he's in it. I think I ended up on the steps of the Nika Fountain, along with a couple of crying drunks and an elderly streetwalker who'd given up trying for the night. At one point, I tried to remember all thirty-six of Zeuxis' propositions of paradigmatic symmetry, but I only got twenty-eight of them, and knowing I couldn't simply drop in to the library in the morning and look up the other eight made me burst into tears. One of the drunks offered me his bottle, which I'm ashamed to say I accepted. It was empty, of course.

Round about dawn, I knew from experience, the watch makes a tour of Nika Square and arrests anyone who can't get out of the way, so I got up and headed back to Astyages' place,

taking my time. No sign of any scuttlehats but plenty of watch. I was sure they were going to pull me in, but they walked right past me, which made me wonder if Phocas had spoken to the City Prefect. One less thing to worry about if he had, but I couldn't know that for sure. I made myself slow down, dawdle, the way I'd seen drunks and beggars do every day of my life, but suddenly I couldn't quite call to mind the fine nuances of how they walk, how they stand, how their heads droop from their shoulders.

Astyages was already up and working when I got there. He likes to do his fancy penmanship in the early morning, when the light comes in through his window just so. He was hard at work on a W when I got there. Amazing what you can do with a simple everyday consonant if you've got the skill and imagination. He'd turned it into an amazing double-crested wave, with a little ship bobbing desperately on the middle peak. If you wanted to, you could see that as transmuting base material into gold, though if you ask me, it's pushing it.

"Green," I said. "Since when is the sea green?"

He gave me a filthy look. "For three bits," he said, "the sea's green."

I grinned at him. Blue is, after all, impossible. Can't be done. To get blue, you have to go all the way to Ges Eschatoi, buy a thumb-sized slab of lapis lazuli for the price of a good farm, trudge all the way back here, over the mountains and across the desert, grind it up in a pestle and mortar and add spirits of earth and gum. People I know in the painting trade reckon blue is proof positive of Nature's nasty sense of humour. Blue sky, blue sea, and who the hell can afford to pay for realism? And even if you've got a ridiculously wealthy customer who's prepared to fork out for the best, it's still only background.

"Letter for you," he said.

I was stunned. "Already?"

"Royal courier," Astyages replied, pretending to concentrate on his W. "About an hour ago. It's on the table, there, next to the glue-pot."

*Phocas to Saloninus, greetings.*

*It's all right. It was an accident. Well of course it was. I've known you for what, ten years? I know you wouldn't murder my sister.*

*And you know me. It's all right. Really.*

*We can sort it all out, I promise; but not if the Watch catches you. You know how things are with me and the Prefect's office. Pescennius would just love to put you on trial, to get at me. Don't overestimate what I can do. There will eventually come a point where I can't protect you any more.*

*The best thing would be if you stay put at Sty's place and have him write me you're there. I'll send scuttlehats to bring you out nice and quiet.*

*What the hell were you thinking about, running away like that? For crying out loud, Nino.*

"Plain paper," I said. "His own hand." Astyages was doing his letter, really concentrating on gold-leafing a loopy-scrolly bit. I folded the letter and put it inside my jacket, safe. Used just right, that letter could be a neat weapon. I picked up a sheet of blank paper from the table. "Do you mind?" I said.

He looked up. "What?"

"Better get rid of this," I said, holding up the sheet.

"What? Oh, yes, good idea." He bent his head over the page in front of him. One smudge or ink-blob and he could screw up two days' work. I went over to the fireplace, made a show of screwing up the paper into a ball and throwing it into the fire. Phocas had always had a genius for details; he'd make sure his men asked; *what did he do with the letter once he'd read it?*

"What did it say?" Astyages asked.

"Come home, all is forgiven." I sat down on the edge of the table. He scowled at me, and I stood up again. "What do you think?" I asked.

He took time off to consider his reply. "I honestly couldn't say," he said. "Give him his due, he's a fair-minded man. If he believes it was an accident, he's capable of forgiving you. Also, I don't think they ever got on, not even as kids. Especially as

kids. And there's always politics, which I know absolutely nothing about. Could be you've done him a favour, for all I know."

"Or he could be trying to lure me back so he can have me slowly tortured to death."

"That's possible, yes." Helpful as ever. "So," he said, pausing to tweak the hairs of his brush into a sharp point, "what're you going to do?"

It'd depend on whom you asked. Ask, say, the Dean of Philosophy at Elpis, and he'd say my crowning achievement was the *Dialogues*, in which I expound the theory of correlative forms. Ask the master of the Temple, he'd say the *Essay on Ethical Theory*. Ask the president of the Mystery, he'd tell you it was vis mercuriae, or possibly combining mel fortis with strong acids on a block of ice to make ichor tonans. The chairman of the Literary Association would go for *Aspis*, though I'd be inclined to doubt he's ever managed to read all forty-seven cantos; privately he'd tell you he much prefers the sonnets, or *Fulvia and Luso*. Down at the patents registry, they wouldn't have to think about it; the Vesani wheel, for forming curves in sheet metal, and if only I'd held on to the patent, instead of selling it for the price of a good pair of boots, I'd have been a rich man at twenty and none of this would ever have happened. If it was the chief of the watch, he'd have no hesitation in going for the Lystra Bank job; I believe it's still required reading for fast-trackers in the Criminal Investigations division. Ask me what the best thing I've ever done is, I'd have to reply; I don't know, I haven't done it yet.

Ask me what I'm proudest of; no problem. None of it.

Well, hell. There's a fundamental flaw in the logic of the *Dialogues* that nobody's figured out yet, but they will, one day, and then my reputation will be landfill. Ichor tonans was, admittedly, a stroke of genius, but what's it good for? Blowing things up. I believe they're allowed to use it in the mines, and for blasting roads through the mountains, but even so. You can't really glory in the invention of something when getting caught with a thimbleful of it carries the death penalty. *Aspis* I wrote for

money, and they still owe me most of it; *Fulvia* is derivative, and I didn't write the sonnets for publication. A lot of bastards got rich from the Vesani wheel, but I didn't. I take no pride whatsoever in my criminal past. I was moderately pleased with *The Madonna with Open Hands* (her head is actually too big for her body, but nobody's ever commented) but that was confiscated when I was arrested the first time, and some toad bought it cheap off the bailiffs, and it hasn't been seen since.

*Saloninus to Phocas, greetings.*

*All right, then, and thanks. But not in daylight. You think you're scared of the Watch catching me. Try being me.*

*Send scuttlehats, in a closed carriage, one hour after sunset. I'll be here.*

*Thanks again. You're a true friend.*

I left Astyages' place as soon as he'd sent the letter. I was nervous, but buzzing with energy. Getting the scuttlehats off my back for a while was the nudge I needed to snap me out of my horror-induced lethargy and get me moving again. I still didn't know how I was going to get out of town, but I knew from experience that when I'm fizzing, I come up with stuff that never ceases to amaze me. Meanwhile, until inspiration struck, I could usefully fill up the time with various necessary chores.

First, I needed premises. Nothing grand; just an enclosed private space with a hearth and a chimney, at least one window, affordable, discreet landlord. With uncharacteristic foresight, I'd investigated a few possibilities a few weeks earlier. The first was already let, but the man who owned the next on my list (disused storage out back of a tannery; perfect) duly took the two angels Astyages had given me as three months' rent in advance, handed me the key and forgot he'd ever met me (I got the impression he'd had plenty of practice).

Next, I needed materials and equipment. With the three angels I'd stolen from the wooden pot on Astyages' desk (you remember, I sat down on it when he was trying to keep a steady hand) I was able to buy basic glassware and most of what I'd

need in the way of ingredients. That was a risk, needless to say. Even in Paraprosdocia, there are only half a dozen places selling that sort of thing, and I'd been expecting all of them to be watched. In fact, I'd tried my level best to think of how I'd get in and buy what I needed without being immediately arrested and my mind just went blank, so I pulled the risk out of my head like someone drawing a bad tooth, and went anyway. I was terrified all the time I was there, and the storekeeper must've picked up on that. He gave me a very odd look when he thought I wasn't looking, but that didn't stop him from taking two of Astyages' hard-earned angels. He packed the stuff up for me in a wooden box, stuffed with straw and with a bit of straw rope for a handle. Too heavy and fragile to run with, so I walked as fast as I could back to the tannery. Didn't see anyone following me.

One angel and five bits left. I spent four bits on bread and cheese (which is all you need; all other forms of food are self-indulgence). Through the obscure alchemy of trade, the angel transformed into a few basic pieces of hardware, including a short-handled axe, about the only thing even vaguely resembling a useful weapon that a man can legally buy in this benighted town. Transmuting gold into base metal. Ha.

I was left with four bits. Armed with four bits, a man can go to the central beef warehouse, where they make up the durable provisions for the military, and buy himself a two-foot cube of government surplus ice. By the time I got it back to the tannery, my hands were past aching and into the numb stage.

You need a calm head and a steady hand to make ichor tonans safely. Once I'd thawed out my frozen fingers over the fire, I found I was shaking like a leaf, and my mind was full of guilt, terror, apprehension and doubt. On the other hand, ice melts, and I didn't have any money left to buy more. It's a miracle I managed to get the job done without setting off a blast that'd have meant they had to redraw all the maps.

It's a lie, propagated and spread by me, that the slightest little jar will set the stuff off. It needs a good, sharp bump. There's

been times when I've walked around for days at a time with a little bottle of the stuff in my coat pocket, though I confess, I died inside every time I got jostled in the street. I left it on the windowsill, went out again, went and sat in that little park just south of the artillery platform, where nobody ever goes. I sat on a low wall and thought about—

In your mind, picture me mixing the blue distillate with the green reagent. I gave it a little stir, for luck, with a glass rod, and put it on one side. It was fizzing, which I hadn't been expecting. I weighed out two scruples of vis zephyris, two of sal petris, one of ossa terrae, loaded the mix in an alembic over a low heat. I felt like my mother, fixing dinner out of leftovers. The blue-and-green mix was still frothing, and I thought; I know what'll sort that out. So I put in two drachms of sal draconis, figuring that the vis alba in the sal would precipitate the fors levis in the blue, which I assumed was what was getting it all worked up. The precipitate would stay behind in the filter when I drained it, so it'd be safe, I thought.

I was in two minds whether to add the solids to the liquid or the other way round. In the end, I got the biggest block of ice we had in store, put the mix on top and slopped in the solids, after first cooling them off on the ice-block. No explosion; so that was all right. Also, the colour had changed, to a sort of brackish purple. I didn't know if that had any significance, but I assumed it was a good omen. You know; purple, the colour of royalty and authority. Can't be bad, surely.

Soon as it was cool, I filtered it through charcoal and then again through paper; left behind a load of shiny bits, like iron filings. Good, I thought, that'll be the fors levis. I decanted the stuff into a tall glass beaker, put it on the bench and looked at it.

The elixir of eternal youth. Well.

Point is, how would you know if it'd worked?

If it hadn't worked, of course, I'd know straight away, in the ten seconds or so it'd take me to die; though, from what I'd gathered from the literature, the failure of my experiment would be

pretty low down on my mental agenda during that period. Fors levis eats the brain. I wondered if I'd done the right thing, putting in the sal drac; but the frothing must've meant that the lux stellae in the blue was reacting with the cor tenebrae in the green, in which case they'd get together and make lead, and the whole thing'd have been a waste of time. The sal drac was to draw off the malign humour in the cor, which had no useful work to do anyway, and leave behind the benign humour to transmute the malign in the lux. All very simple and straightforward, in theory.

But if it worked; the elixir of eternal youth, to prevent aging. Fine. You drink it, you look in the mirror. You look just the same as you did five minutes ago. It'd take ten years before you could say for sure if it'd really made any difference. Oh, fine, feed some to a rat, see if it lives longer than other rats. But what does that prove? Here's a potion that delays aging in rats. Not much call for that in these parts. She'd suggested trying it out on a baby; you'd know within months, if the baby stopped growing. She wouldn't have had a problem with that. As far as she was concerned, ethics is an excuse for a deficiency in vision and outlook.

