

Cities of Silver

Being an account of Doctor Ludweg Phinagler's expedition to Lake Limnia, and what he found there, as told by his amanuensis, Fosse.

Suffice to say, we had a good many reasons to leave Collegium just then, and I will not bore you with them, save that the good Doctor had just finished a terrible spat with Master D_____ of the Modern History faculty, with all the name-calling and bad reviews that entailed. As Master D_____ was a noted member of the Prowess Forum, and last seen stalking the halls of the College, blade in hand, demanding the Doctor's head, my employer thought it prudent to bring forward a piece of research he had been mulling over for some time. For myself, I confess to certain debts in respect of games of chance that had robbed the Collegiate streets of their customary appeal. I felt myself ready to travel again.

We made Helleron easily enough by airship, there to meet the artificer Jons Collier, whose work would be integral to our study. The Doctor himself swore he had sent messengers ahead whom our own passage had outstripped, and that he would have words with the Guild when we returned to Collegium, but certainly Master Collier was neither expecting nor pleased to see us. He had anticipated his invention being tested in the calm, blue waters of Lake Sideriti, north of Collegium. The prospect of roughing it on the moribund shores of Lake Limnia failed to enthuse him.

If Dr Phinagler, my employer, is good at any one thing, then it is his ability to bring people round to his point of view. By his usual combination of rhetoric, flattery and vague promises in respect of College funds, that I have often thought should be taught as an advanced class, he won Collier over.

A sketch: Jons Collier. He is a Beetle-kind man of medium height, more slender and well turned-out than most, bespectacled and of a neat and efficient manner, if seeming slightly agitated and/or exasperated at all times. This last may be an effect of his association with my employer.

Transporting Collier, his experiment and ourselves to Lake Limnia was another forbidding hurdle readily overcome. The keen student will appreciate that Limnia is deep within Imperial territories, where travel is closely regulated. However, the Doctor located a Consortium factora – a house of the Empire's mercantile arm, for the ignorant – and, as per his usual luck, found a factor whose caravan would be making a stop there.

The Doctor spent an evening wining and dining Lieutenant Hermon, the factor involved, and the two of them were soon boon companions, with Hermon promising to take us to Jerez, Limnia's only town, and the Doctor agreeing to credit Hermon in the eventual paper and generally tell people back at the College how very helpful the Empire was being. It may be that the Doctor might have slightly exaggerated his level of influence within the Assembly.

Master Collier was less delighted, and I suspect he harboured more concerns about Imperial policy than my employer, but he accepted with bad grace that we were hardly likely to get to Limnia any other way.

A sketch: Lieutenant Hermon of the Consortium. He is a stocky Wasp-kind, both shorter and portlier than most of his kin, but as pasty as they all are. He wears a long coat to

travel, dyed a faded black and yellow down the right side. His face is somewhat baggy, with pouchy eyes and a broken-veined nose telling of a rather dissolute lifestyle,

His sergeant, te Sander by name, was a more welcoming sight. A sketch: a strapping, strong-jawed man of my kinden, broad-shouldered and with a ready, pleasant smile., His skin - paler than Lowlander Flies – has many mementos of his military past, and he discussed them in detail with me over the course of several evenings while our respective superiors were sampling the Empire's brandy.

Hermon's caravan was comprised of three automotives, plus the fourth that the Doctor had persuaded Jons Collier to hire for our own equipment. Two of the Imperial wagons were stocked with goods Hermon had purchased in Helleron – swords, crossbow bolts and machine parts made more cheaply, and to a more exacting standard, than in the Empire. The third carried a less happy cargo in the form of some three dozen men and women of various kinden, crammed in so that they must mostly stand at all times. The Doctor assured us that these wretches were criminals either exported from Helleron or being repatriated to the Empire after an escape. Master Collier did opine that merely wanting to leave the Empire was probably a criminal offence in and of itself, but not within Lt. Hermon's earshot.

In addition to the dozen regular soldiers under Hermon's command, there were half as many in full-face helms who discouraged any further investigation of the prisoners, and te Sander told me they were Slave Corps – said with a curl of the lip that told me he did not approve either. He pointed out that there were no Fly-kinden in the cage, and said that our own kinden were well provided-for in the Empire, and that I would see for myself should I visit him in Capitas, an offer which he took pains to make as attractive as possible.

Our journey was of several tendays, with Hermon calling at several garrisons along the way. At each he arranged for us to be found bed and board of a uniform and decent quality – such is the difference between travelling with the Empire's blessing, and without, as any who intend to journey there should note. Had I space I would pen a gazetteer, for the sight of so many disparate cities beneath a single flag would be of interest to many, but alas. Another time, perhaps.

I can confidently say that Jerez, Lake Limnia, is the least welcoming place that I, a seasoned traveller, have ever beheld,

For one thing, it was raining, You may feel it harsh of me to hold that against the place, but believe me when I say that it rained *all the time* we were there, or at least when not in active deluge the precipitation was just stopping or about to start. Even Dr. Phinagler, Master of the Geography faculty, was unable to explain how this could be so.

The community itself was an extended shanty-town of slumping, ill-constructed shacks, merging without warning with the lake's reed-stubbed shallows that were cluttered with rafts and house-boats of dubious buoyancy. The one solid building was the Imperial garrison, and this was canted at a slight but noticeable angle because Jerez offered no foundations firmer than semiliquid mud.

Of the locals, who were stretch-limbed, pallid, sharp-featured creatures of a universally sly and sinister demeanour, the less said the better. For the record, they are known as Skater-kinden, and possess an Art to walk on water. Given the quality and quantity of the weather I am mildly surprised that they could not use the same to fly.

I will confess to one of my rare unprofessional moments on seeing this dismal vista, and found myself in my allotted rooms at the garrison feeling despairingly that I should have gone into accountancy as my mother had urged. I considered that – not for the last time – my association with the Doctor would be the death of me, possibly of pneumonia. Thankfully, te Sander came and cheered me up a little by saying that, of all the Empire's conquests, Jerez was the one that the Emperor would give back if he could. Sensing my delicate state, he was thoughtful enough to console me into the small hours.

Master Collier and my employer had the next of their arguments that morning, albeit in hushed tones so that our hosts did not overhear. It turned out that, whilst in his cups, the good Doctor had set our project before Lt. Hermon, and the lieutenant, similarly merry, had become quite enthused by the idea and pledged the Empire's assistance. Jons Collier was not keen on any further Imperial involvement, and the two conducted a fiercely whispered ideological debate that Dr. Phinagler won by the simple rhetorical device of pointing out that it was a done deal, and that backing out now would likely see us arrested as spies. Collier – though he made some unfounded predictions about my employer's likely eventual fate vis a vis digging a hole no Art would suffice to climb out of – accepted this logic. For myself, though I had some sympathy with Master Collier's stance, I found myself not averse to further Imperial interference – solely, of course, for the added ease and efficiency in respect of our project.

Some days later found us out on the lake on an enormous sort of a raft Hermon had commandeered from the locals. It had a sort of house at one end but, most importantly, a hole in the centre some five yards across. The walkway around it was another four yards wide and more, giving some idea of the scale of the vessel. Needless to say, it was slick with moss and weed, and appeared at all times to be on the cusp of disintegrating into its component parts. However, it bore the three of us, Hermon, te Sander and a couple of Hermon's men without complaint, along with its crew of half a dozen locals.

Apparently the raft's design, so apt for our purpose, was to aid fishing, which I imagine is most of what there is to do in Jerez. The central hole, throwing a pool of sunlight onto the lake below, draws the smaller water-life and concentrates it there, especially with the aid of a little bait thrown on the waters. This was explained to us by the raft's master, a gangling Skater called Scarvy. He is hardly worth a sketch but: picture a grimy little man, not much past Fly-kindens size, with a long nose, chin and ears, and greasy hair down past his shoulders, then give him longer arms and legs than a tall man would know what to do with. He wore a padded tunic, stained with fish guts and worse. At first he was resentful about becoming Hermon's menial, but the Doctor practised upon him as his crew sculled us out onto the lake, and the prospect of what we intended quite hit a chord with the disreputable creature.

Specifically, Scarvy thought we were mad, He took pains to tell us that the lake was full of terrible, dangerous beasts that could destroy boats larger than his and pluck the crew from the water. More, he swore that the lake harboured worse terrors than this, though he did not specify save for vague references to unaccountable lights and sounds out on the water. All this was not said as an attempt to dissuade us – indeed he had the crew rowing all the harder

for it. Scarvy, epitomising the meanness of spirit that Jerez must breed into its denizens, wanted to see what would happen to us.

At this point there was another argument between Master Collier and the Doctor which I recall well enough to set down in fair detail.

“You can’t possibly be considering going ahead with this,” was Collier’s opening foray. “You’ve heard what he said. We’re going to get killed.” He had plainly been affected by Scarvy’s tales.

“What? That there are large animals in the lake?” the Doctor retorted. “That is as expected. It is a large lake. That some are predatory? To be otherwise would be unnatural. We need a test in the wild, Jons. Little dunks in the pool at Helleron prove nothing save that it is watertight – a prerequisite, I grant you, but no more than that. If your invention is to be the great aid to research that you hope, it must be tested.”

“And the other business? The man’s strange lights and sounds?” enquired Collier.

“Stuff,” declared Doctor Phinagler, with all that esteemed confidence he was noted for. I, however, who knew him better than most, was well aware that he can wheel that confidence out whether it was justified or not. More, I knew full well that the good Doctor’s academic interests do more than flirt with the controversial. He is inveterately one of those men of study who believe that there is a Great Mystery to be uncovered behind each thing we know, always on the trail of some elder secret from the Bad Old Days, lost kinden, cryptic species or some trace of an ancient and unknown civilisation. This was what starts so many of the disagreements he has with his peers.

I had the uncomfortable suspicion that the sort of tall tale Scarvy was mouthing had been the lure that had brought the Doctor to Lake Limnia in the first place.

This is probably the time to explain just what project my employer had devised with Jons Collier. I shall describe for you Collier’s device, as Hermon’s men drew the tarpaulin off it. That should satisfy both narrative and academic requirements.

It was a sphere, with circular windows of thick glass set into each quarter and an opening underneath. The construction was brass and bronze-shod steel, and all treated and caulked against the water. From its top, like the leaves of a radish, sprouted a bundle of ribbed leather rubes about a strong cable.

“Well I’m not going down in it,” I recall Collier insisting.

“Of course you’re not. I need you up here to manage the pump and winch,” came the Doctor’s reply, for this was the balance of the device – a strong engine to control the sphere’s ascent and descent, and a set of mechanical lungs to freshen the air within.

Collier looked caught between relief and offence that he had already been written out of testing his own invention. Relief won out. “Why then I salute your courage, but, Founder’s Mark, I don’t give much for your chances.”

Doctor Phinagler waved his concerns away with a gesture suggesting that he would still magnanimously share credit with Collier despite his naysaying. “Fosse, if you’re ready?”

I suspect my demeanour verged upon the unprofessional again, for just a moment. I certainly went so far as to ask, “Must I, Doctor?”

“You are my amanuensis, are you not? Well then, I may wish to dictate something.”

Te Sander started forwards, and I truly believe that he would have tried to intervene on my behalf. It was to save him from his superior's displeasure – not to mention the withering force of the Doctor's scathing oratory – that I stepped forward to take my place.

Besides, I have always prided myself on my professionalism.

And Dr. Phinagler himself? Was he not daunted, you ask? I assure you that, whilst he remains a man of more many and varied flaws than I can, in all conscience, expose, cowardice is not one of them. Indeed, his blind faith in his own correctness is something often remarked about him by his peers.

“Just a brief test dive, I think, to start with,” he informed Collier. “Haul us up after ten minutes or so, eh?”

I will confess to mouthing the word ‘five;’ rather urgently at Master Collier, in a moment of weakness, but one problem with being Fly-kinde is that one is seldom on eye level with most people.

Conditions were cramped inside the sphere, and although Collier had included a ring of seats inside the circumference, the curve of the walls forced us both into a forward lean at all times. The Doctor kept shifting his place, seeking elusive comfort, even as Collier and Hermon started to hoist, and, as he is not a small man, the sphere swayed alarmingly as they manhandled it over the fishing hole. We had gained ingress via the opening in the sphere's underside, and soon the view through this changed from wildly-swinging deck to the dark water beneath.

I suggested that this aperture should perhaps be sealed before we progressed, but on enquiry of Jons Collier, it transpired that it was intended to remain open.

“The air within will keep the water out,” Collier's distant voice assured us,.

The Doctor seemed reassured by this. For myself, I had a number of tremulous and unscientific thoughts, and it was all I could do to stop my wings manifesting themselves – our kinde's natural reaction to peril.

The sphere began to descend. I could feel the faint breeze of the air pump and hear the grinding of the winch. The water crowded at the hole below us, lapping in an exploratory manner about the aperture's inner edge.

To my amazement – also my relief – whilst the waster on the outside of the sphere swiftly occluded the round windows, the level beneath us climbed only so high as to make the Doctor draw up his feet to avoid wetting his sandals.

The light swiftly dimmed, leaving us in muddy gloom – the shadow of the raft combining with Limnia's natural murkiness to throw us into eclipse. Undaunted, the Doctor opened a panel in the sphere's upper reaches, letting in a cold, greenish light. The Doctor explained that any flame-based illumination would compete with us for the same goodness in the air that we ourselves would need to live, and so Collier had harvested the organs of fireflies in order to gift us with light.

Through all this, we were still descending, but soon we came to a halt, suspended in the dark. The view out of the windows was not an inspiring one, being just the dour water with flecks of organic matter catching in our light. When we were stationary, though, the luminescence attracted a scattering of fish and other small water creatures to gawp in on us, and I was uncomfortably aware that it might just as easily call up the sort of predatory giants that Scarvy had referred to.

Even as I thought this, the Doctor was directing my attention to beneath our feet. I had briefly forgotten that we had an additional unglazed window there by default.

“Look at that beauty,” the Doctor said, and I looked.

It was hard to make out – a shadow passing deep beneath us, not picked out by our light so much as silhouetted there: the long teardrop shape of a water scorpion gliding through the water, hooked arms held close to the beaked head, and its long stalked tail behind. How large, I could not say, but greater than our little sphere of a certainty. You must bear in mind that Lake Limnia is truly huge – one can see water to the horizon from any bank. It is like a little freshwater ocean.

As we were to discover, all manner of surprises were hidden within it.

