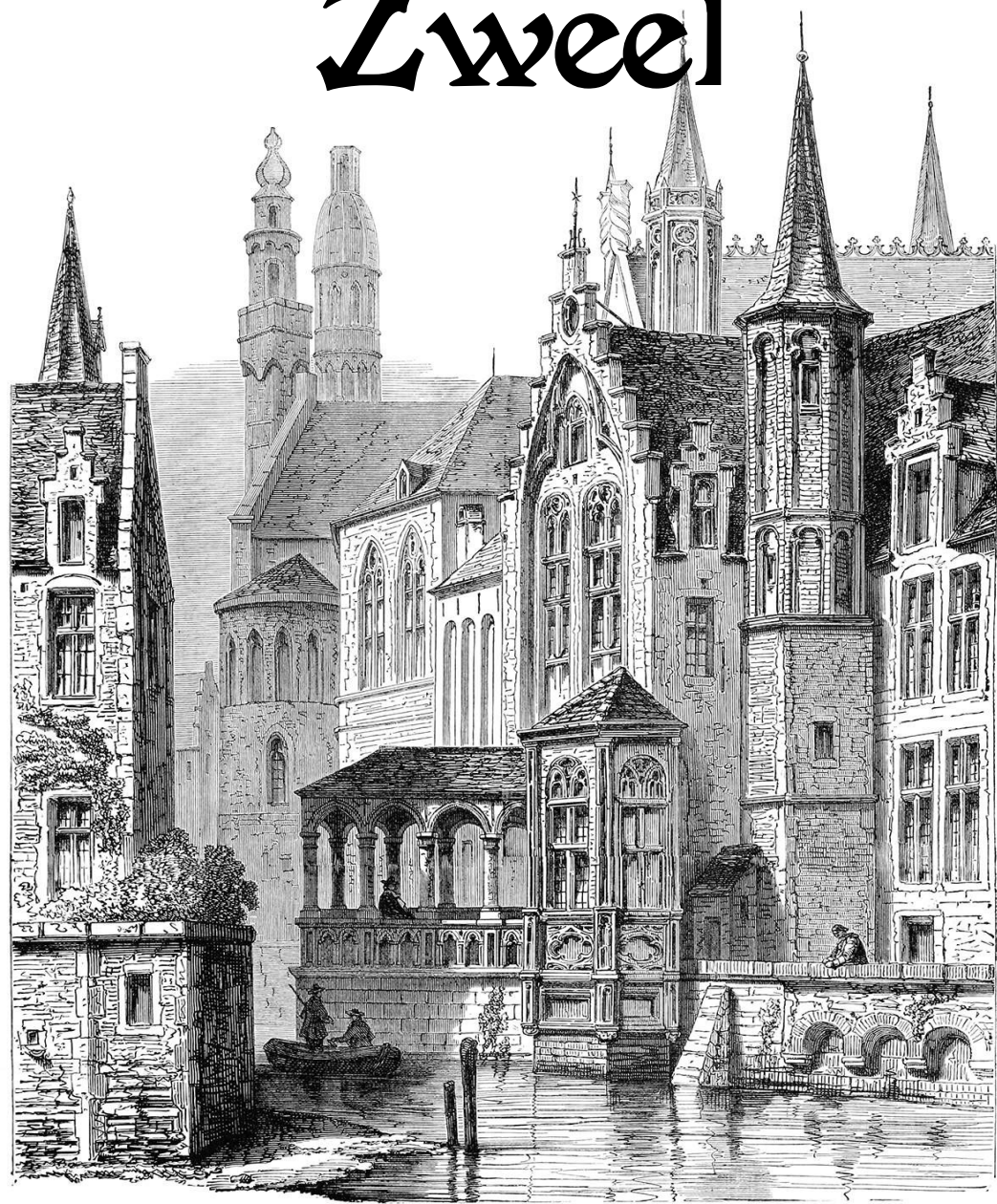


The Ilium of Zweel



a tale of skulduggery by Quentin Dodd

The Ilium of Zweel

The mansion of Belthin Oglar, rising above a walled garden at the end of an avenue, was dark. Belthin, like many men of his age, wealth, and carnal disposition, was attending the Masque of Apolonius this evening, where the wealthiest families presented their daughters for entry into the social season. His servants had been given the evening off, in the pragmatic recognition that most of them would have deserted their posts anyway. Belthin, therefore, chose to make himself seem magnanimous rather than fight against inevitability. Because of this, however, there was no one to notice the dark figure that slipped over the wall several minutes after midnight and slithered up the drainpipe to reach a loose window on the second story.

