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# Jack Vance

## THE MOON MOTH

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The houseboat had been built to the most exacting standards of Sirenese craftsmanship, which is to say, as close to the absolute as human eye could detect. The planking of waxy dark wood showed no joints, the fastenings were platinum rivets countersunk and polished flat. In style, the boat was massive, broad beamed, steady as the shore itself, without ponderosity or slackness of line. The bow bulged like a swan's breast, the stem rising high, then crooking forward to support an iron lantern. The doors were carved from slabs of a mottled black-green wood; the windows were many sectioned, paned with squares of mica, stained rose, blue, pale green and violet. The bow was given to service facilities and quarters for the slaves; amidships were a pair of sleeping cabins, a dining saloon and a parlor saloon, opening upon an observation deck at the stern.

Such was Edwer Thissell's houseboat, but ownership brought him neither pleasure nor pride. The houseboat had become shabby. The carpeting had lost its pile; the carved screens were chipped; the iron lantern at the bow sagged with rust. Seventy years ago the first owner, on accepting the boat, had honored the builder and had been likewise honored; the transaction (for the process represented a great deal more than simple giving and taking) had augmented the prestige of both. That time was far gone; the houseboat now commanded no prestige whatever. Edwer Thissell, resident on Sirene only three months, recognized the lack but could do nothing about it: this particular houseboat was the best he could get.

He sat on the rear deck practicing the ganga, a zitherlike instrument not much larger than his hand. A hundred yards inshore, surf defined a strip of white beach; beyond rose jungle, with the silhouette of craggy black hills against the sky. Mireille shone hazy and white overhead, as if through a tangle of spider web; the face of the ocean pooled and puddled with mother-of-pearl luster. The scene had become as familiar, though not as boring, as the ganga, at which he had worked two hours, twanging out the Sirenese scales, forming chords, traversing simple progressions. Now he put down the ganga for the zachinko, this a small sound-box studded with keys, played with the right hand. Pressure on the keys forced air through reeds in the keys themselves, producing a concertinalike tone. Thissel ran off a dozen quick scales, making very few mistakes. Of the six instruments he had set himself to learn, the zachinko had proved the least refractory (with the exception, of course, of the

hymerkin, that clacking, slapping, clattering device of wood and stone used exclusively with the slaves).

Thissell practiced another ten minutes, then put aside the zachinko. He flexed his arms, wrung his aching fingers. Every waking moment since his arrival had been given to the instruments: the hymerkin, the ganga, the zachinko, the kiv, the strapon, the gomapard. He had practiced scales in nineteen keys and four modes, chords without number, intervals never imagined on the Home Planets. Trills, arpeggios, slurs, click-stops and nasalization; damping and augmentation of overtones; vibratos and wolf-tones; concavities and convexities. He practiced with a dogged, deadly diligence, in which his original concept of music as a source of pleasure had long become lost. Looking over the instruments Thissell resisted an urge to fling all six into the Titanic.

He rose to his feet, went forward through the parlor saloon, the dining saloon, along a corridor past the galley and came out on the foredeck. He bent over the rail, peered down into the underwater pens where Toby and Rex, the slaves, were harnessing the dray-fish for the weekly trip to Fan, eight miles north. The youngest fish, either playful or captious, ducked and plunged. Its streaming black muzzle broke water, and Thissell, looking into its face, felt a peculiar qualm: the fish wore no mask!

Thissell laughed uneasily, fingering his own mask, the Moon Moth. No question about it, he was becoming acclimated to Sirene! A significant stage had been reached when the naked face of a fish caused him shock!

The fish were finally harnessed; Toby and Rex climbed aboard, red bodies glistening, black cloth masks clinging to their faces. Ignoring Thissell they stowed the pen, hoisted anchor. The dray-fish strained, the harness tautened, the houseboat moved north.

Returning to the afterdeck, Thissell took up the strapon — this a circular sound-box eight inches in diameter. Forty-six wires radiated from a central hub to the circumference where they connected to either a bell or a tinkle-bar. When plucked, the bells rang, the bars chimed; when strummed, the instrument gave off a twanging, jingling sound. When played with competence, the pleasantly acid dissonances produced an expressive effect; in an unskilled hand, the results were less felicitous, and might even approach random noise. The strapon was Thissell's weakest instrument and he practiced with concentration during the entire trip north.

In due course the houseboat approached the floating city. The dray-fish were curbed, the houseboat warped to a mooring. Along the dock a line of idlers weighed and gauged every aspect of the houseboat, the slaves and Thissell himself, according to Sirenese habit. Thissell, not yet accustomed to such penetrating inspection, found the scrutiny unsettling, all the more so for the immobility of the masks. Self-consciously adjusting his own Moon Moth,

he climbed the ladder to the dock.

A slave rose from where he had been squatting, touched knuckles to the black cloth at his forehead, and sang on a three-tone phrase of interrogation: “The Moon Moth before me possibly expresses the identity of Ser Edwer Thissell?”

Thissell tapped the hymerkin, which hung at his belt and sang: “I am Ser Thissell.”

“I have been honored by a trust,” sang the slave. “Three days from dawn to dusk I have waited on the dock; three nights from dusk to dawn I have crouched on a raft below this same dock listening to the feet of the Nightmen. At last I behold the mask of Ser Thissell.”

Thissell evoked an impatient clatter from the hymerkin. “What is the nature of this trust?”

“I carry a message, Ser Thissell. It is intended for you.”

Thissell held out his left hand, playing the hymerkin with his right. “Give me the message.”

“Instantly, Ser Thissell.”

The message bore a heavy superscription:

**EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION! RUSH!**

Thissell ripped open the envelope. The message was signed by Castel Cromartin, Chief Executive of the Interworld Policies Board, and after the formal salutation read:

Absolutely urgent the following orders be executed! Aboard Carina Cruzeiro, destination Fan, date of arrival January 10 U.T., is notorious assassin, Haxo Angmark. Meet landing with adequate authority, effect detention and incarceration of this man. These instructions must be successfully implemented. Failure is unacceptable. Attention! Haxo Angmark is superlatively dangerous. Kill him without hesitation at any show of resistance.

Thissell considered the message with dismay. In coming to Fan as Consular Representative he had expected nothing like this; he felt neither inclination nor competence in the matter of dealing with dangerous assassins. Thoughtfully he rubbed the fuzzy gray cheek of his mask. The situation was not completely dark; Esteban Rolver, Director of the Spaceport, would doubtless cooperate, and perhaps furnish a platoon of slaves.

More hopefully, Thissell reread the message, January 10, Universal Time. He consulted a conversion calendar. Today, 40th in the Season of Bitter Nectar — Thissell ran his finger down the column, stopped. January 10. Today.

A distant rumble caught his attention. Dropping from the mist came a dull shape: the lighter returning from contact with the Carina Cruzeiro.

Thissell once more reread the note, raised his head, and studied the

descending lighter. Aboard would be Haxo Angmark. In five minutes he would emerge upon the soil of Sirene. Landing formalities would detain him possibly twenty minutes. The landing field lay a mile and a half distant, joined to Fan by a winding path through the hills.

Thissell turned to the slave. "When did this message arrive?"

The slave leaned forward uncomprehendingly. Thissell reiterated his question, singing to the clack of the hymerkin: "This message: you have enjoyed the honor of its custody how long?"

The slave sang: "Long days have I waited on the wharf, retreating only to the raft at the onset of dusk. Now my vigil is rewarded; I behold Ser Thissell."

Thissell turned away, walked furiously up the dock. Ineffective, inefficient Sirenese! Why had they not delivered the message to his houseboat? Twenty-five minutes- twenty-two now. .

At the esplanade Thissell stopped, looked right, then left, hoping for a miracle: some sort of air-transport to whisk him to the spaceport, where, with Rolver's aid, Haxo Angmark might still be detained. Or better yet, a second message canceling the first. Something, anything. . But air-cars were not to be found on Sirene, and no second message appeared.

Across the esplanade rose a meager row of permanent structures, built of stone and iron and so proof against the efforts of the Night-men. A hostler occupied one of these structures, and as Thissell watched a man in a splendid pearl and silver mask emerged riding one of the lizardlike mounts of Sirene.

Thissell sprang forward. There was still time; with luck he might yet intercept Haxo Angmark. He hurried across the esplanade.