There it was on the bench, just sitting. Well, I asked myself, what're you waiting for?

And then she came in.

I maintain that if our society were properly ordered, and women were allowed to participate directly in the sciences, she'd have been a first-rate alchemist. She never had any trouble following my notes, even though she'd never been taught, she'd just picked it up from books as she went along. Being Phocas' sister, of course, it was only to be expected she'd share the family obsession. But Phocas, in spite of three years at the university, still couldn't grasp the fundamentals of the migration of impulses. Eudoxia could do migration equations when she was fourteen. In fact, I have reason to believe she did Phocas' vacation homework for him, though of course neither of them would ever admit it.

She'd seen the stuff on the bench. "What's that?" she said.

"Nothing."

She gave me that look. "What?"

I told her what was in it. Took her about five seconds to put the pieces together. I could tell she was impressed. Her eyes were wide, and her face shone with that glow of excitement and greed. "Will it work?"

"How should I know?"

She bent over the beaker and sniffed it, pulled back and made a face. "It went volatile."

"Yes, but I put in some sal drac to calm it down."

Frown, as she worked it out in her head. "Filtered?"

"I'm not stupid."

"Little grey bits like filings?"

I pointed to the pad of sodden paper. She inspected it, then nodded briskly. "So?"

I shrugged. "What's the hurry?" I said. "If it works, I'll have forever. If it doesn't—"

"You'll make some more," she said quickly, as if she hadn't intended to say anything. "For me."

I didn't reply. She scowled at me. "No," I said.

"What?"

"No," I repeated. "You want to try it, you know the recipe."

"What the hell—"

"Oh come *on*," I said, as if she was being stupid. "Let me draw your attention to the precise wording of the marriage ceremony. Till death do us part." I smiled at her. "Be realistic."

She gave me a look that was designed to take all the skin off my face. "You're pathetic," she said.

I'm many things, but not that. "All due respect," I said, "but immortality is one thing. Being married to you forever and ever, on the other hand—"

"You bastard."

"That's unfair," I said. "I'm not divorcing you. We'll live out the rest of your natural life together, and then I'll be free. That's the deal you signed up for."

"You'd let me die."

"Everybody dies," I said. "Mortality is the constant that defines our existence."

"Fuck you."

"Besides," I said, "it probably doesn't work. If it was that easy, someone'd have done it centuries ago. And it could be poisonous."

"If it is," she said pleasantly, "you'll die, and I'll know not to drink it."

"Could be it's one of those poisons that takes hours to work. Or days. Weeks, even. It'd be criminally irresponsible of me to let you drink it."

"My brother—"

"Your brother," I replied, "values me a damn sight more than he does you. As you should know by now," I pointed out. "Twice a week you go whimpering to him about me, and what's he done?"

"You going to give him some?"

I smiled. "If it works," I said, "I may eventually publish. But not till I've given it a really thorough trial. Say, two hundred years. Earlier than that, it'd be bad science."

"Are you going to give my brother some or aren't you?"

"No," I replied. "He's funding me to turn lead into gold, which we all know is impossible. This is just a sideline of my own. He doesn't own the research. This," I went on, smiling beautifully, "is just for me. Because I'm worth it."

I hadn't noticed her slide her hand round the base of the beaker. Before I could move, she'd lifted it to her mouth. She'd swallowed twice before I was on my feet.

I shouldn't have put in the sal draconis, I realise that now. Radix vitae would've leached out the malignity from the effervescence, and you can eat that stuff till you burst and be perfectly safe.

When the man turned up to light the lanterns in the park, I went back to the tannery and picked up the ichor tonans. On my way I'd fished an empty acquavit bottle out of the trash, and washed it out in a public fountain. I decanted the ichor, slowly, corked the bottle and stuffed it in my pocket, the way

the drunks do. That, and the fact I'd slept in my clothes and not shaved for two days, really made me look the part. Drunks and beggars are invisible. The perfect disguise.

I wandered the streets for five hours, really getting into the part. My uncle always said I could've been an actor, and I think he was right. What you've got to get right, and what most people pretending to be down-and-outs always neglect, is the walk, the length of stride, the dragging of the side of the boot. You've got to walk like you're always leaving, never arriving. A kind man actually stopped me and gave me three bits.

I reached the Eastgate just after the watch changed. I saw the relief sentry climb up into the watchtower; he'd be there for at least a minute, signing on in the book. That gave me forty-five seconds, more than enough time. I hauled myself up the stairs onto the rampart (nobody was watching, but I couldn't help staying in character; a slight wobble, as you'd expect from a drunk climbing a steep staircase), looked down to make sure the coast was clear, took the bottle from my pocket, dropped it over the wall, and ran like hell.

I got four yards down the catwalk when the blast hit. Shook me off my feet; I landed painfully on my outstretched hands and one knee, only just kept myself from sliding off the catwalk and getting splatted. I dragged myself into a ball and curled up under the rampart.

I counted. On five, a dog started barking, about a hundred yards away. Then I heard the first running footsteps, and got my head down. Even if someone tripped over me in the dark, they wouldn't think twice about a drunk hunkered down out of the wind in the shelter of the rampart, and they wouldn't stop to arrest him for vagrancy, not when there were enemies loose in the City, blowing holes in the walls. Four or five watchmen did in fact run straight past me, but whether they noticed me or not I couldn't say. There was yelling and running, lights waving about, doors slamming in the guard-house. I stayed put and clung to my vagrant persona like a drowning man clinging to driftwood.

Even when the running around had stopped, I stayed where I was till five o'clock, by the Priory bell. Then I got up and hobbled back to the tannery.

A wise man once said that any human being is capable of infinite achievement, so long as it's not the work they're supposed to be doing. The *Dialogues* were a case in point. My thesis was supposed to be a metalingual analysis of Eustatius' *On Various Matters*; I started out with a hypothesis I really and truly believed in, and it took me two years of diligent, painstaking work (during which time I was working as a college porter, since I couldn't afford the fees) to prove conclusively that my hypothesis was wrong. Along the way, quite by accident, I stumbled on some leads in a totally different field. I mulled them over while I was lugging heavy trunks about and scraping vomit off the flagstones after end-of-exams parties, and in a few idle moments I jotted down some stuff. That was the *Dialogues*. When the time came to present my thesis, I realised that it was going to be rather short—

*Did Linguistic Forms Materially Affect Eustatius' Logical Structures in 'On Various Matters?'* No.

—so I left Elpis the night before I was due to appear before the examining board, leaving behind my notes, some unpaid bills and an old pair of shoes I couldn't cram into my haversack. The shame, you see. Curious insight into the mind of my younger self; I thought it less disgraceful to take up highway robbery than to admit to my tutors that I'd just wasted two years of their time and my life.

Though I say it myself as shouldn't, I was a good robber. I thought about it carefully first, rather than just plunging in at the deep end, which I gather is what most robbers do. I spent a week walking the City, taking notes on watch patrol routes and timings, lines of sight, direct routes from the big mercantile houses to the major banks. I went to the Court archive and read transcripts of hundreds of highway robbery trials, which gave me a pretty clear idea of where most robbers went wrong

(sixty-seven per cent of robbers are caught because they start throwing money around in a suspicious manner; thirteen per cent attack men carrying concealed weapons; six per cent rob the same courier in the same place more than four times). I trained for two weeks at the School of Defence in Haymarket, and spent another week picking fights in bars. Only then did I sit down with a large sheet of paper, a map and a pair of compasses, and plan out my first robbery. It went beautifully and netted me seventeen angels thirty. I very nearly quit while I was ahead.

But Elpis isn't a big town, and there were too many people there who knew me, so I took the mail coach to Paraprosdocia. Took me a month to get it mapped out and reconnoitred, and what happened? Third time out, the sedan chair I robbed in Goosefair turned out to be carrying the provost of my old college back at Elpis. I cleared out the next day and got as far as Choris Seautou, where I banked my savings and organised a bolthole for future use. Then I went back to Paraprosdocia and sent a letter to my old college chum, prince Phocas, making him an offer I knew would interest him. On reflection, I still believe it was the smart thing to do; if the watch had got me, the Prefect would've strung me up before Phocas knew anything about it, and I'd have been dead. Death or Phocas; a close call, but on balance I reckon I made the sensible choice.

It was all over town the next day. A certain Saloninus, alchemist, scholar and gentleman thief, wanted for questioning in connection with the death of the lady Eudoxia, had skipped town by the rather drastic expedient of blowing a seven-foot hole in the City wall. It could only have been Saloninus, they reckoned, because the only known explosive capable of doing that much damage was ichor tonans (invented by the said Saloninus); only five men in the world know how to make that stuff, and of those five men, four were out of town at the time. According to a watch captain I overheard in a barber's shop, where I'd just got a job sweeping up for three bits a day, the Prefect had sent a whole company of light cavalry after this Saloninus, so there

was no way he'd get far. Meanwhile, the prince was absolutely livid, and had sent a squadron of scuttlehats after the Prefect's men, thereby implying he didn't trust them to do a proper job, an implication the watch captain clearly resented.

I managed to stick it in the barber's for three days, just to make sure the watch wasn't still looking for me in town. Then I mugged a slobbering-drunk Vesani merchant outside the *Wisdom & Temperance*; five angels twenty. Next morning, I booked on the first mail coach to Choris Seautou. Piece of cake.

Goes without saying, I didn't get on the coach. I turned up at the stop, outside the Mail Office, making sure the booking clerk, yard master and coachman all got a good look at me; got in the coach and sat inside for quite some time, till it was ready to leave; then quietly opened the door on the blind side, slipped out and darted up that little alley that leads to the cheese warehouse; scaled the wall, quickly across the yard, through the back gate into Cutlers' Yard. Then I went to the tannery, cleared out my stuff and hired a cellar under a closed-down inn next to the old Instruction Theatre in Browngate. Sure enough, a few days later, I overheard two off-duty scuttlehats in the *Chastity Rewarded* telling someone they had a red-hot lead on Saloninus that put him in Choris Seautou, and he'd be in custody inside of a week.

The trouble is, when you get a reputation for being clever, you have to live up to it.

The cellar under the inn was perfect for what I had to do. Money, of course, was my biggest problem, followed by the dangers I'd have to run getting supplies. I really didn't want to do any more robberies. Even under ideal circumstances it's a horribly dangerous way of earning a living, and my background information, I knew for a fact, was seriously out of date. Also, I don't think it's a very nice way to behave. And, as the greatest living authority on ethical theory, I guess I have a duty to set an example. But I needed money; not so much for food and stuff, because I've learned the hard way how to do without it

for prolonged periods, but for supplies and equipment; my other difficulty. I thought long and hard, but no flash of inspiration came. With great regret, I decided it was time to cash in one of my last few remaining assets; namely, Professor Laodicus.

Things are best, but people can be useful sometimes. Laodicus is a case in point. Back at Elpis, the second time I was there, just after the *Dialogues* came out, I was the newly-appointed lecturer in moral and ethical philosophy, and Laodicus was the scrawny, tongue-tied, earnest student who doesn't make friends and can't seem to get a handle on the course material. I was going through one of my recurrent being-a-decent-human-being phases at the time, and I got Laodicus through Preliminaries, albeit by the skin of his teeth. He was shaping up to be a worthwhile student when my circumstances changed and I had to get out of town in a hurry. Now, here he was at the Studium, professor of Major Arts, with a keyring that gave him access to the petty cash and the store cupboard. In *Essay on Ethical Theory* I argued strenuously against the enlightened-self-interest view of altruism, dismissing it as thinly-veiled mystical nonsense. Guess I was wrong about that, too.

I walked in through the front gate of the Studium and nobody looked at me. This was because everybody there who might possibly have recognised me knew I was in Choris Seautou. I'd had a wash in a horse-trough and a shave in a barber's shop, and I was wearing a smart, quiet gown I'd lifted off a washing-line on the other side of town. I asked at the porter's lodge where I might find Professor Laodicus at that time of day. Easy, they told me, he'll be in the Old Library. I nodded my thanks, which was what a distinguished visiting academic from the provinces would do. It was a trifle stiff and cold, because of the handle of the axe sticking into the inside of my thigh.