Soon after, the sphere jerked and we began to ascend. I confess I did indicate by my manner that I was glad of it, and the Doctor reprimanded me for my lack of a true scholar’s love of investigation.

Jons Collier was in much better spirits on seeing that we had not drowned, suffocated nor been devoured, and he and the Doctor were quickly discussing the technical aspects of the experiment. Another descent was soon arranged for the next day, and I was instructed to write up a report of the morning’s activities.

It was while I was completing this, back at the garrison, that I found the Doctor standing over me with one of his speculative looks. The expression, very familiar to me, was one of a man who has found a place to push, and is wondering just how much of the world he will break open when he inevitably tries it.

“I don’t think the lieutenant has grasped it,” he remarked to me. “Collier has, I suspect, but he’s keeping his thoughts to himself.” He leant over my shoulder and tapped a finger on the page. “Silhouetted against *what*, eh? Tomorrow, we’re going deeper. Collier’s fairly sure the sphere will stand it.” He gave me a smile intended to be reassuring, “Do you know, nobody has even worked out how deep Lake Limnia is?”

The next day we were greeted by a regatta.

The news had spread swiftly that a Collegiate Master was about some piece of lunacy on the lake, and when our huge raft put out, we found ourselves escorted by a flotilla of all manner of lopsided and unlovely boats, rafts and other floating objects not worthy of any civilized label. It seemed that every outsider in Jerez had hired some locals to paddle them out to watch our experiment, and a fair number of the locals themselves had come to join them. Although I am writing with the benefit of bitter hindsight, I like to believe that I felt some stirrings of suspicion, even then. Perhaps I am wrong, and perhaps that lurking, sinister people had no part in what happened next, but I believe otherwise, and I will say that a shudder passed through me, seeing them all hunched and angular and watching us.

Doctor Phinagler took the attention in good humour, waving to his audience, and wanting to make some manner of speech, save that nothing had been brought that might have allowed his voice to carry so far. Jons Collier, in contrast, was plainly embarrassed by it all.

At last the Doctor and I re-embarked, settling ourselves in the close confines of Colliers’ sphere as best we could. The Doctor’s instructions this time had been, “Take it down as far as we have cable, and leave us there for at least half an hour.”

I took one yearning look out of the portholes at the daylight, and the people, and to Sander especially, whose own expression was a particularly fetching one of worry for my wellbeing, a look that certainly seldom graced the Doctor's own face. Then we were in motion, lurching in jolting stages towards the water, and then beneath it. Once again, the air within contrived to keep the water out, as though they had come to some manner of gentleman's agreement that might be broken at any moment by the wrong word. Once again our firefly-organ lamps gave out their odd luminescence, drawing the little insects and fish of the lake to come and goggle at us. This time, though, the winch did not stop, and we plunged downwards into an utter pitch.

The Doctor appeared to be counting, and at some point significant only to him he covered the lamps once more, and I thought we should be left in complete and utter darkness that even my eyes could not pierce.

And yet we were not. It seems as astonishing to me now as it did then, my post-facto knowledge replacing the initial novelty as the source of my wonder. When the lamps were sealed up, I quickly detected a cool, pale radiance coming from *outside* that our own light had served to hide.

I locked eyes with the Doctor. There are rare moments when we share a discovery in such a fashion, just he and I, and I genuinely appreciate the privilege of being his amanuensis. It is only a shame that they are few and far between and so often followed by prolonged periods of extreme peril. This was to be no exception.

"Look below," he told me, indicating the open aperture beneath, where the water lapped – a little higher now that we had gone deeper.

The sight that greeted me will remain to my dying day among the most awe-inspiring and beautiful from all my many travels.

Below us, through the murk of the water, was the source of that radiance, and I saw there a great swelling curve of silver – and then more, a whole conglomeration of them, as though a family of moons had somehow been trapped in the depths of Lake Limnia. Distance and scale were impossible to measure, but they must have been vast, and I had the sense of shadows within them, not simply grand bubbles of light, but things as intricate as living creatures.

"What am I looking at, Doctor?" I asked.

"I have not the faintest idea," quoth the man of learning.

Then a shadow passed between them and us. For a moment I thought that it was the water scorpion again, but those grasping arms were absent. Instead I beheld the grand oval of an enormous beetle that sculled across the face of the silver light. The pale luminosity leached all colour from it, but I could see the patterns of its shell, a light band edging the darker shade of its thorax and elytra.

The Doctor made a slight sound of consternation. I understood later that he had made a better estimation of just how large the creature was. Still, what happened next was unprecedented.

We had lost sight of it for a moment, as its course took it beyond our narrow window, but a moment later it was back, coursing below us, far closer, and actually turned on its back so that its great dark eyes could scrutinise us. I, who had been foolishly thinking how lucky we were that the scorpion was not about, was given a harsh lesson in natural history by a

sight of its enormous sickle-shaped mandibles, far larger than would be needed to scissor even a man of the Doctor's proportions in half with a single twitch. The breadth of their gape threatened the diving sphere itself.

It was interested in us. The second pass was inexplicable otherwise. Even though our lights were out it was drawn to us, for all that we would be wretchedly inadequate morsels for its undoubted appetite.

Then it was gone again, and I ventured to ask, "Doctor, what signal did you arrange, with Master Collier, should we wish to be drawn up *earlier*?" I recall clearly that the question was couched in just such calm tones, and no other.

It was plain from the look on my employer's face that this was a detail neither he nor Collier had considered.

A moment later I saw a great rounded bulk occlude the windows on one side, and then it had brushed us, the slightest of contacts, and we were swinging and spinning in a great slow-motion dance through the water.

Let them notice that! Surely Collier and the others up above would feel the motion through the cable and know something was amiss. The Doctor and I were clinging desperately to the seats to avoid being thrown out of the central aperture, and as the sphere revolved I had momentary glimpses of the great black bulk of the beetle on its way back, coasting sedately towards with its jaws agape.

Then the winch above started its work and we lurched into a sudden ascent that nearly pitched both of us into the water. The beetle picked up speed with flicks of its paddle legs, but our abrupt motion had misled it, and we saw its curved and armoured back pass beneath us close enough to reach a foot down and touch. My eyes met the Doctor's with sudden elation. We were free of it!

The next moment we were most certainly not, and the beetle had turned with remarkable speed and shouldered into us, one hooked leg scrabbling at the side of the sphere. I fell from my seat, and was half into the lake before the Doctor and my wings had hauled me out, and the world around us was wheeling madly. Up above, I could only guess at the chaos that was being enacted – the raft was not exactly sturdy, nor was the winch so strongly bolted to it to survive much additional strain.

I could see some segments of the beetle's underside in one window. It was vertical beside us, scrabbling to hook a limb on our round hull, its head out of sight above, and more of the rest of it similarly unseen below. We were still ascending, though, and I dared to hope that it would lose its hold and fall back into the depths from which it came. I had not considered what that fearsomely-armed head might be doing.

Then it happened, without warning our upward motion had died away, and then we were descending again, almost ridiculously smoothly, leaving the beetle behind by our sudden change of direction. We dropped back into the silver abyss, and it seemed to me that each second we descended faster and faster.

"Why are they letting us down?" I asked the Doctor, and he turned an expressionless face on me.

"They are not," he said. "It has severed the cable."

By then the water had touched my toes, and I saw to my horror that the level was rising up the inside of the sphere – and intuited with an unwanted clarity that there must be

air escaping from the ravaged tubes above us. And what would that matter, came my next thought, when we were dropping into the void, all contact with the sunlit world cut from us?

Then, and just as I would have sworn the worst had already happened, the beetle came back for us.

I saw it rush out of the silvery light, a swift-sculling shadow diving for us, and I thought that it was going to ram the sphere. Instead, at the last moment, those great jaws gaped, and a moment later it had us, the entire sphere within its mandibles. Almost instantly I heard a whole orchestra of groans and creaks as the insect's strength began to crush inches of solid metal. One point of its mandibles forced itself through the wall by the Doctor's head, and our spherical space became abruptly oblate. And all this time the beast was swimming down, towards the light.

It took no care with us, and in moments our conveyance was on its side, and the air's inclination to keep the water out vanished almost immediately, so that a roomful of lake washed over us with a force like a hammer blow. I was thrown against the sphere's side, my head bouncing from the window, and I remember little more.

I awoke to light.

There is much philosophical speculation as to whether some figment of our selves survives death in some way. Many of the Inapt people have very colourful legends about ghosts and other worlds and the continuation of spirits and essences and such credulous business. Still I confess that, waking into that omnidirectional pale radiance, I felt that I had travelled to another world, one where such stuff as gross matter was but a memory. Perhaps, I considered, those Inapt sages were right about this one thing.

Then I heard a groan, and saw that, lain next to me, was Doctor Ludweg Phinagler, and abruptly I found I was uncharitably hoping that I was not dead after all, if only because spending some post-life existence of unspecified length with the Doctor would seem to be a poor consequence of having been his employee in life. The final nail in the coffin of Inapt belief was knocked in by the fact that beside us was the ruin of Jons Collier's diving sphere. Certainly no Inapt afterlife would allow you to bring your machines with you.

I stood somewhat shakily and regarded it, for it was an easier thing to understand than our surroundings. I saw plainly where the beetle's jaws had deformed it, where the brass casing had split, the steel ruptured. A little more force, I felt, would have sufficed to crack the entire contrivance open like an egg.

"So where are we now?" I mused. "This is no beetle's gullet, but what is it?" The light came from all around, and it had been blinding in the moments after opening my eyes, but now I had adjusted, and I found that we were in a room of unusual angles. The walls and floor were all of a substance unfamiliar to me – not stone nor wood nor metal, but a pale, gauzy, translucent material that gave very slightly at the touch but nonetheless seemed remarkably strong, as though someone had learned to freeze cloth in place.

The light seemed to come from tiny fragments trapped within the substance of our surroundings, and beyond the confines of our prison - for that was the sense I was increasingly given of the space – I could see suggestions of other chambers.

"Fosse?" came the Doctor's voice, and I turned to find him sitting up.

Moments later he had exhausted the limited range of exploration available to him, marvelling at the fabric of our new quarters, and yet noting, as I had, that we were in a chamber that had somehow admitted the diving sphere, and yet had no doors whatsoever.

My kinden have a particular horror of being trapped. We are so used, through our wings and our small size, to be able to come and go as we please, that the wonder of that place's construction wore off almost immediately and left me only with a gnawing dread. I sat on the wreck of Collier's sphere, arms about my knees, while the Doctor pottered in a circle about the confines of our cell, nothing daunted, even whistling to himself a little. The instant annoyance of that tuneless and arrhythmic sound went no small way towards keeping me sane.

Then he stopped – walking and whistling both – quite suddenly, and in a hushed voice called me over.

I dropped down to where he was, but could see nothing more than another span of that pale wall. The Doctor guided me, shifting me left and right until I saw. At a certain angle, the wall became almost transparent, as through some trick in the weave, and I found myself looking out at our captors.

There were three of them, and the most remarkable thing was how familiar they seemed, for they were Beetle-kind. All men, and all taller than the Doctor, I saw an elder and two younger, broad-framed, strong but also run to fat. Although their race was unmistakable, their skin was a weird, pallid shade, the colour I imagine a Wasp might be after a day drowned in the lake. Compared to the Doctor's own pleasant rich brown, it was a unnerving sight.

They were dressed in robes, but of a cut and style I had never seen before: blue-grey silk rolling in sumptuous folds over their bulky bodies, and starched-looking epaulettes or pauldrons to fill out their shoulders, making them seem bigger still. The eldest had the most elaborate clothes, appearing every bit as grand as a magnate of Heleron, all gold edging and jewellery at his wrists and neck and fingers. He carried a staff that seemed made of something not unlike the walls, pearly-white and artificial. His two friends had some manner of tool or weapon scabbarded at their belts. Based on my usual luck I was already putting money on their being weapons.

We saw the older man's lips move, and he gestured at us, and the Doctor murmured that they could surely see in a good deal easier than we could see out. A moment later a new figure had come into view, a hunched little monstrosity only a little larger than I and seeming something like the Skater-kind up above, if only because its limbs were so oddly proportioned – legs very long and the arms, though short, held weirdly elbows-out. He had a moon-round face as pale as his masters' and short-cropped hair, and he wore a sort of smock that made me think of artificers. This prodigal creature approached the wall and ran some little device in a straight line, from the floor up to as high as he could reach, and in the wake of that the wall simply peeled back like fruit rind.

The Doctor and I backed up quickly, and the three Beetles swept into the room. I saw, without surprise, that the two younger men had their devices in hand – short metallic rods that were linked to their belts by a length of cord.

“Travellers,” said the older man, regarding us with the coldest eyes I ever saw, “Welcome to Sclaris.” Never was there less welcome in a man's voice.

It is to be said, however, that my employer is not the most astute man when it comes to picking up these little social nuances. This same faculty, I believe, accounts for both his ability to strike up an instant rapport with otherwise hostile strangers, and his inability to stay amongst colleagues and friends for more than a tenday without offending someone.

Additionally, although he is a geographer by specialty, he is a remarkably knowledgeable artificer, and often's the time I have wondered just how the world might have fared if he had shown a practical interest in that field to match his grasp of theory.

He strode past the three men as though they were nothing, heedless of the raised wand that one of them raised, and examined the wall of our cell, which was now hanging like a curtain.

"Why this is most remarkable!" he exclaimed, oblivious to the eyes of all upon him. "It is silk indeed, and yet a moment ago I'd have sworn this was a solid wall." And, glancing about him, "but it all must be silk them. How is it held so?" There was such enthusiastic wonder in his voice, and frank admiration, that only a heart of stone would have denied him.

However, our chief captor seemed stone through and through. "Our secrets are not for outsiders," he snapped. A sketch of him here is appropriate, I think: though big, he was baggy, age drawing the bulk of him into sagging curves. His mouth was very wide, and seemed almost lipless, and the downturn at each corner presaged a poor temper. His eyes, each sitting in its web of wrinkles, were like slightly misted glass, so that I wondered how well he saw. His hands were knotted, short-fingered and arthritic. Despite all these signs of age he stood very straight.

"I have it. This entire room is like a tent, held suspended. The tensions between the ropes hold the walls straight and there must be – no, there's more than that – some chemistry at work? Some manner of treatment to stiffen the fabric...? How is that possible?"