Before the line of stalls stood the hostler, inspecting his stock with solicitude, occasionally burnishing a scale or whisking away an insect. There were five of the beasts in prime condition, each as tall as a man's shoulder, with massive legs, thick bodies, heavy wedge-shaped heads. From their forefangs, which had been artificially lengthened and curved into near circles, gold rings depended; the scales of each had been stained in diaper-pattern; purple and green, orange and black, red and blue, brown and pink, yellow and silver.

Thissell came to a breathless halt in front of the hostler. He reached for his kiv,<sup>[1]</sup> then hesitated. Could this be considered a casual personal encounter? The zachinko perhaps? But the statement of his needs hardly seemed to demand the formal approach. Better the kiv after all. He struck a chord, but by error found himself stroking the ganga. Beneath his mask Thissell grinned apologetically; his relationship with this hostler was by no means on an intimate basis. He hoped that the hostler was of sanguine disposition, and in any event the urgency of the occasion allowed no time to select an exactly appropriate instrument. He struck a second chord, and,

playing as well as agitation, breathlessness and lack of skill allowed, sang out a request: “Ser Hostler, I have immediate need of a swift mount. Allow me to select from your herd.”

The hostler wore a mask of considerable complexity which Thissell could not identify: a construction of varnished brown cloth, pleated gray leather and, high on the forehead, two large green and scarlet globes, minutely segmented like insect-eyes. He inspected Thissell a long moment, then, rather ostentatiously selecting his stimic,<sup>[2]</sup> executed a brilliant progression of trills and rounds, of an import Thissell failed to grasp. The hostler sang, “Ser Moon Moth, I fear that my steeds are unsuitable to a person of your distinction.”

Thissell earnestly twanged at the ganga. “By no means; they all seem adequate. I am in great haste and will gladly accept any of the group.”

The hostler played a brittle cascading crescendo. “Ser Moon Moth,” he sang, “the steeds are ill and dirty. I am flattered that you consider them adequate to your use. I cannot accept the merit you offer me. And” — here, switching instruments, he struck a cool tinkle from his krodatch<sup>[3]</sup> — “somehow I fail to recognize the boon companion and co-craftsman who accosts me so familiarly with his ganga.”

The implication was clear. Thissell would receive no mount. He turned, set off at a run for the landing field. Behind him sounded a clatter of the hostler’s hymerkin — whether directed toward the hostler’s slaves or toward himself Thissell did not pause to learn.

The previous Consular Representative of the Home Planets on Sirene had been killed at Zundar. Masked as a Tavern Bravo he had accosted a girl beribboned for the Equinoctial Attitudes, a solecism for which he had been instantly beheaded by a Red Demiurge, a Sun Sprite and a Magic Hornet. Edwer Thissell, recently graduated from the Institute, had been named his successor, and allowed three days to prepare himself. Normally of a contemplative, even cautious disposition, Thissell had regarded the appointment as a challenge. He learned the Sirenese language by sub-cerebral techniques, and found it uncomplicated. Then, in the *Journal of Universal Anthropology*, he read:

The population of the Titanic littoral is highly individualistic, possibly in response to a bountiful environment which puts no premium upon group activity. The language, reflecting this trait, expresses the individual’s mood, his emotional attitude toward a given situation. Factual information is regarded as a secondary concomitant. Moreover, the language is sung, characteristically to the accompaniment of a small instrument. As a result, there is great difficulty in ascertaining fact from a native of Fan, or the forbidden city Zundar. One will be regaled with elegant arias and demonstrations of astonishing virtuosity upon one or another of the numerous musical instruments. The visitor to this fascinating world, unless he cares to

be treated with the most consummate contempt, must therefore learn to express himself after the approved local fashion.

Thissell made a note in his memorandum book: Procure small musical instrument, together with directions as to use. He read on.

There is everywhere and at all times a plenitude, not to say superfluity, of food, and the climate is benign. With a fund of racial energy and a great deal of leisure time, the population occupies itself with intricacy. Intricacy in all things: intricate craftsmanship, such as the carved panels which adorn the houseboats; intricate symbolism, as exemplified in the masks worn by everyone; the intricate half-musical language which admirably expresses subtle moods and emotions; and above all the fantastic intricacy of interpersonal relationships. Prestige, face, mana, repute, glory: the Sirenese word is strakh. Every man has his characteristic strakh, which determines whether, when he needs a houseboat, he will be urged to avail himself of a floating palace, rich with gems, alabaster lanterns, peacock faience and carved wood, or grudgingly permitted an abandoned shack on a raft. There is no medium of exchange on Sirene; the single and sole currency is strakh. .

Thissell rubbed his chin and read further.

Masks are worn at all times, in accordance with the philosophy that a man should not be compelled to use a similitude foisted upon him by factors beyond his control; that he should be at liberty to choose that semblance most consonant with his strakh. In the civilized areas of Sirene — which is to say the Titanic littoral — a man literally never shows his face; it is his basic secret.

Gambling, by this token, is unknown on Sirene; it would be catastrophic to Sirenese self-respect to gain advantage by means other than the exercise of strakh. The word “luck” has no counterpart in the Sirenese language.

Thissell made another note: Get mask. Museum? Drama guild?

He finished the article, hastened forth to complete his preparations, and the next day embarked aboard the Robert Astroguard for the first leg of the passage to Sirene.

The lighter settled upon the Sirenese spaceport, a topaz disk isolated among the black, green and purple hills. The lighter grounded and Edwer Thissell stepped forth. He was met by Esteban Rolver, the local agent for Spaceways. Rolver threw up his hands, stepped back. “Your mask,” he cried huskily. “Where is your mask?”

Thissell held it up rather self-consciously. “I wasn’t sure — ”

“Put it on,” said Rolver, turning away. He himself wore a fabrication of dull green scales, blue-lacquered wood. Black quills protruded at the cheeks, and under his chin hung a black-and-white-checked pompom, the total effect creating a sense of sardonic supple personality.

Thissell adjusted the mask to his face, undecided whether to make a joke

about the situation or to maintain a reserve suitable to the dignity of his post.

“Are you masked?” Rolver inquired over his shoulder.

Thissell replied in the affirmative and Rolver turned. The mask hid the expression of his face, but his hand unconsciously flicked a set of keys strapped to his thigh. The instrument sounded a trill of shock and polite consternation. “You can’t wear that mask!” sang Rolver. “In fact — how, where, did you get it?”

“It’s copied from a mask owned by the Polypolis museum,” Thissell declared stiffly. “I’m sure it’s authentic.”

Rolver nodded, his own mask seeming more sardonic than ever. “It’s authentic enough. It’s a variant of the type known as the Sea Dragon Conqueror, and is worn on ceremonial occasions by persons of enormous prestige: princes, heroes, master craftsmen, great musicians.”

“I wasn’t aware — ”

Rolver made a gesture of languid understanding. “It’s something you’ll learn in due course. Notice my mask. Today I’m wearing a Tarn Bird. Persons of minimal prestige — such as you, I, any other out-worlder — wear this sort of thing.”

“Odd,” said Thissell, as they started across the field toward a low concrete blockhouse. “I assumed that a person wore whatever he liked.”

“Certainly,” said Rolver. “Wear any mask you like — if you can make it stick. This Tarn Bird for instance. I wear it to indicate that I presume nothing. I make no claims to wisdom, ferocity, versatility, musicianship, truculence, or any of a dozen other Sirenese virtues.”

“For the sake of argument,” said Thissell, “what would happen if I walked through the streets of Zundar in this mask?”

Rolver laughed, a muffled sound behind his mask. “If you walked along the docks of Zundar — there are no streets — in any mask, you’d be killed within the hour. That’s what happened to Benko, your predecessor. He didn’t know how to act. None of us out-worlders know how to act. In Fan we’re tolerated — so long as we keep our place. But you couldn’t even walk around Fan in that regalia you’re sporting now. Somebody wearing a Fire Snake or a Thunder Goblin — masks, you understand — would step up to you. He’d play his krodatch, and if you failed to challenge his audacity with a passage on the skaranyi,<sup>[4]</sup> a devilish instrument, he’d play his hymerkin — the instrument we use with the slaves. That’s the ultimate expression of contempt. Or he might ring his dueling-gong and attack you then and there.”

“I had no idea that people here were quite so irascible,” said Thissell in a subdued voice.

Rolver shrugged and swung open the massive steel door into his office. “Certain acts may not be committed on the Concourse at Polypolis without incurring criticism.”

“Yes, that’s quite true,” said Thissell. He looked around the office. “Why the security? The concrete, the steel?”

“Protection against the savages,” said Rolver. “They come down from the mountains at night, steal what’s available, kill anyone they find ashore.” He went to a closet, brought forth a mask. “Here. Use this Moon Moth; it won’t get you in trouble.”