The Old Library at the Studium is big. If you burnt it down and ploughed over the site, you could grow enough grain there to feed a village. The philosophy section is the whole of the second floor (up a tightly-coiled stone staircase that plays hell with my

vertigo). It took me a while to track down Laodicus, but I recognised him from twenty yards off. He'd lost his hair (he was thin on top at nineteen) and puffed out round the middle, but his face was the same. Unnaturally so; as though someone had flayed it off and sewn it onto a bald head attached to an older, chubbier body.

He was standing with his head bent over a book. I couldn't resist. I walked up on him nice and quiet, until I was directly behind his left shoulder, and said, "Hello, Laodicus."

Wasn't the smart thing to do. I could have triggered heart failure. As it was, he jumped about a foot in the air and made a squealing noise, like six pigs at market. He looked at me, mouth open and moving, no words coming out.

"Walk with me," I said.

One of those people who'll obey you instinctively if you use the right tone of voice. He turned his head so he didn't have to see me, and said, "What are you doing here? Don't you know—?"

"I'm not here," I said, smiling, as though we were sharing a pleasant memory. "I'm in Choris Seautou."

"You can't stay here." His eyes were bulging, as though I'd put a cord round his neck and pulled it tight. "If they find you here—"

"Don't worry," I said. "You can get rid of me very quickly and easily. Where's your office?"

"New Quad," he replied, then realised he shouldn't have. "What do you want?"

"Keep going," I said. "And smile."

I wish I hadn't told him to do that. He looked like one of the heads they hang up on Northgate, after it's been out in the sun for a week. "What do you—?"

"Shh."

Down the back stairs, out into South Quad, through the cloister to New, turn left. He had a ground-floor set, which implied status. Didn't lock his door, implying either beautiful trust in his fellow men or rank carelessness. I shut the door and slipped the bolt.

"You don't seem pleased to see me," I said.

"You're mad coming here," Laodicus said. "If they catch you here, it'll ruin my career. I've already had the prince's men here, asking questions."

I hadn't anticipated that, though I should've done. "Well, that's fine," I said. "Obviously they believed you when you said you hadn't heard from me, and there's no reason for them to come back. Now, listen. I need your help."

He looked very sad. "What—?"

I told him. He stared at me, as though I'd just asked for his liver. "I can't do that," he said. "It'd be stealing. If anyone found out I'd misappropriated supplies and funds—"

I gave him my hurt look. "In chapter seven, section five, paragraph nine of *Ethical Dilemmas*," I said, "you argue that loyalty to a friend must always come before loyalty to the State. You use the analogy of bricks in a wall; unless each brick bonds to its neighbour, you say, it doesn't matter how straight and level the rows are, the base will never support the upper floors." I smiled at him. "I used to take the opposing view, but you changed my mind. You know, you really have come a long way since your first year at Elpis."

He gave me a terrified look. "I can't," he said. "I'm too scared."

"Nonsense." I'd already won the battle. "You're confusing moral and physical courage. In chapter nine, section two, paragraph four, you write—"

"All right." One of those born academics who'd rather have his teeth ripped out with pliers than have his own words cited against him. "Stay here. I'll be as quick as I can."

I shook my head. "You won't be able to carry all that stuff on your own," I pointed out. Which was true. I, on the other hand, had two years as a porter and a succession of heavy-lifting jobs during my bad years behind me. He couldn't fault my logic.

Fact is, I stumbled into alchemy by accident, during my second spell at Elpis. I'd always been vaguely interested in it, but I was far too busy with my prescribed studies and besides, I

couldn't afford the kit. Then I got to know Euelpides, one of the research fellows. He was looking for an assistant. Pretty soon, we'd exchanged roles; and when he retired, they offered me his job. I needed the money.

Never hard, of course, to attract research funding for alchemy. As long as people believe it's possible to turn base metal into gold (it isn't), you'll find rich men willing to invest. So long as they were prepared to pay, I was happy to try and do the impossible. Where I went wrong, of course, was falling in love with the subject, about three months after I took the job.

A mistake; I can see that now. It was a bit like falling in love with your wife after you've been married three years. Warps your judgement, puts you at a disadvantage. I should know. Done both.

Talking of which; Eudoxia never gave a damn about me. I genuinely believe she was incapable of any kind of affection. And she was terrified—real, tangible, wake-up-in-the-night-sweating fear—of getting old. Not death, which she never thought about, as far as I know. But being old; she said once that age was alchemy in reverse, turns gold into shit. I couldn't really understand that, but I can reconstruct what led her there. At nineteen she was exceptionally beautiful. At twenty-five, she was starting to coarsen up a little, as though someone had subtly defaced a beautiful painting. She used to stand in front of the mirror staring at a new line or wrinkle nobody else could see, and I could practically smell the fear. So; once she'd reached the conclusion that I was the best alchemist in the world, it wasn't enough that I was working for her brother, under contract and practically a prisoner in the wing of the palace he'd had converted into a laboratory for me. She had to make sure, which meant I had to be in love with her; with her beauty, to give me the strongest possible incentive. I came to hate her, the same way I came to hate alchemy, and for roughly the same reason. Even now, I find it hard to forgive her for that.

It's a central paradox that love and rape both find expression in the same act. For two years, I raped science, trying to give

Phocas and Eudoxia what they wanted, gold and youth. Couldn't be done, of course. Not possible. But they both had blind, unlimited faith in me; like being in love, or believing in God. I think I could've endured that. I might just possibly have been able to keep going, trusting that sooner or later the faith would start to crack and break up, they'd realise I wasn't nearly as clever as they thought I was, and they'd eventually let me go, or kill me. What ruined that was the other thing; the discovery, or the faint possibility of it; my one and only truly worthwhile achievement, if only I could achieve it, that would bring me wealth, fame and maybe—just maybe—happiness.

Thanks to Laodicus, I had everything I needed; the last remaining supplies and bits of equipment, and ten angels cash, which he kindly embezzled for me from the Social Fund, of which he was trustee. With my wooden box under my arm, I walked briskly back to my cellar, thinking only about the experiment I was about to conduct, anticipating problems, working through each step in my mind. I can't actually remember reaching the cellar, setting up the new apparatus, lighting the fire, drawing the water. Time melts in the presence of intense concentration. It expands, so that a pot of water takes forever to come to the boil, and contracts as you work through each step of a procedure, trying to get seven things done at the same time without rushing. I'd organised my mind so carefully that I didn't waste a second, but either there wasn't enough, or there was far too much.

The blue and the green. I heated lacrimae dei and flowers of strong metal in a crucible while the compounds were reducing, then mixed the blue and the green in a stone beaker and added the solids to the liquid. No effervescence this time, but a dense white vapour, which made me realise that a windowless cellar wasn't entirely ideal for my purpose after all. I added vis cerulea, a scruple at a time. The corner of a clean rag, dipped in the beaker, came up sky blue. Once step closer to genuine immortality.

Trouble with concentrating on one thing, you neglect other stuff. I had my back to the door; they walked in quietly. First thing I knew about it was when they grabbed me.

The captain told me it hadn't been all that difficult. He'd sent out patrols with orders to report strange and unusual smells. Apparently, you could smell me halfway down the street. As simple as that.

I had a short ride in a closed carriage, wedged in between the captain and a sergeant, with a rope tied to my ankle. When we reached the junction of Whitegate and Long Row, I waited to see which way we'd turn; left to the Station House, or right to the palace. We turned right.

"We'd better get you cleaned up," the captain said, as we drove through the main gate. "Can't go and meet the prince in the state you're in."

I pointed out that we'd been students together, living in self-induced squalor and degradation. First time I met Phocas, I told him, he hadn't shaved for a week and he had vomit on his shoes. The captain smiled at me, and said that he hadn't gone to university. He'd have liked to, but his father was a clockmaker with six children. That, apparently, was me put in my place.

I'd never been forcibly washed before. I told them I was perfectly capable, but I guess they were reluctant to allow me full use of my limbs, in case I got away. The shave wasn't so bad, in fact it brought back old memories. By no means the first time I'd had a blade pressed to my throat while four men held me down. They issued me with a plain, clean gown, slightly frayed cuffs, sort of beige colour. No pockets.

The captain and his men took me as far as the great hall, where I was handed over to the Duty Chamberlain's men. As he handed over the end of my rope, the captain nodded politely and wished me good luck. I was so stunned, I couldn't speak.

The first time I met Phocas, of course, he was nobody. In fact, he was less than nobody. He was twelfth in line to the throne, which meant he had no chance whatsoever, and his father had

just been executed for treason. It was amazing how many people could look straight at him and not see he was there.

I, by contrast, was the favoured nephew of a prosperous land speculator with important political connections, a rising academic star, and one of the inner circle of the inner circle of the in crowd. In fact, I was so central, you could have plotted the location of everybody else by sticking the point of a compass in the top of my head. By rights, I should never have wasted my precious time and attention on a negative quantity like Phocas. But I liked him, then.

He was being thrown out of a party just as I was arriving. He was aggressive-drunk, and the reason for his expulsion, I later gathered, was that some of the puke missed his shoes and hit the hostess's dress, which he'd been endeavouring to remove, regardless of her objections, when his digestive system betrayed him. Two footmen carried him out into the street, with his feet off the ground, kicking in air like a hanged man, and dropped him neatly in a big brown puddle. He sat there for, I don't know, five seconds; then he stood up, a bit shaky but with a certain essential grace and dignity, like a cat; then swayed and flopped up against the wall.

The people I was with marched past him, all don't-look-at-him-you-don't-know-where-he's-been. But he smiled at me—I could see him clearly by the lantern light—and his face said, *please don't think too harshly of me, you're not quite catching me at my best*. I grinned back at him, and he fell over.

Next time I met him was at one of Menestheus' lectures on Stratylides. I'd been sitting patiently, formulating a question in my mind that'd demonstrate beyond doubt to any perceptive witness that I was ten times cleverer than Menestheus, and at least three times smarter that Stratylides. I was putting the finishing touches to it when the old fool stopped talking. Phocas promptly stood up and asked precisely the question I'd been planning.

Well, not precisely the same. Not nearly as tersely or elegantly phrased. But he'd picked up on the same frayed end in the

logic as I had. Menestheus gave him a look, then said, "Actually, that's not quite as stupid a question as it sounds," and went on to give an answer I'd have had great difficulty beating. I was grateful to Phocas for saving me, and impressed with the quiet, good-humoured grace with which he accepted the mincing he got. I asked some people I was with who the kid who asked the question was, and they told me. I arranged to have him invited to a party I was going to, and made a point of talking to him; we chatted for half an hour about ethical positivism, then slipped the party and went for a drink. He didn't have any money, so I lent him half an angel.

A year later, we had the plague. It killed off nine of Phocas' eleven supervening cousins, and my uncle, who proved to have been on the edge of bankruptcy. He was, in fact, a conman of substantial ability but limited intelligence; he hadn't foreseen the flaw in his scheme, which would've collapsed round his ears inside of a month if he hadn't died first. I was six months off my final exams; I had a trunkful of clothes, which my landlord distrained on for arrears of rent, five dozen books and four angels cash.

It never ceases to amaze me how adaptable social geometry can be. Within a couple of days I went from being the centre of the circle to an indefinite point outside its circumference. I couldn't even get close enough to my old friends to ask them for money, and Phocas, newly rich, was out of town, up at the capital for the funerals. My tutor, who admired and loathed me, got me the porter's job. I stayed on and became invisible.

So what? Big deal. I learned an important lesson in alchemy, at any rate; the catalytic agency of gold in the process of conversion between precious-rare and dross, the mutability of all things. Other things I learned; how to shift heavy objects, how to sweep floors, clean up mess, stand perfectly still and quiet for three hours and not be noticed. All good stuff, much more use to me in later life than the course material. I take the view that we're the sum of everything that happens to us, good and bad.