"Very easily possible, for the learned," said the old man, but his voice had thawed, perhaps just a little. "I take it, from your erudition, that you are the master of this device, and no mere subject?" A twitch of his staff indicated Collier's sphere.

The Doctor glanced up, bright eyed. "Indeed, indeed, a remarkable experiment with, it would seem, rather unforeseen results." If he was not engaged in a polite discussion with his peers in a Collegiate drawing room, one would never have known it from his manner. "Doctor Ludweg Phinagler of Collegium, at your service."

"My name is Wellgrind," croaked the old man. "Master Wellgrind, and you have fallen into my domain."

I dared to speak. "We're within the lake, aren't we?"

I received a withering and contemptuous stare from all concerned, even from my own employer. For him, it was that the question was needless. He had already assimilated this fact and walked away from it. For the others, I was made to feel that my very existence was surplus to requirements and might be extinguished at any moment.

"I take it you are a man of learning," Wellgrind stated to the Doctor.

"Amongst my own people I am reckoned something of a prodigy," he confessed mildly. I felt that his claim was somewhat disingenuous, and missed the opportunity to use a number of other adjectives favoured in Collegium, but the company had already made it plain to me that my views were not being invited.

“Curious,” said Wellgrind. “We ourselves hold no ideal higher than knowledge of the world and its workings, but we had not thought the same to be true of your Empire. We had thought that our first intruder from that realm would be a warrior of some nature.”

“Excuse me,” replied the Doctor, greatly put out, “but it is not *my* Empire.”

“Please.” Wellgrind waved the objection away, looking as though the conversation had begun to bore him. “Do not think that we have no spies above the water. We are well informed of what manner of savages dwell on the shores of our domain.”

Which was interesting in and of itself, and I had a sinking feeling, so to speak, as I considered all those locals who had come to watch our second dive. How many of them, I wondered, had secret, submarine paymasters? I should have known the Skater-kindens were a pack of shiftless and untrustworthy villains.

“Ah, well, I won’t deny I was able to wrangle some Imperial help,” the Doctor came back, with precisely the sort of dry, conversational tone that Wellgrind was using, “but in truth my home is very far indeed from yours. I come from the city of Collegium, and there a scholar such as myself is honoured about all things. The quest for knowledge is what has brought me here, and not any Imperial policy.”

“And are you happy in your discoveries?” Wellgrind asked with a mirthless grin. He plainly intended the words as a taunt, to indicate to the Doctor that curiosity had led him fatally astray when it led him to Lake Limnia. Of course, as I noted, the Doctor is often poor at picking up such hints.

“I’m ecstatic!” my employer exclaimed. “What man of learning would not be? To think that such an advanced civilisation was flourishing unseen here – and with such a technology.” He ran his hands over the curious fabric of the walls. “An architecture of silk, and a chemistry that must conceive of and enact things that Collegium has not dreamt of! The necessity of your surroundings here has plainly guided you on so very different a path to that we have taken. I cannot imagine the untold histories behind it.” In all the world there are few things purer and more innocent than the enthusiasm of Doctor Phinagler.

I saw it work on Wellgrind, who plainly wanted to be menacing and tyrannical, but who was yet a man of letters, and could not help but recognise something of a kindred spirit in the Doctor. “Perhaps you are something a little more than this Empire might send, at that,” he conceded reluctantly. “Yet no doubt you have some knowledge of them, and would be prepared to speak of them, and of your own people...?”

“Hmm? Oh, of course.” If the doctor was very blasé about turning agent for the lake-kindens, I could hardly blame him. If I had the Empire as a neighbour on all sides, I would want to know as much as possible about it, too. Beyond that, it seemed unlikely that Wellgrind and his fellows would mount an invasion of Collegium. Perhaps, I mused, they might even end up sending students to the College, once my employer had infected them with his tales of its virtues. It is notable that the Doctor becomes a more fervent supporter of Collegiate policy the further away he actually travels from the city. Whilst there, he finds rather more to complain about.

“Then perhaps we should retire to more comfortable surroundings,” Wellgrind suggested. “You would no doubt find some refreshment welcome, after such a tumultuous journey.” He turned to sweep out, his two aides flanking him.

“Very kind,” the Doctor agreed. “Come on, Fosse.”

There was an awkward pause. “Alas,” Wellgrind said at last, “the invitation was not extended to your slave. “I cannot think that she would enlighten our conversation, and besides, if we are to speak of our sciences and our study, these are not matters to rattle in empty heads.”

The word ‘slave’, that seemed to have rather easily bypassed the Doctor’s notice, lodged quite securely in mine. It is our Lowlands’ proud boast that Beetles, even the Hellenen, do not hold slaves, having been the slaves of the Moths so long before. Here in the depths of Limnia, it would appear that matters had fallen out rather differently.

“But...” The Doctor made vague gestures in my direction. “I may wish to dictate something.”

I, for my part, was attempting to lock eyes with him and transmit, by some Art hitherto undiscovered, the full length and importance of our association vis a vis not abandoning me to the mercies of strange aquatic Beetle-kind. I think it was the eye-level problem that thwarted me, once again.

“One of our research assistants will record your every word,” Wellgrind promised, again injecting a suggestion of menace that hit square on the mark with me but was lost entirely on the Doctor. “As for your slave, we will house her with our own subjects.”

That, at least, sounded magnanimous, though there was something in his tone that did not match quite with the words. So, I thought, these Beetles think themselves absolute rulers, like little Emperors. Well, we will see precisely what their subjects think of that. I was firmly, and correctly, of the opinion that we two were in a great deal of trouble, and further, that if either of us was going to extricate us, it would not be my employer.

“I’ll sort something out, Fosse, never you worry,” were the Doctor’s parting words to me, over his shoulder, as he left with Wellgrind and one of the two younger lake-Beetles.

The remaining Beetle regarded me like a cleaner looks at a stain, and then gestured, and the hunchbacked little man I had seen before hopped into view on his long legs, bowing unctuously.

“You heard Master Wellgrind, Stammers. Get her out of here. I wish to examine their conveyance,” he said, and was already walking past me towards Colliers’ sphere, fumbling at his belt for some manner of toolstrip.

Stammers, barely a foot taller than I, bowed and lurched as though he was on springs, and was abruptly right next to me. The moment the Beetle’s back was turned, the menial’s ingratiating smile decayed on his face, leaving as nasty a leer as I have ever beheld.

“Well now, ain’t you a pretty little piece of flotsam,” he hissed, hunching lower to put his face very close to mine.

“Good day to you, my name is Fosse of Collegium, a student of the Great College,” I told him, trying the Doctor’s trick. Apparently Stammers did not have the same high opinion of learning as his masters, or possibly he simply had a low opinion of me in particular. A moment later one of his hands, small but with a grip like a vice, was about my wrist, and he was dragging me after him.

I stopped almost immediately, and for a moment he was physically hauling me along by my arm. I could not help it. The sight was breath-taking. For a moment I shared every jot of the Doctor’s childish wonder.

Beyond our cell there was a hall, with the same weirdly-angled walls, and open entirely along one side, and beyond that...

It seemed another world, a world to itself. We were, I think, close against one side of it – for they would not have moved the bulk of the sphere further than they had need to – and I was looking into the very heart of what they called Sclaris. Nothing could have diminished that awe-inspiring sight, however. I saw a vast space about me, and it was cluttered with hundreds of chambers constructed as our cell had been. Each was held in place and shape by cables and tethers, so that what might once have been loose bags of fabric were pulled into taut, flat-walled shapes by ingenious use of tension and counter-tension, linked to each other and to the far distant dome in a complex webwork of architecture that must have taken three score mathematicians years to calculate. Cut a single tether, I felt, and the entire spanning assembly would simply spring out of existence. Reason suggested that there would be considerable redundancy built in by any sane architect, but reason was not in session just then, as I gazed out into that busy constellation of chambers. It all seemed so fragile, and yet so vast. Though the silver light was omnipresent, my eyesight was not sufficient to see the end of it.

Those chambers whose walls allowed me a glimpse within showed shadowy forms busily at work, likewise the tubular tunnels connecting proximate suspended halls. I saw some few fliers making somewhat laborious progress in the distance – too far for me to determine kinden save to be sure that no Fly ever handled the air so poorly.

The next yank from Stammers almost pulled my arm off, and I turned my wondering face to him, to find nothing but an expression of petty annoyance greeting me on features more devoid of poetry than a stone. My own kinden are small, but we are broad-minded and great-hearted, more alive to the beauties of the world than most others. In Stammers I saw a man far smaller than his physical stature, and so I pitied him.

Unfortunately, my pity was just one more thing entirely lost on him, and he just hauled me onwards, dragging me onto a narrow bridge between hanging chambers, railed only by the near-invisible gossamer strands that were holding it aloft. Had Stammers not had such control of my arm I might just have taken flight right then, for I saw immediately how a good pair of wings would make anyone a master of the place. I could not have carried Stammers with me physically any more than I could mentally, however, and so my feet remained on the ground. This turned out to be important later.

I consider myself to be a personable sort of woman, but try as I might I cannot match the Doctor's effortless way with – frequently hostile – strangers. I did my best to make small talk with Stammers as the deformed creature hauled me over bridge and through suggestively intestinal circular tunnels, but he had taken an instant dislike to me which, I felt, was just a subset of his more general dislike for everything in the world except his vaunted masters.

“So, what manner of kinden are you then?” I tried.

“A bigger kinden than you, you little freak,” came the reply.

“And what is the position you hold here?”

“Oh I do what my masters tell me. I help them with their experiments. I clean up their little messes. And I handle their subjects, oh yes I do.”

I was having my doubts about the terminology used in Sclaris, for Stammers seemed like nobody's idea of a majordomo.

“You are an artificer, then?” cued by his smock, from which an assortment of hard-to-identify tools was hung.”

“Oh no, oh the masters would whip me if I claimed it. Just a lowly assistant me, but if I’m very, very good, maybe they’ll let me play artificer with a pretty-faced little freak like you, eh?”

By this time I will confess that my usual sunny personality had started to show a few clouds. “And what sort of a stupid name is Stammers anyway?”

At that he stopped – we were in a descending passageway where the stiffened fabric underfoot had been woven rough to provide purchase, and just about to enter into a new chamber. Stammers’ mean, pinched face glowered at me, and I knew I had struck a nerve. “Oh the masters” – and ever that reverential tone over that word - “give many names, little freak. You’d better hope you never earn one. Maybe I’ll suggest they call you stumpy, or gimp, or lefty, eh?”

His meaning was not entirely clear, but no more pleasant for all that.

As we had moved resolutely downwards throughout our journey, the quality of our surroundings had begun to acquire a more slipshod feel to it, and the lights were less frequent, the overall conditions gloomier and the very fabric of our surroundings seeming dirtier. The chamber that we entered was awkwardly slanted, so that both Stammers and I progressed as though walking along the side of a hill. But I saw figures ahead that instantly seemed to make sense of everything I had seen there so far, and I leapt to a conclusion in exactly the way that the College masters caution students not to.

There were two of them, and they were Spiders, and to my ignorant eyes the hunched figures with them seemed merely servants or escorts. Spider-kind were common enough in Collegium for me to know their ways a little, and each one of them seemed at the least a minor lord or lady of their convoluted body politic, walking through our Beetle streets as though it was the height of our good fortune that they deigned to honour us with their presence. I knew they ruled vast lands across the sea to the south, and had dozens of other kinden as loyal and willing subjects to their will, such was their charm and mastery of the human mind. Everything fell into place in that moment. Of course cold-mouthed Wellgrind was not ruler here, and here were the masters that Stammers spoke of. They stood, the pair of them, slender and pale, he silver- and she gold-haired, and I tried to pull ahead of Stammers to approach them, earnest to make a good impression on the true rulers of Sclaris.

“Lord and Lady, I present the compliments of my city of Collegium!” I announced, “I present myself Fosse, ambassador and scholar, at your service!”

There was a terrible silence. I have, in the past, said the wrong thing in the wrong company, but never to that degree.

I looked again at the two Spiders. They were wearing only shifts that left their limbs bare, and they seemed slighter than others of their kinden I had seen. Or perhaps it was that they did not hold themselves with the customary arrogance and mastery I was used to. Perhaps it was that they stood turned in upon themselves, every turn of their body shielding themselves against the world.

Mostly, though, it was that they did not meet my eyes. I have never before known a Spider-kind who would not look into anyone’s face boldly, even a criminal trading gazes

with a sentencing judge, This man and woman were cowed and humbled, retaining the fair seeming of their kinden, but with all the power and majesty stripped from them.

They were prisoners too, and the hunched, Stammers-like creatures with them were guards.

“More subjects, is it?” Stammers demanded, and his fellows nodded. They had the same peculiarity of limb, the same rounded back and moon face, as he, but seemed to me less objectionable of feature and manner, though perhaps that was merely through my more casual acquaintance with them. I had the horrifying revelation that perhaps this kinden had arisen through repeated pairings between Wellgrind’s Beetles and the Skater-kindens above, a thought so repulsive in every particular that it turned my stomach.

“Toss ’em in.” And then Stammers was hauling me towards the lowest end of the room, and I realised that the far wall was, in fact, further than I had thought, and that there was another chamber beneath us, slightly offset for ease of access, and that it was occupied.

The two Spiders had been brought with me, and moments later they were pushed unceremoniously over the edge, the man crying out but the woman staying resolutely silent. I was already thinking what I would do – take flight, evade the guards, go... where? For I was lost in this dreadful sunken place, and at the mercy of its inhabitants.

The dregs of a plan started to come together in my head, belatedly. No fool would drop me into a pit to keep me safe unless they did not think I would fly. I must therefore hide the fact that I could, and make the most advantage of deploying my wings when the opportunity presented itself.

Not calling on them instantly as I was shoved over that abyss required a fearsome effort of willpower, and I am afraid I was sufficiently unprofessional so as to scream a little on the way down – adding verisimilitude to my deception. I could only hope the landing beneath was soft enough to warrant casting people down onto it whom my captors might later have a use for. As it happened, though, I found myself caught by a pair of strong yet slender arms.

The silver light was tightly rationed down here, and the walls curved steeply out from the opening above, then in towards the sagging centre of the floor where the bulk of the residents were clustered – less a room than a bag, a sack to keep people in. The fabric gave slightly even beneath my small weight, explaining how those above could throw people down here so blithely.

It was the Spider-kindens man who had caught me. The expression on his face was stark, nameless – my eyes, keen even in this gloom, could not identify it. He set me down gently.

