

# Chancellor Witt

by Susan R. Matthews, 1952–

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## Author's Note

*Into each well-regulated novel some material may fall that must be excised, in the end, as a non-load-bearing plot element (how I wish I'd made up that phrase!). My upcoming novel Crimes Against Humanity, as first drafted, originally spent more time noodling around in the capital city of Haspirzak Judiciary than was maybe strictly necessary before getting on with the business of the novel, but I had great fun with it.*

*The following self-contained story is one of Bench Specialists—Jils Ivers, Karol Vogel, and Irenja Rafenkel, top-level operatives with powers of “extraordinary discretion” Jurisdiction-wide, answerable to eight Judges and eight Judges only—putting their long-term schemes for Gonebeyond Space*

*forward, and coincidentally shaping a significant element of the story to come in Crimes Against Humanity.*

*Cutting the material from the to-be-published novel forced a minor change in one detail, so when you read Crimes Against Humanity you may notice a single, minor continuity glitch. I hope you won't mind!*

Bench Intelligence Specialist Jils Ivers stood at the tall clearwalls running the length of one of the Third Judge's best conference rooms, hands clasped behind her back, gazing out across the great Gelisar Gardens—the pride of the capital of Haspirzak Judiciary, famous throughout Jurisdiction space for their beauty and the ever-changing delights of their green lanes and grand vistas. Admiring the view.

Behind her she could hear Karol Vogel and Irenja Rafenkel, he enjoying a moment of modest satisfaction in his accomplishment, she apparently unable to stem a spontaneous response to a plate of traditional Aznir pastries. “Holy Mother,” Rafenkel was saying. “These sloeplum knots, Vogel, they almost fall apart if you just breathe on them, and where did you learn to make the filling in these buns? How did you even get the fruit to travel?”

The Gelisar Gardens were supported out of the Third Judge's personal budget, municipal funds, and heritage garden societies all over Haspirzak Judiciary. They wouldn't starve in the new regime. Unlike the Jurisdiction's immense and expensive Fleet, they were a prized possession of Haspirzak, not a costly and unwelcome burden that was now increasingly marginalized.

It had been almost three years since a convocation of Bench specialists had failed to select a new First Judge to govern all nine Judiciaries under Jurisdiction. Maybe Jurisdiction had simply reached an endpoint in its natural evolution; Jurisdiction space was a confederacy, now, nine Judiciaries, nine Bench governments, with their own challenges to meet and order to keep, and none of them eager to spend their funds on maintaining a Fleet that no longer had a mission that would justify its size and cost.

“You like?” Karol teased gently. “I still don't trust anybody from the Dolgorukij Combine any further than I can sneeze. But I do like their pastry. Remember your Cousin Waclav? He taught me everything I know about old-fashioned Dolgorukij bakery.”

*Your cousin Waclav*, Karol said. Jils turned away from the window to take in the unusual picture of two Bench intelligence specialists—two of the highest-level operatives under Jurisdiction, troubleshooters with powers of extraordinary discretion to assassinate or liberate, to topple governments or direct Fleet resources where and how they saw fit, on their plain word alone—with their heads bent over a small bun on a white napkin.

Karol's explicit language confirmed a rumor that had long circulated about Irenja Rafenkel: that she represented in her person the nexus between the Bench intelligence specialists dedicated to life-long service of the rule of Law and the Judicial order; and the Malcontents, the secret service of the Dolgorukij church, slaves of the Saint. Jils watched for a moment or two, amused. She'd known Karol

Vogel better than many of her fellow Bench specialists, over the years; and still he surprised her.

“Do you think SONDARKIT’s Inquisitor will buy in, that Pefisct character?” she asked, finally, hoping to distract Rafenkel while there were pastries left for Jils to sample. Taking up one last dainty—a bit of cake, fruit topping, translucent slices of something’s rich crimson flesh curled into an artful flower with stem and leaves of green something—Rafenkel sat down and drew her flask of rhyti toward her, glancing from Vogel to Jils and back again as if to say your turn.

Jils hadn’t met another female Malcontent that she knew of: but she’d never particularly had her eye out for any, or for Malcontents at all, unless she had a Bench concern of immediate criticality involving the Dolgorukij Combine in some way. Or Combine nationals. Like Andrej Koscuisko, for instance.

First Secretary Sindha Verlaine had commended Koscuisko to Jils’ attention years ago; but even had Verlaine not, Koscuisko would have brought himself to her attention when he’d cried failure of Writ at the Domitt Prison. That decidedly autocratic move—and the regrettably public scandal that had resulted—had brought Koscuisko to everybody’s attention.

“I have my doubts about that one.” Karol had a pressure flask of bean tea, the particularly thick preparation of superhot extraction he apparently preferred of late. “Some of Fleet’s Inquisitors, they’re really fairly ordinary people, happy to get clear of the whole thing.” Jils had tried Vogel’s bean tea. Vespilta-style. Spicy. “Or, not happy, but willing to put the life behind them. Dr. Pefisct, though, there are indicators in his personal files I’m not sure I care for.”

Bench specialists acquired nicknames, sometimes to shield themselves behind a constructed identity, sometimes for use amongst themselves. Now, for a specific self-assigned purpose, Karol had become the Recruiter, and his mission was to offer displaced Judicial torturers new lives in Gonebeyond space, where they were desperate for doctors.

“When will you make the pitch?” Rafenkel asked. Jils took a corner of the cake. It was as tender as a fine-crumb loaf, and not much sweeter; jam and bread at base, but raised to a remarkable level of delicacy. It was almost enough to inspire Jils to consider learning how to cook. Almost.

“Jils is taking me to a party, three days. Catered by the hotel I’m working at, so, easy in. I’ve heard about Witt’s parties. Should be a good one.”

Judicial torturers were very highly-paid specialists. Fleet and the Bench alike agreed that the most efficient torturers operated from a basic grounding in medical practice, and it was hard to recruit licensed physicians to do the job without significant inducements. Koscuisko had been an aberration in that, as in so many other things. He’d never needed the money, and could have had a plum job at a prestigious hospital.

But Koscuisko was beside the point. The point was that the Third Judge at Haspirzak Judiciary—Nantik Parline—had never liked the entire Judicial program of torture as an instrument of State, terror directed against its own people as an increasingly ineffective means of social control.

It was a very expensive program, as well; partly because of the time and trouble it took to create the bond-involuntary Security slaves that were sentenced to serve the Ship’s Inquisitor, and partly because a Judicial torturer was granted the titles

and privileges—and salary—of a warship’s Chief Medical Officer, whether they were very good doctors or not.

“Oh. *Witt*,” Rafenkel said, rolling her eyes. “I keep waiting for some incriminating evidence on his activities to come out of the interrogatories, at Canopy Base. Nothing yet. But I live in hope.”