Thissell unenthusiastically inspected the mask. It was constructed of mouse-colored fur; there was a tuft of hair at each side of the mouth-hole, a pair of featherlike antennae at the forehead. White lace flaps dangled beside the temples and under the eyes hung a series of red folds, creating an effect at once lugubrious and comic.

Thissell asked, “Does this mask signify any degree of prestige?”

“Not a great deal.”

“After all, I’m Consular Representative,” said Thissell. “I represent the Home Planets, a hundred billion people — ”

“If the Home Planets want their representative to wear a Sea Dragon Conqueror mask, they’d better send out a Sea Dragon Conqueror type of man.”

“I see,” said Thissell in a subdued voice. “Well, if I must. .”

Rolver politely averted his gaze while Thissell doffed the Sea Dragon Conqueror and slipped the more modest Moon Moth over his head. “I suppose I can find something just a bit more suitable in one of the shops,” Thissell said. “I’m told a person simply goes in and takes what he needs, correct?”

Rolver surveyed Thissell critically. “That mask — temporarily, at least — is perfectly suitable. And it’s rather important not to take anything from the shops until you know the strakh value of the article you want. The owner loses prestige if a person of low strakh makes free with his best work.” Thissell shook his head in exasperation. “Nothing of this was explained to me! I knew of the masks, of course, and the painstaking integrity of the craftsmen, but this insistence on prestige — strakh, whatever the word is. .”

“No matter,” said Rolver. “After a year or two you’ll begin to learn your way around. I suppose you speak the language?”

“Oh, indeed. Certainly.”

“And what instruments do you play?”

“Well — I was given to understand that any small instrument was adequate, or that I could merely sing.”

“Very inaccurate. Only slaves sing without accompaniment. I suggest that you learn the following instruments as quickly as possible: The hymerkin for your slaves. The ganga for conversation between intimates or one a trifle lower than yourself in strakh. The kiv for casual polite intercourse. The zachinko for more formal dealings. The strapon or the krodatch for your

social inferiors — in your case, should you wish to insult someone. The gomapard<sup>[5]</sup> or the double-kamanthil<sup>[6]</sup> for ceremonials.” He considered a moment. “The crebarin, the water-lute and the slobo are highly useful also — but perhaps you’d better learn the other instruments first. They should provide at least a rudimentary means of communication.”

“Aren’t you exaggerating?” suggested Thissell. “Or joking?”

Rolver laughed his saturnine laugh. “Not at all. First of all, you’ll need a houseboat. And then you’ll want slaves.”

Rolver took Thissell from the landing field to the docks of Fan, a walk of an hour and a half along a pleasant path under enormous trees loaded with fruit, cereal pods, sacs of sugary sap.

“At the moment,” said Rolver, “there are only four out-worlders in Fan, counting yourself. I’ll take you to Welibus, our Commercial Factor. I think he’s got an old houseboat he might let you use.”

Cornely Welibus had resided fifteen years in Fan, acquiring sufficient strakh to wear his South Wind mask with authority. This consisted of a blue disk inlaid with cabochons of lapis lazuli, surrounded by an aureole of shimmering snakeskin. Heartier and more cordial than Rolver, he not only provided Thissell with a houseboat, but also a score of various musical instruments and a pair of slaves.

Embarrassed by the largesse, Thissell stammered something about payment, but Welibus cut him off with an expansive gesture. “My dear fellow, this is Sirene. Such trifles cost nothing.”

“But a houseboat — ”

Welibus played a courtly little flourish on his kiv. “I’ll be frank, Ser Thissell. The boat is old and a trifle shabby. I can’t afford to use it; my status would suffer.” A graceful melody accompanied his words. “Status as yet need not concern you. You require merely shelter, comfort and safety from the Night-men.”

“ ‘Night-men’?”

“The cannibals who roam the shore after dark.”

“Oh, yes. Ser Rolver mentioned them.”

“Horrible things. We won’t discuss them.” A shuddering little trill issued from his kiv. “Now, as to slaves.” He tapped the blue disk of his mask with a thoughtful forefinger. “Rex and Toby should serve you well.” He raised his voice, played a swift clatter on the hymerkin. “Avan esx trobu!”

A female slave appeared wearing a dozen tight bands of pink cloth, and a dainty black mask sparkling with mother-of-pearl sequins.

“Fascu etz Rex ae Toby.”

Rex and Toby appeared, wearing loose masks of black cloth, russet jerkins. Welibus addressed them with a resonant clatter of hymerkin, enjoining them to the service of their new master, on pain of return to their

native islands. They prostrated themselves, sang pledges of servitude to Thissell in soft husky voices. Thissell laughed nervously and essayed a sentence in the Sirenese language. "Go to the houseboat, clean it well, bring aboard food."

Toby and Rex stared blankly through the holes in their masks. Welibus repeated the orders with hymerkin accompaniment. The slaves bowed and departed.

Thissell surveyed the musical instruments with dismay. "I haven't the slightest idea how to go about learning these things."

Welibus turned to Rolver. "What about Kershaul? Could he be persuaded to give Ser Thissell some basic instruction?"

Rolver nodded judicially. "Kershaul might undertake the job."

Thissell asked, "Who is Kershaul?"

"The fourth of our little group of expatriates," replied Welibus; "an anthropologist. You've read Zundar the Splendid? Rituals of Sirene? The Faceless Folk? No? A pity. All excellent works. Kershaul is high in prestige and I believe visits Zundar from time to time. Wears a Cave Owl, sometimes a Star Wanderer, or even a Wise Arbiter."

"He's taken to an Equatorial Serpent," said Rolver. "The variant with the gilt tusks."

"Indeed!" marveled Welibus. "Well, I must say he's earned it. A fine fellow, good chap indeed." And he strummed his zachinko thoughtfully.

Three months passed. Under the tutelage of Mathew Kershaul, Thissell practiced the hymerkin, the ganga, the strapon, the kiv, the gomapard, and the zachinko. The double- kamanthil, the krodatch, the slobo, the water-lute and a number of others could wait, said Kershaul, until Thissell had mastered the six basic instruments. He lent Thissell recordings of noteworthy Sirenese conversing in various moods and to various accompaniments, so that Thissell might learn the melodic conventions currently in vogue, and perfect himself in the niceties of intonation, the various rhythms, cross-rhythms, compound rhythms, implied rhythms and suppressed rhythms. Kershaul professed to find Sirenese music a fascinating study, and Thissell admitted that it was a subject not readily exhausted. The quarter-tone tuning of the instruments admitted the use of twenty-four tonalities, which multiplied by the five modes in general use, resulted in one hundred and twenty separate scales. Kershaul, however, advised that Thissell primarily concentrate on learning each instrument in its fundamental tonality, using only two of the modes.

With no immediate business at Fan except the weekly visits to Mathew Kershaul, Thissell took his houseboat eight miles south and moored it in the lee of a rocky promontory. Here, if it had not been for the incessant practicing, Thissell lived an idyllic life. The sea was calm and crystal-clear; the beach, ringed by the gray, green and purple foliage of the forest, lay close

at hand if he wanted to stretch his legs.

Toby and Rex occupied a pair of cubicles forward; Thissell had the after-cabins to himself. From time to time he toyed with the idea of a third slave, possibly a young female, to contribute an element of charm and gaiety to the ménage, but Kershaul advised against the step, fearing that the intensity of Thissell's concentration might somehow be diminished. Thissell acquiesced and devoted himself to the study of the six instruments.

The days passed quickly. Thissell never became bored with the pageantry of dawn and sunset; the white clouds and blue sea of noon; the night sky blazing with the twenty-nine stars of Cluster SI 1-715. The weekly trip to Fan broke the tedium: Toby and Rex foraged for food; Thissell visited the luxurious houseboat of Mathew Kershaul for instruction and advice. Then, three months after Thissell's arrival, came the message completely disorganizing the routine: Haxo Angmark, assassin, agent provocateur, ruthless and crafty criminal, had come to Sirene. Effective detention and incarceration of this man! read the orders. Attention! Haxo Angmark superlatively dangerous. Kill without hesitation!

Thissell was not in the best of condition. He trotted fifty yards until his breath came in gasps, then walked: through low hills crowned with white bamboo and black tree-ferns; across meadows yellow with grass-nuts; through orchards and wild vineyards. Twenty minutes passed, twenty-five minutes passed — twenty-five minutes! With a heavy sensation in his stomach Thissell knew that he was too late. Haxo Angmark had landed, and might be traversing this very road toward Fan. But along the way Thissell met only four persons: a boy-child in a mock-fierce Alk Islander mask; two young women wearing the Red Bird and the Green Bird; a man masked as a Forest Goblin. Coming upon the man, Thissell stopped short. Could this be Angmark?