There were perhaps around a score and a half of Spider-kindens here, men and women, most young but some of middle years – and that was a tell-tale too because Spiders where I come from have arts and cosmetics enough to look young even if they walk with a cane. The bulk of them were simply sitting in a despondent mob, many seeming to be hurt or simply half-starved. They spared me not a glance.

The man who had caught me, and the woman he had been thrown in with, seemed to retain a little more spirit, probably just because they were newly arrived. I studied them, and after a while I felt as though I was intruding on something private. They were fair and well-formed as Spiders always are, but so stripped of that self-assurance I was horrified and yet

unable not to look. Their natural grace had become something fleeting and furtive, the slave's agility that teaches how to roll with a blow. The magnetic Art and force of personality that was wont to demand, *Look at me*, now cringed back with, *Overlook me, master, please*. It was as though I looked at Spider-kindens naked for the first time. It was as though I saw them anatomised on a slab. I felt profoundly ashamed and guilty, and yet fascinated.

"Good day to you, my name is Fosse of Collegium, a student of the Great College," I said faintly. Where before, Stammers' hostility had turned aside the words, here it was the apathy of the majority. Only the two who had preceded me down here were paying me any heed at all.

"This is how the Beetles treat their subjects, is it?" I threw in, as though I was the great cosmopolitan traveller who had seen all manner of accommodation in my time.

"No," the man said very quietly. "This is." He reached out and snagged the arm of one of the more introverted Spiders. I say 'arm', but in truth there was little left of it – some manner of corrosion had eaten away all the flesh below the elbow, but the bones were bizarrely attached and still together, coated with a verdigris-like patina. What was worse was the skin just about the elbow, where some neat hand had marked off various demarcations and lines, with careful numerical annotations beside them. This was no accident, no carelessness in a laboratory. Some painstaking artificer had been at work, with measurements and scrutiny.

In one of those sudden-reversal moments that seem to attend so many of my travels, I redefined the local use of the word "subjects" with special reference to Master Wellgrind and his fellows' love of science.

"I am Tarn," said the Spider-kindens man. "This is my sister, Ilve. You have plainly come from somewhere far away. I am sorry that you have come to this place."

"She is just some experiment," came a cracked voice from the pack. "Some creature from the vats and the tables."

"Did you not hear how she addressed us?" Ilve returned sadly – everything she did was laced with profound melancholy, beyond even a slave or subject's lot. "How very far from here you must have come from, to speak such words."

"Then she is mad," scoffed the doubter.

"I am neither mad, nor grown in a vat," I announced, as grandly as I could manage. "And I do come from far, far away, from the upper world, and not this lake at all." Because it was still their home, I left out a number of choice adjectives. "I am come here with my employer, Doctor Phinagler, as an embassy to your city. Where I come from, there are no slaves, nor subjects such as you have become. Even the meekest and poorest may walk the streets in safety, and nobody goes hungry or without a roof over their heads." Or that was the idea, anyway. I will not say that Collegium has quite achieved all of this, but we certainly intend to. We are working on it.

If I was expecting instant revolution and the institution of Lots as soon as I had finished speaking, I was to be disappointed. The bulk of them were still ignoring me, and Tarn and Ilve looked at me only with sympathy, and not with any hope. Into the silence was dropped a single mocking grunt, though, far too deep to come from any Spider throat.

My attention was drawn to a figure hunched at the very edge of the floor, where it curved up to become the wall. He sat in the darkest spot in the room, and filled it. I saw impossibly broad shoulders, and eyes that glittered in a small, round head.

Tarn put out a hand to restrain me, but I was already approaching cautiously, rounding the group of apathetic Spiders to get a better look. This, I was to discover, was Donarvan, and he is worth a sketch for his very appearance.

Standing, he would have been seven feet tall, twice my height, and the breadth of his shoulders perhaps all of four feet. His arms were huge to march, the hands looking each big enough to crush my ribs. His waist, by contrast, was far narrower, the torso making an exaggerated triangle, and his legs were, if not slender, then strong like a dancer's, rather than a weight-lifter's. His head really did seem almost comically small, joined to those massive shoulders with very little neck. Round, hairless, almost noseless, and with a lipless gash of a mouth, only his eyes seemed human. His skin was the colour of bronze after it has lost its shine.

I saw at once that he was like a Scorpion-kind, and guessed his totem from that – the same breast we had seen pass beneath us on our first dive. He lacked that people's snagging fangs, and their thumb and finger claws, but his Art had given him more terrible weapons than that. From over each set of knuckles arched a great hooked claw, extending his reach by most of a foot. My imagination helpfully supplied an image of those long arms snapping out, the inward turned point of that hook catching me over the shoulder, driving deep into my flesh and then drawing me towards that bleakly murderous visage.

"Fosse, you mustn't," Tarn cautioned, and indeed I was keeping my distance, save that the room was so cramped, and his arms so long, that this was more difficult than you might think.

"Scoff all you want," I said, to the Water-scorpion, and to all of them. "I'm to be nobody's experiment." I was going to say something about the Doctor rescuing me, but even as I thought it, I decided that there was such a thing as stretching the truth beyond all credulity. Even then, I heard voices above, though, and one of them very familiar – oh, I can tell you, I felt ashamed to have doubted him then. Here was Doctor Phinagler himself, and he had come to rescue me after all, having smoothed things over with our captors, No doubt we would be back on the surface, no doubt, no doubt...

Faces peered over the lip, looking down on us from the room above. Two were fishbelly pale, and one was dark.

"And here you see the holding pen for our experimental subjects," I heard Wellgrind's loathsome voice. "These are in readiness for my house's next studies, or are being studied following the minor, less disruptive procedures. The ready supply of them is limited, of course, but knowledge must be advanced. I, for one, will endure the hardship of fewer slaves to ease my bodily comforts, if it advances the cause of science."

The Doctor looked down – his expression was hard to make out, with the bulk of the light behind him, but I did my best to meet his eyes. He saw me there, sure enough, and glanced sidelong at Wellgrind. I think he said something, too quiet to hear. I am sure he registered some complaint.

When he looked back at me, I made out a helpless, awkward expression on his face – one very familiar from Collegiate society, which in many ways is mimicking old Inapt

customs it does not truly understand. It was an expression that denoted that he wanted to say or do something, and yet to do so would be terribly impolite, and the social impasse had defeated him.

I wanted to call out to him. No, I wanted to *cry* out to him. The same social strictures had seized on me, however, and I would give nobody the satisfaction. What self-destructive mores we do surround ourselves with.

The heads withdrew. The voices receded.

I could sense Tarn and Ilve's eyes on me, their useless, wasted sympathy that they should better spare for themselves. As far as I was concerned, I was getting *out*. My options had narrowed to the point where any next step in the plan was purely theoretical. *Out of here* was its own reward.

Then the big Scorpion chuckled, quiet and yet hugely amused, and I rounded on him. "That's funny, is it, where you come from? What a primitive sense of humour you do have!"

"Fosse, no-" started Tarn, but I wanted to take my frustration out on someone, and the giant looked like the only one I would get a rise out of.

"I don't see the rest of you doing anything," I snapped at them. "And you – there you are, so much cursed bigger than me, and all hooks and claws, and are you any better off? So laughing at me's the only joy you're likely to get -" and my next words were lost in a kind of a squeak as he stood up.

More than seven feet, I decided. In fact, he was probably not far from just reaching up and hauling himself out. I had expected a kind of savage stoop, with those hooks dragging on the ground, but he stood very straight, making his bizarre physique almost a caricature of a strong man. He wore only a loincloth of what looked like fishskin. The anatomist voyeur in me was thrilling even as the rest of me froze in fear.

"I am very hungry," he said, almost a whisper, but a purring bass whisper that thrummed the very weave of the walls.

I made some sort of interrogatory noise.

"Do you think, having got me down here, they will be calling me up for their experiments?" he murmured, taking one step forwards, so that if I had wanted to evade his reach I would have had to push myself against the very far wall of our sagging prison. "This is the experiment, right here."

Tarn and Ilve had gone very quiet and still, prey in the presence of a predator. I made my noise again.

"The Beetle-kindens believe that my people eat human flesh – by choice, by necessity, the details vary. It is one of the ways they know they are more civilised than we. So here I am, unfed for days, and penned with their *subjects*, of whom they have a sufficiency. And I am very, very hungry."

"And do you...?" I could not stop myself asking, cursing the scholar in myself. "Eat human flesh, I mean."

"We await the results of their experiment," the Water-scorpion growled, still oh-so-softly, and yet the deep smooth rumble of his voice turned my insides to water – and yet, at the same time and despite everything, something in me responded in a very different way. Power and control is always attractive, and given the company, his was the only game in town just then. You may be shocked, but I learned then that a man so very keenly perfected

for violence, and who is fully aware of it, has an destructive allure to him that goes beyond kinden.

"I'm getting out of here," I told them all.

Tarn and Ilve's impotent empathy only increased at my declaration, and the Scorpion's thin smile broadened without ever getting more amused. I looked from one to the other.

"Why are you still here, if you know what they're going to do to you? I never met a Spider yet that couldn't climb."

"The walls are slick, near the mouth," Ilve told me. "This isn't the first time I've been in one of these." Hidden tragedy beat behind the words. "There is no escape. Our masters know what they are about."

"Are we observed, right now?" I squinted at each of the walls, trying to see shapes through them, and in doing so almost walked into the Scorpion, who gazed down at me curiously.

"I don't think so," Tarn confirmed. "I don't think they care enough. This isn't somewhere you put someone you're that interested in. They'll just check up on us every so often, take some away, bring some back. See if..." His gaze strayed to the Scorpion.

"You'd get out of here, if you could, wouldn't you?" I asked the question of the whole room, but the bulk of the Spiders just huddled away from me, turning their backs.

"The masters would be angry," one of them muttered.

"What could happen to you that would be worse than staying here?" I demanded.

At that, some faces did turn towards me, and several had been disfigured, their natural fair features twisted and warped by some experiment, or simply by proximity to whatever studies the Beetles were carrying out. In their gaze I saw that, at the hands of a cruel and Apt people, 'the worst' could mean a great many very bad things indeed. They were broken, I thought. They had been here too long, and had lived under the rule of Wellgrind and his people all their lives. And yet...

"You seem different," I noted, looking at Tarn and Ilve. "Where are you from?"

Tarn glanced around him. "There are some places within the water where a few of us can live free, caves where we can hide, little bubbles we have built for nobody but ourselves. Sclaris and the other cities are grand, but the lake is vaster still."

"But they caught you," I finished for him.

"They caught her," he said, indicating Ilve. "They caught her and took her as a slave, and a subject. And I could not abide living free and knowing that. So I came after her." His voice shook at the very thought of it, and it was so plain that he was only one step above the lifeless sitting-dead around us, as far as being in awe of the Beetles went, that the sheer unspoken courage of what he had attempted touched my heart, for all it had failed. I reached out and gripped his hand, remember his arms about me as he had caught me. It was strange to find such bravery and such kindness in such a man, in such a place.

"I'm getting out," I told him. "Come with me."

He shook his head, and I called for my wings, letting them carry me a foot off the ground for a moment before touching down once again. In the wake of that, though the mass of dispirited Spiders did not change, something had. The air had a spark in it. It spoke of hope.

“And can you carry me?” he asked wryly, but I was getting a bit fed up with all this doomsaying talk.

“You’re Spiders,” I told him. “Make me a cursed *rope*. We’re sitting in an entire city of spun silk. Do you really need me to spell things out for you?”

He stared at me. His despairing expression vanished, leaving his face blank as an egg.

I had not watched this particular Spider-kind Art in use before, as it has little practical value in polite society – outside the bedroom in any event – and so it was fascinating to see their hands move, the strands stringing from fingertip to fingertip as the siblings worked together. A twined cable of silk took form swiftly between them, twisting and writhing as they formed it between them. I took up the end, expecting it to stick to my fingers, but it was already dry, and felt as solid and substantial as real silk.

Soon I was ready to fly. The Spiders had formed the rope with one clubbed end that would remain adhesive, because the architecture of Sclaris was notably short of handy projections to tie anything to. Armed with this lifeline, I took to the air and carefully manoeuvred up into the room above. Which was still tenanted.

I touched down and found myself looking straight at Stammers and one of his fellows, who had been sitting up here quite silently doing who knows what, save that their expressions of surprise showed they had not been eavesdropping. I think if I had been a more fearsome specimen then one of them would have run for help, ruining everything. As it was, they decided to stuff me back in the bottle by main force, and rushed for me, Stammers on the ground and his friend with a brief airborne hop, his own Art wings glimmering briefly. *These* then had been the flying kinden I had seen briefly, spotting the open spaces of Sclaris. In the exhilaration of my own plan I had almost forgotten that I did not own the only pair of wings in the city.

I made a determined bid to jam the glued end of the rope on the floor, as this was the only way that I would get reinforcements, but Stammers’ friend was on me too quickly, bowling me over in a tangle of limbs. Stammers was a moment behind, but he grabbed me by my collar and shook me hard enough to make my teeth rattle. “Tracherous little freak, ain’t you,” he spat. “Now you get taught a fine lesson, before you go back down.”

I pushed out at him furiously, and stuck the rope to his smock. For a moment he stared at me, and I stared at him, and his friend stared at both of us, and then I kicked the end of the rope down the hope and shouted “Pull!”

Tarn or Ilve had been ready, and the resulting yank had Stammers halfway to the pit before anyone could react, and me along with him. He let me go quickly enough after that, though, and was frantically trying to get his smock off, whilst his friend got in his way by hauling him back from the pit’s edge, and the Spiders below continued, I surmised, to actually climb up the rope, whether in desperation or because they had misunderstood my circumstances. I myself was left entirely to my own devices, and I could have had it away into Sclaris at any time. It was my own basic decency that held me there, rather than any knowledge that I would be utterly helpless and without resource in the city, and I rolled up my sleeves and descended on Stammers and company with the intention of enacting violence on them. I never had the chance.

There was a moment when the pulling from the pit stopped, and with a cry of triumph Stammers had his smock half-off. A moment later he, and his friend, were gone. The ensuing

tug had been sufficiently powerful to haul them both off their feet and over the edge in a moment.

I took to the air, but the screams were already starting – and they finished moments later, because the Water-scorpion was brutally efficient. When I got there, the mob of listless Spiders had finally been persuaded to move, and the centre of the floor below was given over to a display of sheer dismemberment. Those Art-grown hooks had torn both of our jailers bodily apart.