Jils understood. Canopy Base was where the Dolgorukij terrorist society organization, the Angel of Destruction—“to speak the name of which is as to spit,” Rafenkel had told her—had made its headquarters in Gonebeyond space, and started its campaign of bloody expansion. The Malcontent, the secret service of the Dolgorukij church, had captured and quarantined the Angel’s entire headquarters element there. There was a major effort going on to debrief all parties, and exploit the data they acquired.

Canopy Base was in the Langsarik octant of the no-man’s-land of Gonebeyond space, where Karol Vogel was trying to form a tenth Judiciary. That was why Karol was recruiting Inquisitors for Gonebeyond in the first place.

There was a politely muted chime from the chrono on the desk; Karol stood up. “Got to get back,” he said. “I don’t want to let the kitchen down, they’ve been very good to me. Nice to see you, Rafe. I’ll be in touch.” Turning his back Karol waved an upraised hand of farewell, wagging his fingers; the door closed behind him. Rafenkel shook her head.

“Me at Chilleau Judiciary doing liaison with the Langsariks and Canopy Base,” she said. “Vogel out there at Poe Station in Gonebeyond, when he’s not recruiting medical resources. You and his Honor, on your way out to the Langsarik Coalition to watch a war. What’s the world coming to?”

His Honor, Bat Yorvik. The Bench needed a liaison of its own between Gonebeyond and Jurisdiction space. At least the Third Judge wanted a point of contact, and had decided it was to be Bat Yorvik. Jils had done the negotiations herself, because nobody in Gonebeyond space had any reason to trust anything about the Bench.

It was only an observer’s role, but it was a significant first step. Yorvik had already done the next-to-impossible: become a Bench Judge, when that status had been exclusively reserved for the more deliberate gender for so long it seemed forever. Yorvik was a young man. Plenty of energy. Resilient. He was going to need all the resilience he could get.

“In the time-honored idiom of my people.” Jils shrugged her shoulders. “To hell in a hand-basket.” And to the land of peace and prosperity in a self-motivated push-cart. Both of those things at once.

“Well, if you can, have a word with Witt’s caterers,” Rafenkel said, licking her finger-tip to blot up the last of the pastry-crumbs from the tray. “Any leftovers. See if you can’t have some sent my way. Say it’s a vital contribution to our continued progress in harvesting intelligence resources. Anything you want, so long as I get more of these.”

Jils scooped up a handful of the tiny data cubes that Rafenkel had brought for her. There’d be good reading for her over the next few days. For now, however, there was a particular bone-breaker, a deep-tissue massage therapist, in one of Haspirzak’s service houses, and she was booked for a full two hours coming up very soon. She keyed the talk-alert for the building’s administrative coordinator.

“I’ll have a ground-car now, please, yes,” she said.

It was going to be an interesting few days, and she meant to be prepared to face its challenges.

Chancellor Witt gave the best parties Ship’s Inquisitor Danyo Pefisct had been to in his life. And that was saying something, because Danyo was a personable man who knew how to cultivate a useful acquaintance and was not too nice about tedious details of strict adherence to the Law; after all, as Ship’s Inquisitor—Chief Medical Officer, Jurisdiction Fleet Ship SONDKARKIT, Fleet Captain Fonderell commanding—he was above the law as few others.

It was good luck, Danyo mused, that had brought SONDKARKIT to Haspirzak Proper in time for one of Witt’s galas; and too egotistical to pretend that Witt might have planned the event around SONDKARKIT’s arrival. No, SONDKARKIT had its own reasons for having come to Haspirzak Proper. Fleet was running out of money. The Bench negotiated Fleet’s budget every eight years, planning its tax revenue streams accordingly; and had last done so six years before the selection of a new First Judge had failed, and with it the hegemony that had characterized the Bench since almost anybody could remember.

Jurisdiction was no longer a federal government of nine separate Judiciaries with one supreme Judge selected in a convocation of the senior Judges Presiding from each. It was merely a confederation, now, learning how to operate under a new model of government. Haspirzak Judiciary was not alone in questioning why it should continue to tax itself to pay for a Jurisdiction Fleet to keep order Jurisdiction-wide when it had home defense fleets at its disposal and no single authority to coordinate and direct it.

SONDKARKIT had been in Haspirzak Judiciary when the Convocation had collapsed. It had to sue to Haspirzak for money, resources, facilities. None of which was anything to do with Danyo, so long as his salary was paid—and would continue to be paid as long as the Bench needed Inquisitors. Of that Danyo had no doubt.

The luxury ground-car Witt had sent to meet Danyo’s courier at the launch-field pulled up to the paved apron before the formal entrance to Witt’s palace of a banqueting-hall. Danyo took a moment to stand at the foot of the great broad sweep of carpet-covered stairs from the favored guests’ vehicle drop-off that led up onto the gleaming white-and-gold of the terrace before the massive gilt clearwall-doors to Witt’s mansion, taking it all in. And he wondered, as he did from time to time, exactly where the money came from, and whether he could have any of it, or whether going to Witt’s parties was as close as he was ever going to get to luxury of absolute power.

Halfway up the stairs Danyo was greeted by one of Witt’s senior staff, with a servant right behind him carrying a linen-draped tray on which rested a single barrel-stave glass full of Danyo’s favorite distillate of citrus and roses, accompanied by a single succulent tidbit of savory melon carved into an intricate flower—representing who knew how much time spent carving something that was destined to disappear forever in a single bite.

“Welcome, your Excellency,” the house-master said, with a respectful nod. “Chancellor Witt has been informed that you’ve arrived. Shall I take you to him directly?”

Danyo nodded, his mouth full of the melon. The flavor changed wonderfully on contact with saliva from sweet to salty, an undertone of rose to complement his drink, a finish of the flower in between them all. Wonderful.

Up into the antechamber before the huge entrance hall crowded with Haspirzak’s elite, if never a Judicial officer was to be seen. The Third Judge did not attend Witt’s parties. Witt was included by invitation in the Judge’s annual year-end reception; the dinner to follow, no, but that was already an allowance on Third Judge Nantik Parline’s part, considering the subtle whiff of impropriety that clung to some of Witt’s business enterprises.

Witt earned his nod of recognition honestly. He was a very generous donor to the cultural life of Haspirzak Proper, its spoken arts, its music, the Gelisar gardens. Especially the gardens. The Third Judge was a practical woman; Witt made his contributions, she kept him on the invitations list, and they both considered the bargain one well made.

There were three staircases great and grand between the gather-rooms and the banqueting halls, the gaming tables, the dance floors, the musicians and the acrobats and the better class of courtesans who made themselves available for the occasion in the spirit of fun on a lottery basis for the evening’s duration—their fees generously paid by Witt in advance, as part of the entertainment.