It's an alchemist's interpretation, of course, seeing people as a compilation of ingredients combined and acted on by processes. The implication is, if you leave out one of the ingredients, even if, particularly if, it's unstable or noxious, you get a different result. If the experiment comes out well, then you can't say any one particular ingredient or process was bad. If you end up with a result like me—well, good and bad are by definition unscientific terms. What matters is the purpose of the experiment and whether or not you achieve it.

By any reasonable criteria, Phocas was a successful experiment. He started off as garbage and came out of the crucible pure gold. A lesser man might've celebrated his sudden, unexpected transformation into heir apparent with a whirlwind massacre of everybody who'd derided and despised him when he was nobody; this would've entailed wiping out ninety per cent of the university of Elpis, but that was the sort of thing Phocas' family had been doing for centuries, and nobody seemed to think any the less of them for it. But Phocas wasn't like that. He forgave his enemies and rewarded his friends, except for me. Don't get me wrong. He wanted to help. He tried quite hard to find out what had become of me. But by then my tutor was dead (the plague; we had it relatively easy at Elpis, but he was one of the victims) and nobody else knew or cared. I carried on portering and working in the library when the students were in bed or out drinking, without the faintest idea that Phocas was trying to find me, until I ran into a spot of trouble and had to leave town.

History will have all manner of nice things to say about Phocas; how he checked the power of the provincial nobility, ended the war with the Ammagene, got the public finances under control. In fact, history will love him. No matter which side's in the ascendancy, there'll be a bit of Phocas they can grapple on to and make their own. The Optimates will admire the way he broke the power of the labour guilds and supported free trade, while the Tendency will worship him for his welfare provisions and land reforms. They'll debate endlessly about what

his real agenda was, which side he was actually on, and they'll never get within a long spit of the truth, because history refuses to recognise the possibility that great events and changes of lasting significance could be brought about just because once upon a time there was an absolute ruler who simply couldn't make up his mind. His intentions were always good. Where he was luckier than all his fellow altruists was in somehow contriving to pursue his good intentions without doing irreparable damage to everyone and everything around him. The truth is, he was a simple-minded, basically decent sort of a fellow, born well outside the dangerous confines of the purple, who did the best he could to keep things ticking over quietly so they wouldn't distract him from his overriding mission in life; to discover, or more realistically sponsor the discovery, of the secret of turning base metal into gold. If ever I get around to finishing my *Ideal Republic* (started it ten years ago, paid in advance, spent the money), I'll have to fit him in somewhere as a model autocrat; the man who rules well because he doesn't really want to rule at all.

"Hello, Phocas," I said.

He looked up at me from the papers he'd been reading. "What the hell was all that about?" he said.

I shrugged. "I'm sorry," I said. "I thought—"

"No," he snapped, "you didn't, that's the point. Damn it, I wrote you a letter. And you're supposed to be smart."

I sat down. The guard didn't like it, but Phocas didn't notice. "You see," I went on, "I had the idea that you might, well, blame me—"

"Really." He gave me a hurt, angry look. "How long have we known each other?"

"I'm sorry," I repeated. "I panicked, all right? It happened, and I just had to run, get out of there, as far away as I could. And then I thought, how suspicious does that look? I thought—"

"You thought I'd assume that because you ran away, you'd killed her." He shook his head, as though stunned that anybody could be so stupid. "Well, the main thing is, you've come to no

harm. But really, for crying out loud, Nino, did you have to blow up a fucking wall?"

I did my sheepish idiot grin. "I couldn't think what else to do."

"Amazing." He smiled at me. "Someone could've been killed, you realise. And then you'd have been in the shit."

I hung my head. "Wasn't thinking clearly."

"Just having the stuff'll get you your neck stretched. There's only so much I can do, you know." He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "How did it happen?" he said.

I told him. When I described how his sister died, he closed his eyes and turned his head away, just for a moment. Reminded me of me, when I was a kid and my mother killed a chicken. Thing was, I ate the chicken, even though I disapproved of death. Some things are ugly but necessary.

Then he shook himself, like a wet dog, and said, "Why didn't you warn her?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Not to drink the stuff."

I smiled weakly. "You think she'd have listened?"

"No," he conceded. "No, I guess not."

"Besides," I went on, "it was all so fast. And I suppose I assumed she'd know better than to come in the lab and drink a beakerful of stuff without asking if it was safe."

He was interested. "She just—"

"She asked me what it was. I told her the ingredients. Next thing I knew—"

"Ah." He nodded. "That makes sense. She'd have reckoned she knew what it was from what was in it. Always had a very high opinion of herself, my sister."

"She was a good scientist," I said. "She'd learned a hell of a lot."

"Which killed her," he said, quietly, like a man finally winning a chess game he'd lost interest in a quarter of an hour ago. "Excellent argument against the education of women, if you ask me. Thought she knew what it was, decided to swallow it before

you told her she couldn't. Impatient, you see. She was like it as a kid. Always snatched the honey-cakes as soon as the servants brought the plate in."

"If I'd had the faintest idea—"

"Of course." He raised his hand. Subject dead and buried. "Well," he said, "I guess we can draw a line under all that. I'll issue a statement saying my sister died of natural causes. We'll have to have a state funeral, of course, I'll need you there as chief mourner. Sorry," he added. "I know you can't be doing with official occasions."

"Don't worry about it," I replied. "Least I can do."

"It'll take a week to arrange," he went on. "And in the meantime—"

He didn't need to finish the sentence. Back to my bench, enough time wasted already. He really didn't mean it as a punishment. He sincerely believed I enjoy doing all that stuff.

I stood up. "Just one thing," he said. "Not that it matters worth a damn, but somebody must've helped you. Else, how did you get all that gear? You know we're just fine, but I'm going to have to ask you who helped you out. Got to give somebody to the Prefect, or my life's going to be hell for months."

I sat down again. "I have contacts," I said.

"Yes, I'd gathered." There was a cold core to his eyes. I knew that look. "I'm sorry, but I need some names."

"In the Thieves' Guild," I said.

His eyes widened slightly. "So there really is a Thieves' Guild," he said.

"Of course there is," I lied. "And I'm very sorry, but—"

He shrugged. "More than your life's worth, right. Fine, forget about it. Now I know there actually is a Thieves' Guild, the watch can take it from here. Thank you," he added, "that's a real help." He frowned. "Have I just landed you in it?" he asked. "Only, if I have, I can forget what you just told me—"

"It's perfectly all right," I said. "We assume you've known all about us for years."

(And I thought; curious. He'd asked about his sister's death the way you ask about the health of a business associate's invalid spouse, but verification of the existence of a Thieves Guild had been *interesting*. What would I have seen, I wondered, if I'd been there when they came to tell him Eudoxia was dead?)

"How soon?" he asked.

I'd just put my feet to the ground, ready to walk out. "It's hard to say."

"Try."

I shrugged. It was the gesture of a man without a care in the world, fooling nobody. "Really, I can't say. Could be six weeks, could be a month, could be—"

"Six weeks."

"Or six years," I replied, "it all depends on how lucky I get. If I'm lucky, this time tomorrow. If I'm unlucky, never. There's always the possibility that it simply can't be done."

He grinned at me. "I get the same from the highways contractors," he said. "They know precisely how long it'll take to build a road from the City to the docks, but when I ask them, they always add on two months. Then, when the job's finished when they knew it would be, they ask for a bonus for early completion. Come on, Nino. When?"

"Six weeks."

"Thought so." He smiled at me, and behind me, someone opened the door. "Six weeks, then. I'll hold you to that," he said.

Yes, I'm the world's greatest living alchemist. Foolish to deny it, a sort of reverse boasting. But please accord due emphasis to the word living.

Consider, for example, Laelianus the Attagene. Brilliant man; refined lachrymae dei while he was still a student at Faenori, the first man to split silver into its four aspects—I knew him, for a short while, at Elpis. Or take Herennius, who completely reshaped the way we understand the reintegration of humours. If he was still alive today, I wouldn't be worthy to carry his lecture notes. Not to mention Gordianus Secundus; now there's a

man I'd have liked to have known, but he was already dead by the time I came to Paraprosdocia. Codrinus—

Well. Of interest only to members of the profession. Fact is, this is the golden age, no pun intended, of alchemy. There have been more epoch-making discoveries in the last fifteen years than in the preceding two centuries. And as for geniuses, truly exceptional minds; two dozen, at the most conservative reckoning. But here's a curious thing. Of that two dozen, none of them survived past the age of thirty-three.

At that time I was thirty-two. Thirty-two and eleven months.

There was a craze a while ago for copies of famous paintings—you know the sort of thing; *Judgement of Timaeus*, *The Battle of Sineo*, *Girl with a White Dove*; exact copies, except for one thing left out; the jug in the *Judgement*, or the king's shield in the battle-scene, or the Girl's left earring. The idea was, you hung the painting directly over where you'd be sitting at your dinner party, and you got your fun watching the expressions on your guests' faces as they tried to figure out what was wrong.

Well; the missing article in *Workshop of Saloninus the Alchemist* was one corpse, female. I had no trouble at all spotting it. There might as well have been a hole in the world, through which you could see the stars beneath us.

"Thanks, gents," I said to the guards, as they ushered me in. "I can find my own way from here."

It's a bad sign when you're reduced to bouncing bon mots off the military. As the door closed, I sank down onto the floor and started to shake. Not the sort of thing I usually do. I think it must've been sharing an enclosed space with the thing that wasn't there.

After a while, I pulled myself together, somehow or other; stood up, managed to get the fire going. I'd lost track of when I'd last eaten, but I simply wasn't hungry. While the fire caught, I went to the ingredients cabinet and fished out a bottle of acquavit. The pure colourless stuff. I only had it for fuel for the spirit burner. I swallowed three mouthfuls.

Made me feel worse, if anything.

Well, I thought, what the hell do I do now?

The irony was, any alchemist who knew what he was doing would kill for a bench like mine. Every piece of equipment you could possibly think of, all the very best quality; a row of bottles and jars like soldiers on parade, every rare and obscure material—some of them a hundred angels an ounce, more on the black market (except they're so rare, everybody in the trade would know in an instant where they'd come from). If there was a specialised item I wanted made up, all I had to do was bang on the door and give the guard a detailed specification, he'd take it off to the toolmakers or the glassblowers, and I'd have it in my hand the next day. Expense no object. Unlimited research funding. If there's a hell, I truly believe, it's getting exactly what you've always wanted.

I had six weeks to find the secret of transmuting base material into gold. This is impossible. I reached up to the top shelf of the bookcase and pulled down Polycrates' *Diverse Arts*. Chapter six, page nineteen, paragraph four. To turn base metal into gold.

Ah well, I thought.

First, take common salt (got that) and vitriol (plenty of that); mix well with a glass rod. Done that. Next, take aqua fortis (buckets of that). Combine the aqua fortis with the salt and vitriol to form aqua regia. The trouble with Polycrates, unlike me, is not so much what he includes, which is often true, but what he leaves out; trifles like *incredibly volatile* or *will produce large volumes of toxic gas* or *for crying out loud, do this on a block of ice*. Fortunately, Onesander of Phylae went through this procedure with me shortly after I left Elpis the second time, so I knew more or less what to do. A great man, Onesander, and it was a crime against science when he was hung for issuing fake six-angel bits. His coins were actually three points purer than the government issue, would you believe. I understand they're eagerly sought after these days, by jewellers.

Three or four steps into the procedure, you have to dip the corner of a linen napkin in the brew, then set light to it. Alarming

is putting it mildly. I was extremely lucky to have been shown how to do it by an expert; that said, Onesander's wanted poster called him "a tall man with no eyebrows", a description so accurate that he was in custody within three days of its appearance on the Temple doors. As a precaution, I filled the big basin with water and dunked my head in it. When the napkin had burned away, I shook the ashes carefully into a pot, and worked the bellows until the fire was as hot as I could get it.

