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Excerpt: 3 chapters

MODEL SPECIES

by

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Many researchers mistake the meddling of the Empire as wonders of nature. – Ionun

Morintopealos

Atendere 3, 20:34

One day after the Death of Beros Evetorropelo

Warehouse near the Kenos Middle Docks

The old man doubled over in pain as his stomach cramped violently. His oily, gray hair came loose from the thong that held it from his gaunt, ebony face. In the shadows, the rims of his eyes glowed gold as did the palms of his hands and his mouth. He was wrapped from head to toe in a web of straps imprinted with fine, white stripes. They originated from a gray metal clasp centered over his porta flexus, an area in his center of his torso that also luminesced. He clutched at his abdomen, but hunger pangs continued to wrack his body. His moans were muffled by the shadows and humidity, but still disturbed a rat that lurked in the doorway, causing it to scabble away.

The old man rummaged through the wreckage of several crates. As he fought to find a leftover morsel to sate his greedy hunger, he slipped on the damp, moldy floor and crashed forward onto his shoulder. He stifled a groan against his fist as another wave of hunger passed through him. These pangs were not new to him, but they were worse than what he had experienced in the past. They alarmed him. Had he done something wrong? His muscles and organs, his very bones, screamed for sustenance.

Among the broken wood planks, he found the remnants of a sausage. It was dry and salty, and he choked as he forced it into his mouth. He flailed through the crate slats, hock bones, and packing materials in an effort to find more and let out a cry as he realized that nothing was left.

The corpse of a young man, still bound and gagged, lay on a table in the workroom. Beros had been the young man's name. In death, his face was still younger than the rest of him. He had full cheeks and lips, heavy-lidded eyes and thick hair. In the scant illumination from the lamp on the street below, his flesh was darker than an abyss. Puncture wounds marked his arms, legs, hips and chest. These injuries matched those on the old man's body, hidden by his wrappings. The boy had other wounds as well. At his wrists and inner thighs, the old man had drained Beros' blood.

The blood. He had drained Beros hours ago and left it sitting in several glass carafes on the workbench. The intent was to sell it. Certain people would pay good coin for it. But he should have cooled it immediately. How could he have forgotten to do that? It would go to waste. The ambition of the plan had outstripped his ability.

He grabbed the first carafe. The liquid didn't move as it should and the old man cursed. He had forgotten the anticoagulant too. No matter. He reached a finger into the

flask and fished the scab-like skin off the top. He couldn't let it go to waste. He brought it to his lips without hesitation and sucked it off his fingers. Before he could contemplate it, he washed it down with the blood. The liquid was sickeningly warm and thick, but removed the vestiges of what stuck in his throat. He did the same with the second carafe without spending time considering the sensations. Everything after the third flask settled his stomach and sated his hunger ever-so briefly.

The blood made the next step easier.

The old man staggered to the table where Beros was laid out. He grabbed the leg of the corpse and jerked it loose of the rope that had secured it. The rigidity of the muscles made the old man use all of his weight to move the limb so that the thick, meaty portion of the calf faced him. It was a suitable portion of the body to eat. In a man like Beros, the muscle would be well-marbled with fat. The old man bit into the sinew and ground his teeth through the skin, into the striated tissue of the corpse's leg. He yanked backward and shook his head, but the meat would not pull free. He sucked at the wound and let go when his saliva did nothing to soften it.

He reeled toward his workbench, scattering used flasks and Ignex tubes until he finally found a knife. His unsteady hands dropped the blade, causing him to lunge after it. The maladies of his aged body were fading, or possibly forgotten under the gnawing hunger.

He plunged the knife deeply into the muscle and sawed viciously until a large piece was separated from the bone. He bit into it and shaved off as much as he could with his front teeth. Eating the meat raw made it difficult to chew. As he swallowed, he

cut off a bite-sized chunk and shoved it into his mouth. He cut and chewed and sawed off all of the calf before his hunger abated.

As he contemplated moving to the corpse's thigh, the unsavory, slimy lump in his mouth overcame his edacity. None of this was new to him, but it was unpleasant and reflected badly on his planning.

He retrieved his lamp from where it had fallen earlier, and twisted a disc in its base that brought the lamp to life. In the white, emetanic light, the old man regarded the closed heavy-lidded eyes of Beros. It was regrettable. He would have to be better prepared next time. There was much to be learned, but for now, he had to rest.