Garachnik pushed the window open and swung a lean leg over the ledge, then disappeared inside, taking care to avoid disturbing the vase of flowers adorning the table before the window. He stood at the end of a wide hallway with doors arrayed on either side, disappearing into the gloom ahead of him. The silence in the mansion was absolute. Garachnik permitted himself a thin smile of satisfaction. So far, everything had proceeded according to plan. Belthin's great hounds had eaten the drugged meat he had thrown over the wall, and the window had been unlocked just as Rocciano had assured him.

When Roccano had approached Garachnik two days previous, it had very nearly been the last action of the fat man's life. He had surprised Garachnik at the mouth of an alley, where Garachnik was hurriedly disentangling himself from the fuchsia robes as worn by the priests of the Temple of Larich. The priests had been parading the ikon of Larich through the streets, as was their annual custom, and through various strategies Garachnik had contrived to separate a rosewood coffer, with an oblong coin-slot in its lid, from its rightful custodian. Having secured this object, he let himself drift to the perimeter of the chanting throng, and from there into an unguarded byway, where he quickly discovered that the casket contained not the offerings of a devout crowd, as he had hoped, but rather assorted bits of broken metal, two copper farthings, and several gnawed mutton bones.

"Fortune has displayed her hindquarters to both of us today," Roccano said, startling Garachnik. "I have arrived too late to watch the procession, and you have discovered that the priests of Larich are addicted to decoys and misdirections."

Garachnik's hand strayed toward his dagger, and he mentally calculated the difficulty of slipping out of his robe and springing at the heavysset man in the fur-trimmed jacket and particolored hose.

"Be at peace, friend." Roccano raised his hands in a gesture of goodwill. "When a man catches no fish, he has no cause to fear that another will steal his catch."

“Still, though, an uninformed observer might easily misinterpret my activities and raise a cry of attempted robbery. Results or no results, agents of the law frown on this behavior.”

“True enough, but I am no ignorant bumpkin. I, Roccano of Telpas, am a man with work available for someone with audacity and dexterity, both of which you seem to possess. Tell me, are you thirsty?”

Several minutes later they sat in a nook of a nearby inn, with passerby in the street outside forming indistinct shadows through the panes of mauve glass.

“There you are,” said Roccano as the serving wench set down two foaming tankards and a bowl of roasted snap-beans. After a polite exchange on small topics, Roccano broached his subject.

“Are you familiar with Tothmac Zweel? No? Well, that is unfortunate but not unexpected. One man’s consuming passion is another man’s dusty footnote.”

“If that,” added Garachnik, who had never heard the name in his life.

“Tothmac Zweel was a sorcerer of thunderous erudition, the author of numerous librams and the creator of magical formulae of great delicacy and style. In this current age, he is little recognized outside of a circle of connoisseurs, but ‘Zweel’s Recurring Ratio’ is a computational aid still relied upon by many practitioners, and we owe the efficacy of the spell against biting insects largely to Zweel’s research. In ages past, he dwelt

in an extensive compound by the Sea of Yark, with his household retinue, his noble wife, and three daughters, each surpassed in beauty only by the others. Sadly, though, a generation after his death, his manse was overrun by a free company of bandits, and his stored possessions scattered.”

“Such is the way of the world,” said Garachnik.