Next, the crucible, which I half-filled with expensive copper nails (hell of a waste; but they're nearly pure copper, and I wasn't paying for them). I used up most of a half-hundredweight sack of charcoal before they melted; whereupon I poured the molten metal into my dainty little five-cavity ingot mould and put them aside to take the cold. My bottle of aqua tollens proved to be empty, which was annoying, so I had to make some up from scratch; add salt to water, then add raw fine powdered silver to aqua fortis; combine the two in a glass vessel to produce a brown sludge; add spirit of hartshorn until the sludge disappears; aqua tollens. By the time I'd done all that the little copper fingers were cool enough to knock out of the ingot mould. Take one ingot, lower it slowly with tongs into the aqua tollens; wait five minutes, then fish it out again, wash off the aqua tollens, dry carefully. One small silver-plated copper ingot. Naturally, I've simplified and falsified the instructions (because if I told you how it's really done you could do it too, and put me and my brethren out of business).

Four copper ingots, one silver one. I put on my buckskin glove, shook a little of the burnt-napkin ash onto the tip of my index finger, and gently stroked the silver-plated ingot until the ash was all gone. It happens so gradually that at first you don't notice, unless the light from your lamp catches it at just the right angle. It's a long, slow business, and just as you're in despair and convinced that it's not working, the smear on the surface of the silver assumes an undeniably yellow tinge. That restores your faith, and you carry on until all the ashes are gone and

your fingertip's numb, and the silver ingot is now deep, glowing, honey-yellow gold.

Piece of cake, really.

Time doesn't register when I'm working, so I had no idea how long all this had taken me; experience suggested six hours, but the copper had been painfully slow to melt, whereas the ashes had worked in quicker than I'd been expecting. Broad as it's long. Time melts sometimes, flows and congeals, forms a hard skin over a molten core.

I put all the bottles and jars carefully away, so anyone snooping around wouldn't know what I'd used, then I closed Polycrates and put him gratefully back on his shelf. I poured water into a glass beaker, then added a drop of blueberry juice to turn it a harmless, inert blue; then I put the gold ingot in the beaker, and stacked the four copper ingots neatly next to it. Then I took my four-pound straight-peen hammer off the rack, wrapped the head carefully with cloth and banged on the door with my fist.

The usual graunching of key in lock, and the door opened. I didn't know the guard. I tried to look past him, but he stood in the way.

"I need some stuff," I said.

He nodded. "What?"

"Sal regis, furor diaboli, radix pedis dei, saturated sal draconis in vitriol—"

He scowled at me. I smiled. "Come inside," I said. "I'll write it down for you."

He went off, with his little slip of parchment, and the door closed and the lock graunched. I upended my four-minute timer and waited for the sand to pour through. Then I knocked on the door again.

The guard stuck his head round the doorframe. "What?" he said, and I hit him with the hammer. He went down like an apple from a tree. I waited, counting up to six, then carefully opened the door; there'd never been more than two guards on the door before, but there's a first time for everything. Fortunately, not

this time. I dragged the guard inside, slipped out into the passageway, gently pulled the door shut and turned the key. An hour, my best guess; maybe a bit more, unlikely to be much less. Just how far could I get in an hour?

Scholars are proverbially celibate, and the life of the professional criminal doesn't leave much time for romance, so it won't surprise you to learn that I was only in love really and truly the one time.

Which would've been enough, if things had worked out a little better. She was perfect; beautiful, clever, kind, funny, gentle; a joy to be with, under any circumstances. And she loved me, almost as much as I loved her; but what she loved most of all (which was better than her loving me) was philosophy. If it hadn't been for her, I'd never have written *On Form & Substance*. She had this way of making me think; just the slightest of frowns, or a tiny upwards movement of an eyebrow, and suddenly I could see past the certainties to the real questions behind them. She made me realise that, up till then, all I'd cared about was making it so my enemies couldn't prove me wrong; in other words, winning. Then she came along, and the world changed, and what actually mattered wasn't beating some opponent but *getting it right*—

Perfect. Almost perfect. Just one thing about her that I'd have changed, if I could. She was married. To prince Phocas.

Which led, I'm sorry to say, to a falling-out between my old college chum and me. Not the first, and certainly not the last. He took the view that it was a betrayal of trust, not to mention criminal adultery and treason. I could see his point, and I also accept that under the circumstances, given his position of head of state and fountain of all justice, he had no option but to allow the law to take its course. What I couldn't forgive, still can't, is that it wasn't me he put on trial.

To his credit, he entered a special plea for clemency on her behalf. Unfortunately, in the political climate prevailing at that time, he couldn't have made things worse if he'd tried; the six judges were all Popular Tendency, and that was that. There

have been times, in my darker moments, when I've wondered whether he made that plea deliberately, knowing it'd prompt the judges to order the death penalty out of sheer spite; but no, I don't think so. He loved her, no doubt about it, and losing her, especially that way, tore him apart. Didn't exactly cheer me up, either. By loving her, I'd killed her, simple as that. Phocas was just the weapon I used.

So; she died, I lived. Phocas had his chief investigator swear on oath, by the majesty of the Invincible Sun, that he hadn't been able to discover the identity of the adulterer. The judges (two of them are dead now; the other four will have to wait till I've got a little free time) offered to grant him permission to put the accused to torture to extract the name, if he thought that would do it; I remember, he went white as a sheet and mumbled no, he didn't believe torture would be effective in this case. And the judges shrugged, as if to say, well, if you're sure, and moved smoothly on to passing sentence.

I watched, from a high window. I remember how she stayed calm and controlled right up to the moment they started roping her to the stake. Then, when they grabbed her wrist, she screamed and went all to pieces, she was terrified, it took four strong men to hold her still while they tied the knots. They put a lot of green wood in, so the smoke killed her before the flames reached her. Standard practice, I gather. It's one of those small mercies we're supposed to be grateful for.

I'm a terror for not wasting anything useful, so when it was my turn to deliver the Onesander Memorial Lecture at the Studium, I used her death as a paradigm of alchemical theory. She was, I said, made up, like everything else, of earth, air, water and fire, in due proportion, held in equilibrium by the vis minor, which Philosthenes argues is ultimately derived from the movement of the Invincible Sun in orbit around the Earth. When she was put to death, the addition by an external agency of additional fire broke the vis minor, allowing the external fire to encounter and react with her component elements. Her

earth was consumed and transmuted into res iners Polycratis. Her water was evaporated, and joined the greater external. Her air was expelled by vis major and dissipated, while her internal fire was subsumed by and joined with the external fire to produce ignis nobilis, the assimilatory or communicative process, analogous to the extraction of quicksilver from amalgam. What, I asked, do we learn from this? In transmutation, in this case her flesh and bone to ash, there is exchange through loss, since the ashes weighed considerably less than the unburnt tissue, and communication through change, in that flesh (a soft material) and bone (a hard material) are converted by an agency and a process into ash (an impermanent, brittle material soluble in water and easily dissipated in a draught of air); thereby, we can see that earth is essentially a donor element, weak, suitable for conversion. In the evaporation of water, by contrast, there is communication through continuity, in that her water became steam and migrated, ultimately to join with other vapours in the clouds, in due course to return to the lower levels through the medium of rain; therefore continuity, in that water is never lost and, though capable of transformation, ultimately defies transmutation through the agency of memory. Turning to her air, being the breath in her lungs and other hollow parts at the moment of death, simple expulsion through the action of heat removed it, essentially unchanged in form (though arguably in structure; see Brunellus on the forms of air), so that communication consisted of nothing more than a removal from one place and a relocation in another; which is why we call air the elemens invicta, because it is untouched by mere process. As to her fire, I argued, that was a different matter entirely. In the consummation of the process (my voice was a little shaky at this point), there was a coming together of the external and the internal to form one, a process akin to the act of love, a union or true combination, in that as the process took its course, inner and outer fire combined into an indissoluble whole, burning from without and from within, and where there were two there was now only

one. Hence, I went on, fire is the agent among the elements, and it is to fire we must look. In fire all things have their origin (the ignis genitiva of Marcellus) and their ending (ignis feralia, as postulated by Caesura; but see Ammianus for a conflicting interpretation), only through fire can the other processes operate, only through fire in its aspects as destroyer and refiner can we achieve our objective; transmutatio vera, the genuine transmutation, transmigration of one element into another.

Not everybody agreed, needless to say; but I think I had something there. Where I messed up was going on to associate the vis mutationis with the human emotion of love, and the process of burning with the transmutation of love into hate, or guilt, or misery, or pain, analogous to the refining of the noble metals from base ores by the agency of quicksilver. What can I say? It's one of those intuitive connections you feel but can't really prove, and once you get a reputation for intuition in academic circles, you're screwed. Not that it mattered particularly, in this instance. Three months after I gave the lecture I got caught trying to stow away on the stupid bloody avocado freighter, and that was that; no more public appearances, ejected from my Chair, back to the laboratory with two guards on the door. Story of my life, really.

So there I was in the passageway. Right or left? I went left. Good idea at the time.

Left led past the minor state apartments (where they dump lesser ambassadors, trade attaches, counsel for appellants in civil cases, unimportant dependents and poor relations) to the back or kitchen stairs, which go down two flights to the stable yard, from which it's possible, if you're agile enough, to climb the curtain wall and sneak out onto the leads of the chapel roof; then down the waterspout into the cloister garden, pinch a gown from the vestment room, and then you're just another Brother milling about in the chapel forecourt. That was how I got out the time before last, and on that occasion I got no further than the Chapter yard before the scuttlehats grabbed me and hauled me back in. Therefore, they'd argue, I wouldn't go that way again.

The important thing is, not to run. It's hard. The temptation is to move as quickly as possible while unimpeded movement is feasible. But running sounds like nothing else, and in the palace, nobody runs. So I walked, hands in pockets, down the corridor, trying to sound like some minor functionary, in no particular hurry, waddling from office to archive or one duty station to another. Authenticity is the key. Learnt that the hard way.

I was three quarters of the way along when I heard footsteps coming the other way. The corridor floors are ancient oak boards; you can't help making a racket, unless you're wearing slippers. Only one thing I could do. I pushed open the first door I came to and slipped inside.

It turned out to be a bathroom. Phocas has a minor fetish about cleanliness, so there's bathrooms everywhere in the residential areas. Lucky for me, I thought. I ducked down behind the bath and crouched on the floor, waiting for the footsteps to go away.

There was this smell; really strong (it'd have to be, or I wouldn't have noticed it. You can't spend a large slice of your life in close association with oil of hartshorn and similar noxious substances and expect to keep your sense of smell). Familiar. It was a hell of a time to be struck down with scientific curiosity, but I couldn't resist. Why had somebody filled a whole bath full of honey?

So I looked.

She lay on her back, naked, with the meniscus of the honey just covering the tip of her nose. Her eyes were open, and her face still had that look of mild bewilderment that I'd seen the last time I saw her, as the beaker slipped through her fingers and smashed on the floor. Her hair was trapped in the stuff; she reminded me irresistibly of a fly caught in amber, and that, of course, was the general idea. Honey, as is well known, is of all the soft materials the least prone to corruption, which is why it's such a good preservative. Immerse a piece of meat—which was what Eudoxia was, now—in pure, clear honey, and it'll stay good almost indefinitely.

Good is a comparative term, and not one I'd ever be in a hurry to apply to my late wife. But, lying there submerged in the liquid gold, she was fighting decay and winning, no doubt about that. There was none of the shrinking of the flesh, withering of the lips, puffing and poaching of the ears and fingertips that you generally get with a dead body at that stage of the process. If there was a distortion, it was only the effect of light refracted in slow, golden liquid, adjusting rather than bending the line of her jaw, the angle of her nose to her brow. She was, I have to say, as beautiful as ever, and likely to remain so; exactly what she always wanted, frozen in her youth in her golden bath, finally safe from the vis mutationis, the weakness of earth, the spite of water, the gnawing of air and the irresistible compulsion of fire. I guess it comes down to what you want and what you're prepared to pay in order to get it. In her case, death; but she'd never really got much out of being alive, because of the constant terror of loss, change, deterioration, decay. It was enough to make me want to sit down and write a paper then and there. I'd finally given her what she wanted, the elixir of eternal youth, effected by the removal of her internal fire (the catalyst of change) through the agency of death. She'd have been so pleased, if only she'd been there to see it. Still, you can't have everything, and her body always mattered more to her than her soul, for want of a better word. I couldn't help smiling. Now that's alchemy, I thought.