Danyo wasn’t offered a silver basin from which to pick a ticket. Witt didn’t leave anything to chance where his most favored guests were concerned. For Witt’s elite, the most specialized services were pre-arranged, and Danyo—for one—had never been disappointed.

Three grand staircases, yes, but the middle one—broken by landings at gentle intervals, otherwise isolated from the others—went straight up to a third level. There at the top of the stairs stood Chancellor Thulmar Witt.

Danyo didn’t wear his duty uniform to civilian parties, but Witt’s costume was so perfect a representation of the dress of a Ship’s Inquisitor on working occasions that it was almost illegal. Witt avoided any jeopardy of prosecution for impersonating a Bench officer by means of two critical factors.

One was the color of his costume. It was deliberately wrong: a dark but perceptibly blue cloth, not the regulation black of the precise hue and depth and saturation restricted to Ship’s Primes to wear, the senior officers only, the Captain, Ship’s First Officer, Ship’s Engineer, Ship’s Intelligence, Ship’s Surgeon. Witt had the sense not to wear rank; the surrogate ship-mark he sported was his corporate logo, and no Fleet shipmark of any sort.

And the man who wore it was Witt. Had he not been the respected member of the local civil government, the patron of public works, the friend of the disadvantaged and downtrodden, he would still have enjoyed some immunity from prosecution by reason of a secret of the sort that was public knowledge, a harmless—if of questionable taste—sort of obsession or infatuation with the notorious Andrej Koscuisko.

Witt was a category two hominid, a sub-species normally characterized by a somewhat greenish complexion and a fleshy roundness of the face, thick curling hair of a rich red-brown, warm green-gold eyes.

He hadn't been able to alter his height—or perhaps not even Witt was extreme enough to have bone removed from his shins and thighs—but in all other things, and over the years that Danyo had known him, Witt had done everything in his power to make himself over step by step into a particular genetic strain of Aznir Dolgorukij: that of the medium range in height, blond hair that lay more straight than curling on a less fleshy head and neck, light-colored eyes icy blue or gray.

He'd had the tone and timbre of his speaking voice altered with surgery, dialect coaches, speech therapists, and the best teachers of the linguistic peculiarities of High Aznir that money could buy. When Koscuisko had suffered an injury to his right hand that necessitated the assumption of a cyborg brace for periodic wear Witt had started wearing one just like it, though whether he had obtained the medical records in order to replicate the injury itself Danyo didn't know.

So Witt was granted a certain degree of indulgence of his absurd infatuation because the lengths to which he'd gone to indulge it had put him in the category of persons not fully aware of the repercussions of their pursuits, harmless enough—as far as anybody knew, and the civil authority kept a careful watch—because it was so fundamentally absurd. Danyo was a beneficiary of Witt's obsession. He was an Inquisitor. So was Koscuisko.

"Your Excellency!" Witt called out, his arms outstretched in welcome of a hearty Dolgorukij manner. He'd been a baritone. Now he was a tenor. "So good of you to come. Come up. Come up. I have a very special treat for you tonight, it is my hope that you may it enjoy."

Dolgorukij syntax, Danyo believed. But not overdone. "Very kind of you to ask me," he replied, reaching the top of the stairs to be greeted as an intimate friend with a formal embrace heart-to-heart. It was in everybody's best interest, he felt, if he didn't call Witt "your Excellency," at least not in so public a place. Koscuisko himself was an Excellency twice over, as Witt had once explained to him; by birth into a princely family, as well as by the position he and Danyo both occupied with Fleet. "You're looking well."

"Flatterer," Witt replied cheerfully. "Come along—" taking Danyo by the hand to walk with him, arm in arm—"and let me see whether the Magnard hotel's new pastry chef will condescend to be presented to you. Then you shall taste of the work of his hand. There has been nothing like him in Haspirzak ever, and people in a position to know have claimed that finer pastries are to be found only at the court of the Dolgorukij Combine's Autocrat herself, if there."

They had to pass through three of Witt's banqueting halls on their way to meet the man, rooms decorated in deep sky-blue and white—the colors of the Koscuisko familial corporation. In the first two halls Danyo could see hors d'oeuvres on waiting in readiness on tables against the walls, and didn't have to be told that they were Aznir Dolgorukij delicacies.

And on the tables themselves with their multiple glasses set at the ready and their custom-fired, almost transparent, ceramic name-plates and their condiments-arrays at every hand already stood great basins of thick white soured-cream, brilliant red-root chiffonades, roasts of an unfamiliar cut and appearance

under domed covers, peculiar towering apparatuses—apparently heated—surrounded by rhyti equipage amid lake after lake of ornately decorated rhyti flasks.

Back to the far wall of the room Witt led Danyo, then to one side, where a tall screen—carefully decorated to present the optical illusion of an unbroken wall—masked the arched entrance to a dedicated banquet kitchen full of apparently frenetic activity. It was the fact that once past the sound-dampers between the kitchen and Witt's banqueting hall there was no sudden aural assault of the hubbub, no clamor, no cacophony of raised voices and clattering platters and tableware chiming against serving pieces that forced Danyo to reassess his initial interpretation of the scene.

This was not the chaotic frenzy Danyo had taken it for on first impression. It was a superlatively well-run kitchen operation, and one of its main features occupied the full length of the right side of the room in which Danyo could see heaps of ground grain flour in great ceramic vessels matte-grey with years of wear. There were pyramids of fruit—tree fruit, berries, flowers, roundish misshapen tubers of the earth, bins with sugar white and golden and pink and red, fine-grained and coarse sparkling like smallheavies under the bright white light.

On cooktops laden with pots Danyo could breathe in the welcome warmth of fragrant clouds of seductively scented steam, trays of baked goods cooling on slabs of polished white stone veined as though it was the most expensive of decorative marble in known Space. As perhaps it was.

Of all the activity taking place only one man did not seem to hurry, only one man didn't seem to rush. He was a man of apparent middle age wearing a peculiar apron as spotless as the sugar snowcaps and flour-heaps of his work space, a white headwrap tied smooth and close across his forehead, a white tunic with cuffs turned crisply back to the middle of his lower arms, blue eyes, an iron-gray moustache, and he stood at his work-table facing the room working butter into a dough with floury fingers.

As Danyo followed Witt into the kitchen the man cracked an egg one-handed into his dough, and Danyo couldn't help but notice that the color of the yolk of that egg was more bright and powerful a gold than any other egg he had been served yet in his life.

"This is Pastry-master Jachil," Witt said, low-voiced, as if in possession of a secret. "There is no describing his artistry, no, do not attempt to taste of any one of these before he has released it to table, you will insult him."

Out of the corner of his eye Danyo caught sight of a man in the typical uniform of a managing caterer, the well-polished shoes, the spotlessly dark trousers, the brilliantly white collar standing up underneath the smooth span of a black overblouse that fell only to the waist and buttoned down the front without the slightest hint of any of the soft creases that might indicate that a person might have sat down whilst wearing it.