The big man himself was crouching over the sectioned bodies and I had no wish to know why.

With his eyes wide and his face transfigured with fear, Tarn was holding the rope aloft. I dipped down and took it without landing, hurling myself up again and over the lip. The sticky end was sticky for different reasons now, and considerably less adhesive, but I managed to get it fixed, and braced myself against it too, and Tarn and Ilve shimmied up it and were with me a moment later.

He embraced me instantly. He did not have so many words – none of his aquatic kinden seemed to have that gorgeous love of language our landbound Spiders do – but he made up for it with the spontaneity of his gestures. *You did it!* he was saying, and *How brave you are!* and all manner of thanks, and I will admit to hugging him right back.

Ilve had sat down, seeming exhausted just by climbing out, and none of us were ready for the rope pulling taut once more. There was a moment when we all leapt to the same conclusion, and I flurried over to the lip of the pit to see the Water-scorpion testing the line. Our eyes met.

“What now, little one?” I heard his soft voice murmur. “No gratitude for disposing of your enemies?” There was a little blood at the corner of his mouth, but that might just have splashed there. “Is my experiment so much to your liking that you will leave me here with my hunger?”

“He’s dangerous,” Tarn stated, helping Ilve up. “There’s no telling what he might do.”

Even looking down at the man from a safe distance sent a little shiver through me. He had exactly the poise and grace of a deadly predatory animal, a mantis or a hunting spider – terrifying and beautiful all in one, and nothing to divide the two impressions.

“Perhaps dangerous is what we need,” I said quietly. “Brace the rope.” To my surprise the two Spiders did as I said without argument, despite Tarn’s plain misgivings. Even having lived beyond the city, they came from a long line of the subservient. I wondered what catastrophe had sufficed to bring their once-proud kinden low, or whether they had always been this shadow of their other kin.

It took all our combined strength to get the Water-scorpion out of the pit, and us waiting for a change of the guard at any time. When he stood there, though, fierce and free, I felt as though I had indeed released a caged beast, hungry and savage, out onto the street. It was a feeling of equal parts elation and helplessness.

He crouched down before me, which still didn’t bring his head down to my level. I was acutely aware of being within the arc of his massive arms.

“I am Donarvan, little one, and you are a strange and bold creature to visit our depths.” Not a word of thanks, note, but I don’t think he had such niceties in him. The

compliment was all, and genuine, and I felt my heart flutter. His voice was deep enough to resonate within my own chest.

“I need to rescue Doctor Phinagler,” I announced.

“If you mean your friend, he didn’t need rescuing, it seemed to me. It looked as though he was fitting right in,” Donarvan reasoned. “You need to leave this city, if it can be done, before this is discovered.”

“He’s right,” came Tarn’s voice from behind me. “If we are fleet and nimble, there may be a way out, and so a way back in to save your friend. For now, though, our only chance is to exit Scholaris and hope we leave no trail.

“What about you?” I crouched by the edge, looking down into the dim recess beyond. “Come on, time to trust to your feet.”

The dispirited huddle beneath did not move. Not a single face tilted up towards us.

“I’ll leave the rope,” I told them, but without any conviction in my voice.

Tarn had his arm about Ilve, and I didn’t like that much. It was difficult to say that there was something concrete wrong with her – she did not cough or wheeze, and her skin was not ashen, nor her eyes sunken – and yet plainly there was. That all-consuming melancholia seemed to weigh on her worse than a plague.

“We go down,” Donarvan announced. “It’s the only way.”

“What’s down?” I asked him.

“The lower reaches, no place for a fragile little creature such as you,” he told me, crouching down to not-quite-my-level again. “The failed experiments, the leaked poisons, the stale air, the scavengers and the discarded bodies, and yet, if we are to break from here, that is the one place the eyes of the Beetles will not look too carefully. They do not like to see evidence of their own failures.”

“And we can get there?”

“It’s always easy to go down, little one,” he told me. “It’s the reverse that’s the trick.”

We were well made for stealth, all four of us. My kinden are light and silent by nature, gliding through the world without a ripple, and Tarn and Ilve had the furtive care of those born of a long line of slaves. Donarvan moved like a hunting beast, a killer shadow. I had expected no less of him.

We moved down three levels before I had my moment of doubt, and it was swift but savage work. Tarn would pad ahead of us, in the hope that, if spotted, he would be taken as just one more slave about his business – and several times this is exactly what happened, with the little hunchbacks – Boatman-kinden I was told – restricting themselves to pushing him aside or kicking him, when they discovered him, and suspecting nothing amiss. I was given to understand that they themselves occupied some uneasy position between the Beetle-kindens masters and the Spider-kindens slaves, and that the reason they were more than mere chattels was that they could help in the masters’ scientific work. Aptitude, therefore, was the key. For all the cruelties, it was plain that the Beetle-kindens of Lake Linnia were an advanced lot, in their narrow way. I only hoped that this was not proving too seductive to my employer, although I would have some truth of that sooner than I had anticipated.

Twice, Tarn returned to say that the way was blocked – some sentry on watch to keep out prying eyes, and most likely because the greater Beetle scholars were all very jealous of their discoveries, and constantly tried to spy on one another.

Donarvan dealt with the obstruction, both times, managing the grisly duty and stowing the bodies without a single sound out of place, and with barely a suggestion of blood. I was terrified of him in those moments – when he came back to us as though nothing had happened, the way ahead prepared for us, and not a word spoken. It was not that murder was second nature, but as though it had no meaning to him. He killed as a predator killed, and would have no more understood guilt or morality than a tarantula.

We descended in fits and starts, hiding while Tarn searched out a way downwards, then quickly scurrying down slanting bridges, or sliding through tunnels that were surely more for disposal than meant as a means of travel. Much of the time we were ‘outside’, or the nearest to outside that one could get in Sclaris – creeping like parasites across the face of the city’s many linked compartments, exposed to the cluttered void, sometimes almost pressed between that place’s great organs and its silver skin. The light down here was of a poorer and poorer quality, and the air was harsh on the lungs, acrid with chemicals. I could hear fluid slosh and ripple from not so very far below us.

We had just taken a brief space within again, virtually falling from one chamber to another, and had just exited into the increasingly hostile miasma without, when I heard a familiar voice. It was the Doctor’s, of course, and soon worked out that he, and his interlocutor, were inside the very chamber we were walking atop. The others froze, and retreated to where their shadows would not fall on those within, their footsteps not dimple the ceiling. I, however, crouched there and put my ear to the smoothly-woven material. I could hear some low-voiced man – Wellgrind still, I thought – explaining some matter that sounded technical, and then the Doctor replied in a manner that suggested praise, and then, “but suppose that...” and some complication I was unable to catch.

The others were urgently gesturing at me, but I knew that I could not go, not then. Doctor Phinagler was *right there*. I could not abandon him without some attempt to bring him out with us.

I hissed my intentions at the others, but I did not get close enough to really make myself clear, for fear they would prevent me. Instead I flew back to the opening we had just emerged from and headed inside, navigating via my kinden’s characteristically immaculate sense of direction until I found a tube that opened, perhaps for ventilation, into a large, bulbous chamber from which the Doctor’s voice came.

What I saw down there was not pleasing to any of the senses, and at last I appreciated that the difference between the rulers of Sclaris and their Beetle kin of the Lowlands was something more fundamental than any quirk of appearance.

Much of the chamber below me was taken up with vats, formed as was everything else from that silk-like material, but presumably treated in order to bear their roiling contents. Their gaping mouths were suspended from the ceiling by silken scaffolding, with their gut-like bodies bulging out on the floor. The fumes that arose from them made my eyes and nose smart.

Beyond them, I could see what I took to be tables, although again they were strung in mid-air, held in rigid position by the cross-bracing of their cables. I could see a few cringing Spider-kindens there, attending to some menial tasks, and a couple of the Boatmen were fussing about some manner of machines – although they seemed quite unlike any device of Collegium or Helleron. I saw little in the way of gears or moving parts, but instead the

devices seemed weirdly intestinal, like little models of the city around us, with the work being performed somehow by a precisely calibrated mixing of chemicals. Some of the artifacts gave off a crackling, humming sound, with sharp flashes of light racing along thin lines strung between them.

“The very force of life,” Wellgrind’s voice was saying, in a conversational tone. “Here, it is a simple enough demonstration, fit only for novice students, but I imagine it is new to you. Let me show you.”

I let myself down from the vent and crouched between the vats, edging closer and yet desperate to retain my concealment. I saw Wellgrind’s broad back, as he supervised one of his hunched little familiars in preparing something on a hanging table, and with a lurch of my stomach I identified a Spider-kind body. Corpse it must definitely be, for sections of it had been laid open or removed entire, enough to obscure any detail of age or gender.

“Now, behold,” Wellgrind instructed, and I saw none other than my employer step in – with a pronounced reluctance in his tread, but step in he did, nonetheless. A moment later the humming sound intensified, and the corpse began to move. It was all I could do to prevent myself crying out in shock.

Its limbs twitched, and a shudder passed through its spine, as though it was trying to sit up. One hand clutched at the table, and I had a horror that the dead thing was still being made to feel pain even beyond the merciful point of extinction. Another spasm showed me its head – the top of which was missing, the brain hollowed out entire, and yet it moved.

“I, ah, remarkable,” came the Doctor’s strained voice.

“I am well aware that you have nothing of the sort, above,” Wellgrind observed. “Do not think but that we keep a careful eye on your Empire.”

“As my presence here demonstrates, yes,” the Doctor confirmed.

“Here, I’ll show you something more – no mere prentice’s trick, but some true science. Let me set the matter in motion.” At Wellgrind’s gesture the cadaver was removed, and a further device lowered from above, as impenetrable in purpose as the rest. Whatever it was for, it was plain that Master Wellgrind would require some time to prepare it, and so I shuffled as close as I could to the heels of my employer and hissed at him until he glanced back. I saw his eyes widen, and then he was looking resolutely straight ahead again, eyes apparently focused on Wellgrind once more. However, he contrived to shuffle back until I was almost at his feet so that I could speak as low as I might, and be heard by him and him only. It was the same piece of business we first practised on our trip to the Spiderlands, and we knew it well

“I’m very glad to see you well,” he murmured from the corner of his mouth.

I wanted to pick him up on that, given our last encounter, but the opportunity would be wasted at the volumes I was enforced to speak at. Instead I told him, “Doctor, you must come with me. I’m getting out of the city.”

“Yes, that might be for the best,” he agreed softly. “You run along, indeed.”

“You come with me.”

His eyes remained fixed on Wellgrind. “I’m not entirely sure that will be possible. Master Wellgrind is a powerful man here, and I do rather seem to have his attention. I’m really not sure he’s ready to let me go just yet.”

“Doctor, he’s crazy. He’s a monster. They all are.”

“Now now, generalisations help nobody,” he returned. “And you have not seen what I have seen. Their chemical sciences are so vastly far in advance of our own – to build all this, to treat their materials in so many ways, a wealth of understanding born of necessity. There is so much that might be learned from them, and they are respecters of knowledge. They see in me an equal. If you had only seen their machines, their refineries... all the world of mechanics contrived by the admixture of compounds...”

“Doctor, what I have *seen* is slaves and torture and a madman playing with dead bodies,” I got out as forcefully as I dared. “Whether there are Beetle-kindens here untouched by such grotesquery I cannot say, but Wellgrind and his peers are no respecters of anything wholesome.”

He glanced back at me briefly, and I saw the flash of misery on his face. He knew, full well he knew, that what I said was true, and that he had fallen into a nest of horrors. “It is rather like riding a wasp, Fosse,” he said, and I saw that Wellgrind seemed to be reaching some manner of conclusion. “Staying on is hard, but infinitely preferably to falling off and into the way of its sting.”

“Doctor, I think it’s like riding a scorpion that’ll kill you off any cursed time it likes!”

“Nonetheless, I don’t think I’m in a position to say my goodbyes just yet. I fear Wellgrind is rather possessive, and I am his novelty for today. Tomorrow, who can say? For now, I will feel better knowing that you have contrived some exit. You take what chances you can, Fosse.”

And I believed him. When we are in the vice together, he does sometimes come through with a certain greatness of spirit. I watched as he strode towards Wellgrind, clapping his hands together loudly and requesting in a hearty voice to be shown what the man was about. Under cover of that I made my exit and returned to the others.

They no doubt made all manner of unfounded assumptions about the feckless nature of my employer, but nothing was said, and so we progressed downwards until we were crouching above a festering soup of acrid, bitter water that formed the bilges of Sclaris. It was murky, with a rainbow sheen upon it that made me feel unclean just to see, and things moved there, weird, lopsided insects that sculled and hopped and crawled. Many just floated, quiet dead, and I saw at least one Spider-kindens corpse, part-eaten. A great, stilt-legged water-skater bigger than I was drifted over the oily surface towards us, but one look at Donarvan warned it off.

I opined that I was not going into that, no matter what the alternative. The eyes of my companions were already searching the near wall of the city, though, and at last Tarn pointed something out to the others.

“What is it?” I asked. They seemed to have some trick of seeing more through the effluent water than I could.

“The acids have eaten away at the bubble,” he explained. “There is a hole there that the slaves have not been set to fix yet.”

“A hole into the lake?” I demanded.

“Even so.”

I wanted to ask why the air hadn’t escaped, but I remembered Colliers’ sphere. So long as the rupture was on the inward-curving underside, as here, the lighter air would not readily displace – at least not so swiftly that a repair in a day or so would not deal with the

problem. I stared at the fetid soup, imagining its poisons mingling with the lake's clear waters, seeping out in a filthy cloud.

"We must go," Donarvan stated, "if we are going at all. They will be hunting us already, and the scholar-lords take errant slaves very seriously."

"But I..." For I had not considered one salient point. "I may have to stay. No doubt you all have Art to breath water like this air, but I cannot. My kinden has never needed it."

Tarn was about to say something comforting, but Donarvan immediately saw an opportunity for mischief, if such a juggernaut of death can be said to deal in mere mischief. A moment later he had snatched me up – uncommonly fast for such a big man – and was literally bounding out into the vile waters, and then swimming with legs and one arm, holding me effortlessly out of the water. I had my wings with me by this time, and was frantically trying to wrench myself from his grip, but I had not a fraction of the strength that would have required.