“However, there remain a handful of dedicated enthusiasts who venerate the memory of the great sage, and I count myself as not the least in that company. We gather each year to read from his great work, *The Clarified Sunlight of Wisdom*, on the fifth day of the month of the horse, which is commonly accepted by reputable scholars as the anniversary of Zweel’s birth. In addition, many of us collect historical objects connected to the great man and his life. It is a difficult undertaking. You would hardly believe the amounts of time and coin I have spent in efforts to verify the provenance of items in my collection.”

“Forgery and misrepresentation must be constant worries.”

Roccano drank deeply. “You understand me completely,” he said with approval. “In many cases, it is easier to buy from other collectors rather than go through the effort of verifying authenticity on one’s own. The only difficulty is that some of my fellow devotees often charge exorbitant rates for their items, effectively putting them out of the reach of an honest man.”

Garachnik began to see the path unfolding before him. “Men who horde treasures such as that are no better than thieves.”

“Your words are more precise than you know. They lead me to the meat of our discussion, which is this: The man Belthin Oglar, a hoarder of treasure, a keeper of knowledge from the eyes of scholars, has recently chiseled me out of the rarest of all finds, the ilium bone of Zweel himself! A tomb-robber discovered this priceless fragment among the ruins of the ancient necropolis near Phandrall’s castle, and made a deal with me to sell it for a reasonable fee. Oglar, through some nefarious mechanism, learned of the agreement and arrived at the appointed place fifteen minutes before me. He proceeded to offer a ridiculously high sum that overcame the tomb robber’s scruples.

“A man like that has no right to profit from such perfidy.”

“Again, your thoughts run in parallel to mine. Tell me, are you willing to earn a handsome fee for an adventure of minimal danger?”

From there, terms were negotiated, details provided, and a bargain was made. Garachnik would burgle Oglar’s mansion on a day when Roccano could guarantee that the man would be out. He would retrieve the unethically obtained bone, along with any other portable artifacts of Tothmac Zweel that he might encounter. For this, Roccano provided Garachnik a list of items, carefully numerated in order of desirability. Of more material assistance was a copy of the key to Tothmac’s library, which Roccano had obtained by lavishly bribing a servant girl on Oglar’s staff, who had private reasons to wish ill of her employer.

Garachnik turned the key in the lock, which moved with well-oiled smoothness, and stepped into the library. It was a large room, and more than did justice to Roccano's grudgingly admiring description. Shelves of foliated woodwork held books of various dimensions and bindings. Between two rows of volumes identically bound in mossy green animal hide were a selection of miniature folios in a doll-sized bookcase of their own. Arranged throughout the room, so that at least some were visible no matter what direction the visitor turned, stood pedestals of white stone, each one displaying a prize from Oglar's collection. None had labels, which Garachnik assumed was to allow Oglar the opportunity to dissemble at length about each piece's provenance and function. An unaccompanied caller, however, was left to wonder about the fragmentary stylus, the half-burned branch, the leather belt, the arrangement of mummified bees on a framework of fine gold wire, and all the other objects displayed under transparent bells.

Roccano had been unfortunately vague on the location of Zweel's ilium, and Garachnik suddenly realized he had no clear idea of what the item even looked like. Roccano, who could see the object so clearly in his mind, had forgotten that his confidant might not know what it was, and Garachnik had neglected to ask.

"No matter," Garachnik said to himself. "An object of such value must surely be displayed in a place of prominence here in Oglar's lair. There would be no need to hide it. Therefore, all I

have to do is search.” The windows were covered with heavy drapes, so Garachnik gave up fumbling in the dimness and struck a light.

The little flame cast nervous shadows around the room, and in a moment Garachnik discovered the object of his quest. The bone was in a small shrine in the corner of the room, resting on one of the white pedestals and before a rug of maroon and gold undulating patterns. The ilium, a dish-shaped fragment of bone mounted on a crystal support, was flanked by objects on either side of the glass box: a two-pronged fork with inlaid niello highlights, and a goblet made of jade. Carefully, alert for tripwires and the sounds of mechanical triggers, Garachnik eased open the glass doors of the shrine. Roccano had mentioned neither the goblet nor the inlaid fork, but both looked valuable to Garachnik’s practiced eye, and he slipped them into his pouch. Doubtless, they would fetch a substantial price to supplement Roccano’s fee. Besides, the theft of several unrelated objects would throw off suspicions about the motives behind the theft. Drying his fingers on his shirt, Garachnik reached for the ilium.