Such people kept reclining-boards in their offices, Danyo supposed, hidden in a closet no doubt, upright movers which could be rotated on their axles to let a man relieve the weight on his feet after a spell in the requisitely tight shoes.



“Your pardon, Chancellor.” Looked like the managing caterer, sounded like him, spoke like him. Therefore, managing caterer, both respectfully deferential and a little panicked, by his tone. “May I be of assistance?”

*And leave Jachil alone, for the love of God.* But Jachil himself spoke, his voice calm and reserved, but perfectly agreeable. “I’m honored, Chancellor Witt. I trust our service has been to your satisfaction, but if it isn’t, I hope to hear of it immediately—” almost a note of command there, but, Danyo thought to himself, the emphasis might only be an artifact of Jachil’s concentration—“so that I may speedily amend it.”

“Chancellor Witt,” the master-caterer said to Jachil, that subtle note of panic still in evidence to an ear practiced in detecting shades of fear and uncertainty in the voices of souls subject to Inquiry. Jachil clearly already knew who Chancellor Witt was, after all. “His Excellency Danyo Pefisct, of the JFS SONDARKIT.”

Jachil had folded the egg into the dough with an admirably small number of bare-handed turns. There was no further obvious sign of its existence but the added warmth the yellow yolk had leant the now-cohesive whole, and a subtle elastic shine that was coming up in the bowl as the dough responded to the collagen of the white. Jachil had taken up a scraper to collect the few last stray bits of unincorporated flour from the high sides of the bowl, no single wasted motion of any kind, the bowl now shining as clear as if newly washed clean.

“I very much appreciate—” Witt started to say, but Jachil was lifting the bowl to his ear, tapping its outer shell with a firm precision. Listening to the dough. For the exact sort of “tok” his test would result in producing; to see if it was ripe, in a sense. Danyo admired Jachil’s showmanship even more than his efficiency with the egg, with the scrapings.

“I apologize, Chancellor, your Excellency,” Jachil said. “I want these buns finishing just as third-meat is carried out. Tender as an angel’s kiss, as the Saga has it. The timing, as you know, Chancellor, is crucial.”

There might have been the most subtle, the most effectively veiled, hint of mockery there. Nothing rude. Nothing insulting. As if to suggest very diffidently indeed that of course Chancellor Witt knew perfectly well what citation Jachil was referring to, because Witt was so knowledgeable about all things Aznir Dolgorukij because he was so deeply immersed in all things Andrej Koscuisko. With only the breadth of the softest downiest silkiest of hairs on a newborn’s head of an *of course you really have no idea, but there is no shame in that.*

The managing caterer looked a little worried. “But, pastry-master Jachil, with your permission,” he said. “Perhaps the merest hint of the inauspicious, the cause of the theft of Nart’s young wife?”

That would be a coded cultural reference, Danyo guessed, something from the great national saga of the Dolgorukij Combine to which Jachil had just referred. The managing caterer was Dolgorukij himself, then; but Witt had been silent long enough to feel the need to assert himself, apparently.

This was his house, and his kitchen. Pastry-master and managing caterer, outstanding authorities, decorations on the chest-plaquet of his hospitality, but he—not the managing caterer nor the pastry-master—was master here, after all. Had he somehow sensed that he was being mocked, even if his awareness was subconscious?

“I very much appreciate your presence here tonight, pastry-master,” Witt said firmly. Andrej Koscuisko was the inheriting son of the Koscuisko familial corporation. He would be heard out. “We are all looking forward to enjoying your artistry. Thank you, catering manager, if you would care to walk us out?”

No, the catering manager would have preferred to stay right where he was, to assure himself that Jachil was not in any way put off and was perfectly gratified by such personal attention and would by the way completely justify whatever price Witt was to be made to pay for services rendered. But Witt had left him no choice.

Danyo stole one final glance back at pastry-master Jachil’s work-station as he turned to go. There was a shallow dish, just off the heat or off the chill perhaps, of some brown paste of appetizing fragrance and intriguing promise. Jachil was forming small tongues of tender dough one by one on the bare surface of the table, laying down a line of the filling of perfect consistency from end to end.

Rolling the tongue over into a filled tube and twisting the fat ribbon of stuffed dough into a sort of a knot with an indescribable gesture of his left hand Jachil dropped it, seam side down Danyo thought—or had the seam itself been massaged out of existence? onto a proving-sheet, even while his other hand was lifting the next portion of the dough away from the bowl, feeling for exact weight and size with his fingers, starting his next assembly.

It all went by so quickly that it was done in the amount of time it took Danyo to glance over his shoulder and then turn his eyes forward again. Jachil himself—if he took any notice of Danyo’s interest—gave no sign of so much as remembering that Danyo was there. Had ever been there. Had come and gone. Had an independent existence of any sort whatever.

Witt was his host. Danyo meant to stay in his good graces. Careful not to give Witt cause to turn around—to wonder whether he had Danyo’s full attention—Danyo lengthened his pace for a stride or two. Witt was talking to the catering manager, and had noticed nothing so far as Danyo could tell. In truth, what was there to notice? Witt had meant Danyo to be impressed by the pastry-master. Danyo was impressed.

And once he’d had his dinner he would know if Witt had got it right, about the pastry.

At dinner—which was always a little bit like an endurance race, as Witt scrupulously reproduced the lavish banquets of the Dolgorukij Autocrat’s court as far as possible—Danyo found himself at the high table seated at the right of a woman whose dress uniform wasn’t very dressy at all but signified a very interesting fact that fully explained why Witt had chosen for her the place of honor at his own side.

It was a modest uniform on Jurisdiction Fleet lines, a green-tinged darkish gray; but unlike Witt’s costume there was no pretense of any ship-mark or rank-plaquet: nothing at all. Which meant everything to Danyo.

The woman was a Bench intelligence specialist. And, so far as Danyo knew, the first Bench specialist he’d ever met in his career. “Dame Ivers,” Witt had called her, and had presented Danyo to her rather than her to Danyo, another nice token of the rank differential. Bench specialist Jils Ivers. One of the few silent and shadowy agents of the Bench, answerable to the First Judge alone and none other,

with powers of extraordinary discretion to intervene in any crisis as she saw fit in the service of the rule of Law and the Judicial order.

But now that the First Judge was simply one among her peers, to whom did the Bench specialists report? Was Ivers at Witt's party because she was looking for a job? Witt had certainly hinted to him about a future in private contracting. Whether or not Bench specialists were really all they were reputed to be and more Danyo felt he had a good enough grasp on body language to spot someone who was here on personal business.