Then he had paused near the vast, upwards-arching wall, treading water, and I knew we had reached the hole. He looked up at me, showing sharp teeth when he grinned. Tarn and Ilve were splashing closer – I remembered they had never trusted Donarvan from the start – but they would not get to me in time.

He forced me down into that water and I screamed. After that I screamed some more, my voice sounding unnaturally loud in my ears. My eyes, that had screwed shut in panic, were at last persuaded open again, and I beheld a remarkable thing.

My legs and arms were wet, and I could feel a faint stinging wherever that water touched my flesh. My head and torso were bone dry and, looking down, I seemed to be wearing some enveloping garment of silver that made a bulky sketch of my contours. Donarvan was similarly costumed, head and body, and he was already pulling me through the water with powerful strokes, heading down. I could feel a strong force trying to drag me back towards the surface, and I realised that I was wearing a coat of air. Past me, I could see Tarn and Ilve on their way – he assisting her – and they had their own external lung in just such a fashion. This, I saw, was the Art of the Lake-kindens – of all of them, no doubt. This had allowed them to live in the waters since time immemorial.

Then a shadow passed over me, brief but with a sense of immense size, and a moment later we were out of Sclaris entirely, and I looked back to see a blank wall of tarnished mercury, seeming almost flat it was so grand, but curving away as it receded upwards.

Abruptly Donarvan had dragged me close to his face, and I thought for a moment he intended to bite, but instead he touched our envelopes, and spoke low through our common air so that I could hear him.

"Well, little one, have you ever been more out of your element than now?" he asked me. There was a gauging look in his eyes, though, searching my face for weaknesses like fear, and impulsively I planted a chaste little kiss on his lipless mouth.

"Thank you for rescuing me," I told him. "But where now? Surely the waters around Sclaris are still the domain of its masters? Have you some lair nearby?"

"A lair?" His smile at that was almost human. "Do not be so swift to follow where I might travel, little one – but look, our fellow travellers have some destination in mind."

Indeed, Tarn was gesturing at us, the two Spiders already striking out strongly away from the great dome of Sclaris. Donarvan hooked me with his claw and swam after them.

All three were enviably free in the water, assisted by some Art that no kinden familiar to me ever knew. I myself failed abjectly at swimming, and my wings simply foundered when I deployed them. Besides, the air jacket kept yanking me irresistibly upwards, and though to break into clear air and daylight was something I fervently wished, I could not abandon the Doctor. I even toyed with the idea of seeking out te Sander and his superiors, leading an Imperial task force to scour the lake, but the technical difficulties would have been insuperable, even if they believed me, and the timescales would have seen the Doctor vivisected long before.

We travelled through near darkness for some time, and I began to fret about the freshness of the air within my little cocoon, when I saw a silver shape ahead. For a moment I thought the Spiders had led us full circle and I was seeing Sclaris gleaming in the distance, but soon I realised that our destination, though similar in construction, was closer and far smaller than I realised. A single bubble, tethered to the stem of some vastly attenuated water weed, that descended into darkness beneath us, and ascended into grey water above. When we reached it, I saw that its skin was a weave of silk – not the hard and artificial stuff of Sclaris, but something that looked spider-woven and natural.

Tarn confirmed it to me: this little refuge had been spun by a water spider, the totem of his kinden, and in mimicry of such construction had Sclaris and its sister cities been made, back before the Beetle-kindens shouldered their way to ascendancy.

“Why are we here?” I demanded.

“To take on fresh air, for one,” he explained. “And to take stock. They will be hunting us. Myself and Ilve at least. They have ways of tracking us in the water – specially trained beasts to sniff us out, and Apt devices that can scent us, somehow. But there are ways...” He regarded Donarvan warily. “No doubt you have some place to go, Scorpion.”

“Why, I rather thought I’d see what happened next,” Donarvan told him easily, crouching in the centre of the bubble like a gargoyle – there was not room for him to stand. “You will take her to the Mother, of course.”

The two Spiders stiffened at the mention. Ilve made to say something angry, but lost her breath just as she tried, and sagged back. Donarvan chuckled a little.

“Did you think she was such a great secret? I know of her, and don’t think the Beetles don’t either. I couldn’t tell you where to find her just now, it’s true, but to give that name to the leader of the pitiful remnants of your kinden who live free? Common knowledge.”

“And you think we’ll lead you to her?” Tarn challenged him.

“You think I’m a spy for the Beetles?”

“I know your kind work with them, sometimes.”

“And the circumstances you found me in? And the numbers of their people I have killed for you, that we could get this far?” Donarvan enquired, ever so politely and with a deep undercurrent of menace.

Ilve had been scrabbling at the concave surface of the bubble, digging into the web, and now she produced some little bundle with an expression of desperate triumph. When she opened it, a strange, rancid smell leaked out into our close air.

“Someone has left us a gift,” she said, and was going to expound when some will to speak went out of her. She looked thin and unwell, and I wondered for a moment if she had some plague that the Beetles wanted spread to the rest of her kinden.

“Let me.” Tarn took it from her, and I saw that it was a container made of stone, with some sort of unguent within it. Swiftly and surely Tarn smeared Ilve with it, and then himself, so that they both ended up stinking of its sour, rotten reek. In our confined quarters the experience was somewhat overwhelming.

“This will throw their devices and their animals off our trail,” the Spider explained, stowing the half-empty pot, and webbing over its hiding place with his Art. “Now...” He regarded Donarvan unhappily, but it was plain that he would not be able to stop the Scorpion following wherever he wanted to go, especially with Ilve’s strength, or at least her determination, so visibly flagging.

“Let us go,” he decided, at last.

As we had proved that a lucky and determined slave – albeit one assisted by a huge murderer – could escape Sclaris, and as my comrades were equipped for the basic necessities of aquatic survival, I was privately wondering that the Beetle cities did not just disintegrate as their masters’ treatment drove out the slaves that they depended on. Collegiate political theory (or one of them) surely held that a system driven by such cruelty would inevitably end in revolution or transformation into something more egalitarian.

However, on our trip through the dark waters, with me now clinging along Donarvan’s back, sharing our doubled envelope, I had to revise my opinion of just how carefree a life in the open lake might be. We spent a surprising amount of our time hiding, and I was able to witness a number of different predators for which I would have barely been an appetiser – fish, dragonfly nymphs, even a leech longer than my body that made me wonder if there was some loathsome kinden somewhere below us that had taken it as their totem. The most fear was generated by a great diving beetle – though only a little fellow compared to the giant that snagged our sphere – but that was because it was thought to be a spy for the Beetle-kindens back in the city.

All in all I had the distinct impression that life as a savage within Limnia was to find oneself constantly on the menu. And of course, should the Spiders protect themselves from the wild world by crafting their own bubble cities, as they could surely do, then they could not hide from the Beetles. I began to see how this unpleasant, vitriolic society had come to be.

At the last, I saw something vast looming ahead – not the pale of a city wall, but rock, the very foundations of the lake, and there we entered an aperture so narrow that Donarvan had to wriggle to get through. Shortly after we had ascended a twisting passage and found ourselves in the air. It was a cave.

Caves, in fact – a series of fissures and chambers that had, I was sure, a number of ways in and out. It was not unlike the old warrens back at Merro, where I still had living family, and the resemblance, however trivial, gave me some heart.

We were accosted within minutes of our arrival, if accosted is the word. A half-dozen Spider-kindens turned up, bearing knives and spears, and kept their distance down the tunnel. Donarvan could have broken them all into pieces, I had no doubt, but he was being uncharacteristically respectful and standing at the back.

Tarn introduced us, skating over the precise details of my provenance. “We seek refuge,” he told them.

“All that we can provide,” a woman with a spear told him, which sounded innocuous enough to me, but Tarn took it poorly.

“What do you mean? They have not...?”

“The last in before you had not masked their scent. We are already preparing to move. They are coming here. The Mother has foreseen it.”

We had come so far, and the news seemed to devastate Tarn. His concern was plainly for Ilve, who had folded to her knees again, staring down at the floor. “Have we no time?” he asked weakly.

“Who can say. Stay if you wish. Perhaps the Mother will speak with you. She is determined to see all safe before she leaves.”

We headed inwards, until we came to a larger cavern, dripping with water, which had plainly been the lodgings for a fair number of people until very recently. Even now, there were many Spider-kindens gathering some few meagre possessions – mostly woven or hand-carved, clothes, blankets, some poor tools. I saw men and women and children, whole families disassembling all that circumstances had left them of their lives. Here, Tarn let Ilve lie down, and she curled into a ball.

“Tarn,” I found my voice at last. “You can’t live like this, surely. Is this all you have?” It was not tactful, but the misery I was witnessing had driven tact from me.

The look he turned on me had more dignity than I expected. “This is what we have. This is what they have left us. Most of my people have less – they live within the cities, and serve their masters in whatever capacity is required – menials, assistants, whores or the subjects of their experiments. They are safe from the lake there, and the price of that safety is their birthright.”

“Tarn... where I come from, your kinden do pretty well,” I observed. “In fact they tend to be the ones owning slaves and telling people what to do – although not so much with the mad experiments, it’s true.”

“Then I am happy for them,” was all he said to that – and I could tell he was sincere. “It is like a story, Ilve,” he murmured to his sister. “Another world that turned out differently, where our people are free. Perhaps that is enough, that knowledge.”

“Tarn, listen to me. Come up. We’ll get Doctor Phinagler back somehow and all go up to the surface – why not all of your people, even? I mean, yes, you’d be in the middle of the Empire, and they’re not slack on the slave-taking front, but even so...” But my voice tailed off because a curious look had come over his face, and he was shaking his head in little, jerky movements.

“*Up there?*” he whispered. “We cannot go *up there*. I have seen that place, when I have gone to gather air. It is terrible. We *cannot*.”

“It’s not all like Jerez.” I had misunderstood him.

“It’s empty, all above, and it burns, and it freezes, and there is *nothing* all around.” He was shaking, “We cannot live there. It would destroy us.” Indeed the very thought of it seemed to have unmanned him beyond all sense of proportion – it was not a mere rational consideration of the difficulties involved, the heat of the sun, the night’s cold, the novelty of what must seem the great open space all around. I saw something deeper, an irrational terror that he was fighting back.

Miserably, I wondered if this, too, was the work of the Beetles, whether they had, by artifice or selective breeding, shaped their slaves to fear that most evident of escapes – or perhaps they, too, were afflicted by such fears, and simply living in this water, generation on generation, had instilled these patterns in every mind.

Ilve let out a curious choked sound, not a moan, not a whimper, not quite a sob.

“Is she ill? Or poisoned?” I pressed.

“They made her their subject,” Tarn said. “They knew that she had lived free, and the thought was like acid in their minds that she might have known even a moment’s joy. So they put a venom in her mind that ate her joy, and darkened her thoughts. Now there is nothing left but sadness, and she loses the will to move, to speak, to be herself in any way. Soon, perhaps, she will not care enough even to breathe. I have seen it before.”

I looked into his face carefully throughout this, searching for any sign that he was speaking metaphorically, and found none.

“I would have been next,” Tarn said, so softly I had to lean forwards to hear. “She knew I would not leave her. It shows the depth of her love for me that she could stir herself to escape with us, against all the efforts of the venom.”

“I’m sorry,” I told him.

He shrugged, kneeling by his sister’s side.

Donarvan had remained silent and still all this while, but now I saw his stance change subtly, as someone new arrived. I knew without needing to be told that this was the one they referred to as Mother.

A sketch: she was, I suppose, a study in what Spiders would look like denied their place in the world, their Art and their craft. She looked older than any Spider I have ever seen, her face lined, her hair grey, tied back out of practicality and not fashion. She was small, too – all these Water Spider-kindens seemed to be smaller than I recalled their land-bound kin to be, or at least less imposing. The Mother stood very straight, though, and had a composure and focus that her younger wards lacked, and I think that was the real tragedy. I could see, in her, the ruin of her people’s past glories, that once they really had been lords and ladies as the Spiders I knew were.

Tarn was obviously going nowhere without Ilve, who was just as obviously going nowhere at all, and although the hurried departures were continuing all around us, there seemed just as many Spiders – I realised then that these caves must extend deeper than I had thought, given how many were suffering this tragedy of displacement.

“You are from the surface world,” the Mother remarked.

I nodded, wordlessly. Ilve made another sound, weaker than before.

“I remember, when I was young, I used to hide at the meniscus and watch the boats, such a strange, unreal world on the other side of the mirror.” She knelt down beside Tarn, one hand resting gently on Ilve’s shoulder. “How do you like our home?” she asked me.

The question robbed me of words. She seemed so calm, with her world ending all around her – no, with her world ended, long ago, and whatever her people had made of themselves devolved into lives as vermin or as slaves.

“How did it come to this?” I asked her, a question of infinite degree and yet she seemed to know what I meant.

“This? This is the far end of justice,” I was told distantly, as her real attention was on Ilve. “Once we ruled in our cities of silver, and made *them* our slaves, our clever, clever slaves, that would work at all our tasks so that we could waste our lives in admiring our own reflections. When they uncovered their secrets, all their tools and tricks and devices, we did not see, we did not understand. All the prescience in the world, wasted, because the threat was something so inimitable to prophecy. That is the story we tell, that once we were great, and cruel, even as they are great and cruel. Then they cast us off, the slaves breaking their bonds of silk – cast us off and cast us down and put us in the place we had made for them.” She looked directly at me, her eyes shocking in their matter-of-fact steadiness. “Or at least, so we tell it.”

Donarvan made a rumbling sound in his chest from behind and above me. “What use are histories if all they preserve are your defeats?”

“Perhaps we tell the story to remember that slaves need not stay slaves. Perhaps it is that we know we deserve our fate, that we brought it on ourselves. Perhaps simply to comfort ourselves, that we were not always thus. What of you, Scorpion? What do your people tell?”

“We have no histories,” he answered gruffly, “We do not live in the past. We are only the Now.”

“Then you have no future, either,” she reproached him, and for once he had nothing to say.

Then there was some commotion from nearby, echoing weirdly from the tunnel walls, and I knew we had stayed too long.

I called for Tarn, but he was holding to his sister, head bowed. Only when the Mother touched him on the shoulder did he look up. I could hear screams now, and a strange harsh crackling sound.

“She is gone,” the Mother told him simply, “and you must go too.”

Tears were running down the Spider-kindens man’s face, but he nodded. “Come then, Mother,” he said.