20:34

The Office of Laird Nero

Laird Nero squinted at the last invoice on his desk. This would be the thirteenth in a row he had filled out, in triplicate for a particularly skittish client. His right hand throbbed and he massaged the callus that had formed on the side of his middle finger. Ink stained the light yellow anterior of his fingers. He couldn't make out the ink spots that littered his dark-skinned knuckles.

Evening had crept up on Nero as he worked, and the dimness didn't help his fatigue. One of the sconces hanging on the wall had run out of fuel earlier in the week, and he hadn't gotten around to refilling it.

"No time like the present," Nero muttered. He rose from his desk, retrieved the sconce's vessel, and took it to a cabinet in the lobby where he had a decanter of fuel oil. He had been without an office assistant for too long.

His business was small enough to get along with only Nero, but occasionally invoices accumulated, lamps ran out of fuel, and Nero wished for someone to take care of such annoyances. The last person that Nero had employed had been his nephew Zermino. The kid had lacked ambition and Nero had to tell him everything that needed to be done. Managing Zermino had been as much work as the work itself. That was the case with most of the people Nero hired.

Nero funneled oil into the long, oval vessel and returned it to the wall. He twisted the disc at its neck to turn on the lamp. The switch flooded the emetanism with fuel from the vessel, activating the lamp's apothos. The white light brightened the room considerably, but did nothing to make Laird Nero enthusiastic about the last invoice. He flopped into his chair and debated whether invoice number thirteen could wait until tomorrow.

"Good evening, Mr. Nero," the voice whispered.

Nero straightened in his chair and scanned his office.

"Can I help you?" He couldn't see anyone and he hadn't heard anyone come in through the outer office door. Disturbingly, the voice had been very close to Nero. He glanced out the windows and saw no one there either. "It's late. If you'd like, we could meet tomorrow morning."

"No," said the voice. "Now is best."

It was hard to tell if the man's whispering voice was deep or high, or how the voice would sound in normal conversation. The pronunciation was cultured and the words were well-formed. This kind of voice wouldn't stutter during a focusing ritual. The authority of the statements definitely marked the speaker as male. The voice was near Nero's head, obviously placed by means of apothos.

"That's fine," said Nero. "What can I do for you?" He couldn't help taking another glance through the window.

"Don't worry about trying to find me, Mr. Nero. And please don't move too far from where you are right now."

"Very well," said Nero. "Can you hear me clearly enough?"

"Yes."

Nero suspected that the owner of the voice wasn't nearby, certainly not within hearing range. Apothos would carry Nero's voice too. This man did not want to be known. Nero's efforts to collect information would be deftly deflected.

"I can hear you fine," said the voice, "but you won't have to do much talking. In fact, I'd prefer you didn't."

Nero let the silence stretch.

"Good. This is what I want from you," continued the sibilant whisper. "I want you to investigate a man for me. He is old, with many physical ailments. He is hunched and his joints have been damaged by inflammation. Notably, his hands are weak and gnarled. His sight is poor. His skin is darkened with age but he suffers from a rash that often appears on his face and neck. His hair is, of course, gray and thinning. He is not an apothynom. Are you willing to take this job?"

Nero scratched down the details the voice had provided. "I'm willing."

"Good." Another long pause.

"Has this man been involved in criminal acts?" Nero asked. It was helpful to know whether he should start his investigation with the local constabulary.

"He won't have a record, but I suspect that he is involved with criminal elements," the voice replied.

"Any known whereabouts or kin? A name?"

"I have told you all that I believe is relevant. I'm sure you can manage with what I gave you."

Nero rubbed his eyes. Who was this man and why was he so concerned about secrecy? It wasn't unusual for Nero's clients to want discretion. Occasionally, a proxy was sent to speak with Nero, especially for the first meeting. In the end, all of Nero's clients visited in person.

"I will be able to discover much about old men, but not necessarily the one you seek," said Nero. "Other details will help limit my search, but I can understand your want for discretion." Nero kept his pen poised over the pad of paper.