Thissell essayed a stratagem. He went boldly to the man, stared into the hideous mask. "Angmark," he called in the language of the Home Planets, "you are under arrest!"

The Forest Goblin stared uncomprehendingly, then started forward along the track.

Thissell put himself in the way. He reached for his ganga, then recalling the hostler's reaction, instead struck a chord on the zachinko. "You travel the road from the spaceport," he sang. "What have you seen there?"

The Forest Goblin grasped his hand-bugle, an instrument used to deride opponents on the field of battle, to summon animals or occasionally to evince a rough and ready truculence. "Where I travel and what I see are the concern solely of myself. Stand back or I walk upon your face." He marched forward, and had not Thissell leaped aside the Forest Goblin might well have made good his threat.

Thissell stood gazing after the retreating back. Angmark? Not likely, with so sure a touch on the hand-bugle. Thissell hesitated, then turned and continued on his way.

Arriving at the spaceport, he went directly to the office. The heavy door stood ajar; as Thissell approached, a man appeared in the doorway. He wore a mask of dull green scales, mica plates, blue-lacquered wood and black quills — the Tarn Bird.

“Ser Rolver,” Thissell called out anxiously, “who came down from the Carina Cruzeiro?”

Rolver studied Thissell a long moment. “Why do you ask?”

“Why do I ask?” demanded Thissell. “You must have seen the spacegram I received from Castel Cromartin!”

“Oh, yes,” said Rolver. “Of course. Naturally.”

“It was delivered only half an hour ago,” said Thissell bitterly. “I rushed out as fast as I could. Where is Angmark?”

“In Fan, I assume,” said Rolver.

Thissell cursed softly. “Why didn’t you hold him up, delay him in some way?”

Rolver shrugged. “I had neither authority, inclination nor the capability to stop him.”

Thissell fought back his annoyance. In a voice of studied calm he said, “On the way I passed a man in rather a ghastly mask — saucer eyes, red wattles.”

“A Forest Goblin,” said Rolver. “Angmark brought the mask with him.”

“But he played the hand-bugle,” Thissell protested. “How could Angmark — ”

“He’s well acquainted with Sirene; he spent five years here in Fan.”

Thissell grunted in annoyance. “Cromartin made no mention of this.”

“It’s common knowledge,” said Rolver with a shrug. “He was Commercial Representative before Welibus took over.”

“Were he and Welibus acquainted?”

Rolver laughed shortly. “Naturally. But don’t suspect poor Welibus of anything more venal than juggling his accounts; I assure you he’s no consort of assassins.”

“Speaking of assassins,” said Thissell, “do you have a weapon I might borrow?”

Rolver inspected him in wonder. “You came out here to take Angmark bare-handed?”

“I had no choice,” said Thissell. “When Cromartin gives orders he expects results. In any event you were here with your slaves.”

“Don’t count on me for help,” Rolver said testily. “I wear the Tarn Bird and make no pretensions of valor. But I can lend you a power pistol. I haven’t

used it recently; I won't guarantee its charge."

Rolver went into the office and a moment later returned with the gun. "What will you do now?"

Thissell shook his head wearily. "I'll try to find Angmark in Fan. Or might he head for Zundar?"

Rolver considered. "Angmark might be able to survive in Zundar. But he'd want to brush up on his musicianship. I imagine he'll stay in Fan a few days."

"But how can I find him? Where should I look?"

"That I can't say," replied Rolver. "You might be safer not finding him. Angmark is a dangerous man."

Thissell returned to Fan the way he had come.

Where the path swung down from the hills into the esplanade a thick-walled pise de terre building had been constructed. The door was carved from a solid black plank; the windows were guarded by enfoliated bands of iron. This was the office of Cornely Welibus, Commercial Factor, Importer and Exporter. Thissell found Welibus sitting at his ease on the tiled veranda, wearing a modest adaptation of the Walde-mar mask. He seemed lost in thought, and might or might not have recognized Thissell's Moon Moth; in any event he gave no signal of greeting.

Thissell approached the porch. "Good morning, Ser Welibus."

Welibus nodded abstractedly and said in a flat voice, plucking at his krodatch, "Good morning."

Thissell was rather taken aback. This was hardly the instrument to use toward a friend and fellow out-worlder, even if he did wear the Moon Moth.

Thissell said coldly, "May I ask how long you have been sitting here?"

Welibus considered half a minute, and now when he spoke he accompanied himself on the more cordial crebarin. But the recollection of the krodatch chord still rankled in Thissell's mind.

"I've been here fifteen or twenty minutes. Why do you ask?"

"I wonder if you noticed a Forest Goblin pass?"

Welibus nodded. "He went on down the esplanade — turned into the first mask shop, I believe."

Thissell hissed between his teeth. This would naturally be Angmark's first move. "Ill never find him once he changes masks," he muttered.

"Who is this Forest Goblin?" asked Welibus, with no more than casual interest.

Thissell could see no reason to conceal the name. "A notorious criminal: Haxo Angmark."

"Haxo Angmark!" croaked Welibus, leaning back in his chair. "You're sure he's here?"

"Reasonably sure."

Welibus rubbed his shaking hands together. “This is bad news — bad news indeed! He’s an unscrupulous scoundrel.”

“You knew him well?”

“As well as anyone.” Welibus was now accompanying himself with the kiv. “He held the post I now occupy. I came out as an inspector and found that he was embezzling four thousand UMFs a month. I’m sure he feels no great gratitude toward me.” Welibus glanced nervously up the esplanade. “I hope you catch him.”

“I’m doing my best. He went into the mask shop, you say?”

“I’m sure of it.”

Thissell turned away. As he went down the path he heard the black plank door thud shut behind him.

He walked down the esplanade to the mask-maker’s shop, paused outside as if admiring the display: a hundred miniature masks, carved from rare woods and minerals, dressed with emerald flakes, spider-web silk, wasp wings, petrified fish scales and the like. The shop was empty except for the mask-maker, a gnarled knotty man in a yellow robe, wearing a deceptively simple Universal Expert mask, fabricated from over two thousand bits of articulated wood.

Thissell considered what he would say, how he would accompany himself, then entered. The mask-maker, noting the Moon Moth and Thissell’s diffident manner, continued with his work.

Thissell, selecting the easiest of his instruments, stroked his strapon — possibly not the most felicitous choice, for it conveyed a certain degree of condescension. Thissell tried to counteract his flavor by singing in warm, almost effusive, tones, shaking the strapon whimsically when he struck a wrong note: “A stranger is an interesting person to deal with; his habits are unfamiliar, he excites curiosity. Not twenty minutes ago a stranger entered this fascinating shop, to exchange his drab Forest Goblin for one of the remark-able and adventurous creations assembled on the premises.”

The mask-maker turned Thissell a side-glance, and without words played a progression of chords on an instrument Thissell had never seen before: a flexible sac gripped in the palm with three short tubes leading between the fingers. When the tubes were squeezed almost shut and air forced through the slit, an oboelike tone ensued. To Thissell’s developing ear the instrument seemed difficult, the mask-maker expert, and the music conveyed a profound sense of disinterest.

Thissell tried again, laboriously manipulating the strapon. He sang, “To an out-worlder on a foreign planet, the voice of one from his home is like water to a wilting plant. A person who could unite two such persons might find satisfaction in such an act of mercy.”

The mask-maker casually fingered his own strapon, and drew forth a set

of rippling scales, his fingers moving faster than the eyes could follow. He sank in the formal style: “An artist values his moments of concentration; he does not care to spend time exchanging banalities with persons of at best average prestige.” Thissell attempted to insert a counter melody, but the mask-maker struck a new set of complex chords whose portent evaded Thissell’s understanding, and continued: “Into the shop comes a person who evidently has picked up for the first time an instrument of unparalleled complication, for the execution of his music is open to criticism. He sings of homesickness and longing for the sight of others like himself. He dissembles his enormous strakh behind a Moon Moth, for he plays the strapon to a Master Craftsman, and sings in a voice of contemptuous raillery. The refined and creative artist ignores the provocation. He plays a polite instrument, remains noncommittal, and trusts that the stranger will tire of his sport and depart.”

Thissell took up his kiv. “The noble mask-maker completely misunderstands me — ”

He was interrupted by staccato rasping of the mask-maker’s strapon. “The stranger now sees fit to ridicule the artist’s comprehension.”