I stood there looking at her for quite some time, until an observation eventually filtered its way through my thick skull. The footsteps I'd heard in the corridor had got gradually louder until they reached more or less where I was, and then they'd stopped. Which meant that the stepper of those steps must have stopped too, directly outside the door of this bathroom. Factor in the presence of the prince's dead sister—not something you'd leave lying about unguarded—and I was forced to a painful and humiliating conclusion. I could only suppose that the scuttlehat detailed to guard the body of the princess had gone away for a short while—call of nature or whatever—during which time I'd

slipped in and closed the door. Now the guard was back, and I'd trapped myself in there, with no realistic chance of getting out.

Idiot, I thought.

Well, there was nothing for it. I went to the door and belted it with my fist.

Wish I could've been on the other side of that door and seen the poor bugger's face. The guard would've been aware that he was standing outside a room containing one dead woman. Forcible knocking from inside the room, therefore—Well, he must've pulled himself together by the time he opened the door, because he had that scuttlehat look on his face; dead, stuffed and mounted. He recognised me, of course. They all know me.

"Sorry," I said. "Must've taken a wrong turn somewhere. Do you think you could show me the way to the back door?"

He thought about it just long enough. I really hate punching out scuttlehats. Miss by an eighth of an inch, and either they don't go down or you skin your knuckles on the sharp edge of the steel ear-flaps. Luckily, I was on target this time. He sank to his knees with that faint sigh you get sometimes. I stepped over him and ran for it.

Really, though, I was just killing time. I made it as far as the porters' lodge, just inside the main gate. There's a little sort of alcove in there, where they dump the mail sacks. I scrambled in and pulled a full sack on top of me, making sure there wasn't a telltale foot or elbow sticking out. Time to think.

Time, as I think I may have told you already, melts. In its liquid form (aqua temporis?), it seeps and penetrates, like a thin mineral oil, and pools, and floods, under the influence of heat (the agency of fire; see above, passim). Withdraw that influence and it congeals, like hot fat in a pan, and in its solid state undergoes a kind of slow transmutation into a gooey mess, in which you get stuck. Time pooled and congealed under that mail sack, whose coarse hemp fibres chafed my cheek as I huddled, denying myself the agency of movement. I hate waiting. I can feel time passing, I sometimes kid myself—time passing is a transmutation

of decay, communication by an exchange through loss; components dwindle and are lost, though what remains is by definition the enduring, therefore the refined, the desirable. In theory, you can refine gold by just leaving it lying around, letting the rain and the damp air corrode out the impurities, until only the gold remains. Wouldn't try it though. Someone like me might come along and steal it.

I thought; do I really have to go through with this?

They found me, in the end.

Picture the scene. Phocas and me, at the university, two fresh-faced young intellectual drunks bumping along a narrow alley, having been thrown out of the *Divine Forbearance*, on our way to create the circumstances that led to us being thrown out of the *Charity and Social Justice* (breathing with intent gets you slung out of the *Forbearance*, or it did in my day, but in order to get bounced from the *Charity*, you really have to try). Talking, the way students do; too loud, too fast, from the bottom of our hearts, about things we understood in theory and principle, though we hadn't got a clue about the proof and the practice.

"Hell of a good way to make money, though," I think I said.

"Alchemy." He snorted. It's thing people only do when they're drunk.

"Not that it's possible," I pointed out. "Can't be done."

"Don't be so sure," he replied darkly. "Amazing, what people can do. Look at cattle-breeding. Or glass-making, I mean, there's a case in point. I mean, who'd have thought you could take a load of sand, like just ordinary sand, off a beach, any God's amount of the stuff, and you stick it in a crucible and heat it up really, really, really hot, and next thing you know, you got glass. I mean," he added with intense feeling, "*glass*. Impossible."

"No it's not," I felt obliged to point out. "Glass is actually no big deal. People make the stuff every day."

"Yes, but it shouldn't be possible, is what I'm saying," he said. "Stuff that's solid, so you can touch it, so it's really there, but you can't see it, you can just see *through* it. That's not possible."

He paused to regain his balance, which had temporarily escaped him. "It's more like bloody magic than anything sensible. Well, isn't it?"

I shrugged. I'd forgotten what point he was trying to make.

"So," he went on, his face screwed up in concentration, "maybe the same thing goes for alchemy. Base stuff into gold. Just because we can't do it now doesn't mean to say it can't be done. Well?"

"But it can't be done," I said patiently. "Because of basic alchemical theory."

He spat; so much, then, for basic alchemical theory. "And bloody good job too," he said. "You know what? If ever I get to be prince—"

He paused, stopped dead and swallowed hard half a dozen times. I took a long step back, recognising the symptoms. But he was all right this time. "If ever I get to be prince," he went on, "first thing I'm going to do. Want to guess?"

I shook my head. "What?"

"Hunt down all the alchemists," he said, "string the buggers up. No mercy, no exceptions. You know why?"

"Enlighten me."

"Because," he said, "alchemists are the greatest potential danger to the state. Really. Because," he went on, rubbing his eyes with thumb and forefinger, "what's the basis of government revenue? The gold standard. Why? Because gold is scarce. You get some bastard comes along, figures out how to turn base metal into gold, what d'you get? Total fiscal chaos, that's what. Market flooded, gold worthless, billions of angels wiped out of the economy in a matter of hours."

I wasn't really interested in the subject, but I felt obliged to argue, because when you're that age, and a student, and drunk, you argue the toss about everything. "Oh, I don't know," I said. "Surely the trick would be, to keep it to yourself. Not let everybody know about it. Then you could have your tame alchemists down in the cellar cooking up millions of angels, and only you'd

know it wasn't the good stuff. You'd be rich, everybody'd be fine, no problem, surely."

He gave me a filthy look. "Wouldn't work," he said. "Can't keep something like that a secret for long. Bound to get out, and then you're screwed. Only thing you can do, lure all the really good alchemists to you with bribes and stuff, keep a really, really close eye on them; then, soon as they look like they're on to something—" He did that finger-across-the-throat thing, and hiccoughed.

"Bit harsh," I said.

"Harsh," he replied, "but right. The right thing to do. Always do the right thing, if you're the prince. Hold on there a second, gotta take a leak."

He paused in the doorway of the Convent of the Sisters of Divine Grace, and there was a trickling noise. Then he scampered to catch me up.

"So that's what you'll do, then, is it?" I asked. "When you're the prince."

He laughed. "Not going to be the prince."

"Really?"

"Impossible," he said. "Can't happen."

When I got back to my laboratory, the gold ingot was almost, but not quite, where I'd left it. Ah, I thought.

"Four guards," the guard said.

"Excuse me?"

"Four guards," he repeated. "Outside your door, at all times, from now on."

"I'm flattered," I said.

He gave me a look. "And private Syriscus is in the hospital. You cracked his skull."

From time to time, I really hate myself. It doesn't last long and then it goes away, and then it comes back. "I'm sorry," I said.

"Sure," he said, and left the room. I heard the lock. So what? I thought. He was a scuttlehat. They get paid to stand in harm's way. He was there to keep me from getting out, and I'm a free

man, a citizen of the universe, not a chicken in a coop. I never set out to hurt anybody, not ever. Well, not often. And when I do, it's never the primary purpose, just an unfortunate inevitable consequence. Mostly.

I sat down and read a book; Arcadius on functions, which is fundamentally flawed but still makes a kind of sense. They brought me something to eat; fresh bread, strong white cheese, five slices of farm sausage, an apple. "How's Syriscus getting on?" I asked. They just looked at me. I ate the food, then put my feet up on the bench and closed my eyes, but all I could see was her face just below the surface of the honey. Not guilt; more like the first stirring of an idea. I got up, found some paper and a pen and some ink, and started to write. (And if you happen to be a student in your second year at any decent Vesani university, you'd recognise what I wrote. Hell, you can probably recite the opening paragraph by heart, which is more than I can. There's a really basic flaw on page three, by the way. A small prize if you can spot it).

I must've fallen asleep, because when they woke me, I was face down on the paper, with the ink forming a small lake on the bench-top. I looked up. Scuttlehats.

"Come with us," they said.

"Do I have to?" I said, with a yawn. "It's been a really long day."

"On your feet," they explained. I got up, and they shunted me out of the door. I wasn't happy about being manhandled, but then I thought about the man whose skull I'd broken and decided not to make an issue of it. Memo to self, I thought; must make special effort not to hurt people.

Phocas was waiting for me in the South Library. Disconcerting. I'd been in there twice before, once as a friend and honoured guest, once when I was burgling the palace (long story) and took a wrong turning. It's a hell of a room; on the small side, by palace standards—you could just about squeeze a cavalry squadron in there, but they'd have to leave their horses outside in the corridor—half-panelled in rich golden oak with late Idealist

carvings of harvest and pastoral subjects, with a moulded-plaster roof gilded and painted in trompe l'oeil to represent a canopy of vines and mulberries (traditionally there's a two-angel prize for new visitors if they can spot the life-size moulded wren hidden among the vine-tendrils; I didn't find it until my second visit); five free-standing bookcases, unchained, one of which houses the current prince's own personal collection of books. I was touched to note that three shelves of this bookcase were taken up with the collected works of Saloninus.

"You're impossible," he said.

"Strictly speaking, no. Highly improbable, yes, but—"

"You put a guard in the hospital." Phocas not in mood for jokes. "The other one lost two jaw teeth." He paused, and looked at me. "Where did you learn to punch like that?" he said. "Not at the university."

"I sort of picked it up as I went along," I said truthfully. "Look, I'm really sorry about the guards. It wasn't—"

"Deliberate?" He shook his head. "Well, they're the least of our problems." He picked up a sheet of paper and waved it at me. "You know what this is?"

"Enlighten me."

"It's a warrant of friendly rendition," he said, and I saw that his face was milk-white. "Sworn and sealed by the Mezentine charge d'affaires, relating to charges of forgery, sedition and false coining. You know what that means?"

In other words, extradition. I just about managed to keep a straight face. "You won't let them take me," I said.

He closed his eyes for a moment. "I really don't see that I have a choice," he said. "It's a properly-drawn warrant, there's a valid treaty, they know you're here, and they went to the Senate instead of me personally. If I try and bury this, the Tendency'll have my head on a pike."

I didn't dare look him in the eye, so I concentrated on the tiny plaster wren, directly above his head. It seemed as though it was singing to me. Extradition; I get formally handed over at

the Northgate into the custody of three or four armed couriers. I go quietly. Sooner or later we stop at an inn or a post-house or a road station. A walnut-sized gob of pulveus fulminans goes in the fire, I go out through the window; free and clear. Of course, most of the major governments know me quite well by now, there'd be searches, including body cavities. But if it came down to a choice between my dignity and comfort and my life, no contest. You can easily hide enough pulveus fulminans to take out a wall where the sun doesn't shine.

"Please," I said. "Don't let them do this. It's the gibbet for coining in Mezentia."

"Should've thought of that before you did it." He paused. "You did do it."

I nodded. I make it a rule to tell the truth when there's nothing much riding on it. "I was starving," I said. "I met some men in a bar. They said it was for jewellery, not counterfeiting."

"Nino, you idiot." There was something in his voice, something so close to genuine feeling, that for a moment I felt physically ill. "What can I do? Come on, you're the genius. Suggest something."

"I'm not a lawyer," I said. "Ask the professionals, it's what you pay them for."

"I already did," he snapped, turning his head a little so he wasn't meeting my eye. "They couldn't think of a damned thing. Best they could come up with was a plea of benefit of clergy. But that won't wash unless it's made when you're on Mezentine soil."

Benefit of clergy, I thought, now that's smart. I liked it. Never been a priest before. "Will it work?"