"I realize that your results may be imprecise. Don't concern yourself with that. Simply find out what you can. Now, I suspect you would like to discuss your fees. I will pay you well, you needn't worry. I will mail payments to you, and have a retainer delivered to you tomorrow. We will speak again some night when you are at your desk. Do you have questions? Please consider before you answer, you will not have the means to contact me."

"No," said Nero. "I'll see what I can find out and have a report for you in a couple of days."

The conversation ended.

Nero reread the notes he had taken. An infirm old man. No record, which didn't mean he wasn't involved in some criminal activity. As the client suspected, it meant he hadn't been caught yet. This would certainly be interesting.

When the gas was applied to the heated oil, it erupted with the brilliance of the sun. –

Ionun Morintopealos

Atendere 8, 6:13

Six days after the Death of Beros Evetorropelo

The Apartment of Paulos Gaent

Inspector Paulos Gaent woke just after the sunlight hit the violet waters of Upper Suna Bay. The small clock on his bedside table rang at the same time every morning, and was turned off by a small switch on the emetanism. Gaent rolled out of bed and pulled on a linen robe. He had slept wrong last night and his neck twinged with pain. He opened the shutters of his apartment windows and let the cool breeze into the stuffy room. The early sunlight glinted off the water, interrupted only by the dark form of the Grand Bridge that stretched across the channel. Far on the opposite shore, he could make out the shadowy lines of Denaphaos's docks. Right below his window, most of Kenos, the sister city of Denaphaos, still slept.

He rubbed his eyes and turned to his high-ceilinged bedroom. The domiciles around him and the kitchen below were still quiet. He crossed to the faucet and basin and briefly washed his face and patted his hair into submission. He wondered if his curly hair was thinner today than yesterday, but he quickly pushed the useless thought aside. Eventually his black hair would be completely gone and he would be as shiny-headed as his uncle Edarius. Worrying about the inevitable wouldn't help. Gaent dressed in comfortable clothes, plain brown pants and a dark blue shirt that was tailored to expose the locket that hung below his breastbone, over the gold glow of his porta flexus.

The rest of his apartment was as high and open as his bedroom. The ceilings echoed his bare footsteps as he opened the other windows to the rising sun. The rooms were sparsely furnished. He didn't need much and had more important things to spend money on. Only the desk in his study was cluttered, strewn with dusty books and loose notes. From a crate next to his desk, Gaent took a bottle of pomace brandy.

The largest of his three rooms was dominated by one of Gaent's most favored possessions: a thick, intricately patterned rug. Handmade, and bought during his travels in the Zimatran Mountains. The colors evoked the rich black-greens of the grassy plains, the deep red of the birds, and the chestnut Bayards that lived beyond the mountains. For Gaent, the rug also showed the grays and greens and violets of the summer seas near his home.

He broke the seal on the bottle of brandy, removed the cap, and took a deep pull. The amber liquor was sticky sweet and left a pleasant heat in his throat. He placed the bottle on the floor at the edge of the rug.

Gaent's pendant was a thick, oval locket made of a matte black metal and unadorned aside from the clear window that displayed the configuration of graphite wafers inside. The pendant hung taut against his porta flexus, nearly obscuring the soft yellow glow of that area of his torso. He opened the locket and checked the five squares of graphite that fit snugly against the culcursus, a complex emetanism that allowed Gaent, and all apothynomi, to function efficiently. The fuel wafers were thinner than he expected. The golden layer of surfactant that had been painted on each wafer worked away at them continuously. He would need to replace them soon.

Gaent snapped his locket closed and stood barefoot in the middle of his rug. He gazed at the patterns until the thoughts of his balding ebony pate and the stiffness in his neck receded. As he did every morning, Gaent began the rituals involved in reinforcing the apothos he used as an inspector for the Kenos Constabulary.

The reinforcement of apothos improved aptitude with that apothos, which made it easier to generate when needed. In most cases, Gaent reinforced what he would use in emergencies, when time was a factor. Unless he knew of some extenuating circumstance, he cycled through a standard set, reinforcing them to make sure he would be adept when necessary.

Gaent rarely used the apothos to staunch bleeding. The apothos was tricky, but in the aftermath of a confrontation, it could save a life. He kept it in his repertoire and would reinforce it today. Preparing for confrontations themselves was another matter.