“I would refrain from that, if our positions were reversed.”

Garachnik leapt backward, flattening himself against the bookshelf and holding his light high. The door was closed and the windows remained curtained. He was alone with Oglar’s accumulated curios. Who had spoken?

“I detect puzzlement,” said the voice. “Allow me to explain.”

The voice had come from a nearby pedestal, where sat a cage of twisted wires formed to resemble an expansive country house. Garachnik perceived movement within. Moving closer, he saw a miniature leopard, hardly bigger than his hand, pacing back and forth behind the bars, watching him closely.

“My name is Garl Brosvan, Duke of Rampanat, Marquess of Toronia, and heir to the Earldom of Vix. Not long ago I was captured by my enemies and transformed into the creature you see before you, and sold to Belthin Oglar as a curiosity. The bone you were about to steal is Oglar’s prized possession, and is protected by a cunning snare. Free me and I will instruct you on how to disable it.”

Garachnik considered the tiny beast. Malignant sorcery could certainly produce effects like this, and stories abounded of virtuous nobles transformed into base creatures. However, Garachnik was well aware that things were rarely as they seemed.

“I appreciate your offer of help,” Garachnik said, “but I notice the corners of your enclosure have been marked with the red sign of Ragh, which is often used as a protective device against harmful entities.”

“Exactly so. You are a man of sharp observation, and not a common criminal,” the leopard said. “The red sign of Ragh is proof against many kinds of magic, which is why Oglar affixed it to my prison. This prevents my supporters from issuing restorative magic at a distance, thereby depriving Oglar of a fascinating curio and exposing him to my just wrath.”

“Malign creatures, desperate to escape their captivity, will often prey upon the kindness of strangers. Can you offer surety that what you say is true?”

“I offer you my word as a gentleman.”

“It must be noted that you are not, in fact, a gentleman at this moment, if indeed you ever were one. You are a miniature leopard.”

Garl Brosvan lashed his tail in irritation. “In the castle of Goetis, taking the south stairs up from the great hall, the second door on the second floor leads to the chapel. Six paces from the altar stone is a loose flag in the floor. Lever up that flag and you will find the great seal stones of the Duchy of Rampanat. How could I know this if I were not Garl Brosvan himself?”

“I have no knowledge of Goetis. Your entire statement could be a falsehood.”

“True enough. But the wise man knows when to act decisively, led by the good guidance of his own judgment. Free me and you will know the fullest expanse of a duke’s gratitude.”

Garachnik stood for a moment, considering the tiny creature in its cage. “Many men of sorcerous bent employ guardian beasts to protect their treasures. It is foolish to imagine them all to be hulking monsters who live only to rend and tear. Even more dangerous is the beast who guards with honeyed words and sophistic reasoning. I reject your entire story as untrue,” he said, and lifted the ilium of Zweel from its holder.

The rug on which Garachnik stood swung downward, dropping Garachnik into a slippery-sided shaft. He fell, tumbling wildly, down the long chute, then through a brief interlude of wider space, and landed in a pit of scummy water, followed almost immediately by the contents of the shrine, which he had swept off of its plinth in a reflexive effort to arrest his fall. They landed in the water to his left and right with heavy splashes, after first bouncing off of Garachnik's head.

He wasted little time in bemoaning his situation. Instead, he dove repeatedly under the surface of the water, which filled the pit to the level of his chest. The metal fork he located quickly, and counted himself lucky that its tines hadn't embedded themselves in his flesh when it fell. The jade goblet had been smashed, and Garachnik discarded the fragments, pocketing the gems and antique cameos that had decorated the outer surface. The ilium of Zweel was more difficult to find, as it had become mixed in with the pre-existing layer of bones that littered the floor of the flooded pit and whose origins Garachnik cared not to contemplate. He had only just recovered the artifact when the sounds of unorthodox movement, as of an enormous, sinuous thing forcing its way through a narrow passage, came to his ears.