Thissell scratched furiously at his strapon: “To protect myself from the heat, I wander into a small and unpretentious mask shop. The artisan, though still distracted by the novelty of his tools, gives promise of development. He works zealously to perfect his skill, so much so that he refuses to converse with strangers, no matter what their need.”

The mask maker carefully laid down his carving tool. He rose to his feet, went behind a screen and shortly returned wearing a mask of gold and iron, with simulated flames licking up from the scalp. In one hand he carried a skaranyi, in the other a scimitar. He struck off a brilliant series of wild tones, and sang: “Even the most accomplished artist can augment his strakh by killing sea-monsters, Night-men and importunate idlers. Such an occasion is at hand. The artist delays his attack exactly ten seconds, because the offender wears a Moon Moth.” He twirled his scimitar, spun it in the air.

Thissell desperately pounded the strapon. “Did a Forest Goblin enter the shop? Did he depart with a new mask?”

“Five seconds have lapsed,” sang the mask-maker in steady ominous rhythm.

Thissell departed in frustrated rage. He crossed the square, stood looking up and down the esplanade. Hundreds of men and women sauntered along the docks, or stood on the decks of their houseboats, each wearing a mask chosen to express his mood, prestige and special attributes, and everywhere sounded the twitter of musical instruments.

Thissell stood at a loss. The Forest Goblin had disappeared. Haxo Angmark walked at liberty in Fan, and Thissell had failed the urgent instructions of Castel Cromartin.

Behind him sounded the casual notes of a kiv. “Ser Moon Moth Thissell, you stand engrossed in thought.”

Thissell turned, to find beside him a Cave Owl, in a somber cloak of black and gray. Thissell recognized the mask, which symbolized erudition and patient exploration of abstract ideas; Mathew Kershaul had worn it on the occasion of their meeting a week before.

“Good morning, Ser Kershaul,” muttered Thissell.

“And how are the studies coming? Have you mastered the C-Sharp Plus scale on the gomapard? As I recall, you were finding those inverse intervals puzzling.”

“I’ve worked on them,” said Thissell in a gloomy voice. “However, since I’ll probably be recalled to Polypolis, it may be all time wasted.”

“Eh? What’s this?”

Thissell explained the situation in regard to Haxo Angmark. Kershaul nodded gravely. “I recall Angmark. Not a gracious personality, but an excellent musician, with quick fingers and a real talent for new instruments.” Thoughtfully he twisted the goatee of his Cave Owl mask. “What are your plans?”

“They’re nonexistent,” said Thissell, playing a doleful phrase on the kiv. “I haven’t any idea what masks hell be wearing and if I don’t know what he looks like, how can I find him?”

Kershaul tugged at his goatee. “In the old days he favored the Exo Cambian Cycle, and I believe he used an entire set of Nether Denizens. Now of course his tastes may have changed.”

“Exactly,” Thissell complained. “He might be twenty feet away and I’d never know it.” He glanced bitterly across the esplanade toward the mask-maker’s shop. “No one will tell me anything; I doubt if they care that a murderer is walking their docks.”

“Quite correct,” Kershaul agreed. “Sirenese standards are different from ours.”

“They have no sense of responsibility,” declared Thissell. “I doubt if they’d throw a rope to a drowning man.”

“It’s true that they dislike interference,” Kershaul agreed. “They emphasize individual responsibility and self-sufficiency.”

“Interesting,” said Thissell, “but I’m still in the dark about Angmark.”

Kershaul surveyed him gravely. “And should you locate Angmark, what will you do then?”

“I’ll carry out the orders of my superior,” said Thissell doggedly.

“Angmark is a dangerous man,” mused Kershaul. “He’s got a number of advantages over you.”

“I can’t take that into account. It’s my duty to send him back to Polypolis. He’s probably safe, since I haven’t the remotest idea how to find

him.”

Kershaul reflected. “An out-worlder can’t hide behind a mask, not from the Sirenes, at least. There are four of us here at Fan — Rolver, Welibus, you and me. If another out-worlder tries to set up housekeeping the news will get around in short order.”

“What if he heads for Zundar?”

Kershaul shrugged. “I doubt if he’d dare. On the other hand — ” Kershaul paused, then noting Thissell’s sudden inattention, turned to follow Thissell’s gaze.

A man in a Forest Goblin mask came swaggering toward them along the esplanade. Kershaul laid a restraining hand on Thissell’s arm, but Thissell stepped out into the path of the Forest Goblin, his borrowed gun ready. “Haxo Angmark,” he cried, “don’t make a move, or I’ll kill you. You’re under arrest.”

“Are you sure this is Angmark?” asked Kershaul in a worried voice.

“I’ll find out,” said Thissell. “Angmark, turn around, hold up your hands.”

The Forest Goblin stood rigid with surprise and puzzlement. He reached to his zachinko, played an interrogatory arpeggio, and sang, “Why do you molest me, Moon Moth?”

Kershaul stepped forward and played a placatory phrase on his slobo. “I fear that a case of confused identity exists, Ser Forest Goblin. Ser Moon Moth seeks an out-worlder in a Forest Goblin mask.”

The Forest Goblin’s music became irritated, and he suddenly switched to his stimic. “He asserts that I am an out-worlder? Let him prove his case, or he has my retaliation to face.”

Kershaul glanced in embarrassment around the crowd which had gathered and once more struck up an ingratiating melody. “I am sure that Ser Moon Moth — ”

The Forest Goblin interrupted with a fanfare of skaranyi tones. “Let him demonstrate his case or prepare for the flow of blood.”

Thissell said, “Very well, I’ll prove my case.” He stepped forward, grasped the Forest Goblin’s mask. “Let’s see your face, that’ll demonstrate your identity!”

The Forest Goblin sprang back in amazement. The crowd gasped, then set up an ominous strumming and toning of various instruments.

The Forest Goblin reached to the nape of his neck, jerked the cord to his duel-gong, and with his other hand snatched forth his scimitar.

Kershaul stepped forward, playing the slobo with great agitation. Thissell, now abashed, moved aside, conscious of the ugly sound of the crowd.

Kershaul sang explanations and apologies, the Forest Goblin answered;

Kershaul spoke over his shoulder to Thissell: “Run for it, or you’ll be killed! Hurry!”

Thissell hesitated; the Forest Goblin put up his hand to thrust Kershaul aside. “Run!” screamed Kershaul. “To Welibus’ office, lock yourself in!”

Thissell took to his heels. The Forest Goblin pursued him a few yards, then stamped his feet, sent after him a set of raucous and derisive blasts of the hand-bugle, while the crowd produced a contemptuous counterpoint of clacking hymerkins.

There was no further pursuit. Instead of taking refuge in the Import-Export office, Thissell turned aside and after cautious reconnaissance proceeded to the dock where his houseboat was moored.

The hour was not far short of dusk when he finally returned aboard. Toby and Rex squatted on the forward deck, surrounded by the provisions they had brought back: reed baskets of fruit and cereal, blue-glass jugs containing wine, oil and pungent sap, three young pigs in a wicker pen. They were cracking nuts between their teeth, spitting the shells over the side. They looked up at Thissell, and it seemed that they rose to their feet with a new casualness. Toby muttered something under his breath; Rex smothered a chuckle.

Thissell clacked his hymerkin angrily. He sang, “Take the boat offshore; tonight we remain at Fan.”

In the privacy of his cabin he removed the Moon Moth, stared into a mirror at his almost unfamiliar features. He picked up the Moon Moth, examined the detested lineaments: the furry gray skin, the blue spines, the ridiculous lace flaps. Hardly a dignified presence for the Consular Representative of the Home Planets. If, in fact, he still held the position when Cromartin learned of Angmark’s winning free!

Thissell flung himself into a chair, stared moodily into space. Today he’d suffered a series of setbacks, but he wasn’t defeated yet; not by any means. Tomorrow he’d visit Mathew Kershaul; they’d discuss how best to locate Angmark. As Kershaul had pointed out, another out-world establishment could not be camouflaged; Haxo Angmark’s identity would soon become evident. Also, tomorrow he must procure another mask. Nothing extreme or vainglorious, but a mask which expressed a modicum of dignity and self-respect.

At this moment one of the slaves tapped on the door panel, and Thissell hastily pulled the hated Moon Moth back over his head.