With no set standard procedure, Gaent had several apothos that he considered adequate to handle most situations. For people who were simply misbehaving, Gaent had an apothos that would amplify his voice. It allowed him to command authority and to be

clearly heard over loud noises. If a situation became violent, he also had an apothos that could shock a full-grown man to the point of paralysis. When dealing with more than one person, Gaent knew an apothos that would heat a block of caustic material, creating fumes that would irritate skin and eyes. As per his schedule, Gaent would reinforce that last one today, but also the apothos needed to amplify his voice. He had used it more often than usual over the last few days while tracking down the associates and enemies of a dead criminal by the name Vlahos. The high usage and anticipated need were enough cause for Gaent to reinforce it.

Used on almost a daily basis, Gaent also knew an apothos that would amplify the light entering his eyes, allowing him to see better in the dark. Its reinforcement would wait until tomorrow.

Gaent sat cross-legged at the edge of the carpet and began to drink. He let the gentle violet patterns of the rug clear his mind as the pomace brandy energized his body.

Keeping the bottle with him, he began the routine. He let his mind remember the patterns of each focusing ritual guided by the weaves of the carpet and the staccato rhythm of his fingertips against the bottle. He had done this so often that he knew precisely when he needed to drink more. With concentration, he began the apothos to enhance reinforcement that he would maintain throughout the entire process.

Gaent felt the presence of the apothos as tension in his chest behind the porta flexus. It was exhilarating to Gaent, similar to the strain of running or cycling.

After beginning and maintaining the reinforcement apothos, he began the specific ritual associated with the staunching apothos. As he worked, the tension grew and spread upward to his eyes. Gradually, the pressure turned to warmth. As the apothos came to

fruition, the reinforcement apothos ingrained it within him and associated it with the word "dry", which best represented his thoughts when performing the apothos.

The effects of reinforcing the next apothos, the one for heating the caustic material, were similar, except that this time the tightness in his chest spread outward through his arms and hands. The warmth that the fuel use provided was only truly noticeable in those limbs. By the time he prepared the apothos for amplifying his voice, he barely noticed the increased tension in his chest and eyes or the warmth. What he did feel was fatigue. It would pass, both the discomfort and the exhilaration caused by the process.

The bottle of pomace brandy was three-fourths empty by the time he was finished, and the sun was well above the horizon. He had taken longer with his apothos preparations than he'd realized. He splashed water on his face again and gathered what he needed for the day. He stuffed a few pertinent papers and a fresh bottle of brandy into a leather satchel that he slung across his shoulders.

From outside his room, Gaent could hear the banging of pots and pans from the kitchen and the calls of fuel merchants making their rounds. Gaent rarely caught the fuel merchant that visited his building. While others were just waking and preparing for their day, he was well into his. He would take care of buying fuel oil and wafers after work.

He hustled down the stairs and into the kitchen. The room was very warm and the high windows did little for ventilation. Some of the residents cooked for themselves, but Monar Leitar, their landlady, did most of it. She was a short woman with hair bleached to a fashionable caramel color that contrasted with her deep black skin. Her lack of

stature was overcome by the vim she injected into every action. She was everywhere at once and kept the kitchen spotless.

"Good morning, Gaent. I was beginning to think that you had been called away early. But then, you would have left a mess on your way out and I found none."

Gaent smiled, but didn't show his teeth. "And good morning to you too, Miss Leitar." He helped himself to three slices of dense, still-warm bread. Bread was a difficult thing to make, and Monar took great pride in her oven and the way she could manage to heat the bricks that her baking required. Her locket was extravagant, but it lacked the display of graphite wafers that was popular among most apothynomi. She did wear a blouse with an inverted tear-shape cutout just below her bosom that showcased the green and gold design of the pendant as well as her porta flexus. For her occupation, she was a more talented apothynom than she needed to be.

Monar placed a glass of chilled cordial in his way and Gaent drank it quickly. He rinsed the cup under the water faucet and placed it by the basin. Monar Leitar sniffed at the improper job he had done, but did not comment. Gaent wrapped two pieces of bread and a slice of thick cheese in a cloth napkin and placed them in his bag. He ate a third wrapped around a cured sausage and dodged out of Monar's way before she could comment on the crumbs he was leaving.