Garachnik froze. There were many explanations for a sound of such nature. He had clearly fallen to a point below the level of the street outside, so an aqueduct pipe may have been the source. A heavily-laden cart on the street above him could have also produced a similar noise. Any number of innocuous explanations were possible. Then a section of the mossy stone wall slid inward and a choking scent of ammonia added itself to

the combination of stagnant water and slime. By this point, Garachnik's eyesight had adapted to the near-darkness, but he was surprised to see a dim glow radiating out from the cavity exposed by the sliding panel. In addition, he could now detect a wet sloshing sound, as if an immense amount of damp sailcloth were being pushed into a pile. Forewarned by these sights and sounds, Garachnik was not wholly surprised when the creature hove into view, but could still not avoid a grunt of dismay. The thing on the lip of the opening glistened with slime, and was rubbery and flat, folded back and forth upon itself like a ribbon. Rows of pores perforated its edges, and large nodules, each the size of a fist, dotted the monster's hide in a seemingly random pattern. Garachnik had no idea if the nodules were eggs, sensory organs, or esoteric objects of decoration.

Garachnik had flattened himself against the opposite wall of the pit, but soon realized that he stood in the most likely path of the thing's spring. He edged sideways, but was dismayed to see that the creature adjusted its perch as he moved, maintaining a direct line from its coiled center of mass to Garachnik himself. The possibility of this hideous form housing sentience was unlikely, but Garachnik was in no position to leave any avenues unexplored.

"I greet you, glowing beast," he said, forcing anxiety out of his voice and assuming a tone of casual friendship. "There are scraps of bread and cheese, which I was saving for a snack, in my pouch, and you are welcome to share them with me. Or, for that matter, to eat them all."

The monster paused, and for an instant Garachnik allowed himself the thought that it might be considering his offer. Then it pounced.

It expanded and flattened as it propelled itself through the air, enveloping Garachnik like a blanket of blubbery muscle. Where the creature's hide touched exposed flesh, Garachnik felt a stinging sensation, which was a minor irritation compared to the near-total lack of air. Frantic struggles succeeded only in tightening the monster's grip on him, but he was able to rotate his arm with difficulty and provide a more advantageous angle for the two-pronged fork he still clutched in one fist. His first and second stabs with the utensil did little besides puncture the monster's skin, with minimal effect. The third, though, struck one of the glowing nodes. The monster reared back from Garachnik's head, providing not only greatly desired air, but also revealing the location of several other glowing nodes. These he attempted to pierce with his fork as well, taking advantage of the creature's conflicting desires to both protect itself and destroy its assailant.

Eventually, the creature's grip lessened, but Garachnik urgently thrust the fork into any of the glowing nodes he could see. The creature made a sound like water gushing out of a slit wine-skin and began to deflate. Soon, it was nothing more than a thin substance that covered half the surface of the pool, slowly sinking as the remainder of the glowing nodes faded into opacity. Once Garachnik was convinced that the creature was truly dead, and not simply lulling him into position for a final lunge, he leaned, panting against the side of the pit and studied his makeshift weapon. It still glowed with traces of the greenish-

yellow ichor, but the tines had begun to corrode and bend. He threw the fork away and quickly washed himself with the scummy water. Soon he could detect a stinging sensation everywhere, and became concerned the noxious fluid contained in the creature's integument had leached into the water during their combat, rendering the entire pool contaminated.

"Ho there!" said a voice from the lip of the pit. "Beast, are you through with your dinner? You make noise enough for ten. Did this evening's meal not agree with you? Do you require a bucket of slop to settle your digestion?"

"Be so good as to cast down a rope," Garachnik called. "Or better still, a ladder, if one is handy. I have been propelled into this pit by mistake."

The outline of a hooded head and shoulders leaned over to look down at him. "Where is the beast?" the newcomer asked.

"I do not know, and I do not care to find out. Please help me up." The creature's carcass had not yet floated to the surface of the water, and Garachnik was unsure of its relationship to the man above him. In such a situation, it was prudent to dissemble.