Early next morning, before the dawn light had left the sky, the slaves sculled the houseboat back to that section of the dock set aside for the use of out-worlders. Neither Rolver nor Welibus nor Kershaul had yet arrived and Thissell waited impatiently. An hour passed, and Welibus brought his boat to the dock. Not wishing to speak to Welibus, Thissell remained inside his cabin.

A few moments later Rolver's boat likewise pulled in alongside the dock. Through the window Thissell saw Rolver, wearing his usual Tarn Bird, climb to the dock. Here he was met by a man in a yellow-tufted Sand Tiger mask, who played a formal accompaniment on his gomapard to whatever message he brought Rolver.

Rolver seemed surprised and disturbed. After a moment's thought he manipulated his own gomapard, and as he sang, he indicated Thissell's houseboat. Then, bowing, he went on his way.

The man in the Sand Tiger mask climbed with rather heavy dignity to the float and rapped on the bulwark of Thissell's houseboat.

Thissell presented himself. Sirenese etiquette did not demand that he invite a casual visitor aboard, so he merely struck an interrogation on his zachinko.

The Sand Tiger played his gomapard and sang, "Dawn over the bay of Fan is customarily a splendid occasion; the sky is white with yellow and green colors; when Mireille rises, the mists burn and writhe like flames. He who sings derives a greater enjoyment from the hour when the floating corpse of an out-worlder does not appear to mar the serenity of the view."

Thissell's zachinko gave off a startled interrogation almost of its own accord; the Sand Tiger bowed with dignity. "The singer acknowledges no peer in steadfastness of disposition; however, he does not care to be plagued by the antics of a dissatisfied ghost. He therefore has ordered his slaves to attach a thong to the ankle of the corpse, and while we have conversed they have linked the corpse to the stern of your houseboat. You will wish to administer whatever rites are prescribed in the out-world. He who sings wishes you a good morning and now departs."

Thissell rushed to the stern of his houseboat. There, near-naked and maskless, floated the body of a mature man, supported by air trapped in his pantaloons.

Thissell studied the dead face, which seemed characterless and vapid — perhaps in direct consequence of the mask-wearing habit. The body appeared of medium stature and weight, and Thissell estimated the age as between forty-five and fifty. The hair was nondescript brown, the features bloated by the water. There was nothing to indicate how the man had died.

This must be Haxo Angmark, thought Thissell. Who else could it be? Mathew Kershaul? Why not? Thissell asked himself uneasily. Rolver and Welibus had already disembarked and gone about their business. He searched across the bay to locate Kershaul's houseboat, and discovered it already tying up to the dock. Even as he watched, Kershaul jumped ashore, wearing his Cave Owl mask.

He seemed in an abstracted mood, for he passed Thissell's houseboat without lifting his eyes from the dock.

Thissell turned back to the corpse. Angmark, then, beyond a doubt. Had not three men disembarked from the houseboats of Rolver, Welibus and Kershaul, wearing masks characteristic of these men? Obviously, the corpse of Angmark. . The easy solution refused to sit quiet in Thissell's mind. Kershaul had pointed out that another out-worlder would be quickly identified. How else could Angmark maintain himself unless he. . Thissell brushed the thought aside. The corpse was obviously Angmark.

And yet. .

Thissell summoned his slaves, gave orders that a suitable container be brought to the dock, that the corpse be transferred therein, and conveyed to a suitable place of repose. The slaves showed no enthusiasm for the task and Thissell was compelled to thunder forcefully, if not skillfully, on the hymerkin to emphasize his orders.

He walked along the dock, turned up the esplanade, passed the office of Cornely Welibus and set out along the pleasant little lane to the landing field. When he arrived, he found that Rolver had not yet made an appearance. An over-slave, given status by a yellow rosette on his black cloth mask, asked how he might be of service. Thissell stated that he wished to dispatch a message to Polypolis.

There was no difficulty here, declared the slave. If Thissell would set forth his message in clear block-print it would be dispatched immediately.

Thissell wrote:

Out-worlder found dead, possibly Angmark. Age 48, medium physique, brown hair. Other means of identification lacking. Await acknowledgment and/or instructions.

He addressed the message to Castel Cromartin at Polypolis and handed it to the over-slave. A moment later he heard the characteristic sputter of trans-space discharge.

An hour passed. Rolver made no appearance. Thissell paced restlessly back and forth in front of the office. There was no telling how long he would have to wait: trans-space transmission time varied unpredictably. Sometimes the message snapped through in microseconds; sometimes it wandered through unknowable regions for hours; and there were several authenticated examples of messages being received before they had been transmitted.

Another half hour passed, and Rolver finally arrived, wearing his customary Tarn Bird. Coincidentally Thissell heard the hiss of the incoming message.

Rolver seemed surprised to see Thissell. "What brings you out so early?"

Thissell explained. "It concerns the body which you referred to me this morning. I'm communicating with my superiors about it."

Rolver raised his head and listened to the sound of the incoming message. "You seem to be getting an answer. I'd better attend to it."

“Why bother?” asked Thissell. “Your slave seems efficient.”

“It’s my job,” declared Rolver. “I’m responsible for the accurate transmission and receipt of all spacegrams.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Thissell. “I’ve always wanted to watch the operation of the equipment.”

“I’m afraid that’s irregular,” said Rolver. He went to the door which led into the inner compartment. “I’ll have your message in a moment.”

Thissell protested, but Rolver ignored him and went into the inner office.

Five minutes later he reappeared, carrying a small yellow envelope. “Not too good news,” he announced with unconvincing commiseration.

Thissell glumly opened the envelope. The message read:

Body not Angmark. Angmark has black hair. Why did you not meet landing? Serious infraction, highly dissatisfied. Return to Polypolis next opportunity.

Castel Cromartin

Thissell put the message in his pocket. “Incidentally, may I inquire the color of your hair?”

Rolver played a surprised little trill on his kiv. “I’m quite blond. Why do you ask?”

“Mere curiosity.”

Rolver played another run on the kiv. “Now I understand. My dear fellow, what a suspicious nature you have! Look!” He turned and parted the folds of his mask at the nape of his neck. Thissell saw that Rolver was indeed blond.

“Are you reassured?” asked Rolver jocularly.

“Oh, indeed,” said Thissell. “Incidentally, have you another mask you could lend me? I’m sick of this Moon Moth.”

“I’m afraid not,” said Rolver. “But you need merely go into a mask-maker’s shop and make a selection.”

“Yes, of course,” said Thissell. He took his leave of Rolver and returned along the trail to Fan. Passing Welibus’ office he hesitated, then turned in. Today Welibus wore a dazzling confection of green glass prisms and silver beads, a mask Thissell had never seen before.

Welibus greeted him cautiously to the accompaniment of a kiv. “Good morning, Ser Moon Moth.”

“I won’t take too much of your time,” said Thissell, “but I have a rather personal question to put to you. What color is your hair?”

Welibus hesitated a fraction of a second, then turned his back, lifted the flap of his mask. Thissell saw heavy black ringlets. “Does that answer your question?” inquired Welibus.

“Completely,” said Thissell. He crossed the esplanade, went out on the dock to Kershaul’s houseboat. Kershaul greeted him without enthusiasm, and

invited him aboard with a resigned wave, of the hand.

“A question I’d like to ask,” said Thissell; “what color is your hair?”

Kershaul laughed woefully. “What little remains is black. Why do you ask?”

“Curiosity.”

“Come, come,” said Kershaul with an unaccustomed bluntness. “There’s more to it than that.”

Thissell, feeling the need of counsel, admitted as much. “Here’s the situation. A dead out-worlder was found in the harbor this morning. His hair was brown. I’m not entirely certain, but the chances are — let me see, yes — two out of three that Angmark’s hair is black.”

Kershaul pulled at the Cave Owl’s goatee. “How do you arrive at that probability?”

“The information came to me through Rolver’s hands. He has blond hair. If Angmark has assumed Rolver’s identity, he would naturally alter the information which came to me this morning. Both you and Welibus admit to black hair.”

“Hm,” said Kershaul. “Let me see if I follow your line of reasoning. You feel that Haxo Angmark has killed either Rolver, Welibus or myself and assumed the dead man’s identity. Right?”

Thissell looked at him in surprise. “You yourself emphasized that Angmark could not set up another out-world establishment without revealing himself! Don’t you remember?”

“Oh, certainly. To continue. Rolver delivered a message to you stating that Angmark was dark, and announced himself to be blond.”

“Yes. Can you verify this? I mean for the old Rolver?”

“No,” said Kershaul sadly. “I’ve seen neither Rolver nor Welibus without their masks.”