Gaent hustled out of the kitchen and into the lobby. He grabbed a newspaper from the stack next to the door. The glaring headline concerned a politician that Gaent had no interest in. He flipped the folded bundle of papers over to check for news about the Denaphaos researchers who were visiting Kenos. He had a passing interest, but didn't

have time now to read a page-two article about them. He was attempting to fit the newspaper into his bag when he almost walked into Teria as she came in.

"Look at you, leaving for work when work is coming to you," she said. Teria Bellaphaerneous was a short woman with glossy black hair and long-lashed, golden eyes. She wore a flowing red dress that flattered her slim figure and carried a matching parasol with a hooked handle. Slung over her shoulder was her portable writing desk: a shallow, rectangular box with a latched lid.

"You might have missed me," he said.

"Unlikely. You take the same route every day. Anything good in the news?" she asked with a nod to Gaent's paper.

"Nope," he said and shoved it into his satchel. "What's so pressing that you sought me out? Don't tell me that we have a lead on the Vlahos case?"

Gaent still held half of his breakfast in his hand and took another bite as she led him away from the door. She had ridden her bicycle from Precinct Headquarters to his apartment and had secured it to an overfilled rack next to the building.

"Unfortunately, nothing new on Vlahos. A body was pulled out of the channel. I was at headquarters when dispatch received the call. It's not too far from here, so I figured I'd save you a trip into Headquarters."

"Kind of you," he said.

"And we can walk from here."

Precinct Headquarters was close by, but in the opposite direction. The use of an apothos for long distance communication was efficient, but limited by what target areas an apothynom knew well. Neither the Headquarters dispatchers nor Teria could predict if

or where Gaent would be in his apartment. As far as Gaent knew, none of them were familiar enough with the layout or location of his apartment.

They headed toward the channel, Teria setting a quick pace.

"What do you know about it currently?" Gaent asked.

Teria shrugged. "Not much. A graver on a hull cleaning crew spotted the body. He notified the dock sergeant who secured it and reported to dispatch."

Gaent nodded and chewed the last bite of his sausage as they waited for a horse-drawn cab to pass.

"How can you eat that?" Teria asked. "My stomach would turn flips if I tried to eat that at this time of day."

Gaent shrugged.

"You could at least heat it up."

"Do you know the sergeant that sent the message?" he asked.

"His name is Lor TorIntera," she said without conferring with her notes, "but he's new and I don't know anything else about him."

"I hope no one will have tampered with the body," said Gaent.

"I don't know anyone as zealous about a scene as a new sergeant."

"Sure you do. A woman with your connections in the Darhoran Church must know plenty of votaries, all more zealous than some green sergeant who's had no practice at it." Gaent smiled at his jibe. Teria did not.

"You're always quick with a comment when it's at my expense, aren't you?"

Gaent bit back anything further. He had just put his clerk out of sorts.

"So, I take it you've finally put in for a new partner?" Teria asked after a few silent steps.

Gaent wasn't surprised at the conversation's turn.

Teria was a constabulary clerk, not an inspector. A clerk mostly searched through city records to assist in an investigation. Also, a clerk was often brought to a crime scene where she observed everything she could, recording those pieces of information. The best clerks, in Gaent's experience, were women.

All of the notes in Gaent's bag were in Teria's handwriting. She carried her board for writing, and the pockets of her dress usually held enough pens and ink to last her several days over. She was young and pretty and very good at her job. But unlike most detectives and many clerks, she did not wear a locket. Instead of a dress that exposed her porta flexus where an amulet would hang, she favored dresses that exposed her neck and collarbones.

"No, I haven't given it any thought," said Gaent.

"Meaning that you're too lazy to put in the paperwork," said Teria.

That's the way it had started. Gaent had been too busy to file a requisition when Maragos had been promoted, and the precinct had been too short-handed to automatically move someone to inspector. As the bi-weeks had slipped by, Gaent began eliciting Teria's opinions on cases. While she wasn't the most innovative person, Gaent had come to value her different perspective. At this point, another partner wasn't desirable.

"Don't worry, I'm sure Petorous will rectify the situation and you won't have to put up with as many of my remarks," said Gaent. The precinct chief had mentioned

Gaent's partner status several times in the last half-week, much to the inspector's annoyance.

Teria didn't have time to respond. They had arrived at the scene.