But she just shook her head. “This moment, I have foreseen. This is the end, for me. There will be other Mothers.”

Then the invaders appeared from a tunnel across the cavern from us.

I saw a scattering of the hunched little Boatman-kindens, and each carrying some serious-looking sort of crossbow, but behind them strode three armoured forms that, from their bulk, could only be the Beetles themselves. I was surprised that they had come to do their own dirty work but they seemed to be taking no chances. Their shells covered them from head to toe – not steel but a pearlescent substance no doubt just as hard. Their helmets were featureless, without even an eyeslit, but they strode forward surely enough.

“Go,” instructed the Mother, and she approached them with her arms wide.

I tugged at Tarn’s arm, and at last he came to himself, and he, Donarvan and I were heading for the nearest exit, the last to evacuate. I cast a look behind me as we went, and I saw the Mother face them down, those armoured fiends. For a moment, just a moment, there was all the fierce Art of a Spider-kindens in her, beating them back, cowing them with the force of her personality. Then one of them reached forwards with a slender staff he held, and I heard a sharp crack, though he had barely touched her, and her body convulsed and was thrown aside as if by an invisible hand.

After that we were running – or they ran, and I half-flew to keep up with them. We kept crossing paths with other fleeing Spiders, and soon it was apparent that the Beetles had sent men in at several entrances, though not all, and nobody was sure which way was clear. Everything was a confused, panicky mess, and we darted one way and then the other, seeking egress, until at last we pushed into a cavern that was submerged at one end, and there we found the enemy.

There were three of the Boatmen and a single Beetle, standing like an articulated statue or an automaton, still in water to his ankles. He also held one of those innocuous-looking staffs, seeming all of silvery metal, and linked to his belt by some manner of cord.

“We go through,” Donarvan snarled, and then he was hurtling forwards, arms flung out with the great hooks of his Art directed at the enemy, and to my surprise Tarn followed him. To my greater surprise, so did I.

We had a moment where they had not seen us, and we closed much of the distance. Then the Boatmen were trying to bring their crossbows to bear, but Donarvan was huge and very fast indeed, and they lost their nerve. One got a shot off, that went far wide, and then the Scorpion’s first swipe caught him up and flung him against the cave wall. The other two scattered before him, long legs skittering them out of the way. Tarn dashed past to the water, turning chest-deep to reach back for me.

Donarvan had gone for the Beetle-kinde, and I saw one great barbed fist rake into that armour, staggering the man without breaching his shell. Then the lance jabbed out – a pitiful, weak thrust that would barely have broken the skin, had the weapon been a spear.

I heard that same crack, and saw a blue flash from the staff, and then Donarvan was knocked flat, and possibly dead. I cried out and my wings flung me over to him, because I was not thinking. I heard Tarn call after me, but by then it was too late.

The staff jerked round for me, the Beetle seeing my approach as an attack. Only my nimbleness in the air saved me from the Mother’s fate. Instead I dipped beneath it, low enough to skim the water, and then one of the Boatman-kinde grappled me from the air, dragging me down.

I had a brief glimpse of Tarn staring after me, aghast, but he did the sensible thing. Before they could take him, he fled into the water, and I wished him better luck than I.

Then the Beetle was ordering the retreat, abruptly. The two Boatmen had me between them, dragging me into the water in a jacket of air, just as I had arrived. I did not realise, then, why my captors had suddenly decided to make their exit – certainly I knew it was not for any great importance attached to me.

They had me out into the open water swiftly, giving less the sense of cruel invaders so much as fugitives themselves, and at the last I thought I saw their reason. In the cave mouth we had exited from, even as I was yanked swiftly through the water by the Boatmen, I saw a figure loom. Donarvan, without a doubt, having survived the Beetle’s wand and looking little the worse for wear. And they were scared of him, without doubt. Even in my precarious position it gave me some hope.

Then a vast darkness coursed over us, and I thought at first that the Beetle-kinde had called up one of his insect namesakes as protection or transport. A moment later, however, I had identified the curved and streamlined form as a vessel of sorts – a great teardrop shape with two sculling legs and a sort of open cagework where I was stowed, and to which my

captors held fast. The entire construction felt as hard as steel, but it was of the same artificial materials as everything else the Beetles made – not wood nor bone nor shell nor hardened silk, but some man-made amalgamation of all of those. Still, it made a swift and energetic progress through the water, and I am only glad the vessel made sufficient speed that they had me back in Sclaris before my jacket of air became a stifling tomb.

The next you can probably predict, for I was most certainly bound for the cruel durance of these aquatic Beetles, who bore me all manner of ill will as thwarted jailers always will their truant charges. First, though, I was brought before Wellgrind himself. It was apparent that I had made just that much of a nuisance of myself.

The old, pallid Beetle stared at me, and I half expected the Doctor to be there as well – as though I was some naughty child being paraded before her parents. Instead, though, Wellgrind just had a pair of younger Beetle men to flank him, and a look of cool loathing on his wrinkled face.

“You, land-slave, have put me to some considerable trouble.” He sighed, surely the put-upon scholar called from his researches by trifles. “I have been deprived of some valuable research subjects on your account, and regaining you will hardly make up the loss. Whilst your vivisection may provide a novel challenge to our anatomists, I myself do not subscribe to those theories that suggest those that dwell above are materially different enough to our own slaves as to warrant such study.”

I was waiting for the deaths of Stammers and his fellow Boatman to be added to my account, but Wellgrind was already turning away, having spent quite enough of his valuable time on me, and I realised that his fallen servants were further beneath his notice than even his slaves.

I made just such a comment to my escorts as they led me away – holding tight to me with their pincering little hands. The three of them – so many to subdue one poor girl – said nothing, stony-faced and bleak, until they had found me a bubble of silk suspended taut from the wall of what was plainly a laboratory. They unseamed this with a wand, and thrust me inside, and sealed up the membrane behind me. There would be no airborne escape this time, I saw.

One of them remained behind, then, and I assumed it was to gloat, or to guard, but after the others had departed, this Boatman – *Boatwoman* as I learned – leant close in. She was as moon-faced and hunched as the others, her torso showing precious little delineation of breast or waist, but her voice was unmistakably feminine, when she spoke.

“You should not have come, overworlder,” she told me, somewhat muffled through the veil. “You aided an escape, and there is nothing that incenses the masters more than lost slaves. It enrages them beyond all reason, as you saw.”

I had seen nothing of the sort, but I realised that simply being dressed down in person by Wellgrind was evidence of the great trouble I had apparently put them to.

“I would do it again,” I declared nobly. “Where I am from, there is no slavery.”

I was fishing for a reaction, but caught something unexpected. “That must be grand,” she said sadly, almost too soft to hear. “It makes a fine story.”

“It is no mere story,” I protested. “Just ascend to the surface and you shall find it.” I did not complicate the issue with the amount of west and southward travel also necessary. I saw there would be no point in it. The mere mention of the surface had frozen her, just as it

had terrified Tarn before. Of all the horrors, that was the true tragedy of the place, that all who dwelt there were slaves of their own making, in the end, each mind effortlessly forging its own chains.

Then she started back, taking a long-legged step away, and I saw newcomers approaching. This time there were a good half-a-dozen of the Boatmen, and a Beetle man too, and in their midst a very familiar figure indeed.

“Doctor!” I could not help but cry, and he nodded and managed a weak smile and half a wave as he was brought over to examine me.

“Well there you are,” came his muted voice, and I saw that he had looked better. Certainly he had a few bruises, and for a moment I just thought that he had been on the wrong end of an experiment – not for the first time. Then he was being led past my bubble cell and into the next, a cramped prospect for him. He managed an apologetic grimace for me, as they sealed him in.

“No longer flavour of the month then, Doctor?” I asked him somewhat tartly, as I still felt aggrieved at his abandoning me before.

He turned a reproving eye on me. “Unfortunately, your own exit was somewhat to blame. When they found you gone, I’m afraid that they rather felt that I was involved, or at least responsible, as your keeper. They are an enlightened lot, in some ways, but in others they have a very narrow view of the world.” He shook his head, genuinely regretful. “They have a science here that we cannot guess at, just as a lot of our clockwork and steam power would no doubt baffle them. If they could bring themselves to meet in peace with our people – even with the Empire perhaps – then what advances might we not make together. Alas, they view all who are not of their cities with the utmost suspicion – and a vexing condescension for that matter. They would be almost as slow to learn from an outsider as they would be to teach, they hold their superiority so highly. And, as you have had cause to know, their attitude towards other kinds is less than pleasant. Above all things they are concerned with maintaining their control over their underlings, and pile cruelty upon cruelty on them, thus fomenting more discontent. I believe they probably had their Apt revolution close on ours, but matters have gone very differently here, as you see. The confining nature of the lake, some inbred insularity in the minds of all here... still, it is a sobering thought.” He raised his eyebrows philosophically, as though he were not, in fact, imprisoned and under some dreadful sentence, no doubt. “For all that, they *are* my people – I can see us in them, and we might so easily have gone the same way, had we wished to wreak a greater revenge on those who had been our masters.”

“Doctor,” I interrupted, because sometimes he does need help focusing. “I can’t help noticing that we are prisoners, and of a people whose primary diversion is vivisection. Please tell me that you have a plan.”

“I have half a plan,” he told me, a flick of his eyes searching out any listeners and finding none. “However, you will appreciate that it does not take these walls to imprison us while Sclaris remains a greater prison. We are a great ways underwater. I can only hope that the locals have constructed some manner of submersible conveyance that we might borrow, for without that I fear we might be somewhat out of options.”

My eyes lit up, I am sure. “As to that, Doctor, it so happens I was brought back to the city in just such a device, and I had some look at its workings.” In fact my memory was

running ahead of itself, skipping over some crucial details along the way, but I was too keen on escaping to think things through.

“Why then,” the Doctor mused, “we may have outstayed our welcome. I propose we leave.”

I am not engaged as an advisor to my employer, of course, but Doctor Phinagler’s frequent rash enthusiasms have taught me to add a dash of caution to the mix. I briefly outlined the obstacles: namely that we were within a city inimitable to our kinden, surrounded by hostile sadists and their creatures, and all of this parcel of joys sunk within the bowels of a lake populated by ravenous beasts. And, more immediately, we were incarcerated snugly in cells.

“Nothing will ever get done if we allow ourselves to be cowed by the enormity of the task,” the Doctor lectured me. “Instead, we break it down, as you must surely have been taught, into manageable segments. Firstly:” and he produced from within his robes a curious pale wand.

It would be unfair to claim that the Doctor is particularly light-fingered, or that he has larcenous tendencies. However, he is a man led by the nose by his whims and obsessions, under the influence of which he tends to divide the moveable goods of the world not into categories of “mine” and “theirs” but into “those things I am interested in” and “everything else.” I do not know whether anyone but myself has ever considered just how lucky the world is that his interests are so self-involved and esoteric. He would have made a terrifying merchant magnate, still more so a statesman.

The device was the mirror of those that our captors had employed to seal us up, and before I could argue for a greater interval of planning, he had sliced open his own cell, and we were committed to the venture. He freed me, and we were at large within one of Wellgrind’s laboratories.

There were no half-complete experiments or remnants left lying about, which I would have been more thankful for had I not suspected that the decks had been cleared for the next subjects, meaning us.

“We’re going to have a hard time getting anywhere in this place without being seen,” I decided.

“I would say impossible,” corrected the Doctor. “I won’t play you false, Fosse, we’re in something of a pickle. However, a little improvisation may grease the wheels.” Of course, he had been shown more of these workshops than I, and his recent conduct had led me to underestimate him again. I was pleasantly surprised when he uncovered a sort of compartment wherein protective clothing had been stowed.

“I hope you see what I intend,” he prompted, and waggled his eyebrows in a vexing manner. After a pregnant pause, he added, “You should say, ‘I have a hunch.’”

The gift of humour, I have often found, is oft misplaced amongst the Beetle-kind.

So it was that we disguised ourselves as best we could. I put on a smock too large for me, just as well, for a second such garment was wedged between my shoulder blades to better approximate the uncomfortable posture of the Boatman-kind. I am a fine mimic, so I was able to make something of their long-legged gait, my hands clutched in close to my chest like a miser in a play. Of my natural fair looks, which would never be taken for the pallid idiot-visages of the locals, a sort of mask was found, to cover my nose and mouth, presumably

intended to ward off fumes rather than for day-wear, and a sort of baggy cap to hold my hair. The Doctor himself had procured a sort of suit of armour – not the impenetrable-looking plate of the Spider-hunters, but something plainly intended to help with dangerous lab-work. It was of a thick leathery material that no doubt had arisen in some chemical vat somewhere, gleaming black, and reinforced with plates of what were recognisably common chitin – and even this tiny piece of familiar craftwork made me unbearably homesick. I was privately swearing that I would never leave Collegium again, if allowed to return.

Doctor Phinagler took up broad goggles, and a mask similar to mine. Thankfully land and lake Beetles both tended to rotund frames and fugitive hairlines, and little enough of him otherwise was visible that I hoped the rather marked difference in skin tones would be written off as the grime of the labs, given that he was plainly attired as one of those lowly sort who actually had to *work*.

“How is your memory for where these contraptions were docked?” he enquired.

My sense of direction is, as noted, impeccable, whereas his is mostly non-existent. So it was that, with me leading, we crept from the workshop. I was somewhat surprised that we found no guards immediately, but it seemed that Wellgrind had great faith in his ability to hold prisoners secure.

There followed a painstaking and throat-tightening performance, as we made our way through the least-used byways of Sclaris that I could secure, forever avoiding the locals without looking as though we were avoiding them. We were certainly spotted on a minute to minute basis, but the Boatmen and the Spider slaves paid us little mind as our makeshift disguises held, which at the time I put down entirely to my acting ability. The Doctor, unused to the cumbersome protective gear he wore, progressed by blundering, stumbling and bouncing off the walls, so that I thought any moment we might be unmasked, but then again, Beetles are not the most agile of kinden at the best of times, so perhaps this was a frequent sight in Sclaris.

Eventually, I began to feel that we were having too easy a time of it, and the Doctor explained in a low voice that we were protected in some ways by not having left Wellgrind’s estate. The various aquatic magnates of the lake were all fierce rivals, and to cross from the domain of one to another would be a gruelling task even for a local, but those already within would be accorded the benefit of the doubt. Besides, the lesser kinden were not encouraged to question their betters, and even the least of the Beetles apparently had power of life or death over the rest. That being so, there was little incentive for some nosy Boatman to denounce the Doctor for being drunk and disorderly.