The newcomer hesitated. "Those who come to reside in Belthin Oglar's pit tend to do so for very good reasons. Or, at least, reasons that make sense to Belthin Oglar, which amount to the same thing. If you have not encountered the beast yet, I advise patience. It will introduce itself in good time."

“No doubt this is true, and I agree with you on the wisdom of Belthin Oglar’s judgment. The fact remains, though, that I stand in this foul water through no fault of my own.”

“You will excuse my apparent cynicism, but I have heard that claim many times before now.”

Garachnik assumed an attitude of hard-pressed dignity. “I am Garachnik, Belthin Oglar’s new majordomo. Today was the day I began my duties, and as I made myself familiar with the geography of the mansion, I must have inadvertently activated one of Oglar’s prudent and necessary guards against pilferage. Now I repeat my request: Please extract me from this pit at once.”

The hooded figure stroked his chin. “I was not informed as to any change in the domestic staffing.”

“Is it likely that such a hiring would be announced to the man who skulks in basements and feeds slop to a beast?”

The figure sighed. “There is an uncomfortable amount of truth in such a statement. Stand back while I drop the rope.” A moment later, the end of a thick cable hit the water beside Garachnik, and he climbed up using the spaced knots. The pit sat in the center of a brick basement with a vaulted ceiling. Overhead, several portals opened into darkness, each angled so that anyone falling through them would drop directly into the pit. Garachnik assumed they all corresponded to locations in Oglar’s residence that required special protection.

The hooded figure, gathering the knotted cable and looping it around a stone pylon, noticed Garachnik's attention. "Your new master has various treasures of exceptional value, and I believe he enjoys this particular method of intercepting would-be thieves." The figure turned to face Garachnik at last. He had sallow skin, a nose shaped like a root vegetable, and an over-endowment of teeth, several of which had been filed into points. "My name is Fanarv," he said, lowering his hood. "Since I will now be working under your command, in what way would you care to be addressed?"

"Informality suits me best. You may simply call me Garachnik. I find that familiarity between those in the same service fosters an attitude of cooperation and shared responsibility."

"This will be quite a change from the previous regime. Until now, I was often chastised for even making myself visible to the higher grades of domestic staff."

"No longer," Garachnik assured him. "While I manage this household, you are free to move about as your job requires." He looked down at his dripping clothes. Exposure to the air was beginning to mute the stinging sensation, but in the creases and hollows of his attire there remained a subtle phosphorescence that Fanarv might recognize with suspicion. "This is no way for a man of my station to appear, and my luggage has not yet arrived from my previous situation. Could you direct me to the nearest exit, so that I may purchase something suitable to wear?"

“With pleasure. The corridor to your left connects eventually to the storage room beside the main foyer. Follow me, and I will show you the way.”

Garachnik balked. “I have no wish to disturb Oglar’s visitors by exiting through the main foyer. A modest service entrance would be more acceptable, especially in my current sodden state.”

“Think nothing of it. The house is empty, and no one is slated to return until the small hours of the morning. In fact, I planned to take advantage of their absence to perform several cleaning tasks on the ground floor. If we take the corridor on the left, as I suggested, I will be able to retrieve the flask of cleaning compound before we return. I was searching for it when I heard sounds of thrashing from the pit, and now I recall its location.”

Garachnik followed cautiously behind Fanarv, who paused in an alcove and removed a stoppered earthenware jug from a shelf. He then opened the jug and poured a large measure into a pail, which he took with him as they continued up the corridor.

“This works exceptionally well on stonework.” Fanarv indicated the bilious liquid in the pail. “No doubt you remarked on the exceptional brightness of the colonnade when you entered.”

“Alas, it was too dark for me to appreciate it fully.”

“In any event, this compound is unsurpassed as a cleaner of difficult surfaces. The only flaw in the formula is that it reacts

aggressively to fire, and must therefore be stored in the basement, where the potential for mischance is minimized.”

“The smell leaves something to be desired, as well.”