A small crowd had gathered on the dock before a large cargo ship. Most of the by-standers were common folk. Gaent spotted a few lockets, and presumably, the sergeant wore one as well. Lor TorIntera was a bulky man with fat cheeks that contained a tinge of brown that contrasted with the rest of his jet face. Like most of the city constabulary, he wore a light-weight, dull green avitored breastplate that covered his chest and back. Beneath the armor, he wore a shirt and pants in the gray and navy colors of the city. A thick chain disappeared beneath the collar of the shirt attached to his unseen locket. The baton and crossbow that were hooked to his belt also contained avitored. All were strengthened through closely guarded apothos techniques. The slashes on the arm and collar of his shirt denoted his rank.

TorIntera was attempting to herd away the coopers, chandlers and loadsmen that were ignoring their jobs in favor of more interesting goings-on. The sergeant seemed unaware of the gravers that were cleaning the hull of a ship in the harbor. Gaent watched as their dark faces bobbed from the water near the dock to take a quick peek at what was going on, and then returned to his underwater work. None of these men were apothynomi of note. The body, which had been lain out on the heavy wooden planks of the dock, would not have been altered by apothos in the very recent past.

Teria quickened her step and pushed through the crowd. Her annoyance with Gaent was being taken out on those who remained in her way. A burly, black-eyed

loadsman made a lewd comment, but bowed his head when he realized who Teria was. She reached into one of her pockets and presented her credentials to the sergeant.

"We'll need you all to get back to your tasks," said Gaent from behind the crowd, "after you supply your names. Including you," Gaent said to the dark-eyed man. None of them would want to provide their names, and some of them would give false names. Chances were, none of them knew anything. But Teria would take their details and they could be tracked down if needed. "Sergeant, please help Clerk Teria take names."

The clerk smiled sweetly at the grungy men around her and readied her papers and pens, parasol hooked over her arm. The crowd shuffled past on the hollow wood of the dock and formed a surprisingly orderly queue.

Gaent skirted the gathering and finally saw the body, blacker than a starless night. He put off nearing it for a little longer and stood at the edge of the docks.

The gravers worked underwater with sharp-edged scraping tools, removing barnacles from the hull of a shallow-bottomed boats. It was quicker and easier to have a crew of gravers take care of a boat than to put it in dry dock. The workmen had been curious earlier, but were now pointedly ignoring the dock, not surfacing at all. Gaent occasionally caught sight of the glow from their palms and porta flexus. It took him three or four minutes before he caught the attention of one of the gravers. A man with a shaved head surfaced and inhaled deeply to easily keep afloat. He smoothly stroked to where Gaent crouched on the dock.

"Did one of you fish out the body?"

The graver pushed up his underwater mask and squinted one eye, deep in thought. His face cleared abruptly and he smiled. "Yup, that would be Kareo."

"Great, why isn't he here with the Sergeant?"

The lumpy planes of the graver's face pulled into a deep frown. "Well, you see, we have a job to do. We need to finish scraping this hull," he pointed to the ship behind him, "before this ship heads out at noon."

Gaent nodded unsympathetically. "We'll need you all out of the water and we'll send a constable with one of you to let your employer know what is going on."

The expressive graver couldn't have made a worse face if a shark had bitten off his left foot. Gaent was impressed that he swallowed a curse before he sank to relay the message. The gravers moved unfettered aside from their scraping tools, and were among the best swimmers known. A minute ticked by and then a second before the workmen surfaced and hauled themselves out of the water a few yards up the dock.

"And I don't want to have to send anyone in to check underwater," Gaent yelled. "I want the whole crew assembled." They ignored him for the most part, but Gaent knew that the men wanted no trouble.

The body had dried since the gravers had fished it out of the channel. Its bloodless black flesh hung loosely over its bones. A cheap long-sleeved shirt was buttoned over the torso, and loose ankle-length breeches covered the legs. Gaent approached it slowly, taking in everything he could about the positioning of the body before moving in closer. The man hadn't been killed here, but sometimes how limbs lay could tell a few things about what had happened. Here, it told little. The body lay flat on its back, arms at its side, and legs outstretched.

Gaent crouched near the corpse's head.