He scowled, a sure sign of deep concentration. "They believe so," he said. "The treaty's four hundred years old, it was meant to protect our missionaries when they made trouble for themselves preaching the overthrow of the Guilds, but it's still in force and it specifically covers sedition and related offences. So, yes, probably."

"So you can get me out."

"Only if we let them take you in first." He rubbed his eyes, as though he'd been awake for three days. "It's those bastards in the Tendency," he said, "using you to get at me. Bet you anything you like they put the Mezentines up to it."

"Let's think about this," I said, in my best serious voice. "If you try and bury it, like you said, you'll play into their hands and you'll have a constitutional crisis. If we go along with it, due procedure, all straight and above board, you can get me out and stick it to the Tendency at the same time." I shrugged. "Looks pretty straight-forward to me," I said. "I'll go."

He sat still and quiet for a while, during which time I had to make an effort to remember to breathe. Then he seemed to come to a decision, then pull back from it. "Talk about timing," he said. "When you're so close—"

He looked up as he said that. There's a card game we used to play in the prison hulk at Phrontis Tropaea. I forget the name of it, but there's a point in the game where you've got the option of deliberately letting the other players see your cards. Never played it against Phocas, but I bet he'd have been good at it.

(When I'd gone back to the laboratory after my last outing, I'd picked up the gold ingot, once I'd noticed that it had been moved, and checked the underside. Sure enough, there was a thin line scribed on it, deep enough to cut through the layer of gold plating formed over the silvered copper by the Polycrates process. What I think I neglected to mention was the other ingot, which I'd cast some time earlier from the same mould, out of pure gold, which I'd put next to it. Archestratus in the *Materials* conjectures that the transmutation process starts with the outside and works slowly inwards, like the thawing of frozen meat.)

I managed to make myself look offended. "I said six weeks," I said. "I don't make promises I can't keep."

The enormity of that lie filled the room for a moment, then dissipated like gas in a breeze. "You're following Archestratus?"

I pulled a disdainful face. "Hardly," I said. "But it looks like he may have been right about something, for a change. But it's not ready," I went on. "If you'd cut into that bar with a chisel, you'd have found it's still copper half-way through."

(Which was true. Hell of a job, casting gold round a copper core. I had to support the copper bar inside the mould with four copper nails, so the molten gold would flow round and under it. Attention to detail, you see. It's everything.)

"If I let them take you—"

"Don't worry," I said bravely. "I'll be fine. And when I get back, I can finish the job."

It's been on my conscience for some time now that I haven't been exactly straight with you. What really happened was this.

She came in. She saw the stuff on the bench. "What's that?" she said.

"Nothing."

She gave me that look. "What?"

I told her what was in it, leaving out one key ingredient. Took her about five seconds to put the pieces together. "Will it work?"

"How should I know?"

She bent over the beaker and sniffed it, pulled back and made a face. "It went volatile."

"Yes, but I put in some sweet spirits of colocynth to calm it down."

She inspected it, then nodded briskly. "So?"

I shrugged. "What's the hurry?" I said. "If it works, I'll have forever. If it doesn't—"

"You'll make some more," she said quickly, as if she hadn't intended to say anything. "For me."

I didn't reply. She scowled at me. "No," I said.

"What?"

"No," I repeated. "You want to try it, you know the recipe."

"What the hell—"

"All due respect," I said, "but immortality is one thing. Being married to you for ever and ever, on the other hand—"

"You bastard."

"That's unfair," I said. "I'm not divorcing you. We'll live out the rest of your natural life together, and then I'll be free. That's the deal you signed up for."

"You'd let me die."

"Everybody dies," I said. "Mortality is the constant that defines our existence."

"Fuck you."

"Besides," I said, "it probably doesn't work. And it could be poisonous."

"If it is," she said pleasantly, "you'll die, and I'll know not to drink it."

"Could be it takes hours to work. Or days. Weeks, even. It'd be criminally irresponsible of me to let you drink it."

"You going to give Phocas some?"

I smiled. "If it works," I said, "I may eventually publish. But not till I've given it a really thorough trial. Say, two hundred years. Earlier than that, it'd be bad science."

"Are you going to give my brother some or aren't you?"

"No," I replied. "He's funding me to turn lead into gold, which we all know is impossible. This is just a sideline of my own. He doesn't own the research. This," I went on, smiling beautifully, "is just for me. Because I'm worth it."

I saw her slide her hand round the base of the beaker. With a really rather graceful movement, she lifted it to her mouth. I sat back in my chair to watch the show. When it was over (and it wasn't long; I chose sal draconis because it's quick) I got up and stood over her, turned her face with my foot so I could see her eyes. Not a flicker.

One down, I thought. I'd known, ever since college when she came up to visit Phocas and met me for the first time, that she was trouble. When Phocas more or less kidnapped me and brought me to Paraprosdocia, in the ludicrous but utterly sincere belief that I could figure out how to turn base metal into gold one day, she didn't object. Far from it. *Don't you ever let him go,*

I heard her say to him once; it was the third, no, sorry, make that the fourth time I tried to escape. I was wandering aimlessly through the palace trying to find a door that led to the street, and I happened to stray into the small cloister garden, where they were drinking wine beside the fountain. He assured her that the only journey I'd be making from the palace was the short distance from the back door to the midden—technically outside the palace grounds, because it's on the other side of the curtain wall. *Soon as he's cracked transmutation, I get rid of him*, Phocas said. *Don't you dare*, she replied, *not till he's made me the elixir.* He grinned at her. *Oh, go on, then*, he said. *But then—*

Didn't come as a surprise, not one bit. I'd always known, ever since that drunken episode back at Elpis. The last thing Phocas wanted was for there to be a way to turn garbage into gold. After all, the prince owns more gold than anybody else this side of the Eastern Sea, so he's got the most to lose. Hardly a coincidence that the half-dozen or so incredibly eminent alchemists who'd worked for him before I came, men whose glassware I wouldn't be worthy to wash out, had died in the palace. Irony; transmutation really and truly isn't possible. But I can easily picture what happened. Phocas keeps putting pressure on them to achieve results. They can't do the impossible, so they cheat. Cheating's easy. There are a dozen reliable recipes for instant gold plating, as many again for fool's gold that's practically indistinguishable from the real thing, and let's not get into the murky realm of rigged experiments, sleight of hand, false-bottomed cupolas, and the third and fourth books of Xenocrates' *Experiments* (I lost my copy years ago, but not before I committed the whole of those books to memory). So; they cheated, plausibly enough to convince Phocas that they'd finally done the trick, and that the trick was possible after all. And then he killed them.

Eudoxia was, of course, much smarter than her brother, and she'd taught herself alchemy to a remarkably high level. She knew transmutation couldn't be done. I guess she thought, if it gives my brother pleasure to kill a bunch of charlatans, let

him. She certainly knew better than to argue with him once he'd got an idea stuck in his head. But she'd read that universally-acclaimed early work of mine, *On the Properties of Organic Materials*, in which I proved conclusively that an elixir of eternal youth was not only theoretically possible but almost within our grasp.

*Properties* was another of my little grey lies. There's a fault in its logic that's so huge, I didn't feel guilty about publishing, on the grounds that anybody who couldn't spot it deserved to be made a monkey of. But nobody spotted it, not even brilliant Eudoxia. Now, she knew me well enough to know that bullying just doesn't work. More flies with honey than vinegar has always been the core of her philosophy. She figured that if I was deeply, hopelessly in love with her, I'd make her the elixir to preserve forever the beauty to which I was devoted. To be fair, I don't think she planned to have me killed after I'd come across with the stuff. She'd just leave me to Phocas. At any rate, she sold the idea of marrying me to him by arguing that a man with my propensity to running away couldn't be restrained by force. Instead, make me want to stay; and afterwards, when she was a widow, she could marry again. Phocas agreed; not because he was convinced by her arguments, but because he knew she'd very nearly married Opianus, leader of the Popular Tendency and Phocas' deadliest enemy in politics; her reason being, she'd done the sums and figured out that it was only a matter of time before the Tendency prevailed and Phocas' head found its way onto a spike on Northgate. If she married Opianus, she could hurry along the inevitable, secure her own position and effectively rule through him, if she could be bothered. I don't suppose she could, actually. My belief is, she wanted to make sure her head didn't end up next to her brother's when the end finally came. In any event, the deal fell through when Opianus was supplanted in a particularly nasty bout of Tendency in-fighting; his successor as Tendency leader, Pescennius, was widely known not to like girls, so she gave up. It was therefore in Phocas' interests to have his

sister safely married to a political nonentity; the collateral benefit of keeping me on a leash, if it actually worked out that way, was just icing on the cake.

I'd made up my mind to kill her quite some time ago; then I changed it. I'm deeply ashamed of this, but I'm helpless around beautiful women. That's how I allowed myself to fall in love with Theodosia, and after Phocas killed her, Eudoxia was still there, just as lovely, just as desperate to keep me hooked so I'd brew her stupid elixir for her. Just run away, I told myself, there's no need for another lovely woman to die. The transmutation of flesh to putrefaction, of warm to cold, is established fact, it doesn't need proving again. Just run away, and leave them both behind.

On that occasion I got as far as Lachrima, on the shores of the Great White Lake.

Extradition. So much to do, so little time.

The worst part, of course, was knowing I'd have to rely on other people. I have a thing about that. Mostly, I guess, because other people have always let me down, when it mattered; but it's also this deep-rooted hang-up I've got about trusting people. Never really been able to do it. I guess it's because we always instinctively use ourselves as paradigms of humanity when calculating the likely behaviour of others. I wouldn't trust me further than I can spit, so why would I trust anybody else?

Also, there's some procedures you just can't rush. It takes time for Element A to react with Essence B and produce Compound C; sometimes you can bustle it along with a little judicious heat, but not always, and if you get it wrong, you screw up Compound C or blow a hole in the roof. Furthermore, it's never ever a good idea to hurry when you're using strong acids. Think about it.

Add fine silver to aqua fortis, then add wood alcohol, as pure as you can make it. I spent years figuring out how to do this reaction so as to produce a stable product. Now I was faced with the tricky problem of making it so it'd be unstable. That too is the story of my life.

I started with twenty silver dollars; not the crappy government issue, which is ninety parts silver to ten parts copper, but some home-made (I prefer the term hand-made) of my own manufacture, ninety-nine point six pure, which I'd collected from a safe place after I went to see Astyages. One of the reasons I've never made any money out of counterfeiting is, I make better coins than the State. Can't seem to help it. Always the quiet voice in my head telling me; if a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing properly.

Put the dollars in the bottom of a big glass beaker. Slosh in a whole pint of the very best aqua fortis; made it myself, because you can't get good stuff commercially. Stand well back, because the foul-smelling white steam will kill you if you breathe it in. Watch those little smiling bubbles as the acid eats the silver. Enough to break your heart.

The guards turned up with the ice I'd asked for. They treated me like a cross between a leper and an active volcano. I smiled, and gave the sergeant the twenty-first dollar.

"No, really," I said, as he stared at it. "And thanks."

You could see the battle going on in his mind. On the one hand, I was the unbelievably devious master of escapes, who thought nothing of maiming honest soldiers if they got in my way. On the other hand, a silver dollar is a silver dollar is a month's pay. Of course, it wasn't a silver dollar, because it was in fact illegally better, but he wasn't to know that. Eventually his fist closed round it, and he got out of the room really fast.

I get my wood alcohol from Sirmis. It's the best money can buy. I put the beaker on the ice, glugged in the wood alcohol, stoppered the bottle and stood well back. So far, so good. As soon as it stopped gushing out killer fumes, I trickled in cold water, to start the crystals growing. Tricky part over; now all I had left to do was the relatively trivial chore of turning base metal into gold.

I don't actually know—I'm being totally honest with you now—whether it's possible or not. Truth is, I've never had the

enthusiasm to run the experiment to its conclusion. If I'd happened to stumble across the secret before Phocas got hold of me, maybe I'd have been a bit more motivated. As it was, discovering how to do it would've been my death warrant, so it stayed entirely theoretical. I didn't even dare write it down and work it out on paper, in case Eudoxia saw it. It's been in my head for years, and I never tried it out.