“True indeed. The staff prefers that I mix in lilac oil if I plan to use the compound where the ventilation is poor.”

“A wise course of action.”

The acrid vapors from the liquid, while wholly unpleasant, masked the pungent reek from Garachnik’s own clothes. This provided the benefit of novelty, and also prevented Fanarv from speculating on the reek’s ultimate source. Fanarv continued his discourse as they walked, giving his opinions on the state of the household’s management, and where a new and diligent majordomo might direct his attention to best advantage. They climbed a spiral stair up into darkness, where Fanarv, working by feel, manipulated a catch and opened a concealed door leading to the foyer. Fanarv spoke about how the concealed passages made the duties of the servants easier, but Garachnik had ceased to listen. The opulence of the foyer had arrested the entirety of his attention. The floor was a tessellation of various shades of porphyry. Tapestries, heavy with age and depicting lusty mythologic scenes, hung from crystal hooks in the shape of claws. Bibelots of gold and ivory decorated a pair of marble-topped tables, placed so that guests could admire them while their companions adjusted their garments in the tall mirror before proceeding to the salon. The bibelots, easily pocketable and of unquestionable value, held Garachnik’s attention.

“Thank you for your kind assistance,” Garachnik said once Fanarv reached a pause in his monologue. “I believe I can see myself out from here, and I have no desire to delay you from your duties.” Garachnik made an effort at straightening his collar, which the coating of ichor seemed to have permanently disfigured. “Please continue on, confident that your diligence has not gone unnoticed.”

Fanarv set down the bucket. “As luck would have it, my current assignment is right here, so—”

The arched front door swung open, revealing a handful of figures in silhouette, who entered with an air of professional efficiency. The party consisted of two linkboys in the livery of Oglar’s household and each carrying a night-lantern, as well as a pair of men-at-arms similarly attired, bearing quarter-pikes and daggers. Between them was a man of middle years in sumptuous burgundy and gold, with an ostentatious belt buckle of serpentine design. His narrow shoulders and expansive hips were not fully concealed by the cut of his clothes. His saturnine face wore an expression of disdain at the sight of Garachnik and Fanarv, as if unexpectedly discovering an insect leg in his custard.

Fanarv dropped to one knee. “Master, your new majordomo has arrived. I have been acquainting him with the unique features of the house.”

Nonplussed, Belthin Oglar scanned the room, as if in search of the subject of Fanarv’s words. Within a moment, he was compelled to realize that the menial was describing the glum,

sodden individual on his left, who was surreptitiously studying the two guards and gauging their potential reactions to unexpected events.

“What nonsense is this?” demanded Oglar in a voice like a disapproving shorebird. “A new majordomo? Upon whose authority? Not my own, certainly. Has Vrill given his notice? Where is Vrill? Summon Vrill at once!”

“Your grace,” said Garachnik, stepping into a courtly bow. “I think I may be able to offer an explanation.”

At that moment, Garachnik’s pouch, heavy with the water it had absorbed, and its fabric fatally compromised by the ichor of the creature in the pit, split open at the seams. The ilium bone of Tothmac Zweel, in addition to several antique gems and shards from the jade cup, clattered onto the tile floor.

There was a frozen instant as Oglar recognized the pilfered treasures and his servants waited on him to gather enough breath to issue orders. Garachnik, however, needed little time to grasp the comprehensive failure of his endeavor and the subsequent shifting of priorities. He seized a night-lantern from an astonished linkboy, pulled out the candle, and tossed it into the bucket of cleaning compound that Fanarv had set down.

The resultant fireball was not only large enough to provide a distraction, but also spread rapidly from its container, thus ensuring that Oglar’s household would be more attentive to putting out the blaze than to any thoughts of pursuing a housebreaker. Slippery as an eel, Garachnik sidestepped the guards and ran outside, down the marble steps, and into the

street. An observer, had there been one, would have seen him illuminated in the weird glow of the expanding fire, racing in the opposite direction of his rendezvous with Roccano of Telpas.



QuentinDodd.com