“If Rolver is not Angmark,” Thissell mused, “if Angmark indeed has black hair, then both you and Welibus come under suspicion.”

“Very interesting,” said Kershaul. He examined Thissell warily. “For that matter, you yourself might be Angmark. What color is your hair?”

“Brown,” said Thissell curtly. He lifted the gray fur of the Moon Moth mask at the back of his head.

“But you might be deceiving me as to the text of the message,” Kershaul put forward.

“I’m not,” said Thissell wearily. “You can check with Rolver if you care to.”

Kershaul shook his head. “Unnecessary. I believe you. But another matter: what of voice? You’ve heard all of us before and after Angmark arrived. Isn’t there some indication there?”

“No. I’m so alert for any evidence of change that you all sound rather

different. And the masks muffle your voices.”

Kershaul tugged the goatee. “I don’t see any immediate solution to the problem.” He chuckled. “In any event, need there be? Before Angmark’s advent, there were Rolver, Welibus, Kershaul and Thissell. Now — for all practical purposes — there are still Rolver, Welibus, Kershaul and Thissell. Who is to say that the new member may not be an improvement upon the old?”

“An interesting thought,” agreed Thissell, “but it so happens that I have a personal interest in identifying Angmark. My career is at stake.”

“I see,” murmured Kershaul. “The situation then becomes an issue between yourself and Angmark.”

“You won’t help me?”

“Not actively. I’ve become pervaded with Sirenese individualism. I think you’ll find that Rolver and Welibus will respond similarly.” He sighed. “All of us have been here too long.”

Thissell stood deep in thought. Kershaul waited patiently a moment, then said, “Do you have any further questions?”

“No,” said Thissell. “I have merely a favor to ask you.”

“I’ll oblige if I possibly can,” Kershaul replied courteously.

“Give me, or lend me, one of your slaves, for a week or two.”

Kershaul played an exclamation of amusement on the ganga. “I hardly like to part with my slaves; they know me and my ways — ”

“As soon as I catch Angmark you’ll have him back.”

“Very well,” said Kershaul. He rattled a summons on his hymerkin, and a slave appeared. “Anthony,” sang Kershaul, “you are to go with Ser Thissell and serve him for a short period.”

The slave bowed, without pleasure.

Thissell took Anthony to his houseboat, and questioned him at length, noting certain of the responses upon a chart. He then enjoined Anthony to say nothing of what had passed, and consigned him to the care of Toby and Rex. He gave further instructions to move the houseboat away from the dock and allow no one aboard until his return.

He set forth once more along the way to the landing field, and found Rolver at a lunch of spiced fish, shredded bark of the salad tree and a bowl of native currants. Rolver clapped an order on the hymerkin, and a slave set a place for Thissell. “And how are the investigations proceeding?”

“I’d hardly like to claim any progress,” said Thissell. “I assume that I can count on your help?”

Rolver laughed briefly. “You have my good wishes.”

“More concretely,” said Thissell, “I’d like to borrow a slave from you. Temporarily.”

Rolver paused in his eating. “Whatever for?”

“I’d rather not explain,” said Thissell. “But you can be sure that I make no idle request.”

Without graciousness Rolver summoned a slave and consigned him to Thissell’s service.

On the way back to his houseboat, Thissell stopped at Welibus’ office.

Welibus looked up from his work. “Good afternoon, Ser Thissell.”

Thissell came directly to the point. “Ser Welibus, will you lend me a slave for a few days?”

Welibus hesitated, then shrugged. “Why not?” He clacked his hymerkin; a slave appeared. “Is he satisfactory? Or would you prefer a young female?” He chuckled rather offensively, to Thissell’s way of thinking.

“He’ll do very well. I’ll return him in a few days.”

“No hurry.” Welibus made an easy gesture and returned to his work.

Thissell continued to his houseboat, where he separately interviewed each of his two new slaves and made notes upon his chart.

Dusk came soft over the Titanic Ocean. Toby and Rex sculled the houseboat away from the dock, out across the silken waters. Thissell sat on the deck listening to the sound of soft voices, the flutter and tinkle of musical instruments. Lights from the floating houseboats glowed yellow and wan watermelon-red. The shore was dark; the Night-men would presently come slinking to paw through refuse and stare jealously across the water.

In nine days the Buenaventura came past Sirene on its regular schedule; Thissell had his orders to return to Poly-polis. In nine days, could he locate Haxo Angmark?

Nine days weren’t too many, Thissell decided, but they might possibly be enough.

Two days passed, and three and four and five. Every day Thissell went ashore and at least once a day visited Rolver, Welibus and Kershaul.

Each reacted differently to his presence. Rolver was sardonic and irritable; Welibus formal and at least superficially affable; Kershaul mild and suave, but ostentatiously impersonal and detached in his conversation.

Thissell remained equally bland to Rolver’s dour jibes, Welibus’ jocundity, Kershaul’s withdrawal. And every day, returning to his houseboat he made marks on his chart.

The sixth, the seventh, the eighth day came and passed. Rolver, with rather brutal directness, inquired if Thissell wished to arrange for passage on the Buenaventura. Thissell considered, and said, “Yes, you had better reserve passage for one.”

“Back to the world of faces.” Rolver shuddered. “Faces! Everywhere pallid, fish-eyed faces. Mouths like pulp, noses knotted and punctured; flat, flabby faces. I don’t think I could stand it after living here. Luckily you haven’t become a real Sirenese.”

“But I won’t be going back,” said Thissell.

“I thought you wanted me to reserve passage.”

“I do. For Haxo Angmark. Hell be returning to Polypolis in the brig.”

“Well, well,” said Rolver. “So you’ve picked him out.”

“Of course,” said Thissell. “Haven’t you?”

Rolver shrugged. “He’s either Welibus or Kershaul, that’s as close as I can make it. So long as he wears his mask and calls himself either Welibus or Kershaul, it means nothing to me.”

“It means a great deal to me,” said Thissell. “What time tomorrow does the lighter go up?”

“Eleven twenty-two sharp. If Haxo Angmark’s leaving, tell him to be on time.”

“He’ll be here,” said Thissell.

He made his usual call upon Welibus and Kershaul, then returning to his houseboat, put three final marks on his chart.

The evidence was here, plain and convincing. Not absolutely incontrovertible evidence, but enough to warrant a definite move. He checked over his gun. Tomorrow, the day of decision. He could afford no errors.

The day dawned bright white, the sky like the inside of an oyster shell; Mireille rose through iridescent mists. Toby and Rex sculled the houseboat to the dock. The remaining three out-world houseboats floated somnolently on the slow swells.

One boat Thissell watched in particular, that whose owner Haxo Angmark had killed and dropped into the harbor. This boat presently moved toward the shore, and Haxo Angmark himself stood on the front deck, wearing a mask Thissell had never seen before: a construction of scarlet feathers, black glass and spiked green hair.

Thissell was forced to admire his poise. A clever scheme, cleverly planned and executed — but marred by an insurmountable difficulty.

Angmark returned within. The houseboat reached the dock. Slaves flung out mooring lines, lowered the gang-plank. Thissell, his gun ready in the pocket flap of his robes, walked down the dock, went aboard. He pushed open the door to the saloon. The man at the table raised his red, black and green mask in surprise.

Thissell said, “Angmark, please don’t argue or make any — ”

Something hard and heavy tackled him from behind; he was flung to the floor, his gun wrested expertly away.

Behind him the hymerkin clattered; a voice sang, “Bind the fool’s arms.”

The man sitting at the table rose to his feet, removed the red, black and green mask to reveal the black cloth of a slave. Thissell twisted his head. Over him stood Haxo Angmark, wearing a mask Thissell recognized as a Dragon Tamer, fabricated from black metal, with a knife-blade nose, socketed

eyelids and three crests running back over the scalp.

The mask's expression was unreadable, but Angmark's voice was triumphant. "I trapped you very easily."

"So you did," said Thissell. The slave finished knotting his wrists together. A clatter of Angmark's hymerkin sent him away. "Get to your feet," said Angmark. "Sit in that chair."

"What are we waiting for?" inquired Thissell.

"Two of our fellows still remain out on the water. We won't need them for what I have in mind."

"Which is?"

"You'll learn in due course," said Angmark. "We have an hour or so on our hands."

Thissell tested his bonds. They were undoubtedly secure.

Angmark seated himself. "How did you fix on me? I admit to being curious. . Come, come," he chided as Thissell sat silently. "Can't you recognize that I have defeated you? Don't make affairs unpleasant for yourself."

Thissell shrugged. "I operated on a basic principle. A man can mask his face, but he can't mask his personality."