It's a six part procedure—you'll pardon me, I'm sure, if I don't tell you about it, just in case you're tempted to give it a go yourself, which (trust me) would lead to all manner of horrible consequences for you as and when your king, prince, duke or city council finds out what you're up to. The most I can bring myself to do is give you a hint. You add stuff to stuff, do stuff to the resulting stuff, and you get stuff out at the end, which may or may not be gold, depending on whether or not it works. It's all quite straightforward and doesn't need ice; you could do it at home, on the kitchen table, but don't, please.

So I did that. Then I ran up three walnut-sized knobs of pulveus fulminans, wrapped them in incredibly thin gold leaf and put them where they wouldn't be found. I won't dwell on that stage of the operation. All done, and just in time.

"I need to see the prince," I said.

The sergeant—not the same one as last time—nodded. I got the impression he'd been expecting me to say that, so presumably Phocas intended to say good-bye, as I'd hoped he would. Say what you like about Phocas, he's always been predictable; a fine quality in an ingredient, essential to a well-controlled experiment.

(It'd have been so nice if my life had been a well-controlled experiment. You know; start off with your basic ingredients, add education, experiences, events, stirring with a glass rod, when appropriate retarding the reaction with a block of ice. Predictable consequences, intended results, and something worth having at the end. Hasn't quite worked out like that. As for the result, the product, we'll have to wait and see. I may yet surprise myself.)

"The lawyers say it ought to be all right," Phocas said. He looked grey with worry. "They've drawn up the heads of defence and I've sent the papers on ahead by express courier, so they'll be there before you arrive. With any luck—"

"I'll be fine," I said. "Really." I smiled at him. "You know, I always thought I was smart, but benefit of clergy—"

"Damn it," he said, "I almost forgot." He scrabbled among the papers on his desk, found what he was looking for. "Lucustus Saloninus, do you solemnly swear to perform and uphold the office of deacon in the most holy and sacred convocation of the Company of the Invincible Sun? Say yes."

"Yes," I said, and waited. "Is that it?"

"That's it. You're a priest. Now get out of my sight."

"Really a priest?"

"*Yes*. Good-bye. Try not to rob anybody or blow anything up."

"Phocas." I looked straight at him, something I wouldn't usually do. "I need to tell you something before I go."

"Well?"

"In private."

He looked dubious, and the scuttlehats went suddenly tense. "Oh come on," I said. "I'm a priest now. If you can't trust the clergy—"

"Fine." He nodded at the sergeant, and the scuttlehats left the room. "Well?"

I lowered my voice just a little. "It's started," I said.

"What?"

"The experiment." It took a moment for it to sink in, and then his eyes grew round as dollars. "I've started it up. It'll take about five hours."

He'd grabbed my sleeve. "You mean—?"

"In my laboratory," I said, "on the bench, there's a stone basin, next to the water-clock. In the basin there's a handful of iron nails, covered with a pale green liquid. In about an hour from now, you should start to see a pale yellow coating on the nails. Whatever you do, don't touch them, the stuff in there'll eat your

fingers to the bone. Just let them be, but someone's going to have to watch the stuff like a hawk. So long as the liquid stays green, it's fine. If it starts to turn blue, someone's got to add two drops of the dark brown stuff in the dark green glass bottle; that'll put it right, but it's got to be done the moment the liquid starts changing colour. Otherwise the whole experiment's a write-off and I'll have to start again, it'd set us back months." I grinned. "This is about the most inconvenient time they could've picked."

He frowned at me. "Couldn't it have waited till you got back?"

I shook my head. "The principal reagent only stays stable for a day or so," I said. "It takes nine weeks to mature once you've brewed it. Also," I added quietly, "I may not be coming back. I'd hate to die without having tried."

He looked sick. "Don't talk like that," he said. "The lawyers—"

"I'll write it all out when I get to Mezentia," I said. "I'll mail to you via the diplomatic courier."

"No." He looked terrified. "For pity's sake, don't do that. We can't trust anybody with something like this. When you get back, there'll be plenty of time."

I shrugged. "Suit yourself," I said. "Just make sure there's someone watching that stuff for the next five hours. That's all I ask."

"Don't worry," he said, and his voice was just a shade higher than usual. "I'll do it myself."

"Really?"

"You have my word."

I smiled at him. "In that case," I said, "I've got nothing to worry about. Bless you, my son," I added, and went and banged on the door.

The story of my life, so far.

When I was young, I wanted to know the truth. I was impatient. I saw things so very clearly. It's probably a mistake to teach logic to the young. Logic is a weapon as well as a tool. You learn it, you master it, you can't wait to go out and use it on someone. At Elpis, I laid about me with the sword of logic till nobody

was left to fight. Then, absurdly, the money ran out, and shortly afterwards, so did I.

Running away; the story of my life. I ran away from philosophy and set about doing stupid things. Stealing is stupid, because sooner or later you get caught. Getting caught is also the story of my life. I always get away, but I always get caught. I used to think I just stumbled into alchemy by accident, but now I'm old enough to know better, I understand that there's no such thing as a coincidence. The two predominent factors that make me up, philosophy and criminality, when combined together on the block of ice that serves me for a personality go to make up alchemy. We were, to coin a phrase, made for each other.

The stupid thing is, I probably am the greatest alchemist who ever lived. Not because I may or may not have found out how to turn base metal into gold, but because—well, we'll come to that later. I'm also a pretty competent philosopher, but only as long as someone's prepared to pay me to do it. The longer you think about truth and wisdom, the more clearly you come to understand that they're figments of the imagination; and what does that leave? Well, there's the sheer pleasure of fencing with logic, which wears a bit thin after a while, and there's the reasonable living that can be made from lecturing and writing and teaching. I'd have settled for that, if only I'd been left alone, but no such luck.

Phocas and Eudoxia shaped my life. When I wasn't running away from them, I was lying to them, to keep from getting killed. I murdered Eudoxia because I had to; too old and tired to run any more, too weary to keep pulling knobs of pulveus fulminans out of my arse and jumping through windows. As for Phocas; I guess he meant well, but that's no excuse. I've meant well at various stages in my life, and there's no excuse whatsoever for me.

Curiously enough, one of my greatest talents, before I lost it, was making friends. People instinctively liked me, once upon a time. Theodosia loved me. You'd need to be ten times the scientist I'll ever be to figure out the chemistry behind that.

Well. I'm sorry, by the way, that I lied to you earlier. Couldn't resist. I guess that above all, I'm a showman, a performer, a liar. And you can take that to the bank.

"For God's sake," Pescennius said, scowling at me. "Did you really have to trash the entire palace?"

He was exaggerating, needless to say. But, "Yes," I replied. "Omelettes and eggs," I explained. "Also, if a thing's worth doing—"

He poured me a cup of that pale green tea that's so fashionable these days. Myself, I'd as soon drink rainwater from the gutter. "How did you do it, exactly?" he said.

Pescennius, formerly head of the Popularist Tendency and now First Citizen of the Republic, is, of course, an old college chum of mine. We go way back. "This stuff tastes like piss," I said.

"Yes. How did you—?"

"All right," I said wearily. "But it goes no further, right?"

"You have my word."

I knew him too well for that. Still, it didn't matter. He and I had a murder in common. That sort of mutual bond is something you can trust.

"Argens fulminans," I told him, stretching back into his really quite comfortable chair. "Otherwise known as fulminate of silver."

"Never heard of—"

"You wouldn't have," I said. "I discovered it. Fulminate of gold's been around for centuries, it's in all the books. I wondered if you could get the same effect with silver. They're both completely useless, of course."

He scowled at me. "Slow down," he said.

I grinned. "Fulminate of silver," I said, "is an explosive, a really powerful one. Trouble is, it's incredibly unstable. Other fulminates blow up when you bang them or drop them. Silver fulminate tends to go off under its own weight. No, I'm serious. The weight of one layer of crystals forming on top of another is

enough pressure to detonate it. That's why it's so useless. You can't make more than a tiny quantity before it self-destructs, unless you slow it right down with ice. And when the ice melts—"

He was thinking really hard, trying to keep up with me. "Go on," he said.

"I brewed up a large quantity of silver fulminate," I said. "On a big block of ice. I left it on the bench in the laboratory, along with another experiment I knew Phocas was interested in. That was just to get him in the same room as the fulminate and keep him there till it blew itself up. And him with it, of course."

"And the whole of the east wing."

I shrugged. "It's not like I had reliable data to work from," I said. "So I had to guess. You've got to admit, I erred on the safe side."

"You could put it like that."

"Anyhow," I went on, "it worked. And, thanks to you arranging the extradition for me, I was twelve miles from the city in the company of irreproachable witnesses when Phocas died, putting both you and me in the clear. Then, all I had to do was escape from the Mezentines—"

"How did you—?"

I mock-scowled at him. "Trade secret," I said. "Which I intend to keep to myself, for when I need it to escape from your scuttlehats, when the time comes."

He was too smart to be drawn by that. "It worked out all right," he said, "just about. When you suggested this whole thing, I—"

"You thought I was crazy, I know. But you trusted me. Thanks."

"I have this feeling I'll live to regret it," Pescennius said.

"Then you'll be luckier than Phocas," I replied. "Anyway, the hell with it. You got what you wanted; Phocas dead, the government in chaos, all the ingredients for a successful coup."

"Don't call it that," Pescennius said irritably. "It was a popular revolution."

"Of course it was." I stood up. "Thanks for the tea," I said. "I'll be going now."

He looked at me. "Where?"

I smiled. "I've never lied to you," I said. "So don't ask me that, or I'll have to spoil a perfect score."

He nodded. "Take care," he said. "For what it's worth, you're a hero of the people."

"And a priest, too," I said. "Is there no end to my talents?"

I went to Choris Seautou, where I had money and a place to work, and it was there that I successfully concluded my life's work, the achievement with which my name will for ever be linked, my great contribution to humanity, the source of my considerable wealth. It was about time, and I'd earned it.

And here I am. After a lifetime of wandering and running away, I now live in a big house, with two hundred acres of parkland and seventy-odd servants. I spend most of my time reading, now that I can afford to buy all the books I could possibly want. I don't write any more. Don't need the money.

I did make some notes of my various experiments in alchemy; but last year I had a huge bonfire out in the meadow and burned the lot. So, for example, the only directions for making silver fulminate anywhere in the world are the ones you've just read. The idea is that anyone disturbed enough to want the stuff will follow said instructions and, since there's a deliberate mistake in them, won't survive the attempt. The recipe for gold-out-of-garbage will die with me; arguably no great loss, since I never did find out if it works or not. The only data from my alchemical researches which will survive me is the formula for my great invention, which I sold, along with the business, to a Vesani consortium for more money than anybody could possibly spend in a lifetime. Needless to say, they intend to guard it with the utmost ferocity. It was a term of the contract that I didn't keep a copy of the formula myself. No problem, I told them.

I'm an honest man now, a pillar of the community. I even pay taxes. In fact, last year alone I paid enough to keep a regiment in

the field for a year (now, there's something a man can be proud of, don't you think?). Every Solstice I get a basket of white plums and a case of Faventine red wine from First Citizen Pescennius, who never did get around to holding free and fair elections, and is now practically indistinguishable from my other college chum Phocas, except he doesn't kill alchemists. I eat the plums and give the wine to my gardeners.

Oh, and last autumn I got married. She's a nice girl; not much to look at but sharp as a knife, and she makes me laugh. She married me for my money and my library. I think I married her because I like someone who gets their priorities right. I still think about Theodosia, of course. After giving it a great deal of thought, I've reached the conclusion that I probably didn't kill Phocas because he had Theodosia executed. I've tried to blame him for that, but I can't. My fault.

My invention, by which I turned base materials into negotiable gold and assured myself of the only true immortality—Sorry, I haven't been entirely straight with you. My name really is Saloninus, but I changed it when I came to Choris. You'll know me as Longinus Agricola, the inventor of synthetic blue paint.