The previous course had been carried away. It was time for the pastries to make their appearance. In the interim between the clearing of the one and the laying of another there was more time in which to actually converse, because people had only a beverage before them, a glass of wine, a thin narrow beaker of carbonated water, an elegant tulip-shaped serving of a choice liqueur. "Chelatring Side," Ivers was saying. "Yes. It's been several years now, and I still remember some of those dishes. This meal has pleasantly called that occasion to my mind."

Witt certainly looked pleased at that, so although Danyo didn't know where Chelatring Side was he could tell it must be Dolgorukij and probably to do with Andrej Koscuisko. He could ask. That might be a gracious move for a guest to play, continuing a conversation of such interest to his host.

He didn't get an immediate chance, however, because it was at this moment that the master caterer made an entrance with a long parade of service staff bearing platters full of pastries, some of which Danyo had seen several hours before. A dessert course, Danyo assumed.

Had there been any question of its identity, it would have been resolved by the appearance of the pastry-master Jachil at the end of the line, clean white cap and apron, hands folded in a relaxed manner before him, his measured tread and calm self-confident expression that of a man who was the most important element of the display and knew it.

The master caterer came to a halt before Witt at the high table, the line of servers forming up in two ranks behind him. Jachil joined the master caterer, to one side, very slightly to the rear, and let the master caterer bow for him.

"It's my pleasant duty to present the next course to you at this time," the master-caterer said. Danyo couldn't resist a quick glance at Dame Ivers, to see how she was taking this, but could detect no reaction on her face. She was simply taking it all in, the master-caterer, the pastries, the pastry-master Jachil.

"And welcome," Witt said. "Please to the pastry-master present my very sincere compliments." It was all very elegantly done, and Jachil bowed his head—his head only—in acknowledgement of the compliment. The master-caterer moved off to one side, to direct platters of pastry down the tables of Witt's guests, at right angles to the head table; it was Jachil who supervised the placing of pastries in display before Witt himself and his guests most favored.

Witt was over-playing this piece of the play, in Danyo's opinion; but maybe Jachil was more of a local celebrity than Danyo knew. He didn't live here. He had no understanding of the intrigues at senior levels of Haspirzak society, beyond what Witt showed him with bits of business like these.

Jachil had taken the more heavily laden tray into his own hands, stepping up to the dais from the graduated riser at its front to place the tray before Witt himself.

It fell to other servers to distribute somewhat more modest trays to the balance of Witt's guests, seven on a side.

"Permit me," Jachil suggested, selecting a pastry to place on the dessert plate before Ivers with a deft deployment of two broad flat serving-pieces. This was apparently the height of gracious condescension on Jachil's part, judging by the way Witt beamed. "For you, Chancellor Witt, if I might suggest one of the sugarcrisps to start. A portion of laceleaf for your other honored guest, perhaps?"

Danyo was not to be so honored, apparently, nor the woman at his right hand, the senior official of Haspirzak's Port Authority. "I haven't seen appleflower tart like this forever," Ivers said. If she meant the pastry before her, Danyo could freely admit that it looked delectable indeed.

*And the flavor, Dame Ivers, what of that?* Witt was eager to ask the question, Danyo could tell. As the host, however, he could not fish for complements. It was up to the guests to offer up spontaneous or polite praise as the occasion demanded.

But Witt was made to wait. Once first tastes had been taken all of the guests at the high table fell suddenly mute, and ate their pastries, rather than praising them, with a surprising degree of distraction that Danyo didn't really understand until he'd had his first forkful of one of them himself.

At the end of the banquet there were one's choice of concerts that ranged from the decorous—with melodic stringed instruments—through a cabaret act or three, and past an up-and-coming young composer's suite inspired by the great Haspirzak gardens to comedic monologues of a certain, and mildly salacious, type. Then a buffet reception to recruit one's strength for the long journey home, it being a half an hour's walk to the compound gates—though nobody walked it—and it being dark outside.

There were always a few guests that lingered, some for a last word or two, and some—a very few, specially selected, people—who stayed on for the most exquisitely private of Witt's entertainments. Danyo was always invited to stay on, just a little while longer, for his professional assessment; because what Witt put on were vids of interrogations, highlights from Witt's latest addition to his Andrej Koscuisko collection.

Not everything he showed was the genuine article, Witt would say freely; only one or two pieces were official records—Judicial records—almost in the public domain, almost, Witt would explain cheerfully, although of course they were nothing of the sort. Never any live action on site; which was a point of prudence on Witt's part and less awkward all around, even if it complicated things a bit for Danyo.

Witt had never hinted at anything so crass as to request a performance of a sort from Danyo, no. But he'd always found himself a little on edge with frustrated thirst to hurt somebody when he returned to his ship after one of Witt's late night soirees; and after the first time or two that it had happened, someone had either noticed or been put on notice: because for three days afterward he'd found his bond-involuntary Security slaves assigned unaccountably, but completely, out of his reach.

It was annoying. The bond-involuntaries were at his disposal, for his use. They'd been condemned under Bond to serve as his hands and fists in Secured Medical. It was his responsibility to keep their understanding of the self-inflicted torture that they would suffer for any deviation from the required standards of performance fresh and easily called to mind in the event an infraction might come up suddenly on the horizon. It was his duty to the Bench, no more, no less.

The room to which Witt's most honored guests had repaired was rich with sky-blue carpeting and intricately carved overhead beams, the lights tuned to the soft yellow spectrum of beeswax candles, arranged with deep soft armchairs like modest thrones of state on a Dolgorukij model and superlatively comfortable couches upholstered in leather from real kine.

There were no more than eight or ten of Witt's guests remaining; but one of them was the Bench specialist, and nothing would be happening until she'd been seen off the premises. Danyo was certain of that.

Yes, right enough; Witt had returned from seeing the chief of all of Haspirzak's civil security all the way down to the vehicle entrance, as Witt's formal expression of the deep and sincere respect he had for the money it cost him one way or another to encourage good relations between his business interests and local law enforcement. Witt strode briskly into the room, making straight for Specialist Ivers, who stood at the buffet table contemplating the pastry-master's sweets.

"Ah, Dame Ivers," Witt called. "I promised myself this as a personal treat, the Mikrow sheets to open up to you. Finally my chance, for which I have this entire evening been waiting. Your partner does not join us? Alas."

Witt was eager to get to his private amusements, Danyo surmised. Pushing Ivers out the door, in a sense. "His loss," she said, to Danyo's moderate perplexity. "He's late." Witt offered his arm—in a very expansive mood, clearly, or as if he were a little drunk. An error of judgment, in Danyo's opinion. He didn't expect Ivers was fooled.

But who was her partner? Not another Bench specialist, surely? One was rare enough. Two in the same place would be a significant omen, if of uncertain import, but more to the point if there was another Bench Specialist here at Witt's party surely Witt would have had him at the head table with Ivers where Witt could keep an eye on them both.