"Aha," said Angmark. "Interesting. Proceed."

"I borrowed a slave from you and the other two out-worlders, and I questioned them carefully. What masks had their masters worn during the month before your arrival? I prepared a chart and plotted their responses. Rolver wore the Tarn Bird about eighty percent of the time, the remaining twenty percent divided between the Sophist Abstraction and the Black Intricate. Welibus had a taste for the heroes of Kan Dachan Cycle. He wore the Chalekun, the Prince Intrepid, the Seavain most of the time: six days out of eight. The other two days he wore his South Wind or his Gay Companion. Kershaul, more conservative, preferred the Cave Owl, the Star Wanderer, and two or three other masks he wore at odd intervals.

"As I say, I acquired this information from possibly its most accurate source, the slaves. My next step was to keep watch upon the three of you. Every day I noted what masks you wore and compared it with my chart. Rolver wore his Tarn Bird six times, his Black Intricate twice. Kershaul wore his Cave Owl five times, his Star Wanderer once, his Quincunx once and his Ideal of Perfection once. Welibus wore the Emerald Mountain twice, the Triple Phoenix three times, the Prince Intrepid once and the Shark God twice."

Angmark nodded thoughtfully. "I see my error. I selected from Welibus' masks, but to my own taste — and as you point out, I revealed myself. But only to you." He rose and went to the window. "Kershaul and Rolver are now coming ashore; they'll soon be past and about their business — though I

doubt if they'd interfere in any case; they've both become good Sirenese."

Thissell waited in silence. Ten minutes passed. Then Angmark reached to a shelf and picked up a knife. He looked at Thissell. "Stand up."

Thissell slowly rose to his feet. Angmark approached from the side, reached out, lifted the Moon Moth from Thissell's head. Thissell gasped and made a vain attempt to seize it. Too late; his face was bare and naked.

Angmark turned away, removed his own mask, donned the Moon Moth. He struck a call on his hymerkin. Two slaves entered, stopped in shock at the sight of Thissell.

Angmark played a brisk tattoo, sang, "Carry this man up to the dock."

"Angmark!" cried Thissell. "I'm maskless!"

The slaves seized him and in spite of Thissell's desperate struggles, conveyed him out on the dock, along the float and up on the dock.

Angmark fixed a rope around Thissell's neck. He said, "You are now Haxo Angmark, and I am Edwer Thissell. Welibus is dead, you shall soon be dead. I can handle your job without difficulty. I'll play musical instruments like a Night-man and sing like a crow. I'll wear the Moon Moth till it rots and then I'll get another. The report will go to Polypolis, Haxo Angmark is dead. Everything will be serene."

Thissell barely heard. "You can't do this," he whispered. "My mask, my face..." A large woman in a blue and pink flower mask walked down the dock. She saw Thissell and emitted a piercing shriek, flung herself prone on the dock.

"Come along," said Angmark brightly. He tugged at the rope, and so pulled Thissell down the dock. A man in a Pirate Captain mask coming up from his houseboat stood rigid in amazement.

Angmark played the zachinko and sang, "Behold the notorious criminal Haxo Angmark. Through all the outer-worlds his name is reviled; now he is captured and led in shame to his death. Behold Haxo Angmark!"

They turned into the esplanade. A child screamed in fright; a man called hoarsely. Thissell stumbled; tears tumbled from his eyes; he could see only disorganized shapes and colors. Angmark's voice belled out richly: "Everyone behold, the criminal of the out-worlds, Haxo Angmark! Approach and observe his execution!"

Thissell feebly cried out, "I'm not Angmark; I'm Edwer Thissell; he's Angmark." But no one listened to him; there were only cries of dismay, shock, disgust at the sight of his face. He called to Angmark, "Give me my mask, a slave-cloth. . ."

Angmark sang jubilantly, "In shame he lived, in maskless shame he dies."

A Forest Goblin stood before Angmark. "Moon Moth, we meet once more."

Angmark sang, "Stand aside, friend Goblin; I must execute this criminal. In shame he lived, in shame he dies!"

A crowd had formed around the group; masks stared in morbid titillation at Thissell.

The Forest Goblin jerked the rope from Angmark's hand, threw it to the ground. The crowd roared. Voices cried, "No duel, no duel! Execute the monster!"

A cloth was thrown over Thissell's head. Thissell awaited the thrust of a blade. But instead his bonds were cut. Hastily he adjusted the cloth, hiding his face, peering between the folds.

Four men clutched Haxo Angmark. The Forest Goblin confronted him, playing the skaranyi. "A week ago you reached to divest me of my mask; you have now achieved your perverse aim!"

"But he is a criminal," cried Angmark. "He is notorious, infamous!"

"What are his misdeeds?" sang the Forest Goblin.

"He has murdered, betrayed; he has wrecked ships; he has tortured, blackmailed, robbed, sold children into slavery; he has — "

The Forest Goblin stopped him. "Your religious differences are of no importance. We can vouch however for your present crimes!"

The hostler stepped forward. He sang fiercely, "This insolent Moon Moth nine days ago sought to preempt my choicest mount!"

Another man pushed close. He wore a Universal Expert, and sang, "I am a Master Mask-maker; I recognize this Moon Moth out-worlder! Only recently he entered my shop and derided my skill. He deserves death!"

"Death to the out-world monster!" cried the crowd. A wave of men surged forward. Steel blades rose and fell, the deed was done.

Thissell watched, unable to move. The Forest Goblin approached, and playing the stemic sang sternly, "For you we have pity, but also contempt. A true man would never suffer such indignities!"

Thissell took a deep breath. He reached to his belt and found his zachinko. He sang, "My friend, you malign me! Can you not appreciate true courage? Would you prefer to die in combat or walk maskless along the esplanade?"

The Forest Goblin sang, "There is only one answer. First I would die in combat; I could not bear such shame."

Thissell sang, "I had such a choice. I could fight with my hands tied, and so die — or I could suffer shame, and through this shame conquer my enemy. You admit that you lack sufficient strakh to achieve this deed. I have proved myself a hero of bravery! I ask, who here has courage to do what I have done?"

"Courage?" demanded the Forest Goblin. "I fear nothing, up to and beyond death at the hands of the Night-men!"

“Then answer.”

The Forest Goblin stood back. He played his double-kamanthil. “Bravery indeed, if such were your motives.”

The hostler struck a series of subdued gomapard chords and sang, “Not a man among us would dare what this mask-less man has done.”

The crowd muttered approval.

The mask-maker approached Thissell, obsequiously stroking his double-kamanthil. “Pray Lord Hero, step into my nearby shop, exchange this vile rag for a mask befitting your quality.”

Another mask-maker sang, “Before you choose, Lord Hero, examine my magnificent creations!”

A man in a Bright Sky Bird mask approached Thissell reverently.

“I have only just completed a sumptuous houseboat; seventeen years of toil have gone into its fabrication. Grant me the good fortune of accepting and using this splendid craft; aboard waiting to serve you are alert slaves and pleasant maidens; there is ample wine in storage and soft silken carpets on the decks.”

“Thank you,” said Thissell, striking the zachinko with vigor and confidence. “I accept with pleasure. But first a mask.”

The mask-maker struck an interrogative trill on the gomapard. “Would the Lord Hero consider a Sea Dragon Conqueror beneath his dignity?”

“By no means,” said Thissell. “I consider it suitable and satisfactory. We shall go now to examine it.”

***THE END***

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**notes**

**1**

Kiv: five banks of resilient metal strips, fourteen to the bank, played by touching, twisting, twanging.

## 2

Stimic: three flutelike tubes equipped with plungers. Thumb and forefinger squeeze a bag to force air across the mouthpieces; the second, third and fourth little fingers manipulate the slide. The stimic is an instrument well adapted to the sentiments of cool withdrawal, or even disapproval.

# 3

Krodatch: a small square sound-box strung with resined gut. The musician scratches the strings with his fingernail, or strokes them with his fingertips, to produce a variety of quietly formal sounds. The krodatch is also used as an instrument of insult.

## 4

Skaranyi: a miniature bagpipe, the sac squeezed between thumb and palm, the four fingers controlling the stops along four tubes.

## 5

Gomapard: one of the few electric instruments used on Sirene. An oscillator produces an oboelike tone which is modulated, choked, vibrated, raised and lowered in pitch by four keys.

## 6

Double-kamanthil: an instrument similar to the ganga, except the tones are produced by twisting and inclining a disk of rosined leather against one or more of the forty-six strings.

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