Then, and sooner than I had thought, we descended to a chamber that was half-submerged, finding three separate conveyances moored there, just as I recalled. Except that by then I was beginning to think that my famous sense of direction had miscarried, and even now I wonder if we did not simply stumble on a completely different marina by way of the sort of mad luck the Doctor is so often subject to.

We surveyed our chariots, and the shortcomings in our plan were immediately clear. So obvious was the difficulty, and so totally had it been overlooked, that the two of us spent some time staring at the machines, looking for a solution that was simply not there.

“Fosse,” said the Doctor after a while, “when they carried you on these machines, how did they get you inside?”

“Well Doctor, I have to admit that they did not.” I padded over to the water’s edge. “There is some Art they have, you see, that when they enter the water, the air seems to stick to them...” And I thrust my arm in, with some vague idea that the coats of air might not have been Art at all, but some weird property of the water itself. Needless to say, it did not work for me.

“So they just popped you on top, in that sort of cage thing, did they?” The Doctor was being rigorous in exhausting the possibilities, “that, I cannot help noticing, is entirely open to the water. Which we cannot breathe.”

I confirmed concisely that this was the case.

“Well this is not optimal,” the Doctor remarked.

At that point, the others arrived. Because Beetles are, as noted, not stealthy, we heard them approach, but they were coming along our trail, and we had nowhere else to go but the water. We were at bay.

There were a good dozen of the Boatman-kind, armed with short hooked pikes, and a few with big, double-strung crossbows, and in their midst a trio of the Water Beetles – perhaps even the same trio that had first greeted us. The flanking two were in that all-over pearly mail that I remembered so unfondly, but their leader was Wellgrind, certainly, in his fine and outlandishly-styled robes. His broad face, with its long gash of a mouth and pouchy, vice-riddled eyes, had a new expression on it, that sat there awkwardly. I realised that he was amused.

“Look at you, what a paragon of ineffectual invention,” he addressed the Doctor. “What do you think you look like?” When the Doctor made vague gestures of comparison between himself and his hosts, the old man shook his head almost merrily. “Oh no, you surely do not think so? Believe me, had I not decided on this little experiment, this test of your resourcefulness, then you would have been set upon the moment you stepped from your cell. Why, you make such a grotesque assault upon the senses the very slaves would probably have attacked you out of superstitious fear. My, my, my, no, what a ludicrous show you make.”

Wrenching off goggles and mask, the Doctor revealed a highly put-upon expression. “I take offence that this treatment.”

Wellgrind shook his head, almost fond. “Ah, I had high hopes, Ludweg, that you might prove something special. Your understanding of our ways seemed so genuine. It is a shame that you have failed me like this.”

“I would submit that our difference of opinion arose only after you decided to imprison me,” the Doctor said heatedly.

“Ah no,” Wellgrind said. “Alas no, your shortcomings are more deeply rooted than that, and no point denying it. I do not know what manner of bizarre latitude your people allow within their cities, what curious laxness of discipline, what perverse ways of dealing with their slaves, but it is plain that there is a kernel of wrong-headedness at the very centre of your culture. Even the Empire of the Wasp-kind, from our studies, is not quite so deformed in its beliefs. I have only to look upon your concern for your own slave to know that something has gone drastically wrong in your culture. I am willing to bet that you have never beaten the creature in her life. I will not deny that this sentiment does not arise occasionally within my own people, but we are swift to excise such weakness. We must be

men of science, after all, and such mawkish ways of thinking will only cloud our judgment. The slaves must be kept in their place. It is the way of the world.”

“We have no slaves, where we come from,” I announced. Nobody paid me the blindest bit of notice, but I soldiered on nonetheless. “But you, you have nothing but. I see it plain now. Your Spiders are kept as slaves, and as scared and beaten as slaves can be, to keep them down. Your Boatmen are slaves still, taught to hold you in awe as though you were something more than human. And you, you yourself, Master Wellgrind, are a slave of the first order.”

At that, I had buried a hook into him deep enough to bite, and he was forced to acknowledge my existence. Doctor Phinagler was making frantic gestures at me to get me to shut up, but I kept on despite him.

“You are slaves because you are helpless without your slaves. You are reliant on them for all things, even the construction of this city itself. You must keep them terrified of you, for if they realised for a moment how weak you are, they would destroy you – and so you are a slave to your own fear. You care so much when a slave escapes because you fret night and day about your hold over them – no doubt you wake from nightmares where a single slave dares tell you ‘no’.”

The wonder of it was, a brief twitch of his face told me that I had hit it exactly with those last words – and it was not news to him. He was self-aware enough that he knew all of this, the teetering foundations his society was based on, lurching from generation to generation in a constant cycle of oppression – riding the Wasp, as the Doctor has said, because no matter how bad it is, to fall off would be worse.

“You are prisoners and slaves, all of you. You are your own jailers,” I told them all. “And you sit in your little bubble cities, in your little bubble lake, of no more consequence to the world than a fish in a tank.”

Wellgrind’s mouth was working, and I saw a little foam of spittle at the corners and wondered for a moment if apoplexy would carry him off before he could order our demise. In the end, though, he did not have the worlds to riposte. I had broken all records for insolence in Sclaris. Nobody had spoken to one of these Beetle-kinde so in living memory.

“Gah!” he got out, at last, but the Boatmen took this as an order and advanced on us, leaving us to choose between the points of their pikes and the dark water beyond.

“We will have words about which of us is best placed to engage in high-level diplomacy,” the Doctor observed tightly, as the lake lapped at our heels.

“Enough words,” came a new voice – unexpected enough that I did not recognise it at first, and then something was amongst the enemy.

I had not seen him properly at work, before. His murders had been for the most part out of sight. He was a big man, this Donarvan, and yet how swiftly, how elegantly he moved. Mantis-kinde would take notes on grace, and Wasps on ferocity, and for sheer natural armament, his landbound kin could not have matched him.

Dripping with water still – surely he had only emerged moments before our arrival, having dealt with whatever watch was posted in the waters without – he struck and struck, each blow driving his Art-grown hooks into a foe and then flinging the luckless, ruptured victim aside – the little Boatmen seeming mere toys to him. They died mostly trying to get out of his appalling reach.

One of the armoured Beetles had a staff such as they had stung him with before, but Donarvan was ready for that now – he closed swiftly and had his foe’s weapon-arm in his huge hands, lashing it about so that I saw the elbow twist entirely the wrong way, the armour plates bending out of shape, and then the staff itself smashed into the helm of the other Beetle warrior hard enough that both weapon and mail shattered. There was a percussive flash and crack, as of strange energies unexpectedly released, and the blow’s recipient was flung all the way across the chamber into the water, where he surfaced face down and lifeless. The man that Donarvan held, with his broken arm, was tossed aside with contempt.

That left Wellgrind.

I expected rhetoric. No College Master in the world would not have taken the opportunity for a scathing decial of his enemy, and a eulogy for the virtues of Collegiate philosophy. Surely Wellgrind had courage in his convictions, and would quell this insurrection with an angry word?

But it seemed that he had no courage at all. He had crumpled to the ground even though not a blow had struck him, crawling backwards on arse and elbows away from the menace of Donarvan. All I had levelled at him was shown true in that moment, and I remembered how frightened his kin had been of the Water Scorpion before, and how Tarn had hinted that the Beetles even came to arrangements with the man’s kinden. Here was no whipped slave, no brainwashed lackey. Here was freedom personified – and if it was freedom from morality as well as chains, well, in that moment I felt my heart leap all the more.

Danger is always attractive, in a man, after all. In moderation.

With one stride, Donarvan had struck, but his hook simply snagged the Beetle’s fine robe, hauling the man to his feet and then a foot further. Even then, some more of the Boatmen were crowding at the entrance, armed and fretting, but Wellgrind’s mere presence made a more than ample disincentive for rash action.

There was a scuffle, then, from one side, and I saw that a Boatman had been silently aiming one of those ugly crossbows at Donarvan, but a lithe figure had pounced on him and was now wrestling furiously – Tarn, of course. I was already in motion then, snatching up a fallen pike and taking to the air with it, but even as I descended, point first, I felt a twinge in my heart that he, too, had so overcome his nature as to come after me. Or perhaps vengeance for his sister had moved him, but I preferred the former.

I am no great fighter, but I too can be inspired, and it was clear that the Boatman was getting the better of the squabble, So it was that the wretch got the business end of the Pike in him with all the force my wings could muster, and I was even able to help Tarn to his feet.

“This is all very dramatic but what now?” came the Doctor’s voice.

“This is the creature you wanted rescuing, little one?” Donarvan demanded, still dangling Wellgrind, but nodding towards my employer. “He hardly seems worth my time.”

“We need to leave. They’ll come at us from the water soon,” Tarn snapped out.

Donarvan was backing up, Wellgrind before him like a shield, I saw several crossbows levelled amongst the watchers, but none of them dared risk their master. The dogmatic awe that had been pounded into them now worked to our advantage.

“Get them in,” the Scorpion snapped. Tarn nodded and laid hands on me, pausing a moment, with terrible wheels moving behind his eyes. Then he set me in the water up to my neck and I felt the jacket of air form about my body.

The Doctor, who did not know what to expect, submitted to the same treatment rather less willingly, but eventually we were both bobbing there, watching to see what Donarvan would do.

What he did was throw Wellgrind. The old and sagging Beetle made a surprisingly fine missile and struck into the ranks of his followers very satisfactorily. In the confusion the three of us made to go.

I counted, though, and stayed because there should have been four, and the other two stayed for me, so we saw it all.

Tarn had no intention of fleeing. He had come to that decision by the time he had readied us for the water, and perhaps my example of spear-work had set him on the course. Even as we retreated into the water, he was running. He had another of the Boatmen's pikes.

They were helping Wellgrind to his feet, his mouth open to issue a command. It never came. Tarn was already upon them. He had been moving even as Donarvan flung the Beetle away.

I saw the pike-head ram home, scarcely slowed by the heavy artificial fabric of Wellgrind's robe, however ornamented. In that moment I knew how it must have felt to be a Moth-kind lord in Collegium – Pathis as was – when the first crossbow bolt struck home amongst their people. It was a gesture, a symbol, more than it was an attack. It was the slave turning on the master. Whether he had learned such desperate courage from me, or from Donarvan, or from the dark depths of his own despair, I could not say.

Word would spread, of that I was sure. Even in trying to keep this act quiet, the Beetles would ensure that Tarn's infamy grew. The slaves would hear that one of their own had drunk the blood of their masters. Fear would temper, as the story grew, into something harder.

They killed him, of course. In a frenzy they killed Tarn, set about him with weapons and the butts of crossbows, with their crabbed little fists and their overlarge feet, and all the while Wellgrind was squealing like a child, his artificer's hands flapping madly at the bulging, red-slick mound where his insides had split under his robe – a breakage that neither our nor his artifice could mend.

Then crossbow bolts began lashing the water, and Donarvan grabbed the Doctor and me, and kicked out into the lake.

I thought there would be some cave, some temporary shelter. I thought that he would be afraid, as they were all afraid, a prisoner of Lake Limnia. Donarvan was a man who scoffed at barriers and boundaries, though. He had been taken once by the Beetles, because of that utter lack of fear and respect. Now he shouldered aside the very edges of his world. He brought us up, swimming swift and sure despite the burden that was all we were, and though our air grew stale, and I confess I felt a little unprofessional panic towards the end, we broke the surface unexpectedly, into the blessed, blessed rain of Limnia above.

It was night – we would have seen the growing light otherwise. There was, of course, no sign of the raft, the Empire, Jons Collier. Even Jerez was absent – Limnia is huge, after all, and the Skater-kind can only despoil one small part of its shore at any given time.

We made the water's edge with Donarvan's help, and the three of us lay there for some while, soaking wet, and getting no drier, exhausted mentally and physically. I think the Doctor went to sleep – he always did have the knack, no matter what. For myself, I huddled

close to Donarvan, feeling the hard contours of his muscles, leaching at the warmth of him. His arm, when he curled it about me, was as large as my whole body.

In the morning he was gone, slipped back into the lake that was his domain. He had stayed beneath the stars with me, though, and I think he had done so to show that not all the denizens of Limnia were afraid of the open sky.

We found Jerez after some stumbling along the lakeshore, and turned up cold and hungry and very weary indeed in the Imperial garrison. Our reappearance prompted some general rejoicing. Hermon and te Sander were both glad to see us, but perhaps Jons Collier was most so, if only because he had been held in the garrison cells under suspicion of having something to do with our vanishing. He took the loss of his invention philosophically.

The Doctor and I spoke for some time, in the Imperial infirmary, about precisely what we should say. As far as we knew, the world at large was entirely ignorant about what lay within Limnia – and the ferocity with which the aquatic Beetles guarded their knowledge suggested to us that we should leave the lake's vicinity as swiftly as possible, before any possible reprisals. We both had the uneasy feeling that the lake's masters would be more than capable of striking into Jerez – even into the Imperial garrison itself.

What could be done, what should be done, or if anything should be done, that was the subject of our talk. The world below was one of subjugation and cruelty, but then the world above was not noticeably lacking in such commodities, whether within the Empire or beyond. Even Doctor Phinagler, who does so see the best in everything (mostly from wilful blindness) was forced to admit to that.

In the end it was decided that the Doctor would present a formal paper to the College, detailing our findings. He really did have very firm intentions on this point. This would be the discovery that made his name and rocked the Collegiate view of the world. We would be a wine and dine talking point for years to come.

Of course, when we did finally return to Collegium – and somewhat delayed for certain other escapades that befell us on the way – the Doctor's enemies within the College turned out to have gained rather more influence than he had expected, and his face was decidedly unwelcome despite his best efforts – he who could talk amiably with bandits, lakemen and Imperial bureaucrats. His hopes of a formal presentation were dashed, and instead certain historical matters concerning debts, unpaid dues and unwise and defamatory comments were given much airing. Only such shameful treatment at the hands of his peers would have reduced him to the level of publishing to the city at large in such a lowly format such as this, and it is with a grim heart that he acknowledges that, whilst such an imprint may yet provide him with some modicum of funding for his next expedition, it will nonetheless cast a suspect veil over the veracity of what I write here.

Nonetheless, every word is true, and you may go into Lake Limnia yourself and assay the weight of my words for yourself, though of course if you do, you may find the return journey rather more challenging.