Perhaps as much as another hour, then. Danyo only knew two or three of the people who'd be sharing the after-party party. Since they had little in common besides their unorthodox interests there was no small talk to be had. Danyo sat by himself in one of the room's curtained alcoves, sipping his drink. Earlier in the evening—with the curtains drawn—there'd have been sexual play, coupling, nobody's business but that of the people within; the privacy barriers were still in operation. It was peaceful. It was quiet. It was dimly lit and comfortable in the room.

He was trying to trace the intricate floral pattern in the beams of the ceiling when one of the wait staff approached to refresh his tray of tidbits and snacks, with a follower carrying a tray—a bean tea service? Danyo could smell the spicy bitterness of the brew. There were such teams of servers in the room on similar missions, each a matched pair, junior member in white dress, senior member in dark trousers and white overblouse.

Danyo didn't mind if he did have some more nibbles. There was a sort of a pickle made of tiny pearl-like weepers that he was certainly willing to eat more of. He was going to pass on the bean tea, though. It was a lapse on the part of Watt's otherwise perfect household management staff to bring him bean tea at all, but Danyo wasn't about to take exception, not after the meal he'd had. He was replete. Relaxed. Ready for the next treat, to finish out the evening.

The senior server didn't offer Danyo bean tea. The junior server stood, blocking the entrance to the alcove, as the first man stepped in and around to place himself behind the second chair in the alcove, facing the one in which Danyo sat; and started to take off his overblouse.

That wasn't just a waiter's napkin across the man's forearm, Danyo realized. It was covering a green-grey overblouse, folded with such neat precision that it was all but invisible. And beneath the linen-draped tray from which the junior man unloaded the bean-tea service onto the table next to the unoccupied chair the junior man was holding a pair of boots.

"Thanks, Georg," the first man said, handing off his now-discarded white server's overblouse. "Be seeing you. My regards to everybody at the Magnard."

The junior man bowed. The senior man kicked his shoes beneath the chair from behind and stooped momentarily out of sight. Putting on his boots. When he straightened up again to shake out the dark overblouse he'd been carrying and settle his shoulders into it Danyo saw that it was a Fleet pattern, the same—Danyo was suddenly convinced, even if the light was a little too dim to be certain of the color—as that worn by the Bench specialist, Dame Ivers.

"Well," the man said, coming around from his partial concealment behind the chair half-masked by the alcove curtains. He sat down. He poured himself a little cup of bean tea, drank it off, poured himself another, flicking something off his lap with his free hand as he sat. No cream. No sugar. The man was clearly a mutant life form, whoever he was, if he actually liked his bean tea straight. "Good-greeting, your Excellency. You're enjoying the party?"

Danyo realized how the yellow lighting had betrayed him to his own subconscious assumptions. The grey color of the uniform trousers the man wore was easily mistaken for darker than it was. A waiter glimpsed briefly, perhaps out of the corner of the eye, followed by a subordinate server, just like five pair of other such servers, each distracting Witt's other guests at the very same instant of transformation—elegantly done. Invisible in plain sight. Was that how this man had got into the very depths of Witt's banqueting halls, the most exclusive salons but one?

"Up until now, yes," Danyo said. Ivers had been expecting a partner to meet her. Witt knew that. Ship's Inquisitors were assassination targets, but Danyo had been under Witt's protection since Witt had taken formal responsibility for his safety from the security post that Captain Fonderell had sent down planet with him, now cooling their heels in a squad room on the launch fields somewhere.

Witt's security was excellent—as it had to be, to protect some of Witt's secrets, some of which Danyo knew and doubtless many more he didn't. This man wore something quite like the uniform of a Bench Intelligence Specialist. There had to be implications. "To whom do I have the unexpected experience of speaking?"

"I'm a man with an opportunity. How much do you know about what the Third Judge's demands are, in exchange for her continued support of JFS SONDARKIT and all the others in Haspirzak Judiciary?"

Demands? No. Of course not. He paid as little attention to politics as possible, because he had no one with whom to gossip on board ship. He knew general outlines, to the extent that a man couldn't avoid hearing; and if there'd been word of demands and threats of withholding support, Danyo was fairly confident it would have made some noise in the screamers.

"Please state your business," Danyo said coldly. He was still waiting for a name and an identification. He didn't think any would be forthcoming, and people were to approach a Ship's Inquisitor with more respect. "Does Witt know you're here?"

"Of course he does. In a manner of speaking. The point is that I can offer you a job. In the event that you should suddenly want one, of course. We can offer you the best job security a man could want, and your current job may not be as safe as you might have thought it to be."

"So you really *don't* know who I am." Danyo had only assumed the man did, because he'd called Danyo "Excellency." He wondered how long he was going to have to wait before Witt would make the man go away. "I'm a Bench officer. Are you suggesting that the Bench will cut senior staff? I'd be careful. I'm catching a little hint of treasonous thought. I know how to investigate treason, in word and deed."

"Here's the thing, though," the man said. Ship's Inquisitors had to become careful listeners if they were to become any good at all at their jobs. Danyo was sure he'd heard that voice recently, calm, composed, a light baritone. He just hadn't placed it yet. "By this time tomorrow there won't be any Bench officers on Fleet ships. Ship's Inquisitors won't be senior Bench officers because there won't be any Ship's Inquisitors any more. You'll be needing alternative employment. I need doctors."

So, yes, Danyo had heard rumors, some of them tonight. There was speculation. Since Danyo had graduated from Fleet Orientation Station Medical—Fossum, from FOSM—with a Writ to Inquire all those years ago, the supply of Ship's Inquisitors had been dwindling, activity at Fossum slowing as enough suitable candidates couldn't be got together for even two classes of potential Inquisitors a year.

Someone had heard that the Fleet-level detention center at Bederico was running at half capacity, fewer criminals put under Bond, fewer courses of indoctrination requiring fewer dancing-masters to teach men how to be so afraid of their governors that they would not hesitate to do whatever they were told. A man had heard all sorts of startling stories. Almost all of them groundless and absurd.

"Reserving judgment on your actionable language." Whether or not this man was the Bench specialist he appeared to be presenting himself as being it was worth issuing the admonition, Danyo felt, if only to level the playing field. Because the man had him at a disadvantage. "My tenure was granted by the First Judge herself."

Which was perhaps not the best thing to say, since there was no longer a First Judge in the same sense as had obtained when he'd taken up his Writ. Still, the contract had been issued in the name of the Bench, guaranteed employment as Chief Medical Officer for as long as he liked up to thirty years. The first eight were

required as due the Bench for its investment in his training; after that he could renew for either four years or eight years at a time.

After thirty years, though, if he wanted to retain his position, he would have to wait for an appropriate vacancy, should there not be one immediately available. They weren't making all that many new Inquisitors. It was as good as lifetime employment. "I'm on the books for nearly four years in my current renewal. You suggest I desert, I think. Where, exactly, would I go, then?"