The corpse was male. His face was sunken, fallen, despite the bloat from the water. The man's eyes were dark under half-open, thick lids. The lenses were clear, but the edges of the sockets had become a sickly brown. His hands were bony and all of the man's flesh pooled around his bones as if he had been melted in the sun. He had a full head of healthy hair. Sea life had eaten on some areas of the body, but not many. Nothing large enough vied for position among the boats and ships in the channel. Gaent doubted that the body had been in the water more than a day and a half.

Teria approached, writing without looking at the board or where her pen wrote. The notes would be neat, neater than what Gaent could produce while playing full attention to his writing. Her gaze darted across the body, the dock, and the water beyond.

"I had TorIntera call dispatch for a few patrolmen to take names," she said, but her eyes didn't leave the corpse.

Gaent nodded. The gravers were standing in a huddled group waiting for their turn. The one with the shaved head and lumpy face that Gaent had talked to was in the center of them, and wore his scowl deeper than the rest. "Make sure we get a chance to talk to that one," said Gaent.

Teria's eyes flitted toward the gravers. "The one with face that would sour milk?"

"That would be him."

She nodded and turned to the body.

"What is that mark just under his collar?" She pointed the nib of her pen at the corpse where the top several buttons were undone.

Gaent barely noticed the faint brownish mark at the man's clavicle. He reached out and opened the shirt wider. The lighter coloration of the bruise stood out against the

matte black flesh of the man's chest. Gaent carefully undid the rest of the buttons and found similar marks on each clavicle and at the sternum. They were all thick, round blemishes of brownish-gray. In the center of each, Gaent could see the torn flesh of a puncture wound.

"Do you know what those are from?" Teria asked.

"No idea. You?"

"I don't think I've seen their like." She made a small noise in the back of her throat, but dutifully continued to sketch.

"No locket," Gaent said. He would have been surprised to find one. The man's skin bore no signs that he had ever worn one. Another set of bruises started just above the waistband of the man's breeches where a hipbone jutted outward. "Make sure you note that each bruise had a puncture wound in its center."

Teria nodded. "There's one on the top of each shoulder too, right at the joint." She moved the cloth out of the way to show Gaent. She had sharp eyes. "I suspect that we'll find more on his legs."

"Good guess. He didn't just tumbled off the pier. His eye sockets are substantially brown."

"Are you thinking exsanguination?"

Gaent nodded and pushed away the sleeves of the dead man's shirt. The wrist bore a deep incision that was consistent with cases in which a murder victim had his blood drained to be sold as surfactant.

"But I don't think the punctures are related to that, they don't pierce blood vessels and we wouldn't see so much bruising if that were the case," said Gaent. "We'll check with Bisson; see if he can give some names of the current sellers."

Gaent pushed the pants cuffs. The left leg was in generally fine condition aside from more punctures and bruises. On the right leg, the calf was entirely missing. "Now, that's interesting," said Gaent.

"Very," Teria agreed. The word was strained.

The wound was ragged. The muscle had been taken from the limb, leaving the bone exposed.

"Fish certainly didn't do this." Gaent shook his head and quickly glanced over the rest of the body.

"No other wounds like it," Teria commented as she watched.

"Dock Sergeant TorIntera?" Gaent called. He waved the sergeant over and rose to his feet. "I want you to clear the dock for me. I'm going to need a little peace and quiet. Send someone to talk to the employer of those gravers and keep them nearby. I'm going to want to talk to them myself."

TorIntera nodded several times and hurried off to carry out Gaent's directions. Gaent was happy that the sergeant was content with his simple position. He didn't need anyone trying to help him more than he requested. When TorIntera had herded away the bystanders, Gaent knelt beside the body, facing away from the city of Kenos and toward the waters of the Bay. Teria sat next to him, cross-legged.

Gaent took the bottle of pomace brandy from his bag and drank. Next, he opened a small pocket on the inside of his satchel and took out a thick graphite fuel wafer and a

tube of surfactant. He placed a small daub of the golden cream on his left palm and then placed the wafer in the middle of it. Quickly, he took another gulp of the brandy before starting. The apothos he had in mind would take a decent amount of fuel to power.