Of course. He realized the answer even as he asked the question. Gonebeyond space, where criminals, rebels, insurrectionaries—mutineers—found refuge, outside the boundaries of Jurisdiction. Where Andrej Koscuisko was to be found, and his ship of assignment—the Jurisdiction Fleet Ship RAGNAROK—with the delicate issue of its so-called "mutiny in form" yet to be taken up for consideration by the Bench.

Bench specialists? In Gonebeyond? Could anything be put past a Bench specialist? Was this man himself a renegade? If Danyo gave the alarm, if this man was a secret agent for some criminal enterprise opposing the Bench, would it come to Danyo to perform the interrogation? That could get messy. It could go all the way, maybe even as far as a Tenth Level command termination. It was an intriguing thought.

"It's not an altogether unusual strategy," the man said. "Other people have found it expedient to vacate a Fleet appointment, and I'm confident there'll be more. There's Chazin, for one. Are you familiar with the situation, there?"

When a man was a Fleet inquisitor and a reasonable person he found it prudent and proper to connect with the loosely organized, carefully sequestered, souls in similar situations. So yes. He'd heard about Chazin. There'd been enough evidence of illicit activity in her off-duty hours to have cost her both her rank and her position. She'd fled rather than risk being released from duty to make her way in private life, even with her considerable savings to smooth her way.

Ex-Inquisitors reduced in rank would no longer receive the same degree of Fleet protection, and the Bench would have confiscated any funds that could be traced back to illegal activities—even though they couldn't level criminal penalties, not against an Inquisitor—leaving her without the kind of money she would have needed to buy protection of her own. She'd run, instead, with as much of her money as she'd been able to take with her.

"Now that you mention it," Danyo said slowly. "I think I may have talked to someone who'd talked to someone. I heard she's out there somewhere in some dirty hole with some dirty patient load in some dirty clinic, practically none of the creature comforts worthy of the description, no kind of life for a person of her status. Why would I be interested in anything of the sort?"

"Because the point is that people *have* heard from her." Drinking off another cup of bean tea the man stood up. "Think about it. I'll be in touch. Or you could find someone to take you to Poe Station in Gonebeyond, and ask after me there. Karol Vogel."

He cut the privacy field, and Danyo heard a mild disturbance in the room outside the alcove. Witt returning with the Bench specialist? Yes. Danyo wanted to see this: so he left his comfortable place and followed.



“You’re late,” Dame Ivers said, to Danyo’s mysterious companion. “Chancellor Witt, this is my partner. Karol, Chancellor Witt, and the Mikrow pages, fabulous. Have you eaten? We should go, I’ve imposed on our host’s gracious hospitality for long enough.”

“Yeah, I got a bite to eat in the kitchen,” the man said. Karol Vogel. Danyo wondered if he’d be able to dig anything up on a Karol Vogel—whether that was really his name, for starters. “I apologize for my late arrival, Chancellor. I’m sorry to be leaving immediately, but Dame Ivers and I have a very challenging schedule.”

If Danyo knew Witt, Witt would not be happy, right now. No man with complex trade and financial arrangements and extensive contacts in multiple business communities would welcome the attention of a Bench specialist, and now there were two of them. He could detect no sign in Witt’s demeanor, however.

“You find me desolated,” Witt said, one hand to his chest as if over his heart, bowing. “Perhaps I may have the pleasure of your company at some future event, perhaps Dame Ivers will speak of her visit in terms tempting enough to encourage you to propose yourself at any time. Is it to be good-greeting, then?”

“Thank you for everything,” Dame Ivers said warmly, and with apparent sincerity. “We’ll borrow one of your house-masters and see ourselves out, Chancellor.”

That was that, then. Witt could hardly argue with a Bench specialist; he’d have to be content with having hosted her, publicly, for the duration of the evening. Witt bowed, beckoning for one of the house staff standing by just outside the door. “It’s been my very great honor. Good-greeting. I hope to see you again, Dame Ivers. My house is as your own, waiting to welcome you home whenever you like.”

She’d been the last of the guests Witt had to see to his threshold. Now that they could proceed to more specialized amusements, however, Danyo wasn’t sure he could really give them the full attention they deserved. Witt would proceed; these other guests could be allowed no hint of unexpected developments, and Danyo—as far as he could tell—was the only person who’d even known that Vogel had arrived in disguise as one of Witt’s house staff. So he’d go with Witt and the others to see what Witt had selected from his library to display, and talk to Witt later.

He only wished he could put his finger on what, exactly, it was that he’d been sure he found familiar about the man.

By the time Danyo was ready for fastmeal and a shower on the following morning he was already late, and due back on board JFS SONDKIT. The house-master who followed Danyo’s fastmeal into the room in Witt’s palatial home in which he’d slept waited until the server had laid the table and left before he spoke.

“By your leave, your Excellency,” he said. This was unusual, because as a general rule Danyo didn’t speak to anybody before he’d had his morning jifka, and he’d become accustomed, over the years, to the general rule of protocol that servants did not speak unless they were spoken to.

Maybe it was different for Witt’s people, Danyo mused, pouring another spoonful of sugar into his flat-bottomed flask of jifka. Maybe in the great houses of the Dolgorukij Combine servants were held in higher esteem than would seem to be the conventional norm, and since Witt was running his household along the lines of that of a Dolgorukij autocrat he’d had his staff trained accordingly.

True that the house-master was waiting for Danyo's acknowledgement, before he spoke on. Danyo drank half of his jifka, then refilled the flask with deliberation. For all the house-master knew Danyo might have been hung over. Certainly a welcome selection of restoratives stood in readiness on a brightly polished tray just to his left.

"Yes?" The chrono said it was nearly mid-day, and the shuttle on which he was to return to SONDARKIT had been directed to stand by not later than the shiftchange. First thing in the morning. It was almost an hour from the dirt of Haspirzak to the JFS SONDARKIT; his leave, granted on short notice and proposed as one of short duration, would expire at the start of second-shift. It wasn't the fault of Witt's staff—Danyo had left very explicit instructions that he was not to be disturbed, though Danyo might use Witt as an excuse anyway.

*So what*, Danyo asked himself irritably, buttering a torn-off bit of breakfast roll. He was Ship's Inquisitor. Captain Fonderell had never taken formal notice of minute insubordinations before, and if Fonderell tried to place a note in Danyo's personnel records or dock him some trivial amount of a day's pay just to humiliate him Fonderell would find who was of them the more laughed at, stopping two hours of a man's pay because he'd overslept. A senior officer's pay. A Chief Medical Officer's salary.

"SONDARKIT has requested a status check, your Excellency. There would seem to be a meeting at which your presence is absolutely required. The Chancellor, sir, found himself unsuccessful in his attempt to intervene for an extension of his Excellency's downleave, and is very urgent to see you before your departure."