The graphite wafer was heavy in his hand as he gazed out into the channel. Ships were starting to come in bearing morning supplies from Denaphaos and Zyrie, sister cities of Kenos in the Interan League. Long, wide ships from the Bayard Plains brought foodstuffs to the city. Lightermen ferried sacks of grains and boxes of not-yet-ripe fruit from ship to shore on their flat boats. Gaent tried to put their shouts and exertions from his mind. He was very aware of Teria sitting patiently next to him, and Sergeant TorIntera and the gravers watching him from down the dock. Gaent watched the waves and drew in some of the salty, fishy scent through his nose. When his mind was clear and calm, Gaent almost unconsciously took another drink from the brandy bottle and began to whisper the incantations he needed.

Expediency wasn't needed and the apothos Gaent required was different from the reinforced apothos that he maintained. The apothos he produced from the alcohol was not designed to create the effect he desired. It acted upon the fuel wafer in his hand to produce the resulting effect. He wove his way through the apothos and the tension began to build in his chest behind his porta flexus. The pressure extended to his eyes until it became pleasant warmth.

As he spoke the final syllables of his focusing ritual He leaned close to the corpse and focused on the puncture in the sternum. The apothos let his eyes see differently than they had before. Small features became large and he saw only topology. Things were a different color than they usually were.

"The puncture goes into the flesh," said Gaent. Somewhere far away he heard Teria's pen begin to scratch against her board. He followed the collapsed tunnel of the wound as it pushed through the layers of skin and other flesh. Instead of the docks surrounding him, Gaent only saw the track of the injury. "It follows straight to the bone and ends..." Gaent expected the wound to end at the bone, but it didn't. "It goes into the bone, into the middle. The bone has a void within it like the marrow has been taken out."

He moved on to another puncture, this one at the top of the shoulder. He followed this one as well, past the tendons and ligaments of the joint, but it ended similarly in the bone of the upper arm. "Again the middle of the bone is empty," he relayed to Teria. The wound in the corpse's forearm was the same. Gaent released the apothos. The brightness of the sun shocked him and he quickly pulled away from the body.

A wave of fatigue fell over him and he compulsively reached for the brandy.

"Going to need some time?" Teria asked.

Gaent nodded and squeezed his eyes shut. "Yes. That would be nice."

Teria fished her watch from her pocket, noted the time, and marked it in her notes. Gaent tried to remember the last time he had seen his watch. It was somewhere on his desk, certainly. How long ago had he placed a fuel stone in it? He couldn't remember. "Our friends are getting restless, Gaent. Should I go ahead and ask some questions of them?" Teria rose gracefully.

"Yes, why don't you? I'll call when I'm ready. Make sure you ask if anyone knows this poor fellow. And the one that pulled him from the water is named Kareo. Ask him..."

"Yes, I think I can handle it," said Teria. She gave him a smile and turned toward the mob of gravers. She was an incongruous sight against the broad, wide-shouldered men. Gaent considered going with her, but she addressed them as equals.

"Which one of you is Kareo?" Teria asked. "I'd like to speak with him first."

The man that Gaent had spoken to with the shaved head and mobile face raised his hand. Gaent stifled a groan.

With his free hand, Gaent retrieved a small jar from his bag. He scraped the graphite fuel on the edge of the container, cleaning most of the surfactant from the wafer. Then he wiped the stone off with a cloth and retrieved the bread and cheese from his satchel. While eating, Gaent watched his clerk. Teria was in the middle of the group with Sergeant TorIntera standing protectively behind her. A picture of efficiency.

Gaent didn't wait for her or call out when he had finished his snack. He prepared the wafer, performed the focusing ritual again, and began the work of exploring more of the puncture wounds. He didn't expect to find anything different from the others, and was soon proved wrong. In a puncture wound on the left leg near the knee, Gaent found a tiny transparent shard.

Instructions:

Please, ****be honest**** and be as thorough as you feel necessary. Email your answers to katenab@gmail.com. Thank you!

Questions:

- 1.) Did you finish reading the excerpt? If no, where did you stop?
- 2.) Have you read an excerpt from this novel in the past (through my web pages or as a beta reader)?
- 3.) Were you satisfied with the opening chapter of this excerpt?
- 4.) Did the second chapter grab your interest more than the first chapter?
- 5.) Was the chronology of events clear?
- 6.) What genre would you say this novel is?

Any other constructive criticism is welcome!