That was a shame, but Witt had made the right call. Fonderell wasn't the man to take any civilian's input on matters of military protocol. The only civilians Fonderell would listen to were Judicial officers, and sometimes the civil authority—provost marshals, port authorities.

If he insisted on fastmeal he'd have less time to talk to Witt. Nor was he completely confident of his stomach; so he half-emptied the flask of jifka, left the roll half-eaten, and rose to get dressed. Shame to be hurried. But there it was.

"Wait outside, house-master. Please tell my host that I will be coming as soon as I'm decently clothed." Witt was good for a new set of clothes every time Danyo saw him, and this time was no different. Not just clean linen; bootsocks, trousers and underblouse and all. New. Lovely stuff. His wardrobe would be completely courtesy of Witt, soon, and the Fleet issue stuff could go into the trash.

He made quick work of dressing. There'd been no time last night to discuss "Karol Vogel" and what he'd said with Witt. They'd agreed to have a chat in the morning—as Danyo had struggled off to bed, scant hours ago—and here Captain Fonderell was cheating him of his bit of gossip, of a chance to investigate a potential situation of interest. What did Fleet think of Bench specialists, what was the official position? Should Danyo casually mention his encounters with two of them to Fonderell, and see what happened?

Properly clothed now Danyo sallied forth with the house-master as his guide to go see Witt, leaving his things behind. Witt had people to manage a man's luggage, and frequently there was something pleasant tucked into the folds of his clothing—all absolutely legal, of course. A packet of delicacies. A small bottle of a delicious and almost unattainable wine. If his orderly on duty wasn't bond-

involuntary, Danyo hunted out the parting-gift himself to avoid any chance of it going astray, but there was no danger of a bond-involuntary palming a treat for himself.

The house-master brought Danyo through private passageways to what seemed to be Witt's sitting room, his private suite. Witt had already dressed, but he'd had a problem presented to him last night, and had probably risen early. There were medications for negating the aftereffects of one of Witt's parties, and Witt would have had no difficulty in obtaining them. Danyo had written out several of the choicest scripts himself.

"Four months." Witt didn't ask how Danyo had slept, wish him good-greeting, ask if he'd eaten. "Four months at the hotel Magnard. References checked and cross-checked, but there's nothing there any more to follow up on, dead end. Invalid identity codes. No audit trail. He came from nowhere. Now he's gone back. Tell me, what was such a man doing pretending to be a pastry-master, and in my house? My house, where no one saw him at all once he completed his last service until he was suddenly in my private salon hours later?"

"I heard him call the man who brought his boots "Georg"—" Danyo started to say. Witt was apparently just angry enough, just anxious enough, to cut him off.

"Georg. I spit. Georg is nobody, a nothing, he knew the Bench specialist only as Jachil, and I correct myself, he was not *pretending* to be a pastry-master, what perfidy. We have checked Georg very carefully, and it is clear, Dr. Pefisct, that Georg will be of no help to us whatever. We have even kept from him the importance of everything, so that he knows as little of it now as he did last night. And. Danyo."

Witt was pacing up and down in front of a beautiful writing-desk, gleaming dark brown wood, feet carved into the talons of a predatory bird. There were papers, flatfile flimsies, hard-print dockets strewn across its padded leather surface. Danyo had never seen Witt betray the least bit of untidiness, before.

"The Third Judge has a Kospodar thula at her command, did you know that?" Witt asked the wall. "Her personal courier. It left this morning, they tell me. They tell me further that it has docked in the maintenance atmosphere of the Jurisdiction Fleet Ship SONDARKIT. She was not on it. Therefore another Bench judge is, and it would seem that they have come to talk to you about something. That is my guess."

*So, is there anything you would like to tell me?* As a question that would be only reasonable, not accusatory at all. There could have been any number of things that hadn't come to Danyo's mind under the influence of Witt's party. Nothing Danyo had connected with Witt, that went without saying, but now?

"I'm surprised," Danyo said, and sat down because Witt had forgotten to ask him to. "I've never interviewed a Bench judge unless it was for clarification of my findings. If I'm going to be speaking to one now it's news to me. But I might have an idea." It did fit in to what he thought the Bench specialist had been hinting at, last night. Witt was waiting, so Danyo continued, speaking slowly, trying to remember the conversation exactly as it had happened.

"He said I'd be out of job, that Haspirzak Judiciary was going to outlaw the entire function of Inquiry." Had Vogel said that? Danyo was sure enough that Vogel had meant something like it, though his recall wasn't as sharp as he would

have liked it to be. “That by tonight—‘this time tomorrow,’ he said—there’d be no Bench officers on Fleet ships, and there’s only the one of us there now, and it’s me. I presumed he meant Haspirzak Judiciary. No, I presumed he was crazy, but we’ve never been made to feel especially welcome in Haspirzak, even while the old First Judge was alive.”

Witt flung himself down into a chair at the desk with a vehement thump. “I have heard nothing,” he said, finger-combing his fine blond hair back up across his forehead with his left hand, rolling his head against the palm of that hand now laid flat at the back of his neck. “But why did he say such a thing to you, do you think?”

*I have heard nothing.* All of Witt’s influence, and all of Witt’s money, couldn’t buy him everything: the Bench staff itself apparently remained proof against corruption, infiltration, compromise. The Bench specialist’s remarks might actually have meant nothing more than to make that point with Witt, who stood in little real need of Bench access so long as he maintained lucrative and even frequently entirely legitimate relationships with the civil authorities wherever he did business.

“He said he had a job for me in Gonebeyond, and to meet him at Poe Station. As if I knew where that was. Offered me protection, I think. I’ve heard of another Inquisitor who did a runner when things started to stink up around her, what with no Fleet in Gonebeyond to follow up. I don’t know what the full story is. But there is the fact that Andrej Koscuisko isn’t dead yet, is he? If anybody was going to take an impact round between the shoulderblades it’d be him, surely.”

Witt had apparently mastered his frustration, at least for now, and was clearly thinking hard and fast. “Safehaven being full of Nurail,” Witt said, almost absentmindedly. “Yes. One sees the point. We’re out of time, though, Dr. Pefisct, I’m afraid, you’ve got to go, and discover what that thula is doing with SONDARKIT. So I have only this to say, please do not be insulted. I can get you a secure position with a business concern in Gonebeyond. You can help me get close to Koscuisko. Send me a thank-you note as soon as you can. I’ll try to set up a meeting, the sooner the better.”

The house-master was at the door. Witt waved a gentle good-greeting with one hand before he propped his elbow up on the arm of his chair and rested his chin in his cupped hand, thinking through his next step, perhaps. *Witt, Danyo thought. Of course. Witt.*

If it turned out that he was to go begging for employment, he could think of no more useful an acquaintance to enlist in his hunt for a new and lucrative position.

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